

## Love at the Time of Independence

The Debates on Romantic Love in the Sudanese Left-Wing Press of the  
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## LOVE IN THE TIME OF INDEPENDENCE

### THE DEBATES ON ROMANTIC LOVE IN THE SUDANESE LEFT-WING PRESS OF THE 1950S

#### ABSTRACT

This article explores the way in which romantic love and companionate marriage were debated in Sudan at the time of independence by analysing a small corpus of love stories published in a special column of the left-wing newspaper *al-Saraha*. I start by contextualizing the left-wing press at a time of tremendous political, economic, and social change in Sudan as a key to understanding the pedagogical mission of *al-Saraha*. I then describe the various opinions on companionate marriage discussed in these texts and analyse them structurally, highlighting both common patterns and systematic omissions. Finally, I seek to interpret the spread of the ideal of romantic love in Sudan in relation to the theory of the rise of individualism as a sign of a modern State, and to show that the solution these texts proposed was not to disconnect individuals from society, but to reform society as a whole so as to harmonize collective and individual wills.

LOVE IN SUDAN<sup>1</sup>

Love is the emotion I associate most closely with my experience of Sudan, not only because I often describe my relationship with the country as a question of love, but also – more prosaically – because love literally fills the air there. Love stories were one of the favourite topics that friends and acquaintances of all ages liked to talk to me about, but this is not merely a private matter: love is discussed on television shows and radio programmes, and is one of the most widespread subjects of music and poetry, including the music that assaults the ears of passengers using the *mu'assalat*, the public transport system. Love stories make fortunes for telephone companies, as people spend hours on the phone discussing relationships (Lamoureux 2011). In the evenings at home, I used to be lulled to sleep by the soft voice of my friend talking on the phone to the man she would later marry. Of course, these many words are also spoken as a substitute for physical contact, which must remain extremely limited until marriage. In any event, perhaps to compensate, people converse about love endlessly, and however difficult their lives may be, love lies at the heart of their concerns and of their very existence.

The starting point for this article is my observation that despite this widespread presence of discourses on love in Sudanese society and popular culture, research on this subject in Sudan Studies is virtually non-existent. To be fair, anthropologists are, as usual, further ahead when it comes to analysing the daily lives, problems, and interests of common people than are historians, and romantic relationships have been discussed – at least indirectly – in the context of works on gender relations, migration, kinship, and so on (see, for example, Evans-Pritchard 1951, Kenyon 1991, Boddy 2007, Willemse 2007, Abusharaf 2009). As the historian Nakanyike Musisi (2014) has argued in a survey of her own research on the history of sexuality, however, scholars have been so busy analysing the overlapping of power and sexuality (as is the case with research on HIV and female genital mutilation) that they have lost sight of people's actual experiences, of the way they perceive, experience, and talk about sex. Musisi was limiting her discussion to sexuality, but the same

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argument might easily be extended to love. Recent research has signalled a new interest in this issue, however, including the pioneering work by Jennifer Cole and Lynn Taylor, *Love in Africa* (2009), which nevertheless mostly includes works by anthropologists.

If Sudan anthropologists have underplayed the role of love in their works on kinship, marriage, and so on, then historians have downright ignored it, and the history of emotions is notably absent from Sudanese historiography. This article represents a first faltering attempt to fill this gap.

From a methodological standpoint, how a fleeting feeling such as love can be captured has been a riddle for historians. As Rosenwein (2002, 2010) has pointed out, the experiences of a feeling on the one hand and its codified expression on the other – in songs or literature, for example – do not coincide, and choosing where to look has clear methodological implications (see also Plamper 2010). Here, I have gone for the simpler choice and opted to study the texts. During one of my most recent visits to Sudan, I discovered a column dedicated to love in *al-Saraha*, one of the left-wing newspapers I was collecting copies of. This column offered me a window on public discussions about love around the time of Sudan's independence in 1956, and despite the limited number of texts – only ten – it represented a starting point for bringing emotions back into history. The texts also proved to be a prudent choice for a beginner working in a field that has been so much ignored by historians, as it allowed me to use the literary analysis tools with which I am familiar. Above all, an analysis of written discourses on love is important in dialogical terms, and love stories published in the press or broadcast over the radio informed individual experiences, offering a framework for comparing and situating personal stories.

While working on the protean – and sometimes obscure – field of the study of emotions and affect, I have heard on several occasions that writing a history of emotions has come into fashion. I believe, however, that it turns out to be “fashionable” in the same way the study of gender was some decades ago, in the sense that it is essential. Emotions represent a fundamental, vital, and indisputable aspect of every person's life, and if the aim of social history is to recover all aspects of the pasts of ordinary men and women, it cannot be achieved without exploring their emotional world. As scholars of the history of emotions remind us, historians are accustomed to a type of historical writing that considers emotions to be an overflow, something that must remain outside the historical text because otherwise the historian's objectivity would be obfuscated (Rosenwein 2002). Historians must be dispassionate, and must make the material they analyse ‘dispassionate’, too, in the sense that they need to extract its factual, non-emotional elements. This is a fiction, however: we stumble upon moving stories in the archives all the time, and emotions may spill out from even the driest document. This is often the way we connect with past; we are constantly being moved by fragments and shadows of past emotions that feed our historical imagination (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992).

Finally, I am perhaps stating the obvious when I repeat what micro-history has been telling us for decades, which is that the microscopic scale leads to a finer understanding of macro-dynamics. The love stories I have collected are a clear case in point. As we shall see, the *al-Saraha* column on love harbours information not only on gender relations, but also on the politics of development and nationalism, and the existential and concrete inextricability of the political, the social, and the intimate, especially at the dawn of independence.

This article is organized in the following manner. Considering that the main sources are semi-literary texts – newspaper articles – I shall embrace both an historical and a literary approach. I shall first place the discussions on love in the context of the history of Sudanese politics and the press in order to both contextualize and underline the specificity of *al-Saraha*. I shall then analyse the recurrent patterns in the description of love relationships as well as the omissions, and conclude by drawing some general conclusions about the nature of love in the left-wing press of the 1950s.

## HISTORY AND THE SUDANESE PRESS

From its very beginnings, as it is well known, the press in Sudan has been connected to politics (Salih 1965, Al-Malik Babiker 1985, Muhammad Salih 1996, Galander and Starosa 1997, Sharkey 1999). In fact, the press developed with the formation of political factions after the First World War, and continued to reflect such divisions after that time. In order to give a sense to all this, however, we need to pause for a moment and provide a short outline of the political history of Sudan from the beginning of colonization.

### *The press and factional politics*

In 1899, Sudan became an Anglo-Egyptian Condominium ruled by two countries, Egypt and Great Britain. Although the British-led Sudanese Government held most of the powers, Egypt had a unique impact on the political development of the country.

From the beginning of the 1920s until well after independence in 1956, Sudanese politics was split into two factions. The first included those who wanted full independence for the country but under the supervision of Great Britain. This group formed the Umma party in 1945 under the spiritual leadership of the Mahdi's son *sayyid* 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi. The second faction claimed that Sudan was a part of Egypt and the Nile Valley, and in 1943 formed the *Ashiqqa* party (which was renamed the National Unionist Party in 1952), headed by Ismail al-Azhari (the first Prime Minister of Sudan) under the spiritual guidance of the Khatmiyya Sufi *tariqa* led by *sayyid* 'Ali al-Mirghani. The NUP took a far more radical stance vis-à-vis the Sudanese government than did the Umma, and was supported by Egypt. After the

Second World War, Egyptian efforts to redefine the Condominium Agreement became more focused: in 1947, Egypt succeeded in bringing the case of Sudan before the United Nations, and in 1951, the Egyptian parliament unilaterally repealed the Condominium Agreement. The Egyptian Free Officers coup d'état staged in 1952 unlocked the way to independence for Sudan, as Egypt dropped all claims of sovereignty over the country and requested its immediate self-government. This was ratified in the February 1953 agreement by which Egypt and Great Britain established a three-year transitional period leading to self-determination. On 1 January 1956, Sudan became the first independent country in sub-Saharan Africa (Bakheit 1965, Abu Hasabu 1985, Abdel-Rahim 1986, Beshir 1974, Daly 1991, 2000, Warburg 2003).

Another crucial issue in this same period was the question of the South. By its Southern Policy, the Condominium had kept the South administratively separate from the North from the mid-1920s until the Second World War. This divided the North and South into two de facto heterogeneous halves in terms of language, religion, and institutions. When talks on self-determination began, Southern politicians asked for the creation of a federal system and safeguards for the cultural specificities of the South, but none of their demands and conditions were met, and as early as 1955, a year before independence, a part of the Sudanese army stationed in Torit mutinied, the first in a series of clashes that would later escalate into civil war (Collins 1983, Poggio 2011, Rolandsen 2011, Rolandsen and Leonardi 2014).

The press grew and flowered in the heated climate of the years around independence. According to Galander and Starosa (1997, 211), in 1951, "a country with a literacy rate of only five per cent published seven daily and fourteen weekly Arabic newspapers, a daily and a weekly in English, and a weekly Greek paper. On the eve of independence, the country produced nine daily and seven weekly 'intensely partisan' newspapers." The authors describe the press as being composed of three types of newspaper: "party-owned" papers, such as *al-Umma*, after the name of the Mahdi's party, and *Sawt al-Sudan* for the NUP;<sup>2</sup> party-oriented papers, including *al-Sudan al-Jadid* and *al-Nil* for the Umma party and *al-Sudan al-Hadith* for the Unionists; and "neutrals", the most famous of which was the *al-Ray al-Amm* daily paper, which was mostly concerned with party politics, but carried articles from both sides.

Other types of paper also developed alongside those associated with factional politics. Some had entertainment or education as their main purpose, such as *Hina Omdurman*, which published the broadcasts of Radio Omdurman, and *al-Sibiyān* and *Future*, two magazines for young people, one aimed at a Northern public and the other at Southern readers. Another newspaper of note was *Kordofan*, the only regional paper of the time, which carried

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2. The NUP split in 1956 and a faction formed the People's Democratic Party, whose newspaper was *al-'Alam*.

all sorts of local news alongside national stories. Finally, in 1956 a magazine dedicated to women's rights, *Sawt al-Maraa*, began to be published.<sup>3</sup>

Last but not least, some newspapers were entirely dedicated to the workers' movement. Here I must pause again, because the history of the left-wing press cannot be detached from the history of the labour movement in Sudan after the end of the Second World War.

### *The press and the workers' movement*

From the mid-1940s on, Sudan experienced a series of profound economic and social transformations that affected the lives of most Sudanese. These changes were partly triggered by the new philosophy of development adopted by London in its colonies at the end of the 1930s. During this period, which is often called 'late colonialism', Britain sought to promote social and economic advance in the colonies. The idea was to expand the competences and duties of the colonial state, creating a welfare system for colonial citizens that was able to guarantee certain basic rights, such as the right to health, decent housing, water, and education, while at the same time boosting economic development through investments in infrastructures such as an improved road system, better equipment for local industries, and rationalizing agriculture (see for example: Cooper 1996, Lewis 2000, Seekings 2011). In Sudan, notably, two five-year development plans were implemented consecutively from 1946.

Within this new paradigm of development, great importance was attached to the rights of workers.<sup>4</sup> From 1946 on, various envoys were sent directly from the Ministry of Labour in London to prepare and supervise the introduction of brand new workers' rights intended to regulate all aspect of their working lives, including the number of working hours and days off, and the right to sick leave, permits, pensions, and so on. Typical of this period is a quote from the report by the 1948 Commission on Living Standards, one of many commissions created from the late 1940s, according to which: "the whole trend of world opinion is towards raising the wages and standard of living of the worker and the Sudanese worker does not intend to be left behind in this movement..."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most important of these rights in the particular economic conjuncture of the early 1950s was the right to form trade unions.

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3. Unfortunately I could not locate the first issues of that magazine in the libraries consulted in Khartoum.

4. I have discussed this question in "An uphill job demanding limitless patience". The Establishment of Trade Unions and the Conflicts of Development in Sudan, 1946-1952", forthcoming in *International Development Policy*.

5. Report of the Independent Committee of Enquiry, Khartoum, 14.4.1948, FO 371/69235, The National Archives, London, p. 13.

Sudan experienced two critical economic phenomena during and after the Second World War: first, the boom associated with the production of cotton, which was triggered by increased demands caused by the Korean War; and second, and as a consequence, very high inflation generated by the cash obtained from the sale of the raw material. It is in this context that the new labour laws, in particular the Trade Union Ordinance of 1948, sparked the unionization of the majority of urban workers. The spread of trade unions was impressive: by the end of 1952 there were as many as 99 registered trade unions including an estimated 70,000 and 120,000 workers, compared with a rough estimated total number of salaried urban workers of between 150,000 and 200,000.<sup>6</sup>

The years between 1948 and 1952 were ones of intense labour struggles. Waves of strikes shook the country incessantly during this period, with workers protesting for a salary level commensurate with the high cost of living. Various expert commissions were created to examine the workers' demands. Their reports described their precarious working and living conditions, and in many respects took their side. For its part, the labour movement adopted an intensely anti-colonial language and strategy, attacking the government not only for the inadequate measures it was taking to improve their situation, but also for its "imperialism". It should be noted that in spite of their Marxist-inspired language, the majority of union members offered scant support for the small, communist-oriented Sudan Liberation Movement party (SLM), and voted for the two factional parties (Fawzi 1957, Warburg 1978, Niblock 1987, El-Amin 1996a, 1996b, 1997, Sikainga 2002, Abd al-Wahab M. 2008, Abusharaf 2009, Tareq 2012). At the end of the 1940s, the various parties, including the formerly moderate Umma, had all adopted a radical anti-colonial lexicon. In other words, radicalism was in the air.

From the 1940s on, a type of left-wing press began to emerge that was ideologically close to Marxism, but politically less connected to the SLM than it was to the workers' movement. Among the first periodicals were *al-Ummal* (The Workers), of which very little is known except that it was published in Atbara in the late 1940s and was issued by the Sudan Railways Trade Union; *al-Taliya'a* (The Vanguard), which was considered to be the mouthpiece of the Sudan Workers Trade Union Federation;<sup>7</sup> *al-Shaab*, a bi-weekly, pro-worker,

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6. Development of Trade Unions in Sudan, undated, unsigned, in Robertson to Allen, 1.11.1950, LAB 13/480, The National Archives, London.

7. Dhikrayat al-61 ta'asis sahifa al-Midan (Memory of the 61 foundations of al-Midan newspaper), <http://www.alrakoba.net/articles-action-show-id-64020.htm>, consulted on 1.5.2016. Al-Midan is a historic newspaper of the Sudanese communist party.



anti-imperialist, pro-Egyptian publication;<sup>8</sup> and finally *al-Saraha*.<sup>9</sup> Although censorship was applied, newspapers such as *al-Shaab* were able to carry slogans such as “people want freedom” (9.12.1950) and “the evacuation of the British from Sudan is our first objective” (6.1.1951). However, a number of journalists, such as Abdallah Rajab, the editor of *al-Saraha*, went to prison several times. For Galander and Starosa (1997, 212), this gave them great visibility and turned them into celebrities.

In this burgeoning press, however, only *al-Sahara* published a column dedicated exclusively to love, which had the emblematic title “Pure Deep Emotions” (*wajad iniat sirfa*). Before I explore this material, however, it is important to highlight the characteristics of *al-Saraha*, a newspaper that was unique in the panorama of the press at that time.

### *Al-Saraha*

*Al-Saraha*, which means ‘Frankness’ in Arabic, was a bi-weekly newspaper founded by Abdallah Rajab in 1950. The information about the newspaper to which I could access is scarce, and it is difficult to ascertain whether its readership consisted mostly of skilled urban artisans, who were often literate, or Sudanese civil servants, or both.<sup>10</sup>

Abdallah Rajab was a peculiar intellectual figure. He was born in Singa in 1915, and began his life as a trader between Singa and Gedaref.<sup>11</sup> He was self-taught and did not attend school, and yet he quickly discovered that his true vocation was journalism, and began to collaborate with the *Kordofan* newspaper in 1945, for which he continued writing as a correspondent even after this. Not only did he teach himself how to master writing in classical Arabic, but he also learnt English so well that he translated English novels into

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8. It has not been possible to gather any information about this newspaper so far. It was an impressive left-wing, staunchly pro-Egyptian paper, which published also cartoons and articles on popular culture. After 1956, its focus narrowed as it covered only politics and the relations between Sudan and Egypt.

9. While *al-Saraha* is the main source of this work, it has also been possible to compare it with contemporaneous issues of *al-Shaab* and *al-Ray al-'Amm* from the impressive collection of historical newspapers kept at the National Record Office of Khartoum.

10. However, a volume about the memories of Abdallah Rajab (1987) exists, which I could not locate at the time of my last fieldwork.

11. Scattered pieces of information are to be found on a web page of the city of Singa (<http://www.singacity.net/vb/showthread.php?t=2442>), and here: *Fi Dhikra al-Sahafi al-Mukhadram Abdallah Rajab* (in memory of veteran journalist Abdallah Rajab), <http://www.alrakoba.net/articles-action-show-id-28864.htm>, consulted on 1.5.2016.

Arabic. He later joined other newspapers, such as *Al-Sudan al-Jadid* (in 1947) and *al-Nil*, until finally, in 1950, he decided to edit his own newspaper.

*Al-Saraha* was a peculiar journal, especially if one compares it with the most popular daily of the time, *Al-Ray al-'Amm*. Although it was not an organ of the communist SLM, it was clearly Marxist, and its ideological orientation had a direct impact on the types of news it published. A rough list might include:

- a) *News about the workers' movement*: the newspaper reported news of every strike throughout Sudan, whether small or large, of which it was given notice. It also published statements issued by various unions, the Railways Union in first place, but also unions of students, journalists, and nurses; it even re-published union statements issued to other journals (see, for example, the 8.1.1956 issue, which was a republication of a Union statement appeared in *Al-Ray al-'Amm*).
- b) *News and speeches from Soviet Russia*: the newspaper regularly carried articles about life in the Soviet Union and reports of Soviet pamphlets or speeches by Lenin or Stalin (as in the issue of 3.2.1956, in which an Arabic translation of an historical speech of Lenin was published entitled "The Words of the Amazing Stalin", with a picture of Lenin and Stalin from 1922).
- c) *Nationalist pedagogical essays*: articles such as the one published on 8.1.1956 on the responsibilities of educated people towards the country, or another in which the author discussed the Afro-Arab nature of Sudan (19.10.1956). These articles were aimed at shaping an informed public opinion that was aware of the national challenges ahead. This echoes what was noted already by Galander and Starosa, that a crucial function of the press in the 1950s was public education.
- d) *The Southern question*: in a similar vein, there were regular columns about the situation in the South that described the political attitudes of southerners, the economic situation, development plans, the status of infrastructures and services, and the question of education. The challenge the journal was taking up was how to modernize the South and bring it into the Sudanese nation. *Al-Saraha* sought to propose constructive solutions to this question by helping its readers get to know the South better, while framing this knowledge through the paradigm of development (cfr. Rolandsen and Leonardi 2014).
- e) *Matters of general public interest*: general information, usually critical in nature, on matters such as the annual budget, the country's economic performance, agricultural output, the malfunctioning of agricultural schemes, and so on.
- f) *The 'powerless'*: the paper was extremely attentive to voicing the grievances of various sections of Sudanese society. For instance, at the beginning of 1956, it covered a series of demonstrations by unemployed Sudanese that were repressed by the police. It reported problems relating to the provision of services such as the issue of housing or electricity. Finally, every issue

carried one page dedicated to provincial news, not only from the Kordofanese cities (El Obeid, Bara, al-Nuhud), Eastern Sudan (Atbara, Port Sudan) and the Gezira (Wad Medani) but also from Darfur and South Sudan.

g) *Women*: a special page in the newspaper was dedicated to women, including a special editorial called "Women's World". This page dealt mainly with women's political rights, above all the right to vote, but it also discussed certain real or perceived problems experienced by women,<sup>12</sup> some of which concerned female work and education (should girl wait before marrying or work after school? Is working compatible with having a family?). Missing from this section were topics covering the intimate lives of women and the question of male-female relationships.

It will be helpful if I briefly compare *al-Saraha* with another popular newspaper, *al-Ray al-'Amm*. This paper was much more interested in news that was directly connected to the political life of the country and international issues, chiefly relating to Egypt. It also published news about trade unions, but limited itself to major events. Perhaps the most interesting point of comparison concerns gender relations. *Al-Ray al-'Amm* also included a special column on women's issues, and the types of topic it covered were similar to those found in *al-Saraha*. At the same time, it also carried criminal stories that revealed questions of intimacy. For example, one article described how a wife accused her husband of having tried to rape a 14-year-old child (14.10.1956), while in another about three cases of beating and assault, an even shorter paragraph told the story of a woman who struck the husband who had sought to kill her, and then committed suicide (4.10.1956). True, such articles were rare, the writing style was dry and concise, and nothing at all was said about the social setting of the crimes, not to mention the names of the people involved. They did, however, show intimate relationships in all their complex lights and shadows. *Al-Saraha*, on the other hand, was not at all the kind of newspaper that would carry such news, and generally report stories reflecting (disturbed) intimate relationships, with one exception: its column on love.

### *Love in al-Saraha*

It is not known when the column on love was first published. The first available issue dates from April 1956, and after that it came out quite randomly. Its irregular publication suggests that it might only have been published

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12. As noted by Sharkey (2003), in 1956 one question monopolized the page: why did Sudanese men prefer foreign women to local women? It should be noted, however, that such marriages were extremely rare.

when there was space for it, and that it was not a priority for the newspaper, which was busy with the intense political life of the time.<sup>13</sup>

Even though *al-Saraha* might have been the only newspaper that dedicated a section to it, love was a hot topic in the popular culture of Sudan at the time. It was a central theme of Sudanese songs: for instance, the author of an article entitled “Love in our Songs” published in *al-Ray al-‘Amm* on 3 October 1956 complained about the abundance of “tears and sobs” in the songs of the time.<sup>14</sup> Notions of romantic love were also widely disseminated in Sudanese urban centres by Hollywood and Egyptian films from the mid-1920s (Sharkey 2003, 64). Love was a central preoccupation of the press well beyond Sudan, however: we just need to think about the explosion of the subject in Western literature that marked the Romantic era, so that for the first time in history, books dedicated entirely to relationships, love, and affection – such as Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* – became international best-sellers (on Jane Austen and her impact “abroad”, see Park and Rajeswari 2015). Closer to Sudan, Qasim Amin’s *Liberation of Women* discussed the question of companionate marriage at length, adding to a debate that raged in Egypt after the end of the nineteenth century (Russell 2004). In short, Sudan was hit head-on by global flows of discourse on love (on love in Africa, see, for example, Hunter 2010, Prichard 2013; and on love in the Middle East, see, for example, Ze’evi 2006, Babayan and Najmabadi 2008, Peirce 2009, Stokes 2010).

Perhaps the most widely-studied editorial that is closest geographically and chronologically to our case is *Dear Dolly*. Kenda Mutongi analyses the story of this column, which appeared in the journal *Drums* and which was published in Cape Town but widely distributed in Anglophone Africa, in a chapter of the famous volume *Love in Africa* (2000). *Dear Dolly* was “the column that answered the courtship and sexuality questions of young men and women” (Mutongi 2000, 83-84), and readers from Ghana to South Africa sent letters addressing straight questions about issues relating to couples and sex, to which they received equally straightforward replies from a fictitious Dolly.

Compared to *Dear Dolly*, *al-Saraha* editorial about love was quite different. First, there were no questions and answers, but stories written by readers and addressed to a certain Muhammad al-Hassan Ahmad, who appears to have been the editor of the column. It should be noted, incidentally, that “letters to the editor” sections appeared in various newspapers, but the letters were usually written by citizens who wished to expose a certain situation or problem. In terms of content, the “*wajad iniat sirfa*” does not show the same feature of light entertainment that was clear in *Dear Dolly*. Finally, as regards

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13. The dates of publication are: 6.4.1956, 30.9.1956, 28.10.1956, 2.11.1956, 12.11.1956, 23.11.1956, 3.12.1956, 16.12.1956, 25.6.1957, and 9.9.1957.

14. The Sudan Radio archive is currently inaccessible, and the newspaper did not publish the lyrics of songs. A project to digitize the radio archives is under way.

style, the register of the letters was quite high; they were written in classical Arabic of varying complexity, and some were filled with metaphors, plays on words, and figures of speech, while others were written in a more simple – but still elaborate – language.

Dissimilar styles probably reflected differences in authorship. The editor, Muhammad al-Hassan, claimed that he published the “best stories” that were sent to him, and in one text he hinted that there was quite a long waiting list for publication (*Al-Saraha* 30.9.1956). He himself was the author of at least some of the stories.<sup>15</sup> Some texts were published in the name of the author (although many were undistinguishable popular Sudanese names), while in other cases pseudonyms (like *al-Munbathiq*, or “the one who has been enlightened”) were used.<sup>16</sup> Another important element is the gender of the authors: all but one of the texts were written from the male point of view, meaning that the problems and issues of relationships were mostly tackled from a male perspective.

As for their content, the most important feature is that *al-Saraha* love stories were not only fraught with obstacles – as are all love stories in literature – but also had all (but one) a tragic conclusion. There were three main causes for such unhappy endings: 1) social pressure; 2) “backward traditions”; and 3) the nature of love itself.

### *Society*

A typical example of social pressure destroying romantic bonds is the story entitled *First Love* (23.11.1956). It begins with a passionate description of the love and feelings between the narrator and a girl: his happiness at their first meeting in Port Sudan, the feeling he had of being young, energetic and vigorous, with his life in front of him, and the way his vigour matched that of the girl, who was in the “spring of her age”. He then describes the girl in terms that exemplify the archetypal female ideal: she was modestly dressed, beautiful, and mysterious, “she did not speak unless she was asked to do so”, and when she did speak, her voice was like the music of the greatest composers. Echoing the narrator’s nationalist feelings, she embodied the same vitality as the young nation that had just been freed from the shackles of colonialism. And then, suddenly, their relationship ended when the narrator’s father travelled from Atbara to Port Sudan with the news that he had to marry the daughter of an aunt, and not the girl he loved. He tried to resist, but to no avail:

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15. Such as the one entitled “Repentance without Crime”, 28.10.1956.

16. A few examples are: Muhammad Salih Ibrahim, author of “The Beloved”, *al-Saraha* 12.11.1956; Mirghani Hassan Ali, “Love in Our Community”, *al-Saraha* 3.9.1956; and al-Munbathiq, “The First Love”, *al-Saraha* 23.11.1956.

My father threatened me with things that I don't need to mention here, and when faced with this I could only relinquish my desire and sacrifice my happiness for the path of younger people who are in urgent need to benefit from such a sacrifice – such as my younger sister, who married the man she liked. I will not forget my first love, however, the first person to open up my heart, my virgin heart.

In this text, the male perspective completely erases the story of the girl: not only is she never given a name – even a fictitious one – but the reader also does not know her feelings about having been rejected and what happens to her afterwards.<sup>17</sup>

The second example, which is entitled *Love Story* (3.12.1956) and was published just ten days later, is the only text in this collection that is written from the female perspective. The events are similar to the story above, except for one significant difference – the conclusion. The female narrator met a man at a wedding party who “devoured her with his eyes”. Her eyes met his own, and “our look wrote such sinuosity of the soul we call love”, a quote that offers an example of the literary style of the text. She fell in love with the young man, who was an educated person and an artist, and her love grew daily. One day, however, somebody else asked for her hand in marriage, but she dared to refuse him. She describes this decision as a catastrophe, although she does not provide much detail, and eventually makes a choice:

She kept her love for him and the pledge she made to him. She decided to devote her entire existence to this love, as she cherished her love for him above anything else. She would never change, and she would sacrifice her femininity and everything else!

As is the case with other texts, not much is known about what exactly happened. What is narrated here are not events but feelings, and the story is not one of events that happened to people but a narrative sequence of emotions: love grows and is frustrated, and is then saved by the determination of the girl to dedicate herself to her love. Any contextualization seems unnecessary.<sup>18</sup>

The third example of obstacles associated with to society offers us one of the most tragic stories. Entitled “The End of Love” (25.6.1957) and signed by a certain A. Abdin, it is the story of a girl – Khadija – in the village of Abu ‘Arus

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17. On the practice of female name avoidance, see Sharkey 2003, 70, and 1995.

18. Although this is a general tendency, the text entitled *Small Happiness* (9.9.1957), brought it to a head. The reader is not provided with any means of understanding what actions have triggered the feelings that are portrayed. Two people are described as becoming close to each other (as lovers? as friends?), but the feeling is a fleeting one, and it fades away as rapidly as it had appeared. The text becomes a narrative of the feeling of the ephemeral. How and why this happens remains unknown to the reader.

(literally, 'the father of the groom'), who commits suicide on the day of her marriage, at the age of 20, because her family is forcing her to marry a man she does not love. The writer comments that the family was shocked that she could carry out such an act, as arranged marriages were the norm in the village. For the people of the village, the suicide was an abnormal, excessive reaction to something that everybody endured. The narrator was of a different opinion, however: "This is truly the triumph of love in the valley of Sudan; indeed, it is the triumph of the powerless!!!"

The narrator then goes on to compare Khadija with a woman he himself had loved. This highly literate urban woman faced the same dilemma: "the educated girl was going to a relative who had graduated from Oxford and who owned a splendid car and lived in a house with an expensive garden in the British neighbourhood". The educated girl "did not wish to dash the hopes of her father" by refusing the marriage. Unlike Khadija, his beloved girl did not commit suicide and accepted her fate. The author concludes bitterly:

For my friend Muhammad al-Hassan [the editor], Khadija made a mistake because she ended up by committing the ugliest crime any human being could inflict on herself ... However, it is my point of view that my educated girl committed a crime no less ugly than that of Khadija, the ignorant girl from the village of Abu 'Arus.<sup>19</sup>

This text launches a dual attack against a society that does not realize the tragedy of arranged marriages, and against his educated friend who agreed to comply with society's demands. Placing the text in the context of the Arabic tradition of love as martyrdom may help us understand the narrator's criticism. The first obvious reference is one of the most popular stories in Arabic-speaking countries, that of Majnun and Leila (Seyed-Gohrab 2003, El-Ariss 2013). In addition, Arabic versions of Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* – and even its original in English – were available to Sudanese readers. The Arabic version probably came to Sudan through a popular adaptation known as the "The Martyrs of Love", which had been diffused in Egypt around the 1890s. Mark Bayer (2007) has observed that the changes to the play fitted in with the Sufi tradition of love as a feeling that requires the total annihilation of the ego. In the Egyptian version, Romeo surrenders to the emotion of love to the point of being satisfied and eager to die for it, and love is accomplished in death. One might imagine that similar ideas lay behind "The End of Love": for the narrator, the "crime" committed by the girl who accepts what her family has imposed on her is that of not having been radical enough in her love.

I would make one final observation. The gender discrepancy of the 'sacrifice' made for love is evident: in the first story, the boy accepts his fate and

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19. *Al-Saraha* 25.6.1957 NRO.

marries, while in the other two the two women sacrifice themselves by renouncing the joys of companionate life or, worse, by suicide.

### *Traditions*

The texts I have discussed above do not focus on specific traditions, but rather on how families and society behave towards individuals. In a few cases, however, the stories hint more clearly at the way “backward customs” dehumanize intimate relationships and lead to tragedy. The story that most embodies this is emblematically entitled “He Paid the Price of Love with his Life” (4.6.1956). It is signed by a certain ‘Ali al-Malik, and differs from the others in that facts predominate over feelings, and names and circumstances are described more explicitly.

The narrator recounts the story of Kubu, a man who lives among an unidentified pastoralist group, who decides to marry. It is not specifically stated that the man is not a Muslim, but he does not have a typical Muslim name. He has to pay a dowry in cows, but that year “it was impossible to collect a cow or two”, and so the tribe offers him the alternative of killing a member of another tribe “to pay his dowry in blood”. Early one morning, therefore, he takes his spear and leaves. He travels until he reaches an army camp and decides to kill somebody there. He finds a man washing his clothes in the barracks washing area and asks him for a glass of water, and when the man bends to fill the cup, Kubu kills him. The narrator comments on the homicide thus:

And this action was carried out by him without doubts or fear [...] Kubu did not feel any regrets, as if he had slaughtered a chicken and not a human being with a heart and hopes and a body.<sup>20</sup>

The text then goes on to describe Kubu’s happiness as he returns to his village, his spear covered in blood, the celebration of the wedding, the slaughtering of a goat, and the moment when his beloved wife kisses him as her husband... “And Kubu feels at ease and [...] feels that he owns the world [...] and when he goes to sleep there is no discomfort and no regret” The day after, the police, who were looking for him, caught him at home. Happiness died in the eyes of his wife. He was taken to the barracks and condemned to death. Images of death mix with images of disillusioned hope:

When his head was placed in the noose, he did not stop imagining his girl [...] who was dreaming of his return, of her receiving his spear stained with blood and gathering the wood for the fire. The rope tightened around his neck [...] and his whole body swung back and forth [...], but this was not her decision.

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20. *Al-Saraha* 4.6.1956, NRO.



By this last sentence, the author intended to underline that there is one more indirect victim of the story – Kubu’s wife – who not only had no say in the marriage, but was also trapped by destiny to live as a disgraced woman who had been married for one day to a man who was hanged for murder.

In this story, Kubu is described as being closer to a beast than to a human being: he is happy that it is easier to kill a man than to give two cows; he kills the man who gives him water as if he were a chicken; he feels no regret; and he is surprised when he is caught and hanged. The author is sending a clear message to his readers: “backward” customs debase human beings. The story of Kubu therefore has a pedagogical function, in line with *al-Saraha*’s mission to modernize people’s minds.

At the same time, however, the story reveals another side of the coin: the stereotypical disparaging view that educated Sudanese had of the peripheries. Fundamental social dynamics such as the question of the dowry were not taken seriously, but were depicted as caricatures revealing the backwardness of the inhabitants. Kubu was the antithesis of the modern man, and was described as a radical other who belonged to a world of customs where a lack of rationality meant a lack of humanity. Living at the margins implied being stuck in a world without history and religion, in a form of primitive and debased humanity.

### *The nature of love*

A third type of obstacle along the path towards a happy denouement of feelings of love is fantasy and its excesses. This is an important motif that was, for instance, taken up in the discussion of “Love in Our Songs” published in *Al-Ray al-‘Amm* on 3.10.1956. In it, the author, a certain Muhammad “‘Ammu” (uncle), condemns love songs because they only describe forms of tragic love: “The listener considers the number of tears and sobs that abound in the love songs, so according to the laws of our love songs, people who are touched by them do not know that their feelings are not a curse.” Secondly, love songs are condemned because they treat ill-fated love as a higher form of love than orthodox, socially-sanctioned love. Instead, for the author, “normal” love is *generated* by marriage: “a love that has a scope, that illuminates the future, brightens life, and binds the two lovers by a sacred bond until their death”. He concludes: “So love is connected to hope, and love dies with the same death as hope”, only to grow again.<sup>21</sup>

A similar message is offered in a text from *al-Saraha* (30.9.1956) entitled “Love in our Community”, signed by Mirghani Hassan ‘Ali. This text is also the only one in which what is narrated is not a specific story, but general considerations on relationships. The problem the author seeks to solve is how to understand the conditions under which love becomes “real”: that is, feasible

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21. *Al-Ray al-‘Amm*, 3.10.1956, NRO.

and possible to realize. His solution is to place the couple in an appropriate setting to allow them to get to know each other:

The circumstances I am referring to are those in which the woman frequently meets the man in a productive environment or any other professional activity they carry out together that offers them the opportunity to observe each other closely. From these circumstances, and through these relationships, real love germinates: a conscious love, with no insomnia, no tears, no crying in front of ruins, because under these circumstances love will be allowed to identify its objectives clearly ... to grow ... to burst forth. This is how love works in countries where equality between a man and a woman is achieved, that equality that results in the woman gaining financial independence ...that is to say, her participation in production, next to the man.

The author then compares this kind of love with that to be found “in our backward community”, which is love at first sight, “hidden love”, in a society that places “the woman in the coffin of the harem”. For the author, this is the kind of love that has the worst consequences, as amply demonstrated in popular songs: “all our songs portray our understanding of love”. For Mirghani, too, “love will be kindled ... certainly it will ... through marital relations, as this is the only cradle for love in our backward community.”

Indeed, the question of the “limitations of love” seems to have been at the heart of a debate divided between two different concepts of it. All the authors accept that love can be a force that exceeds rationality; for some, however, love is an emotion that must be lived to its extreme consequences, whatever they may be, while for others socially unsanctioned love is to be condemned because it leads to tragedy, and because it represents a fantasy that does not match reality. This faction condemns the glorification of “martyr” love because it belittles the type of love that is most common among people, an ordinary love that is a *consequence*, and not a cause, of marriage.

### ABSENCES

In this section, I shall focus on the omissions that are a feature of the texts, and attempt to delineate a topography of their hills and valleys, because in actual fact, the omission of certain items of information was also a strategy for giving prominence to others, in line with the general editorial interests of the journal concerned.

The first type of information that is absent from the texts is any elements that might help to situate the characters in terms of origin, social background, and even class in any way. None of the texts mention the ethnic belonging, culture, or language of the people they describe. It is rare to find even a passing reference to the geographic location where a story is set, but even where

there is one, as is the case with Abu 'Arus or Port Sudan, it lacks any connotation. In those stories in which a relationship is hindered by an arranged marriage, family, ethnic, or cultural associations between the bride and groom are never mentioned directly. In other words, ethnic differences are never offered as an explanation for a failed love.

Instead, it is interesting to note that in the only text that makes any reference to class differences – the story of Khadija – the narrator insists (by using narrative strategies such as repetition of connotative sentences) that the two girls (the educated girl from Khartoum and the “ignorant” village girl) face precisely the same dilemma. In this way, the text underlines the fact that love makes people equal, and that one’s behaviour when one is in love does not depend on class, origin, or education, but on individual choices. Love is described as a universal and egalitarian force, in both its joy and pain.

The second element that is absent from these texts is an explicit connection between love and religion, and the religiosity of individuals is neither evoked nor discussed as an explicative element, in spite of the importance of the Sufi tradition in Sudan and of love in general in Islamic culture, possibly because of the paper’s left-wing slant (see, for example, Chittick and Nasr 2013). On the other hand, it is likely that this tradition influenced the literary imaginary anyway. There are implicit references, well hidden though they may be, to the civilizing power of Islam: in Kubu’s story, the victim is murdered while offering water, and in this way, Kubu breaks the basic laws of hospitality and Islamic charity.

The final category of absence is sexual transgression. I raise this because, as we have seen, there were passing references to it in other newspapers, which means that it was possible to talk about transgression in a public space such as the press. In *al-Saraha*’s love column, however, this topic is entirely absent, as is, more generally, anything pertaining to bodily or erotic love, which is conspicuous by its absence (with one exception, a story called “Repentance without Sin” from 28.10.1956 that tells of two people who fall in love with each other’s picture, but here the only act of physical tenderness between the two, a kiss, lead the girl to fall into a depression). In these texts, transgression consists in stepping over the wishes of family and society, and involves a broad debate on the moral conflict between one’s own aspirations and those of society. This debate remains strictly within the limits of heterosexual romance, however.

It is worth making a final remark, on anonymity. I mentioned earlier that the majority of the texts are more about feelings than they are about people, and so the lack of information about ethnic, class, geographical, or religious backgrounds goes hand in hand with the generally blurred image of the characters’ individual identities. True, the texts had to fit into one or two columns, and needed to be concise, but the fact remains that information of this kind was clearly not prioritized. The crucial point to underline here is that this choice allowed the text to be extremely intimate and utterly impersonal at

one and the same time. Dramatic events were disclosed, but they were staged and acted out by unidentified and unidentifiable characters who sometimes more resembled caricatures. One might infer that anonymity was the only way to talk about dramatic feelings, tragic events, and intimate relationships.

If one compares these texts with biographies – in particular those from the literary tradition of the *Tabaqat* – the reason behind the anonymity strategy becomes obvious (Sharkey 1995, and one example: Wad Dayf Allah 1930). The *Tabaqat* were written in the form of praise for the lives of illustrious individuals (who were mostly men), and the type of information offered stressed their intellectual and/or religious achievements, which justified their inclusion in these anthologies. In the *Tabaqat*, intimate information of all kinds was rigorously kept outside the narrative because it was inappropriate for the genre. Intimate relationships and feelings could therefore only be revealed and discussed if they were not associated with recognizable individuals, and conversely visibility and recognisability meant that it was impossible to discuss intimate matters, and more generally to use words that might cast shadows over a person's reputation. It did happen, of course, that politicians were attacked personally in some newspaper articles, but the intimate remained firmly out of bounds. In *al-Saraha*, conversely, the intimate could only be evoked in an impersonal form: stories were disembodied and individuals caricaturized, so that people could recognize themselves and feel at a comfortable distance from them at the same time.

#### *CONCLUSION: LOVE IN SUDANESE SOCIETY*

In historical sociology, the classic interpretation of the rise and spread of romantic love is that it went hand in hand with the growth of individualism and the atomization of community relations, the process of rationalization of state institutions, the rise of nationalism, and the reorganization of production, which in the West meant industrialization. In short, romantic love was a synonym for modernity (Giddens 1992). While the historicity of the thesis has been much criticized, its core tenets remain unshaken (Lantz 1982). In this light, the texts I have reviewed add nuance and complexity to that interpretation.

The main question underlying the texts is what kind of love is more modern, in line with the newspaper's mission to 'awaken' and educate people to modernity, development, and Marxism. Is it the individualistic, romantic version of socially unregulated love, or is it the love that only marriage can generate, a love as a form of sharing and community-making, sanctioned by society, but also one that is not (self-)destructive, love "without ruins" that also goes hand in hand with other form of social progress?

In most of the stories, the characters are caught between a desire for romantic, individualistic love and the social pressures that make it impossible. The man who has to leave his first love and the educated girl who agrees to

marry the man who studied in Oxford both take the decision not to challenge the social order as expressed by the desires of their families. They do so because they cannot bear the break-up of social relations that rebelling against their families would entail. The price to be paid for their choice is high, however, because they lose their own integrity and suffer a spiritual death. In the highly political atmosphere of the time, and in such a clearly politically-oriented newspaper, one cannot help thinking that these two versions of love also carried a political subtext. As Jo Labanyi (2004, 234) has noted in the context of Spanish Romanticism, “Romantic love... has a combative quality, allowing it to stand for political rebellion by signifying individual free choice in a world still determined by birth rights”. In other words, romantic love bears the marks of revolution.

And yet these texts do not argue that people should defy social norms outright; on the contrary, those who challenge these norms must suffer even more. For instance, the girl who commits suicide has not only annihilated herself, but has also set herself outside the rationality of the community, in which everybody concludes arranged marriages. The choice of individualism always leads to disaster.

A person who is caught up in a romance is torn between two forms of love. The first consists in the intimacy and affection that one owes oneself in order to love the other (as in Sufism, in which God loves himself by loving the human being, so that romantic love implies a sense of love for the self), while the second is the love, intimacy, and affection owed to the other (the family, society, etc.), which is also necessary in order to love oneself. It is as if we were looking at two concepts of the theory of affect competing with each other: the Halbwachsian concept (all emotions are regulated by social norms, and we carry society within us; see Halbwachs and Granger 2014), and a more Massumi-Deluzian concept (affects are those impulses that break the structure and are uncontrollable, irrational, and illogical: see Massumi 2015).

The complexity of these texts lies in the way in which they reconcile the two positions rather than oppose them. Indeed, the crucial point that needs to be understood is that accepting society, or at least finding a form of compromise in relation to it, does not mean moving from a state of being in love to a state of being without it. Family and society are not described as being external to love or as lacking love, intimacy, or emotions; on the contrary, they lie at their very core. It is out of love for her father that the educated girl marries the man who studied at Oxford. A daughter who obeys her father is obeying a relationship that is invested with love and conceived as a loving rapport. It is just that the two types – love of one’s family or society and love of the man or woman of one’s choice – seem to be irreconcilable. For *al-Saraha*, the reason for this is to be found not so much in the nature of romantic love in itself, but rather in how society functions – or rather, malfunctions.

In the years when these articles were being published, Sudan had just gained independence and, as we have seen, a variety of issues was troubling

the young nation. Many intellectuals believed that the most formidable challenge to modernization and nation-building consisted in entrenched social norms and 'backward traditions'. International models of alternative gender relations were circulating widely at the time: Sudanese intellectuals were certainly heavily exposed to the global spread of romantic companionate relationships through the radio, cinema, foreign novels and so on, and this went hand in hand with models of the changing situation of women in the West that emphasised their role in economic production and how equality between men and women was being achieved. In addition, the Marxist ideology that inspired newspapers such *al-Saraha* also placed gender at the heart of its struggle, as witnessed by the number of articles in *al-Saraha*.

The editors, journalists, and readers of the paper were sharply aware of the gap between these ideals and the situation in Sudan, however: the point was not only to give women more rights; it was also to reform society so that there could be a closer match between personal freedom and social injunctions. In other words, the moral sub-text of these stories was not that individuals had to disobey society, but that society *as a whole* had to be reformed. Only by reforming it could the two forms of love, of oneself and of others (family and society, that is), be harmonized.

The final point to be noted is that while individuals were waiting for society to be more in harmony with their own desires, the optimal solution suggested by the majority of these texts was neither to accept and surrender to it nor to abandon it, but rather to find a middle way by using one's own inner freedom and intimacy to adopt what we might call *adaptation by resistance*. In "First Love", for instance, the man opts for an arranged marriage, but he also decides to write his own story and make it public as a lesson for future generations (and indeed he mentions that his sister married the man she loved); similarly, the girl who renounces her femininity finds a middle way between refusing and accepting what is imposed on her, which seems to be the best possible solution for her in the end, while at the same time putting the people around her on notice that she will not bend to *these* social norms. In this form of semi-concealed resistance, which always implies forms of silent personal sacrifice, a person imperfectly seeks to cope with the two irreconcilable forms of love I have cited above.

In these texts, the thesis of the emergence of romantic love as a symbol of the atomization of society does not seem to work. The idea that they seem to be seeking to convey from a structural standpoint, in line with the pedagogical aims of the newspaper, is that the road to happiness is paved with collective effort, and that it is only by working hard to achieve progress, by sacrificing oneself in the present to focus on development and modernity, that romantic love might eventually triumph.

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