



Islam and cultural identity among the Berti of Sudan¹

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Abstract

Focusing on the Berti of Sudan, this article assesses the role of Islam and Arabism as important variables in the social construction of cultural identity of the studied people. In line with most relevant recent literature, the author looks at cultural identity as a social construct, a dynamic ideology of shifting borders and a historical process that is grounded on diachronic social formation. The article argues that the present Berti identity is a conscious reflection of their subordinate position *vis-à-vis* the kingdoms and states which have dominated Sudan over the past few centuries.

Who are the Berti?

The Berti live in the northern Darfur Province of the Republic of Sudan. Their land extends roughly from line 13°44' to 14°34' N and from line 25°16' to 56°17' E. Other smaller Berti communities have established themselves in various other parts of the country.

The Berti live in small permanent villages and practise a combination of hoe cultivation and animal husbandry. Millet is the main crop although other crops like sorghum, sesame, peanuts, okra and hibiscus are also cultivated. Animals kept by the people include goats, sheep, cows and camels (for more details on economy see Holy, 1973; El-Tom, 1997).

Until several generations ago, the Berti spoke their own language which belonged to the middle Sahara language group. Since then, they have evolved their own brand of Arabic as a mother tongue.

The Berti are Muslims and like all Muslims in northern Sudan, they follow the Maliki school of Islamic law. Public sacrifices and rituals are common features of Berti life. These are religious sacrifices for health, rain, rites of passage, misfortunes and public festivities. Technical religious knowledge required for rituals accompanying these sacrifices comes from local religious leaders known as *fugara* (sing. *fekki*; see El-Tom, 1982, 1988; Holy, 1991).

The Berti and Islam

The year 1317 A.D. was a turning point in the history of Christianity and Islam in the Sudan. The king of the hitherto Christian Nubian Kingdom converted to Islam. The conversion was officially launched by changing the royal church into a mosque (Hassan, 1973, p. 125). This incident was not the start of the infiltration of the Arab Muslims into the Sudan but a result of it. The influx of the Arab nomads and traders was sanctioned by the historical Non-aggression Pact between the already Muslim Egypt and the Christian Nubian Kingdom (Hassan, 1973, pp. 114–115). It was, however, not until the fourteenth century that the penetration of the Arabs into the sultanate of Darfur, in the Berti area, was reported (O'Fahey, 1980, p. 5). This report took the form of official complaint to the Muslim King of Egypt (Hassan, 1973; see also Hassan, 1977).

Recent sultanates of Darfur (1650–1916), of which the Berti were a part, also attracted many migrants from Muslim west Africa. Their position on the pilgrimage route to Mecca was significant: many migrants did not proceed beyond them, while others settled there on their way back from Mecca. Unlike the bottom-up adoption of Islam in Nubia, the new religion here was adopted first by the kings of Darfur and then spread downwards. Reminiscent of modern Sudan, religion was used by the ruling dynasty as a basis for legitimacy. This process of early Islamisation of the dynasty is best expressed by the legend of the 'wise stranger' who came and married into the ruling family:

“. . . the supersession of the Tunjur by the Keira [royal lineages] is ascribed to Ahmed al-Maqur, Ahmed 'the ham stringed': An Arab from North Africa. . . . Ahmed was hamstrunged by his brother after a quarrel over the latter's wife, but was rescued from the desert and taken to the Tunjur King, Show Dorshid. Show is portrayed as

¹This paper is based on a number of fieldwork visits carried out during the 1980s and 1990s. Visits were confined to Berti rural area and may not do justice to urban centres. The author is grateful for comments made by staff of Kimmage Mission Institute, Dublin, for whom this paper was originally written. The author also benefited from comments made by K. Beck and R. Seeseman of the University of Bayreuth, in addition to those of the three anonymous reviewers of GeoJournal.

a mysterious and tyrannical ruler, feared by his subjects; Ahmed won his favour and his daughter by introducing new and more civilised ways – for example of eating” (O’Fahey, 1980, p. 123).

The myth of the wise stranger is not unique to the Fur people. Fairly similar versions are reported from among the Sudanese of the Nuba Mountains (Trimingham, 1968, p. 135) and they exist among the Berti as well. Indeed many Muslims as well as Christians across the world exhibit myths of similar structure (cf. St. Patrick of Ireland). The wise stranger of the Berti is Mohammed Yanbar (also Janbar, meaning big turbaned), the ancestor of the ruling Basanga lineage. This lineage continued to supply Berti kings until the present time. According to the story, Janbar is said to have been dispatched from Mecca specially to convert the Berti pagans single-handedly. The Berti were then ruled by their ancestor, the giant, Namudu. Close to the border of the Berti territory, Yanbar secluded himself for seven years meditating in the desert. Having successfully strengthened himself by seclusion, he resumed his journey to meet his host, the giant Namudu. Yanbar was armed by the most potent of all arsenals, the power of God, derived from the Koran and the tyrant Namudu became both passive and cooperative. It did not take Janbar long to impress his host by his skill and wisdom. His superior wisdom was soon demonstrated by many values and practices which he advised; most notably by changing the method of eating which put an end to the scourge of hunger which had bedeviled Namudu and his subjects. In their communal meal times, the Berti used to wait for the dishes of food to be brought from different houses in the village. Each time a dish was presented, the people rushed and consumed the food and waited for the next dish to arrive. As a result eating times were interrupted by periods of waiting. More importantly, the food was never blessed as grace was never said. Despite the vast amount of food consumed, the community always remained hungry. Yanbar did not like the habit and eventually intervened. His first task was to make everybody wait until all the food was brought. He then taught the people to say grace before partaking in the food: ‘In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate’. The urge to attack the food also became redundant; the manna looked abundant for everybody. This advice made a significant difference. It was that between a full belly and continuous hunger. Everybody was satisfied for the first time and plenty of food was left at the end. Namudu was most impressed by his guest. His immediate reward was to appoint Yanbar as a chief over all his subjects. There was, however, a hurdle to cross; Yanbar had to join the royal lineage if he was to qualify. For this, Namudu offered him his daughter to take in a pagan marriage. Yanbar was agreeable but only if the marriage took place following the sunna, i.e. the prophetic way of taking spouses. In essence, this is the introduction of Islamic marriage, in opposition to the hitherto, abduction of sexual partners. To copper fasten the new rules and values introduced, Yanbar had to establish a Koranic school and teach the locals the Koran and the Islamic way of living. The conversion process was well under way but was not yet complete. Justice could only be restored

by getting rid of the tyrant, Namudu. For this, Yanbar resorted again to his religious power which had served him well before. It was not very long before the giant conceded defeat and was forced to evacuate the area. He headed west, perhaps to the very same mysterious destination from which he had originally come.

This Berti narrative shows remarkable parallels with its Fur counterpart. Despite the difference in names, contexts and motivations, the structure of the text is the same. In both, there is a wise and just intruder crusading against a chaotic and despotic tyrant. The wise stranger originates in Mecca, with all its symbolic attributes: holiness, lack of ambiguity and association with the east which is the most auspicious direction for the Berti (Holy, 1983). After all, it is to the east that one turns for prayers, converts animals into hallal meat and is oriented in the grave at death for eternal rest. Namudu’s place of origin is, on the other hand, ambiguously located in the west. The saviour belongs to the ‘appropriate’ religion while the host is an unbeliever with all the connotations of the term. The intruder has a definite genealogy while that of his host is obscure and mysterious. The wise man draws his authority and hence power from God while the tyrant depends on mundane physical repression for domination. Lastly, through blessing and organising food consumption, the intruder was able to eliminate hunger which dominated the reign of his predecessor.

The intruder is assimilated into the society of his host in two basic ways: firstly, the values of the wise man regarding group action, eating, marriage, learning the Koran, saying prayers, etc, prove superior and are therefore adopted by his hosts.

Secondly, the pedigree of the wise man is adopted and his marriage into the ruling lineage enables him to be claimed as an ancestor. Again the marriage of the wise man is important in at least two respects: firstly, it provides the ruling lineage with legitimacy and therefore with reverence afforded to a dynastic royal family. Such is the case with the Keira of the neighbouring Fur (O’Fahey, 1980, p. 123) and the Basanga of the Berti. Secondly, it gives Islam a strong hold which favours its adoption by the subjects. There is indeed ample evidence of kings enforcing the spread of Islam. The fact that Islam subsequently became the religion of the ruling elite made the new ideology more appealing to the masses.

Islamisation of western Sudan went hand in hand with the Arabisation of the people. The dual process – which is still advancing – is far from being unique to the western region of the Sudan and is common to many areas of the northern Sudan (O’Fahey, 1980, p. 123; see, Hassan, 1966, p. 122) where many ethnic groups have been incorporated into the Arab kinship system, despite the limited size of Arab immigration into the country. Among the Berti, the claim to Arab ancestry is, more or less, open to its alleged 99 lineages.² Many Berti claim to have copies of written pedi-

²To insist that there are 99 lineages among the Berti is to go for a static way of looking at divisions within an ethnic group. The number of these divisions should be taken as in a continuous process of fission and fusion. The importance of the figure 99 perhaps lies more in its symbolic importance as an auspicious figure. For example, God is known to have 99 names in Islam. The list of these names can be heard recited by children in Koranic

▲ Mohammed (the prophet);
 ■ Fatima = ▲ Ali;
 ▲ Shareef Hasan;
 ▲ Shareef Jafar;
 ▲ Shareef Ismael;
 ▲ Shareef Abdalla;
 ▲ Shareef Hasim;
 ▲ Shareef Nasralla;
 ▲ Shareef Khalid;
 ▲ Shareef Zein El-Abdeed;
 ▲ Shareef Mohammed;
 ▲ Shareef Abi Bakar;
 ▲ Shareef Khaleel;
 ▲ Shareef Idrees;
 ▲ Shareef Mohammed (used to donate a quarter
 of his fortune to the poor every year);
 ▲ Shareef Hashim;
 ▲ Shareef Hasan;
 ▲ Shareef Jamal El-Deen;
 ▲ Shareef Ahmed;
 ▲ Shareef Mohammed;
 ▲ Shareef Ali;
 ▲ Shareef Abdellateef;
 ▲ Shareef Abdelwahab;
 ▲ Shareef Ibrahim;
 ▲ Shareef Haj (pilgrim) Mohammed Yanbar;
 ▲ Shareef Toar;
 ▲ Shareef Nasralla;
 ▲ Abdalla;
 ▲ Eesa;
 ▲ Salim;
 ▲ Amara;
 ▲ Ishag;
 ▲ Ali;
 ▲ Tom;
 ▲ Abdalla;
 ▲ Osman.

Figure 1. A Basanga pedigree. The document reads: 'This is the pedigree of Osman Abdalla El-Tom, his brother Mohammed Saleh Abdalla El-Tom, and their sisters Ashaya Abdalla El-Tom, Medinna. . . , Hajja. . . and Halima. . .' Some of the names are followed by comments or nicknames. The Pedigree ends as follows: 'Son of Shareef Hasan son of Imam Ali who was the father of Hasan and Hesain and who were the sons of our prophetess Fatima El-Zahraa; the daughter of the prophet Mohammed. . . , with whom the pedigree ends'. (Symbols: ■ woman, ▲ man, = marriage alliance.)

grees but I managed to obtain only two different pedigrees belonging to the Basanga and the Sharafa (also known as kashirto) lineages. Some members of the Sharafa lineage are particularly obsessed with their written pedigrees and probably have more copies in circulation than any other lineage in the area. Their name indicates a claim to direct genealogical connection with prophet Mohammed whose ethnic group was referred to as Sharafa as well.³ The Basanga similarly claim to be Sharafa though they rarely stress it as their 'cousins', the members of the Sharafa lineage, do. This perhaps relates to the position of the two lineages in the Berti political structure. The two lineages are narrated to have

schools as well as formal schools. The prophet, too, has 99 names which are also learnt, though to a lesser degree. Moreover, the rosary chain used for prayers also consists of 99 units of beads.

³Others say that this lineage is known as Kashirto and has only recently assumed its new name Sharafa. Its claim to Arab ancestry is an exaggerated pursuit of what is open for all other lineages of the Berti. This is indeed a sensitive issue which culminated into a court case in the area only a few decades ago.

had an old accord which was designed to reduce tension between them which was precipitated by their rivalry over the political leadership of the Berti. The agreement gave the Basanga full authority over political affairs in return for their withdrawal from religious leadership. On the other hand, the Sharafa were accorded full power in the religious domain on condition that they would not interfere in the political leadership of the Berti. The accord was soon to be used by the two lineages for their political and religious domains respectively. To this day, the Basanga emphasize their Bertiness to enhance their political legitimacy while the Sharafa stress their prophetic origin which consolidates their religious position. The written pedigrees support the version of the oral history that the two lineages share a common ancestor (see Figures 1 and 2). Yanbar of the Basanga is said to have been accompanied, or elsewhere, followed, by a cousin called Shareef Dawazain (also Dawazaid), the ancestor of the Sharafa. Dawazain is located only 8 generations above the present one in the Sharafa pedigree. A gap of a few generations occurs when we compare this with Yanbar who

- ▲ Mohammed (the prophet)
 ■ Fatima = ▲ Ali;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Ali;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Hesain;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Zein El-Abdeen;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Mohammed El-Baqir;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Jafar;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Ismael;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Abdullahi;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Hashim (who talked to a gazelle and milked it by the power of God);
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Mohammed Abi Labba;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Nasr El-Deen;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Khalid;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Zein El-Abdeen (a third of his wealth went to other Muslims every year of his life);
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Mohammed, who followed four sects simultaneously;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Abu Bakar (he was a saint);
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Khaleel;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Idrees (famous for his memorisation of the entire Koran);
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Mohammed;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Gureesh;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Hashim (a quarter of his wealth went to the poor);
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Husein;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Mohammed;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Jama El-Deen;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Ahmed;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Mohammed;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Ali (nicknamed El-Tayib, the son of the man who fled from Mecca to Medina);
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Mohammed Dawazain;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Tahir;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Mohammed;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Malik;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Tomain;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Hesain;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Adam;
 ▲ El-Sayid El-Shareef Mohammed El-Hesain.

Figure 2. A Sharafa pedigree. The document reads: 'Khaleefa Omer said: learn your pedigree so that you maintain contact with your relatives'. (Symbols: ■ woman, ▲ man, = marriage alliance.)

is placed 11–13 generations back in the pedigree. The common ancestor in the two pedigrees is four generations above Yanbar and only one generation above Dawazain. Above this point, the two Pedigrees merge together into the same line of names. They are, however, far from being identical and a few names are either added, omitted or differently spelt. The pedigrees connect the living people with the prophet 34–37 generations above. My reference to only two different pedigrees should not imply that other similar documents do not exist in the area. Moreover, many Berti claim Arab ancestry in the orally transmitted account of their history, a fact which carries equal analytic weight. This of course indicates a strong correlation between Islamisation and Arabisation. Indeed the Berti often speak about the two processes as if they were synonymous. This can best be attested to with reference to their conceptualisation of circumcision. Some scholars claim that the practice was introduced in the Sudan by Muslim Arabs and/or accorded an Islamic attribute afterwards (Lewis, 1966, pp. 52, 68; El-Tom, 1996). Alternative

terms used for circumcision could be translated as: 'to Arabise' (*yaarib*) or 'to usher the novices into the prophetic way of life' (*yidakhillum fi el sunna*).

The connection between Islam and Arabisation is indicative of two distinctive ideals: to be an Arab and a Muslim. This is clearly shown in geomancy in which the Berti portray their neighbours of the four cardinal directions. Two indices are used to describe these neighbours: Firstly, their ritual cleanliness, symbolic of their piety as prayers necessitate continuous ritual ablution (*wadhu & ghusl*). This is in opposition to ritual impurity in the absence of prayers and by implication lack of ablution. Hence, a group can be described as (ritually) clean or dirty (*tahir* or *nigis*).

Secondly, a group is assessed according to its intelligibility indicated by its fluency in the Arabic language. Thus, those who speak Arabic are regarded as intelligible (*mu-fatiheen* lit. intelligent, open-minded). Those who do not, are simply *tugoom* and *mugaffaleen* (dull, stupid, blocked-minded). It is not the geographical centrality of the Berti

and their land which is important. Rather, it is their ethnocentric election of themselves as arbitrators of others around them. In their assessment of others, it is those to the east of Berti and who are in effect the power holders in the Sudan who score positive on both accounts. In some sense, this may indicate acknowledgement of the power appropriated by this group in modern Sudan. Equally, this may highlight the Berti's aspiration to identify with their culture which is propagated by the state machinery as 'the national Sudanese culture' per se (El-Tom, 1993).

Appropriation of Islam did not result in uniformly Muslim societies. As noted by Geertz, various societies we refer to as Muslim exhibit only a few characteristics in common (Geertz, 1968). Deviation from Islamic orthodoxy defined in local, national or universal terms appears to be stronger in Muslim black Africa (see Holy, 1991). As Morsy put it, the Islamic religion in African societies is a fusion of orthodox beliefs and practices belonging to the indigenous pre-Islamic religious systems (Morsy, 1978, p. 109). The appropriation of Islam by any societies including the Berti, is necessarily syncretic in the sense of selective localisation of certain elements of the new religion (see Shaw and Stewart, 1994).

In Berti society, adherence to Islam is emphasized more at the collective than at the individual level. Islamic rituals are enthusiastically performed when they are collective in nature: festive prayers and rituals accompanying marriages, rain-making, funerals, naming ceremonies, to mention but a few. At the individual level, Islamic rituals are grossly neglected. This is clear in the case of the Muslim daily prayers and ritual ablutions. Only a handful of individuals in each village, mostly of the upper cohort, perform their daily prayers. In sharp contrast to this, the two annual festive prayers of pilgrimage to Mecca and the end of the fasting month of Ramadan are attended by the whole adult sector of village populations. This is despite the orthodox rule which accords the individual daily prayers higher importance than the festival prayers. The former are enforced by the Koran and theologically classed as (*farad*), i.e. obligatory rituals. The latter are mere imitation of the practice of the prophet (*sunna*) and are not obligatory. The proclaimed adherence to Islam sometimes involves reinterpretation of certain religious rules. The majority of the Berti villagers live on home-made millet beer which forms the greater part of their daily diet. Most of them are prepared to go into elaborate details justifying the status of this beer with reference to Islamic laws. Some argue that the alcohol forbidden in the Koran belongs to the category of the locally distilled spirit and does not include millet beer. Others see its lawfulness as contingent on its local production and acquisition; in other words, it is perfectly legal when it is procured by lawful means. It is also argued that the process of its production includes cultivation of millet which is in itself seen as a religious practice. Again some see the consumption of beer as legal so long as it does not induce the drinker to cause trouble to other people. As the beer contains a low level of alcohol, it is often assumed that it rarely causes drunkenness anyway. These views have now been challenged by the new

Islamic laws which are gradually gaining ground in the area, particularly in urban centres.

The Berti have to some degree adopted the Islamic lunar calendar. Nonetheless, their system of time reckoning is still cyclical since it is only the month and not the year which is known. The fast of the month of Ramadan is enthusiastically observed, especially by men. Non-observance of fasting is believed to invite misfortune on the whole community. The attribution of a collective status to an individual action can also be noticed in the case of homicide. It is normally settled by a collective payment of *diyya* (blood money, see Holy, 1972). The *diyya* represents a collective acceptance of the responsibility which should, according to orthodox Islam fall on the individual killer (Lewis, 1974, p. 108). The payment of religious dues (*zakat*) and alms (*sadaga*) are more or less observed by the Berti. Failure to pay them is known to decrease wealth as well as to incur the inevitable punishment after death. To withhold them is not only a crime but a sin.

The last part of the Islamic creed enjoins upon the believers the obligation of the pilgrimage to Mecca, if they have sufficient means. The Berti have little enthusiasm for making the pilgrimage compared to Muslim West Africans. Unlike the Berti, the West Africans do not accept the long distance to Mecca as an excuse. Even though a pilgrim acquires a title and a status for himself/herself when he/she fulfils the duty, this is much less of an incentive for the Berti than for the Muslims in West Africa. The pilgrimage to Mecca is often substituted by a visit to a local shrine or tomb, as is generally the case in northern Sudan and some other Islamic areas. There are no famous tombs in the Berti area and few Berti make the effort to visit shrines in other parts of the country. There is, however, an insignificant number of local shrines which are visited by some people. Most of these shrines are of unknown saints.

The sex division of religion whereby men are more Muslim and women are more 'pagan' has been noted in Muslim Black Africa (Trimingham, 1968, p. 46). Islam shows a tendency towards masculinity whereby men enjoy a certain degree of monopoly, particularly in regard to its public facets (see Lewis, 1986; Holy, 1991). This holds true to a very large extent also for the Berti. Village women do attend the prayers performed for the two annual festivals. Their attendance is, however, poor compared to that of the men. They neither attend the rain and misfortune rituals, nor do they participate in prayers performed at burials, deaths and marriages. With regard to the individual daily prayer, they are the least proficient in performing it. In theory, girls are welcome in the Koranic schools. Their number is, however, comparatively low and confined to those below the age of ten (see El-Tom, 1982). It is perhaps possible to argue that women offset their marginalisation in Berti Islam in other ways. They remain the reservoir of the pagan cults which prevail parallel to Islam. These are the rituals classified by the Berti as customary rites (*aada*) or occasionally superstition (*sanam*). These rites are performed at various stages of millet cultivation and life crisis and rites of passage. Lewis in his work among the Somalis regards the attraction of women to these cults (for example *zar*) as a form of response

to their exclusion from other public rituals (Lewis, 1966, p. 64). An interesting duality exists in the administration of divination and the treatment of illness by the Berti. The Islamic geomancy co-exists side by side with other methods of divination, notably, the use of cowrie shells and trance possession. The former is dominated by men and sourced in Islamic texts while the latter is dominated by women and with less claim to have a religious origin. Koranic medication performed by learned religious healers is a mere alternative to herbalism practised by illiterate rootmen.

The confinement of women to the backyard of the house, a feature identified with Islam, is observed by the Berti to a lesser extent than in many other Islamic societies. Still, Islam has left its mark on Berti house architecture. There is always a separate area for women in a house. Yet, their separation does not exclude them from the majority of social activities. They cannot be regarded as socially dead in the way Gilson describes the Lebanese women he studied (Gilson, 1982). Women work jointly with men in fields, markets, water delivery, etc.

Premarital pregnancy is frequent and does not create the enduring stigma that is attached to it among the Arab Bedouins. An illegitimate birth is certainly regretted but the child's illegitimacy is soon forgotten. In contrast with the Islamic code of practice, a fine and an oath are sufficient to settle cases of adultery. This is now coming under increasing pressure from the new Islamic laws which were introduced since 1983 but have not been fully implemented in the area.

Peripherality and the Arab–Islamic identity

The drive towards Arab–Islamic identity cannot be understood without recourse to the subordinate position which the Berti occupied throughout their documented history of the region. Since the 13th century, the Berti have always been under hegemonic power of kingdoms, colonial states and more recently under the post-independence governments of riverain Sudan. Throughout, the Berti sought empowerment through their increased incorporation into the Arab–Islamic world. Various kingdoms of Darfur from 13th century onwards, prospered from their connections with the Arab–Islamic world. The Muslims brought a wealth of state administrative skills aided by literacy and a unifying faith. In short they were among the earliest agents of modernity. Darfur kingdoms remained in touch through their caravan trade routes to Egypt, and their annual contribution to the refurbishment (*kiswiyya, mahmal*) of the holy mosque in Mecca (Hassan, 1977, p. 212).

The Turko-Egyptian rule over Sudan (1821–1885) further consolidated this process. Sudan became a part of the Muslim empire and a source of immense wealth to the coloniser. It is here that we learn that the merit of converting to Islam goes beyond redeeming one's own soul. It was narrated that the Turks ordered their slave traders to set free all captives who turned out to be Muslims and confine future raids to 'pagan areas'.

The Mahdi's rule of 1885–1898 again leaned on both Islam and Arabism as a source of legitimacy. The Mahdi

was not merely a Messiah and later a saint, he was also a direct descendant of Prophet Mohammed, a Shareef. The Mahdist state adopted a rigorous implementation of Islamic law across the state. This era also witnessed an intense power struggle between inhabitants of northern and central Sudan (riverain Sudanese) and the westerners (gharraba) whose origin is in the western provinces of the country. The struggle was further fuelled by the very fact that the Mahdi's deputy and later successor (Khalifa) himself was a westerner and had maintained power via the support of his fellow region men. Surprisingly, the Khalifa remained a gharraba in the eyes of the riverain Sudanese despite the fact that his ethnic group was much closer to those in riverain Sudan in their Arab cultural orientation.

The crushing defeat of the Mahdist state by the Anglo-Egyptian/British forces (1898–1956) paved the way for the domination of the riverain Sudanese over others in the country. It is the riverain Sudanese who were to assist the colonial power and later to succeed them in running the country after independence (1956). The entire state machinery was to become a hegemonic base for riverain Sudanese, most notably in politics, administration and military domains. The spoils of the inherited decision-making structures of the state were further translated into economic capital, thanks to the riverain Sudanese merchants (Jallaba) who monopolised trade throughout the country and spearheaded the spread of riverain lifestyle (see Beck, 1998; Manger, 1994). The new era also witnessed an evolution of the riverain Sudanese culture as a microcosm for the whole nation. The entire state machinery (law, economy, education, arts, media) was mobilised to impress upon the nation the new identity. Diverse groups of north and central Sudan were to be approximated into a single monolithic stream informed by Arabism and Islamism. Through a mixture of mythology and manipulation of 'facts', the children of the new nation are inspired to look to the holy land across the Red Sea for their history, heritage and creed. This evolves into a fundamental strength of Islam over the Christian faith. Through the western control of its upper echelon, the latter remained a religion of the outsiders, propagated by Europeans rather than near and distant ancestors. In mid 1980s, a Sudanese Minister for Culture and Information ordered the management of Sudan National Museum to be true to their history.⁴ The Museum was to be reordered to show just that. Several historical objects, many of early Christian and Nubian Sudan, were removed in favour of new Islamic artifacts.

The division of Sudan into two cultural entities is certainly a simplified picture of a much more complex reality. The dominant ethnic group(s) represent in fact a collection of several diversified cultural and linguistic groups. The claim to a truer Arab ancestry is perhaps what earned them the term *Awlad Al-Arab* (children of the Arab). Their domination over the country is further reflected by the widely used term *Awlad Al-Balad* (children of the country). Monopoly over Arabism and indeed power went hand in

⁴The Minister was Abdalla Mohammed Ahmed whose affiliation to Muslim 'fundamentalism' earned him several important posts in the current Sudanese government of Al-Bashir.

hand with the deprivation of the others. These include many but most notably the Gharraba, the southerners, the Nuba, the Beja and the Ingessana. In themselves, they are of diverse cultural origins, unified only by their relative exclusion from power. The fact that many of these dominated groups are Muslims and are well versed in Arab culture hardly matters:

“While the Western regions of Darfur and Kordofan compare similarly well to the south in terms of unequal access to education and other services, this fact has over the years being covered under the blanket of common Muslim religion and Arabic culture. When signs of unrest and political protest were expressed during the mid 1970’s in demand mainly for more equality, this agitation was suppressed as being mainly racist” (Ibrahim, 1989, p. 40; quoted in Harir, 1994).

The very construction of the national identity on the bases of Religion and Arabism is problematic in its differential availability to all in the same country. While the Berti can flaunt their connection to Islam and Arabism, many others cannot. The ‘pagan’ and Christian southerners are a case in point. Their retention of African cultures and their pride of African origin make it untenable and often undesirable to identify with the chosen national identity. Increased emphasis on Islamism in recent years made it even more difficult to forge alliances with Muslim groups who do not fit into the riverain Sudan identity. It is these latter groups who have borne the brunt of the recent policy code-named ‘the Comprehensive Call to Islam’ which underpinned Al-Bashir’s government’s commitment to Sharia laws. This Campaign aims at completing the Islamic project of the government through (a) religious indoctrination, (b) general favouritism for supporters of the Campaign, (c) mobilisation for Jihad against government opponents and (d) isolation of Christians, pagans and non-supporters (see Salih, 1995, p. 75).

The Berti are perhaps more fortunate compared to those who are more marginal within this project. The Comprehensive Call foisted upon them aims at and is restricted to ensuring their conformity to the government brand of Islam. More importantly, they are also mobilised through the same Campaign to enforce Islam on others and hence the call for ‘Jihad’ against the infidels. Battalions of volunteers known as Popular Defense Forces fight the now ‘Jihad’ war alongside the government’s formal army. ‘Jihad’ as portrayed by the government propaganda is a holy war whose Godly reward is infinite. Muslims who die during ‘Jihad’ are declared martyrs, often seen in holy dreams decorated by henna, reminiscent of Sudanese weddings, and surrounded by beautiful and ‘albeit virgin’-mermaids of heaven (see Sultan, 1997).⁵ Their enemies are not so fortunate. They simply perish (*yahlaku*) in war and end up in hell. Many men from the Berti area have participated in these ‘holy wars’. While some might have been enticed by the translucent heavenly mermaids, many others have been whipped to war through the government efficient carrot and stick mobilisation tactics.

⁵Henna is used during wedding celebration by both the bride and the groom. Its use here indicates that the martyr is wedded to the heavenly mermaids.

The Comprehensive Call Campaign is also instrumental in many other fields in the area: Its members organise preaching through their wandering learned men, form Koran study groups and rename schools and classrooms after historic Islamic figures. Through multiplicity of committees in all communities, agents of the Comprehensive Call also act as informants in all matters concerning the application of ‘sharia laws’.

Conclusion

The myth of Namudu and his Arab visitors affords us great insight into the way the Berti subscribe to history in their rationalisation of their current identity. A point of caution is due at this stage. In as much as it subscribes to the past, myth as a form of narrative here should be seen as an account of present Berti reality whose principal tenet is an aspiration to be a part of the grand Arab Muslim world. Past and present power dynamics in the area hardly dictate otherwise. Throughout, the Berti alluded to ethnicity as a cornerstone for forging their cultural identity. The process involves both defining their own boundaries and legitimating alliance with others; in particular the dominant sector of the state. Three basic points are important here with regard to ethnicity and identity construction: Firstly, the formation of Berti cultural identity is a continuous process that is highly responsive to outside influence. To look at ethnicity as a dynamic process rather than an invention of the past is nothing new although it has often been missed in relevant literature; a point which has been raised by many others (Storey, 1997; Class, 1995; Stephen, 1996). The case of the Berti indeed depicts ethnicity as an ideology that is continuously shaped by interactions within a wider state, both colonial and post-independence (Storey, 1997; Class, 1995; Stephen, 1996).

Secondly, ethnicity here is a cultural construct and a flexible ideology rather than a product of biological reproduction. Some may, however, feel more comfortable to treat biological reproduction itself as no more than socially manufactured perception.

Thirdly, the mere presentation of ethnicity as a construct which is continuously in the making and unmaking presupposes a rejection of ethnicity as, to borrow O’Brien’s words, ‘an immutable primordial entity’ (O’Brien, 1986, p. 898). The rejection of reification of ethnicity lends support to its treatment as a dynamic formation of shifting borders. In that, the emphasis of ethnicity as a historical process, grounded on diachronic social formation, should be paramount (O’Brien, 1986, p. 898; Eriksen, 1991).

Islam occupies a prominent position in the Berti construction of identity. It provides meaningful ways of knowing the world and of interacting both within the group and with the others. It is a venue into modernity and a ticket for entry into and acceptability in the dominant riverain culture (see Seesemann, 1998; Manger, 1994). The acquisition of Arab-Islamic identity has been gradual but incessant. Over several centuries, every single state, of which the Berti were a part, contributed to their increased Islamisation. The British colonial rule was no exception in this regard. It

protected them against the incursion of missionaries, formalised the teaching of Arabic and codified Islamic rules in family laws governing marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc. Enforcement of a tighter version of Islam has, however, been intensified in recent years, following the post-1983 governments. This has left its mark in different aspects of Berti life: most notably the consumption of alcohol, dress codes for women, observance of prayers and more recently involvement in Jihad. While recent Islamic and cultural policies may be seen as an attempt to homogenise the Muslim part of the Sudan, their impact on the unity of the whole nation is bleak. Among others, these policies have widened the divide between the Muslim and non-Muslim segments of the nation.

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