THE ARABIC WRITINGS OF
EASTERN SUDANIC AFRICA

AN OVERVIEW

The Spread and Use of Arabic

The history of the coming of the Arabic language to eastern Sudanic Africa has yet to be written. The history of the language is, of course, a function of the spread of Arab immigrant groups, nomads and others, into the area from at least the late seventh century onwards, a process largely unnoticed in the historical record (see further, Hasan (1967)). The immigration of Arabic-speakers, in whatever number, was the prelude to a slow and continuing process of Arabisation and Islamisation throughout the region, as far as Lake Chad and beyond. The first stage was the slow undermining between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries of the Christian Nubian states along the Nile by the immigrants, and of their religion and language; a process which may be symbolised by the Arabic inscription dated 16 Rabi‘ I 717/29 May 1317 recording the transformation of the church in Old Dongola into a mosque.

Away from the Nile Valley, the slow infiltration of Arabic-speaking nomads led to the coalescence of camel and cattle-keeping tribes north and south of the central savanna zone by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (see further, O’Fahey (1980), 3-8, and Braukämper (1992), 25-57 and 82-134). The same centuries also saw the emergence of large multi-ethnic states across the savannas. The Funj Sultanate with its capital at Sinnar, Darfur, Wadai and Bagirmi were states that were at least nominally Muslim (for an introduction to the Funj and Darfur, see O’Fahey and Spaulding (1974)).

By the seventeenth century much of the region was involved in long-distance trade, either across the Sahara or through the savannas. The states of the region established commercial links with Egypt and North Africa which led in turn to the growth of trading settlements throughout the eastern bilād al-sūdān. Because of these trade links, both international and inter-regional, Arabic gained ground as a lingua franca, while Islamic Law and a concomitant literacy increasingly regulated trade and diplomacy.
Islam and Literacy

The immigrant holy man has conventionally been regarded as the main agent of both Islam and the use of Arabic in eastern Sudanic Africa. A number came from West Africa on their way to the holy cities; others came from Egypt or Arabia. In fact, most holy families of the area claim a “Wise Stranger” origin, as do most of the ruling families (Holt (1973), 121-33).

Holy men (called faqih, or more colloquially faqi, with the anomalous plural, fuqarā’, but precisely drawing attention to their role as Sufis who were learned in fiqh) received grants from the local rulers of tax-exemptions or landed estates. By the eighteenth century, many of these grants were being recorded in charters written in Arabic; such charters are among the earliest surviving written records from the region (see O’Fahey and Abu Salim (1983) and Spaulding and Abu Salim (1989)). The holy men established mosques and schools (masjid and khalwa; al-Tayyib (1991) is a detailed study), where Arabic and the elementary Islamic sciences were taught. The level of literacy diffused by the khalwas is a matter of dispute, but they certainly served to enhance the status of Arabic as the language of religion and learning vis-à-vis the indigenous languages.

In contrast to Islamic West Africa, Arabic became the most widely spoken language in the region (it is the mother tongue of at least 60 per cent of the people of the Sudan Republic). Arab immigration and closer proximity to Egypt and Arabia appear to be the main factors accounting for the difference in this respect between the western and eastern bilad al-sudan. Thus, by contrast to Hausa and other languages in West Africa and Swahili in East Africa, there is no significant writing in local languages using the Arabic script. Indeed, Nubian ceased to be a written language as Arabisation and Islamisation took hold.

Relatively little research has been undertaken on colloquial Arabic in the region. As a result it is difficult to make any reliable generalisations about dialectical differences within the region. The general features of colloquial Arabic in the modern Sudan are reviewed in Hillelson (1935), xi-xxiv and Qāsim (1409/1989), 247-387. ‘Awn al-Sharīf Qāsim has produced a comprehensive dictionary (2nd edn., 1405/1985), while Stefan
Reichmuth has published a detailed study of the Shukriyya dialect (1983). There are a few studies of the Arabic dialects of the Chad region (see Carbou (1954) and Kaye (1976)).

The Beginnings of the Literary Tradition

Eastern Sudanic Africa has been regarded as “poor” in Arabic writings by comparison, for example, with Islamic West Africa. Lack of research is the main reason for this impression; this is particularly so for the Muslim areas of modern Chad and the Fezzan.

Even in the study of the Nilotic Sudan, most scholars, Sudanese and non-Sudanese alike, know and make use of basically only two pre-colonial indigenous texts, the so-called “Funj Chronicle” and the Kitāb al-tabaqāt fī khusūs al-awliyā’ wa’l-šāliḥīn wa’l-‘ulamā’ wa’l-shu‘arā’ fī ’l-Sūdān (“The Generations of the Saints, the Pious, the Learned and the Poets in the Sudan”), by Muḥammad al-Nūr b. ʿAbd Allāh (1139/1726-27-1224/1809-10). The K. al-tabaqāt has been learnedly edited by Yūsuf Faḍl Ḥasan; its uniqueness as to genre within Sudanic Africa, the vitality and idiom of its language and the light it throws on all aspects of the Sudanese religious class, albeit within a limited geographical range, all make it a prime candidate for translation into a European language. The “Funj Chronicle”, of which there are at least twelve known manuscripts located in such diverse places as Nottingham, Cairo, London, Paris, Vienna and Istanbul as well as Khartoum, covers in its various recensions the Turco-Egyptian period (1820-85) more fully than the Funj Sultanate (1504-1820). The Funj Chronicle is a complex document whose stemma has yet to be fully worked out; a proper edition, and hopefully a translation, is a major task for Sudanese scholarship.

The studies by Trimingham, Holt and others of Sudanese Islam have tended to underscore the rural, popular Sufi, and in a sense almost anti-intellectual, character of the Sudanese religious class. In general, this characterization may well be true, but the author of the K. al-tabaqāt did elect to include in his work the ‘ulamā’ or “learned”. Out of 270 biographical notices, some twenty-five holy men are noticed as authors. Overwhelmingly, their works are commentaries (sharḥ) or
glosses (ḥāshiyah) on such standard texts as the three ‘Aqā’id of Muḥammad b. Yūṣuf al-Ṣanūsī (d. 892/1486), the Mukhtasar of Khalīl b. Ishāq (d. 776/1374) or the Risāla of Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 386/996). How original these writings were is not known, since no systematic study has been made of those works still extant. The earliest surviving works date from the seventeenth century (see Chapter One). Of these early works that are still in existence, there are glosses on the theological epitomes of al-Ṣanūsī by Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Muḍawwī (c. 1040/1630-31–1090/1683-84) and a work by Arbāb b. ‘Alī b. ‘Awn (d. 1102/1690-91) that has seemingly survived only in West Africa. In other words, we know that there was a tradition of writing tawḥīd and Mālikī fiqh in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Sudan, but the nature and context of that tradition has yet to be determined. The basic work of locating, listing and editing these manuscripts has yet to be begun. A question to be investigated is when and how did the Mālikī School come to dominate the region. For the seventeenth century and earlier there is some evidence of a Shāfī‘ī presence; by the end of the eighteenth, the Mālikī School was entirely dominant, except in Sawākin, which remained steadfastly Shāfī‘ī. However, from what little is known already, the tradition does present something of a paradox; the Sudanese holy men of the eighteenth century and before are described by later writers (e.g., Trimingham (1949), 111-20) as living in a world of “popular” Sufism, but they wrote mainly on fiqh – only two or three titles that are indisputably on tasawwuf are listed in Chapter One.

The Nineteenth Century

The paradox lies in that with the imposition of Turco-Egyptian colonial rule in 1820 and onwards, the Sudanese religious class were theoretically more open to the “orthodox” influence of al-Azhar through the Azhar-educated religious bureaucracy the Egyptians imposed. In reality, 1820 does not represent any great turning-point in Sudanese religious and cultural life. Outside intellectual impulses were becoming significant at least a generation before the invasion; for the Sudan the crucial years were between about 1800 and 1820. The acceptance of these impulses may be linked to the emergence of a new urban
or quasi-urban trading class and with the breakdown of the Funj political order, as has been suggested by Jay Spaulding (1985). That Spaulding’s analysis is on the right track may be suggested by the absence of such new impulses both within the Darfur Sultanate which retained its political cohesion until its destruction by al-Zubayr in 1874 and in Wadai until its conquest by the French.

The breakdown of the old order in the Nile Valley precipitated or was the result of a growing Arab and Islamic consciousness (see McHugh (1986) for a detailed discussion). This found literary expression in the production of elaborate genealogical works designed to situate the Sudanese within a new Islamic Arab past (see Chapter Two). It is striking that very few such writings have been found in Darfur or Wadai.

The colonial regime in the Nile Valley (1820-85) did produce a modest literature written by Sudanese and other officials. Perhaps its greatest achievement was the consolidation of the earlier historiographical tradition represented by the “Funj Chronicle”. This quasi-colonial chronicle tradition in the Sudan may be compared to a similar tradition represented by the various versions of the Fezzan Chronicle (Chapter Two).

The key change in what was to be a literary explosion, in both popular and scholarly writings, in the nineteenth century came from what may be termed, the internationalization of Sudanese Islam, both in terms of Sudanese scholars going abroad to study under the intellectual giants of the day, and the coming of representatives of new forces within the Muslim world to the northern nilotic Sudan. Both channels served to integrate local Sudanese Islam into the wider Islamic world (see further, Hofheinz (1992-93)).

Representative of the first channel was the mosque-school of the Āl ʿĪsā at Kutrânj on the Blue Nile; Ahmad b. ʿĪsā al-Anṣārī (d. 1241/1826) studied in Cairo with the Mālikī jurist and Khalwatī shaykh, Ahmad al-Dardīr (or al-Dardayr, d. 1201/1786) and the lexicographer, Muhammad Murtadā al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1791). In Mecca, he was initiated into the Sammāniyya ṭarīqa and studied with the noted West African scholar and reforming muḥaddith, Ṣāliḥ al-Fullānī (d. 1218/1803; see Hunwick (1984)). Al-Anṣārī wrote a commentary on the briefest of al-Sanūsī’s theological epitomes, al-ʿAqīda al-ṣuḫrā, as well as another work on tawḥīd.
The spread of the Sammāniyya order to the Sudan under the Sudanese scholar Ahmad al-Ṭayyib w. al-Bashīr (d. 1239/1824) was another example of a Sudanese going out into the wider world and bringing back new impulses. But the Sammāniyya was only the precursor for the spread of a number of other orders or brotherhoods that were to dominate the devotional life – and thus the writings – of the Northern Sudanese in the nineteenth century and beyond. The new orders were organised on a much more centralised and hierarchical basis than the clan-based holy men, of vaguely a Qādirī or Shādhi persuasion, of the century before. All the new orders, Khatmiyya, Ismā‘iliyya, Majdūbiyya, Rashidiyya and several others including the Sanūsiyya in the central Sahara – with the exception of the Sammāniyya and Tijāniyya – were influenced by the great Moroccan mystic and muhaddith, Ahmad b. Idrīs (1163/1749-50-1253/1837). Despite the alleged easier access to al-Azhar brought about by the Turco-Egyptian conquest – a path chosen by some Sudanese scholars – the hearts of the vast majority of the Northern Sudanese were seduced, directly and indirectly, by the teachings and prayers of a somewhat anti-establishment figure, Ibn Idrīs. His form of Islam, with its emphasis on devotion to and guidance from the Prophet and its rejection of the fanaticism of the Schools (ta‘ṣṣub al-madhāhib), seems to have appealed to the Sudanese far more than the rigid adherence to the Schools, taqlīd, current in al-Azhar. Ibn Idrīs himself wrote very little, but he and his prayers initiated a pan-Islamic literary tradition, of which a major part was to be found in eastern Sudanic Africa.

What did these new impulses signify for Sudanese literary production? It seems possible even at this stage and with only a limited amount of research having been undertaken to discern several trends. One relatively unexplored area is popular religious (madiḥ) and other poetry. Very little poetry has been preserved from before 1800; thereafter, the volume grows dramatically until the Mahdist Revolution of 1882-85. The study of this corpus, both its form and content, would reveal much about the interaction between the classical and colloquial forms of the language and on the main themes of popular spirituality.

Another trend was the emergence of a tradition of writing within the new brotherhoods that lasted over several genera-
These three were not unique; all the brotherhoods, both old established affiliations such as the Qādiriyah and the new orders produced (as they still do) an extensive literature to cater for the needs of their adherents. The didactic nature of this literature is well illustrated by the writings of the founder of what became geographically the most widespread order in the region, the Sanūsiyya, Muhammad b. ʿAlī al-Sanūsī (d. 1276/1859). Al-Sanūsī, the senior of Ibn Idrīs’s students, established an order in Cyrenaica whose lodges were to spread to the oases of the central Sahara as far south as Wadai. The Sanūsiyya were to spearhead resistance to the imperialist designs in the region of the Italians, French and British. Al-Sanūsī’s writings include several major studies on the question of *ijtihād*, a history of the various Idrīsī dynasties as well as numerous works for the brethren of the order (Chapter Seven).

The pioneer of the Sammāniyya tradition in the Nilotic Sudan, Ahmad al-Ṭayyib, wrote extensively on *tasawwuf* including a commentary on Ibn ʿAtāʾ Allāh al-İskandarı (d. 1309), *al-Hikam*. Only one of Ahmad al-Ṭayyib’s numerous sons appears to have been an author, although several of his pupils were. However, a grandson, ʿAbd al-Mahmūd Nūr al-Dāʾim (d. 1915), was a prolific author, of whose works a substantial number have been published. ʿAbd al-Mahmūd succeeded his father upon the latter’s death in 1286/1869 as head of the Ṭabat branch of the Sammāniyya. He joined the Mahdist cause in 1883, but later fell into disfavour with the Khalīfa who had him imprisoned. After the Mahdiyya he returned to Ṭabat. He is said to have written histories of both the Mahdī and the Khalīfa, but these have yet to be located. His writings include *Azāhir al-riyāḍ*, a major study (384 pp. in the Cairo edn.) of his grandfather and his pupils and a work comparable to Muhammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Sammān and numerous commentaries.

The literary tradition within the descendants of Ahmad al-Ṭayyib has flourished ever since at the various Sammānī centres in Omdurman, Ṭabat and elsewhere. The Qarbiyya branch in Omdurman, whose present (1993) Shaykh is Dr. Ḥasan Muhammad al-Fāṭih Qarīb Allāh, has been
particularly effective in adapting the Sammāniyya tradition to a modern urban context.

A final Sammāni figure and one of great significance within modern Sudanese literature is Muhammad Ṣaʿīd al-ʿAbbāsī (1880-1959), a son of Muḥammad Sāḥif b. Nūr al-Dāʿīm. Al-ʿAbbāsī represents an important stage in the development of modern Sudanese poetry; much influenced by developments in modern Egyptian poetry and active in the Graduates Congress in the 1930s and 40s, nevertheless his poetry consciously reflects his Sammāni Sufi background.

The same progression from Sufi writing to modern literature is strikingly illustrated by the Majdāhib family of al-Dāmar (Chapter Ten). The Majdāhib holy family were given a new direction by Muḥammad Majdūb b. Qamar al-Dīn (d. 1247/1831), who accompanied Muḥammad ʿUṭmahān al-Mīrgānī to the Ḥijāz and who was an esteemed companion of Ahmad b. Idrīs. The Majdāhib were not only prominent as Sufis; members of the family served as ṣādīqūs and teachers throughout the central and eastern Nilotic Sudan. Muḥammad al-Tāhir b. al-Tāyyīb (1248/1832-33–1307/1890) was to play a key role in mobilising the Beja nomads of the eastern Sudan in support of the Mahdi. The tradition of scholarship and writing among the Majdāhib has produced several significant modern representatives, among them the poet Muḥammad al-Mahdī al-Majdūb (1919–1982) and Professor ʿAbd Allāh al-Ṭayyīb (b. 1921) who is well known in the Sudan and beyond as a poet, mufassir and teacher.

Perhaps the student of Ibn Idrīs who had the greatest longterm impact on the Nilotic Sudan was Muḥammad ʿUṭmahān al-Mīrgānī. Member of a prominent Ḥijāzī family, already well known in the Muslim world of the mid-eighteenth century through the career of ʿAbd Allāh al-Majjūb al-Mīrgānī (b. 1119/1707-8, d. 1207 or 1208/1792-94), Muḥammad ʿUṭmahān undertook a missionary journey to Sinnār and Kordofan between 1815-21 that tied much of the Nilotic Sudan to the school of Ibn Idrīs. Soon after, he established his own order, the Khatmiyya which spread to much of the northern and eastern Nilotic Sudan as well as Eritrea, the Yemen and Egypt. Muḥammad ʿUṭmahān was a prolific writer who is perhaps best known in the wider Muslim world for his Qurʾānic commentary, Ṭāj al-tafsīr. His descendants were able to consolidate the order’s position and to avoid fissiparous
tendencies; in this century, they used the order as a basis for a political party, the Democratic Unionists, which has played (as it still does play) a major role in the politics of the Sudan Republic. Of the turuq whose writings are listed in the present volume, the Khatmiyya together with the Sanūsiyya have perhaps played the most overt political role in the region (Chapter Eight).

The tight organisational control of the Mirghanīs over the Khatmiyya may be contrasted with the other branches of the Idrīsī tradition, the Rashīdiyya, Dandarāwiyya and Jaʿfariyya as well as local schools established by students of Ibn Idrīs or students of his students (Chapter Six). But one general effect of the new orders was to force the older affiliations, Shadhiliyya and Qādiriyya based on holy families with primarily local allegiances, to redefine and reassert themselves. The resultant literature is listed in Chapter Eleven.

Like the leaders of the Majādhīb and Rashīdiyya, Ismāʿīl al-Walī (1792-1863) represents what may be termed the indigenization of the Idrīsī tradition in the Sudan. Descended from a Jaʿali holy family settled in Kordofan, Ismāʿīl al-Walī was initiated by Muḥammad ʿUthmān al-Mirghani when the latter visited Kordofān in 1816. Some ten years later, he formally broke away from the Khatmiyya and established his own tariqa, the Ismāʿiliyya, which became an active missionary order based on central Kordofan. What is striking is the literary activity of Ismāʿīl al-Walī and his immediate descendants; he himself wrote at least sixty-three works, tafsīr, tasawwuf, fiqh, madh, and works on the tariqa itself. His son and successor, Muḥammad al-Makkī (1822-1906), who lived and died within the Sudanese Sufī tradition, wrote less (fifteen titles), but on similar themes. Another son, Aḥmad al-Azharī (d. 1882), chose the Azharī path; he studied at the mosque for twelve years before returning to teach in al-Ubayyid. Among his writings are a genealogical history of his family, poetry in praise of his father’s pacification and forcible conversion of some Nuba villages in south-central Kordofan, and a refutation of the claims of the Mahdi. A prominent later member of the family was the first Prime Minister of the Sudan Republic, Ismāʿīl al-Azharī (1900-69).

Another member of Ismāʿīl al-Walī’s family, Ismāʿīl b. ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Kurdufānī (d. 1897), also provides a link to the Mahdiyya, in his writings on the Mahdi and the military tri-
umphs of the revolution. Muhammad Ahmad, the Mahdi, as a scholar leading a revolution wrote on specific topics for specific purposes. But the volume of his writings is very substantial; over a thousand letters, proclamations and the like have survived (see Chapter Twelve).

The Mahdiyya released an outpouring of literature; in defence or condemnation of the Mahdi; popular devotional poetry, and a variety of memoirs and apologias (see Chapters Four and Twelve).

The study of the Arabic writings of the eastern bilād al-sūdān is still in its infancy. The sheer size of the region and the scattered nature of settlement away from the Nile Valley make the registration and collection of material arduous. However, enough is now known to suggest a complex and diverse tradition of local scholarship which was (and is) responsive to impulses from the wider Muslim world.