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**Race, Discrimination, Slavery,  
Nationalism and Citizenship in  
the Afro-Arab Borderlands**

With particular reference to the Sudan

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# Race, Discrimination, Slavery, Nationalism and Citizenship in the Afro-Arab Borderlands

## With particular reference to the Sudan

Kwesi Kwaa Prah

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### Introduction

This paper attempts to historically trace and raise issues concerning tensions in the Afro-Arab Borderlands, (with particular reference to the Sudan) which are generally avoided in public discussions because too many people regard these issues as sensitive and unsuitable for discussion in polite company. They are however issues which in the light of the establishment of the African Union, the implications and goals of this institution, the ideals implicit in the creation of this institution and the historical tensions in the Afro-Arab Borderlands, are matters whose discussion cannot be wished away or indefinitely postponed.

We need to remind ourselves of the fact that, in the historical experience of Africa, two major forms of dominance have been nationally imposed. The first of these was the cultural and political imposition arising out of the Arab conquest of North Africa which started in the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. with the *Hejira*. The second over-lordship has arisen out of Western expansion and conquests and is of much later vintage mainly dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The conquest of North Africa by the Arabs was a slow process, which has been steady over the centuries. Apart from the political implications of conquest, perhaps even more important and in many ways more socio-culturally consequential has been the process of cultural denationalization of African communities in the face of Arab conquest and over-lordship, and the replacement of African cultural institutions by Arabic ones. Possibly the most notable and far-reaching of these cultural denationalization experiences has been the case of the Berbers/Tamasheq in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. The culture of the Berbers/Tamasheq and the language of the people suffered subjugation and denigration from very early in the history of the Arab/African encounter. Recent conflicts, protests and demonstrations in Algeria highlight the historical plight of Berber national culture in the face of Arabization and dominance. In a news item put out on the BBC on Sunday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, 2001, the Algerian President Bouteflika during a visit to President Bush in the US announced that his government will give greater cultural rights to the Berber. But possibly nowhere in the Afro-Arab Borderlands is the problem of race, class and citizenship in such high tension between Arab and African (or possibly Arabized Africans and Africans) as the Sudan and Mauritania. These two countries are frequently in the news for these reasons, but indeed the problem and scenario is enacted in other countries in the region including Libya, Mali, Niger and Chad.

The situation in Mauritania is beset with nascent conflict.<sup>1</sup> The history and tradition of African enslavement by Arabized moors is old and has persisted to the present day.<sup>2</sup> In his own ornate language, writing in 1955, Gunther points out that, the Moors, "in the olden days were avid and successful slave traders; every year they descended into Senegal, and reaped a crop of human loot".<sup>3</sup> Slavery was abolished by the French in 1905. A second abolition was proclaimed with the independence constitution of Mauritania in 1961. It has however continued and the tensions arising out

of the enslavement of Africans in Mauritania has frequently threatened the peace between Mauritania and Senegal. This former French colony of 2 million people probably contains the world's largest concentration of chattels. In 1993, the U.S. State Department estimated that up to 90,000 blacks live as the property of North African Arabs (known as *Beydanés* or white Moors). Other sources add 300,000 part-time and ex-slaves, known as *haratins*, many of whom continue to serve their owners out of fear or need. The local anti-slavery group *ElHor* ('The Free') estimates that there are as many as one million *haratins*.

It is frequently forgotten that Christianity predates Islam in the Sudan. Francis M. Deng reminds us that :

Christianity entered the scene in the sixth century and was able to establish kingdoms that survived for a thousand years. But the intervention of Islam in the seventh century set in motion a process of gradual decline for Christianity. This decline culminated in the eventual overthrow of the Christian kingdoms in 1504 by an alliance of the Arabs and the Islamized kingdom of the Funj, whose origin remains obscure, but is known to have been "Black" as its Arabic name, *El Saltana El-Zegra*, "The Black (meaning Black) Sultanate" reflects. (Among the Northern Sudanese, the word "black" is never used to describe people since it is considered insulting to call a freeman black that being the colour associated with the slave race.) In due course, Islamization and Arabization gained hold in the North and eventually overshadowed the preexisting indigenous and Christian elements.<sup>4</sup>

In this day and age, with a fundamentalist Islamic regime firmly in power in Khartoum, it is difficult for people to imagine that Sudanese society had a Christian, pre-Islamic ancestry. Some years ago, in a conversation with one of the leading Sudanese archeologists who had fled the Sudan and was based in exile in Cairo, I was informed that the regime is so anti-intellectual and obscurantist that it tried to suppress scholarship about pre-Islamic Sudanese culture, much in the same way that the Taliban regime in Afghanistan treats pre-Islamic Buddhist culture. Deng adds that :

Although the process of Arabization and Islamization in Northern Sudan was persuasive, it should be noted that it was carried out in a context of a racially stratified society that deemed the Arab people and their culture superior and the African Blacks and their belief systems inferior. The Arabs were propped up by military conquest, supported by material wealth, and elevated in status by the universal image of Islam and Arab civilization. In contrast, the Black African was considered, an active or potential slave, the downtrodden of the earth. Many Black Africans in the North converted to Islam because, by simply uttering the formula : "There is no god, but the (One) God and Mohammed in his Prophet," they suddenly became freemen and respectable members of the community. For many, the motivation to do so was irresistible. To the new members of the Muslim identity, which was associated with the Arabic language and culture, the sense that they had been promoted into a superior class was more than religious or cultural; it developed into a gift of birth and descent, assumed and sometimes fabricated, ultimately a belonging to the Arab race. Over the centuries, these elements evolved eclectically, embracing indigenous races, customs and practices, but retaining the emphasis on the Arab-Islamic umbrella as the uniting feature of the community and ultimately of the emerging nation-state. The stratification

and the discrimination remained, however, and would continue to demean the non-Arabs and non-Muslims.<sup>5</sup>

Since August 1955 an armed struggle is being fought intermittently in the Sudan. In Africa its only rivals in duration have until recently been the Eritrean armed resistance which was inaugurated in September 1961, and the Angolan civil war. The early beginnings of the African nationalist insurgency in the Sudan can be traced to the Torit Mutiny of 17th August 1955, when members of the Equatoria Corps garrisoned in Torit revolted against the military authority of the ending Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, then officered by Arabist Sudanese. This happened within months of the transfer of state power from the Condominium Administration into Sudanese hands on the 1st January 1956.

After the collapse of the mutiny, armed resistance emerged at various points in the South. Rebel units under Latada and Paul Ali Gbatala operated as separate insurgency groups on both the east and west banks of the Nile. Until the early 1980s, Ali Gbatala's unit operated in Western Equatoria. However by 1959, the initial force of the armed resistance had been spent. The fires of armed rebellion seriously rose again in 1963 with the emergence of *Anya Nya* then under the leadership of SANU (Sudan African National Union). Through various turbulent stages of evolution, the war was brought to a major lull by the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972. While most of the African nationalist insurgents led by Joseph Lagu agreed to the peace of Addis Ababa, some elements under Gordon Mourtat Mayen, Ali Gbatala, and others rejected the agreement. Ali Gbatala continued the armed struggle, Gordon Mourtat Mayen and Aggrey Jaden remained in exile as political and historical representations of continued rebellion.

With the explosion of the Akobo Incident in 1974 when the integration process of former *Anya Nya* units into the national army broke down, the fires of war increased in intensity. The *Any Na* Patriotic Front surfaced out of small beginnings in the Adobo Incident and formed under the political leadership of Gordon Mourtat Mayen until 1981.

While the Addis Ababa Agreement brought for almost ten years some measure of peace to the South, in hindsight, the 1970s appear more as a period of armistice than a durable peace. The Nueri regime which ruled over the peace of Addis Ababa increasingly flaunted and rescinded the terms of the Agreement and willy nilly propelled the Sudanese state into the fiery vortex of a full scale civil war, by 1983. Since the early stages of the renewed insurgency, the resurgent armed resistance, in the main, has been led by Dr. John Garang. There was a faction led by Okot Atem (later eliminated by the Garang faction) based mainly in Nuerland, this group claimed roots from the Mourtat Mayen wing of the resistance. Over the past five years, other fissures have appeared in the camp of the resistance, with the emergence and growth of what has come to be known as the Nassir faction, which today represents the main group contending the leadership of the African nationalist resistance in the Sudan. Over the past two years, two major Nigerian sponsored peace conferences have been held in Abuja without success in resolving the conflict. The Nassir faction is fighting for separation of the Southern Sudan from the rest of the country. Until fairly recently Garang had insisted that the war is for the liberation of the whole of the Sudan from the hands of 'the Khartoum clique'. There are indications that Garang's wing is currently rooting for a confederation.

Why has the Sudanese conflict so far eluded substantial peace? This question can be partly understood in terms of the inability of the warring parties to achieve a political and constitutional arrangement which would resolve the contradictions on which the civil war is premised. The dominant feature of these contradictions is the national question in the Sudan, a situation in which an Arab minority controls state power; dominates the armed forces, the civil bureaucracy, the political elite, commerce, trade, banking, and the judiciary, and orders these instruments of state power towards

a spoken or unspoken policy of Arabization of the African national majority. But complicating matters further has been the discovery of oil on a massive scale in the south of the country.

Since the end of the Second World War, more specifically since the Juba Conference of 1947 African nationalist opinion has largely defended the idea of a federal arrangement which will recognize the African majority. This has been repeatedly rejected by successive Sudanese regimes. The Addis Ababa Agreement gave some room for African national self-expression in the constitutional form of Southern Regional Autonomy but the looseness, and fragility of the constitutional edifice led to a steady erosion of its basis by the Numei regime which as time went on increasingly pursued a policy of divide and rule, and constant dismantling of the Addis Ababa Agreement, and Arabization.

### **The National Question**

According to the only Sudanese census which gave a count of Arab and African in the Sudan, only 39 per cent of Sudanese regard themselves as Arab.<sup>6</sup> In spite of this fact the Sudan is regarded by most international bodies to be part of the Arab World. This oddity is on account of the fact that the prevalent character of the Sudanese state is Arabist. The Sudan in national terms is a minority-ruled state. In a crucial political sense that creates comparisons with the erstwhile white minority-ruled South Africa and Namibia in Sub-Saharan Africa, however limited the scope of these comparisons may be. It is ironical that this comparative perspective of South Africa and the Sudan is noted by the former South African White parliamentary opposition leader Van Zijl Slabbert.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the two cases provide classic examples of settler-colonialism.

In Mauritania, the African and Arab proportions of the population is also constantly in dispute. While African observers claim that the majority of the population is African, the Arabs make opposite assertions.

In Chad, Niger and Mali the preponderance of the African populations are rarely disputed. The nomadic character of these Sahelian countries further complicates definitive assessments of population sizes and African/Arab proportions.

The Sudanese conflict is often explained as simply a regionalist confrontation. This view is as erroneous as the suggestion that it is largely a religious conflict. While the problem bears both regionalist and religious dimensions, those features of the conflict belie the more fundamental character of the contradiction which is that the Sudan is largely made up of Africans who are homogeneously more concentrated in the South where their cultural features are also less Arabized. The Southerners have to some degree been Christianized but most lean more profoundly on their traditional African cosmology and ritual. In the north most of the nationalities have to a great degree been Islamized but again here Africanist beliefs are not uncommon, particularly among the Fur, Fung and Nuba. It is in the north that the African cultural traits have been most diminished and replaced by Arab culture. In many areas of the north, African languages are slowly perishing in the face of Arabizing forces and influences. The Beja who have historically resisted Arabization are increasingly being Arabized. The Funj, Nuba, Messalit, Zaghawa and Fur, remain largely conscious of their African national identity. However, of all the African nationalities of the North, it is particularly among the Nubians that claims of Arab identity is most rampant. Another irony here is that before the penetration of Arabs in Nubia, this area of the Sudan had been Christianized; from earlier beginnings, by 543-580 AD, Christianity had established preeminence over purely African religious practices, and indeed Christianity then became the official religion.<sup>8</sup> As recently as 1742 pockets of Christian communities were reported to be in Nubia.<sup>9</sup> Although today many Nubians claim Arab nationality, in as much as they have been culturally Arabized, it is noteworthy that structural linguistic similarities exist between the Nubian languages of the Nile basin particularly Dongolawi and Mahas, and the

languages of the Nuba Mountains, some of the smaller African nationalities of Darfur, and some languages in the South.

As I have indicated elsewhere, essentially it is possible to classify Northern Sudanese who claim Arab nationality into either one of the two groups. On the one hand the Jaali and the Barabra who are mainly Arabized Nubian riverian cultivators and on the other, the Juhayna who are mainly nomadic groups. Among especially the Jaali Nubian dialects still survive in the face of increasing Arabization.<sup>10</sup>

The Mauritanian case in the Afro-Arab Borderlands has interesting parallels. French and Arabic are widely spoken. Moors in the south speak a dialect of Arabic, Hassaniyyah, while several other African languages are spoken including those of the Pulaar, Soininke and Wolof peoples.

After independence, linguistic Arabization was pursued more doggedly, there was a long dispute between the Moors and the Africans over retaining French as an official language; in 1991, Arabic became the sole official language. The increasing pre-eminence of Arab culture and influence in the economy, politics and social life of the society has continued apace to the present.

The dominance of the Arab minority in the Sudanese political economy is practically defined in conditions of extreme underdevelopment in the South and relatively better development in the North. Class variation has tended to run along the crucial national distinctions. This is particularly noticeable among the elites, with African representation singularly weak among the mercantile and banking elements, judicial, and military brass. The ranks of the lowest menial workers in Khartoum and Omdurman are well represented by Africans.

The need for the dominant groups in Sudanese society to define themselves as differently as possible from African is in some instances reduced to absurdity. For example, as the late African nationalist leader Joseph Oduho (assassinated in March 1993 by Garang's troops) explains:

In every passport given to any Sudanese, whether he be brown, semi-white, pitch-black, it is always said "brown" is the colour. And on my passport it is written that I am brown, and probably if I went one day to Nigeria, they will say, brown? this man! It is one of those things ... that you cannot know until you have lived here a long time to know the real difference between the South and the North<sup>11</sup>

The claim of Arabness in the Sudan carries with it, subjectively a notion of cultural and national superiority.<sup>12</sup> This situation has tended to encourage Arabization.

Historically, in the collective psyche of the African perhaps what has crystallized most uniformly in African perceptions of the Arab is the history of slavery. Abdel Rahman Sule, a Southern Moslem who had been in the forefront of pro-federalist politics in the 1940s and 1950s, recalls his youth early this century.

My father was a chief, the *effendia* who came around our village to kill elephants were Muslims. I used to see what these people were doing. That is how I became a Muslim. In 1927 I was caught with arms from Ethiopia, by then I was already a Muslim. But I was very aware of my Africaness. When I was a kid, if I was woken late in the morning by my father, he would say "If it had been the days of the Ansars you would have been taken". My father always woke me up early so that in his words I am not taken by the Ansars.<sup>13</sup>

The veteran politician Clement Mboro, whose father was an Ndogo Chief recalls that during the 1930s;

There were .... Arab traders and peddlers coming around to trade .... The attitude of the people was one of distrust .... That they were not sincere, they were not honest, they were not to be trusted .... They used to sell us the black people, they used to trade in people .... Thus we grew up with the feeling that they were not friendly, not sincere ...<sup>14</sup>

The inability of post-independence Sudan to meet this history squarely, frankly, dispassionately; treat it objectively and openly on all fora of social activity has tended to exacerbate the Sudanese national cleavage. Oduho is caustic in his remarks.

Well, people usually are not very happy particularly people from the Northern Sudan, of the mention of the slave trade. And one really cannot understand why this should be so .... All the years I was a school teacher, history was out of the curriculum of the Southern Sudan. It was not allowed to learn history ..... When I left the country in 1960, history was not taught. From 1950 to 1960. That entire decade, history was never taught. The history of the Sudan has never been taught in the Southern Sudan. Just to avoid the idea of slavery .... Now they are teaching it, but they skip over it .....<sup>15</sup>

The effacement of the history of slavery in the Sudan does not only in effect deny the Africans in the South access to knowledge of their national history. Equally this denial debases the history of the Northern nationalities. For, as Sir Harold MacMichael explains,

the importation of slave women from the South which has proceeded uninterrupted for centuries, has lent a further measure of spurious homogeneity to all these Nubian people<sup>16</sup>

Few testimonies capture this reality better than the late Sirr Anai Kelueljang's famous poem *My Cousin Mohammed* :

Listen!

You, Mohammed, and I, are not brothers

You're the son of my aunty - you are my cousin!

Long ago your Arab father came; also, he came with the Holy Koran and his traditional ways. But without a mistress for his wife!

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