CHAPTER ONE

ISLAM IN THE SUDAN

A Brief Geographical Introduction

Arab chroniclers writing before the sixteenth century designated the broad stretch of territory of sub-Saharan Africa from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea as bilād al-Sūdān, the land of the Blacks. Thus, the western Sudan included the lands to the south of the Sahara and north of the forest belt of modern West Africa; the central Sudan included the basin of Lake Chad; and the eastern Sudan included the modern-day Republic of the Sudan. This broad geographical designation was adopted by pre-colonial European travelers to the African continent and continues to be used to describe this great belt of territory. The remainder of this book will refer to the area that corresponds to the contemporary Republic of the Sudan as the Nilotic Sudan or as simply the Sudan. The territories extending from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea will be referred to as the geographical Sudan.

Prior to the Egyptian occupation in the nineteenth century, the Nilotic Sudan was divided along linguistic, religious, and cultural boundaries. From the first cataract of the Nile, south of Aswan, to the sixth cataract, north of the intersection of the Blue Nile and the White Nile, was the region known as Nubia, bilād al-Nūba. South of Nubia was the Funj Sultanate located on the Blue Nile. To the west of the Funj Sultanate lay the Sultanate of Darfur. These regions were greatly influenced, due to their geographical location, by the cultures of Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula. Islam—undoubtedly the most important cultural influence—arrived from these two areas and became firmly established in the Sudan.

The Arrival of Islam

The niche that Islam carved for itself in the Nilotic Sudan involved a gradual process that began with the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641. When Alexandria, the last stronghold of Byzantium in Egypt, fell in
Map showing extent of Mahdist influence in March 1895. Reproduced by permission of Durham University Library, SAD 217/2150[MP].