Introduction

There are a variety of discourses that may be used to describe the recent history of the Sudan. One approach would be to discuss developments in the context of the post-colonial state, doubly appropriate in the Sudan's case since the country experienced two periods of colonial rule—by Egypt between 1820 and 1885 and Britain, predominantly, between 1898 and 1956. Both powers and in both periods created the arena and the institutions that, at least for the moment, define the Sudan.

Another obvious way to analyse the Sudan's recent past is to see it as a struggle between different groups for control over resources. Here, 'group' can stand for a state, a religious brotherhood, a political party or a self-identified ethnicity. Conflict in and around the Sudan exists on at least three levels: (1) regional, between Egypt, Libya, Iran, etc. This level of conflict will not be my concern here, but it will, as the conflicts at the other levels intensify, become increasingly important and perhaps in the end decisive. (2) Within the Sudan, between North and South, or between the Khartoum Government and organised rebellion in the form of the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M), and (3) also within the Sudan, interethnic conflict between, for example, Fur and Arab in Darfur, Arab and Nuba in Kordofan, Nilote and non-Nilote in the South.

The present paper seeks to analyse the latter two levels of conflict with reference to the Islamic factor, and by the latter I do not mean Islamisation in the sense that historians of Sudanic Africa have used the term but the organised expression of a specific religious and political ideology, 'Islamism' (Islāmiyya). In the Sudan especially, there is a constant need to remember the distinction between being a Muslim and being an Islamist; if both are labels, they carry very different implications.
To be a Muslim in a Fur-speaking village in Jabal Marra means something different than to be a Muslim in a Ja‘aliyyín village near Shendi on the Nile; to be a Fur Muslim or a Ja‘ali Muslim in Khartoum has yet another significance. In turn, these meanings are different from deliberate adherence to a specific Islamist political ideology.

From one perspective, Islamism, as organised in the National Islamic Front (al-jabha al-Islāmiyya al-qawmiyya), is an expression of a Northern Sudanese ethnicity’s determination to preserve its control over as much as possible of the Sudan, not least the Nile Valley. From its own perspective, Sudanese Islamism is a local expression of the Islamic resurgence, the determination to establish a social and political order based upon God’s revelation.

The coup of ‘Umar al-Bashīr of 30 June 1989, when the Islamists captured the Khartoum Government, has brought all these levels of conflict into the open. The effect of the 1989 coup has been to intensify and clarify the ideological divide between North and South. It has also introduced a new dimension into local interethnic competition over resources which are now increasingly defined in religious and racial terms.

Islam and the riverain Elite

By a Northern Sudanese ethnicity, I mean the riverain Northern Sudanese, i.e. the inhabitants of the Nile Valley between Aswan and Khartoum and those living in the Gezira between the Niles and to the east and west in the savannas. The riverain Sudanese are overwhelmingly Arabic-speaking (with the exception of some Nubians), wholly Muslim and to a greater or lesser degree identify themselves genealogically and culturally as Arab.  

The impact of Islam on the riverain northern Sudan was complex and cannot be simplistically reduced to a model of ‘popular’ or Sufi Islam in contrast to urban Azhari ‘orthodoxy.’ The dominant state of the region between 1500 to 1800, the Funj Sultanate of Sinnár, was both an African ‘divine kingship’ state and an Islamic polity. Under its umbrella, specialised holy clans emerged, who mediated a Sufi-based Islam to the communities they served and who increasingly usurped the functions of the state. The first colonial period (1820-81) coincided (there is no evidence of a causal connexion) with the implantation throughout the northern Sudan of new Sufi brotherhoods, Khatmiyya, Ismā‘īliyya, Rashidiyya etc., most of which stemmed from the Moroccan mystic, Āḥmad b. Idrīs (d. 1837), one of the seminal figures in the