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Sudan

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Introduction

Controversies and debates concerning Sudanese history have always been closely related to the question of national identity and stretch back to the national independence movement in the 1930s. It was mainly the graduates of the British Gordon College,¹ that is, the western-educated northern Sudanese elite, who started calling for a national history to replace the historical accounts promulgated by the colonial powers. After independence, these young men became the country's leading politicians and educationalists. Nationalist ideas in Sudan arose out of the literary movement and therefore permeated the Arabic language, literature, and culture. Gordon College graduates discussed politics in literary salons and published historical essays in the influential literary journals *Al-Nahda* (Awakening) and *al-Fajr* (Dawn); one of them was Makki Shibayka, who later became one of Sudan's leading national historiographers.² The northern Sudanese intellectuals emphasised the strong cultural and historical links between Sudan and the Arab world and focused closely on the history of the northern Nile Valley region. The history of the country's southern regions, and of the northern non-Arabic peripheral regions of Sudan such as Darfur, has been neglected by national historiography. Although there have been many political and educational changes in Sudan since independence from the country's former colonial powers in 1956, the predominance of Arabic and/or Islamic topics within history textbooks has seen little change to this day and remains the subject of heated controversies in all parts of Sudan.

Context/Historical Background

Sudan is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation state that is home to a wide variety of tribes, languages and religious beliefs. Despite this diversity, politicians and educationalists from northern Sudan have insisted, since independence, on introducing Arabic as the sole language of instruction in all parts of Sudan and on teaching the same curriculum, strongly based on Arabic-Islamic history and culture. President Abboud nationalised all schools, including those in the south, in 1957, simultaneously introducing an Arabic national curriculum. The 1957 decree marked the beginning of a policy of Arabisation through education, a policy which has prevailed up to the present day, following only a brief interruption after the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972. The period of peace and limited political autonomy for the south that ensued after the agreement and continued to 1983 temporarily brought the civil war between the north and the south, in progress since 1955, to an end. But even during this time, the history taught in schools was first and foremost the history of the Arabs, northern Sudan and Islamic Africa. A southern Sudanese education expert from the Equatoria district, asked about his school experience, responded: 'I can't remember anything [from] school that [made] specific reference to the local context or Southern Sudan'.³ Southerners were not asked their views on, and had no say in, reforms and changes in education. This was no new experience for the southern Sudanese, as they had already experienced a similar sense of powerlessness during the period of British colonial rule. Their perception of independence was that of a mere shift of power from one foreign master, namely the British, to another, the northerners.

During the Anglo-Egyptian condominium (1899–1956), northern and southern Sudan were subject to administration as separate states; after 1922, the so-called Closed Districts Order regulated and limited the movement of northerners to the south.⁴ Whereas in the north, particularly in the central Nile Valley region, state education was promoted, schools were built and the teacher training college and later curriculum development centre *Bakht al-Rida* was established, education in the south was studiously ignored by the government. The south was isolated and education left to missionary societies.

Those from northern Sudan argue that the separatist policies of the British and missionary education in the south are to blame for planting the 'seeds of separation' between northerners and southerners; one prominent representative of this view is Yusuf Fadl Hasan (see documentation below). Muhammad Umar Bashir is another well-known intellectual from northern Sudan who criticised the Christian missionaries for dividing education and excluding the northern Sudanese Arabic and Islamic culture from education in the south.⁵

Missionaries planted the worst memories of Arab slave raiders in the minds of schoolchildren in the south, collective memories that continue to be passed down to this day.

Southern Sudanese academics, however, take a different view. The most prominent scholar from southern Sudan, Francis Mading Deng (see documentation), admits that Christian missionary education worsened the tensions between north and south. However, this was only possible, he further argues, because of the already existing fear and mistrust among southerners towards the Arabic-Islamic north, a mistrust exacerbated by the fact that, while slavery had been formally abolished in Sudan in 1924, the practice of 'domestic slavery' still continued, with southerners held in such situations in the north.⁶

Southerners, along with some northerners, have expressed the view that the majority of northern historians and politicians have always avoided coming to terms with the Sudanese history of the slave trade. An official at the Curriculum Centre in Khartoum, having been asked why this topic was not addressed in history textbooks beyond a note in the margins, argued that this had been the only way of fostering peace and national unity and that discussing controversial issues like the slave trade in class would hinder the process of building a common national identity in Sudan. Conversely, Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im (see documentation) sees this rejection of responsibility on the part of the north as an inadequate response to the challenge of creating national unity.

The question of national identity has always been a central issue within Sudanese educational politics. From a northern Sudanese perspective, it appears reasonable that Sudanese national identity should be based on Arabic language and culture as well as on Islamic faith, since the ascendancy of Islam and the use of Arabic as a lingua franca date from the rise of the Islamic Funj Sultanate in the early sixteenth century.⁷ The northern viewpoint further perceives the Arabic language and the Islamic religion as necessary tools for the creation of national unity. The religious and cultural diversity of Sudan has always been a threat to unity in the eyes of the ruling elites, who have therefore pursued a policy of racial and cultural hegemony.

During the early period of President Ja'far Muhammad Numayri's rule in the 1960s and 1970s, educational policy was inspired by pan-Arabism and socialism rather than Islam. History textbooks therefore focused on the Arabic world (*al-watan al-arabi*), and attempts were made to create a sense of national unity via the Arabic language and the history of the Arab world. While African history and the rise and fall of East and West African kingdoms were also included in textbooks, the main emphasis was placed on Arab history.

In 1990, shortly after President Omar al-Bashir had come to power, a conference was held on education policy; one of its resolutions was that new curricula and textbooks should be created and that they should be based on Islamic values, Islamic religion and Islamic culture. The textbooks produced in accordance with this resolution, which are still being used today, clearly reveal the aim of the ruling elites to homogenise the ethnically and credally heterogeneous population through the unifying force of Islam. Both southerners and secular northerners deplored the 'Islamic indoctrination' they saw as emanating from the textbooks⁸ (see documentation, Ndole Ndoromo Kumama).

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of January 2005 brought the long civil war to an end; the referendum on the independence of southern Sudan which had been agreed upon in the CPA took place in January 2011. After an overwhelming majority of 98.83 per cent of southerners voted for independence, the [Republic of South Sudan](#) formally declared its independence on 9 July 2011.⁹ The autonomous Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GoSS) includes the Ministry of General Education and Instruction, one of whose central duties is the preparation and development of new curricula for primary and secondary schools.¹⁰ As Mou Mou points out (see documentation), the various curricula and textbooks from northern Sudan and neighbouring African countries can no longer be used in South Sudan; in his view, a specific curriculum for the new country must be developed, which should focus on its own south Sudanese history and society with the intent of making South Sudan 'one nation'.

Does the independence of South Sudan herald an end to 'history wars' or, in the words of Francis M. Deng, to 'wars of vision'?¹¹ Does this mean that struggles over cultural hegemony in Sudan and discussions around whose history to teach in its schools have now come to an end? The answer is no, for a number of reasons. Although Sudan has now become two separate states, both north and south still continue to be multi-ethnic and multi-religious states. There are non-Muslims and non-Arabs in the north, and there are Muslims and Arabs living in the south. Students may continue to feel pressure towards cultural homogenisation even more strongly than before, especially if they now belong to a minority group within their state. Other pre-existing ethnic conflicts, such as the crisis in Darfur, where crimes against humanity have been committed against the Muslim non-Arab population, may now intensify.¹²

As long as Omar al-Bashir remains the president of northern Sudan, no major reforms of the Islamic-based curricula and textbooks in use there are to be expected. But how will southern politicians and educationalists be able to meet the enormous challenge of creating new textbooks and writing their own history for the first time? Keeping in mind that there are very few written

sources on the history of southern Sudan, creating history textbooks appears to be an extremely difficult task.¹³ Unlike other parts of Africa, southern Sudan has historically been very isolated; only very few foreigners, among them Europeans and Arabs, have succeeded in crossing the Sudd, the large swamp 'barrier' region located at the Bahr al-Jabal part of the White Nile.¹⁴ Furthermore, as Feng has put it, 'the complex and intense history of the Sudan indicates that the country is confused in its sense of identity and vision of its destiny'.¹⁵ How can national history be written under such circumstances? Due to the fact that only a tiny number of southerners are educated to university level, it is highly probable that international experts, be they genuinely knowledgeable or self-appointed, and western 'neo-missionary' societies will take charge of or at least be involved in textbook production and the writing of south Sudanese national history—a history that will include difficult elements of the past, such as the history of slavery and the civil war. It remains to be seen whether South Sudan can succeed in promoting peaceful understanding and tolerance through history teaching or whether new history, culture and identity wars will emerge.

Debates/Documentation

The following quotations illustrate a range of different points of view on the function of education within the nation-building process and on the role of history education for national Sudanese identity.

Voices from northern Sudan:

Yusuf Fadl Hasan

Missionaries poisoned the minds of children by teaching them far more about Arab slave traders [than about other subjects] and scarcely anything about the role of Europeans here in the Sudan and in the transatlantic flow of African slaves. Doubtless Islam was badly impaired by the myth of the rapacious Arab traders. Its image was greatly tarnished, especially when [this damaged image] was exploited by Euro-Christian propaganda.¹⁶

Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im

Northern rejection of responsibility for the sins of their fathers, and of the few politicians and Jallaba [traders from north Sudan] who have continued that

infamous tradition [of slavery], is an understandable but extremely inadequate response to the challenges to national unity, political stability, and economic and social justice presented by the southern problem.¹⁷

Muhammad Umar Bashir

Education plays a fundamental and vital role in solving the problem of national unity ... [At the time of independence] students in the north worried about the hostile attitude of students in the south, their talk about the slave trade, and their orientation towards Africa, and not the Arabs, as well as towards the church and the West. Many [northerners] feared that these signs could just be the beginning of a southern secession movement and lead on to the creation of an independent hostile southern state.¹⁸

Voices from southern Sudan:

Francis Mading Deng

Northerners mostly dwell on the separatist policies of the British and especially [their] encouragement of a southern identity based on traditional systems, with the modern influence of Christianity and Western culture ... What they do not realize is that traditional identity and Christian Western influence have combined to consolidate and strengthen a modern southern identity of resistance against Islamization and Arabization. Forced assimilation is no longer possible, if it ever was.¹⁹

Mou Mou

We have different curricula now. We have the Ugandan curriculum, we have the Kenyan curriculum, we have the Ethiopian and we have [the] Sudanese—by which I mean Northern Sudanese—and ours. These things are not unified. Do you think we will be *one nation* with so many different curricula? No, we won't. So one of the challenges facing us is *to unify our curricula*. These different curricula should boil down to *one curriculum for Southern Sudan*. Why? It simply means [that] if we do not have a curriculum where our children will read *our history*, study *our geography*, study *our society*, then it simply means we are producing *non-Sudanese* [citizens].²⁰

Ndole Ndoromo Kumama

What is written in the Sudan[ese] history textbooks is very negligible, as if the people of South Sudan have [had] no stories about their existence since [time] immemorial. Worse, what they recorded and wrote is a cursory register [of wars]. No documentation [has been] done on the life of the indigenous [people of Sudan] and their achievements. The social and cultural aspects of the communities of the south are totally neglected ... Thus, it is very vital and a must for us to include the teaching of social and cultural histories of South Sudan[']s societies, nations and kingdoms in our school curricula and syllabi. Teaching history in the republic of Sudan did and does not build [the] self-image of the learner in South Sudan ... The [current] system of education inculcates and instils to the young mind of the pupil his/her belongingness [*sic*] to the Arab and Muslim world. The learner is constantly informed that Sudan is an Arab Muslim country and that it is [a] spearhead to inculcate and penetrate the Arab Muslim civilization into the interior of Africa.²¹

Conclusion

'Unity within diversity' has been a slogan omnipresent in Sudanese political discourse since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Since South Sudan's declaration of independence, many southerners have placed their hopes on a peaceful future for an independent southern Sudan and the end of Arabic-Islamic hegemony. Will southern educationalists be able to come to terms with the conflict-laden past as part of the process of national identity-building? What will the new history textbooks for southern Sudan look like? How can the balancing act of creating a sense of belonging among the population of the new southern nation state and fostering positive relations with neighbouring northern Sudan succeed? Voices from southern Sudan demonstrate the depth to which feelings of mistrust and anger towards the north have taken root in the collective memory of the south. There is still a long road to travel until these negative sentiments can be dispelled. In 1983, Muhammad Umar Bashir, discussing the educational system in northern Sudan, observed: 'The real crisis that education and culture face in Sudan lies in the gap between what is said and what is done as well as the discrepancy between the written educational goals and strategies on the one hand and their practical realisation on the other hand'.²² It is to be hoped that education in the south will find a way of negotiating and avoiding this gap in its aim of creating national identity and stability.

Notes

1. Gordon Memorial College, founded by General Kitchener in 1902, served as the principal training centre for jobs within the colonial service. It became a breeding ground for nationalist activity among the educated classes from the 1920s until independence in 1956, when it was renamed University of Khartoum. See H. J. Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 50–60; M. S. al-Qaddal, *Tarih as-Sudan al-hadith. 1820–1955m* [History of the modern Sudan. 1820–1955] (Khartoum: Markaz Abd-al-Karim Mirghani, 2002), 463–480.
2. M. S. al-Qaddal, *Tarih as-Sudan al-hadith*, 126. Makki Shibeika/Mekki Shibeika (variant spelling) (1905–1980) received his doctorate in history from the University of London and later became professor of history at the University of Khartoum. He wrote many studies of Sudanese history, including M. Shibeika, *The Independent Sudan: The History of a Nation* (New York: Robert Speller, 1959). See R. A. Lobban, R. S. Kramer and C. Fluehr-Lobban, *Historical Dictionary of the Sudan* (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 254.
3. M. Sommers, *Islands of education: Schooling, civil war and the Southern Sudanese (1983–2004)* (Paris: UNESCO, International Institute for Educational Planning, 2005), 62.
4. See M. O. Beshir, *The Southern Sudan. Background to Conflict* (Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1970), 41–42; D. H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Oxford, Bloomington, Kampala/Nairobi: James Currey, Indiana University Press, Fountain Publishers, in association with International African Institute, 2003), 11–15.
5. M. U. Bashir, *al-Ta'lim wa-'l-wahda al-wataniya* [Education and national unity] (Umm Durman: Markaz Muhammad Umar Bashir li-d-Dirasat al-Sudaniya, 2005), 13. *Muhammad Umar Bashir* and *Mohamed Omer Beshir* are two different spelling variants (Transliterated Arabic and English) of the same name. Muhammad Umar Bashir is a renowned northern Sudanese scholar and should not be confused with Omar al-Bashir, the president of Sudan.
6. See F. M. Deng, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994), 4–9, 69–76. Francis Mading Deng graduated from Khartoum University and pursued postgraduate studies in the UK and at Yale Law School in the US, where he obtained his LLM and JSD degrees. In 2007 Deng was appointed UN Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide.
7. See Y. F. Hasan, *Studies in Sudanese History* (Khartoum: SUDATeK, 2003), 209. See also Y. F. Hasan, *The Arabs and the Sudan. From the Seventh to the Early Sixteenth Century* (Khartoum: Khartoum Univ. Press, 1973).

8. See A. Breidlid, 'Education in the Sudan. Privileging of an Islamic discourse', *Compare* 35 (2005) 3, 247–263.
9. 'Results for the Referendum of Southern Sudan', 2011, accessed 5 June 2017, <http://southernsudan2011.com>.
10. Official Website of the Government of Southern Sudan, accessed 5 June 2017, <http://www.goss.org>.
11. F. M. Deng, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994).
12. On 14 July 2008 the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced criminal charges against President al-Bashir, accusing him of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity.
13. The first history textbook for use in secondary schools in South Sudan was edited by Anders Breidlid (Oslo University), in cooperation with Sudanese scholars and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology of South Sudan. The book project was funded by the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. See A. Breidlid, ed., *A Concise History of South Sudan* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2010).
14. See R. A. Lobban, R. S. Kramer and C. Fluehr-Lobban, *Historical Dictionary of the Sudan* (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 283.
15. F. M. Deng, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994), 160.
16. Y. F. Hasan, *Studies in Sudanese History*, 211. Yusuf Fadl Hasan is a professor of history at Khartoum University.
17. A. A. an-Na'im, 'National Unity and the Diversity of Identities'. In *The Search for Peace and Unity in the Sudan*, ed. F. M. Deng and P. Gifford (Washington, D.C., Lanham, Md., U.S.A: Wilson Center Press, 1987), 71–77 (here 73). An-Na'im is a professor of law at Emory Law School. He is an expert in human rights in cross-cultural perspectives.
18. M. U. Bashir, *al-Ta'lim wa-l-wahda al-wataniya* (Umm Durman: Markaz Muhammad Umar Bashir li-d-Dirasat al-Sudaniya, 2005), 20. Bashir composed the original text in 1983. [Translated from Arabic by the author].
19. F. M. Deng, *War of Visions*, 205.
20. SRS—Sudan Radio Service, 'Under-Secretary Urges Single Curriculum for Southern Sudan Schools', Mou Mou, under-secretary at the GoSS Ministry of Education, in an interview with Sudan Radio Service (SRS), 6 February 2010, accessed 5 June 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100214105122/http://www.sudanradio.org/under-secretary-urges-single-curriculum-southern-sudan-schools>.
21. N. N. Kumama, 'Teaching history in independent South Sudan', *Emmykwa's Blog*, 20 August 2010, accessed 5 June 2017, <http://emmykwa.wordpress.com/2010/08/20/teaching-history-in-the-independent-southern-sudan>. Ndole Ndoromo Kumama is an educationalist and teacher from South

Sudan. He received his master's degree from Newcastle University and specialised in educational management, planning and curriculum development.

22. M. U. Bashir, *al-Ta'lim wa-l-wahda al-wataniya*, 47.

Further Reading

Seri-Hersch, I. 'Histoire scolaire, impérialisme(s) et décolonisation(s): le cas du Soudan anglo-égyptien (1945–1958)'. PhD diss., Aix-Marseille University, 2012.