

SUDAN

The issue of identity has always been a contentious political one in the Sudan. The sheer size of the country, the artificial political boundaries, and the on-going conflicts for power exacerbate the problem. This has had serious implications for the inherited cultures of the country where the struggle for Arab-Islamic political and social supremacy has destroyed or undermined many other cultures and people of equal importance in the historical development of the country. The problem is aggravated by the fact that Sudan's people were predominantly nomadic.

Tracing the Problem

It is not possible to talk of this issue without blaming colonial policies in the country to a great extent. Religious animosity was non-existent in the region before the British and the missionaries entered the country. This explains historical circumstances that generated present-day tensions, but should not be used by the Sudanese to justify them.

It would be a mistake to blame Islam for these problems, since the religion is seen to be a victim rather than a culprit. Past and present mistakes of the Muslim rulers of the country have greatly distorted the image of the religion. Despite the fact that the religion is a strong spiritual force in the lives of the Sudanese, it is a religion – in that context – with little material imagery. This has led the people, with the explicit support of the present government, to borrow imagery from other Muslim states in a futile attempt to associate the country with its Arab-Muslim counterparts. The result has been the emergence of an inappropriate, ostentatious architectural style with no roots and no meaning within the social and historical context of the Sudan. These attempts have put many historical buildings and districts at risk. Old buildings and roads are transformed physically, or renamed, and a systematic wiping out of previous identities is being attempted.

There are isolated attempts at relating new architecture to Sudan's building heritage, thus placing the buildings more comfortably within their socio-economic, historical and climatical context. Some of these attempts have led to an eclectic architectural style that needs to be refined and developed. An increased obsession with facadism needs to be addressed and the meanings, as well as the images, related to Sudan's heritage need to be preserved.

The rulers in Khartoum are not the only ones to blame for the loss of important aspects of the country's heritage. International neglect is also a major culprit. It is only relatively recently that interest in the archaeological sites south of the Egyptian border revealed valuable information. Many sites are still unexplored and important structures and sources are gradually being lost. Castles and settlements remain undocumented.

The amazing Turkish port-town of Suakin on the Red Sea has been allowed to disappear. The fact that the Sudanese Government was not able to preserve these historical buildings, existing almost intact – yet uninhabited – till the 1950s, is understandable.

Additional culprits in these tragic crimes on the country's heritage must be the educational institutes and intellectuals who have rarely focussed their efforts to explore their heritage. As an architect training at the University of Khartoum in the 1980s, we learnt of the ancient wonders of Greece and Egypt. Only passing reference was made to the ancient kingdoms of Nubia, if mentioned at all. It is amazing how generations of scholars have been pro-

grammed to believe that their heritage has none or little value – it is even more amazing that they have succumbed to that ignorance. Awareness of heritage needs to be instilled in the Sudanese from an early age, through all levels of education.

Except for the southern and south-western parts of the country, the rest of the population is a hybrid mix of different races. The northern riverain communities have almost always had the upper hand in power and in social status. These people originate from Nubian-Arab-African ancestry.

A Rich Heritage

There was a rich heritage in the area before the advent of the Arab Muslims. The first settlements probably date back to 5000–4000 BC. The pyramids and temples in the north of the country are not familiar worldwide, yet they pay tribute to kingdoms and culture that flourished nearly 3000 years ago in the region of Kush. The scenes of these great achievements were the cities of Napata and Meroe, the centres of a powerful kingdom from 900 BC until the rise of Christianity during the period 542–543 AD.

Attempts to extend the Muslim rule further south after the conquest of Egypt were not successful. A treaty signed in 652 AD established a period of uneasy peace. Yet, this was the period when Islam extended rapidly into the Sudan. It has been said of the Nubians that they are a people who always conquered their conquerors. The invaders stayed and adopted the Nubian way of life.

These same northern areas were scene to one of the greatest crimes against the heritage of the Sudan – in the 1960s, large areas of Nubia ceased to exist when it was flooded by the waters of the Aswan Dam. The residents of the Wadi Halfa resisted relocation in acts of brave defiance that went little noticed by the international community. All to no avail, because the waters rose gradually and wiped out a wealth of information that can never be reclaimed.

The Funj kingdom, with its centre further south on the Blue Nile in Sennar, flourished for 300 years. The origins of the people of the Funj is still a mystery. Whoever they were, they established a kingdom that dominated large areas of land and gave modern-day Sudan much of its character. The Funj adopted Islam as a religion.

It was during this period that the unique Sudanese practice of Islam developed. Sudanese sufism flourished and was based more on the ritualistic than the philosophical. These rituals, still strong today, leave few physical remains – except for the numerous Gubas (sheikh's tombs with conical domes) that spot the landscape – yet they represent a vivid and wonderful intangible heritage that needs to be systematically studied and preserved.

Another period of extreme importance in the history of the country must be the era of the Mahdist regime with its centre in Omdurman. This was a short period of independence between the Turkish/Egyptian and British/Egyptian colonial periods, spanning the years 1885–1898. Omdurman needs to be conserved as an exceptional African city. The size and character of the city make it truly unique in the continent.

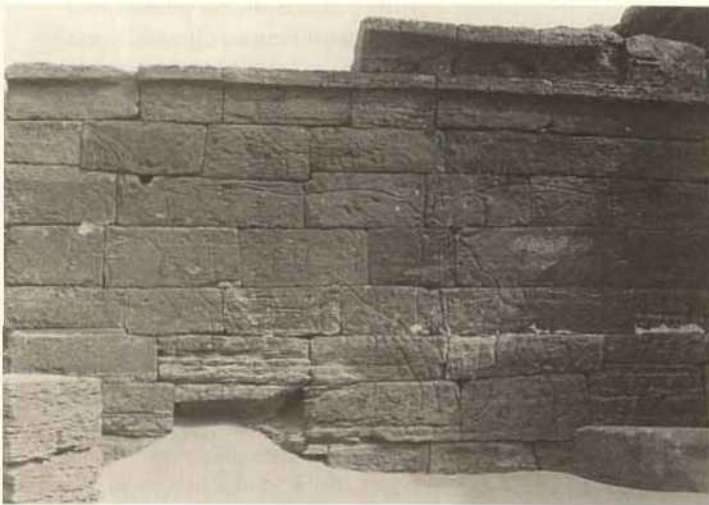
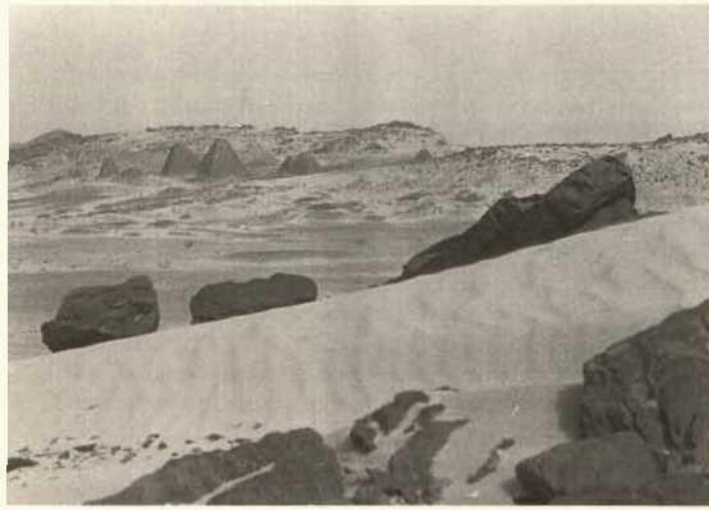
Another concern are the Nuba people of the Nuba Mountains in south-west Sudan. They are a forgotten people who have historically never asserted themselves against Muslim-Arab control – to this day they are gradually and systematically being eradicated as a people and as a culture. The extent of the damage done in the Nuba Mountains and in the Southern regions of the country can

probably be fully appreciated only when the raging civil war subsides.

An issue of importance in the Sudan are the wonderful aspects of intangible culture such as dance, song, poetry, folklore and zikr (remembrance of the prophet through poetry, song and dance) from all regions of the country. The nomad cultures of western Sudan also need recognition and documentation.

One can only hope that the Sudanese government and the international community will try to save what is left of this valuable cultural heritage – before it is too late. In the meantime, the onus probably rests on Sudanese academia to play a bigger role in education, documentation and preservation within any financial or political restrictions they may come against. It is through the efforts of a few previous scholars and institutes that some of the ancient glory of the country has been retained for future generations.

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Archaeological sites, traces of the ancient kingdoms of Nubia