

Are Sudanese Arabs?



udan, once the largest and one of the most geographically diverse states in Africa, split into two countries in July 2011 after the people of the south voted for independence. The government of Sudan gave its blessing for an independent South Sudan, where the mainly Christian and Animist people had for decades been struggling against rule by the Muslim north.

After the secession of the South, the Republic of Sudan became the third largest Arabic speaking country in region. Sudan is also a diverse country combining a variety of ethnicities and cultures. The country has attracted considerable media attention through time as a result of her dreadful series of civil wars. Two rounds of north-south civil war cost the lives of 1.5 million people, and a continuing conflict in the western region of Darfur has driven two million people from their homes and killed more than 200,000. Ethnicity and identity, among political factors, are considered as central causes for the wars which, are often defined in the media as African vs. Arab conflicts.



Map of Sudan

The issue of identity in Sudan represents a crucial challenge for achieving peace. Attempts at objectively defining the Sudanese identity, within a context of ethnic diversity, with the objective of promoting tolerance and national unity, are periodically carried out by various organizations, notably Khartoum University's Writers Union. Yet, lack of scientific data—including polls, genetics and reliable statistics—often turn these attempts into unfruitful theoretical discussions.

Although genetics can be crucially important for facilitating the course of this discussion, minimum to no research efforts have been carried by geneticists. However, in order for any genetic research to be properly proposed, an overview of the ethnic framework that comprises Sudan becomes crucial. First, it must be understood that Sudan, after the secession of the South, can be categorized into two primary areas:

- Northern area encompassing the Nile River valley, stretching from Wadi Halfa in the north, to Kosti and Sinnar in the south, as well as the entire eastern zone of the country. Hence, the area engulfs almost all of the central, northern and eastern states. The populations within this area mostly cluster along the Nile Valley and form the majority of Sudan—about 75%.
- Western area includes the states of Kurdofoan and Darfur. The inhabitants of this area represent diverse ranges of intermixtures between natives, populations of West African origins, and minorities of Arabs and migrants from the Northern area.

Despite the interactive nature of relationship between the inhabitants of the Northern and Western areas, they greatly differ in demographics, social structuring and ethnic identities. Although Arabic is shared between the two areas, the languages and origins of the regions' indigenous populations are different.

On my research, I emphasize the Northern area because it represents the economic hub and center of influence over the rest of Sudan, including the Western area. Further, the Northern area is gifted with the Nile River, making it site for one of the earliest human agglomerations, and the center of human activities in the country in modern times.

Sudan is part of the contemporary Arab world—encompassing North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant—with deep cultural and historical ties to the Arabian Peninsula that trace back to ancient times. Nonetheless, the cultural, social, and physical traits of the country's Arab populations remain non-Arab to considerable extents.

This reality is also true, with varying extents, for the other parts of the Arab world, particularly the Levant and North Africa. That is because, as Professor of History Craig Lockard at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, stated in his book *Societies, Networks, and Transitions* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008, p. 277), the historical expansion of the Arabs “spread not only Islam but the Arab identity and Arabic language to many peoples in Western Asia and North Africa.” In such regions, just as in Sudan, native non-Arab origins shape and define the characters of populations in significant ways, yet, with varying extents.

With regards to history, it is impossible to establish a date for the start of contacts between Arabia and Sudan, because, as ethnologist and member of the Anglo-Egyptian government in Sudan in the early twentieth century H. A. MacMichael, explained in his book *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan* (Cambridge University Press, 1922), communication between the two coasts of the Red Sea probably goes back to “the earliest dawn of history.” The distance between the Sudanese and Arabian Red Sea coasts do not exceed 120 miles which may be crossed by primitive boats. Also, the larger parts of Sudan and Arabia share similar topographies, distinguished by flat terrains, thus, making travel exceptionally easy for the people of both regions.



Sudanese Arab bedouins. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Reports on pre-Islamic Arab migrations are diverse and scattered across a wide variety of sources. As Sudanese author Rabi' Mohamed Alhaj has indicated on his article "[Arab migrations to Nubia and the Eastern Sudan and their cultural and civil impacts](#)" (published at *Al-Amir.info*) data points to the fourth, second, and first centuries B.C. as dates for Arab movements and settlements in Sudan.

Sudan's history with Islam, on the other hand, greatly differs from the other parts of the Arab world. Unlike the rest of the Arab world, Sudan was never subjected to the Caliphate rule. Thus, the spread of the Arab identity and Islam in Sudan occurred relatively late and at a much gradual pace. Hence, there exists no specific date to mark the beginning of the Islamic era and the end of the Christian one. The powerful Nubian Christian kingdoms of Sudan did not only resist the imperial expansion of the Arab-Muslims, which started in 624, but have challenged their territorial claims by invading Egypt on a number of occasions. Failing to invade Sudan, the Arabs have influenced the indigenous societies primarily through

intermarriage, migration, and the peaceful missionary efforts of the Sufi-Muslims.

This ancient and close relationship is what enticed Abdalla Eltayeb, one of Sudan's most recognized scholars, to trace the origin of the Arabic language to the ancient Meroitic language, named after Meroe, the metropolis of the ancient Kushite kingdom in central Sudan. On an interview on Sudan TV, he compared Arabic with Meroitic words:

For example, the name 'Alwa' [i.e. Arabic for 'Upper'], which is used to refer to the region of Soba [in central Sudan] and its surrounding is found in the ancient Meroitic archeology. It indicates its very meaning [in Arabic], that is the 'Upper' land. And here, we find linguistic resemblance. (as translated from Arabic by the author)

Eltayeb's argument was adapted, by some academicians, to the theory that defines the Semitic dialects of neighboring Abyssinia (i.e. what is today the country of Ethiopia) as a "center of origin" (on p. 159, in professor of linguistics at Michigan State University Grover Hudson's Language classification and the Semitic prehistory of Ethiopia, *Folia Orientalia*, volume 18, 1977) for all Semitic languages.

Indigenous groups and the Arabs

The ethnological classification of *Hamitic*, refers to indigenous ethnic groups in the northern regions of East Africa who share common ancestral and/or linguistic origins. Hamitic groups form the indigenous populations of Sudan's Northern area. The Kushites, followed by the Nubians, form the most ancient of these populations. The civilization of Kush is considered by historians as one of the earliest and most advanced human civilizations. The Kushite identity appears to have vanished, perhaps by the sixteenth century, and melded into the Nubian and Arab groups. Although the Nubian and Kushite languages are not well studied, they both appear to be Afro-Asiatic; though some linguists categorize the Nubian language as Nilo-Saharan.

The pyramids of Sudan, Meroe. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

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The pyramids of Sudan, Meroe. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

The majority of these Hamitic groups have historically intermixed with migrants from the Arabian Peninsula and formed the current populations of the Northern area. Arabic is the native tongue of the majority of these populations who maintain an Arab identity and who are loosely sub-divided into a range of Arab tribes—e.g. Ja'alin, Shaigiya, and Rikabiya. No noteworthy differences exist between these tribes other than clan affiliation. Being predominantly riverine, their way of life is traditionally agricultural. A range of physical characteristics, from stereotypical black-skin Hamitic/East African to brown-skin-Mediterranean, characterizes the Northern populations.

The Nubians form the largest existing Hamitic ethnicity in Sudan who, supposedly, did not intermix with the Arabs. Their population is demographically distributed through the northern zones of the country's Nile River valley. Other Hamitic groups are concentrated in the eastern area; these include the Beja, Beni-Amir and Halanga. All these groups have managed to preserve their language and ethnicity in front of a dominating Arab identity.

Worth mentioning are the Beta Israel Jews, indicated in Jon Entine's [*Abraham's Children: Race, Identity, and the DNA of the Chosen People*](#) (Grand Central Publishing, 2007) as descending from an ancient Jewish population, were relocated to the State of Israel beginning in the 1980s. As I have elaborated in a prior [article](#), their demography was distributed between Sudan and Ethiopia until the 1960's. Due to border shifts and relocation of settlements, during the 1950s and 60s, they were de-associated with Sudan and became part of Ethiopia, hence, they are known today as the Ethiopian Jews.

Literature

Three perspectives propel the academic controversy on the origins of the Sudan's Northern populations: The *Pan-Arab* perspective viewing them as almost entirely Arab; the *African* perspective portraying them as almost exclusively African; and, the *Afro-Arab* perspective defining them as a mix of Africans and Arabs.

The Pan-Arab perspective is the oldest of the three going back, perhaps, to the late nineteenth century. Scholars, who support this perspective, tend to minimize, or ignore, the indigenous non-Arab elements of the populations. The argument overlooks the Hamitic/East African physical features that are wide-spread through the Northern populations. Secondly, the argument fails to recognize the Hamitic cultural elements that are detectable across a wide range of existing local traditions, such as *Pharaonic-female-circumcision* and Jirtig rites in *marriage ceremonies*.

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The African perspective, on the other hand, was originally introduced by various Nubian activists in the 1950s seeking to present Sudan as a Nubian entity. However, as Nubian activism became unpopular, the perspective was adopted and adapted by a variety of other elements, within the academia. Proponents of this perspective, claim that the historical impact of the Arabs in Sudan reduces to language and identity. On line with this view, many scholars view the Arab identity in Sudan's Northern area as the historical product of an "Arabization" process. Osman Suliman, professor of Economics at Millersville University, referred to the "fragmented Arabized Nubian qabilahs [tribes]" of North Sudan in his book *The Darfur Conflict: Geography or Institutions?* (Routledge, 2011, p. 153). Another is Brendan O'Leary, Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, who questioned whether "Arabized Nubians are Arabs?" in his paper "The Federalization of Iraq and the Break-up of Sudan" (in *Multiculturalism and Minority Rights in the Arab World*, Oxford University Press, edited by Will Kymlicka and Eva Pförtl, 2014, p. 226.) The extreme of this view is expressed by social activist and researcher Albagir Al-Afif (as cited in Ibrahim Ali Ibrahim's review in Arabic, "[The Danger of the Project for Demolishing the Sudanese identities](#)," *Elaph*, 2 March 2014) who suggests that by adopting the Arab identity, they have become "estranged from their true inner self, which is without any doubt Nubian" and describes their Arab identity as "artificial" (as translated by the author).

Despite of its popularity, the African view contradicts the immense amount of genealogical records of Northern families that trace to Arabia. The works of prominent Sudanese scholar on the Arabic language and literature, Awn Alsharif Qasim (e.g. *Sudanese Encyclopedia of Tribes and Genealogies*, Afro-Graph, 1996) and the aforementioned work of H. A. MacMichael, are few examples of researches that offer reliable investigations on Arab lineages of the North.

Proponents of the Afro-Arab view, which was originally developed in the 1960s as an attempt to reconcile between the African and Arab elements of Sudan, commonly describe Sudan as a "melting pot" of Africans and Arabs (see for example "[Ending Sudan's identity crisis](#)," by Sudanese blogger Amir Ahmed, *The Guardian*, 10 June 2011). As another Sudanese author Amal Abbas has stated in her Arabic article "The Sudanese identity through history" at *Alrakoba*: "The Hamitic, the Negroid, and the Semitic lineages

have mixed, and the result was this element that represents a single nationality; that is the Sudanese nationality" (as translated by the author.) The theory suffers from a major defect; that of oversimplification. While stressing the concept of *melting pot*, it overlooks the existing ethnic, linguistic, and demographic barriers that separate the populations. Ethnic groups, such as the Nubians and the Fur (of Darfur), diverge on each of the mentioned elements.

Nonetheless, each of the three perspectives contains an element of truth that the others lack. The Pan-Arab perspective points out the existence of genealogical origins from Arabia. The African perspective emphasizes manifest Hamitic elements spanning genealogy, culture, and traditions. And despite the simplistic nature of the Afro-Arab *melting pot* perspective, it offers a common groundwork out of which a new perspective might be built.

Genetics and anthropology

Traditional anthropological research on Sudan was predominantly based on a racial approach that relied on skeletal analysis and focused on the Nubian population. The common hypothesis of such research suggests that "the living Nubians are the result of the massive penetration of Negroid Africa by Caucasoid genes during the last 14,000 years," (as stated in [Dennis van Gerven](#)'s "Racial History and Bio-Cultural Adaptation of Nubian Archaeological Populations", in *The Journal of African History* of Cambridge University, Vol. 14, No. 4., 1973, p. 558) The latter cited research explained how "these studies begin with the a priori assumption that there were two basic groups, or types [i.e. Negroid and Caucasoid], which occupied Africa early in its prehistory, and that any biological and/ or cultural deviations from these idealized types represent a mixture, or a hybridization, of the two." Although this approach is primarily outdated due to its highly theoretical and unreliable nature, it has significantly influenced contemporary research.

Although few comparative genetic studies have included Sudan, they are not targeted towards investigating and understanding Sudanese populations. One study has concluded that "Populations inhabiting the North of the region [i.e. Sudan] showed close genetic affinities with North Africa, with a component that could be remnant of North Africans before the migrations of Arabs from Arabia" ([Begoña Dobon](#)'s "The genetics of East African populations: a Nilo-Saharan component in the African genetic landscape," *Nature*, 28 May 2015). Another study, with less conclusive analysis, suggested a close genetic affiliation between the Nubians and Egypt ([Hiba MA Babiker](#)'s "Genetic variation and population structure of Sudanese populations as indicated by 15 Identifiler sequence-tagged repeat (STR) loci," *Investigative Genetics*, 4 May 2011).

Conclusion

The wars and conflicts in Sudan are commonly traced to a conflict between ethnic diversity and national identity. Thus, Genetics can be crucially important for facilitating the discussion on this subject in a meaningful and an objective manner. Physical anthropology research on Sudan is mostly limited to skeletal analysis, of a racial nature, and some genetic studies that do not emphasize Sudan. The proposed genetic study has the potential of being the first to provide meaningful scientific insights on the

structuring and intermixture of Sudanese populations. Such a study would be performed after gaining an appropriate understanding of the ethnic structuring and histories of existing populations, within the country. The Northern area represents the center of human activity and encompasses the highest population density in the country; hence, the proposed genetic study would emphasize this area.

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