



Sudanese Trade in Black Ivory: Opening Old Wounds

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Abstract

The historical experience of what became known as the trade in “black ivory”, a beautification name for the slave trade, is rarely addressed by the traditional or modern Sudanese elites. Little is said about the grievances that it precipitated. Its memory is behind the division among the population. This trade dates back centuries in history but took an aggressive shape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when Sudan saw intensive exploitation of humans as a commodity for domestic use and export. Even before that, slavery had emerged as the backbone of the economy of the Sudanese Islamic states known as the Funj and Fur Sultanates (kingdoms). Caravans crossed the desert, followed the Nile or crossed the Red Sea carrying their human cargo. Turco-Egyptian rule under Mohamed Ali targeted Sudan to monopolise trade, extract gold and capture slaves. This ushered in the start of slave trading on a large scale for both domestic use and export. Traders and soldiers joined the fray and traditional routes for transporting slaves to Egypt and Arabia were more active than ever. However, Sudanese slaves played an important role in shaping the economy and society and were later to play a significant role in modern Sudanese history by advancing the concept of nationalism. The civil war that lasted over twenty-one years brought back old memories and the resurgence of slavery became a hotly debated issue in the present conflicts in different parts of the country, even after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that halted the civil war in southern Sudan.

1. The origins of the Sudan slave trade

The Sudanese traditional and modern elites rarely address the historical experiences that shaped the development of their country. They especially shy away from addressing the issue of what became known as the trade in “Black Ivory”, a beautification name for the slave trade. It is, for them, a topic that encourages silence, and is viewed by many as an embarrassing institution that brings back atrocious memories. Politically, they reckon that the less said the better, and that it is always useful to depict the practice as a uniquely European sin that in the case of Sudan should be blamed on the Turco-Egyptian invaders of the nineteenth century.¹ However, today there is a growing interest in the question of “human mobility” among Sudanese intellectuals. Such mobility in the

¹ As Hunwick (2002) noted, this is the case for most Arab scholars who have recently attempted to come close to the subject and probe this aspect of their past. It is not surprising to see members of the Sudanese elite who claim Arab descent behaving in the same manner.

country has come about as a result of drought, desertification and other aspects of environment degradation.² Increasing violence generated by civil war has led to displacement, depopulation and abduction of men, women and children that recall memories of the slave trade and rekindle grievances precipitated by past experiences of similar, if not totally identical, nature.³ The political reality of today's Sudan has highlighted interest in the experience of long gone ancestors in the diaspora as well as the experience of those who now live in a "quasi-diaspora" situation. This particular group has developed a sense of fascination with the roles of their ancestors on the global scene and the latter's ability to cross cultural boundaries and develop new identities, and hence has gone in for emulating them.

The institution of slavery in the Sudan was an old one that antedated conquests by external forces.⁴ The steady flow of slaves was responsible for the continuity of slavery over a long period. Without that foundation, it would have been difficult to maintain the slave trade owing to emancipation and high mortality rates combined with low fertility among the slaves.⁵ In the nineteenth century the institution of slavery was deeply entrenched in the social structure of Sudanese society. Most slaves domestically used or exported were procured from peripheral ethnic groups from within the country and from other neighbouring African countries. This was the great reservoir of manpower from where they were captured in wars or raids, kidnapped, paid as tax or tribute, presented as gifts, or simply bought.⁶

The slaves came from different places and often travelled long distances. They came over land, down the Nile or across the desert to markets in north and central Sudan. The loss of life on such long distance treks was significantly high, yet still thousands were able to reach their final destination. Figures for those captured and able to reach the markets are difficult to come by. However, the slave flow was steady and went on for a long period after the International Declaration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1807. One main figure, which is well documented, continues to haunt and remains engraved in the memory of most Sudanese, and marks the relationship between the indigenous population, represented by the Nubians, and the Arab Muslims who invaded Egypt in the early days of the spread of Islam. This is, namely, the figure stated in the Baqt agreement of the year 640, which shows that the Nubians were to give the Muslim rulers of Egypt annually 360 slaves and other local items in return for food supplies, wine, horses and cloth.⁷

It has not been possible to erase the memories of this figure, nor the experience of the centuries that were to follow, bringing more misery. The descendants of those who

² There is a large body of literature on these topics. For the most recent publications see Assal (2004). The bibliography provided by Assal has covered most of the important recent contributions on this topic in Sudan. For more on environmental impact see also Mohamed Salih et al (2001), Manger and Ahmed (2000), de Waal (1997), Ahmed (1992), and Deng and Minear (1992).

³ A number of southern Sudanese intellectuals dealt with this issue in their attempts to reach an in-depth understanding and enlightened analysis of the conflicts in Sudan. See Wai (1981), Deng (1995), Nyaba (1997) and Jok (2001), to mention a few. Also see Khalid (1996, 2000).

⁴ Many accounts describing the practice of slavery in the land that came to make up modern Sudan can be found in Burckhardt (1813) and Nachtigal (1971 transl.), as well as the writings of O'Fahey (1973, 1980, 1985) and Spaulding (1982, 1985, 2006).

⁵ It should be noted that unlike the case of slaves in the Americas, domestic and military slaves in Sudan were not given adequate opportunity to marry and reproduce themselves.

⁶ See Mowafi (1981), Fisher and Fisher (1970), Lovejoy (2004) and Clarence-Smith (2006).

⁷ For more details of this agreement see Yusuf F. Hassan (1973) and Nugud (2003). Most feelings of bitterness, the grievances of today and references to past injustices start with the citation of this agreement.

suffered from the slave trade can still see some resemblance to the actions of the past in the daily interactions of the present. Ethnic conflict, civil war, abduction of men, women and children, and economic marginalisation fuel bitterness and rekindle grievances that are yet to be fully addressed even after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that, for the moment, has halted the civil war in southern Sudan.

2. Slavery in the Islamic kingdoms (Sultanates) of Sudan: the 14th century and after

Slavery was the backbone of the economy of the Fur and Funj kingdoms (Sultanates) of Sudan. Together with ivory, gold, gum Arabic and other commodities, slavery was the major source of wealth for the two Sultanates and represented the most important export item in the trade with Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula. While the Fur Sultans controlled the slaves and other commodities that went north across the Sahara desert or towards the Nile, the Funj Sultans were in control of such trade on the Nile and across the Red Sea. The areas which the Fur Sultans raided or gave permission for slave traders to raid extended south and south-east beyond the boundaries of what became the present southern Sudan. The most common areas for the Funj and the slave traders of their Sultanate were the Nuba Mountains to the west of their capital, Sinnar, and the Ingessana Hills and the Ethiopian borders to the south and southeast.

Slaves collected during the different raids were first taken to the capital towns of these Sultanates before they follow the traditional caravan routes for export. There were three traditional routes for the slave trade in these Sultanates. The trade from the Fur Sultanate used two routes: the first and most common was the Forty Days Road, which started from el Fashir and Kobe and connected the Sultanate with Asyut in Egypt; and the second was along the Nile, reaching the markets of Shendi, Berber and Dongola via el Obeid in Kordofan. As for the Funj Sultanates, the slave caravans either followed the Nile route from Sinnar to Shendi, Berber and Dongola or moved in an easterly direction to the Red Sea, reaching the town of Sawakin from where the slaves were exported to Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula across the Red Sea. From Egypt, many slaves were passed on via Alexandria by sea to Turkey.

The slave caravans covered long distances and slaves faced tremendous suffering on such journeys. Many of them perished in transit and in the distant past these routes used to be littered with human skeletons. These same routes were later, during the nineteenth century, followed by caravans organised by the different government authorities that ruled over the population as well as by independent slave traders.

3. The Turco-Egyptian invasion of Sudan in 1821 and after

Mohamed Ali, who came to power as Viceroy of Egypt under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Sultan, was aware of the potential of Sudan and intended to utilise this potential. Three major objectives lay behind his invasion of the country in 1821. His desire was first to monopolise the Sudanese trade. Second, he believed that Sudan and Ethiopia abounded in gold, which he needed to finance his efforts to modernise Egypt. Above all, he was interested in the prized dark-skinned strong slaves from the south to man his army, which would enable him to dispense with his mutinous white slaves (Mumluks). Getting as much gold as possible would help with financing the expansion

of the Egyptian economy; and getting strong men to replace the Mamluk forces would strengthen his army, allowing him to defy the Sultan and build an empire of his own.⁸

Once Sudan had been conquered in 1821, Mohamed Ali encouraged his invading forces to work hard to achieve the goals he had set for this invasion. His army officers engaged in the organisation of raids that went in different directions south of the Arabic-speaking Muslim ethnic groups in the country, captured and enslaved thousands of people, mostly young able-bodied men, and sent them north to Egypt to be trained as soldiers. Some of the women and children captured in these raids were sent to the Arabian market in Jeddah and the proceeds were used to buy food for his troops in Sudan.⁹

The raiding forces were accompanied by chiefs of nomadic Arabic-speaking groups, chiefs such as Idris wad Adlan of the Funj, Suleiman Abu Ruf of the Rufa'a al-Hoi, Awad Al Karim Abu Sin of the Shukriya and Ahmed Abu Jinn of the Rufa'a al-Sharq. Those indigenous tribal chiefs also went on their own annual raids and on their return with their loot they were required to supply a given number to the government representatives.¹⁰ "There are only estimates of the number of Sudanese who arrived at the training camps in Aswan in southern Egypt. A large number perished of hardship in transit from Sinnar and Kordofan. Of those who arrived many died in camps of fevers, chills and dryness of the climate. Thus out of an estimated 30,000 slaves who came to Upper Egypt in the years 1822 and 1823 only 3,000 survived."¹¹

Mohamed Ali's invasion and the expressed interest in black slaves, not only in Egypt but generally in the Ottoman Empire due to the limitation on the flow of slaves from Europe and East Asia, signalled the start of a lucrative slave trade from Sudan and beyond.¹² This involved soldiers and officers from the invading Turco-Egyptian army, who were eventually followed by traders who found their engagement in such trade more profitable than in other commodities. Those traders were, in the early days, individuals of many different nationalities, the majority being Egyptian and European. Sudanese traders were the last to join the trade but were to be exposed as the most notorious in the history of this trade.

By the mid-nineteenth century men like Zubeir Rahma and his lieutenant Rabih Fadlallah and others were in full control of the trade in the south-western part of Sudan. Zubeir was the leading figure and had built a reputation as a slave trader, administrator and state builder who was able to organise an army of loyal and well trained slave

⁸ Mohamed Ali's need for men and directing his attention to bring them from Sudan were a result of the manpower shortage that Egypt faced at the time in relation to expanding agricultural projects, establishing new factories and building a strong army. Mowafi (1981) provides relevant figures on manpower needs in Egypt at the time.

⁹ "In 1822 Mohammed Ali himself had instructed one of his commanders to send male slaves to the army and sell captured women and children in the Arabian market in Jeddah, using the profit to buy rice for the Sudanese troops. But hungry soldiers could not always wait for the proceeds of slave sales abroad. In the mid- and late 1820s, officers collected newly captured slaves who were unsuitable for the army and then sold them in the markets in the central rain lands." Ewald (1990: 164).

¹⁰ For more on the slave raids at that time and the involvement of the tribal chiefs, see Hill (1970). It should be noted that raiding by these tribal chiefs was in existence before the Turco-Egyptian invasion.

¹¹ These are the figures cited by Mowafi (1981: 15-25) from different travellers' accounts.

¹² As the supply of white slaves from Circassia and Georgia sharply declined, the Egyptian market turned increasingly to the abundant source of black slaves from the region of the Upper Nile. See Segal (2001: 149-153).

soldiers.¹³ He was able to assert his political and military leadership over other merchants in the area in the decades following 1850, and by 1874 was powerful enough to conquer the Dar Fur Sultanate. However, that region was not the only source of slaves in a trade that persisted into the first quarter of the twentieth century. Slave raids continued in south-eastern Sudan and in the no-man's-land between Ethiopia and Sudan known as Beni Shangoul, Humasha and Aquldi. This was dominated by three prominent figures that established their own sheikhdoms in the area, namely, Khojele al-Hassan, Tor al-Guri and wad Mahmoud. For a long time, the three maintained shifting alliances and moved from side to side between the dominant rulers of Sudan and Ethiopia. While much is written about the activities of Zubeir and others in south and south-western Sudan, very little has been written on those of the above-mentioned three.¹⁴

4. Markets, numbers and caravan routes

A number of major markets that acted as transit points for the slave trade in Sudan seem to have dominated the scene during the 18th and the 19th centuries. They occupied strategic places in the flow of this trade in the country and were the points where merchants from different places outside Sudan gathered to exchange goods brought from Egypt, Europe and India and buy slaves, gold, ivory and other local commodities for export. Prominent among these was Shendi market, which was vividly described by Burckhardt in 1814. It was, according to Burckhardt, a fabulous market for a small place, where one could find such things as spices, medicines, German swords and razors, saddles and leather goods from Kordofan, writing paper and beads from Genoa and Venice, cloth, pottery and basketware of every kind, soap from Egypt, cotton, salt and Ethiopian gold. And above all, Shendi was also a great slave centre, probably the greatest in central Sudan at the time. Its important position came from the fact that it was a crossroads on the Nile close to the Red Sea and so the way was open to Arabia, India and the Far East. To the west it was connected by caravan routes to places as far as Lake Chad and Timbuktu. The Nile provided a highway to Egypt and the North, while Ethiopia could be reached by tracks through Metemma and Gondar.¹⁵ Caravans from Egypt to Shendi set out once or twice a month. Those from Sinnar arrived in Shendi every six weeks carrying different commodities, including slaves and gold. Gold was brought all the way from Beni Shangul, where it was bought exclusively by

¹³ In his autobiography titled "I was a Slave" (Wilson, 1935: 131-132), Wilson, who claims to have been enslaved by Suliman Zubeir and freed by Gessi, states that Zubeir was "painted as a cruel, relentless, sadistic ruffian whose sole interest in life was making money by dealing in slaves, and whose chief amusement was the slaughter and torture of innocent unoffending people. But in later years this story has been discredited by people who know, and it has been clearly shown that Rahama was a very great deal more than a mere trader in, or owner of, slaves. He dealt in slaves because slave-trading was then the principal commerce of his country. It was then a method of obtaining wealth, and wealth – plus certain other qualities – meant power. And it was power that Rahama really sought. He was a born leader of men – and was also more than that – for he could not only conquer, he could also govern."

¹⁴ The story of Zubeir was told by himself to Mr. H. C. Jackson of the Sudan Civil Service (Jackson, 1913). The way Zubeir and others built their strongholds in the areas they controlled is dealt with by a number of historians (O'Fahey, 1981, O'Fahey and Spaulding, 1983), as well as by anthropologists such as Ewald (1990). Khojele and other traders in the Sudan-Ethiopian border areas can be found in works by Dafallah (1973), Triulzi (1981) and James (1968, 1971 and 1979).

¹⁵ As Moorehead (1962) stated, Burckhardt was able to build a fairly complete picture of the Nile valley in the northern part of Sudan and his meticulous notes covered every aspect of life along the river. A detailed account of the places he visited, such as Berber, al-Damer and Swakin, together with his description of Shendi market, tell us much about the situation in that part of the world at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

merchants from Sawakin, probably for export to India.¹⁶ Makk Nimr, the ruler of Shendi, provided the merchants “with a safe-conduct and afforded safety with in his realm. He had first refusal of all merchandise. The goods which he selected were exchanged by his vizier who was under instructions to behave with justice and in no way to compromise the interests of his friends as he called the merchants.”¹⁷

The Gallabat Market catered for the supply of slaves from Ethiopia. The catchments for slaves coming out of this transit market extended southwards to the Beni Shangoul area and south and south-east to the Oromo lands. Gallabat supplied its human cargo to Sinnar and Shendi markets and some went directly to Sawakin on the Red Sea. Sinnar also played a similar role in the trade link with Shendi. However, in western Sudan, Kobbei and al-Fashir were the places where merchants from the Nile region known as Jellaba as well as foreign traders conducted direct trade with Asyut in Egypt through the *darb al-arba'in* (the forty days road). These were the two main points where the slaves were gathered and then sent via caravan routes across the desert to Egypt, while a certain number reached Shendi through al-Obeid in Kordofan.

Estimates of the numbers of slaves captured and transacted during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are all approximations dependent on the accounts of European travellers who visited Sudan during that period. Burckhardt, whose observations were meticulous, suggested that about five thousand slaves passed through Shendi market every year. They were drawn from every tribe along the Nile, but Ethiopian slaves were regarded as superior to all the rest for the beauty, warmth and constancy of their females to their masters. Ethiopian men made the best house servants and clerks. Most of the slaves offered for sale were under fifteen years of age. Out of this number two thousand five hundred were taken by caravan to Sawakin town on the Red Sea; one thousand five hundred went to Egypt down the Nile; and one thousand to Dongola town, where they were sold locally to different pastoral or cultivating ethnic groups in the area. Regarding the market in Sawakin, Burckhardt gave the numbers of those taken away by the traders' boats as ranging between two to three thousand slaves every year. In 1790, Browne, who was the first and only European to pass along the whole length of *Darb el Arba'in*, noted a caravan of one thousand slaves. By 1820, just prior to the Turco-Egyptian invasion of Sudan, the German geographer Ritter observed that Dar Fur caravans numbered from five to twelve thousand slaves. During the 1830s, the Egyptian government's system of customs duties encouraged private slave traders and it was reported that those traders brought as many as ten to twelve thousand slaves annually into Egypt from Sudan.¹⁸ Although the Mahdist state did not abolish slavery it prohibited the export of slaves, especially males, so that they did not end up as part of the enemy forces. Even inside the country the sale of male slaves was discouraged. Strong male slaves were encouraged to join the Mahdist armies as “Jihadiya” and promised freedom when doing so, while their owners were promised compensation. The sale of other categories of slave was centralised in Omdurman and the slave market was attached to the state treasury (*Bayt al Mal*). The number of slaves that passed through this market was some hundreds at any given time.

¹⁶ Using Burckhardt, Bjorkelo (1989) gives a detailed description of the market and the flow of commodities in Shendi. He illustrates, with a diagram, the connections that Shendi had with the rest of the country and abroad. See p 24.

¹⁷ Quoted in Spaulding (1984) from Santi and Hill (1980).

¹⁸ Burkhardt's figures are quoted in Moorehead (*ibid.*). This increase in the number supplied by private slave traders happened at the time when Mohammed Ali imposed monopolies on almost all imports from Sudan except slaves. See Ewald (1990: 165). Browne and Ritter's figures are quoted in Beswick (2004).

5. Uses of slaves

Slaves were kept for use in different parts of central and northern Sudan. Domestic use can be categorised in a number of forms. Prominent among these was taking slave girls as concubines or using them in brothels. Throughout the history of the slave trade in Sudan, light-skinned Ethiopian girls were favoured as concubines. After the invasion of the nineteenth century, the Turkish and Egyptian officers and soldiers were reputed to have taken many such girls as wives. A traveller in Sudan in 1833 observed that “few are the Turks who have not Ethiopian girls in their harems”. Another one noted that “there was hardly a harem in Sudan or Arabia that had not some Abyssinian or Galla slave that had passed the Gallabat market. Many of the Egyptian officers purchased wives there. These were mostly young girls from seven to fourteen years of age, kidnapped in the southern vassal states and the borderlands of Ethiopia, and brought thither to recruit Sudanese harem. They are described as very pretty, have good figures, small hands and feet, soon become most clean in their person and dress, pick up all the benefits of civilisation, get fairly educated, make good servants, and are faithful and loveable.”¹⁹ As a custom it was seen as a form of hospitality for a host to offer the services of a slave girl to a traveller who was spending the night at his place. However, such a girl had to hand over to her owner any payment that she might receive from the guest as the price for her favours. Slave owners also used their slave girls to run brothels in towns for their own profit.²⁰

Some girls were mostly used as domestic servants. The girls in this category mostly came from Dar Fur and Kordofan. They worked in the homes of wealthy merchants, leaders of traditional ethnic group and governing officials.²¹ Men were used domestically as herders and agricultural labourers. Under the *sagiya* system of cultivation they provided the labour needed for hazardous agricultural and domestic tasks.²² They were bought by pastoralists to look after the livestock and to do all the manual labour that pastoralists did not do and looked down upon as being beneath their dignity. They were also bought by agriculturalists on the banks of the Nile in northern Sudan to undertake the task of drawing water from the field through the *saqia* (water wheel) system.

Al-Zubair Rahama, the Sudanese slave trader, administrator and state builder, organised a formidable army of slaves that he used to rule south-western Sudan and eventually to conquer the Fur Sultanate towards the end of the nineteenth century. The number of his slave soldiers was over one thousand and later he had an army of over six thousand slaves.²³ His lieutenant Rabih ibn Fadalalla, himself a slave, was later able, using an army of slaves, to extend his power over the area from the present day Central African

¹⁹ This quote is from Mowafi (1981), who gives a summary of the notes by Hoskins, *Travels in Ethiopia* (1835), Junker, *Travels in Africa* (1890) and Wylde, '83 to '87 in the Sudan (1888). However, Baker gives a more detailed description of the same from his visit to Gallabat. Baker (1869).

²⁰ See Hill (1970:116).

²¹ Ewald (1990: 168) states that “by early 1860s, almost all households in Kordofan – not just those belonging to merchants – possessed at least one slave: usually a woman, whose main task was grinding grain, but who also probably laboured in the field during busy seasons and did other heavy house work. Such a woman, in fact, had become essential to establishing a household.”

²² Though he does not deal with the role of the agricultural labour among the Danagala group in northern Sudan in detail, Omer (1985) gives a brief outline of the tasks the slaves were required to do.

²³ See Lovejoy (2000: 211). Like those on the banks of the Nile, Zubair used his slaves for agricultural production. “Al-Zubayr’s centre at Daym Zubayr was surrounded by hundreds of farms and plantations.”

Republic to northern Nigeria until he was defeated by the French in 1900. Another lieutenant of Zubair was Hamdan Abu Anja, who became one of the most important leaders of the Mahdist armies. In a similar manner, south-eastern and south-western Ethiopia saw the rise in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of Khagali al Hassan, another slave trader, who organised an army of slaves and together with other chiefs (shaykhs) controlled that part of the region in close collaboration with the Ethiopian emperor.

Using the different caravan routes originating from the catchment areas and passing them through transit markets, slaves were exported to Egypt and from there to Turkey and other places in the North. From Sawakin, boats transported their human merchandise to Egypt and Arabia. Here again, light-skinned young Ethiopian girls were used as concubines and seen as the best substitute for the white girls who used to be imported from Europe and north Asia. They were well thought of in Egypt and Arabia. Many well-to-do members of Egyptian society married such girls and the offspring of these marriages have been known as Habashi (Abyssinians) ever since. Black girls who were well trained were used as servants and mostly occupied the position of cook.

Also in Egypt, male slaves were trained as soldiers and integrated into the army, and used to man the newly established industries and as part of agricultural labour force. They were also used as servants and cooks but not as much as were girls for such tasks. Young boys who underwent castration and became eunuchs were highly priced and immensely valued as guardians of the harem. The trade in these eunuchs was small and it was estimated that only about one hundred of them usually reached Egypt each year. One major reason was that few survived such an inhuman operation. Those who did fetched very high prices for their owners. They were bought by those in positions of power to look after their harem. Burckhardt reported that “Mohamed Ali caused two hundred young Dar Fur slaves to be mutilated, whom he sent as a present to the Grand Signor”.²⁴

Throughout the history of this region, slave soldiers played a very significant role. Black slave soldiers were first employed in Muslim Egypt during the reign of the two dynasties of the Tulunids and Ikhshidids and from then onwards they played an important role in the history of the Fatimid dynasty until its fall. Mohamed Ali attempted to build an army of such soldiers; the Jehadiya came into being as a result of his efforts and were later to have an important impact during the Mahdiyya and in the modern history of the Sudan.²⁵

6. The impact of the slave trade on society

The slave trade impacted on Sudanese society in almost all aspects. Notwithstanding the bitterness that the subjects had felt, it had a lasting and significant impact on culture and traditional beliefs, on the organisation, structure and economy of different groups in the northern and central regions, as well as on political activity at the national level. On the cultural level, the slave groups were able to introduce elements of their musical arts and instruments when given the opportunity to entertain themselves and their owners. This later activity found its way into the religious field and hence instruments such as drums were incorporated in Sufi practices. Sufi leaders were reputed to have a considerable number of slaves in their domains that, in addition to their engagement in

²⁴ For this quote and more of Burckhardt's account of this, see Moorehead (1962: 168).

²⁵ For a detailed analysis of the role of slave soldiers in the Greater Nile Valley, see Ewald (1990).

agricultural production, were active during religious celebrations and led the drumming and the dervish dances.

Traditional beliefs carried over from the indigenous areas where slaves were captured were, and some still are, practised, though mostly with little publicity. These include spirit possession such as “Zar” and “Tumbura”, where many traditional practices are followed. Such practices became well known in various parts of Sudan, Egypt and Arabia and were always attributed to slave communities and their origin traced to Ethiopia and south-western Sudan. Different ethnic groups engaged in some of their traditional recreational activities such as dances and wrestling during the holidays when slaves might have been allowed some free time and came together to enjoy themselves.²⁶

The slave raids, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had impacted negatively on the structure of the targeted groups. Vast areas were depopulated and those who survived the raids were displaced and scattered in different directions. Their group’s cohesion and their capacity to secure production of what they needed for survival were diminished. Some had to adopt a new identity and join other groups in order to survive.²⁷ On the other hand, efforts to abolish slavery and the slave trade were met with some resistance from those who benefited from slave labour and saw the process of manumission as leading to the economic decline of their areas and the possible arresting of the development of their wealth, which they founded on the misfortune of the slaves. A slave mode of production dominated the economic sector during the Funj and Fur Sultanates and a middle class of officials and merchants emerged and continued to consolidate its hold on society during the early decades of the Condominium period. The exploiters could not see their prosperity continuing without their slaves.

On 6 March, 1925, in response to the government’s efforts to abolish slavery, the three most prominent religious leaders in Sudan addressed the director of intelligence of the Condominium Government, saying:

As you are well aware, labour at present is the most important question in the Sudan, which should be considered with greatest interest. The Government, the companies and the individuals who are interested in agriculture are in need of every hand that can be obtained and which would contribute to the success of these schemes. Further, the Government and its officials must have marked during the past few years that the majority of freed Sudanese have become useless for any work. The women folk among them generally turned to prostitution, and men are addicted to drinking and laziness. For these reasons we urge the Government to consider very carefully the wisdom of indiscriminately issuing freedom papers to persons who look upon these papers as granting them freedom from any liability to work or carry out the obligation under which they may stand.²⁸

²⁶ For the origin of Zar and Tumbura, see Constantinides and El-Nager in Valdo Pons (1980).

²⁷ Beswick (2004: 158-9) reports that her Dinka informant suggest that while different Dinka clans were on the move they were able to adopt some of the Nuba who were in need of protection from the slave raider. This was the case of the clan groups of the Ngok and Alei when they were migrating west and northwest from south of the Nuba mountains. “Over time this Dinka clan adopted many Nuba refugees referred to by the Dinka as dhony. It is probable that these fleeing peoples were a product of recent Baggara slave raids.”

²⁸ This petition was presented by the leading religious sect leaders in the country, namely Ali al-Mirghani, Sharif Yusuf al-Hindi and Abdel Rahman al-Mahdi. See Sikainga (1996).

This address is similar to the petition presented 27 years earlier to Kitchener by sixty-eight nobles of Omdurman, in which they stated:

The restoration of the saqiyas and agriculture, which are essential for the reconstruction of the country, cannot be achieved without the slave labour. Without that, there will be no prosperity for any native and there will be no progress in the Sudan to be able to catch up with the rest of the world. In order to remove our suffering and improve our conditions, we present to you on behalf of all the people, hoping you will have favourable consideration.²⁹

Slaves were the backbone of the economic activities carried on by these prominent religious leaders and notables. They had built their prosperity on the misery of those who had the misfortune to be captured and enslaved. Slaves who were granted their freedom and were the main concern of those who opposed their emancipation were to become an effective part of the labour force when the colonial state transformed them into wage labour and made them the pillars of modern Sudan. Over and above that, they in fact played a significant part in political developments before and after independence.³⁰

7. The role of the Sudanese diaspora as soldiers, intellectuals and religious leaders

Sudanese slaves in the diaspora had a significant role as soldiers, intellectuals and devoted religious figures. Ever since the Egyptian conquest of 1820-21, and the subsequent enrolment of Sudanese slaves in the *jihadiya*, these slaves continued to play a significant role in the politics of both Egypt and Sudan. The famous revolt of the *jihadiya* in Kassala in 1864-65 was one of the biggest popular resistance movements in the history of Sudan before the outbreak of the Mahdist movement. In the case of the Mahdist movement itself the role of ex-slaves was crucial. Sudanese soldiers in Egypt in the early twentieth century played an important role in the Urabist Revolution. Earlier, in mid-1798, when the French were occupying Egypt, Napoleon sent a letter to the Sultan of Dar Fur requesting the supply of two thousand slaves, some of whose descendants later, in 1883, took part in the French war in Mexico.³¹ One such soldier in this group was Ali Jaifun. A member of the Shilluk tribe of Upper White Nile, he was captured by Hawazma Arabs and then handed over to the government in part payment of taxes. He was pressed into the regular army and first served in the Sudan, taking part in one of the many assaults of the government army on the Nuba hills. After that, he joined the Sudanese battalion in Mexico (1863-1867) and on his return joined the Sudanese garrisons on the eastern frontier. When the government forces were defeated by the Mahdists he escaped to Masawwa and was taken to Egypt, where he was promoted and later joined the forces that defeated the Mahdists.³²

Intellectually, two individuals of Sudanese slave origin had the opportunity to make some significant impact and leave their imprint on politics in Europe and the Americas. These were Felix Darfur and Duse Mohammed Ali. Felix might have been one of those

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ The transformation of slaves into emancipated workers and their contribution to the development of the country and their role in politics through the labour movement in Sudan before independence is documented by Sikainga (1996).

³¹ The incorporation of the black slaves into the French army in Egypt was a result of the lack of possibility of finding recruits among the Egyptian population. For this and other details of the role of slaves as soldiers see Mowafi (1981) and Ewald (1990).

³² See Hill (1967: 47).

requested by Napoleon, as mentioned above. He was purchased by a French army officer who took him to France. While there, he became fluent in the French language and received education in engineering and journalism. He became involved in politics and when Haiti became a republic in 1818 he went there, intending to contribute to the new black nation. His major contribution was publishing a paper and became politically active. He submitted a memorandum to the legislature criticising the government, which he saw as not representing the public interest. He was tried by a military court and executed in 1822.³³

Duse Mohammed Ali was a well-known figure in the Pan-African movement. An Egyptian mulatto of Sudanese origin, he was taken to England by a French officer who was a friend of his father, who was killed in the course of the Urabist Revolution. He received an education and started to write in newspapers and magazines. In 1911 he published a book on the history of Egypt and in 1912 founded a magazine in London and got involved in politics, supporting the cause of the Ottoman Empire using a Pan-Islamic discourse. After World War I he migrated to the United States, where he cooperated with Marcus Garvey in the Universal Negro Improvement Association and by doing so contributed to the growth of Pan-Africanist aspirations in the United States. There he also published “Africa magazine” and at the same time founded the Central Islamic Society in Detroit. Finally, he migrated to Nigeria, where he founded a newspaper, and died there in 1945.³⁴

Many of the Sudanese slaves who accompanied their European owners to Europe were, after some time, freed and gained some religious education that allowed them the opportunity to play significant roles in the field of religious advocacy. A few of them were able to tell their stories, which showed the processes of transformation from their early lives in their native villages, to their days of captivity and sale as slaves up to their freedom and conversion to Christianity. Two such individuals, Sister Josephine Bakhita and Salim Wilson, may serve as examples of this category. Sister Bakhita, who went from slavery to sanctity, was born in 1869 in Dar Fur as a member of the Dagu ethnic group. She was abducted at the age of nine, following the fate of her twin sister, who was abducted from there years earlier. She was sold as a slave four times before ending up as a slave of the Italian consul in Khartoum who, in 1885, took her to Italy. There, after some time, she was admitted to the Institute of the Catechumenate, received education in Christianity, and was baptised and confirmed as a Catholic member of the Italian church in 1890. She became a devout Christian, lived a simple life and in 1896 her vows were received and she became the first black sister in the convent of the Daughters of Charity of Canossa and an attraction to visitors. She travelled up and down Italy for vocation promotion. Even though her command of the Italian language was not perfect, she was able to communicate with the public during her tours. She died in 1947 and “on December 1, 1978, Pope John Paul II recognised and proclaimed the heroicity of her virtues and on May 17, 1992 the same Pope proclaimed her Blessed in the presence of thousands of devotees who had thronged St. Peter’s Square to pay homage to their favourite Mother Moretta”.³⁵

³³ This information was reported by Abbakr (1992) and adopted by Kurita (2003).

³⁴ See Kurita, *ibid.*

³⁵ The story of Sister Josephine Bakhita appeared in a book entitled “Bakhita tells her story” by Sr. Maria Luisa Dagnino. The information in this paragraph is based on the booklet entitled “Bakhita: From Slavery to Sanctity”, which was extracted from this source by Clare Ukken, FSP, and published by St Paul Publications-Africa.

Salim Wilson's story was not very different from that of Bakhita. Born as a Dinka and the son of a chief, he was captured by an Arab group which he could not identify. He was among the slaves in the army of Suliman al Zubair when the latter was defeated and killed by government forces led by Lieutenant Romolo Gessi, one of Gordon's right-hand men. He joined the government forces and fought with Gessi, and later made it to Egypt and then to England with a priest named Wilson, from whom he seems to have acquired his name. He received missionary training in an institute known as Hume Cliff College in Derbyshire, was confirmed and became a communicant of the English Church. Together with a Congolese friend, he toured some parts of England, telling their stories to Christian communities. He later followed his benefactor Mr. Wilson to Palestine, where he had the chance to meet with Gordon of Khartoum, who was visiting Jaffa at the time. After returning to England, in 1887 he accompanied another missionary named Brooke to Cameroon and Congo, but failed to fulfil his dream of going back to Sudan, which was one of the reasons for his embarking on the mission. Nothing is known of what happened to him after the publication of his life story in 1935.³⁶

8. The role of the Sudanese diaspora inside Sudan

The detribalised ex-slaves who came back to Sudan with the Condominium forces in 1898 were the first to lead the attempts at building a national movement and raising political consciousness after the failure of the pro-Mahdist revolts of the early decades of the twentieth century. The Sudanese diaspora inside Sudan played an important role in national politics. The most distinguished was the role played by Ali Abd al-Latif and his detribalised colleagues in the Revolution of 1924. Ali Abd al-Latif led the "White Flag League" association that called for the unity of the Nile Valley and Sudanese nationalism. The concept of nationalism was revolutionary in the sense that for the first time in Sudan it advocated the creation of a "Sudanese Nation founded on a non-racial basis". Such equality of the races that brought those of slave origin on a par with the rest of the country's population was not to the liking of those who thought of themselves as free men and hence they were opposed the League.³⁷ The common use of the term "Sudanese", at the time, referred to those who had been uprooted from their homelands and carried away as slaves. Those who saw themselves as free members of society in Sudan insisted on the use of the names of tribal/ethnic groups as a matter of identity affirmation and distinction. It is only in recent decades that the term was able to gain public acceptance.³⁸

Founded in 1948, the Black Block (al-Kutla al-Sawda) was the first known political organisation comprising ex-slaves that attempted to address their social and economic conditions and that of their descendants. It was spearheaded by Mohammed Adam Adham, a medical assistant graduate of Kitchener School of Medicine, whose slave family originally came from Dar Fur. His father was an army officer from the Daju ethnic group, who were one of the main targets for slave raiders during the Fur

³⁶ Salim Wilson, who claimed that his Dinka name was Hatshil Masha Kathish, published his autobiography in 1935 under the title "I was a Slave". It was published by Stanley Paul and Co. Ltd, London.

³⁷ Kurita (2003, 2003a) addressed the issue of the Sudanese diaspora in politics and documented the role of Ali Abd al-Latif in the 1924 revolution through interviews with some of the participants in the revolution as well as family members, also addressing the role of detribalised people in modern Sudanese history. Ongoing research by Elina Vezzadini at the Middle East Studies Centre, University of Bergen promises more on this topic.

³⁸ More information on Felix Dar Fur can be found in the short paper Abbakr (1992). I depended on Kurita's (2003) description of Duse Mohammed Ali, which was based on Duffield (1971).

Sultanate and the Turco-Egyptian rule of Sudan. The Black Block began as a social organisation and was preceded by the Black Co-operative Society that was founded in the late 1930s as a philanthropic organisation concerned with discharged soldiers and ex-slaves in the capital. This later organisation eventually became part of the Black Block when the Block was officially launched by Adham in 1948. It adopted broad slogans in order to conceal its militant concern with the social and economic conditions of the people from the South and the Nuba mountains. It developed close contact with the Umma Party and at one point received some financial support from that party. Among its leaders, besides Adham, was Zayn al Abdein Abdel Tam,³⁹ who had been a leading figure in the White Flag League.

The Black Block expanded rapidly and attracted an increasing number of people from the Nuba Mountains, Dar Fur, West Africans and detribalised ex-slaves in urban areas. Its mouthpiece was the “Africa” biweekly journal edited by Adham, which addressed social and cultural subjects of relevance to its adopted objectives. The national political parties dismissed the Black Block as racist and the colonial administration did not give it a license to operate as political party. It also failed to form an alliance with the emerging political leadership of southern Sudan, who labelled the Block as pro-unity with Egypt due to the fact that its leadership comprised detribalised people who were ex-army officers and loyal to Egypt, where they were raised and trained. By the early 1950s the Black Block had collapsed, giving way to a number of non-Arab political bodies such as the Nuba Mountains General Union and the Beja Congress, which took over most of its concerns.⁴⁰

It is to be noted that in its efforts to contain the political and other activities of the above-mentioned diaspora the Condominium Administration practised a mild form of apartheid on the return of those ex-slaves who came with the invading forces after the collapse of the Mahdist state. Special quarters were planned for their settlement in urban areas where they were, in most cases, joined by those slaves who were granted manumission by government representatives. In each town such quarters were well known and carried special names, the most common of which were “radif”, “Daim” and “Malakiya”. At the same time some of the emancipated domestic slaves were allowed the opportunity to establish their own villages and a number of them settled on the banks of the Blue and White Niles.

9. Claims of a resurgence of slavery during the civil war in southern Sudan

Slavery, abduction and human rights violations came to be among the most debated issues during the Civil War between North and South Sudan that ended with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005. Although the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium abolished slavery and the slave trade was suppressed, some form of the practice continued. Slave raids were reported in the south-eastern region of the country, led by *shaykhs* controlling the no-man’s land between Ethiopia and Sudan.⁴¹

³⁹ The descendants of those ex-slave enlightened and progressive leaders continued to play a very significant role in different political parties. It should be remembered that it was Abd al Wahab, son of Zayn al Abdein Abd al Tam, who became the first Secretary of the Sudanese Communist Party.

⁴⁰ For more details on the Black Block and its alliances with the Umma Party and relationship with southern Sudanese political movements, see Sikainga (1996: 169-172).

⁴¹ For more on these raids, see Daffallah (1973) and James (1968).

The reason behind such a state of affairs was the fact that senior British officials' perception of Sudanese slavery was in conformity with that of the slave owners, religious elite and nobles, who resisted the government's efforts to emancipate the slaves. These officials discouraged the issuing of manumission papers on the assumption that this would have a negative effect on the economic development of the country. However, freed slaves became the prime target of colonial recruitment policies and formed the backbone of the labour force during the early twentieth century by providing cheap labour.⁴² Cash crop production in the Gezira and the economy of herding and rain-fed land cultivation also increased the demand for labour, which led to a continuation of slave raiding and trading despite the declared government policy of abolition.⁴³

More significant is that the bitter memory of slavery endures in the relations between people from different parts of the country. Mass displacement and rapid population mobility in the post-independence decades have accelerated change in all aspects of life for many ethnic groups and inter-ethnic conflicts resulting in some forms of abduction and forced removal of individuals can be observed rekindling the difficult times of past experiences. Among pastoral groups in north and south Sudan, small-scale inter-ethnic abduction remains a common practice.⁴⁴ A wide range of economic relations between individuals from the north and south of Sudan existed over long periods of time and varied in shape and form. Coming as a displaced population under harsh environmental conditions, some Dinka groups and individuals have provided cheap labour or entered into some form of unequal partnership with the settled cultivators of southern Kordofan and Dar Fur. Similar displaced groups and individuals did the same in other parts of central and northern Sudan. The majority of the relations that such people enter into ranged from bondage to benign forms of sponsorship and adoption. Yet the majority of these relations, while they may involve economic exploitation, cannot necessarily be described as slavery. Until recently those displaced populations were also a source of army recruits and represented a large part of the central government's armed forces during the civil war.

It was noted by a number of observers from inside and outside the country that widespread and systematic enslavement of men, women and children, far different from the types of relation mentioned earlier, emerged during the second civil war after 1983. The Murahaleen militia were armed and given a free hand in raiding areas which the government saw as sympathetic to the SPLA. More recently, government troops and government-backed Popular Defence Forces made up of Baggara tribesmen have regularly raided the Dinka and other tribes for slaves and other forms of booty.⁴⁵

It was, however, during the last part of the Civil War that accusations of slavery gained a high profile. Such accusations were exchanged between the fighting parties, to an extent that prompted the intervention of the international community and international

⁴² See Sikainga (1996). His quotes from Willis (pp. 1 and 36) vividly express the attitude of some British officials regarding the slave trade in Sudan.

⁴³ The increase in the number of slaves in the Gezira between 1905 and 1912 is in the thousands, as documented by Sikainga (1996: 42).

⁴⁴ An informant interviewed by Beswick (2004: 159-160) explained the kind of conflict that takes place between the western Dinka and the Baggara as something that had gone on for a long time. "We raid the Baggara and capture girls and make them wives and they give birth to children and they do the same thing. This has been going on for a long time across the (Kir/Bahr el-Arab) River... If we capture men we kill them but we kept the women and children."

⁴⁵ For more on the Western observers, see Beswick (2004). The earliest Sudanese observers who documented the role of the Murahaleen in the civil war were Mohmood and Baldo (1987).

non-governmental organisations. In December 2001 an International Eminent Persons Group (IEPG) was established to investigate, on the ground, means of preventing abduction, slavery and forced servitude. The findings of the group showed that there was a wide array of grave human rights violations in Sudan. Abduction of civilians and forcible recruitment by armed forces were the most common violations, which were carried out by all sides in the war.

The IEPG acknowledged as a fact the existence of “a wide range of economic relationships between northerners and persons from the south who were either displaced or have migrated to the north. Such a relationship ranges from debt bondage to benign relationship of sponsorship or adoption. The majority of these relations, while they may involve economic exploitation, do not fall under the rubric of Slavery. However, we also found evidence of exploitative and abusive relationships that, in some cases, do meet the definition of slavery as contained in international conventions, which Sudan has signed.” The report goes on to state that “the resurgence of slavery in contemporary Sudan differs both from the historical slave trade of the nineteenth century and from small-scale inter-tribal abduction (or ‘hostage-taking’) that is endemic among many pastoral peoples in East and North-East Africa. The pattern of slave taking that has developed since the start of the civil war is, to a substantial degree, the product of a counter-insurgency strategy pursued by successive governments in Khartoum.” However, while the IEPG noted the government acknowledgement of the abduction of civilians and its effort in establishing the Committee for the Elimination of Abduction of Women and Children, it also noted the government’s failure to acknowledge its own responsibility for acts committed by militias and other forces under its authority.⁴⁶ The debate has since subsided with the signing of the CPA and has yet to be heard in the case of conflicts in other parts of the country such as the case of Dar Fur.

10. Concluding remarks

Slavery and the slave trade was one of the major features of Sudanese society. It dates back several centuries in history. Some of the states, such as the Fung and Fur Sultanates, that existed within the boundaries of what is now geographically recognised as modern Sudan built their economy and society on the proceeds from the use of such human beings as a commodity. Slave raids were organised by the rulers or by traders and professional slave raiders granted permission by the rulers. This was evident in the Fung and Fur Sultanates, whose rulers had control over the trade in their territories and over the caravans that went to Egypt and Arabia carrying that cargo. However, it was during the Turco-Egyptian invasion of Sudan, and the decades that followed, that the slave trade reached its zenith. Mohamed Ali’s forces engaged in the mass abduction of men, women and children and sent them to Egypt to be trained as soldiers, sold them in local markets or exported them to markets in Arabia.

These forces of Mohamed Ali were later joined by merchants of differing nationalities. However, those who were seen as the most notorious and who precipitated long-lasting bitterness and grievances among those who were subjected to the slave raids, were northern Sudanese merchants such as al-Zubair Rahama. Very little is mentioned of the other traders on the Sudan-Ethiopian borders who continued with this trade into the

⁴⁶ The report of the International Eminent Persons Group (22 May 2002) was a detailed investigation of the situation. It gave a summary of its findings in 11 points and came up with 16 detailed recommendations with supporting analysis.

early twentieth century.⁴⁷ Notably, progress with abolishing this trade was slow, was pursued with hesitance from the colonial government side and encountered resistance from the dominant classes in Sudanese society, including prominent religious leaders who were supposed, according to the principles of Islam, to be the first in calling for such abolition.

Slaves played an important role in the country's economic, cultural and social life and did the same in the places to which they were exported. Their role as soldiers in Egypt and beyond was very significant. They did the same and became influential leaders of the fighting forces in the Mahdist armies and among the invading forces that recaptured the country and established the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. On their emancipation, ex-slaves constituted a major part of the labour force in Sudan and later played a significant role in national politics. They were the pillars of the White Flag League and leaders of the 1924 revolution. Those in the diaspora were also able to play important roles in supporting Pan-Africanism and other political efforts of black people in Europe and the Americas.

The memory of slavery and slave raids is still in the minds of those whose descendants had undergone this inhuman experience. Bitterness and justified grievances have fuelled the civil war. Claims of a resurgence of slavery persuaded the international community to establish a committee to look into the allegations. The committee's report was able to show that there were violations that to a certain degree bordered on the definition of slavery and made recommendations on how to remedy the situation. With the CPA being implemented, albeit at a slow pace, all forms of abduction and other forms of forced movement of people are expected to stop and old grievances to be addressed.

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⁴⁷ One possible reason is that these traders were concentrating most of their raids on the Ethiopian side of the border. However, they continued to raid ethnic groups such as the Uduk and the Koma on the Sudanese side of the border. See James (1968).

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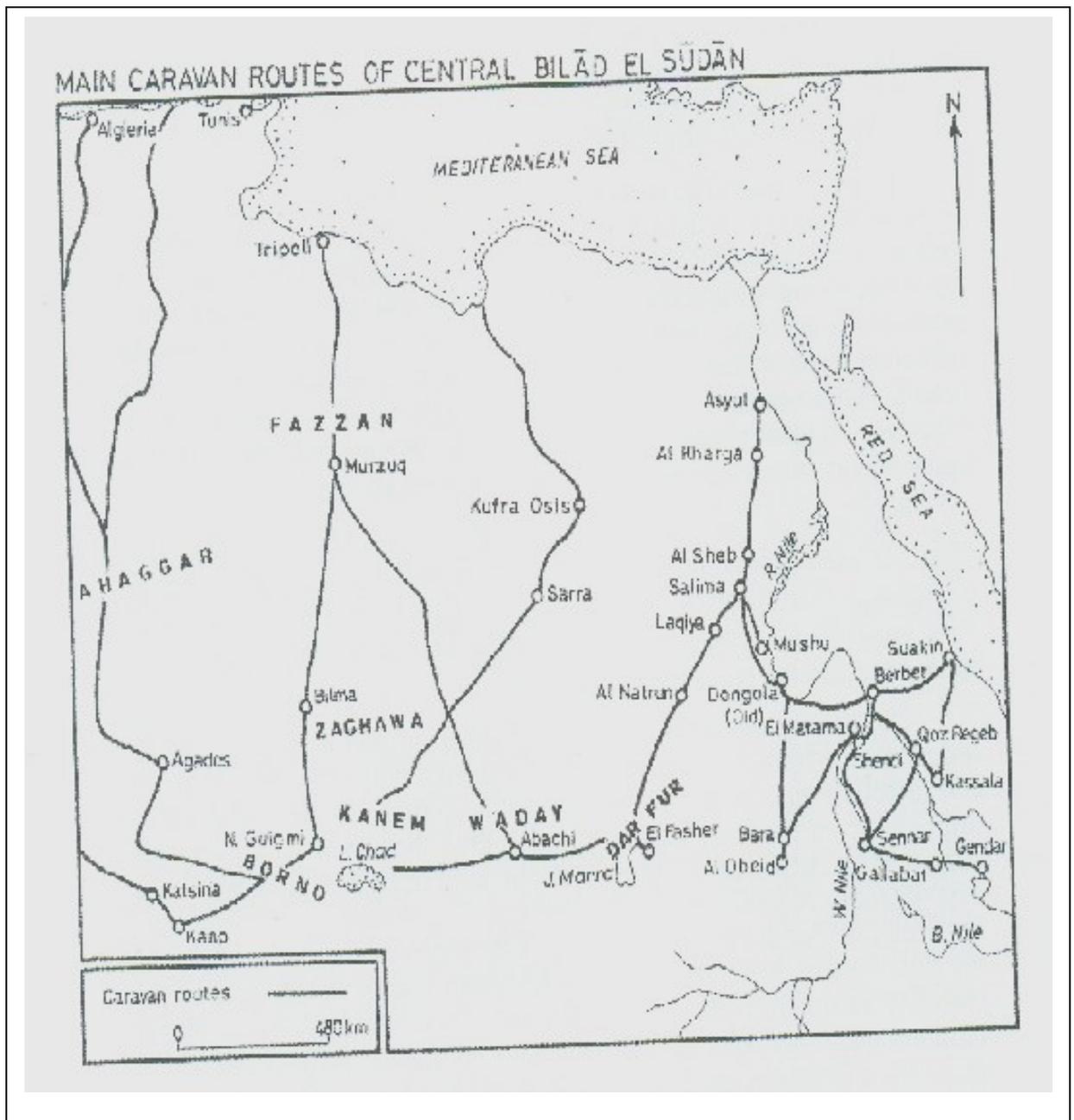
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The route followed by Bakhita as a slave from her village in Dar Fur to El Obeid, Khartoum and Sawakin before reaching Italy..

Source: Bakhita Rahiba Kanuciya, a booklet in Arabic, Khartoum, 1992.



Source: Yusuf Fadl Hasan (2003), Studies in Sudanese History, SUDATEK Limited, Khartoum. Sudan