

# **The Role of Oral Poetry in Reshaping and Constructing Sudanese History (1820-1956)**

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My intention in this paper is to explore the significant role of oral poetry as a means of political resistance in the Sudanese nationalism movement, and its potential for reconstructing Sudanese history. I will focus on historical events which inspired the creation of poetry, and on the impact of poetry as a folkloric phenomenon in the process of history.

In particular, I intend to highlight the significant role of Sudanese women, the creators of this expressive form of folklore, in reforming the process of Sudanese history-making. Most of the materials in this paper were created by women. This does not belittle the contribution of men; rather, it indicates the significant role of Sudanese women in provoking nationalistic feeling.

This paper will depend mainly on oral poetry and songs which were collected when I was working on my M. A. thesis, "Design in Needlework in Omdurman Area" in 1984-85, in northern, central, and western Sudan. I collected some of these songs and poems from my grandmother, my aunt, and my father, who was an eyewitness to several crucial events of Sudanese history. In addition, the data includes a number of popular and national songs that have been broadcast through the Sudanese media. The materials are in Sudanese colloquial Arabic, and I have translated them into English.

## **Introduction**

The credibility of folklore, particularly of oral forms, as a valid source for the reconstruction of history has been, and continues to be, a polemical question. Classical historians have typically depended on written documents which in turn focus on "important" events and are concerned primarily with

politics. Based on his experience in Africa and other areas of the world, Jan Vansina has argued that oral data is a reliable historical source (1965:183). Vansina is one of a number of scholars who have developed methods of historical criticism that utilize oral resources, and he has inspired important research on Africa. Nevertheless, his work raises many controversial issues about the definition and classification of oral traditions. Vansina argues that these traditions are transmitted by word of mouth, handed down intact from generation to generation, and that their preservation depends on memorization (1965:19-20). As Ruth Finnegan notes, this stereotype of uncontaminated tradition may reflect the nineteenth-century romantic and evolutionist viewpoint (1988:110). More recent scholarship emphasizes that tradition should not simply be viewed as a body of old and unchanging ideas that are deeply rooted in time; rather, it may be seen as a continuous process of creating meanings based on a group's shared experiences (Walls 1990:108). It is "the process by which individuals simultaneously connect to the past and the present while building the future . . . it is rooted in volition and it flowers in variation and innovation" (Glassie 1993:9). This means that when dealing with tradition we should recognize and realize its complex nature, in which conventional forms remain stable even as the content changes in response to circumstances.

As pointed out by Louis Mink in his article "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension," "stories are not lived but told . . . narrative qualities are transferred from art to life" (1987:557-8). This is clearly true because stories or histories depict human experience, actions, and suffering. They are "human activities of projecting meaning onto or finding meaning in physical and other events" (Carr 1986:20). This does not mean that these genres exist in people's lives without any potential of telling facts about the past, since the past itself is a fabric and reflection of time that exhibits human experiences.

The real challenge facing scholars is how to develop objective methods and different modes of historical analysis within their particular state of consciousness, to explore and capture the facts or the "truth," and to reconstruct an exact moment in human experience. However, historical truth is always beyond our reach, since it was the experience of others. Vansina argues that:

In practice it can never have more than a likelihood of truth, because the past has gone for good and all, and the possibility of first-hand observation of past events is forever excluded. History is no more than a calculation of probabilities. This is true not only as far as the interpretation of documents is concerned, but for all the operations of historical methodology. (1965:185)

Vansina has to be credited for the last part of this statement; he questioned the credibility of written documents in the same manner that others (such as Lowie, Hartland, and Van Gennep) discredited oral traditions as reliable sources for reconstructing the past (Vansina 1965:8-9). Because written documents, like oral sources, are themselves sometimes misleading, the circumstances involved in their documentation are major factors in labeling and shaping them. Many societies have constructed indigenous accounts of the past by developing sophisticated oral traditions; because of this, oral folkloristic materials should be treated as reliable sources in reconstructing the past of a given society.

In Sudan, historical narratives or oral poetry are usually used to document specific historical moments. In the case of historical poetry, authorship, participants, and the place where the event occurred are typically well known, while specific details within the poem may have undergone slight changes over time. The poetry may be linked with natural phenomena such as famines, eclipses, or floods, or with physical features of the landscape such as mountains, rivers, and deserts (Hurreiz 1986:87). These can be used as evidence to support the historicity of the events. In Sudan, for instance, when old people refer to their age, they do not use numerical figures; instead they associate their age with a natural phenomenon. My grandmother told me that she and her cousin were born during the time of *al-Nagma um danab* (the star with a tail). When I traced the appearance of this star, it turned out to be in the late nineteenth century, and precisely 1881, which coincided with the rise of al-Mahdiyya (an Islamic movement in the Sudan).

Methods of investigation and interpretation may be more important factors than the materials themselves in considering the credibility of oral or written documents. As several scholars have shown, folkloristic materials, if studied systematically, can potentially be used to reconstruct history.<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, some historians and anthropologists studying western Sudan depended chiefly on oral sources to reconstruct the history of the region.<sup>2</sup>

Oral poetry is one of the most powerful folkloric genres used to document and present moments from people's history. This fact was recognized early on by Johann Gottfried von Herder, a German scholar (1744-1803), who wrote that "the cultural and historical pattern of people, the national soul, is expressed best in its language and particularly in its folk poetry" (Wilson 1976:29). Oppressors and oppressed alike have used folklore to further their own accounts of history.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout their history, the Sudanese people, using different means of expression, have demonstrated a fierce resistance to colonial governments as well as to local rulers. Folk songs and oral poetry were weapons used by the Sudanese, especially by women, as a mode of resistance. Resistance led

to creation of poetry, but poetry also reformed and reshaped the historical record. As pointed out by Petr Bogatyrev “folk songs often fulfil the function of historical narratives, a function that brings them closer to the functions of scientific work” (1976:21). Indeed, folk songs or oral poetry not only fulfill the function of historical narrative but also reform and reshape the historical events of human experience by giving them their full meaning.

### **The Role of Sudanese Women**

Sudanese women have been known throughout history as a powerful and effective force in mobilizing social and political action. In ancient times the power of Sudanese women enabled them to be elevated to a high political and social status (Haj al-Zaki 1982:3). This high status of Sudanese royal women persisted from the Meroitic times (280 B.C.E.) to Medieval Sudan (Mohammed Kheir 1987:9). Even in the Nineteenth century, powerful female rulers were found in Shendy (central Sudan).<sup>4</sup> This high political position of women was unusual among Muslim countries of the period. The historical status of Sudanese women no doubt established a strong foundation for the powerful role of women in present day Sudan.

During the colonial period, women played a crucial role in preparing men for fighting by enhancing their power to face their enemies. They used oral poetry to invoke national feeling and to encourage men to attack the invaders. In many events the decision to wage war came from a provocative signal made by women, accompanied by enthusiastic songs. The story of Taja, Sultan Ali Dinar’s sister, described later in this article, is one of many illustrating women’s influence in the decision to wage war.

British poet Rudyard Kipling described the Sudanese as “first-class fightin’” men who “broke a British square” in his poem “Fuzzy Wuzzy” (Kipling 1977: 162-163). It should come as no surprise that these men were such fine fighters; one important reason for their bravery was that if they dared to back away, they faced the taunts of Sudanese women.

### **The Features of the Songs**

The songs have characteristic dramatic, symbolic, musical, and metaphorical features that carry messages within the community. The language used in creating poetry is highly stylistic, varied according to the situation. Sometimes when the message has to be addressed directly to the ruler, women create plain songs, without any symbolic allusions. The songs usually express moral and cultural values and stress social attitudes. These songs are classified according to their varying structural forms. There are different modes of songs, such as rejoicing, mourning, lamentation, and

panegyric songs. The words used in the poetry are put into specific forms to express particular conditions and feelings.<sup>5</sup> The poetry that I will present in this paper is performed in Sudanese colloquial Arabic, the language spoken by the majority of the Sudanese. The examples come mainly from northern, central, and western Sudan. Since both literal and literary translation of these songs will affect the structural form of the texts, and consequently the beauty and the exact meaning of songs<sup>6</sup>, I will explain some aspects of these songs in order to facilitate the understanding of the text.

### **The Poetry and the Events**

When the Turkish troops of Muhammad Ali invaded Sudan in 1820, they began with the northern region. The people who inhabited the region were mainly Nubian, Danaqla, Shayqiyya, Rubatab, and Ja'aliyyin. All these groups resisted Muhammad Ali's troops, despite the advanced weapons they used. When the troops neared the Shayqiyya region, rumors of their arrival had preceded them. The rumors described the troops as highly equipped with advanced weapons, and indicated that they had already conquered the people in the far north. On hearing the rumors, women started preparing men to meet the enemy, emphasizing that, in spite of the potential disadvantage of their traditional weapons, they would have to defend the land. A very famous poetess called Meheara bit Aboad, known for her strong character, made the initial signal when she dressed in men's clothes, carried a sword, and said to the men, "Here we are, our clothes are for you." In other words, she tried to provoke them by reversing the situation. It was the beginning of the inflammation of national feelings. The men responded positively, and Meheara created a song:

Alela al-iyal rikbu khail al-kar  
 Giddamon a'qeddon bel alghar daffar  
 Genyatna al-usood allela titnater  
 Au yal Pasha al-ghasheem gool le gedadk kar

Translation:

Today our men on their horses  
 In front of them their command  
 In his beautiful horse struts.  
 Our men, like lions when they roar  
 Oh, Fool Pasha, just let your chickens go away.

This song is full of rhetorical discourse in a symbolic form that presents the situation and brings the audience into the setting of the battlefield. The imagery explaining differences is fascinating, creating a contrast between the two groups of warriors. The Sudanese in this song are described as lions, whereas Muhammad Ali's troops are described as chickens (metaphors for courage and cowardice, respectively). This use of imagery reflects self-consciousness of the language and its usages as well as subtlety and depth of linguistic expression. This song is performed enthusiastically, accompanied by clapping and drumming.

The second example comes from the Ja'ali region where Muhammad Ali's troops continued their invasion southwards. Nimir, the king of Ja'al, decided to defeat Isma'il Pasha, the commander of Muhammad Ali's troops (and Ali's son), by using diplomacy. When the Pasha arrived in Shendy, the capital of Ja'al, King Nimir gathered his people to welcome the Pasha, but he was so arrogant and proud of his success that he hit Nimir on his face with his pipe. King Nimir said nothing but determined to seek revenge. He invited Isma'il to a party in his house, offered him and his people a big feast, rich with food and wine. Once the Pasha and his people were completely drunk, King Nimir burned them alive. This event led to an expedition by the Turkish leader Muhammad Khusrawi Daramali, who sought to avenge Isma'il's assassination and end Nimir's rule (and eventually brought about another period of Turkish occupation).<sup>7</sup> Inspired by this siege, King Nimir's daughter, Banona, created a famous song mourning her father's death and praising her people's courage and bravery:

Ya boggat a' good assam  
 Ya mugna' banat Ja'al  
 al-Uzaz min jam  
 al-Khail a'rkassan, ma gal  
 I'dadin kam  
 Fartag hafilin, malay serujin ddum.

Translation:

Oh, gulp of strong poison  
 Oh, covering of Ja'ali noble women  
 When horses came, you didn't  
 ask how many, but you scattered them,  
 with blood in their saddles.

The poetess refers to the hero as a gulp of strong poison in his antagonists' throats, unbearable for them because he is, like this poison, a bringer of death. The second verse refers to Nimir as a covering for women.

Women of this region covered their heads with cloth, stressing Islamic values. When the king becomes a “cover,” that means he protects them and they depend on him. The last two verses illustrate the battle field, especially the reaction of King Nimir, the hero, and his people when they saw the enemy’s horses. Nimir didn’t pay attention to the number of horses, but instead courageously attacked them. The saddles full of blood were a sign of his heroism and courage. This song is sung in the form of a genre of mourning, known in Sudan as *Manaha*.

In 1881, Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi, a Muslim Leader, led a religious war against the Turkish occupiers for their injustice and cruelties upon the Sudanese (Wingate 1968:7). He defeated them, and by 1885 united an independent Sudan under the umbrella of Islam. He declared *Sharia*’ (Islamic Law) as a way of life. Al-Mahdi’s supporters were excited by his heroic achievement; women recited a form of panegyric song praising al-Mahdi’s success and victory:

Mahadina jab maktubuo  
 Qal lina salu utubo  
 al-Haram aturko derobo  
 al-Haram al-marissa  
 al-kassar al-kanissa  
 al-katal Turk al-Kawa  
 Khala al-mudeer yat hawa.

Translation:

Our Mahdi brought his book  
 Asked us to pray and ask God’s forgiveness  
 Don’t sin or follow its path  
 He prohibited alcohol  
 He destroyed the Church, the sign of infidelity  
 He killed the Turks who were in al-Kawa  
 He left their director wandering without authority.

This song explains al-Mahdi’s Islamic thought, as presented in *al-Ratib*, a book written in direct language to facilitate the understanding of Islamic law by the followers and remind them of what was revealed by God in the Koran. The people are proud that al-Mahdi defeated the Turks, seized the director of al-Kawa (a town in the White Nile province), and left him without authority, wandering. The poetry of this song is created in a direct way; its purpose is to convey messages to the people and the occupier.

Bit al-Makkawi, a great poetess of the Mahdiyya period, created another song praising al-Mahdi’s victory. Describing this victory, she used the image of a beating drum as a symbol of her joy and pride. Through the

metaphor of wool which must be trimmed when it becomes too long, she urged al-Madhi to cut back anyone who had exceeded their limits. Bit al-Makkawi also likened al-Mahdi's generosity to the Nile. When the Nile floods, every duck will propagate. Similarly, by liberating the Sudan, al-Madhi allowed people to live a full and proper life under the umbrella of Islam. The use of metaphor was for poetic effect; it was not meant to hide the meaning from outsiders.

Tabl al 'iz darab  
 Hawaina fel barza  
 Wa ghair tabl Um Bukan  
 Ana ma badoor 'iza  
 En tal al wabar  
 Wasiyhu bel jaza  
 En ma 'amma Neel  
 Ma farakhat wiza

Translation:

The drum of pride and joy is beaten  
 This elevated us to a high status  
 My only pride and joy is Um Bukan drum  
 If the wool is getting long, trim it.  
 Without the Nile's generosity,  
 no duck will propagate

In the late days of the Mahadiyya period, after the death of al-Mahdi, the Khalifa Abdullah, al-Mahdi's successor, became militant.<sup>8</sup> The Khalifa's rule caused considerable restlessness for some groups in Sudan, especially the *Shukriyya*. Hurreiz states that "finding their tribal supremacy and political sovereignty threatened and endangered, the Shukriyya showed signs of rebellion against the Khalifa Abdullah's regime" (1975:124). When the Khalifa heard about these rebels, he ordered them to evacuate the Botana, their home land, and join him in Omdurman, while some of them were sent to Kassala, in eastern Sudan. Al-Hardalo, the famous Shukriyya oral poet, created a body of poetry which expressed humiliation and was a protest against al-Khalifa's regime and his people.

The following is one example of this poetry:

Nasan gubah min al-gharib yom jona  
 Jabu a ttasfiya min al biyut maragona  
 Awlad nas uzaz mitt al kilab sawwona  
 Ya yaba'n Nugs yal ingiliz alfuna



## Translation:

They are a notorious people who  
 Came to us one day from the West  
 They brought destruction and drove us  
 They treated us like dogs.  
 Oh, Father Negus, Oh, English men,  
 hurry to our rescue. (Hurreiz 1975:125)

It is said that when Khalifa Abdullah heard this song, Hardallo was summoned to Omdurman, humiliated, and imprisoned. Nevertheless, he continued his protest from prison and created poems addressed to the Khalifa personally. In these, he described his headgear as something sewn by al-Khalifa himself, implying that it was not well sewn, and that the Khalifa was illiterate. However, P.M. Holt maintains that claims of al-Khalifa's illiteracy were concocted and irrational. He states that "illiteracy has never been an insuperable obstacle to a talented ruler. Furthermore, the amount of paperwork was so great that the Khalifa used his clerks as would any busy administrator" (1976:265). Hardallo continued his protest until the year of 1898, the end of the Mahadiyya period and the beginning of the condominium rule.

The condominium rule in Sudan faced various aggressive forms of resistance (see Abdin 1985; Haj al-Safi 1989; Mawut 1983). During the condominium rule the state of Darfur, western Sudan was governed by its own people. When the British invaded Darfur, 1916, Sultan Ali Dinar was given the choice between facing the invaders, who were highly equipped with advanced weapons, or surrendering. He consulted his sister Taja, who became outraged and insisted that he face the infidels. If men refused to fulfill their responsibilities, she threatened that women would take their place. According to Sudanese traditions and values, this would be a real humiliation for men, because warfare is the men's concern. At this time, many songs were created by women to encourage men to face the invaders. One of these songs was sung as follows:

Abdel Rahman ya sudasi  
 Ya nugarti wa nihasi  
 In garate laya gasi  
 min al habout namla rasi

## Translation:

Oh Abdel Rahman the sudasi  
 you are my drums and joy  
 If you flee the war and do not face the enemy  
 I will cover my head with ash  
 a sign of misery and sadness

This song was sung during men's preparation for the war. Women conducted specific rituals, known mainly as *jirtiq*. The *jirtiq* is usually performed for the bride and the groom during a wedding ceremony. In it, they were enclothed with silk, beads, rings and other jewelry made of silver to protect them from evil eye and generate fertility. In times of war, this ritual was commonly performed for unmarried men, because people believed that if the warrior died, he would enter paradise and marry an angel, called *hur al 'yan*. This concept is confirmed by the Muslim Sufis, who believe in this as a kind of joy.<sup>9</sup>

In this example, the hero's name is Abdel Rahman Jeregandi, and the woman who created the song is his relative. She praises him as the one who brings peace and joy for her by describing him as *Nugara* (drum) and *Nihas* (cooper drums). When the group has their drums installed, it is a sign that they enjoy peace and victory. The poetess politely warns the hero not to flee the battlefield, or else she will cover her hair with ash instead of perfume, showing her misery and grief.

The most striking events during the condominium rule were led by students of Khartoum military school who, in November 1924, decided to face the colonial regime with armed force. Women supported them morally and practically. They sewed the flag that represented *Jam'yat al Liwa al Abyad* (the White Flag League), under which they united. The flag was depicted in fine embroidery, and its design consisted of a crescent and stars. The white of the flag symbolized lawfulness, peacefulness, and moderation, and the end of discrimination between the different tribes of the Sudan. Thus, the flag represented the unity of the Sudanese and Egyptian people in the Nile Valley and their unity in the struggle against the British (Kurita 1989:57). Aza Haj al Amin was the wife of one of the members of the League, Ali Abdel Latif. She participated in the league's secret political meetings, and secured the communications and movements of the members. She confronted the British rulers personally by beating an officer who tried to search her home hoping to confiscate some anti-colonial material (Kashif 1984:163).

Hassan Abdin mentions that "[Huddleston Pasha's] orders to the mutineers to surrender were refused and when it became apparent that they were determined to reach their destination, a company of British troops, already alerted, was ordered to fire on them. The ensuing battle continued throughout the evening and night of November 27-28; after almost seven hours of continuous shelling, the mutiny was broken up" (1985:93-94). The colonial rule caused great loss, but this incident also awakened national feeling and inspired people to further protest. Al-Abadi, a national poet, sang a song which honored these students. He praised their heroic acts, especially that of a hero called *Thabit*, meaning "undismayed":

Yislam Ismak, Samok Thabit  
 Yom Kashafo sadrak wa legook Thabit  
 Allah yazi a nas al-kurah

Translation:

God bless your name Thabit  
 When they removed the clothes from your dead body  
 Your chest showed that you were steady  
 and undismayed when facing death.  
 God harm those notorious people

This metaphorical use of words makes the hero's name a central point. The hero's name, Thabit, becomes a symbol of courage and patience in the battle field.

During World War II, Sudan was one of the countries affected indirectly. Sudan at that time was under British rule, and the British colonial government promised the Sudanese people that if they did well in the war in East Africa, Sudan would have its independence. Many Sudanese participated in the war in pursuit of their freedom. The role of the women again was to provoke national feeling and especially to encourage men to participate in the war. Women created many songs, and one famous singer called Aisha-al-Fallatiyya and her sister Jiddawiyya went to the battle field singing for the soldiers, encouraging them to attack the enemy. Aisha sang:

Ya Hitler al Almani  
 Wa Mussolini ya Tilyani  
 Kurseek ma bejlis Tani  
 Yatla' qirish brani  
 ma beseer hina

Translation:

Oh, German Hitler  
 Oh, Italian Mussolini  
 Your Chair will never ever stay again  
 You are just like  
 a foreign piaster  
 with no value in our market.

Apparently, the poetess was aware of what was going on in the world. She knew about Hitler and Mussolini and she refused to accept the foreign occupation of her country. Her message not only addresses the Germans and

the Italians but goes deeper to express her feelings about any *girish brani* (foreign piaster), including the British rulers who are no longer welcomed in her homeland.

Another example from the same period relates:

Tayara Jatna tahuom  
Sawaga zol mal khom  
Ramat alghanabil kom  
Katalat humar Kaltoum  
Fil Mourada.

Translation:

An aeroplane came to us swaying  
Her pilot had no target  
He hit us with a bunch of bombs  
which killed the poor Kaltoum's donkey  
In the Mourada.

These verses illustrate a spectacular picture of an amateur pilot who bombed the civilian, poor people, instead of hitting a military target. The only loss was Kaltoum's donkey. This confirmed that the country was protected and the pilot lacked the courage to hit the target. The words are simple, but the message is strong.

The last example emerged when the British colonials adopted the policy of "indirect rule." Indirect rule was the means by which the British controlled their colonies, including the Sudan (Sanderson 1986:95). The policy of indirect rule was particularly intended to economically repress the natives and restrict access to education and other means that could be used to build the nation (1986:93). The British colonials encouraged the missionary campaign to come to the Sudan and lay down a foundation of education based on Christianity. Muslim communities strongly opposed this idea. Oral poetry was used to express resistance of this kind of education. Yusuf Mustafa al-Tinai created the following poem:

Ma bahab al-mot almukasher  
Wa ma bakhush madrastel mubashir  
E'ndi ma'hd watani al a'ziz

Translation:

I am not afraid to face a hated death  
I will never ever enter the missionary school  
I am proud of my traditional Islamic education.

This poem illustrates and expresses popular resistance by refusing to participate in a suspicious education which might influence faith. Sudanese Muslims prefer traditional education that stresses the Islamic attitudes and values forming their group identity.

Hawa al-Tagtaga is known as the poetess of Isma'1 al-Azhari, the first president of the Sudan. Al-Azhari and his fellows were the people who had struggled and suffered during the British colonial period. Hawa created this song after the presidential election. In it, she is praising al-Azhari's knowledge and wisdom, both as an educated man and as a politician. She is teasing those who denounced him before the election, pointing out that they now are regretting not having joined him:

Al mabeek nidim ya kheri  
 Faz bel dawla jaber hali  
 Yeslam 'aglak albederassa  
 Yeslam fikrik albesiyassa  
 Akber dawla Azhari sassa

Translation:

Those who denounced you, they regretted  
 You won the state election  
 God bless your ideas and thoughts  
 Which represent your knowledge and wisdom  
 You have skilfully won our independence  
 from the greatest country [England]

### **Conclusion**

Folklore can shape people's socio-cultural and political life. As artistic expression, poetry has the potential to affect the process of history-making and to represent powerful forces in its reshaping of events. The aesthetic aspects of poetry play an important role in confining the message. The symbolic, metaphoric forms, and other devices used in the creation of the poetry secure the connection of the message to the community. Sudanese women play a crucial and influential role in creating the poetry of political protest. They have the capability to change the potentially negative impact of war into a challenging situation by preparing men to take on their responsibilities.

This gives rise to the question of the validity of these folkloric materials in reconstructing the past. Some might argue that these songs merely praise, reflecting subjectivity and bias. This might be true, but the songs also include other key terms with which historians can identify

specific events and characters that might contribute to a history of the past. The use of oral poetry in Sudan has not only shaped and reformed historical events but left its impression throughout the Sudanese nationalist movement for independence. Oral poetry, like written documents, has the potential to be a trustworthy historical medium.

### Notes

1 See, for example, Sayyid H. Hurreiz's article "The Use of Folk Poetry in Political and Social Protest by the Shukriyya," (1970:123-131) and Henry Glassie's *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts* (1975).

2 Musa al-Mubarak al-Hasan, author of *Tarikh Dar Fur al-Siyasi, 1882-1895* (The Political History of Darfur, 1882-1895), (1970), is considered a pioneer in using oral data to reconstruct Darfur's political history. R. S. O'Fahey's *State and Society in Darfur*, (1980), Ledwien Kapteijns' work, *Mahadist Faith and Sudanic Tradition*, (1985), and Alexander De Wall's study *Famine That Kills Darfur, Sudan, 1984-85*, (1989) are other important examples of this approach.

3 See, for example, Dorson 1972:17-18; Hurreiz 1972; Wilson 1976.

4 John Lewis Burkhardt, a Swiss traveller who visited Sudan in the early nineteenth century states that the mother of the King Nimir in Shendy (central Sudan) was of the royal blood of *Wolad Adjib* (sons of Adjib). This agrees with the narrative of Bruce, a European traveller who stated that he found in Shendy a woman upon the throne, whom they call *Sittina* (an Arabic word, meaning Our Lady) (Burkhardt 1822:247).

5 For example, in the 1930s a certain Mr. Reed, a British district commissioner, received word that the women inside the encampment of Sudanese battalion #11 were making traditional wine. Reed decided to inspect the camp without the permission of the head of the battalion. On hearing of this, the head of the battalion asked the women of the camp to prepare to fight Reed. The women brought sticks and kitchen utensils to use as weapons, and they began to beat Reed with them. Reed turned and fled, and he was pursued by the women. While trying to cross Khor Abu Anga, a tributary of the Nile, his horse became stuck. He left it and ran to Al-Murada marketplace, where he approached the chief of the market, Um Kadawyya, to seek refuge. She locked him inside the store of Ibrahim Wad al-Awad. Her morals would not permit her to see a man, even a potential enemy, humiliated. When the women arrived, Um Kadawyya protected Reed by telling them that he had gone to his headquarters. She sent them after him. When they were gone, she whistled to summon the police. After that, al-Abadi, a poet, heard the story and created a song in the form of *manaha*,

a genre of mourning — mocking Reed by commemorating a moral, rather than physical, death:

Daganu al khadam wa sakanu bel a'dan  
 Al Taftesh yteer aratu kan ma kan  
 Ahaya a'layho al gafaloho fi al dukan  
 Shalatu Um Kaduyya wa Gafalatu fi ddukan  
 Wa darabat al sufara wat lamlamu al hukam  
 Ahaya alayho al gafaluhu fi ddukan

Translation:

Oh! He has been beaten by women  
 Woe to inspection, I wish it never happened  
 Oh! He has been locked inside the store  
 Um Kadawyya is the one who locked him up  
 She locked him inside the store  
 She gave a signal to the police and they came to his rescue  
 Oh! He has been beaten by women.

6 See Hymes 1981:320.

7 See Hurreiz 1977:23.

8 The Khalifa seems to have been quite a complex and confident man. In one striking incident, he sent a letter to Queen Victoria saying that, if she would convert to Islam, he would consider marrying her.

9 Rumi, the famous Sufi poet, wrote:

Everyone is so afraid of death,  
 but real Sufis just laugh,  
 nothing tyrannizes their hearts.  
 What strikes the oyster shell doesn't damage the pearl. (Jalal al-Din 1990:85)

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