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Kim Searcy

**The Formation of
the Sudanese
Mahdist State**

**Ceremony
and Symbols
of Authority:
1882-1898**

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The Formation of the Sudanese Mahdist State

Ceremony and Symbols of
Authority: 1882–1898

By
Kim Searcy



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This book is the first analysis of the Sudanese Mahdiyya from a socio-political perspective that treats how relationships of authority were enunciated through symbol and ceremony. The book focuses on how the Mahdi and his second-in-command and ultimate successor, the Khalifa Abdallahi, used symbols, ceremony and ritual to articulate their power, authority and legitimacy first within the context of resistance to the imperial Turco-Egyptian forces that had been occupying the Nilotic Sudan since 1821, and then within the context of establishing an Islamic state. This study examines five key elements from a historical perspective: the importance of Islamic mysticism as manifested in Sufi brotherhoods in the articulation of power in the Sudan; ceremony as handmaids of power and legitimacy; charismatic leadership; the routinization of charisma and the formation of a religious state purportedly based upon the first Islamic community in the seventh century C.E.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout world history, religion and politics have been inextricably intertwined. The separation of church and state, a Western concept that achieved preeminence during the age of Enlightenment, was primarily inspired by the ethical thought of the Greek philosophers.¹ According to this concept, politics is the utilization of power in a region, territory, or society—especially the power to govern, to decide who controls the institutions of society and on what terms. From the perspective of those who have embraced the concept of church-state bifurcation, this power to govern has no relation to religion.

Historians such as Montgomery Watt contend that those who hold this view are misguided. Despite Western claims of a separation of politics and religion, when men are prepared to die for a cause they support, the two are in fact linked. There must be some deep driving force that propels people to this extreme position, and this force is usually supplied by religion.²

One reason for the inevitable relationship between the realms of religion and politics lies in the simple reality that power is not monolithic. Power in politics is always a compound of force, influence, and authority. Political power requires meaningful purpose and vision to be accepted as authority. People within or from beyond the boundaries of a political system will subvert, disobey, and resist force if they believe that a political system lacks, or threatens, a vision of meaning or purpose. In certain classical traditions in the West, a specific kind of ideal intelligence, “wisdom,” is seen as a primary factor for conferring legitimacy on political governance. The ideal was governance by a philosopher-king. This dual role has always been awkward because there is, inevitably, an unequal balance between the use of wisdom and force.³ Wisdom may guide the mind and force may affect the body, but seldom do wisdom and force—alone or together—fundamentally

¹ Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 25.

² W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968), 1.

³ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “Religion and Politics.”

shape the heart or the will. For authority to be given legitimacy, qualities of commitment beyond the powers of the human mind and body must be involved. Wisdom becomes decisive authority only when it is transformed from philosophy into religion.

In most cultures and throughout most of human history, religion is the guarantor of legitimacy, and politics is the custodian of temporal authority. This link between politics and religion is made starkly manifest in Islam. The word *dīn*, which has often been translated as religion, and *dawla* (state), are conjoined within the meaning of Islam. Islam encompasses the spiritual and the political, the private and the public domains. To address Islam in terms of a church and state dichotomy is to divide Islam.

This book examines the link between religion and politics in Islam through an analysis of the Sudanese Mahdiyya, specifically the ways in which the Mahdiyya's leaders employed religious symbols and ritual in order to shape, legitimate, renew, and inform their society. The study of the relationship between ritual, symbols, and political authority is not a novel one. European historians have long examined how ritual articulates power and authority, primarily directing their analysis to the context of ancient, medieval, and early modern European societies. Historians such as Paula Sanders and Roy Mottahadeh, who deviated from this European model and explored political authority and power within the context of Muslim polities, have done so in relation to established Muslim states, such as the Fāṭimid dynasty (969–1171) that ruled Egypt and regions of the Maghrib and the Levant, and the Būyid dynasty (934–1062) of western Iran, Iraq, and Mesopotamia.

This study is the first treatment of the Sudanese Mahdiyya from a sociopolitical perspective that analyzes the way relationships of authority were articulated through ceremony and symbol. The Mahdiyya began as a revolt and ultimately culminated in the establishment of a state. As a consequence, the book analyzes the evolution of the political culture of a movement that became a body politic. A core concern of this study is the insignias and symbols of the Mahdists: how did they imbue these with a meaning that was uniquely Mahdist and Sudanese. The Mahdists intended their message to be a universal one, but invested their symbols and ceremonies with meanings that could be understood only by those conversant in Sudanese religious lore. It was primarily through the use of symbols and ceremonies appropriated from the Sufi brotherhoods of mystical Islam and two Sudanese

Islamic polities—the Funj and Fūr sultanates—that the Mahdists articulated their claims to authority.

The Mahdist period (1881–98), from its very establishment, has received considerable attention. This is, perhaps, due to its timing: it began as an insurrection just as the European powers made their colonial penetration into Africa. In addition, it was rare for an indigenous movement to be militarily successful against a much more powerful foe.

Historians have largely focused on the events leading up to the formation and demise of the theocratic state of the Mahdists. These historians have a wealth of primary material to draw upon, as a great many of the proclamations, teachings, sermons, and judgments of the Mahdī are extant. These documents have been compiled into seven volumes and published by the contemporary Sudanese historian, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, under the title *al-Āthār al-kāmila li-l-Imām al-Mahdī*. Abū Salīm also published an earlier one-volume version of this text entitled, *Manshūrāt al-Mahdī*. Ismāʿīl ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Kurdufānī, deemed to be the official Mahdist chronicler, wrote two important historical texts on the Mahdiyya. His first treatment, *Kitāb saʿādat al-mustahdī bi-sīrat al-Mahdī*, deals with the early period of the Mahdiyya from a chronological perspective. His second text, *al-Ṭirāz al-manqūsh bi-bushrā qatl Yuḥanna malik al-Ḥubūsh*, treats the military confrontations between the Mahdist state and Ethiopia, again from a purely chronological point of view.

One of the most important sources is Naʿūm Shuqayr's work treating the history and geography of the Sudan, *Taʾriḫ al-Sūdān al-qadīm wa-l-ḥadīth wa-jughrafiyyatuhu*. Shuqayr worked for the Turco-Egyptian intelligence department from 1890 to 1898, and as a consequence his treatment of the Mahdiyya is somewhat biased. Nonetheless, this work, which was first published in 1903, contains primary textual material from intelligence reports, eyewitness accounts, and personal interviews concerning the Mahdiyya.

The European perspective of the Mahdiyya is brought to the fore in the writings of European prisoners and British military intelligence reports. Two of the most well-known captives of the Mahdiyya were Rudolf Slatin and Father Joseph Ohrwalder. Slatin, an Austrian soldier who became governor-general of Darfur in 1881, surrendered to the Mahdists in 1883. His memoir on the Mahdiyya, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, was published in 1896 shortly after his escape from the

Mahdists. Father Joseph Ohrwalder, a Catholic priest, wrote *Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdist Camp*; this was translated and published in 1892.

Sir Reginald Wingate, a British military intelligence officer, translated the memoirs of Slatin and Ohrwalder from the original German into English. Wingate, who ultimately served as director of military intelligence during the British campaigns to reconquer the Sudan from 1896 to 1898, also wrote a book detailing the rise of the Mahdī and the early stages of the Mahdiyya (*Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, published in 1891). These accounts are unquestionably biased against the Mahdists, who were essentially portrayed as a fanatical mob manipulated by corrupt and cruel leaders. Khalīfa 'Abdallāhi, the Mahdī's successor, received the brunt of this polemical blow, delivered primarily by Slatin, who depicted the Khalīfa as a man solely governed by his personal quest for worldly power. Despite the anti-Mahdist tone of these accounts, they provide useful information, as the authors witnessed the early stages of the revolt and subsequent state formation. In addition to these accounts, there are other anti-Mahdist European works written by men captured by the Mahdists' forces. For example, the German merchant Charles Neufeld was taken prisoner in 1887, and spent twelve years in captivity. Upon his release he wrote about his time as a captive and the Mahdist state during his imprisonment. Neufeld's account, *A Prisoner of the Khaleefa: Twelve Years' Captivity at Omdurman* (published in 1899), is important because he was an eyewitness to the development of the Mahdist administration in Omdurman.

The followers of the Mahdiyya were known as Anṣār al-Mahdī (the Mahdī's helpers). Some of these Anṣār composed memoirs that provide a useful counter to those of the European chroniclers. *Ta'rikh ḥāyatī*, written by Bābikr Bedrī, an early adherent of the Mahdiyya, is an autobiography that paints a detailed portrait of the social and economic conditions of the Mahdist state, in addition to treating the religious aspects of the Mahdiyya. The memoir of Yūsuf Mikhā'il, a Sudanese Copt who joined the Mahdiyya in 1883, and who worked in the public treasury and served as the commander of the Coptic standard of the Mahdist army at the battle of Karārī, provides useful information concerning the administration of state policy during its formation. His memoirs were published in 1934 under the title *Mudhakkirāt Yūsuf Mikhā'il 'an awākhir al-'ahd al-Turkī wa-l-Mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān*. The published memoirs of 'Uthmān Diqna, the leader of the Mahdists'

forces in the eastern Sudan, relates his military battles and provides information on a number of important personalities of the period.

However, it was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that scholars began to extensively use the large amount of published and unpublished primary textual material on the Mahdiyya to present a chronological account of the major political events as well as the structure of the state governed by the Mahdī and his second-in-command, Khalifa ‘Abdallāhi. These historians have approached the Mahdiyya with a variety of analytical methods. The Sudanese scholar ‘Abdallāh ‘Alī Ibrāhīm treated the Mahdī’s ideological battles with the religious scholars (‘*ulamā*’). Muḥammad Sa’id al-Qaddāl, also a Sudanese historian, conducted a study on the economic history of the Mahdist state. Robert Kramer, an American, is the most recent scholar to treat the Mahdist state; in his dissertation he analyzed the social and political structure in the capital, Omdurman. The most thorough of these historical works is that of the British Arabist, P. M. Holt, who wrote *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*. Holt’s work, published in 1958, was the first history of the Mahdiyya to engage in an analysis of the political and administrative history of the movement and subsequent state using primarily Arabic sources. Holt, however, gives only a cursory glance at the relationship of ritual and symbol to the articulation of power and authority. The work that comes closest to exploring ritual and symbols of authority during the Mahdiyya is Abū Salīm’s *al-Adawāt al-ḥukm wa-l-wilāya fī-l-Sūdān*. In this study, Abū Salīm describes the various accoutrements of power used by Sudanese rulers and religious leaders. But his work offers no analysis on the relationship between these accoutrements and the sociopolitical forces implicit within these symbols of power.

This book, unlike other treatments of the Mahdiyya, uses primary textual material to explore the formation of the theocratic state within the context of an analysis of the myriad ways in which the leaders of the Mahdiyya articulated their claims to authority using symbols, insignia, ritual, and ceremony. The study is concerned with the question of how these men utilized religious ritual to shape the constellation of interests that produced constructs of such pervasive power.

The first chapter offers an overview of the political and religious history of the Sudan leading up to the Mahdiyya. Chapter 2 traces the specific symbols, ceremonies and rituals employed by the Mahdists and places them squarely within the Prophetic and Sudanese Islamic tradition in order to illustrate how the use of these symbols resonated

within the social and religious consciousness of the populace, which, in turn affirmed the Mahdī's legitimacy.

Chapter 3 analyzes the concept of charismatic authority in relation to the Mahdī. The fourth chapter continues this discussion on personal authority and political legitimacy within the context of the reign of the Mahdī's successor, Khalīfa 'Abdallāhi. The central question in these two chapters is what distinguished the reigns of the Mahdī and the Khalifa, and the ways each man articulated his claims to political and religious authority. In chapter 5, I address the formation of the Mahdist state. The institutions of state, specifically the treasury and the courts of law, are given close attention. The study will conclude with a discussion concerning the continuing relevancy of the symbols of authority in post-Mahdiyya Sudan.

The transliterations in this study adhere to that of the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (3rd edition) for standard Arabic proper names and terms. For Sudanese and African names, *Arabic Literature in Africa*, vol. 1: *The Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*, is used. The standard English for proper names with an English form (e.g., Khartoum) will be used. All translations from the Arabic are my own, unless otherwise noted. Generally, common era dates are given; where two dates are presented, these appear as the Islamic Hijri date (AH), followed by the common era date.

CHAPTER ONE

ISLAM IN THE SUDAN

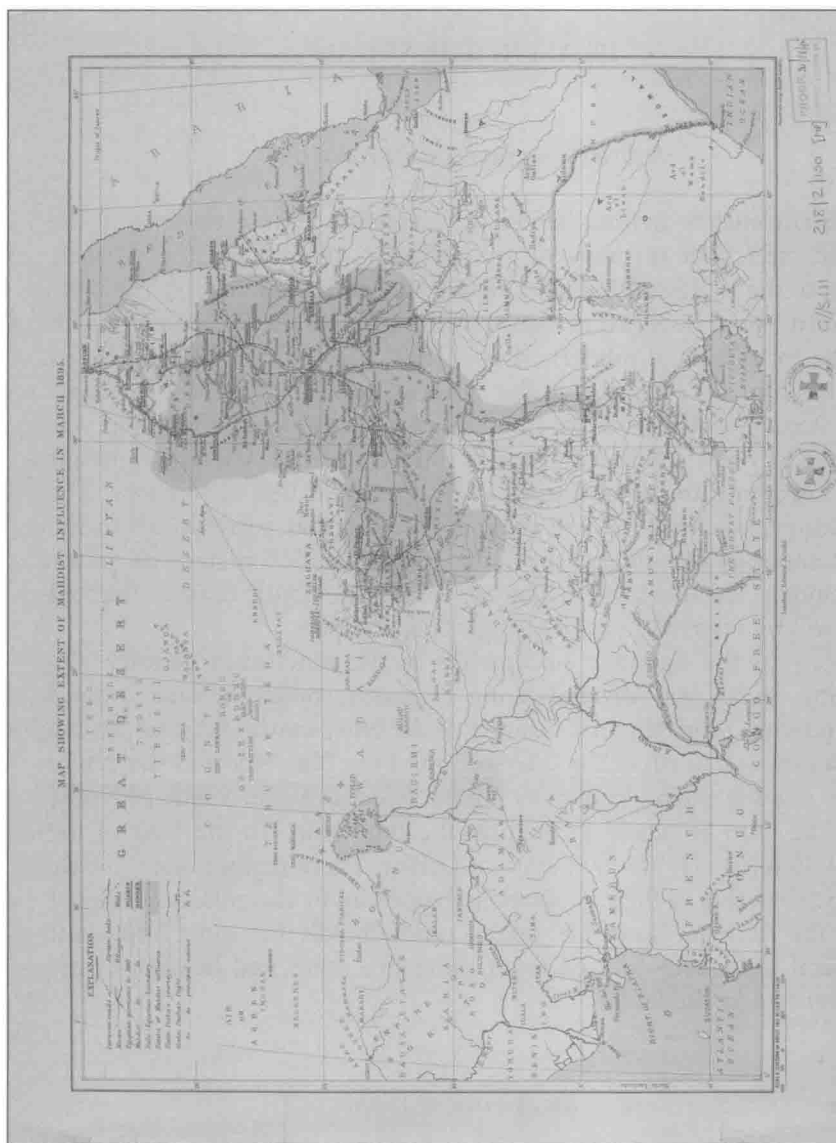
A Brief Geographical Introduction

Arab chroniclers writing before the sixteenth century designated the broad stretch of territory of sub-Saharan Africa from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea as *bilād al-Sūdān*, the land of the Blacks. Thus, the western Sudan included the lands to the south of the Sahara and north of the forest belt of modern West Africa; the central Sudan included the basin of Lake Chad; and the eastern Sudan included the modern-day Republic of the Sudan. This broad geographical designation was adopted by pre-colonial European travelers to the African continent and continues to be used to describe this great belt of territory. The remainder of this book will refer to the area that corresponds to the contemporary Republic of the Sudan as the Nilotic Sudan or as simply the Sudan. The territories extending from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea will be referred to as the geographical Sudan.

Prior to the Egyptian occupation in the nineteenth century, the Nilotic Sudan was divided along linguistic, religious, and cultural boundaries. From the first cataract of the Nile, south of Aswan, to the sixth cataract, north of the intersection of the Blue Nile and the White Nile, was the region known as Nubia, *bilād al-Nūba*. South of Nubia was the Funj Sultanate located on the Blue Nile. To the west of the Funj Sultanate lay the Sultanate of Darfur. These regions were greatly influenced, due to their geographical location, by the cultures of Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula. Islam—undoubtedly the most important cultural influence—arrived from these two areas and became firmly established in the Sudan.

The Arrival of Islam

The niche that Islam carved for itself in the Nilotic Sudan involved a gradual process that began with the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641. When Alexandria, the last stronghold of Byzantium in Egypt, fell in



Map showing extent of Mahdist influence in March 1895. Reproduced by permission of Durham University Library, SAD 218/2/150[MP].

the latter half of 641, the Muslim general 'Amr b. al-'Āṣ began sending military expeditions into Nubia. At this time, Nubia consisted of two Christian kingdoms: Nubia and 'Alwa. The kingdom of Nubia extended from the first cataract to the fourth cataract and its capital, known as Dongola al-'Ajūz ("old Dongola"), was located on the upper Nile between the third and fourth cataracts. 'Alwa's borders ran from the fourth cataract to the upper reaches of the island of Sinnār; its capital, Soba, was located on the right bank of the Blue Nile about fifteen miles from present-day Khartoum. Missionaries from Egypt introduced Christianity to the Sudan in the sixth century.¹ Many churches were built and there is no evidence of any forced conversions. However, Christianity remained primarily the religion of the kings and nobility. J. S. Trimingham notes that the people accepted Christianity nominally, but continued to practice various forms of animism. He argues that the religion of the populace was animistic prior to Islam, and elements of animism continued in the Islam of the Nubians. This argument does not entirely resonate because there can be found in Islamic mysticism, which arguably is the most influential form of Islam in the Sudan, Hindu elements as well as Neoplatonic influences. The role of Islamic mysticism in the religious culture of the Sudan will be treated in depth in subsequent chapters. What may be noted at this point, is the important cultural role of Christianity in Nubia in the years immediately preceding Islam's arrival. The language of the region, Nubian, through the influence of Christianity, became a written language. Hence, the nominal acceptance of Christianity by the population notwithstanding, Christianity had come to shape the consciousness of the Nubian kingdoms.²

Thus, around 642, when Arab Muslims began sending raiding parties into Nubia, they found a people loosely united by a common religious culture. It is perhaps due to this unified religious consciousness that these military incursions all ended with the Muslims being defeated by the Nubians. In the face of a foreign foe, the Nubians galvanized their forces to rout the enemy. Heartened by their success, the Nubians themselves made raids across the border into Upper Egypt.

'Abdallāh b. Sa'd b. Abī Sarh, who succeeded 'Amr b. al-'Āṣ as governor of Egypt, determined to put an end to the Nubian raids into

¹ J. S. Trimingham, *Islam in the Sudan* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1949), 78.

² *Ibid.*, 79–80.

Upper Egypt, and in 651 led a well-armed expedition into Nubia. This force penetrated as far as Dongola and laid siege to the town, destroying the church in the city center. King Qalidūrūn (r. ca. 651), seeing his capital city in ruins, sued for peace. The king and ‘Abdallāh concluded a treaty known as the *baqt*, in which the Nubians promised to provide 360 slaves to the Muslims annually, and maintain the mosque the Muslims had established in Dongola. In addition, ‘Abdallāh promised the king that he would provide him with grain whenever the latter’s reserves dwindled.³

On the basis of the reports of the medieval Arab historian al-Maqrīzī, in the first year of the treaty, the Nubians delivered forty additional slaves to the Muslims, who in turn gave the Nubians gifts of tools, alcohol, seeds of barley, wheat, and horses.⁴ The *baqt* laid the foundation for trade between Nubia and Egypt. The treaty lasted six hundred years and although there were times when payment was withheld, for the most part, slaves from the upper Nile Valley were transported to Egypt annually in exchange for wheat and barley. In addition to laying the foundation for trade, the treaty paved the way for the spread of Islam in the Sudan.

Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in its initial stages was a dynamic force that spread very rapidly. Ten years after the Prophet’s death, Arab Muslims were in control of the entire Arabian Peninsula and Egypt, and were establishing a foothold in North Africa. However, in the Sudan, Islam spread relatively slowly. The *baqt* was the prelude to Muslim missionary activity in the Sudan, as it allowed traders to have contact with the Nubians, and these traders may well have engaged in proselytizing endeavors. The *baqt* agreement was not honored consistently, and despite the fact that the terms of the *baqt* essentially forced the Nubians to build a mosque in Dongola, over time, as individual rulers became committed to Islam, mosques were built free of the constraints of the agreement. However, this commitment to Islam was a slow and gradual process and these factors alone do not paint a complete portrait of how Islam became the dominant religious culture of the region, particularly given the reality that the Nubians managed to preserve their religious and cultural integrity for almost seven hundred

³ Na‘ūm Shuqayr, *Ta’rikh al-Sūdān* (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1981), 59–61.

⁴ Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī, *al-Khiṭaṭ b. al-Maqrīzī* (Lebanon: Dār al-‘Irfān, 1898), 1:323–5.

years after the initial Arab thrust. Their independent nature allowed them to maintain their political independence and their language in the face of the ever-increasing cultural and religious hegemony of the Arabs.⁵ The rise of Islam and the Arabization of some of the Nubian groups in the Nilotic Sudan is primarily attributable to internal causes, specifically the weakness of the Monophysite Church in Nubia.

The Christian kingdoms of Nubia collapsed as a result of the weakness of Christian churches, coupled with the infiltration of Arabs, who settled in the kingdoms and gradually intermarried with the Nubians.⁶ A new Arabized Nubian elite arose from the unions of Arab men and Nubian noblewomen; the matrilineal system meant that male offspring from these marriages became noblemen. This new elite increasingly identified itself with Islam and Arab culture. Christianity began to disappear through the absorption of the Nubians into the Arab tribal system and the cultural ascendancy of Islam. According to Trimingham, Dongola collapsed around 1320, and 'Alwa collapsed around 1504, not as a result of Arab wars of conquest, but rather through their cultural infiltration, which gradually led to an Arab-Islamic hegemony in the region.⁷

The Funj Sultanate

Shuqayr, on the other hand, maintains that the demise of Nubia corresponds to the ascendancy of a dynastic state in the region known as the Sultanate of the Funj.⁸ This state was founded in the early sixteenth century by a king known as 'Amāra Dūnqas (r. 1505–34), and continued to exist, albeit in a debilitated state, until the Turco-Egyptian invasion of 1820. This invasion forced Bādī VI, the last titular Funj ruler, to surrender in the summer of 1821 to the invaders.

The origins of the Funj are shrouded in mystery. According to their own claims they are the descendants of Umayyad Arabs who migrated to the Sudan after the collapse of the Umayyad dynasty in the eighth century. Three theories on the origins of the Funj have been put forth: The first has the Funj originating in Ethiopia; the second maintains

⁵ Trimingham, *Islam*, 72.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Shuqayr, *Ta'rikh al-Sūdān*, 97.

that they were a war-band of Shilluk who traveled from their homeland on the upper White Nile and conquered the Arabs who had subdued 'Alwa; the third hypothesis concludes that the ruling dynasty of the Funj originated with a refugee prince from Bornu, who settled among the Shilluk.

However, there is little concrete evidence from the Nilotic Sudan to support these theories. Arkell noted in his 1932 article on the origins of the Funj, that the Umayyad claims of the Funj were suspect and that they were most probably Shilluk.⁹ This hypothesis has stronger claims based upon indigenous sources, specifically the account related to James Bruce by Aḥmad Sīd al-Qom, a high officer in the Funj court.¹⁰

The Funj established a vast kingdom that extended from the third cataract to Fāzūghlī on the Blue Nile, and from Suakin on the Red Sea to Kordofan. The capital of the kingdom was at Sinnār, which is located about 100 miles south of Khartoum between the Blue Nile and the White Nile. The kingdom was divided into semi-autonomous, small principalities, and the ruler of each paid tribute to the king of Sinnār.

Shuqayr noted that when the Funj initially became ascendant in the region they were animists, but converted to Islam out of political expediency, under threat of attack by Sultan Salīm, the Ottoman Turkish ruler who conquered Egypt in 1517. The Funj king sent a letter with genealogical tables to the Ottoman sultan in order to substantiate the Funj claim that they were indeed Arab Muslims:

It is said that in those days, after Sultan Salīm had taken possession of the regions of Suakin and Massawa he turned his attention to Ethiopia with the intention of attacking Sinnār. Thus he wrote to the Funj king demanding his capitulation. The king responded by writing, "Indeed I don't know what has incited you to wage war against me and take possession of my land. If it is for the sake of establishing Islam in the land, verily I and the people of my kingdom are Arab Muslims and we practice the religion of the Messenger of God. And if your goal is material in nature, I know that the majority of my people are simple bedouins who emigrated to this land in search of sustenance. They have nothing."¹¹

⁹ A. J. Arkell, "Fung Origins," *Sudan Notes and Records* 14, no. 2 (1932), 205–10.

¹⁰ James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the Years 1768–1773* (Edinburgh: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1804), 89–94.

¹¹ Shuqayr, *Ta'rikh al-Sūdān*, 100.