

SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 15 2011





The map reflects the new territorial situation following the independence of South Sudan in July 2011.

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Palaces in the Mountains: An Introduction to the Archaeological Heritage of the Sultanate of Darfur

Andrew McGregor

There is a side of Darfur that does not involve raging conflicts, refugee camps or war crimes. As in so many areas of conflict, such scenes tend to form our full knowledge of these places, representing a loss both for ourselves and the people who live there. Twenty years ago Darfur was nearly unknown outside of Sudan and not even very well-known within it as most Sudanese had never been to Darfur and knew relatively little about it, though all were aware of Darfur's last Sultan, 'Ali Dinar, who despite fighting Mahdists, Egyptians and Britons to keep Darfur separate from the rest of the Sudan, had become a kind of national anti-colonial hero whose story was taught in schools across the country.¹

However, there is convincing evidence that Darfur was once the centre of a great African civilization, at once a melting pot of regional influences while maintaining a unique multi-tribal, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic character of its own. Darfur is one of the least examined archaeological regions in the world, yet one so rich in remains that almost any kind of investigation would be sure to reveal lost secrets about the trade in objects and ideas between sub-Saharan Africa and the civilisations of the Mediterranean coast. It was a place whose story was told in the great untouched stone monuments of its dynasties and the oral traditions of its peoples, a story in which the causes of the current violence in Darfur are deeply embedded, as may be their solution.

Though not wishing to exoticise this culture, it is relatively easy to cite a number of unusual and intriguing elements of this civilisation:

Darfur was a multi-ethnic society bound by elements of a common culture, one in which many of its residents identified nearly as strongly with the idea of the Sultanate as a political and economic entity as they did with their own tribal affiliations.

Darfur was a place that practiced elements of a divine kingship, one reflected by the veil worn by the Sultan and the presence of the Kamni, or "Shadow Sultan," a royal relative accorded the privileged lifestyle of a Sultan, but who was expected to die at the same time and in the same way as the king, even if this meant the use of royal executioners (Nach-

tigal 1971, IV, 326-28; Muhammad ibn 'Umar ibn Sulayman al-Tunsi 1845, 172).

Darfur's economy was based largely on agriculture, trade and slavery, including the lucrative production of eunuchs for the courts of the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East.

Even as Islam gradually became the state religion of Darfur, a local and pre-Islamic religion was preserved by the women of the community and given state sanction in the Sultanate by including their rituals and presence in official religious events. In the hills and caves of the mountains old women lived in isolation in ancient holy places, preserving elements of the old religion, and even acting as guardians for strange, talking snakes that issued prophecies and shared secrets with their guardians (See Arkell 1951, 230; MacMichael 1922, Vol. 2, 100-101; Davies 1922, 167-168).

Much of the old religion centered on large, sacred stones which formed places of pilgrimage where various symbols were smeared on these stones with flour, butter and milk. Such rites had especially important roles in rain-making, marriages, births and circumcisions.

One of the most important figures in Darfur's administration was the togoinye, the Locust Wizard, who was charged with performing the necessary rituals and incantations on mountain tops needed to turn back the dreaded waves of locusts that plagued the region.²

A pair of volcanic lakes were used by the royal court for prophecies in times of danger, the ripples of their waters interpreted by carefully trained seers (Nachtigal 1971 IV, 368; Hobbs 1918, 357-63).

The Sultans of Darfur and some of the neighboring regions maintained enormous harems of wives, concubines and slave girls. The death of a Sultan was usually accompanied by the massacre or blinding of scores of the new Sultan's brothers and half-brothers to ensure the stability of the new regime (Plate 1).

Like the mediaeval kingdoms of Europe, the power of the Sultanate depended upon ranks of heavily armored horsemen drawn from the aristocracy of the kingdom. The cult of heroism practiced by these fursan, or knights, was best



Plate 1. Harim of the Sultan's Palace, el-Fashir.

¹ This paper is largely based on the author's *Darfur (Sudan) in the Age of Stone Architecture c. AD 1000-1750: Problems in historical reconstruction*, BAR International Series 1006, 2001. Other treatments of this period can be found in R. S. O'Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate: A History*, New York, 2008 and H. G. Balfour Paul, *History and Antiquities of Darfur*, Sudan Antiquities Service Museum Pamphlet, Khartoum, 1955.

² See the discussion in McGregor 2001, 34, fn. 25.



displayed at the 1821 Battle of Bara, in which the Fur Sultans lost Kordofan to the forces of the Egyptian Viceroy. In their first encounter with artillery, the Sultan and his horsemen charged the guns so fiercely in their zeal to kill the fire-spitting demons that the cannon bore the marks of their sabres for years after the battle (see McGregor 2001, 75-76).

One of the many interesting traditions in Darfur is one in which Dhu el-Qarnayn (Alexander the Great) was the first ruler of the Fur homeland in the Jebel Marra Mountains. This unlikely tradition holds that he built his house at Merri and introduced the date palm to the region, but the story is very much in character with the many Alexandrine romances that recorded the great king's adventures in the far flung corners of the earth. What is unusual here is the apparently pre-Islamic origin of this tale in Darfur. The sons of Dhu el-Qarnayn are reputed to be buried in barrows near the volcanic lakes of Jebel Marra, which remained an important site of pilgrimage for the Fur into the 20th century (Arkell Papers, SOAS, Box 3/File 12/(Darfur 4)).

Finally, the great number of poorly understood antiquities in the region has encouraged various writers and scholars to suggest links between Darfur and Old Kingdom Egypt, the Kingdom of Kush (Meroe) or even the later mediaeval Christian kingdoms of Nubia. Unfortunately, what many of these theories have had in common is an unwillingness on the part of their proponents to believe that the massive stone ruins of the Darfur mountains could actually be the work of an indigenous culture.

Geography of Darfur

An understanding of Darfur's strategic location and the routes in and out of Darfur are also important in identifying the cultural influences that helped shape Darfur civilisation.

The main trade routes from Darfur generally ran north-south rather than east-west. Most famous was the north east caravan route to Egypt, the Darb al-Arba'in, or Forty Days Road. Almost directly north lay the difficult and often waterless route to Benghazi through Kufra Oasis, a highly strategic site both then and now. To the north west lay the more favorable route to Tripoli. The route running east through Kordofan to the Nile was little used and extremely difficult until a series of wells and water storage points in Tebeldi trees was created beginning in the 18th century. Even in 1916 the invading Egyptian Army that used this route nearly perished due to thirst and hunger before they fought a single battle. Ironically, the only thing that saved them was the fact that preservation of the wells and Tebeldi trees was regarded as a sacred duty for the Sultan of Darfur. Even faced with an invading army, the Sultan refused to destroy the water network, which would have ensured the destruction of the invaders. The difficulty and rare use of this route in earlier centuries form one of the main arguments against theories that Darfur was the creation of Meroites escaping the Axumite invasion or a western extension of the Christian kingdoms of Nubia in the mediaeval period.

To the south of Darfur lay the Fertit, pagan African tribes whose enslavement and export by the Darfuris provided the sultanate a rich income. It was also the source of goods from the African interior that were shipped through Darfur to markets on the Mediterranean coast.

To the south west lay the important kingdoms of Borno, Bagirmi and Kanem, now parts of Nigeria and Chad. These kingdoms played important roles in the introduction of Islam to Darfur and especially in developing certain phases of Darfur's architectural heritage, when architects from these regions were brought to work in Darfur due to their knowledge of proper Islamic forms. In practice, this constituted something of a revolution in architectural styles that reflects Darfur's shift from isolated mountain kingdom to a commercial center with international ties and an important part of the Islamic frontier in Africa.

To the west lay a region of smaller border sultanates such as Dar Tama, Dar Qimr and Dar Masalit that formed a barrier between Darfur and its western rival, the Sultanate of Wadai. Despite many historical and cultural similarities the two states were constantly at war, and the perilous position of the border sultanates meant that mobility was a more necessary quality in their royal courts than the construction of permanent administrative and religious structures. The Masalit, however, were formidable warriors in their own right, which helped keep Dar Masalit's neighbors wary of the small kingdom.

Most importantly, we have the Jebel Marra mountain range in the heart of Darfur, an ancient range of well-watered volcanic peaks approximately 3,000m high with a pleasant climate and a traditional abundance of fruit and grains that has endured several droughts in recent years, increasing competition for resources between pastoral Arab tribes and sedentary agriculturalists. Though only 50km wide from east to west and 110km long from north to south, this very human friendly environment has probably been inhabited for thousands of years, but confirmation of this must wait for opportunities for fieldwork.

Table 1. Dynastic Chart of Darfur.

The Tora (Legendary)	? to the 12 th century
The Daju (Indigenous African)	12 th century to 15 th century
The Tunjur (Berber/Arab)	15 th century to early 17 th century
Kayra Fur (Indigenous African)	Early 17 th century to 1916

This dynastic chart shows, in very rough fashion, the dynasties of Darfur and their approximate dates of rule. This is just a general guide, as such charts ignore significant overlaps between these parties as they did not always rule in the same areas of Darfur, which is roughly the size of France. It also ignores the importance of non-ruling groups such as the Arabs, the Zaghawa and various other tribes in shaping Darfur. Nevertheless, it introduces our main players: the historically uncertain Tora, and their successors, the Daju, the Tunjur and the Fur, the latter eventually lending their name to the kingdom.

The Tora

Somewhere in the shadowy world between mythology and history lie the Tora, the legendary race of “white giants” that are credited in Darfur with the construction of the earliest megalithic stone-works. Oral traditions claim this race of invaders came from the north, suggesting the Tora may have been Berbers from North Africa who crossed the desert, probably passing through the Tubu homeland of Tibesti to reach the moderate and welcoming climes of Darfur’s Jebel Marra.

The Tora are credited with introducing:

Megalithic construction

Advanced stone-working techniques

Terrace farming, which enabled Jebel Marra to support a possibly far larger population than it does at present

Irrigation techniques

The cultivation of palm trees.

The Tora remain the great enigma of Darfur history. Indeed, we cannot even say with any certainty that such a group existed, though if not the Tora, some group was responsible for the megalithic stonework that was already in place by the time the Daju took control of Darfur. Interestingly, there are some sections of the Fur who claim Tora descent despite their legendary status (Arkell Papers, SOAS, Box 3/File 13/ (Darfur 3); Arkell 1937a).

Tora Construction

With Tora architecture we are clearly in an African world dominated by the circle and the oval. Although Egypt and Mesopotamia made several very early experiments with oval



Plate 2. Casemate cupboard (From an original photograph in the archive of Glencairn Balfour Paul (EUL MS 370), Special Collections, University of Exeter, by permission of the Estate of Glencairn Balfour Paul).

temples, the architectural plans of these civilisations and the designs of all those later influenced by them were dominated by the square and the rectangle.

Tora stonework is easily identified, consisting of massive masonry, faced on both sides and filled with rubble. Tora buildings are extremely solid and not easily destroyed. The stonework is very distinct from modern Fur stonework, which consists largely of balancing single stones one atop another, with no attempt at facing.

The following are a few characteristics of the Tora style, which were adopted with some variations by the better known Daju, Tunjur and Fur dynasties.

Multi-chambered structures are found within a massive oval or circular compound wall.

Large stone plinths are commonly used.

Round casemate cupboards provided storage areas (Plate 2).

Terracing of mountain building sites is done with large boulders.

Palaces, the largest type of structure, may be as large as 200m to 400m in diameter.

Palaces and other residences typically have two entry points; the Orré Dé (the main gate for men), and the Orré Baya (“the narrow gate,” used exclusively by women).³

The Daju

With the beginnings of the Daju Dynasty sometime in the 12th century Darfur enters the historical period. Though the Daju left no known records themselves, they came to the attention of Arab geographers such as el-Idrisi and Ibn Sa’id. A number of local rock paintings of sword-wielding horsemen may also represent the Daju.

Known to the other tribes as the “People of Pharaoh,” in other words as the followers of a tyrant, the rule of these fierce local horsemen was not remembered fondly in Darfur. The Daju, who were not yet Muslims, appear to have arrived in Darfur from points to the east and south, though their oral traditions suggest the Shendi region. Daju genealogies claim descent from the Himyarite dynasties of Yemen, though this is typical of later attempts to tie indigenous African Islamic groups to the prestigious Arab tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. Fashioning such *nisha*-s or genealogies for a price was once an important profession in the region.

Among the Daju Dynasty’s most notable rulers is Ahmad el-Daj, who tradition holds rode an antelope west to the new Darfur homeland of Dar Sila in modern day Chad. Another ruler of note is the rather ferociously named Omar Kissifurogé, whose name means “Eater of the Fur” and seems to provide a rather concise commentary on tribal relations of the time. Omar is also remembered for ordering Jebel Umm Kardos to be moved closer to his residence. The hill to this day bears a large unnatural looking depression near its base. This order and other acts of tyranny, including levying taxes

³ For Tora construction methods, see Balfour Paul 1955, 21.



of grain only to pour the grain out into the sand in front of the taxpayers, were reputed to have brought an end to Daju rule in Darfur. The tale of ordering a mountain to be moved and the story of Ahmad el-Daj's wild ride on an antelope are examples of recurring motifs in the region's oral traditions, with the story of the sultan riding west on an antelope appearing in Zaghawa, Tunjur and Fur versions of the tradition, though each version features a different king. These recurring motifs are discussed further below.

Until proper archaeological surveys and excavations begin in Darfur, these traditions provide the bulk of what we know about the history of Darfur. There were no written records kept until the Islamic sultanate of the Fur took power in the 17th century, but even these were not readily shared with outsiders. These documents might have provided an abundance of historical information on Darfur, but the royal archives suffered devastation at the hands of the freebooting slave army of Zubayr Pasha in 1874, and then again in the late 19th century during the rule of the Mahdists, who burned any records they could find. Finally in 1916, the invading Egyptian Army threw most of the records they found into the streets of el-Fashir as they looted the Darfur capital after the defeat of Sultan 'Ali Dinar's army at the Battle of Beringia.

Daju Construction Methods

Under the Daju it appears to have become a tradition for each sultan to build his own palatial residence, a practice that continued under different dynasties and has left the region with an astonishing number of important archaeological sites. The typical Daju grave is a long barrow, the most interesting of which may be found at the volcanic Dereiba Lakes in Jebel Marra. As mentioned earlier, these barrows have become identified in Fur oral tradition with the legends of Alexander or Dhu el-Qarnayn, "He of the two Horns," as he is known in Islamic tradition. In this form he is said to have been the first sultan of Darfur in certain folk traditions in the area, though it is quite certain Alexander never reached remote Darfur. The Dereiba lakes, whose strange atmosphere rarely fail to make an impression on visitors, appear to have formed a highly sacred space from the earliest pre-Islamic times.

The barrows at the lakes were a place of pilgrimage until recent times. They appear in a cluster of four, with a smaller fifth barrow nearby. According to a Fur tradition the barrows belonged to the sons of Dhu el-Qarnayn, while the fifth and smaller barrow was said to belong to their dog. Pilgrims typically crawled around the barrows on all fours and would reach into the barrows through a small hole and extract soil to consume after mixing the earth with water. This soil was understood to contain elements of the bodies buried in the barrows. The deep ruts formed by the crawling paths suggest the pilgrimage is a tradition of great antiquity.

The Tunjur

If the Tora represented a first wave of Berber migrants to Darfur, the arrival of the Tunjur in the 15th century would

appear to represent a second wave. Though the Tunjur exist in Darfur and eastern Chad to this day, their origins remain mysterious. If they possessed their own language, no trace of it remains – the Tunjur have never been known to speak anything other than Arabic and claim to be the descendants of the Banu Hilal Arabs.

The best guess is that the Tunjur represented a group of Arabized Berbers who began moving south after the arrival of the Banu Hilal (also known as "the Sons of the Crescent Moon"). Traditions indicate they moved south gradually from the Tunis region, remaining in the Ennedi Massif of northern Chad for several generations before moving south again to seize northern Darfur, ruling there simultaneously with the Daju in southern Darfur for some time (Gros 1971, 272-76; Braukämper 1992, 103-04). Another branch of the Tunjur also established a kingdom in Wadai, now the eastern province of Chad.

The slab-lined graves of the Tunjur differ greatly from the barrows used by the Daju. They are typically oval to somewhat rectangular in shape and are found in significant numbers near Jebel Masa and outside the vast Tunjur city of Uri.

Despite their claims to origin in the Muslim Banu Hilal, the Tunjur appear to have been entirely pagan upon their arrival in Darfur. Perhaps traditional forms of Berber religion had re-asserted themselves among the Tunjur on their slow multi-generational movement south to Darfur, or perhaps Islam had little resonance outside of the leading families. For now this remains one of Darfur's intriguing historical puzzles.

The arrival of the Tunjur proved something of a revolution in military affairs in Darfur. The Tunjur warriors wore coats of mail with conical helmets and rode armoured horses. Their use of lances, iron-tipped javelins and curved sabers eventually drove the lightly armed Daju from power.

The Tunjur introduced a number of important changes to Darfur society:

- Organization of the state
- Organization of a state labour force (corvée)
- Introduction of long-range trade
- Introduction of Islam - the first traces of Islam are seen, at least in the ruling group.

Though the works of the Tunjur may be seen in many places in Darfur and there is a rich body of oral tradition concerning them, all their works are strangely attributed to one individual, Shau Dorsid. Since the name means roughly "The Master Over Us," it is possible that all the Tunjur rulers have been conflated in tradition into one individual. As such, Shau Dorsid is recalled as a tyrant and despot who was constantly engaged in military campaigns. Various tales assert he was a "straight-nosed white giant" from a race that preceded even the Tora, while others suggest he may even have been Italian or Spanish in origin (Arnell Papers, SOAS, Box 5/File 24/(Darfur 16); Musa A. 'Abd al-Jalil and 'Abd Allah A. Khatir 1977, 5-6). Like his Daju predecessor, Omar Kissifurogé, Shau Dorsid was said to have ordered

enormous but useless construction projects, in his case, the leveling of a mountain so he could build a residence on it. The site is still known today as “Mailo Fugo Jurto,” or “the leveled mountain.” (Nachtigal 1971, IV, 276). According to tradition, Shau Dorsid was deposed by his half-brother Dali and fled on a white horse to the mountains of Ennedi in northern Chad, though to this day a small Tunjur group in Dar Inga continue to call themselves “the Showunga,” “the people of Shau Dorsid”. Keeping in mind the recurring motifs in local oral tradition, we can note the similarity with Ahmad el-Daj’s flight west on an antelope and the flight west nearly a century later of the last Tunjur Sultan of Wadai, who also escaped on a white horse after being overthrown by an Arab-Maba coalition (“The Native Chronicle of Wadai,” in Palmer 1928, 26-27).

Another important motif in local tradition is the arrival of the “Wise Stranger” who transforms the local culture. The story is common to many ethnic and linguistic groups in the eastern Sahel region – in Darfur the Wise Stranger first appears in Tunjur traditions and is known as Ahmad el-Maqr (Ahmad the Lame) (Nachtigal 1971, IV, 275; O’Fahey and Spaulding 1974, 114; MacMichael 1912, Appendix III, 231-234). All these tales have a number of common elements:

The Wise Stranger comes to a remote and barbarous land. He introduces new customs (especially associated with eating).

The Wise Stranger marries the chief’s daughter and begins a new dynasty.

The tale of the Wise Stranger usually appears to be closely tied to the arrival of Arab or Islamic influences in the region. As such, it became an important element in establishing the legitimacy of a new dynasty. In local tradition, the Wise Stranger actually arrived twice in Darfur, helping establish both the Tunjur and Fur dynasties.

Today the Tunjur are found in Darfur, Kanem, Wadai, Ennedi and northern Nigeria. They keep the memory of their once powerful kingdom and their Tunisian origins alive through song, oral tradition and the wearing of the Black Turban of mourning by the Tunjur chief in Darfur.

Tunjur Construction Methods

Berber chouchet (“pillbox”) tombs appear to have spread from northern Algeria to the Tunis region and then on into Tibesti and eventually into Darfur, where they appear outside the stone ruins of long-abandoned cities. The introduction of the chouchet style and its abandonment after Tunjur rule may give us an important clue as to the Berber identity of the mysterious Tunjur (see Camps 1991, 1400-1407).

Otherwise, in more monumental works, the Tora style continues to appear alongside innovations associated with the introduction of Islam, at least at the highest levels of Tunjur society.

Uri

The great stone city of Uri was built by the Tunjur at the

nexus of important trade routes to Egypt and Tripoli. Some three to five miles in circumference, Uri contains a variety of lifestyles and construction methods consistent with an extended occupation. The area is today so thickly covered with brush that the mosque was not discovered until the 1950s (Figure 1).

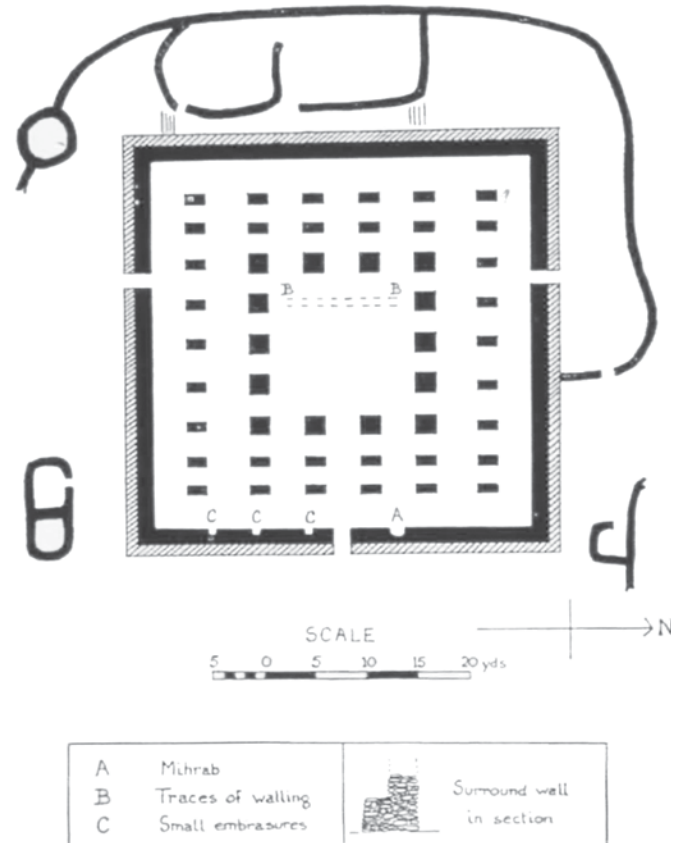


Figure 1. Plan of Uri by Balfour Paul

There are two main areas to the site, which now bear the names “The Lower Palace” and the “Upper Palace.” The Lower Palace is roughly 150 yards (140m) in diameter and is enclosed by walls nine feet (2.75m) thick. The most notable features are the so-called Kadi’s House, the mosque and the six foot (1.8m) high “Platform of Audience.” These latter structures are ubiquitous at royal Tunjur sites and usually consist of a round stone structure leveled off with a roof of wood. It is assumed that they were used for audiences given by the sultan.

The square mosque presents a number of architectural innovations including the use of a continuous bonded buttress at its base, a feature that has only one known parallel in Darfur, that being at another Tunjur city, Ayn Farah. There is little question regarding the function of this building – as seen in the plan, it has an obvious *mihrab* in the east wall facing Mecca. Six rows of pillars held the missing roof and an open courtyard was set in the center. The discovery of this mosque by the late Glencairn Balfour Paul was of great importance, as it marked a major crack in the widely held belief that the Tunjur were never anything more than pagans (Balfour Paul



1954, 140). It would be more accurate, however, to regard this as a sign of the Islamization of the royal court and not the Tunjur people as a whole, many of whom continued to follow pagan beliefs into the 19th century.

It may have been the advantages offered by Islam to long-distance trade that convinced the Tunjur sultans to adopt Islam, even if only superficially. Nevertheless, the entire site retained a negative reputation due to its associations with pre-Islamic paganism and well into the 20th century the site was littered with various useful or valuable objects the locals declined to collect “because of the Shaytans” that lived there.

Just outside the complex is a structure known as the “House of Dali.” In Uri, Dali is remembered as Shau Dorsid’s chief eunuch and a member of the noble Kunjara clan. Though Dali was never a sultan, he appears to have played an important role in some still undefined way in the Tunjur to Fur transition. Dali is famous in Darfur for having codified the traditional law, which was based on payments of fines and compensation in farm animals and bolts of *tekkaki* (local cloth) instead of imprisonment or physical punishment. Right into the late 19th century, those suspected of committing a crime could still choose trial by Islamic Shari’a or trial by Dali’s Law, though the Sultan always kept a large corps of executioners close to exercise his right to arbitrarily have prisoners beaten to death whenever it pleased him. In some traditions, Dali won a power struggle with the unpopular Shau Dorsid, with the latter then fleeing west from Uri on the back of an antelope. It should be noted that there is another “House of Dali” at Jebel Foga, built in the traditional Tora style.

The so-called Upper Palace is surrounded by a vast number of *tukel* (hut) circles, demonstrating the considerable population the city once had. The upper palace building itself has all the usual attributes of a Darfur stone palace:

- A walled circular enclosure 15 feet (4.57m) high
- A platform of audience nine feet (2.74m) high
- Stone benches on the interior of the enclosure walls.

A zigzag road built of enormous stones leads up the hill, where the summit is enclosed by three circular walls. At the summit are a number of large boulders, at least one of which shows signs of being used as a grindstone for grain. Given that there are many more convenient places to grind grain, it seems probable that these stones were involved in ritual offerings of grain.

Local traditions say Shau Dorsid lived at the top of the hill with his horse. Water was passed to the top of the hill by a chain of slave girls, which is a story common to several Tunjur sites. Also of note is a large square-cornered building known as the *Bayt el-Mayram*, literally “the House of the Princess,” but probably better understood as the House of the Queen Mother. As in less-Arabized Berber societies, the female blood relatives of the king played an important role in the administration and in the sultan’s inner circle. This cultural trait was either passed on to or shared by the Fur rulers.

In the cemetery near Uri, colonial administrator A. J. Arkell

found beads of Indian and Venetian manufacture, as well as examples of a double spiral pendant that is commonly worn by women from the Tripoli region, but not those from Darfur (Arkell 1937b). Uri appears to have been a successful trade conduit and was mentioned in an Italian geography of 1582, which also makes reference to a commercial agent of the Tunjur king resident at Barca, close to Libya’s Mediterranean coast.⁴

‘Ayn Farah

Twenty miles (32km) south of Uri is ‘Ayn Farah, at once the most spectacular and most controversial archaeological site in Darfur. ‘Ayn Farah is a huge mountain ridge complex with a citadel at its center some 200 to 300 feet (61 to 91m) above a deep gorge with a year-round supply of fresh spring water (Figure 2). The entire site of ‘Ayn Farah was mistakenly identified as a Christian monastery by A. J. Arkell, the first head of the Sudan Antiquities Service, on the basis of some rather small and unconvincing evidence (Arkell 1960, 115-160).

Like Uri, the site is also covered in thick brush and has gradually become a home for baboons and other wildlife. Before it was abandoned, however, ‘Ayn Farah provided its inhabitants with a natural fortification strengthened by various defensive improvements in the terrain around it. Most of the structure shows evidence of the Tora style of faced stone walls filled with rubble.

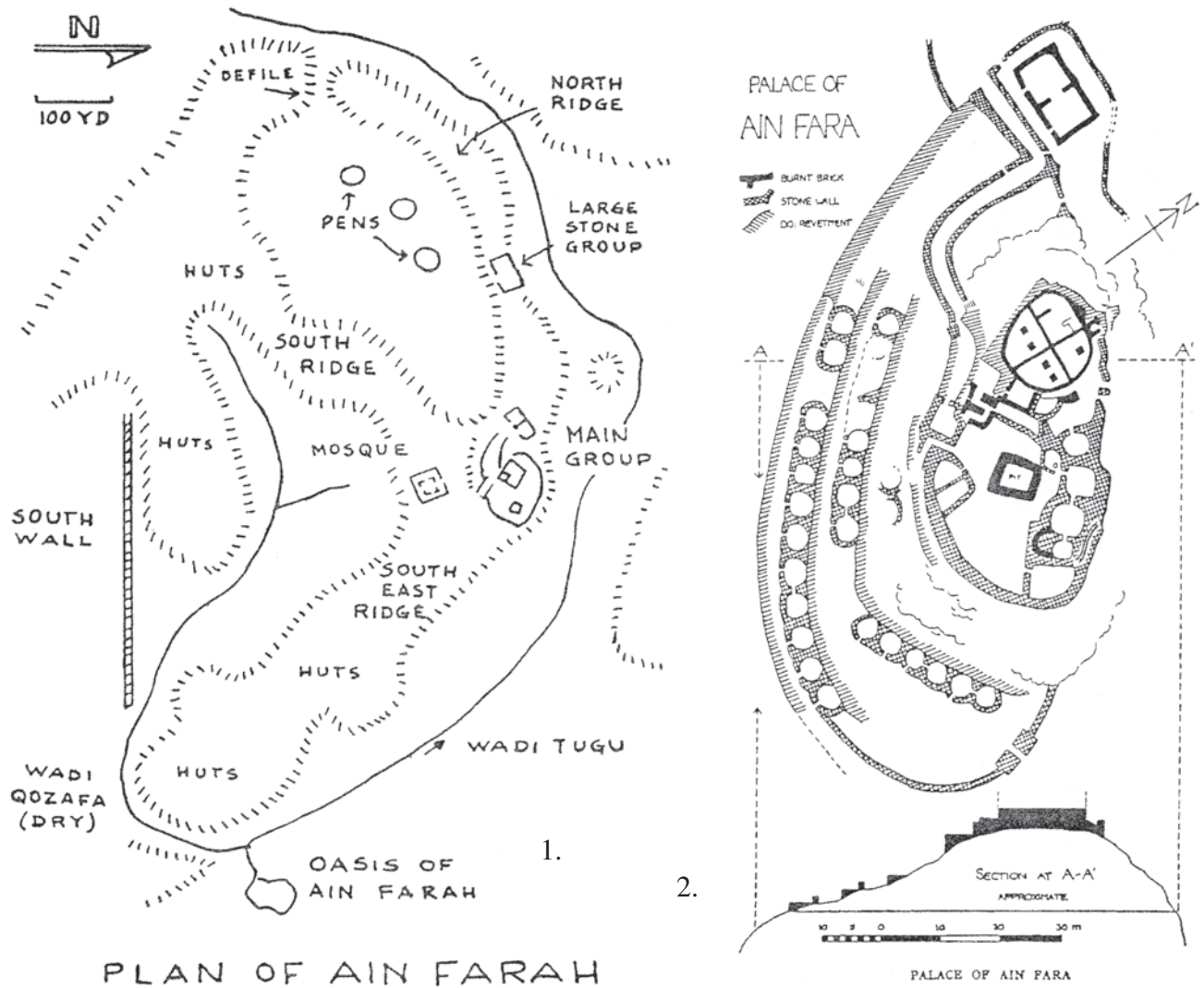
A large two-room rectangular building may have been the actual royal residence. Fragments of blue glass panes were found here and in a nearby *tukel*, though neither building had any windows (see Balfour Paul, Darfur Field Notes, p. 127, University of Exeter Archives).

The south wall of the complex contains rows of *tukels* that might have served as quarters for servants, retainers or even the harim, though Arkell thought these to be the cells of monks in a Christian monastery. A number of bricks at the site appear to bear characters of the Tifinagh script used by the Berbers and based on the ancient Libyan script. Surface finds on the still unexcavated site include iron stirrups, spears and musket balls.

Two hundred metres south west of the citadel is the Ayn Farah mosque, the center of a strange controversy (Figure 3). The square building, complete with *mihrab* and *minbar* on the east wall, seems unquestionably to be a mosque similar to the one found at Uri. Yet in 1957, a certain Lady Rugman approached Arkell with two decorated sherds of Christian Nubian pottery she claimed to have found inside the ‘Ayn Farah mosque 29 years earlier (Plate 3). The sherds are undeniably Christian, and the motifs allow them to be easily dated from between AD 550 at the earliest extreme and AD 1100 at the latest.⁵ On the basis of these two sherds and Lady Rugman’s story, Arkell revised his identification of the

⁴ See, however, Hrbek (1977, 78), who downplays the commercial importance of Uri.

⁵ Using Adams’ classification system, the sherds can be identified as 1) Group N.IV, Style N.IVA, Classic Christian Fancy Style, and 2) Group N.III, Style N.III, Early Christian Style. See Adams 1986, 244, 246.



PLAN OF AIN FARAH

Figure 2. 'Ayn Farah - 1. General plan by de Neufville and Houghton; 2. Plan of the Palace by Balfour Paul.

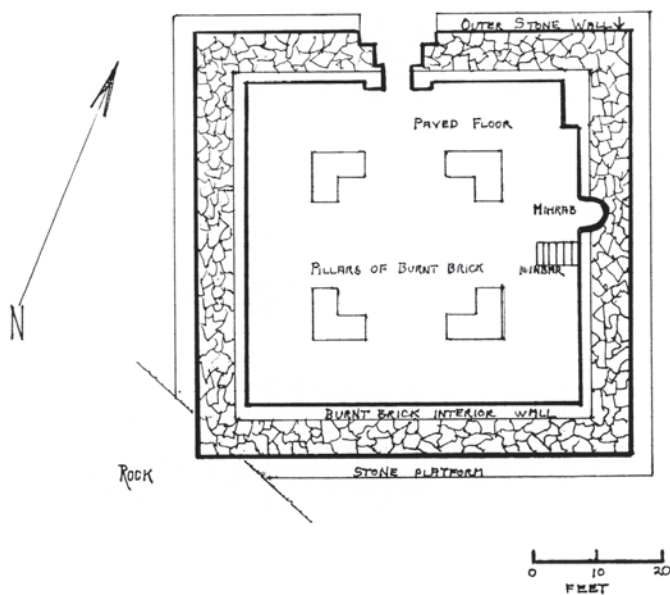


Figure 3. Plan of the mosque at 'Ayn Farah.



Plate 3. Nubian Christian sherds allegedly from 'Ayn Farah.



site, claiming the mosque was actually a church and part of a large Christian monastery. The problem is that all other aspects of Lady Rugman's description of the building are inconsistent with what we know of it, including her claim that piles of such sherds were lying about the interior. The site had been visited several times by capable observers prior to Lady Rugman's alleged visit and no one had ever found any sherds other than those of a rough redware that is still in use in Darfur today, the exception being a sherd of this type bearing a Tunjur brand found by H. A. MacMichael. Though Arkell would claim the structure was actually a type of late Nubian church of the 13th or 14th centuries, there is ample evidence against such a claim and there is in the end little reason to revise the tentative dating of the Ayn Farah complex from the more probable 15th or 16th centuries.

The greatest argument against Arkell's identification is the presence of a second mosque at the site, attached to the bayt el-mayram, a practice known from Bornu. The building is simple in form, but is undeniably a mosque and would seem to confirm the identification of the larger worship hall as a mosque and not a church. Though he had noted the presence of this second mosque in an early trip to the site, Arkell never mentioned it again after he began identifying Ayn Farah as a Christian monastery. Just below the second mosque are the remains of several *qubba*-s, likely used for royal burials. Unlike northern and eastern Sudan, where *qubba*-s are relatively common, all *qubba*-s in Darfur have either been demolished or are in ruins, save for the late 19th century *qubba* of Zakariya, a prominent landmark in el-Fashir (Plate 4).



Plate 4. "Secular Qubba" of Sultan Zakariya, 19th century.

The Fur

The first ruler of the Islamic Fur dynasty was Sulayman Solong, who took power after a struggle of perhaps several generations between the Tunjur and the Fur, followed by or simultaneous with another struggle between two factions of the Fur for control of the sultanate (Figure 4). The losing faction, the Musaba'at, were eventually driven out of Darfur but were compensated with the rule of Kordofan. The factional struggle may have been over whether the Fur should convert to Islam or remain with their ancient religious traditions,

Figure 4. Fur Sultan wearing the *Kalamsiyah* (crown) – by Balfour Paul.



though there may have been other issues; one Fur tradition records that the dispute was between two chiefs, Kuru and Tunsam, over a property in Dar Fia.

Despite its name, meaning "Abode of the Fur," Darfur during the Fur ascendancy was not a typical kingdom representing the supremacy of a single ethnic group over certain of its neighbours. Just as the Fur were not so much a tribe as a collection of various groups that were voluntarily assimilated to the Fur culture and language, Darfur was as much an idea as a territory – a place where various tribes lived in a largely cooperative atmosphere with access to the highest civil and military posts, save the throne, which was reserved for the Kayra Fur.

The Fur rulers had a strange relationship with the Arabs and Islam. Unlike many groups that converted to Islam, the Fur never had the same deference to Arabs as the original Muslims or Islamic authorities that other cultures had. Islam had largely arrived in Darfur from fellow Africans in the west rather than Arab missionaries from the east. While the supposed Arab origin of the ruling Kayra Fur clan was part of the clan's claim to legitimacy, it was never felt necessary to change the language of the court from Fur to Arabic. The Fur never experienced an inferiority complex in their relations with the Arabs; to the contrary, the Arabs in Darfur were little more than unruly and difficult subjects of the Sultan, though in typical Darfur fashion, those willing to work with the regime found ready employment in the army or administration.

The adoption of the tale of Ahmad el-Maqur, the Wise Stranger, by the Fur may indicate a closer relationship between the early Fur and the Tunjur than the later Fur were prepared to recognize in the interests of establishing the Fur dynasty as the first Muslim rule of the region.

Fur Construction Methods

Under the Fur dynasty, the Tora style reappears in a revitalized and massive form. The earliest works continue to be stone structures using the customary African-style circular or oval plans. During Fur rule, the gradual change to the use of burnt brick as the main building material is accompanied

by a change to imported square or rectangular plans for administrative and religious buildings, though the circular form continues to be the main element in domestic architecture (the *tukl*). An examination of a few examples of Fur architecture illustrates the development of the Fur style.

The Palace of Sulayman Solong

The residence of Sulayman Solong, the first sultan of the Fur dynasty, was a return to the round forms of classic Tora architecture (Figure 5). Some of the features include benches, an inner court for the immediate family and an outer court with huts or *tukl*-s for other relatives or retainers (see discussion in McGregor 2001, 94). The evidence of this structure and that of several of his predecessors suggest some kind of link between the Fur and the legendary Tora that survived the architectural innovations introduced during Tunjur rule.

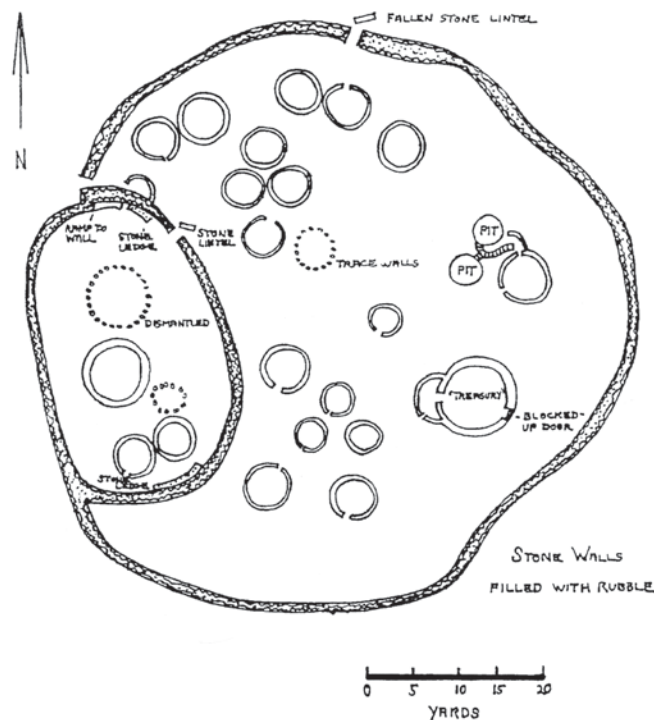


Figure 5. Plan of Palace of Sultan Sulayman Solong at Jabal Nami.

Sulayman Solong was born during the troubled years of the civil war between the Kuru and Tunsam factions of the Fur. His nickname, Solong or Solongdungo, meant ‘red-skinned,’ red being the skin colour locally associated with Arabs. Though his father was a Fur chieftain, his mother was a Masalit, who were believed to be part Arab, hence the nickname. After hiding with his mother’s family in Dar Masalit as a youth, Sulayman returned to Darfur, uniting it in a series of 33 military campaigns. His talismanic drum and shield adorned with tiny bells were incorporated into the Kayra Furs’ reliquary in el-Fashir, but these and other invaluable objects were all lost in the looting carried out by the slave troops of Zubayr Rahman Pasha in 1874. Sulayman is remembered as the first king of the Kayra Fur Dynasty largely because of his

determination to bring Islam to Darfur as the state religion. This sometimes required extraordinary efforts – traditions record that he personally circumcised many leading chiefs as well as thousands of others with a single razor specially brought from Cairo (de Lauture 1855-56).

Prison of Kurru, Turra

Another feature of some Fur royal compounds is the presence of immense lined grain-pits, probably fashioned after a similar pit found at ‘Ayn Farah. Local traditions always identify these pits as “prisons,” though there is no evidence to support this (Figure 6). It seems unlikely, in any event, that a royal residence would incorporate a fetid pit of unhappy captives at its center. This attribution likely has its roots in the Fur Sultans’ practice of placing rivals and officials who had incurred the Sultan’s displeasure in solitary confinement in the sealed darkness of deep rock clefts in the Jebel Marra Mountains for a period of months or even years.

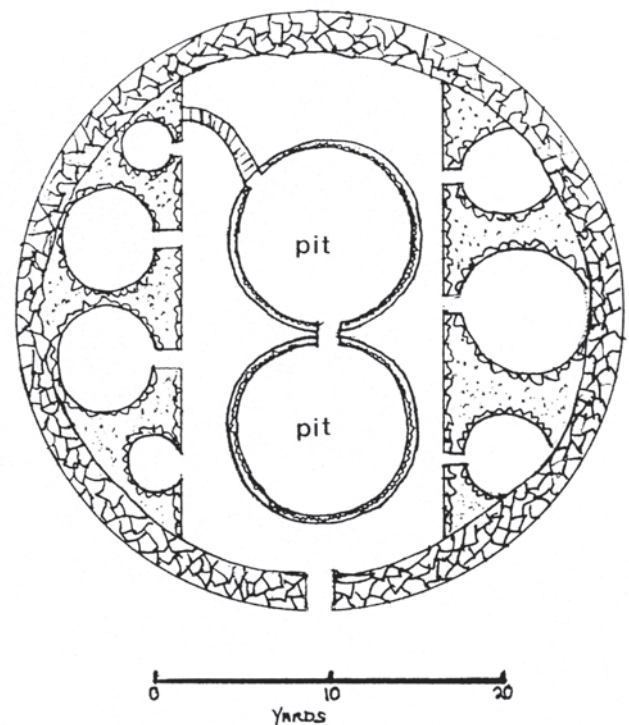


Figure 6. Plan of “Prison” of Sultan Kuru at Jebel Forei.

Gogorma Palace

As the Fur kings began to build their palaces and fortresses further west along the *wadis* leading to Wadai, the buildings began to take on new rectangular forms, probably due to the importation of Bagirmi architects from southern Chad, though the use of red brick and a massive dry-stone revetment to level the hill recall earlier Tunjur innovations (Balfour Paul 1955, 24, fig. 8). The Bagirmi were known as builders in the great Kanem/Bornu empire of southern Chad and northern Nigeria.

Shoba Mosque and Palace

With the construction of the city of Shoba and its magnificent palace and mosque, we see the Fur mastering the methods of burnt-brick construction, but in a style that differs



significantly from the brick works of Christian Nubia (Figure 7, Plates 5 and 6). The familiar Tora construction methods that had characterized buildings in Darfur for centuries had largely been abandoned by the late 17th century.

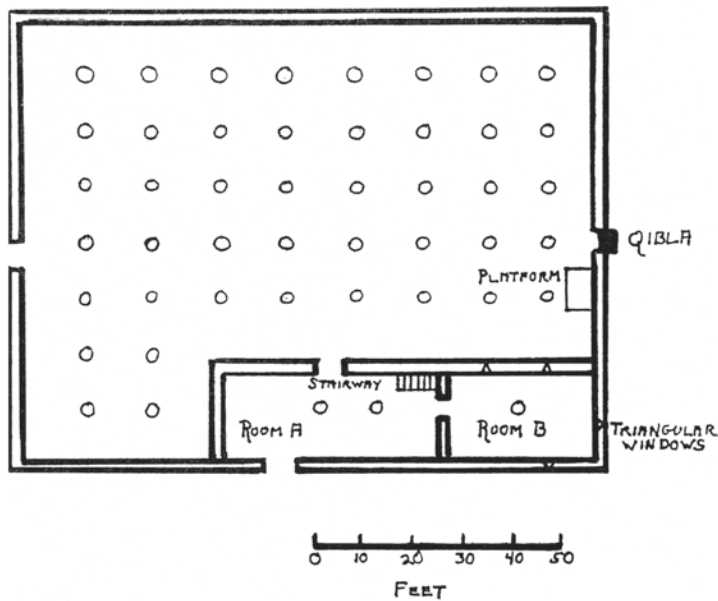


Figure 7. Plan of the Shoba mosque.

The Shoba palace was an imposing three-storey, 40-room edifice, with an elaborate ring of defensive walls (Plate 7). According to one tradition, Sultan Muhammad Tayrab went into seclusion here for one year in the mid-1700s, taking with him 365 wives and concubines for company and 365 rams for his dinner. The mosque is similarly large and impressive.

The Tombs of the Fur Sultans at Jebel Kurru

In the heartland of the Fur, at a place called Jebel Kurru, are



Plate 5. Shoba mosque.

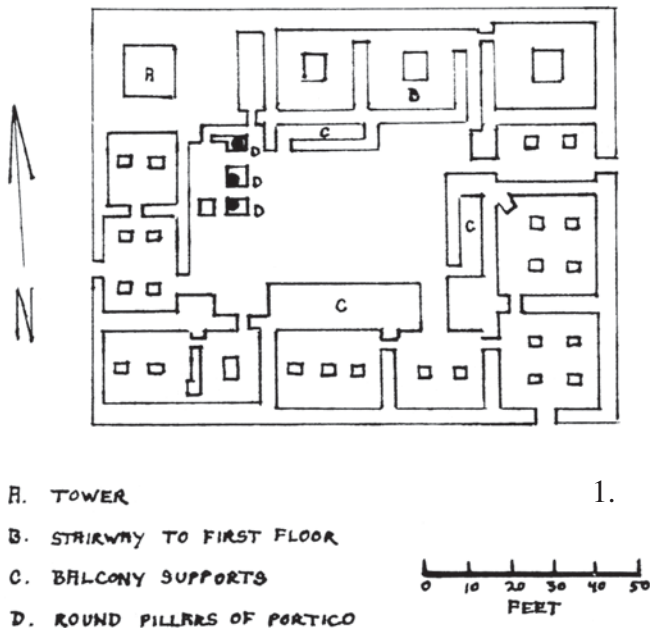


Plate 6. Interior of the Shoba mosque.

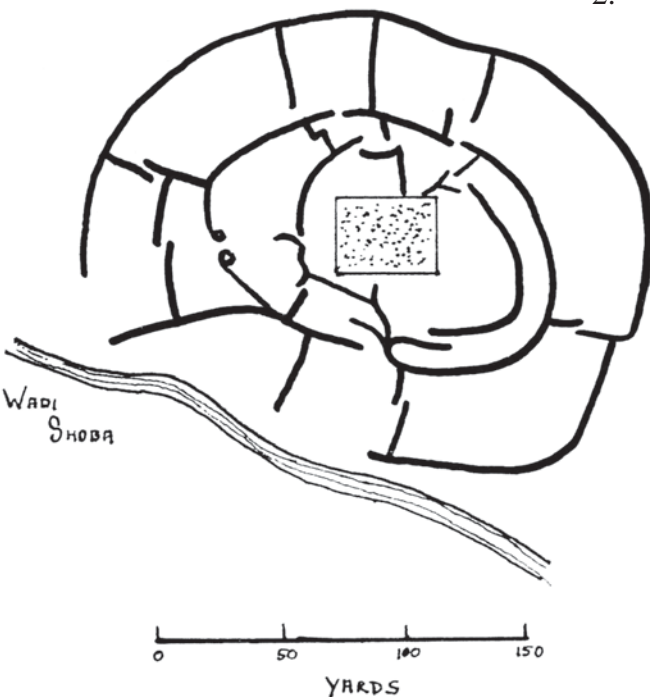
found the tombs of all the Fur Sultans, save for three: Umar Lel, who was unpopular for favouring slave troops over the *fursan* and was, therefore, abandoned on the battlefield in Wadai; Ibrahim, who was killed in a furious cavalry charge against Zubayr Rahma Mansur's slave troops at the battle of Manawashi in 1874; and the last sultan of Darfur, Ali Dinar, who was killed by a mixed British-Sudanese commando team in 1916, marking the end of the Darfur Sultanate (Balfour Paul 1955, 6; Nachtigal 1971, IV, 338. See also the discussion in McGregor 2001, 95-97). Just beyond the royal Fur burial ground are much older tumulus-style graves, which the Fur Sultans recognized as belonging to their ancestors. Ali Dinar's body was photographed, as was the British practice to squash



Plate 7. Ruins of the Sultan's Palace, Shoba.



1.



2.

Figure 8. Shoba: 1. Plan of the large palace; 2. System of stone-walled enclosures.

rumors, and then buried out in the desert to prevent his grave from becoming a place of pilgrimage for those interested in reviving Darfur's independence. Ali Dinar's "trophy photo" is in fact the only image of any type we possess of any of the rulers of Darfur.

The tombs at Kurru were originally *qubba*-s, but most had fallen into disrepair at the end of the 19th century. Ali Dinar ordered the *qubba*-s dismantled and their materials re-used in the construction of a series of oval enclosures topped by thatch roofs (Plate 8). It's interesting to note that *qubba*-s are nearly always the form used for tombs of holy men in the



Plate 8. Tomb of Sultan Sulayman Solong at Turra.

rest of the Sudan, but in Darfur they are used exclusively as royal tombs, perhaps influenced by local concepts of a "divine kingship" that had survived the transition to Islam.

Conclusion

Rex O'Fahey, a career scholar of Darfur history and culture, nicely summed up the ritual cycle that dominated life in the Fur Sultanate as

"the magnification by the state of local ritual life, the accession ceremonies paralleled those of the provincial and local chiefs, drums were everywhere the symbol of political unity and authority, old women were ritual guardians and seers at local shrines devoted mainly to snake cults throughout the Fur lands, and the pervasive influences of religious norms and sanctions far older than Islam informed all aspects of the popular and political culture."

O'Fahey 1980, 23.

Some of the political symbols are depicted in Plates 9 and 10.

Unlike Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the African religions are not religions of the book. They are rarely recorded



Plate 9. The Nahas – Royal drums, symbols of the Sultan's power. They are named *el-Dar 'Amir* ("The Land is Prosperous") and *'Ata el-Manla* ("The Gift of the Land").



Plate 10. Kakr (Royal Chair) of the Fur Sultans.

and codified – indeed, their most crucial elements are often deeply guarded secrets known only to a handful of initiates, which leaves the interpretation of oral traditions and physical evidence as the most reliable means of understanding Darfur's history and culture and the African spirituality at its core. The transition to Islam in Darfur, for example, was accompanied by a visible transformation in building styles and techniques (Plate 11).

The almost continual construction of various royal residences, defensive works, agricultural terraces and major cities built of stone are evidence of a thriving and successful commercial culture in Darfur. Contrary to older claims of cultural influence from the Nile, particularly of the ancient Egyptians, the Sudanese Meroites and the Nubian Christians, Darfur appears to have absorbed many of its most important religious and architectural influences from western empires



Plate 11. Example of gimbeel woodwork, inlaid with ebony and ivory. From the Palace of 'Ali Dinar, el-Fashir.

such as Bornu, Kanem and Bagirmi, or the northern regions now known as Tunisia and Libya. These influences, however, tended to be assimilated into the existing local cultures of Darfur rather than taking a position of dominance over local beliefs and traditions.

The late survival of pagan beliefs in Darfur helps give us some idea of what indigenous religion in Sudan was like before the arrival of Islam, and before that, the arrival of Egyptian religious influences in the Nile Valley. The oral traditions of Darfur are also valuable historical and mythological resources, but the destruction and cultural disruption of recent years may mean it is already too late for their systematic collection. Hopefully this fate will not be shared by Darfur's material remains, which may yet yield a new understanding of the importance of Darfur's indigenous culture and its historic relations with its neighbours.

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