

SOME PERSONAL NAMES AND NICKNAMES
AMONG THE RIVERAIN PEOPLE OF NORTHERN SUDAN

Northern Sudan encompasses a vast and complex cultural area with a diversity of peoples, of modes of living and of social and cultural traditions. This article is concerned with the nature and meaning of names among the riverain people, who constitute part of a larger cultural entity whose peoples are commonly known as 'northern Sudanese'.¹ With a few exceptions, the riverain people exhibit some uniformity in their cultural and religious traditions, derived partly from Arabism and Islam. The personal names of the riverain people reflect and reaffirm their shared interest in Arab culture and Islam. Thus, personal names not only assume historical, cultural and religious meaning for the riverain people but also affirm their identification and connection with Arabs and Muslims

I should like to express my thanks to my wife, Anne, who made valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Also, thanks are due to the Ford Foundation and the Nuffield Foundation for their grants to undertake research among the Shaygiyya tribe of Northern Sudan. I have followed the conventions of *Sudan Notes and Records* in transliterating Arabic words. In view of the citation of many Arabic names, I have decided to make the text less cumbersome by omitting diacritical marks for the most part. The two letters M and F, which the reader will encounter in the text, are to designate names for males and females respectively.

¹ The term 'riverain people' is commonly used to denote the tribes which inhabit both banks of the River Nile extending from the Egyptian border south to Khartoum. On the other hand, the term 'northern Sudanese' covers a wider geographical area and encompasses sedentary and nomadic peoples, as well as town-dwellers.

elsewhere. There are also personal names and nicknames which are peculiar to the riverain people and which give the northern Sudanese nomenclature its distinctive flavour. The discussion of these two aspects is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject. Rather, I shall concentrate on some specific aspects of personal names and nicknames which are common among the riverain people and with which I am familiar.

Among the riverain people it is customary for a person to be addressed by their personal name or *ism* (for example, male: *Ali*, *Muhammed*, *Hasan*; and female: *Fatma*, *Arafa*, *Sakina*). But if asked about further identity, then the person will cite their personal name and *nasab* or genealogy. Thus, for example, the name *Muhammed Hasan Ali* indicates that Muhammed is the son of Hasan who in turn is the son of Ali. This is unlike the practice in Western nomenclature where the second and third names of a person are not necessarily those of their father or grandfather. Among Arabs, as well as northern Sudanese, such indications of genealogical links between a person and three or four ancestors are historically true statements of ancestry. But beyond these four links, and in order to avoid confusion due to a similarity of names, people often adopt the name of the ancestor of their lineage, clan or tribe. While recognition of a person's belonging to a particular tribe, through the addition of the name of the ancestor of that tribe (e.g. *Ja'ali* 'of the Ja'aliyyin tribe', *Mahasi* 'of the Mahas tribe') is identifiable nationally, the name of the lineage or clan will be known only within the tribe.

True or fictitious descent from a common ancestor, and the subsequent use of his name as part of the full name of a person, is not only employed to establish a person's kinship identity, but also to define their traditional status, rights and duties as a member of a particular family, lineage, clan or tribe. In the traditional organization of the rural population of the riverain tribes a person's genealogical designation is particularly significant in relation to their rights of land ownership and residence. Moreover, the use of tribal names (such as *Shaygi*, *Ja'ali*, *Mahasi*, *Dongolawi*, *Hadendowi*) provokes in jest praiseworthy or derogatory associations and gives rise to a contentious social classification of tribes. Thus, a *Shaygi* and a *Ja'ali* will each regard himself as superior to the other.²

One variation of the tribal name which is common among northern Sudanese and Arabs in general, is the repetitive use of the name of an ancestor as a mark of respect or to commemorate the death of this ancestor, e.g. *Muhammed Ahmed Al-Hasan Muhammed Ahmed*. Such a personal name can be confusing as others may use the same separate

² The genealogical designation of a person's name ends in *-i*. But in certain cases, peculiar to northern Sudanese, *-ab* is added at the end of the name of the ancestor (e.g. *Hashmab*, *Khairab*, *Kinaishab*) denoting 'the descendants of'.

names in a slightly different sequence. To avoid this confusion either the tribal affiliation of the person or his nickname will be added to the personal names.

It is not proper, and even impolite, among the riverain people to address a person to his face by his personal name unless the speaker is very much the social superior. This also applies to addressing older women. Therefore, in speaking to superiors, equals or near-equals, it is obligatory to use, as a mark of respect, secular or religious titles. Among such titles are those of kinship terminologies such as: *jiddī* 'grandfather', *abūy* 'father', *ammī* 'paternal uncle', and *khālī* 'maternal uncle'; those of religion such as *hājj* 'pilgrim', *fakī*³ 'man of religion' and *khalīfa*⁴, a deputy in a religious order; and those which are secular such as *sayyid* 'master' or, in a religious context, 'a descendant of the Prophet', *shaiikh* 'village headman' or, in a religious context, 'a man of religion', *'omda*⁵ 'head of a district' and *ustāz* 'teacher'.

The use of a nickname gives an indication of the unusual personal attributes or idiosyncrasies (abstract, physical or social) of a person, and it can be assumed that a nickname has its origin in reality. While a personal name is given at birth, a nickname is acquired and sometimes, when it is added to the personal name, it may become perpetuated like a surname. Invariably a nickname requires the use of the prefix *abū-* or *umm-* (literally 'father of' or 'mother of'). Thus:

<i>abu saffa</i> ⁶	snuff-taker
<i>abu jidairi</i> ⁷	a spotty-faced person
<i>abu shanab</i>	a big-moustached person
<i>abu fag</i>	a lazy person
<i>abu likailik</i>	a fat-bottomed person
<i>abu surra</i>	a fat-belly-buttoned person

³ *Fakī* is a corruption of *faqīh* 'a jurist'.

⁴ *Khalīfa* is a title conferred by the head of a religious order on a follower in view of his zeal and dedication to the spreading of the order.

⁵ With the abolition of the system of Native Administration, this title is no longer used.

⁶ Snuff, *sa'auṭ*, is commonly used among northern Sudanese. The snuff is taken as a lump and placed between the inside of the lower lip and the front of the lower jaw.

⁷ *Jidairī* is the diminutive of *jidrī* 'smallpox'.

abu sha'ar
*abu musran*⁸

a hairy person
 a person with intestinal disorders

In the case of female nicknames, I have encountered two which were given at birth as first names: *Umm Raid* 'a long-necked woman' and *Umm Ukhwan* 'a woman with many brothers'.

In the case of twins of different sexes their first names are frequently *Al-Tom* or *Al-Toma*, meaning simply 'the twin (M)' and 'the twin (F)'.

Sometimes a person's personal name is not used in the normal mode of address; instead, they are addressed by the name of their eldest (or only) son and occasionally by the name of the eldest daughter if there are no sons. This also requires the use of *abu-* or *umm-*. Thus, *abu Al-Hasan* 'father of Hasan' or *umm Al-Hisain* 'mother of Hisain'. The use of this combination, as a mode of address, is a mark of respect and it is less common among northern Sudanese than among Arabs elsewhere.

Urbanization has led to the growth, alongside the customary personal names, of nicknames based on geographical location which indicate either a person's place of birth, residence or an abstract quality. For example:

<i>Ali Dongola</i> (M)	Ali of Dongola town
<i>Hasan Korti</i> (M)	Hasan of Korti town
<i>Muhammed Al-Masri</i> (M)	Muhammed the Egyptian
<i>Dar Al-Na'im</i> (F)	the home of plenty
<i>Balad Al-Nabi</i> (F)	the country of the Prophet
<i>Asya</i> (F)	Asia
<i>Makka</i> (F)	Mecca
<i>Medina</i> (F)	Medina

Moreover, it is not uncommon to use the occupation of a person as part of his personal names. Thus: *al-jazzār* 'the butcher', *al-garmādī* 'the plasterer', *al-hajjar* 'the stone-mason', *'atūlī* 'the porter' and *al-warrāg* 'the writer of charms'. These occupational names tend to evolve into a family name and are transmitted through generations irrespective of the person's actual occupation. This is not dissimilar to such English names as 'Butcher', 'Baker', 'Goldsmith', 'Fowler' etc.

As in most Arab or Muslim societies, many personal names (both male and female) of the riverain people have Islamic associations or connotations. As the term 'Islam' means the submission or resignation to the will of God (Allah), the prefix '*abd-*' 'slave' is commonly added to personal names. Thus the name *Abd Allah* 'slave of God' is the most direct composite name denoting this submission. There are

⁸ The implication of this nickname is that the person is in the habit of complaining persistently about a disorder of his intestines.

other personal names which are derived from the attributes of God, such as: *Abd Al-Rahman* 'the slave of the Compassionate', *Abd Al-Karim* 'the slave of the Generous', *Abd Al-Jalil* 'the slave of the Sublime' and *Abd Al-Rahim* 'the slave of the Merciful'. Names of prophets also figure in personal names: for example, *Isma'il* (Ishmael), *Ibrahim* (Abraham), *Isa* (Jesus), *Musa* (Moses), *Nuh* (Noah) and *Sulaima* (Solomon). But, as one might expect, the names of the Prophet Muhammed and those of his descendants figure most prominently in personal names. Thus, for example: *Muhammed* (the Prophet), *Aisha* and *Khadija* (the Prophet's two wives), *Al-Abbas* (the Prophet's uncle), *Ali* (the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law), *Fatma* (the Prophet's daughter) and *Hasan* and *Husain* (the Prophet's grandchildren).

Other personal names which have a religious association are those of the first four caliphs (*Abu Bakr*, *Omer*, *Othman* and *Ali*) in particular, and those of the Ommiad and Abbaside caliphs (such as *Mu'awiya*, *Yazid*, *Al-Amin*, *Al-Ma'mun* and *Al-Mu'tasim*).

The riverain people, and northern Sudanese in general, share these names with other Muslims but they are impartial to the religious and political overtones associated with these names highlighted by Islamic sectarianism. For example, the Shi'ites will not use, as the northern Sudanese do, the names of the first three caliphs as they claim that they violated the rule of succession to the leadership of the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet. To the Shi'ites the fourth caliph, Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, should have succeeded the Prophet. Thus the names of Ali and his descendants are commonly used among the Shi'ites, and these names are called upon in times of need and distress, as well as being used in oaths.

But more specific personal names and surnames used by the riverain people that have a religious association are those connected with Sufi orders. The surnames *Al-Mahdi*, *Al-Mirghani*, *Al-Hindi*, *Al-Sammani* and *Al-Majdhub* indicate that the person is a descendant of the founder of a Sufi order and by extension a follower of that order. In particular, the use of the personal names *Sirr Al-Khatim*⁹ 'secret of the seal', *Khatmi*¹⁰ (belonging to the Khatmiyya Sufi order) and *Mirghani* (the family name of the founder of the Khatmiyya Sufi order) among the Shaygiyya and other tribes indicates their bearers' association with the Khatmiyya Sufi order. What is significant about religious names and titles is that they are a means of identification, they confer religious status and power (particularly titles), and their use is claimed to bring blessing to the bearer.

⁹ *Sirr Al-Khatim* is the title assumed by the founder of the Khatmiyya Sufi order, Sayyid Muhammed Othman Al-Mirghani, as he claimed that God revealed that his order was the 'secret of the seal' and *khātīm al-turuq* 'the seal of all orders'.

¹⁰ The feminine form (*Khatmiyya*) of *Khatmi* is also given to women as a personal name.

In addition to the tribal and religious names, there are personal names and nicknames which have a variety of associations. In the lists that follow are some examples of these associations.

1. Animals, Birds, Insects

<i>Tumsah</i> (M)	crocodile
<i>Al-Rihaw</i> (M)	the grey crane
<i>Al-Nahal</i> (F)	the bees
<i>Al-Anag</i> (F)	the ewe
<i>Akud</i> (M)	camel
<i>Al-Dabi</i> (M)	the snake

2. Military Ranks¹¹

<i>Sanjak</i> (M)	head of a company
<i>Jawish</i> (M)	staff sergeant

3. Trees, Herbs and Perfumes

<i>Sandalayya</i> (F)	sandalwood
<i>Al-Nakhil</i> (F)	the date-palm trees
<i>Al-Hail</i> (F)	cardamom
<i>Rayhan</i> (M)	sweet basil

4. Colours

<i>Al-Azrag</i> (M)	the black
<i>Al-Ahmar</i> (M)	the fair colour (lit. 'red')
<i>Khadra</i> (F)	blackish-green
<i>Halabi</i> (M)	fair colour

5. Objects

<i>Ballas</i> (M)	earthenware jar
<i>Barud</i> (M)	gunpowder
<i>Kabsun / Kabsul</i> (M)	capsule
<i>Al-Tur'a</i> (M)	the canal
<i>Al-Shubbak</i> (F)	the window
<i>Taya</i> (F)	temporary camp

6. Physical Appearance

<i>Fanduk</i> (M)	fat buttock
<i>Kadamur</i> (F)	ugly
<i>Agra'a</i> (M)	bald
<i>Al-Rawga</i> (F)	the beautiful
<i>Al-Bi'aiw</i> (M)	the small

7. Character

<i>Al-Nuzahi</i> (M)	the generous
<i>Gaddal</i> (M)	proud

¹¹ Both *Sanjak* and *Jawish* are Turkish military titles which were introduced with the Turco-Egyptian conquest of 1820-1.

<i>Tayih</i> (M)	absent-minded
<i>Lafut</i> (F)	flighty
<i>Al-'Asi</i> (M)	the rebel
<i>Al-Sabur</i> (F)	the patient one
<i>Al-Hajjas</i> (M)	the liar
<i>Al-Mahla</i> (F)	the slow walker
<i>Al-'Ashug</i> (M)	the lover
<i>Al-Sahwa</i> (F)	the absent-minded
<i>Al-Hakuma</i> (F)	the government

8. Days and Months¹²

<i>Khamis</i> (M)	Thursday
<i>Jum'a</i> (M)	Friday
<i>Ramadan</i> (M)	fasting month
<i>Sha'ban</i> (M)	the eighth month of the Islamic year

So far I have been elaborating on some common personal names and nicknames to be found among the riverain people. However, there are specific names associated with certain social groups, particularly with ex-slaves and gypsies, which are distinctive and indicate their social difference and inequality in power and position. People who are neither ex-slaves nor gypsies will not use these specific names. Two names which indicate that the person is a gypsy or of gypsy extraction¹³ are *ḥalabī* 'from Aleppo' (a town in Syria) and *ḥamūr*¹⁴ 'reddish colour'. In the case of ex-slaves, on the other hand, their names are derived from the nomenclature of their ex-masters. Their original names have been lost but, since their incorporation into the culture of the riverain people and their emancipation, they have adopted Arabic names, some of which

¹² It is likely that these names indicate that the person was born on that particular day or in that month.

¹³ Gypsies claim that they have come from Upper Egypt but the name suggests that they are from Aleppo, a town in Syria. The popular theory is that gypsies, after leaving India, came to the Fertile Crescent (Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon) and from there some went to eastern Europe and others went to Egypt and north Africa. This would account for the claim by Sudanese gypsies that they came from Upper Egypt.

¹⁴ Though the colour *ahmar* (literally 'red', but referring to people with light-coloured skin) is specifically associated with gypsies, there are riverain people who, in terms of colour, look like gypsies, but they will not be classified as gypsies as the latter's identity is not only associated with skin colour but also with occupation (being blacksmiths and hawkers), obscurity of origin and certain behavioural patterns.

are classical. In the past, slaves, who lived with their masters, adopted the names of their masters, so this represents a shift in their identity and status. A further change, which is now common, is that younger, educated ex-slaves have dropped their ex-masters' surnames and have adopted names which are not commonly found in the repertoire of names of their ex-masters.

However, ex-slaves continue to be identified as a distinct social group through, among other attributes, their traditional personal names and nicknames. These names indicate social difference and inequality. Some of these personal names which I found to be in current use are¹⁵

<i>Abd Al-Bayyin</i> (M)	the slave of the Eloquent
<i>Abd Al-Tamm</i> (M)	the slave of the Perfect
<i>Abd Al-Farraaj</i> (M)	the slave of the Reliever
<i>Khādim Allāh</i> ¹⁶ (F)	the slave of God
<i>Allāh Atana</i> (F)	God's gift
<i>Allāh Itaya</i> (F)	God's gift
<i>Al-Rubb Yajūd</i> (F)	God's generosity
<i>Rubb Jud</i> (F)	God's generosity
<i>Jād Al-Rubb</i> (F)	God's generosity
<i>Allāh Jabu</i> (M)	God brought him
<i>Rajin Allāh</i> (F)	in God's anticipation
<i>Allāh Ma'ana</i> (F)	God be with us
<i>Khādim Al-Fakī</i> (F)	the slave of the man of religion
<i>Khādim Sidha</i> (F)	the slave of her master
<i>Izz Baitna</i> (F)	the pride of our house

Some personal names are associated with the characters of the ex-slaves:

<i>Mafhumīn</i> (M)	knowledgeable
<i>Mablul</i> (M)	wet (i.e. weakling)
<i>Ashmana</i> (F)	needy
<i>Surur</i> (M)	joyous
<i>Tamm Zina</i> (F)	her beauty is complete
<i>Safī Al-Niyya</i> (M)	clear intention
<i>Al-Batran</i> (M)	the vain one
<i>Al-Malik</i> (M)	the king
<i>Al-Malika</i> (F)	the queen

¹⁵ Though the prefix '*abd-*' is used among the riverain people in conjunction with God, the Prophet and attributes of God, it is interesting to note that certain attributes of God came to be associated with ex-slaves only. In theory there is no differentiation in the use of these attributes.

¹⁶ This term is commonly used to refer to a female ex-slave. The term *khādim* is from the Arabic root *khadama* 'to serve'. Prior to their emancipation, slaves were employed as domestic servants by their masters.

Moreover, some personal names are associated with objects:

<i>Al-Ratina</i> (F)	pressure lamp
<i>Sumait</i> (F)	beads
<i>Murjan</i> (M)	coral
<i>Tawr Shain</i> (M)	ugly bull
<i>Rayhan</i> (M)	sweet basil
<i>Al-Jaz</i> (F)	paraffin
<i>Ajaj</i> (F)	swirling dust
<i>Al-Jazira</i> (F)	the island
<i>Murfin</i> (M)	morphine
<i>Tayir</i> (M)	tyre
<i>Mayy</i> (M)	mountain ram
<i>Huruz</i> (F)	charms

There are still other names peculiar to ex-slaves:

<i>Mabruk</i> (M)	congratulations
<i>Mursal</i> (M)	the messenger
<i>Kasba</i> (M)	gain
<i>Tagil Mizana</i> (F)	heavy (weighing) scales
<i>Salatin</i> (M)	Slatin ¹⁷
<i>Yaslam La'ina</i> (M)	to be preserved for us
<i>Fakhur Taj</i> (F)	the pride of the crown
<i>Izz Thabat</i> (F)	the glory of firmness

While traditional names persist among the riverain people, educated northern Sudanese are introducing new names, particularly in urban centres, and this practice is spreading to rural areas. Many of these new names are classical Arabic ones, including male personal names such as *Sami*, *Sabah*, *Ma'adh*, *Hisham*, *Ayman* and *Haytham*, and female personal names such as *Suhair*, *Shadiyya* and *Rudaina*. These names would not have been used by their parents or grandparents. On meeting a villager recently I told him that our mutual (educated) friend has a daughter by the name of *Rudaina*. His reply was: 'Where did he get this name from, and what does it mean?' Names, like fashions, change with time and circumstances. However, the repertoire of personal names among the riverain people remains one of the idioms through which Islam, Arab culture and social differences are expressed. Genealogies of the riverain people are a testament to the repetition and constancy of these names.

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¹⁷ Sir Rudolf Karl von Slatin Pasha, Baron (1857-1932): a famous Austrian officer who served in Egypt and in the Sudan under Kitchener, becoming Inspector-General of the Sudan after the reconquest.