



## SUDAN



**Area:** 1,861,484 square km

**Population:** 49,197,555 (2023 est.)

**Capital:** Khartoum

**Ethnic Groups:** Sudanese Arab (approximately 70%), Fur, Beja, Nuba, Ingessana, Uduk, Fallata, Masalit, Dajo, Gimir, Tunjur, Berti, et al.; in total there are over 500 ethnic groups.

**Languages:** Arabic (official), English (official), Nubian, Ta Bedawie, Fur, et al.

**Religion:** Sunni Muslim, small Christian minority

**Life Expectancy:** 66.09 years

**Literacy:** 60%

**Economy:** Agriculture: sugar cane, sorghum, milk, groundnuts, onions, sesame seed, goat milk, millet, bananas, wheat; Industry: oil, cotton ginning, textiles, cement, edible oils, sugar, soap, shoes, petroleum refining, pharmaceuticals, armaments, automobile/light truck assembly, milling; Exports: oil, agricultural products.

**Gini (Income Inequality) Index:** 55 (comp.US=41.1)

**Gender Inequality Index:** 0.553 (little change between 2018 and 2021; comp. US=0.204 Very High)

*Napin koogoon faddan koodo sarmi.*

“Who owns gold needs who owns silver.” (People need each other to live.)

-- A Nubian Proverb Collected in Fadijja (Nobiin)

### The Ancient Middle Nile

Although great attention has been paid to the settled, agricultural societies along the fertile soils adjacent to the Nile River, the earliest food production in sub-Saharan Africa was pastoralism, the herding of cattle by nomadic, pottery-using societies around 8,000 years ago. Recent genetic evidence from the aDNA in samples of ancient hair points to migrations of the first African pastoralists from the Middle Nile southwards to Kenya, bringing a cattle-centered economy that would one day be embraced by the entire length of the African continent.

The territory of the Republic of the Sudan was the home of key ancient sites situated both north and south of Khartoum, the nation's capital. At the confluence of the Blue and White Nile Rivers, the region was known as the Middle Nile. The Middle Nile was home to powerful Nubian kingdoms, including Kerma, which paralleled the rise of ancient Egypt and often formed a corridor for contact between sub-Saharan Africa, the Mediterranean, and West Asia. By the early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, Kerma's territory extended hundreds of miles and was marked by trade in gold and exotic goods, brick temples and a grand palace, leading the Greek historian Herodotus to describe the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE capital as a “great city” of the ancient world. Called Kush by the Egyptians, the kingdom is also remembered for its later capital at Meröe (275 BCE-300 CE), which became an active center of industry and trade. The Meroitic script has not yet been fully deciphered, but extensive archaeological research has revealed that the territory gained prominence despite having been subjected to Egyptian military invasions and terrorized by nomadic pastoralists during its long history. The Nubians, who were renowned for their army of archers, ruled over Egypt between about 747 and 656 BCE as that state's 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. After a ruling queen mother (*kandake*) named Amanirenas was defeated by the Romans in 24 BCE, an era of peace followed with the establishment of the powerful cult of the goddess Isis.

## Colonization and Conflict

After the fall of Kush, three Christian kingdoms (Makuria, Alwa, and Nobadia) emerged in medieval times, when the Middle Nile also witnessed a long period of significant Arab immigration and increasing Muslim influence. Eventually, the gradual establishment of Islam followed incursions, settlements, and trade. In the period known as the At-Turkiyyah, Sudan went from Mamluk to Ottoman rule through Egypt. From the conquests of Muhammad Ali Pash beginning in 1820 to the fall of Khartoum in 1885, an era of slave raiding, mercenary armies, and the extraction of local wealth in the form of tribute and taxation ensued.

From the mostly Sunni Islam practiced in the Sudan (and a second wave of the faith deeply influenced by Sufism), the Mahadiyah uprisings (1881-1899) are thought by some scholars to be the political origins of Islamism and eventually led to British rule through the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium from 1899 until 1955. British administrators divided the territory into two competing factions, separated by ethnic identities and religions: North and South, thus ushering in a source of future conflict. Civil wars (in 1955-1972 and 1983-2005), the conflict in Darfur (2003-2010), and ongoing struggles have led to the secession of South Sudan (2011), while perpetuating violence and food insecurity in the once productive region of the Middle Nile. At the end of 2023, the UN political mission originally assigned by the Security Council in 2020 to support the nation's transition to democratic rule was ordered to abandon the country.

## The Art of Living and the Spirit of the Sudan

Although persistent war crimes, violence against women and girls, and other suffering have seemed to comprise the only constant, the imperative to survive through shared arts remains. The deadly combination of violence and environmental change has only exacerbated the modern struggles of the Middle Nile, again sending many Sudanese into exile, including artists. The Sudanese Film Group formed by Eltayeb Mahdi, Ibrahim Shaddad, and Suliman Elnour in 1989 was the culmination of brief government support for creativity in the late 1970s and ended with the military coup by Omar al-Bashir (r.1989-2019).

A film community has operated in exile and the early industry was recently revived in Sudanese director Suhaib Gasmelbari's documentary film "Talking Trees" (2019) [shown at CFAF 2020]. The film explored the history of the Sudanese Film Group through a series of poignant interviews. Other new filmmakers of note include Amjad Abiu Alala, whose feature film "You Will Die at Twenty" was nominated for an Academy Award [and was the opening film at CFAF 2021], and Mohamed Kordofani, whose film "Goodbye Julia" opens CFAF 2024, and is set within the context of the events that led to the secession of South Sudan in a story told through the lives of two women, one from the North and the other from the South.

Sudanese cultural artists have not shied away from difference or controversies. The writer Tayeb Salih's early novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) was written in Arabic and confronted the western world with its portrait of the Arab Muslim community in Sudan. Salih employed "themes of reality and illusion, the cultural dissonance between the West and the exotic Orient, the harmony and conflict of brotherhood, and the individual's responsibility to find a fusion between his or her contradictions."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, amidst decades of hunger, the culinary arts of the country have also suggested the dynamic interplay of differences: the foods and influences of centuries of exchanges from West and East Africa to West and South Asia and the Mediterranean. Omer Eltigani and Leena Habilla note [that] "Sudanese cooking and collective feasting represent both a means of survival and a community-strengthening exercise, a cultural expression and a social lubricant in all aspects of a Sudanese community life."

Writer Leila Aboulela, the first winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing, is the daughter of a Sudanese father and Egyptian mother. She was born in Cairo but lived in Khartoum from the age of 6 weeks until her twenties. Living in exile, Aboulela invokes the spirit of the Sudanese, when she comments: "Unsettling times are not a new phenomenon. Throughout history, writers have written during wars, repression, and catastrophes. Art can bring comfort to the afflicted as well as serve a political purpose by interrogating injustice."

--Written by Candice Goucher (Portland, Oregon), December 2023

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in University of Leiden, The African Studies Centre, "Tayeb Salih."  
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