

# Omdurman and the History of Sudanese Women: The Dialectic Relationship between the Place and Its Inhabitants\*

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## Abstract

This paper explores the complex relationship between Omdurman and its people by looking at some of the historical aspects of that city's establishment, development and its impact on the history of a segment of the Sudanese modern political movement, in particular, the modern Sudanese women's movement. The paper provides a brief introduction and analysis of the relationships, and related gender issues that have existed in Omdurman, the modern Sudan's "traditional" capital, which was also dearly known to many, as the "national capital". The writer argues that the development of the modern Sudanese women's movement was largely influenced and shaped by the prevalent Islamo-Arabic ideology, which was nurtured in the city of Omdurman, during the Angol-Egyptian colonization 1898-1956, to the determined of many of that city's residents, mainly, racialized, working class women.

## Introduction

I confess! As an Omdurmani, I have a love-hate relationship with this city. In my opinion, Omdurman's history symbolizes everything that is good – as well as everything that has gone wrong in our beloved homeland, Sudan. This paper explores the complex relationship between Omdurman and its people by looking at some of the historical aspects of the city establishment, development and its impact on the history on the Sudanese women.

In my view, the written history of Sudan – and in that respect the city of Omdurman – is the history of the Jallaba class. Indeed, the written history of the modern Sudanese women's movement, which has its roots in that city, is the history of urban middle class women, who were either ethnically and/or culturally part of the this Jallaba class – A group of the northern Arab riverians who adopted the Sunni version of Islam as their religious doctrine.

Recall the famous phrase of Charles Dickens in his epic *A Tale of Two Cities*, now a cliché: "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." (Dickens: 5). For a large number of women who were slaves, former slaves, concubines and/or from lower working-class strata, growing up and living Omdurman during the Turks, Mahadia and the Anglo-Egyptian regimes, it was the latter – it was the worst of times for these women.

In Sudan, race, class, and gender, are not mutually exclusive. They are, and have always been, interconnected. The dynamics of race and gender relations in Omdurman were closely linked to its working and middle class urban culture. The colonial authority had consciously constructed the policies that created this middle class and working culture in Omdurman.

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In the early days of the Anglo-Egyptian colonization, a local workforce was needed to operate the local government machinery. The opening of Omdurman Al-ameer'ia in 1902, as the first modern elementary and later as a junior high school in Sudan, was no accident – it was needed to train the local labour force for low and junior clerical positions in the new colonial government. At this time, the *Khalawie* (local religious schools) were the extent of the Sudanese educational system and did not have the capacity or the potential to meet these economic demands; however, these *Khalawie* played a vital role in maintaining a conservative ideology that was instrumental in suppressing women.

Being wad Arab – and by extension being bit Arab – is factor that brought many privileges, due to the domination of the Arabic culture and language in Sudan. This issue is a political ‘hot potato’ and a very sensitive one for a lot of people. Discussing it, is rather painful and uncomfortable, and maybe this why there is so much denial around it. I will continue to discuss the different complicated aspects of class, gender, and race relations and influence that Omdurman had on its inhabitants, specifically women residents. I believe, it is a very modest contribution, and it would be my sincere hope that more people will get involved and continue this long process.

## Methodology

The methodology I employed in this paper to explore this issue is based on reviewing some of the literature available on the subject, as well as interviews with a few of Omdurman’s residents. This approach was also complemented by my own experiences and observations growing up in the city. I analyzed the issues using elements of the “Critical Race Theory” approach. As Carol Aylward indicates, “Critical Race Theory was designed to confront subtle forms of discrimination perpetuated by law and to challenge and expand rights analysis... At the heart of Critical Race Theory is the thesis that legal – *and other social discourses* – have not appropriately taken account of the social reality of race and racism and has ignored the fact that law ‘is both a product and a promoter of racism’”. (Aylward: 30)

The discussion in this paper covers the period from the establishment of modern Omdurman in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to approximately the mid 1950s.

## Omdurman: A Historical Background

A quick look at the history of the establishment of Omdurman and its development would be of a great help to us in order to understand the issues at hand. The city of Omdurman is relatively new in comparison to the other cities in Sudan, such as Donqia, Swakin, Elfashir, Sinnar, etc. Historically speaking, I am not sure from where was the name originated. However, one story states that the name was attributed to a woman by the name of Om'dur who had a number of *ghata'ti* (from ghoti'ia - hut), which were made available to people as a *manzala* (inn/hotel) regardless of their background. People used to stay the night and be fed without any fear of *al-hum'bata/ al-raba'teen* (robbers), *al-nakhas'sa* (slave traders), and/or the local authority. Later, the name became Om'dur Aman (safe), and through the years, the residents started to pronounce it as Omdurman.



Omdurman is situated at the West bank of the River Nile in what was traditionally known at the Sheikhdome of the Jum'oe'y'a tribe, which occupied the area between Jabel Aulia to the south and Al-sror'rab to the north, including the Islands of Um Beteekh, Um Aga'rib, and Um Shedair'ra. The Jum'oe'y'a tribe's subdivisions included the Nai'lab, the Tai'raab, A'jailab, Fet'hab, etc., a homogeneous group of people who are part of the northern riverain Arabic composition of north-central Sudan.

Upon the arrival of Mohamed Ali Pasha to Sudan in 1821, the Jum'oe'y'a were under Mekk Adris Al-me'haina, who was later killed by the Pasha's Soldiers for his refusal to pay allegiance to Mohamed Ali (Al-badi: 99, 100). However, Omdurman as a modern city was established by Mohamed Ahmed Almahadi, when it was chosen by him to as the new capital of the newly-established Mahdist regime after his troops took back the city of Khartoum, the political capital of the Turkish colonizers, after their demise in January 26, 1885.

Almahadi named his new capital, Omdurman, (the "Holy Spot"). It would appear that this name was part of the Almahadi's ideological warfare against the Turkish colonizers and their supporters from *Ullemma* (official religious leaders) at that time. The reasons for the Mahdist revolution against the Turkish were summarized as follows:

1. "The atrocities that were committed by the – *Turkish* – colonizers;
2. The unfair and over burden taxations and its collection system;
3. The ban on slave trading; and
4. The privileges that the Turks bestowed upon the Khatemia sect and the Shai'qiyya tribe." (Ali Ibrahim: 26)

Shortly after naming Omdurman as the capital of the Mahadia regime, M.A. Almahadi passed away. The struggle for power began among his Kholafa: Abdulelahi Al-ta'yshi (Ameer of the Blue Brigade of the people of western Sudan); Ali Wad Hiloo (Ameer of the Green Brigade of the people of central Sudan); and Al Khalifa Shareif (Ameer of the Red Brigade of the people of northern Sudan).

Using his tribesmen, Alkhalifa Abdulelahi Al-ta'yshi immediately consolidated his power and succeeded in becoming the sole ruler of the regime. Abdulelahi Al-tay'yshi's Blue Brigade consisted of all of the western Sudanese tribesmen, as well as the *Jehad'dia* under the leadership of Hamadan Abu-A'nja.

The *Jehad'dia* ("Bazingar") was an army of well-trained, professional, slave soldiers, who were initially recruited by Al-zubair Rhama Mansur (a slave trader) and others whose family members were also enslaved by the Turko-Egyptian army. Their weaponry consisted of modern firearms, riding horsebacks and camels. They were usually instrumental in changing the power dynamics in any volatile situation, such as the one that occurred during the struggle for power after M.A. Almahadi's death. (Algalad:166-172) This piece of information is also important, as it helps us understand the ethnic mix and power dynamics in Omdurman.

Moreover, the aforementioned third reason for igniting the Mahdist revolution is extremely important in this context, as slavery and slave trading were foundations of the Sudanese



economy during these periods. As well, it helps us understand and put into perspective the ideological framework of the Jallaba class, who were part of the forces that opposed the Turkish colonization in its late days. (Algadal: 99-100)

## **The Jallaba Institution and Women of Omdurman**

In this context, I am using the term “*Jallaba*”, as it was used to describe a group of some of the northern Sudanese Arabic riverian who were – and still are – at the helm of economic power and the control of the wealth in Sudan. “*Jallaba*” originally depicted those of Arabic background who had become very successful commercially. They acted as agents between foreign producers and local markets, spreading their activities throughout Sudan and surrounding areas. They traded in various goods including ivory, ostrich feathers and slaves. Later, the term “*Jallaba*” evolved to include groups from those of Syrian, Egyptian, Armenian, Greek and Turkish descent who were profiting from slave trading in the old city of Khartoum. (Woodward:23)

The term “*Jallaba Institution*” came to have political meaning, defining this class of people that played an important role in Sudanese history. (Suliman:17-118). Its ideology and practices have been dominating Sudan social and economic life for quite sometime.

The Jallaba’s economic interests were intertwined with the interests of all of the successive regimes in modern Sudanese history since 1821, including the Turkish, the Mahadia, the Anglo-Egyptian colonization and post independent Sudan. In order to maintain their interests and the status quo, including slave trading, the Jallaba constructed an ideology that is based on Islamo-Arabism as the centre of its core values.

Makris discussed this issue eloquently when stating,

“Although these northerners were coming from number of Arabized tribes, especially from the riverian regions, such as Ja’aliyyun, Danaqla, Bdiayriyya, and Sha’iqiyya, at a certain level they described themselves as a single Arab community. Allegedly, this community went back to the Prophet – Mohamed – and the Islamic Arabian heartland from which their forefathers had emigrated to Sudan. In the next century, the descendants of these ‘Jallabas’ would constitute an Arab elite that would run the country.” (Ali:42)

As stated earlier, slave trading by the Jallaba was the foundation of the Sudanese economy during the Turks and Mahdia’ regimes. Understandably, the majority of these slaves were females. Hence, this Jallaba class carefully constructed an ideology that would help them maintain their economic interest and power.

According to Sikainga,

“Most slaveholding societies in Africa and elsewhere created ideologies that justified enslavement. These ideologies legitimized enslavement of non-members of the society.... Determining legitimate target of enslavement has been an important part of Muslim ideology... Following the Muslim conquest of Egypt in the seventh century, the Christian kingdom of Nubia became a major source of slaves for Muslim Egypt. The conclusion of the *baqt* treaty between Nubia and the Muslims opened the former to Muslim traders, particularly slave trader, who gradually carried the frontier of Islamic



influences deep into the country. The treaty required the Nubian king to send an annual tribute of 360 slaves to Egypt. After the rise of the Funj and the Fur kingdoms and the spread of Islam and Arabic in northern Sudan, the slave raiding frontier moved further south. Adoption of an Arab identity by northern Sudanese had become a major criteria for distinguishing them from non-Muslim people of the south. However, the adoption of a particular identity entails the development of certain perceptions about others. Northern Sudanese Muslims created derogatory ethnic labels to refer to non-Muslim groups in the south. These generic names included *Fertit* below Dar Fur, *Janakhara* below Wadai, and *Shankalla* below Sinnar. Hence, the slave-raiding frontier was defined in ideological, ethnic and geographical terms. The inhabitants of Dar Fertit, the Nuba Mountains, and the Upper Blue Nile became prey for northern Muslims. The term Fertit was used by the people of Dar Fur to describe non-Muslims and stateless societies south of Bahr al-Arab. As a label associated with slavery and inferiority and enslavement, Dar Fertit was pushed farther south.” (Sikainga: 7-8)

Some sources indicate that, “Immediately after they captured, the slaves were circumcised and Islamized.... As a rule, the conversion of slaves was not taken seriously and slaves were still considered to be subhuman pagan or, in the best case, second-class Muslims.” (Ali: 44)

Instantaneously, after the defeat of the Mahadist regime by the Anglo-Egyptian army in 1898, the new colonial authority started to take steps to stop slave trading. One commentator observed that,

“However, problem of slavery was central to maintenance of civil order and the planning of economic policy, as according to some estimates, the slave constituted twenty to thirty percent of the population of the north. The colonial government feared that immediate emancipation of all slaves and the effort to transform them into wage labours would lead, at least initially, to economic depression and civil anarchy, and would injure feelings, religious creed of slave owners.... Although the slave trading was immediately outlawed, domestic slavery was not abolished. Instead, policies were designed that would eventually lead to its gradual eradication, something that was not completed until the 1940s.” (Ali: 46)

Naturally, Omdurman’s slave owners and so-called ‘nobles’ were vehemently opposing any slave emancipation, particularly for female slaves. One month after the Anglo-Egyptian colonizers conquered Omdurman, these ‘nobles’ expressed their concerns in writing to the Anglo-Egyptian officials under the pretext that if female slaves were to be liberated, they would become prostitutes and thus it was against the “Sudanese customs and traditions.”

These 68 ‘nobles’ were heads of most of Omdurman’s elite families. They have continued to influence public policy and pop culture – specifically in Omdurman, and in Sudan in general – until today. Moreover, the pressure continued from Omdurman’s ‘nobles’. Prominent religious figures, including Abdelrahman Almahad, Ali Al-merghani and Al-sharief Al-hindi, put their full weight behind the slave owners in Omdurman. As well, these religious figures registered their opposition to the liberation of slaves, especially female slaves, in Petitions to the British Officials in 1898 and in 1925.

*(For the full text of these aforementioned Petitions and names of these ‘nobles’, please see Sikainga: Appendix I, and Nugud:155).*





The Anglo-Egyptian colonizers constructed their policies carefully in order to suppress the mounting resistance of Sudanese in southern and western Sudan – Dar Foor in 1916, Nowair in 1920, (Algalal: 300), and Denka in 1930 (Alair: 14), as well as the slave owners. The Anglo-Egyptian officials accomplished this task through collaborating with these slave owners and working within the ‘customs and traditions’ as expressed by these northern Jallaba and through taking a conciliatory approach towards Islam – the Jallaba’s ideological term of reference.

Professor Woodward observed that,

“... the Sudan government had to set about the establishment of stable and even mutually beneficial relations with the people of northern Sudan.... In reality, however, the search for collaborators and the danger of revolt required not repression of Islam, but a policy that sought to erect an acceptable and quiescent body of Islamic officials, the *ulemma*... ...Rudolf von Slatin... the first and only inspector general – was particularly keen in establishing a board of *ulemma* to oversee the administration of what was in effect government-sponsored Islamic life. Under the direction of the board (in practice, friends of Slatin), *qadis* employed by the government dispensed the justice of shari’a, which was set up to govern many aspects of family and religious life in the north... they were responsible for the administration of mosques, some built with government encouragement ... and the running of an Islamic college, *Mahad al’ilmi*, in Omdurman.” (Woodward: 29, 33, 34)

According to Islamic jurisprudence, slaves were considered property of their owners. Thus, the Anglo-Egyptian officials relied heavily on these *ulemma* in order to enforce their policy of maintaining the status quo. As Mansour Khalid stated that, “It was not unusual for Wingate Pasha to seek the help of one of the prominent sheikhs, Sheikh Modether Ibrahim Al-ha’jaaz, to issue a religious decree that allowed the postponement of slave emancipation in northern Sudan for seven years out of concern for safety and public interest.” (Khalid: 416). These same *ulemma* were particularly responsible for the suppression of women – especially female slaves and working class women – and for maintaining the Jallaba ideology for years to come.

Sikainga in his eloquent analysis of this issue stated that,

“While male slaves had to grapple with the antipathy of government officials and the resistance of their owners, slave women faced even greater obstacles to emancipation.... As male slaves began to leave, the labour slave women became even more vital and owners made every possible effort to prevent their manumission. The owners were supported by colonial officials who viewed all female slaves in Muslim societies as concubines. In their view, liberating them would break up families and disrupt domestic arrangements. Consequently, all disputes between female slaves and their owners were regarded as family matters and referred to shari’a courts. Furthermore, these officials were apprehensive of social consequences of manumission and felt female slaves if liberated would become prostitutes.” (Sikainga: 54)

Of course, these religious courts, (*al-maha’kim al-shar’ia*), administered by the *ulemma* and appointed by the government officials, were very pleased to take the self-righteous role of morality guardians, imposing their own ideology and version of Islam.

Due to the pressure applied on the officials, Makris argues that, “Courtesy and diplomatic tact



demanded that the word 'slave' should be abandoned as descriptive status; instead other more neutral terms were used, such as 'volunteer slaves', 'servants', 'unpaid workers' and 'Sudanese'." [emphasis is mine] (Ali: 47). Ironically – and probably to the surprise of many – the term 'Sudanese' was a legal term, synonymous with the term *Abid* or slave until 1948. (Khalid: 453)

## Omdurman: The Name, Its Neighbourhoods and Ethnic Composition

As mentioned earlier, M.A. Almahadi named Omdurman the *Holy Spot* and made it the capital of his new regime; however, the establishment and the development of Omdurman as a city fell on the shoulders of Alkhalifa Abulelahi Al-ta'yshi. Alkhalifa divided Omdurman into residential areas, based on the composition of his army and his commanders (the Ameers), with *Gubt Al-Mahadi* (shrine) as the centre of the city. Hence, the majority of Omdurman neighbourhoods were named after prominent Mahadia figures and/or establishments.

Furthermore, in most Omdurman's neighbourhoods, there were many ha'warie (subdivisions). These ha'warie were named according either to the ethnic composition of the majority of residents, or the predominant trade of most of the residents. Examples of these subdivisions include: Hai Al-sroojia (local horse leather pads makers); Hai Al-umarab; Hai Tamma; Hai Felata, etc.)

In the old city of Omdurman we find many neighbourhoods, with different ethnic compositions, such as follows:

To the North, North-East and North-West of the *Gub'ba*:

- Abu-roof (Al-ameer Almerdi Wad Abu-roof, from the Botana area of Central Sudan - Ruf'aa tribes, as well as Ja'leen, and Uma'rab tribes)
- Wad Noo'bawie (Al-ameer Mohamed Wad Noo'bawie, from the Beni Jarar tribe of Kordofan, Central Sudan)
- Hai Al-hejra (migrants tribesmen from the Northern Sudan, started by mostly the relative of Almahadi, who had a fall-out with the Alkhalifa Abudllahi Altaay'shi, upon Almahadi's death. The area is also know by "Wad Al-baseer" in reference to Mohamed Altayeb Wad Albaseer, one of the residents)
- Bait Al-maal (The State Treasury, mostly Danaqla, and Ja'leen tribes of Northern Sudan)
- Al-rukabia (A North-Central Sudanese tribe)
- Wad Do'rou (Religious Sheikh from a North-Central Sudanese tribe)
- Hai Al-de'baqa (the tannery. Workers were from North-Central Sudanese tribesmen)
- Hai Al-kashif (Mamluks, Danagla, some originally from Northern Sudan, and Egypt)
- Hai Mekkie (Al-Say'ed Al-Mekkie Al-wali's family and associates, from Kordofan, North-Central Sudan)
- Hai Al-umd'da (Umd'da Wad Yassien; a Northern tribesman)
- Hai Al-sooq/ Hai Al-Arab (The main market, Ja'leen, Kababeesh, North and Central Sudan)
- Al-musalma (Coptic Christian, who ancestors were mostly from Egypt)



- Al-mulazmeen (Al-khalif's bodyguards from the Jehadeya; former slaves from Southern and Western Sudan tribes)
- Hai Brambell, including the Hai Al-ya'hood (the Jewish quarter)
- Hai Al-rubatab (a Northern Sudanese tribe)

To the South and South-West of the *Gub'ba*:

- Al-hashmab (Sheikh Abul Gasim Hashim, the Grand *Gadi* during the Mahadia)
- Hai Al-ta'ysha (a tribe from Western Sudan)
- Almorada (main port and local market – the majority of the residents were from Dar foor, Nuba Mountains, Southern Sudan)
- Al-abassia (in reference to Abbas Hilmi, a former Khadif of Egypt – a settlement of former slave soldiers, who were originally from the Western and Southern parts of Sudan)
- Hai Alzubat (similar composition, as Al-abassia, mostly soldiers and officers of the Anglo-Egyptian army of 'Sudanese' background)
- Abu Kadouk (Al-ameer Hassan Wad Abu Kdouk Al-bertawie – from Dar foor, and other residents from Al-jemo'eea tribe)
- Abu Se'ed (Al-fete'hab, which is part of Al-jemo'eeya tribe of Central Sudan)

As we have seen from the aforementioned description of Omdurman's neighbourhoods, we could easily conclude that the city had an extensive mix of ethnicity – residents were from various areas in Sudan. Dinka, Ne'wair, fer'tit, and Foor in fareeq Raid, and Hai Alzubat. Umarab or Ja'aleen, and Roba'tab in fareeq Al-umarab and Al-hashmab. Taay'sha, Foor, Bertie and Danaglla, in Hai Al-umara, Abu-kadook and Alabassia. Ma'hess and Jamoo'eia in Al-shay'iakha and Alfitehab. Shay'gee'ia in Alabassia and Bait Al-maal. These are just examples of some of the predominant ethnic groups in Omdurman.

Omdurman was also known as Ka'rish Al-feel. This derogatory term meant "elephant's stomach" – big, holding a lot of unknown items that were mixed together without knowing their origins. People living in homogeneous and rural areas in Sudan gave this label to Omdurman due to its ethnic diversity. Moreover, Omdurman with its urban middle class culture, generated much admiration, but also resentment and anger due to its residents' perceived snobbish and cocky attitude. This resentment is sometimes expressed either overtly or covertly.

A large segment of the aforementioned group of Al-jallaba worked in Alzariba(s) and the sooqs (local malls). The ethnic mix was diverse. However, at the time, most people who worked in clerical positions or white collar jobs were Awlad Arab; people who worked in labour positions and in the army were mostly nas zorog (dark-skinned and/or "Sudanese"). That was due to the racist policies and attitude of both the colonial authority and Jallaba, especially after the 1924<sup>th</sup> Revolution of Ali Abdel Latif. At the time, working with the army was considered "hag abeed sakit" (for slaves and alike). As a consequence, the working and middle class was sharply divided along racial lines.

The majority of people of northern Arabic origin lived in the neighbourhoods situated to the north, northeast and northwest of Omdurman's centre, as in Abu-roof, Bait Al-maal, Al-hejra,





etc. In contrast, the majority of people who were from western and southern origin lived in the neighbourhood situated to the south and southwest of the city centre, as in Almorada, Al-abassia, Hai Al-zubat, etc. Omdurman was also divided among ethnic and racial lines. (Algalal: 278)

Al-khalifa Abdullellahi organized the city in a way that would allow him to keep a close eye on his enemies: the Ash'raaf ("nobles") and the supporters of M.A. Almahadi, as they were also of northern Arabic backgrounds. However, he also paid close attention to the city's economy. Alkhalifa introduced the Sooq's court to organize Omdurman's commercial affairs and a separate court to look after the slaves' affairs (Mah'kemet Al-kara), as slave trading was an important part of the economy. He also organized Bait Al-maal (the Treasury) in order to accommodate the large number of slaves that he inherited from the Turks, the majority of whom were females.

During this time in Almorada (located beside the Nile), the Jallaba off-loaded their goods – including "human goods" – in Al-zareeba. They took them to be sold in Sooq Al-nakhas'sa, the infamous market that used to be located at the entrance of kubrie Shambat (the bridge). I believe this is where the current Um'mia (Water Distribution Plant and Power Station) is found today – between the neighbourhoods of Bait Al-maal and Al-mulazmeen.

Through the first five decades of the 1900s, the male-dominated society kept – or tried to keep – women isolated. However, women were everywhere in Omdurman, contributing to every aspect of the residents' daily lives. Nevertheless, their contributions were never acknowledged, especially the large number that drove the labour force of the local economy.

It is important to note here that in the Battle of Karary in 1898, more than 10,000 men gave their lives fighting the invading colonial army. (Zolfu: 543-551). Hence, a large number of Sa'ra'rie (concubines and former female slaves) became widows after their 'masters' died and/or abandoned them after that battle. A few female slaves also gained their freedom by Shyihadat Al-horia (Freedom Certificates), which were issued by the colonial authority. (Interview notes with Haja Mahala). These factors created an urgent need for women to work.

In the local economy, women worked in a number of Al-anadie (local bars) making and selling drinks and food. Some worked in Alzariba cleaning grains, making Tobag'ga (food tray covers) and Maga'sheesh (straw brooms). Another portion of the women worked as Masha'tat (hair stylists). Some worked as Dal'lal'lyat (vendors). Some sold foul and ta'salie (peanuts and roasted melon seeds). And unfortunately, some worked as Shara'meat (prostitutes). These are examples jobs available to women at this time. As I stated, there were many sole-support mothers left struggling to survive and raise their children in an economy and a society that did not even recognize some of them as human beings!!!

## **Omdurman: Why it became the 'Centre'?**

During the Mahdia, Omdurman grew from a small homogeneous village to a thriving metropolis. People came from all parts of Sudan to Omdurman to pay their respect to the Khalifa – Abdullellai Al-tay'shi – and to visit the Mahadi tomb (the new ruler demanded and brutally enforced this policy). Omdurman, the *Holy Spot*, became the political, economic and



religious capital. It also became a kind of large and open prison for those who had any independent tendencies beyond the Mahadia's strict code of allegiance.

Death and family members' enslavement was the expected punishment for those who dared to disobey the Khalifa's orders to come to Omdurman and pay their respects – including his own cousin. (Bakri: 66-80) The women's prison and sij'jin Al-sa'yer were full of family members whose only crime was either refusing Al-khalifa's orders to come to Omdurman and/or were from the 'enslaveable elements'.

As a result of Al-khalifa's policy of forced emigration to Omdurman, the inhabitants of Omdurman constituted very diverse ethnic groups from all parts of Sudan. Al-khalifa was also instrumental in forcing many residents into 'political marriages'. As a practical consequence, inter-tribal marriages among residents of Omdurman have become common. However, official marriages were recognized as those between the northern-central reverian Arabs and western Arabized groups, such as the Ta'aysha, Baqqara, Kaba'beesh, etc. Indeed, relationships with women who were concubines, slaves and former slaves were not recognized as official marriages.

Due to many factors Omdurman has become a 'melting pot' and the 'centre'. Though appearing to be an ideal city on the surface, injustices against women – especially women of non-Arabic background who were former slaves and concubines – were prevalent underneath that serene façade.

In my view, many other factors have contributed to Omdurman's position as a cultural, religious and political centre. Some of these factors include:

- **Educational Opportunities:** The establishment of the Religious College, *al-ma'ahed al'ilmi*, in 1911 (later became Omdurman's Islamic University), as well as the establishment and the flourishing of the religious schools, *khala'wie*, which was supported and encouraged by the new colonial authority. These religious schools were mainly run by some of Omdurman's 'nobles' and elites. As well, some of these schools were run by the religious college founders and graduates, including Sheik Al-badawie, Sheik Al-amin Al-dareer, Sheik Abdul majid, Sheik Ibrahim Al-noor, Sheik Wan'ni, Sheik Al-jozooli, Sheik Gad'deh Al-dam, Sheik Eissa Doleeb, Sheik Al-ben'na, Sheik Al-keteyabi, Sheik Hassan, Sheik Ghareeb Allah Al-tey'yaar, etc.

The establishment of the formal education institutions, such as the Omdurman Al-ameer'ya for boys, and later for girls, Al-ahfad, Al-melaik, Nursing and Midwifery schools in 1920, the Teachers' Training School, etc. Also, the contribution of the informal educational institution was very instrumental, such as the opening of the Sewing Training Houses in Al-musalma and other parts of Omdurman.

- **Media:** All media outlets were established and operated from Omdurman. These media outlets, include:
  - Al-hadara Newspaper, 1920's
  - Ra'ed Alsudan Newspaper, 1923 (Hussien Sharief)



- Al-nahda Magazine, 1930's
  - Al-neel Newspaper, 1935
  - Al-fajer Magazine, 1930s
  - Omdurman Radio Station, 1940
  - Swat Alsudan, 1940
  - Al-mutamer, 1940
  - Akhbar Foorawie, 1944
  - Al-rai Al-aam, 1940's
  - Alsudan Al-jadid (Ahmed Yousif Hashim), 1940's
  - Hona Omdurman Magazine, 1940
  - Al-ay'yam, 1953 (Bashier Mohamed Sa'eed)
  - Swat Almar'a, 1955
  - Al-gafila Magazine, 1956 (Haja Kashif)
  - Al-manar Magazine, 1956 (Suwad Alfateh)
- **Arts and Cultural Institutions:** The establishment of the Cultural Societies has contributed greatly to the creation of a 'pop culture' and the formation of an Omdurmani public opinion and way of thinking. These known Cultural Societies, which were exclusively of male memberships, constituted a version of the 'old boys' network. Many members were also simultaneously members of other societies in other parts of Omdurman. Some of these societies include:
- The Sudanese Unity Society (Suliman Kehsh'a and other)
  - The White Flag League (Ali Abdel Atife and others)
  - Abu-roof Society (Hassan and Hussien Al-kid and others)
  - Dar Al-refaq Society (Mohamed Sa'eed Al-kahra'bji, Kara'ef, Abu Al-roos, etc.)
  - The Hashmab Society (Mohamd and Abdella Ash'ri, M.Ahemd Mahjoob, Mawia Noor, Mohamed and Abdella Ash'ree)
  - The Kata'bba Group (Hassan O. Badri, Kara'ef, Umarabi)
  - Sheikh Al-daba'q Group
  - Sheikh Al-seraj Group
  - Al-dehleez Group (Tawfeeq Salish Jeb'reel)
  - Girls' Cultural Society (Khalda Zahir, Fatima Talip and others)

The influence of these cultural societies has extended way beyond Omdurman to become the pacesetter for the rest of the country – artistically, culturally, ideologically, and politically – as these societies were the roots of most modern Sudanese political organizations. (Abuzaid, Mirghani: 103, 118)

All of these cultural societies had several commonalities: they were male-dominated and oriented, except for the Girls' Cultural Society. Moreover, they all adopted an Islamo-Arabic conservative ideology. Membership for the all-male organizations was exclusive to the society's elites; and for the Girls' Cultural Society, the only women's organization at the time, membership was reserved to what were considered to be the 'ladies' of Omdurman's families.



Naturally, the description of “lady” did not include a very large number of the working class women who were former slaves and concubines! For instance, the Girls’ Cultural Society stipulated school graduation as a membership condition!!!! (Khalda Zahir: interview notes)

It is my belief this elitist mentality has greatly influenced the establishment, organization and development the modern Sudanese women’s movement. Much emphasis was put on eradicating ‘negative customs’, a filter to measure working women’s and Sudanese indigenous practices by the strict and conservative, moral Islamo-Arabic ideology.

As discussed above, the vast majorities of working-class women in Omdurman were left out of the mainstream and were not recognized as viable members of society. In her articulate analysis of the Sudanese women’s movement, Sondra Hale argues that,

“... Women are also brewers, street vendors, tailors, basket makers, weavers, potters, needle workers, domestic servants, midwives, wedding ceremony and ritual specialists and functionaries, spiritual experts and healers, ritual mediators, musician/singers, beauticians, shopkeepers, bartenders, market merchants, prostitutes. Many earn irregular wages, but payment is often in kind or in goods. Often ‘outside’ the boundaries of Islamic decorum, these women are shunned by the SCP and other parties: organizing, or recruiting them would be a cultural risk.” (Hale: 232)

In this juncture, I recall the analysis of Manning Marable, while discussing of the injustices in the American society, he notes that,

“Despite the orthodox cultural ideology of the so-called ‘melting pot,’ privilege and the ownership of productive resources and property have always been unequally allocated in social hierarchy stratified by class, gender and race. Those who benefit directly from these institutional arrangements have historically been defined as ‘white’ – *please read Islamo-Arabic* - overwhelmingly upper class and male... The hegemonic ideology of ‘whiteness’ – *Arabism* – is absolutely central in rationalizing and justifying the gross inequalities of race, gender and class, experienced by millions of American – *please read Sudanese* – relegated to the political peripheral status of ‘Others.’ ... Whenever the question of the national unity is at stake, boundaries in space and time are drawn... A decision is made to represent the ‘Others’ – *please read as people of non-Arabic origin* – as missing, absent, or supplement. ‘Whiteness’ – *Islam-Arabism* – becomes the very ‘centre’ of the dominant criteria for national prestige, decision-making, authority and intellectual leadership.” (Marable: 185) [Emphasis and highlighted additions are mine]

It is my belief there are many parallels between this analogy and the issues discussed in relation to the condition of these working class women in Omdurman.

## Conclusion

As I stated earlier, my love-hate relationship with Omdurman stems from what it represents in Sudanese history and the history of the Sudanese women’s movement. As a thriving urban centre and as a pop culture icon, Omdurman deserved the admiration of many, including me; however, its history and the dismissive attitude and ethnocentrism of the Jallaba elites – males and females – make it difficult for a lot of people to reconcile with these issues. I believe the



explanation of current day dilemmas in Sudan lies in its modern history. As Mansour Khalid stated, “The true tragedy of Sudan does not lie in what was said, but it lies in what was silent about in its written history.” (Khalid: 410)

Although I discussed the plight of the marginalized women in Omdurman in relation to the Jallaba elites in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is my view that the mentality and the conditions that kept these women marginalized still exists. As one of its supporters, I put a special call forward to the organized Sudanese women’s movement in general, and to the Sudanese Women’s Union (SWU) in particular, to pay more attention to and examine its positions around these issues.

In my opinion, the SWU has a long way to go in order to become truly representative, in the real sense of the word, of the interests of the working class and marginalized women – to become less elitist and a more open organization. It is my belief the first step in this process is to self-evaluate its history, ideology, practices, etc.

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#### **Interview Notes with following residents of Omdurman:**

Al-ameerlai Hassan Al-zain

Haja Mahala

Haja Teyb'ba

Khalda Zahir Elsadati

Mansour Sa'eed Adem,

Zahir Sarour Elsadati

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on this paper by both Dr. Khalda Zahir and Ustaza Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, who were present at this aforementioned Symposium. The writer is also grateful to all of those forgotten women who have shared their stories with him during his upbringing in the city of Omdurman.

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