CHAPTER 3: AN ECO-SYSTEMIC CONSTRUCT OF NORTHERN RIVERAIN SUDAN

3.1   SUB PROBLEM 2

The study context needs to be identified eco-systemically. This needs to be initiated by the articulation of social, political, cultural and religious descriptions and the identification of the recurring themes in the literature of the region.

3.2   HYPOTHESIS 2

It is believed that through the eco-systemically based identification of recurring themes in the literature of/on the region, essential and incidental attributes of the place and culture can be articulated. This can become a tool in interpretation of tangible/ intangible artefacts, spatial interventions, and social practice.

3.3   OUTLINE OF CHAPTER 3

This chapter is initiated by looking at the history of the region. The reasons behind the delimitation of the area of study are articulated and justified. The recurring themes are then expressed through an intensive literature review. The origins of the people are explained and elaborated. The identity of the northern riverain people is established as a political and a religious concept. The northern Sudanese riverain people are thus introduced.

3.4   THE CONTEXT: ITS HISTORY AND ITS VALIDITY AS AN AREA OF STUDY

Three main civilizations lived on this land, extending along the Sudanese Nile valley from the present northern border with Egypt to the town of Sennar on the Blue Nile and Kosti on the White Nile: the Kushites, the Meroites and the Funj (refer to Table 3.1).

The Kushites had their centres at Kerma and then at Napata. The peak of this kingdom's strength started around 2000BC and it ended around 900BC (this is according to Hakim (1988: xv) who refers to a variety of authors. The Neo-Kushites ancestral phase started in 1070 BC (Hakim, 1988: xv). There is some confusion among historians regarding the Napatan and the Meroitic cultures. During the Meroitic phase, two cultures seem to have co-existed. Hakim states that:

> "… the evidence reveals a marked degree of cultural continuity in which I find it very difficult to justify the presence of either a hiatus or a duplication of culture at any one time. Indeed, while evidence for cultural continuity is overwhelming, there is a marked absence of evidence to indicate otherwise." (Hakim, 1988: 9).

He therefore proposes to extend the term Meroitic to the whole period from the tenth century BC to the fourth century AD (Hakim, 1988: 10).

Kerma emerged as the capital of Kush in about 2000BC at the time that Egypt conquered Nubia. In the 8th Century BC, Kush became known as a great power with its new centre at Napata. This new independent state played a major role in the politics of Africa and the Middle East for about 1000 years (Nothling, 1989: 43). Kushite interest in expansion seemed to concentrate on the northern regions rather than to the south (*ibid*). When Kush lost control of Egypt, Napata remained as a religious capital while Meroe became the new centre. Expansion interests were then re-directed to the south (Nothling, 1989: 44-45). Table 3.1 identifies the historical milestones in the development of the Nubian region while Fig. 3.1 locates the area geographically showing the extent of Nubia and Kush during 700BC and 1750BC simultaneously. Also note the location of the main cities in relation to the Nile cataracts.
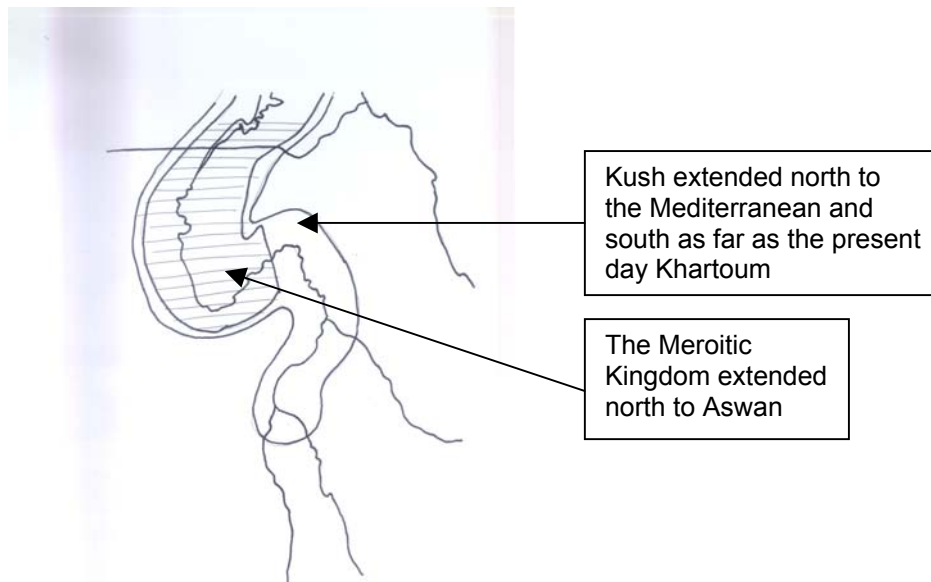

Kush extended north to the Mediterranean and south as far as the present day Khartoum

The Meroitic Kingdom extended north to Aswan

Fig. 3.1 Nubia and Kush between 700BC and 1750BC. Diagram by author adapted from Meyer (2003).

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The area of study does fairly represent the extent of the Meroitic Kingdom at its peak. Hakim (1988: 79) states, based on various sources, that it:

> "… extended from about Wadi Al Arab, just south of Maharaqa (Heirasycaminos – the southern limit of the Ptolemaic and Roman Dodecaschininos) to near Sennar on the Blue Nile and Kawa – Geteina on the White Nile (Arkell 1966: 136; Vercoutter 1962: 265) and perhaps even beyond this towards Malakal and Bahr el-Ghazal (Wainwright 1947: 22; Kirwan 1956: 16). On the west of the Nile the extent is still unknown while on the east the Meroites did not seem to have extended their occupation beyond the western Butana (Hintze 1959:170)."

AXUMITE NUBIA	324AD Axum, a powerful trade-based maritime nation to the east has developed and Meroe is defeated by its first Christian king.
	200AD Environmental degradation, deforestation and overgrazing, the decline of Meroe.
KINGDOM OF MEROE	*ca* 600-300BC Nubian capital moved from Napata to Meroe with relocation of the residences and the burial sites of the kings: beginning of the Meiotic kingdom.
	671 Nubian driven out of Egypt by the better equipped, iron armed Assyrians. They retire to their old capital Napata.
KINGDOM OF NUBIA	Peak: 712-657. Nubian rule in Egypt.
	800 Iron working introduced from the middle east (?).
	ca 900 Emergence of Nubian kingdom, dynasty of independent Nubian Kings.
	Nubia under Egyptian rule.
	1500 Egypt resumes its interest in Nubia, forst are repaired and Kush is overthrown.
KINGDOM OF KUSH	*ca* 1700-1750 Egyptian withdrawal is followed by the emergence of a rich culture at Kerma.
	ca 2000-1600 Egyptian control in northern Nubia, trade control and access to gold deposits.
	ca 2300 C-Group occupation of the Nile: possibly from the Red Sea Hills.
	2500 Egyptians capture 7000 people and 200 00 domestic animals, possibly precipitating the end of the A-Group culture.

Fig. 3.2 Historical episodes (Diagram by author adapted from Meyer, 2003).

Decline in the major civilizations in the region was initiated when Meroe broke up into three Nubian Kingdoms that accepted the Christian faith in the 6th Century. Meyer (2003) dates the decline to an earlier period (200AD) and attributes it to corresponding environmental degradation (Fig. 3.2). This issue will be further elaborated later in the study.

To the north were Nobadia (with its centres at Faras and Qasr Ibrim) and Makuria (al-Muqarra)(with its capital at Old Dongola) (Jakobielski, 1987: 231-233). These were later unified into one state. The Kingdom of Alodia ('Alawa) was further south and had its capital at Soba (Fig. 3.3). Ethnic, linguistic and economic factors differentiated between the three kingdoms. Alodia ('Alawa) was primarily a slave trading state and was omitted from the terms of the Baqt (Jakobielski, 1987: 232 and 234). Blood ties between the thrones of Dongola and Soba ensured friendly relations between the two kingdoms. The border between the two southern kingdoms was the area between the 4th and 5th cataracts. Alodia ('Alawa):

> "… embraced beside the traditional territories of Meroitic culture in the Butana and on the eastern bank of the Nile, also the fertile areas of Gezira up to at least Sennar; it doubtless bordered with Ethiopia." (Jakobielski, 1987: 231)

It is seen that Alodia ('Alawa) provided another step in the development of the region under study. Ties with the previous cultures were not completely severed and the line of cultural continuity was still maintained. Makuria (al-Muqarra), with its capital in Dongola, was a unifying element integrating the Nubian community (Jakobielski, 1987: 235). Yet, the geographical extent of these kingdoms, the fact that they were divided rather than unified and the duration of their existence did weaken their impact and influence on the present day Sudan.
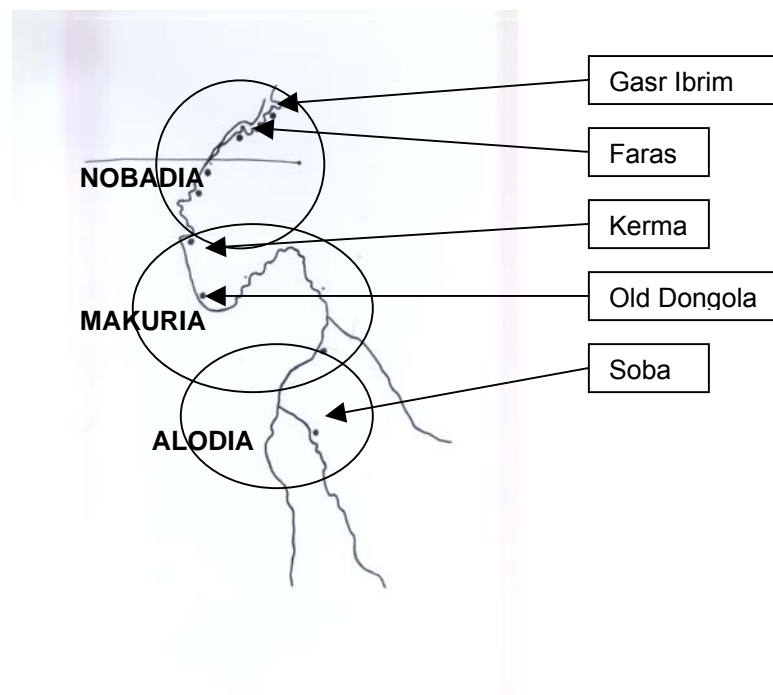

Fig. 3.3 Diagrammatic representation of the three Christian Kingdoms by the author.

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Geographically, Alodia ('Alawa) still retained the extent of the Meroitic kingdom to the south – and this later also became the extent of the Funj Kingdom, assumed to be the real boundaries of the country before the foreign invasions of the Turks (1821-1882) and the Egyptians and British (1989-1956).

> "The relations of the Fatimids, the Ayyubids, and the Mamluks with the Arabs in Upper Egypt and their policies towards Nubia led gradually to the erosion of its strength. The Mamluk policy, as it was in its final form, aimed at the conversion of Nubia into a vassal kingdom. This design hastened the process of Islamization. The Arabs who entered in large numbers with the Mamluk armies intermarried with the royal family and assumed power. Finally… the Nubian Kingdom was not so much overthrown as turned inside out – the royal family became both Islamized and Arabized. The collapse of 'Alawa was mainly due to the gradual ascendancy of Arab tribesmen, whose movements into the interior were stimulated by the exhaustion of the mines, and by the decline of the trade routes after the destruction of 'Aydhāb and the fall of al-Muqarra, which had for centuries hindered Arab migration through the Nile valley." (Hasan, 1967: 90).

The Nubian archers of Makuria (al-Muqarra) resisted Arab invaders for centuries until they concluded with them the Baqt treaty in 642 AD. During this time, a matrilineal system of succession prevailed and was the reason that the Arabs gained positions of power such as chieftainships. Finally, the Banu 'l-Kanz married into the Nubian royal family and seized the throne (Hasan, 1967: 124-125). Between the signing of the Baqt and the emergence of the Funj kingdom, the character of the northern Sudanese people gradually evolved. According to (Hasan, 1967: 128), after the fall of Dongola there was a dark age in the history of the Sudan, the story of which is taken up by local tradition. The immigrants did not come in the form of invasions, but as small successive parties of peaceful nomads (Hasan, 1967: 128). There were no doubt some local clashes and tribal warfare (Hasan, 1967: 129), but no major wars occurred during this period.

In 689AD another threat was facing Alodia ('Alawa), invaders apparently coming from the southern parts of the Gezira: "These invaders were, I would hazard, the ancestors of the Funj." (Hasan, 1967: 130). Alodia was also under threat from al-Muqarra, who came to collect slaves, "… probably for the purpose of paying the Baqt." (Hasan, 1967: 130-131). Another reason for the disintegration of the kingdom was the isolation of the church. Links with churches elsewhere were severed by the middle of the 13th Century (Hasan, 1967: 131).

Two new forces then came into being with the collapse of the Nubian kingdoms: the Arab 'Abdallab group with their centre in Qarri and the Funj with their centre in

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Sennar. The Funj exerted their influence over the 'Abdallab Arabs but also created a partnership with them that greatly influenced the future character of the country. The extent of the Funj kingdom is unknown.

> "The Ottoman conquerors of Egypt (923/1517), like the Mamluks before them, soon clashed with their southern neighbours and subsequently annexed northern Nubia as far as the third cataract, making this region a frontier province against the Funj kingdom." (Hasan, 1967: 134).

The territories of Makuria (al-Muqarra), Alodia ('Alawa) and the Beja from the beginning of the 16th Century became united under the Funj (Hasan, 1967: 134).

> "The Kingdom of Sennar, founded in A.D. 1504, was a federation of principalities extending from the 3rd cataract in the north to the Abyssinian frontier in the south; eastwards it reached the Red Sea at Suakin along the caravan routes from Berber and Shendi; south-eastwards the nomads of the Butana were its vassals. Westwards the kings of Sennar obtained for a short period some power over the dry steppe-lands of Kordofan and even the Nuba hills; but it was only during the second half of the 18th century (sic) that this vast western region played any important part in the history of Sennar, whose south western frontier was, in effect, the White Nile." (Crawford, 1951: 1)

According to Holt & Daly (1988: 28) the coming of the Funj did not necessarily disrupt the already existing social and political systems. This means that there was continuity for a long period of time:

> "'Amāra Dūnqas was the first ruler since Meroitic times to unite under one authority the whole riverain Sudan north of the equatorial swamps. The older ethnic and political units of medieval times, however, did not evaporate with the coming of the Funj overlordship; rather, the kings of Sinnār seem to have incorporated them as an integral and permanent part of the new governmental system."

Expansions in the Meroitic and Funj eras determined the boundaries of the present Sudan (Fig. 3.3). Foreign contacts and the establishment of trade routes affected the future character the country and the location of major towns. Western Sudan has always been strongly linked to the history of northern riverain Sudan, especially after the Mahdiyya (1882-1898). The west maintains its own identity though Greater Khartoum has emerged as the unifying force between all Sudanese regions. The Fur Kingdom in the 16th Century was a strong entity that interacted with the kingdoms to the east of it. Even though the Funj expanded to the Nuba Mountains at some time this was for a short period and did not have a strong impact in the future development of the two regions and did not transform the identity of either.
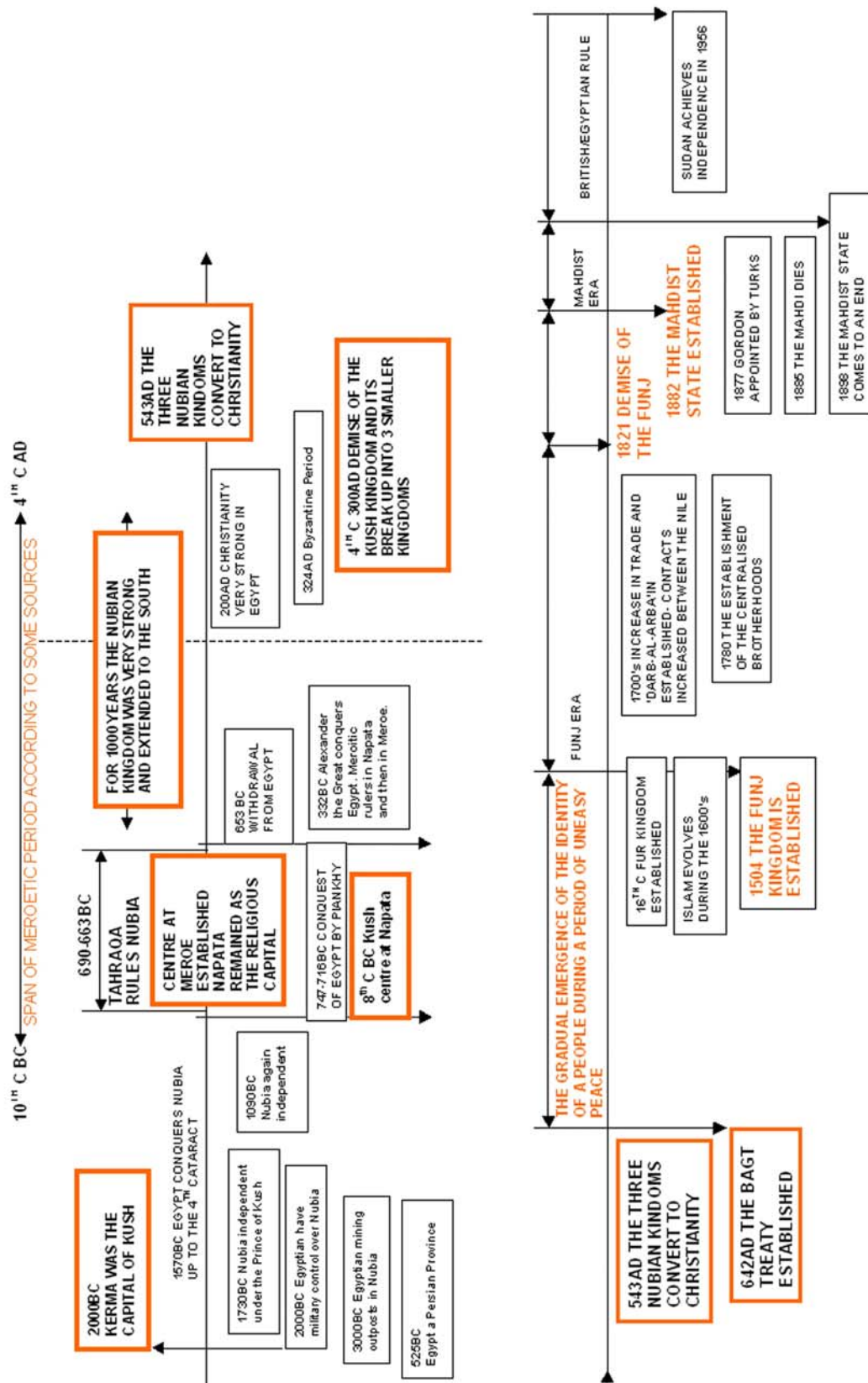
Table 3.1 Historical timeline.

THE EGYPTIAN SUDAN

THE MAHDIST STATE

THE FUNJ DOMINIONS &
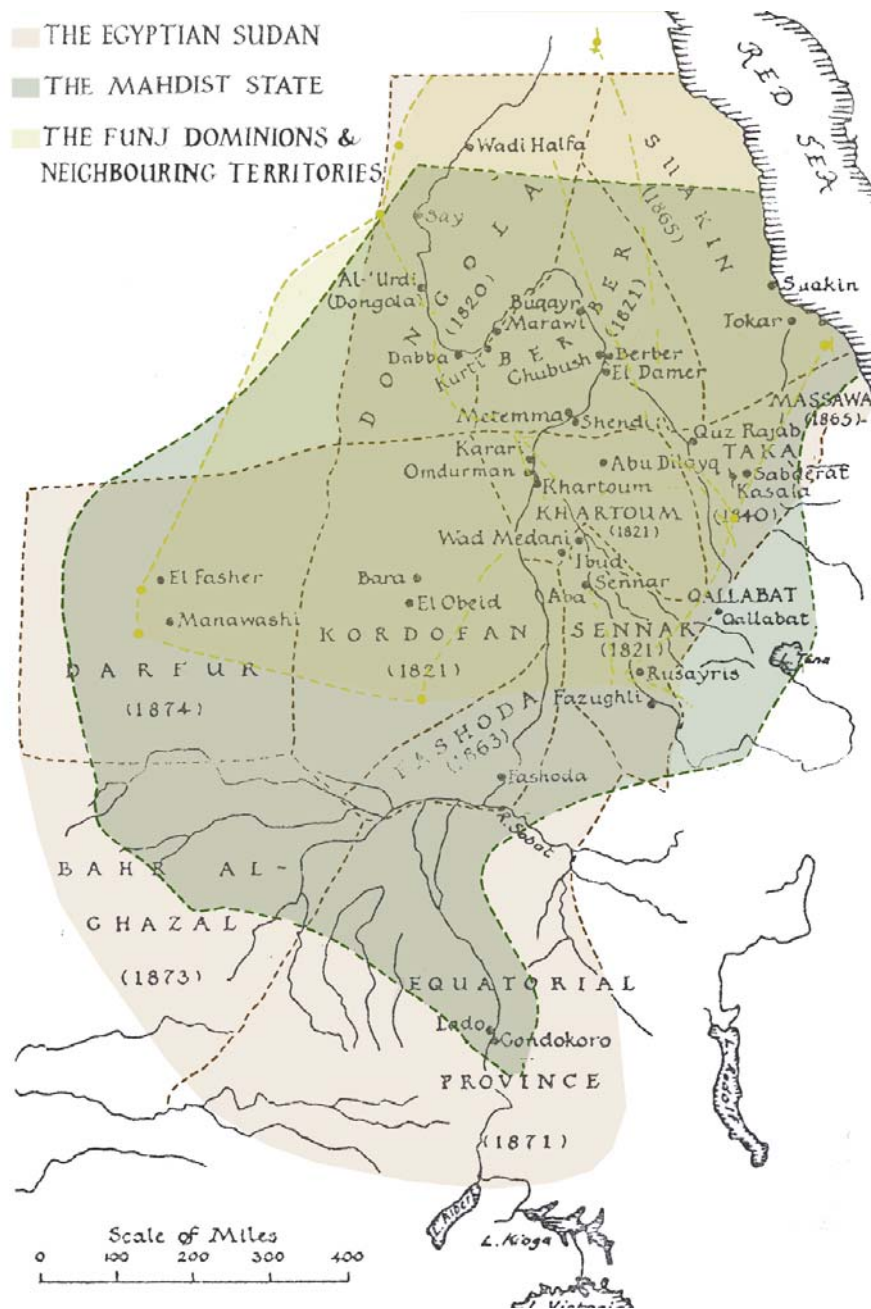NEIGHBOURING TERRITORIES

Fig. 3.4 Rough boundaries of the Sudan at different phases adapted from Holt and Daly
(1988: 239-241)

It could be asked whether the west of the country can be excluded from this study,
being predominantly Muslim, similar to the riverain regions. Both the western Sudan
and the northern riverain Sudan are historically part of the Sudanic belt, extending
from the west coast of Africa to the east. They are inevitably linked culturally, yet the
culture of the riverain regions revolves around the Nile and through contacts with
Egypt. These are aspects missing in the west and thus, two cultures are created with,
undeniably, many similarities.

The western Sudan has stronger contacts with the rest of Africa across the western border. The riverain peoples' contact with the rest of Africa ensued to the south, along the Niles. Also, Islam travelled along the north coast of Africa before it permeated into the central regions of the continent. Thus, contact with the Arabian Peninsula was not as direct as it was in the Nubian states.
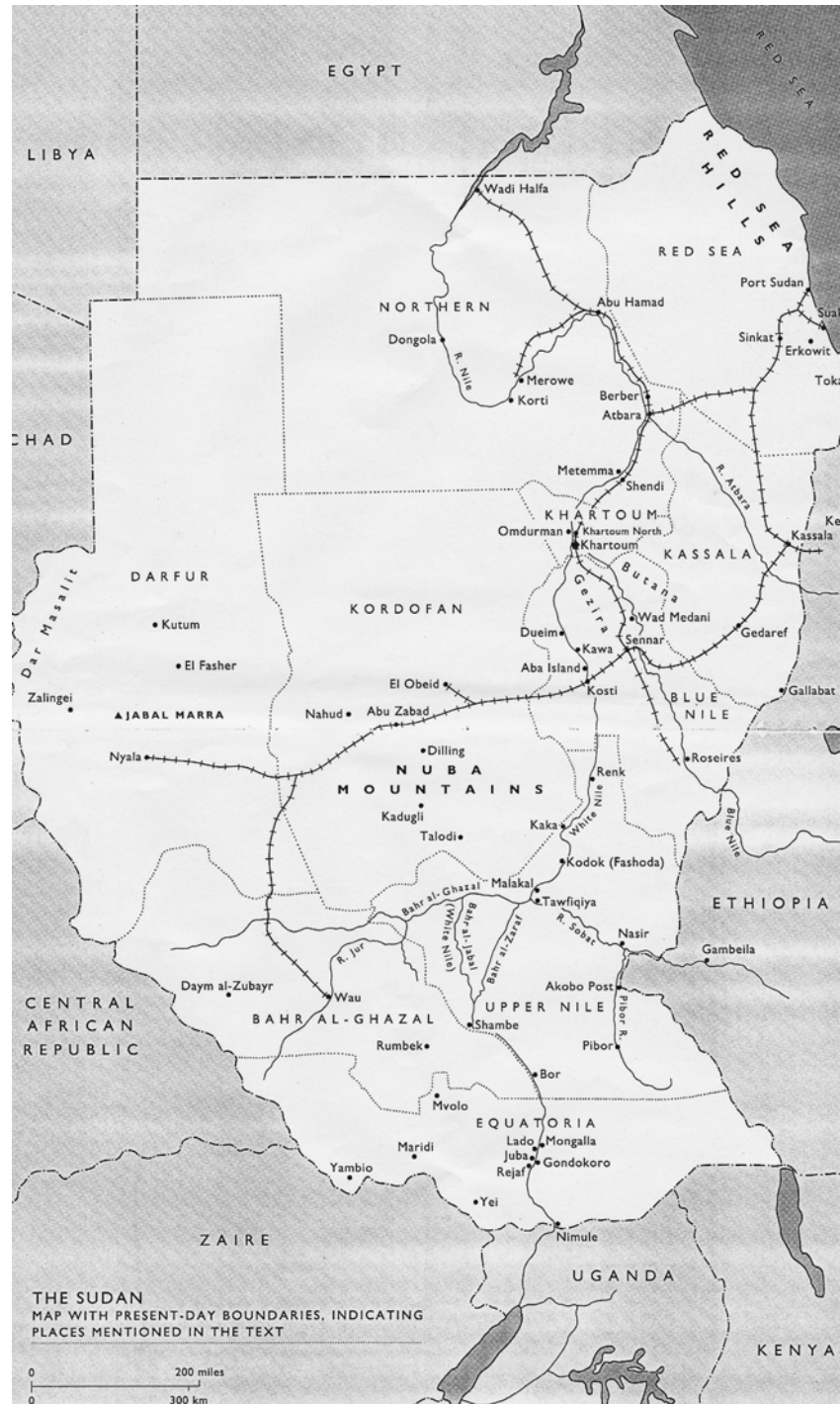

Fig. 3.5 Map from Daly and Forbes (1994)

The sub-division of Africa after the period of European colonisation disrupted the homogeneity of these areas. Resultant countries were not cohesive as cultural entities and disparities gave rise to severe conflicts (see the present-day extent of the Sudan in Fig. 3.5). "By 1900, in half a century, all Africa was mapped, explored, estimated and divided between the European powers." (Wells, 1922: 289).

In this scramble for wealth and political power, Europe disregarded the history of the continent and the existing cultural forces. For this reason, this thesis looks only at the old boundaries of the country where this cohesiveness is still evident and where there is a sense of shared aspirations of a people – a shared history, culture and religion. It could be asked whether in that sense northern and southern Nubia, separated by the northern border with Egypt, could be treated separately. The delimitation does accept the political subdivisions; even though it is acknowledged that the Egyptian and Sudanese Nubia will have many similarities. The fact that the available literature divides between the two makes it difficult to tackle both areas in this study.

The area of study has historically been called 'the land of the blacks' or *bilad al sudan* (Beshir, 1968: 1) or the southern lands; its people have been known as the Ethiopians, meaning burnt faces.

> "Ancient Arab historians gave the name Sudan to the vast lands beyond the Great African desert. But, while ancient Sudan, which meant the land of the black people, embodied a broad geographical and human spectrum, modern Sudan with its present state boundaries came to existence only at the beginning of this century." (http://www.sudan-embassy.co.uk/infobook/ history.php).

The delineation of this area could be a contentious issue when regarding the present day political upheavals in the country and the long-running tensions between north and south, and more recently between the west and the centre and among western tribes themselves. The author has no separatist motives, no political statements to make through these delineations, but derives these from the academic process followed.

The study leads to the conclusion that the northern riverain Sudan is a definable region with its own identity and its unique history and it has prevailed as a distinct

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area throughout the various historical episodes of the country. This conclusion is reinforced through the following sections.
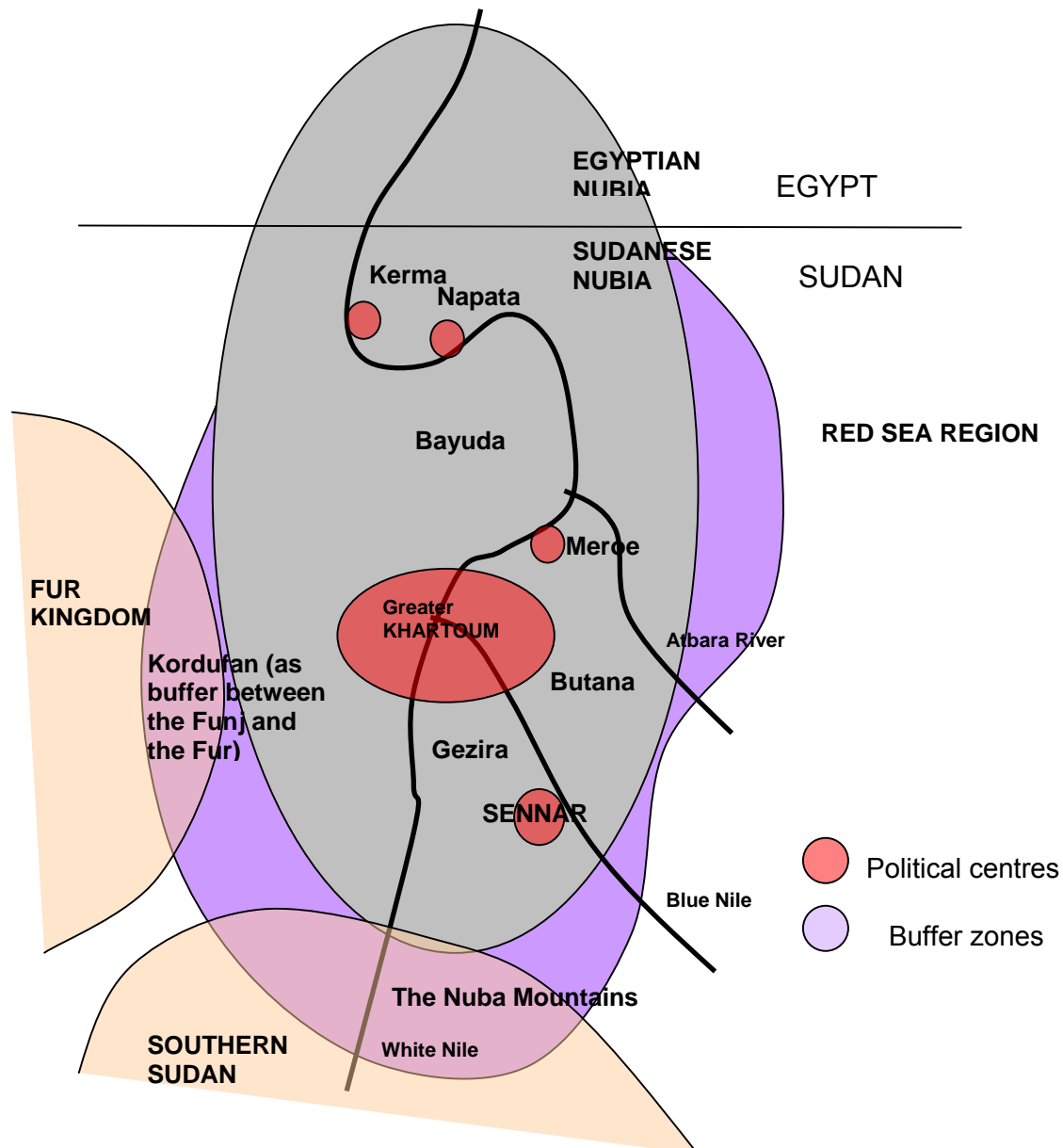

Fig. 3.6 A diagrammatic representation of the region under study (denoted by the colour grey, except for Egyptian Nubia) and its surroundings.

3.5   RECURRING THEMES IN THE LITERATURE ON THE REGION

It is appropriate to investigate recurring themes in the reviewed literature on the region under study. These will guide the process of study and inform the approach and structure of the thesis. They will also give an indication as to what clues are significant and need to be identified, where the information may be obtained and of an appropriate methodology to adopt in interpretation.

The following themes relate specifically to the northern riverain regions. Some aspects may have been characteristic of the region through many centuries, some of them more recent, yet all of them are evident today.

3.5.1   Social conscience, religion and ethics

Features of social conscience, religion and ethics, particular to the northern riverain Sudan, dominate literature on the region. It is evident that this society is guided by very strict laws of interaction in a system that is 'other-determined', in the sense that sanctions such as shame and ridicule predominate rather than a sense of guilt, as is emphasised in western societies. It is a system that presupposes a high degree of shared norms in the society.

> "Nordenstam considers Sudanese ethics to be predominantly other-determined and outward-oriented, internally consistent, a comprehensive system centering around the notions on courage, generosity, honour, dignity and self-respect... There seems to be a contradiction in these ethics between the self-determined elements, which derive from Islam, and the other-determined elements, which derive from popular ethics.... " (Kronenberg, 1987: 393).

Nordenstam (1968: 109) previously reciprocated these concepts through interviews done among students at the University of Khartoum. He states that: "The popular Sudanese ethic seems to be clearly shame-oriented." (Nordenstam, 1968: 110). Conformity is detected as a result of this system of ethics, and where the university students would consider a socially accepted notion to be incorrect they would justify that through referring back to a religious principle (Nordenstam, 1968: 116).

The impacts of this approach are far-reaching and deeply rooted in Sudanese culture therefore the resultant social rituals dominate life in the Sudan:

> "We are convinced that ethics have a more profound effect on the behaviour of Nubians than do immediate economic gains. They are closely connected with a continuous cycle of ceremonial activities, as well as with an economic system of shared ownership (and quarrelling)." (Kronenberg, 1987: 394).

The enculturation of the concepts of *muruwwa* (manliness) for example, begins very early in the life of a Sudanese. Kronenberg explains how many childrens' games in Nubia represent a technique for disgracing the loser:

> "The child learns to pay heed to the shame or honour manifested towards it by others. The highest value is placed on public opinion and on the fear of disgrace. Village gossip is an important external sanction, for when everyone knows everything about every person, one must avoid 'being talked about'." (1987: 393)

Of the Hadendawa nomads of eastern Sudan, Vagenes says that talk, or gossip, is a forceful mechanism that people fear (Vagenes, 1998: 170). This is very much evident in the region in question. Vagenes goes on to explain that of the economic capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital of the people, symbolic capital has historically been more emphasised. This is expressed by the males through strength and control and by the women through virtue and self-control, this reputation being maintained through seclusion (Vagenes, 1998: 171-172). Men's honour is seen as equivalent to the socially accepted conduct of the women of their family (Vagenes, 1998: 177).

Burckhardt (1822: 32) wrote:

> "In no part of the eastern world, in which I have travelled, have I ever found property in such perfect security as in Ibrim. The inhabitants leave the Dhourra in heaps on the field, without a watch, during the night; their cattle feed on the banks of the river without anyone to tend them; and the best parts of the household furniture are left all night under the palm-trees around the dwelling; in short the people agreed in saying, that theft was quite unknown in their territory. It ought, however, to be added, that the Nubians, in general, are free from the vice of pilfering."[1]

In a recent study carried out by SaferAfrica on safety and crime in various African cities, the conclusions on Khartoum mention religion as a deterrent for criminal activities (Mohamed and Karam, 2003: 26). One can question whether these deterrents were not rooted in more ancient social customs that preceded Islam. What is interesting though is that, despite the fact that Sudan is among the poorest countries in the world in terms of income and human development and in addition to its long-term civil war, crime is still low: "With an estimated population of more than five million, Greater Khartoum has a low crime rate in comparison with other major cities in the world." (Mohamed et al, 2003: 7). It needs to be noted though, that crimes of violence among Nubians rarely come before courts as their code of honour means that family matters should be settled within the family and outsiders must not know of them (Kronenberg, 1986: 396).

An other-determined ethical system presupposes a high degree of shared norms in a society (Nordenstam, 1968: 113). Religious values create a 'strain of inward-orientation in the informants ethics', continues Nordenstam (1968: 114). This contradiction is acknowledged, yet the other-determined system of ethics has

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[1] This feature of the Nubians is mentioned again, in the same source page 136.

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generated the most visible aspect of this society, which is discussed in the following section:

3.5.2   Elaborate social interaction systems

Cloudsey (1983) explains the concept of _hinniya_ (loosely translated as 'kindness'). It is very important for a woman to be considered as _haneena_ (kind) in the community. This means that a large amount of time is spent on exchanging visits, gifts and providing help in material goods or through actual assistance in daily chores but especially during rites of passage and religious and social rituals. Through these concepts an intricate and well-organised system is set up which is equivalent to the institutionalised social support systems of the west.

Cloudsey perceives this focus to be bound with the ethics of honour and generosity as part of the Muslim religion. But she sees all of these efforts as being directed to the extended family only. "... to reach out beyond the family to different sections of the society is not considered…" (Cloudsey, 1983: 21-22). Her claim that in Muslim society there is no tradition of allegiance beyond the extended family is highly controversial and not very accurate but this is beyond the scope of this discussion. What is evident is that social networks do focus greatly on the extended family or fareeq:

> "The family is for the Sudanese a 'reservoir' which combines economic security, political influence, social support, and psychological assistance. Especially for the non-professional women who hardly have any possibilities to make contacts outside the family, the associations with relatives and friends are of utmost importance. These associations have a complicated field of interaction of reciprocal rights and duties as a consequence. They make up the economic as well as the social security, for instance with respect to "public opinion"; not only do they protect against personal injury, but also guarantee emotional security, and in particular entertainment.
>
> On the one hand these associations are enlivened through occasional informal visits and sporadic exchange of favours; on the other hand they are dutifully expressed and fermented on special occasions, such as weddings, bikah ceremonies, circumcisions, and Islamic feasts, where it is a duty for the members of an extended family to participate." (Ismael, 1982: 181).

One of the tenets of Islam, other than care for blood relatives, is that fellow Muslims should be cared for as well as neighbours. This is very obvious in the northern riverain culture and becomes visible through the giving of _sadaqa_ (alms) to the poor on a variety of religious occasions and through lifecycle rituals in which neighbours

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are fully involved, even when they are not blood relatives. This is explained in later chapters.

Cloudsey (1983) emphasises the fact that social conscience is intricately bound up with religious beliefs. Kronenberg on the other hand believes that the rituals and ceremonies were evolved as a means to integrate and syncretize members of a disjointed community into joint action:

> "Nubians developed a practical attitude to historical events by conquering their conquerors; for the invaders stayed, abandoned their former ways of life and adopted the Nubian language and culture. The social structure of a Nubian village is a mosaic pattern of families or lineages who share the same culture or language but maintain their own identity and distinctiveness by claiming different ethnic origins. This 'genealogical compartmentalization', as we may call it, is the response of the Nubian culture to history: Nubians assimilate the politically or otherwise dominant foreigners by ascribing to them a separate status in the web of Nubian society. But isolation and disintegration is overcome by elaborate and obligatory ceremonial activities. Participation and symbolic gift-exchange on the occasion of the rites de passage of any member of the Nubian community is an ethical duty. Ceremonial and ritual activities not only integrate and syncretize members of the community into joint action but attempt to bridge the gap between human and super-human as well." (Kronenberg, 1987: 389-390).

3.5.3   Complex and intricate kinship system

According to Ferrarro (1998), the so-called 'Sudanese kinship system' is the most complex of all kinship systems as it is the most descriptive, with the largest number of terminological distinctions. The system permits the recognition of socio-economic differences (Ferraro, 1998: 184). An uncle from the mother's side is identifiable from an uncle from the father's side, through the term used. In daily life and for major decisions, such as marriage, the type of relationship between people determines many aspects of interaction. For example, marriage to the first cousin from the father's side is seen as better than a first cousin from the mother's side. Yet, the mother's side of the family are perceived as being more _haneenin_ (kind) and protective of the child. Therefore, for example, maternal uncles will protect a woman from the wrongdoings of her husband or his family. Patrilineal dominance influences contacts, and therefore people tend to focus on the male line of relatives (Bannaga, 1987: 101). Yet, historically, a matrilineal system of succession prevailed and played a major role in the political transformation of the country. The non-Arab practice of inheritance meant that wealth and power were passed on to a sister and her sons

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(Hasan, 1967: 127). This system previously enabled new-coming Arabs to gain wealth and political and social power through marriage.

3.5.4   The slave trade, racism and political power

Despite the fact that Nubians are a minority in the Sudan (Voll, 1985 and Kronenberg, 1986), they have consistently had more political power and a higher social status:

> "The antithetical figures of the brown-skinned, slender, generous and honourable Nubian and the black, strong but clumsy, greedy and wanton Negro are standard types in Nubian folktales." (Kronenberg, 1986: 391).

Arab descent has been, and still is, a source of pride and distinction (Holt and Daly, 1988: 3). The Funj rulers, for example, adopted an Arab ancestry to increase their prestige among Muslims and to enhance their moral authority over their Arab subjects (Hasan, 1967: 174). The northern elite has always determined Sudanese policy and development (Ibrahim, 1979: 194). Because of the harshness of the rest of the country, the riverain people were always stronger politically. Holt and Daly (1988: 4) explain how the nomads would have to exchange animals for vegetable foods and in bad years had to become dependant on the settlements along the Nile. Mazrui (1998: 125) also explains how the Arabic language has become an indigenised tongue with a powerful constituency of native speakers and that the language and thus the speakers of the language, are powerful forces in the society.

The slave trade has had a major role to play through the different eras of the Sudan's history. Descent is the most important means of defining status. This may be a result of the centuries that slavery has existed in the region. The Baqt Treaty specified commodities to be exchanged between the Arabs and the Nubians, slaves being one of those commodities:

> "Ye people of Nubia, ye shall dwell in safety… so long as ye abide by the terms settled between us and you… Every year ye shall pay 360 head of slaves to the Leader of the Muslims… without bodily defects, males and females, but no old men nor old women nor young children." (Drower, 1970: 74).

The advent of Arabs and the superiority given to people of Arab descent meant that racism and differentiation between people was further emphasised.

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Slaves were obtained from Dar Fur and Kordufan in the west, or from south of Sennar or Ethiopia. Slaves were a principal export from the region. Shendi was at a major crossing point of trade routes and a trading destination. In the 1800s, the eve of the *Turkiyya*:

> "Not only did slave caravans pass through Shendi, but a large number, estimated at about 5000, were annually sold in the market or the adjoining private houses." (Bjørkelo, 1989: 25).

The slaves were a commodity, exported and exchanged for trade, but they were also employed in houses, the fields and in the herding of animals by the local riverain tribes (Bjørkelo, 1989: 25). Thus, the issue of slavery is a key in the portrayal of the constructed identity of the region.

Slave trading had ceased before the conquest and the British/Egyptian condominium agreement in 1899. But there were still cases of forced capture of individuals and the existence of slave captured in the old days who worked the land and as servants. The administration did not call for the immediate freeing of all slaves – as that would have disrupted the economy significantly – but rather tried to keep the existing slaves with their 'masters' as long as they were not badly treated. They also tried to introduce a wage-labouring class to replace the slave-labouring class (Beshir, 1968: 20).

Kronenberg quotes Hayder Ibrahim who wrote in 1979 that:

> "It would not be an exaggeration to say that northern riverain Sudanese groups could be counted among the most intolerant societies as regards their relations with the 'slaves'. These groups, being marginal ethnic groups between the Arab and Negroid spheres, became preoccupied with their 'purity' and 'noble' origin." (1986: 396)

Unfortunately, the above statement applies to northern Sudanese attitudes, today, perhaps as strongly as it did in the 1970's. Adams also wrote in 1977 (p. 64) that: "Nubian society is not notably class-structured along occupational lines, but it is still to some extent caste-structured along ethnic lines."

3.5.5   Trade routes

The functions of ancient routes that cross through the country have been trade, travel, transport of mine products and the transport of pilgrims. Famous Arab travellers such as Ibn Khaldoon travelled on the Adfu-Hamaythira-Aidhab Road,

which penetrated the eastern desert from Egypt to the port of Aidhab (destroyed by the Turks in 1426 AD), on their way to Mecca. The Suakin-Berber Road is regarded as one of the oldest routes connecting the interior of the country to the Red Sea coast. The Pilgrim's Road also penetrated the Sudan from the west to Suakin, to bring pilgrims to Mecca from Mauritania, Chad, Niger, Mali, Senegal and Cameroon. It was famous during the Meroitic, Christian and Funj Kingdoms. The Forty Days Path connected the western Sudan with Egypt (http://www.sudani.co.za/Tourism/ Historical%201 and%20routes. htm).

According to Bjørkelo (1989: 3), the ecology of the region under study and the available technology have a limited range of economic adaptations: that is irrigation, agriculture and animal husbandry. This meant that people had to search for other means of livelihood, trading being one of them (Refer to Figs. 3.7 and 3.8).
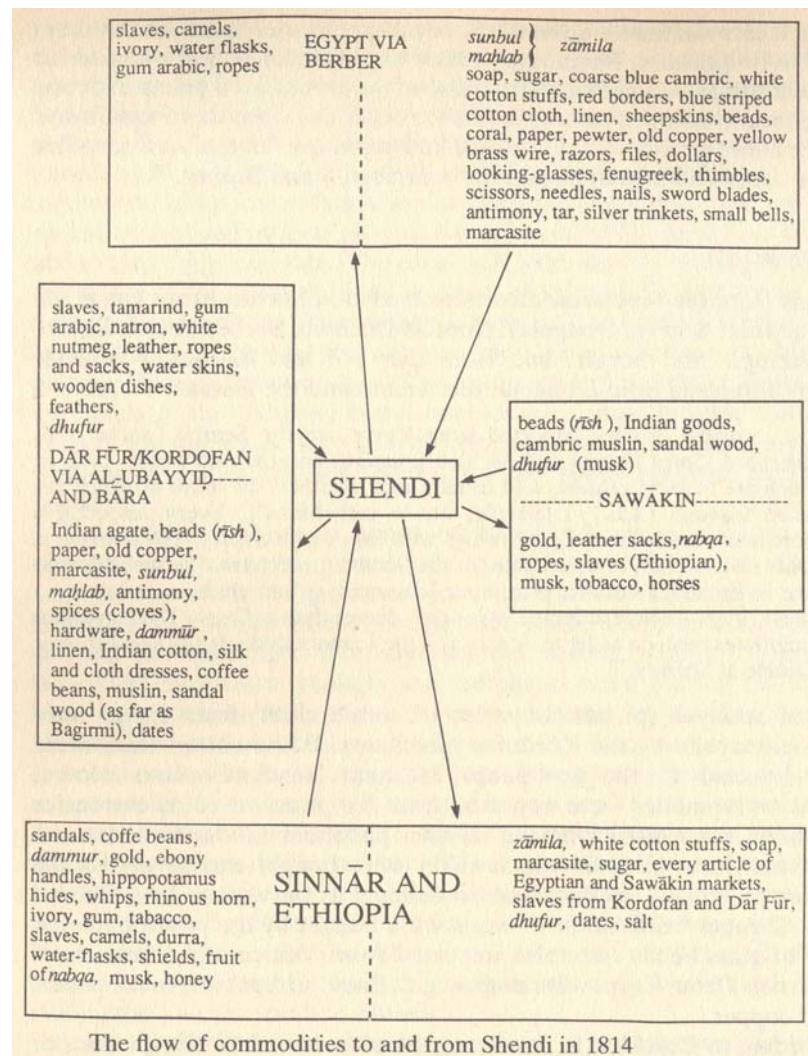

Fig. 3.7 Goods being traded to and from Shendi (Bjørkelo, 1989: 24)

There is a long tradition of immigration in the region[2] in search of increased income and work opportunities. The term *jalaba* refers to people from the northern riverain region who travel to the west and south of the country in search of trade opportunities. *Jalaba* is derived from *jalab* meaning to fish or the hook used for fishing. It also refers to 'bring' or people who have come from other regions (Gasim, 1985: 229). These *jalaba* traders played a major role in the spreading of Islam through the different regions of Sudan and in the mixing of people of different origins.

Caravan routes criss-crossed the land, with prolonged stops at places that then developed urban features through the creation of varied activities at these locations (Fig. 3.7). These became the later cities of the region. Muslim pilgrims used the same routes. Also, all of these factors in unison, created a dynamic that generated the features of the country, including places of settlement and fusion of cultures.

Fig. 3.8 Trade routes between the major towns of the northern Sudan indicated in orange.

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[2] Adams (1977: 61) explains this pattern of migration in search of better livelihoods and proceeds: "All evidence suggests that the pattern of Nubian labour migration (which was apparently established as early as the Egyptian VI Dynasty) has continued uninterrupted until modern times."

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3.5.6   The harshness of the environment, the desiccated landscape and the poor economy

"Where, O God, is the shade? Such land brings forth nothing but prophets. This drought can be cured only by the sky." (Salih, 1969: 109)

The Sudan is characterised by its barren, desert climate and its flat topography. The arid and semi-arid areas in the north constitute a large percentage of the area of the country. There are few mountain ranges, none of which are in the area of study. Being under the influence of the trade winds, the Sudan is hot in summer, with scarcely no rain in the north. The rain increases dramatically in the southern regions. The weather is warm and dry in the winter. Severe sandstorms, *haboobs*, are frequent between April and October in the north (http://www.sudan-embassy.co.uk/infobook/geography.php). These *haboobs* are one of the most challenging aspects of the climate that designers have to deal with. Two elements of the environment penetrate everything: the sun (Norberg-Shultz, 1979: 115) and the sand.

There is uncertainty as to the nature of the environment in which in which the pre historic cultures of Nubia developed; some believe that the desert conditions were prevalent in the Sahara during most of its history, while others envision longer periods when north Africa was "rolling savannah or woodland" (Adams, 1977: 102-103). But it is generally agreed in the literature that there were drastic changes in the climate in northern Africa, with alternating wet periods and dry periods throughout the last two million years (ibid).

Meyer (2003) believes that the desiccated natural environment has existed since about the 4th Century AD. The Sahara desert was formed some 5000 years ago and has only been hyper arid for the last 2000 years. This roughly coincides with the disintegration of the large unified and powerful Nubian kingdom into smaller and less influential Christian kingdoms (Meyer, 2003). In 2500BC, changing climate in North Africa led to the desiccation of the Sahara. The pastoralists moved into Nubia (private conversation and documents,Meyer, 2003). Till today the Sahara has a wide variety of vegetation types: perhaps a remnant of a time when it was more fertile.

Studies done on the Kassala region (on the Sudan-Ethiopian border) indicate that there were two dry episodes: end of the 3rd and end of the 2nd Millennium BC. After the second arid episode there was a short humid episode and then the definitive arid

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conditions. These results were checked against archaeological records of settlement patterns. The results coincide with the transition from the late Kassala period of scarce settlement around the end of the 2nd Millennium BC, to smaller settlements spread over the landscape. The re-organisation of settlements in this region coincided with the complete disappearance of crop traces in the archaeological records, and to the highest presence of domesticated fauna. Later, more complete desertification probably led to highly nomadic pastorlism in the Sudanese Kassala region, as compared to the highly organised statal system of the pre-Axumite Kingdom in the then more fertile Ethiopia (http://www.pages.unibe.ch/shighlight/ shighlight.html).

Where agriculture is possible, sedentary lifestyles predominate and these give rise to 'civilisations'. The Arabs were therefore not the only reason why the people of the region adopted nomadic traits. Temperature changes must have limited agricultural practice and encouraged people to adopt an Arab lifestyle which, coming from the Arabian Peninsula, was based on experience in dealing with harsh and arid conditions.

> "The Sudan is a hard land. Its geography leaves relatively few choices of life-style to those who win their livelihood there, and the economic and social patterns that arise from the land are tenacious and deeply rooted in antiquity." (Holt and Daly, 1988: 3).

The Nile, which moves through it, is a life-giving source yet in a subtle, non-invasive sort of way. According to Norberg-Shultz (1979: 115), there are no lush, fertile and dramatic valleys along its banks. It would be more accurate to say that these lush and fertile valleys to not extend far back into the desert areas, but are a narrow strip along the rivers. There is a historical dependence on the rivers and the amount of cultivable land it provides.

> "Excessively low Niles meant famine, and when the opposite happened, water-wheels (*sāqiyas*) and houses could be destroyed and fertile slopes and islands could be washed away or replaced by sand." (Bjørkelo, 1989: 56).

Life depended on natural forces over which people had no control. Many parts of the country appear to be hostile and uninhabitable. Away from the riverbanks, much of the landscape is undomesticated. Settlements exist as separate incidents in a sea of space, apparently disconnected except for the people most familiar with the region. The migration of Arabs to the region may also have been caused by climate change

on the Arabian Peninsula, especially the Arabs who migrated in ancient times, that is the Beja (Beshir, 1968: 4).

3.5.7   Sudanese Sufism

The spiritual concerns of Islam are expressed through various Sufi sects with mystics as their nuclei. Religious attitudes in the Sudan are probably similar to those in east and West Africa. Islam went through similar phases of development in these regions, as did Sufism. Despite its peculiarities and the gradual infiltration due to the Baqt agreement, Sudanese Islam was strongly linked to that of Africa. This is the result of a number of reasons. Islam penetrated the Sudan across the Red Sea and through Egypt directly, but another important point of penetration was via its western borders from the rest of Africa (Fig. 3.9). Thus, the religion travelled along the northern coasts of Africa and then across the desert regions of inland Africa until it reached the Sudan. One may speculate that a major reason for this was the route of travel to Mecca. These avenues of Muslim penetration have had profound influence on the nature of Islam that did finally reach the Sudan. The contact with Africa had a number of repercussions, one of them being an acceptance of older African traditions in new religious practices.
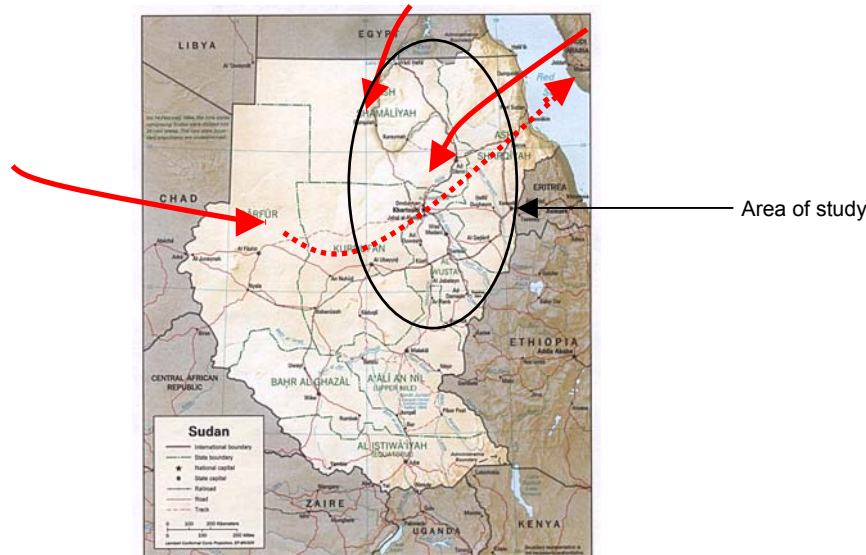

Fig. 3.9 Routes of Muslim penetration into the Sudan. The route taken by people from west and northwest Africa to the pilgrimage in Mecca is shown as a dotted line.

> "The main stream, but not its original cradle, is Islam as it reached the Sudan after a long journey in history and in different lands. Some of the first 'Ulama came from Hijaz, Egypt, North Africa, and many fu_kra migrated from west Africa. The local culture that had taken place before the Arab and Moslem penetration was conveyed by the local women as a result of intermarriage; this culture was not a selective one but assimilated many old Egyptian and Coptic traits." (Ibrahim, 1979: 125-126).

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Ibrahim (1979: 160) elaborates on the penetration of Sufism:

> "The Sufi orders penetrated into the Sudan, synchronizing with the decadence of intellectual Sufism in the fifteenth century. For this reason the Sufism which entered the country was more practical, ritual and rather superficial than intellectual and philosophical, or in other, Sufi, words an "external" Sufism and not "internal" Sufism; the former concentrates on rites while the latter concentrates on meditation."

He explains the impact of the above on a village in northern riverain Sudan:

> "One can conclude that the orthodox Islam of the seventh century, the philosophical Islam during the contact with Persia, Greek or Indian ideas reflected in many Islamic schools after the expansion of the Islam, and the Islam of the fundamentalists salafiain [traditionalists] of the nineteenth century had no effect on the villagers' culture. The popular Islam in the village is a harmonious blending of the old cultures, and many non-Islamic traits remain one with the new religion, which has a great flexibility to accommodate local conditions. Islam tried from the beginning to integrate the local beliefs. In the Arabian Desert Islam absorbed many old Semitic superstitions and practices, e.g. many rites of the present pilgrimage, but in many cases did not replace the rites and customs of the indigenous population. In the Sudan they accepted the Islam without totally uprooting their old Nubian, Coptic or non-Islamic beliefs but they tried to give them an Islamic meaning… the carriers of Islam were mainly traders and nomads who were themselves on the periphery of the orthodox Islam, and their contact and relation with the Sudanese culture was not one of dominancy, but of interaction and dynamic incorporation of the non-Islamic components in the new religion." (1979: 134).

Due to a complex amalgamation of influences and reasons, including the difficult natural and climatic conditions, the role of the *shaykh* (a religious leader) came to dominate in Sudanese society. Many of the *shaykhs* originated from the *Maghrib*, North African region. Peoples' hopes were expressed through what the *shaykh* can do for them, and so a cult of saints evolved into one of the most characteristic aspects of Sudanese society till the present day. This aspect dominates social life and still plays a major role in present-day political affiliations.

3.5.8   The *shaykh's* cult

Sudan's culture is dominated by Sufi cults as is evident from the numerous shaykh's qubbas (domes indicating places of burial) scattered through the country. "The center for this cult is the tomb or burial place of a holy man." (Barclay, 1964: 182). The reader is referred to Chapter 4 and the Glossary for further explanations and examples.

> "A shaikh may not show his miracle karama during his life-time, or his holiness may be controversial after his death; in such cases he may give evidence ya-bayin in one way or another after his death. If this happens the people are obliged to build a shrine or his tomb may be encircled with stones, and the place is called bayan lit.

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manifestation… the place will be visited by many people and many flags and pieces of cloth are to be seen on the bay<u>a</u>n." (Ibrahim, 1979: 152).

Before the transition to the Middle Eastern and North African pattern of organised Sufi brotherhoods, around 1780, Sufi practice was characterised by the pattern of individualistic *fuqara* (holy men) typical of the Sudanic belt. This refers to the east-west strip spanning from the Red Sea to the West African Atlantic Coast. These decentralised, ancient <u>t</u>*ariqas* (Sufi orders) were autonomous and each had their own *silsila* (chain of spiritual descent) as compared to the centralised, reformist brotherhoods of the early 19th century (Karar, 1992). Loyalty to the *shaykh* and to the <u>t</u>*ariqa* still dominates Sudanese daily life.

> "Spiritual authority has, throughout the history of the Sudan, been the most decisive factor in stabilising and consolidating of political and temporal authority. The Sudanese attitude towards religion, and especially mysticism and Sufism, has undergone no actual change in its essence but only in its methods, rites and intensity, as the people are now more occupied with worldly interests." (Ibrahim, 1979: 152).

3.6 IDENTITY OF A PEOPLE: WHO THEN ARE THE NORTHERN SUDANESE?

> *"What race are you?" she asked me. "Are you African or Asian?"*
> *"I'm like Othello – Arab-African," I said to her.*
> *"Yes," she said, looking into my face. "Your nose is like the noses of Arabs in pictures, but your hair isn't soft and jet black like that of the Arabs."*
> (Salih, 1969: 38)

The above sections have identified aspects of the region that come up incessantly in the available literature. This has helped in the construction of the region's identity as a historical synthesis of a variety of people and forces. The core culture is that of the Nubians. Who they are, where they came from and how long they have been there can only be speculated. One theory says that they were desert dwellers (hunter gatherers), who moved to the Nile after a period of extreme desiccation and developed agriculture very early in history (Hassan, 1987: 25). The Nubians are today divided by a political boundary between Egypt and the Sudan. The Aswan dam later reinforced this separation. The dilemma for the academic researcher is that this division has also divided the literature describing the Sudanese and Egyptian Nubia (Kronenberg, 1987: 390). These one people have somehow come to have a favoured position in the Sudan and a disadvantaged one in Egypt (Kronenberg, 1987: 391).

Many tribes claim Arab descent, for the reasons explained above. These are Barabra and Ja'ali groups, the Fazara camel nomads of north and south Kordufan and the

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nomadic or semi-nomadic Jahayna groups (Holt and Daly, 1988: 3 and 6). Yet, it is the 'Abdallab groups who came to be viewed as the supreme representatives of the Arabs as:

> "The Rufa'a, found on the Blue Nile, preserve some memory of a distinct origin. Their ancestors lived in geographical proximity to the Juhayna, both in the Hijaz and in Upper Egypt... In the late fifteenth century an Arab population, probably of varied origins, became sedentarized at the junction of the Blue and White Niles under a chief from the Rufa'a named 'Abdallah Jamma'. He and his successors, the 'Abdallab, became prosperous from the tolls levied on the desert Arabs during their annual nomadic cycle, and were recognized by the Funj rulers of Sennar (1504-1821) as paramount chiefs of the Arabs." (Holt et al, 1988: 6).

Between the Arab tribes there were non-Arab enclaves that played a major role in creating the identity of the people through interaction. The Fur Kingdom, in the west, established in the 16th century was perhaps the most important contact. The Nuba Mountains became a refuge to a pagan tribe as the Arabs came to dominate the plains of Kordufan (Holt et al, 1988: 8), but their cultural influence was minimal. The Ta'aysha of the west have enormous influence on the identity of the region being researched due to mass migration to Omdurman during the reign of Khalifa 'Abdullahi (1885-1898), successor of the Mahdi. It is important to acknowledge the influences on the region and the limitations of a description of the social and political set-up of the region as its identity in constantly under transformation. Aspects described merely represent the most abiding characteristics and the most visible.

The Funj were an obscure people who came from the south (Holt et al, 1988: 6). The genesis of the kingdom is shrouded in mystery. Some speculate that they were of Shilluk origins.

> "The Shilluk now occupy a comparatively small area on the western bank of the White Nile, but formerly their range was much more extensive. As late as the mid-nineteenth century their northern limit was the island of Aba, thirty years later to be the cradle of the Mahdia. Until the early years of the Turko-Egyptian regime, they raided the Arab settlements down the White Nile, and one such raid is said to have led to the foundation of the Funj kingdom by a band of Shilluk warriors." (Holt et al, 1988: 3).

The same authors further elaborate:

> "The origins of the Funj have been a tantalizing problem for modern students of Sudanese history, and various interpretations have been placed on the scanty data available, not always with due criticism of the sources or caution in the deductions made. The Funj have been regarded as immigrants to the Blue Nile from the Shilluk of the White Nile (as stated by Bruce), from Bornu, or from Ethiopia. More recently the White Nile hypothesis has been revived, but the immigrants are now presented as the

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> bearers of ancient Nubian culture to their new homeland. A recent contribution by an anthropologist suggests that the enquiry itself has been wrongly formulated, and that the origin of the Funj should not be sought in tribal migrations but in the status and function of the group so designated. Essentially, however, the problem remains unsolved. Without fresh data (possibly from archaeology), and without a more rigorous investigation of the linguistic and historical data which have been adduced in support of the various hypothesis, further progress appears unlikely." (Holt et al, 1988: 28)

What is evident is that the kingdom is a source of pride to present-day Sudanese. These sentiments are richly expressed in the long, intensively descriptive poem by Mohammed 'Abd al Hay: *al 'aodah ila Sennar*, The Return to Sennar (1999). Many of the identifying features of the country were developed during the Funj era. These include the Sufi culture and its rituals, the boundaries of the country, the external influence trade and contact and attitudes to material culture.

Today the issue of identity is a contentious political one. It could be one of the causes of the social and political upheavals in the country. Religion and language were important power tools throughout the history of the country. Deep conflicts arise in terms of allegiances: to the Arab nations or to the African continent. This is evident in terms of the culture. Ahmed Etayib's *Sudanawiyya* theory emphasises that the Sudanese are neither Arab nor African but are a distinctive people in their own right (personal conversations, 1992). The issue of identity not only creates a national crisis but a personal one as well. Ibrahim (1979: 203) explains the concept of the *effendiyya* (a term used to denote educated men) and how Sudanese intellectuals are drawn between their education (mostly based on western concepts) and their local culture. Northern Sudanese intellectuals will still view non-Arabicized groups and those perceived to be descendants of slaves with a degree of contempt. These sentiments are rarely expressed explicitly but play a key role in the structuring of society.

Identity, and links with Arab lines of descent, has always implied power and political affluence. It is a main reason for the social and political upheavals in the country. Language is also one powerful tool in this struggle. The supremacy of Arabic in Egypt was not challenged as strongly as other places by the colonialists, thus Egypt was the source of the spread of the language in the Nile valley:

> "Northern Sudan was increasingly Arabized partly as a result of the impact of Egypt. Many Sudanese resented Egypt's political influence. Paradoxically, most of them

> nevertheless embraced Egypt's cultural, linguistic and religious leadership." (Mazrui, 1998: 16).

In the Sudan, English is neither the medium of the state nor society (Mazrui, 1998: 78). Egypt, Sudan and Iraq's refusal to join the commonwealth was partially a linguistic decision (Mazrui, 1998: 207). Mazrui identifies Arabic as a hegemonic language in the Sudan:

> ".... a dominant indigenous or indigenized tongue with a large and powerful constituency of native speakers... Both the speakers of the language and the language itself are powerful forces in the society at large." (1998: 125).

This is compared to a preponderant language, which is triumphant in itself, but its native speakers not necessarily so, or compared to imperial languages which came with a dominant external power and had not developed a large enough number of native speakers (Mazrui, 1998: 125). In this particular context, the influence of language and the religion are indivisible. Both became important power tools throughout the history of the country. And they both gave northern riverain people their 'new' identity: Arabic speaking Muslims of mixed descent.

Within that definition exist many others invisible to outsiders, yet intensely influencing power structures: that is the perceived 'purity' in terms of Arab descent. This exists in parallel to the professed superiority of the Nubians, some of them who still retain their Nubian languages as a mother tongue and have protected their ethnicity by limited intermarriage with Arab groups, such as the Halfawiyyin. This leads one to the conclusion that it is contact, of either the Arabs or the Nubians, with people from further inland in Africa, that can generate racist attitudes and not necessarily towards people of Nubian-Arab descent. But these perceptions and attitudes do not change the identity of the people as a homogeneous group: Arabic speaking Muslims of mixed descent, with alleged affiliation to various tribes from the Arabian Peninsula, based on which they define their status in northern Sudanese society. These people are a product of intermarriage between Nubians, Arabs and Africans from further south and west of the northern Sudanese Nile valley.

3.7   SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

An eco-systemic construct of the concrete and abstract aspects of the region is achieved through a reading of the physical and cultural history of the region to determine its boundaries, its natural characteristics and its people. It becomes

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evident that the delineated area has a shared identity and can therefore be viewed as a separate entity from the rest of the country.

Recurring themes in the literature on the region point to complex origins of the people, rooted in Nubian/African and Arab descent. Social and political implications of the alleged lines of descent are articulated. The identity of the northern riverain people is established as a political and a religious concept. The northern Sudanese riverain people are thus introduced as Arabic speaking Muslims of mixed descent, with alleged affiliation to various tribes from the Arabian Peninsula, based on which they define their status in northern Sudanese society. Though they appear as a homogenized group to outsiders, it is acknowledged that status-granting factors are intricate and highly adhered to, yet subtle in the way of expression.

Through the above, the sub-problem has been addressed. The set hypothesis has been demonstrated in that recurring themes in the literature of/on the region have exposed the essential and incidental attributes of the delineated culture. This is acknowledged as a useful tool of interpretation. The presence of physical artefacts and the form of spatial interventions will be viewed in the light of this eco-systemic construct of the study context.