CHAPTER TWO

The Eastern Bilad al-Sudan from the early Sixteenth to the early Nineteenth Century

The period of Sudanese history from the early sixteenth to the early nineteenth century is for the most part obscure and lacking in firm historical data. Primary sources are few and have hardly been exploited. The oldest literary source extant is a biographical dictionary (a genre characteristic of Islamic historical writing) containing nearly three hundred notices of Muslim holy men. Muhammad wad Dayfallah, the compiler of this work, the *Tabaqat*, came from a family of religious scholars living at Halfayat al-Muluk. He is said to have been born in 1726–27, and he died in 1809–10. The *Tabaqat* contains biographies going down to 1802–03. It is clear from internal evidence that these are not all the work of one hand, since they vary considerably in style, nature and language, some of them amounting to only a few lines, others to several pages, subdivided into chapters. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the *Tabaqat* includes older materials.

The second literary source available to us is conventionally called the Funj Chronicle, and it exists in a number of recensions. The original chronicler was a certain Shaykh Ahmad ibn al-Hajj Abu ‘Ali, better known as Katib al-Shuna, ‘the clerk of the government grain-store’ – an office he held after the Turco-Egyptian conquest. His home was in the eastern Gezira, near the Blue Nile, but all we know of him comes from a few references in his chronicle, the last of which dates from 1838. Internal evidence indicates that the original draft was made before the fall of the Funj sultanate in 1821, but the oldest extant recension goes down to 1838. Later continuations brought the chronicle down to 1871–72, with a good deal of editing and supplementing of the earlier material. The Katib’s original version falls very clearly into two parts. The first, much shorter, portion deals with the origin of the Funj, and the rulers from the early sixteenth century to 1724. From that date, the accession of Badi iv Abu Shulukh, the information becomes increasingly copious, as the author draws on his own recollections and those of the generation of his father (d. 1802). The Funj Chronicle is thus a detailed source for events of the last century of the Funj kingdom, although the author’s field of vision is practically limited to the Gezira, and he has little to say about the important tribal polities of the main Nile.
A source of a different kind is provided by Sudanese genealogies. A number of these were collected by the later Sir Harold MacMichael, and published in translation in his *History of the Arabs in the Sudan*. These genealogies were compiled in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, and incorporate earlier materials. The intention of their compilers was not historical accuracy but primarily to make a statement about contemporary political and social relationships. These genealogists lay stress upon the descent of the Funj from the Umayyads, that of the Ja’aliyyin tribe from the ‘Abbasids, and of more than one holy family from the Prophet. At best the genealogies offer firm historical data for only a few generations before the time of writing. Before that, as with Funj traditions, it is a matter of interpretation.

A further problem is the deficiency of documentary sources. Here some advance has been made in recent years, with the discovery and (to a small extent) the publication of land-charters and related documents. Extant charters, so far as they are known, are of comparatively late date, and none earlier than the eighteenth century; most date from or after the reign of the Funj ruler Badi iv (1724–62). These charters throw light on the social history of the Sudan in the period, systems of land-tenure, the position of religious teachers (who were the principal beneficiaries) and the great officers of state. Like the *Tabaqat* and the Funj Chronicle, they indicate an islamization of indigenous usages and institutions.

The fourth main source of information on the Sudan in these three centuries is travellers’ accounts. These are fairly few in number, and were for the most part written by men passing through the region to get to Ethiopia or to Egypt. The earliest is of the Jewish adventurer, David Reuben, who claimed to have spent time in the entourage of ‘Amara Dunqas, the first Funj ruler. The seventeenth-century Turkish writer, Evliya Chelebi, purported to describe a visit to Sennar in 1671–72, but his veracity has been impugned. Reliable information begins in the eighteenth century, and becomes increasingly detailed and valuable as time goes on. Of outstanding importance is the account given by James Bruce of his return from Ethiopia to Egypt by way of Sennar and the main Nile in 1772. A detailed picture of society and conditions in Nubia as far south as Shendi was given by the Swiss traveller, John Lewis Burckhardt, who made two journeys in 1813 and 1814.

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 caution. The Funj have been regarded as Shilluk immigrants to the Blue Nile, from Bornu, or from Ethiopia. The White Nile hypothesis has recently been revived, with the immigrants now presented as bearers of ancient Nubian culture. 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.

The establishment of the Funj kingdom, arabicized and islamized as *al-Saltana al-Zarqa* (the Black Sultanate), is ascribed to a certain ‘Amara Dunqas,
and is dated with curious precision to the *Hijri* year 910, i.e. 1504–05. If any reliance is placed on Reuben’s account, ‘Amara’s court was constantly on the move throughout his domains, and the ‘king’s city’ was Lam’ul, an unidentified site eight days’ journey beyond Sennar. The legend of the founding of Sennar given in the Funj Chronicle suggests that ‘Amara and his people were cattle-nomads, who, in the early sixteenth century, were moving northwards down the Blue Nile. The permanent settlement of the dynasty at Sennar was perhaps not for another century, since, according to the Funj Chronicle, Sultan Irbat or Rubat (1616–45) founded the mosque there. His son, Badi ii Abu Diqin (1645–80), completed it and built a five-storied palace.

While the Funj were establishing their power on the upper Blue Nile, its lower course and the territories of the southern reaches of the main Nile, i.e. substantially the kingdom of ‘Alwa, had been overrun by Arab immigrants. Traditionally, the town of Arbaji on the Blue Nile was founded thirty years before Sennar by an Arab named Hijazi ibn Ma’in, which suggests Arab penetration by the late fifteenth century. A greater figure was ‘Abdallah Jamma’, a leader of the Arabs (*Jamma* means ‘Gatherer’), who is presented in tradition as a champion of Islam. To him is ascribed the capture of Soba, which sank into unimportance: according to Reuben, in the time of ‘Amara Dunqas it was in ruins. ‘Abdallah’s status as Muslim hero is confirmed by traditions representing him marrying the daughter of a Hijazi holy man, and as the eponymous ancestor of the ruling clan, the ‘Abdallab.

The situation these traditions seem to depict is of two immigrant groups, both perhaps nomadic, moving into the former kingdom of ‘Alwa, Muslim Arabs from the north, pagan Funj from the south. Katib al-Shuna makes brief reference to co-operation of ‘Amara and ‘Abdallah to fight the indigenous people, but a tradition transmitted by Bruce speaks of the defeat of the Arab leader near Arbaji in 1504 by a pagan, black nation, subsequently known as the Funj. The chief of the Arabs ‘thus became as it were their lieutenant’. This tradition specifies 1504 as the year in which military victory gave the Funj hegemony over the Arabs; the allusion to Arbaji indicates its significance as an Arab frontier-settlement. But Funj dominance did not remain unshaken. ‘Abdallah Jamma’, whose capital was at Qarri on the main Nile, died in the reign of ‘Amara ii Abu Sikaykin (1557–69), and the Funj king thereupon appointed ‘Abdallah’s son, ‘Ajib al-Kafuta, to succeed him. Early in the seventeenth century ‘Ajib revolted and drove out King ‘Abd al-Qadir ii, who fled to Ethiopia. His brother, ‘Adlan i, regained the throne, and defeated ‘Ajib at the battle of Karkoj in 1611–12. ‘Ajib himself died in the battle, and his sons fled to Dongola. The mediation of a Muslim holy man, Shaykh Idris wad (i.e. son of) al-Arbab, obtained an amnesty for them. They returned to Qarri, where one of them was duly appointed shaykh.

In other respects the early Funj period was a time of territorial expansion and consolidation. Bruce recorded the conquest of Jabal Moya and Jabal Saqadi, isolated hills in the central Gezira, by ‘Abd al-Qadir i, a son of ‘Amara.
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Dunqas, who ruled in the mid-sixteenth century. ‘Abd al-Qadir II had apparently accepted Ethiopian suzerainty before ‘Ajib al-Kafuta drove him into exile. His successors rejected Ethiopian claims, and relations deteriorated into inconclusive frontier warfare in 1618–19. The reign of Badi II saw a significant extension of Funj power westwards. A defeat was inflicted on the Shilluk, who at this time dominated much of the lower White Nile, and a bridgehead was established at Alays, now called al-Kawwa. Badi then made a difficult crossing of the plain of Kordofan, and besieged the little Muslim hill-state of Taqali, imposing tribute on its ruler.

Far to the north, Funj territory marched with Egypt, which became an Ottoman province in 1517. For some decades, however, much of Upper Egypt was beyond the effective control of Cairo, while Lower Nubia was similarly loosely dependent on the Funj sultan; at first there was no occasion for a clash between the Ottomans and the Funj. Extension of Ottoman rule into Nubia occurred when Özdemir (Azdamur) Pasha, a relative of the former Mamluk sultan, Qansawh al-Ghawri (1501–16), was authorized to undertake an expedition against Ethiopia. On his way from Upper Egypt to Suakin, he intervened in a tribal struggle in Lower Nubia, and captured Ibrim. Garrisons of Bosniak troops were installed there and at Aswan and Say, while administration of the region (primarily collection of revenue) was committed to an official entitled kashif. These remote representatives of Ottoman authority developed, during the next three centuries, into an hereditary caste intermarrying with local people. From Nubia, Özdemir proceeded to the Red Sea coast. Suakin passed into his hands; Massawa was taken in 1557, and became his administrative centre; Zayla was conquered from the Portuguese. Özdemir died in 1559–60, during the course of an inland campaign, having thus established the Ottoman province of Habesh, i.e. Abyssinia.

Like Lower Nubia, Habesh in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries became a weak and remote outpost. The Portuguese threat passed away, and the Red Sea became, in the seventeenth century, a quiet backwater of Muslim commerce. When Bruce visited Massawa in 1769, it no longer had an Ottoman governor but was ruled by a tribal chief with the title of na‘ib (Arabic: ‘deputy’). The Ottoman garrison had intermarried with local people and their descendants formed an hereditary military caste. The na‘ibs were nominally subordinate to the Ottoman governor of Jedda, but in practice were dependent on the rulers of Ethiopia, with whom they shared the customs revenue, and had ceased to pay tribute to the sultans. In 1814 Burckhardt found a similar state of affairs in Suakin, which was governed by an amir chosen from the patrician families of the Hadariiba, a tribe of mixed Arab-Beja origin. Descendants of the Ottoman garrison-troops, who claimed mostly Kurdish ancestry, were another element in the population. Ottoman authority was limited to the amir’s recognition by the governor of Jedda, and to a customs-officer, who had the title of agha.

The Funj king was thus the overlord of extensive territories, from the Third Cataract to the foothills of Ethiopia, and from the eastern desert to
Kordofan. It was not a centralized or highly administered state, but rather a species of high-kingship, in which much power was held by subordinate rulers. Chief of these was the ‘Abdallabi shaykh of Qarri, who bore the title *manjil* or *manjilah*, and was viceroy over the north. Within this region were tribal territories along the main Nile, notably of the Ja’aliyyin and the Shayqiyya, which defeated the forces of Badi II, and broke away from Funj suzerainty. Old Dongola was still a town of importance, and a colony of Funj in the vicinity strengthened the king’s control in the north. In the southern territories, the heartland of the Funj kingdom, provincial governors were appointed by the king, but there was a tendency for the office to become hereditary. Four of the chief governorates were the march-provinces of the Taka (the modern Kasala); Atbara, on the upper waters of that river; Khashm al-Bahr, controlling the riverain areas upstream of Sennar; and Alays, guarding the crossing of the White Nile into Kordofan.

The conversion of the Funj rulers to Islam seems to have taken place very early. Reubeni’s account, for what it is worth, depicts ‘Amara Dunqas as at least a nominal Muslim, showing great respect to self-styled descendants of the Prophet. His son and successor bore the Muslim name ‘Abd al-Qadir. ‘Abdallabi tradition describes the revolt of ‘Ajib al-Kafuta against ‘Abd al-Qadir II as a holy war, which was followed by the building of mosques far up the Blue Nile and in the Ethiopian marches. ‘Ajib is also represented as making the Pilgrimage to Mecca. Bruce, in a significant remark about the Funj invaders, says that ‘They were soon after converted to Mahometism, for the sake of trading with Cairo.’

Islamization of the peoples of the sultanate was largely the work of individual holy men who settled, taught the Qur’an and endeavoured to bring social usages into conformity with the Sharia. Some such teachers were already active before the coming of the Funj: Ghulamallah b. ‘Ayid, whose father came from the Yemen, lived in the Dongola region, probably in the early fifteenth century; Hamad Abu Dunana brought the Sufi order (*tariqa*) of the Shadhiliyya to the Berber district in 1445. The marriages (whether real or alleged) of Hamad’s daughters are interesting. One was the mother of the holy man Idris wad al-Arbab, while another is said to have been the wife of ‘Abdallah Jamma’ and the mother of ‘Ajib al-Kafuta. There are some indications that ‘Abdallah himself was primarily a holy man, although of a more militant character than was usual in the Nilotic Sudan.

The *Tabaqat* of Wad Dayfallah ignores Muslim pioneers before the Funj sultanate, and its geographical range centres upon the main Nile. But it offers
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a glimpse of the islamization of the borderland between Funj and ‘Abdallab in the northern Gezira when, after speaking of the foundation of Sennar and Arbaji, Wad Dayfallah states:

And in that territory, no school of religious learning or of the Qur’an was known. It is said that a man would divorce his wife, and another marry her on the same day without ‘idda, until Shaykh Mahmud al-Araki came from Egypt, taught people about the ‘idda, and dwelt on the White Nile. He built a castle called the castle of Mahmud. 12

Thus the Muslim missionary is shown as primarily a teacher of Islamic law, the Shari’a, and introducing Muslim usages regarding divorce and remarriage. (It is significant that the Sudanese word for a religious teacher or holy man is faki, from the Classical Arabic faqih, ‘a jurist’. And Mahmud had a fortified dwelling, on the very frontier of Islam, ‘between the Hassaniyya and Alays’, 13 i.e. between the Arab tribal land in the northern Gezira and the future Funj bridgehead. The precariousness of Islamic institutions is illustrated by the remark that between Khartoum and Alays were seventeen schools, all destroyed by the Shilluk and Umm Lahm, the year of famine and smallpox in 1684.

Wad Dayfallah represents the second half of the sixteenth century, the time of the joint rule of ‘Amara II and ‘Ajib, as a period of active islamization. Holy men coming from Egypt, Baghdad and the Maghrib taught the Shari’a and religious sciences, and initiated followers into the Sufi orders. Particularly important was the Qadiriyya order, introduced into the Gezira by a visitor from Baghdad, Taj al-Din al-Bahari, in the second half of the sixteenth century. Natives early played a part in these activities. Mahmud al-‘Araki studied in Egypt before returning to his homeland on the White Nile. The territory of the Shayqiyya was an important centre of Islamic teaching in the reign of ‘Ajib. Four brothers, the Sons of Jabir, three of whom had studied in Cairo, maintained a school in which they taught the Shari’a, and the succession of teachers continued in descendants of their sister. 14 Establishment of a holy family consisting of the kinsfolk of a religious teacher or Sufi guide was characteristic of Sudanese Islam in this period. 15

The fakis had a distinctive and important role. Some, especially local heads of Sufi orders, possessed considerable political influence. Badi II Abu Diqin granted Bishara al-Gharbawi, a holy man in the Shayqiyya territory, exemption from all taxes and dues; these privileges were confirmed in the following century by Badi IV Abu Shulukh to his successors. Other fakis were endowed with grants of land and, perhaps in connection with these, were invested with Funj symbols of authority, the stool and turban, and even in one case with the tajiyia umm qarnayn, the horned cap which was the distinctive sign of secular authority. The holder of this exceptional privilege, Shaykh Hasan b. Hassuna (d. 1664–65), the grandson of a Tunisian immigrant, possessed great herds, traded in horses and dominated the country around the village which still bears his name, north-west of Khartoum, like a feudal lord, having
a private army of slaves, ‘each one of whom bore a sword with scabbard-tip and plate and pin of silver’. 16

In the eighteenth century, when Funj-‘Abdallab control over the main Nile was weakening, the Majadhhib, a family of hereditary fakis, established a tribal theocracy among the Ja’aliyyin, south of the Atbara confluence. The founder of the state was Hamad b. Muhammad al-Majdhub (1693–1776) who, after studying under Sudanese teachers, made the Pilgrimage and was initiated into the Shadhiliyya order. He acquired enormous prestige among the Ja’aliyyin as a teacher and ascetic, and became the effective ruler of a district centring upon his residence at El Damer.

Burckhardt, who visited El Damer in 1814, described the Majdhubi theocracy in its last phase. Its ruler, al-faki al-kabir ‘the great teacher’, was Muhammad al-Majdhub (1796–1831), a grandson of the founder. Burckhardt comments on the neatness, regularity and good condition of El Damer, which had several schools drawing pupils from a wide area in the Sudan; the teachers had many books on theology and law, brought from Cairo. Many of the fakis had studied at Cairo, in al-Azhar, or at Mecca. The religious prestige of the Majadhib was widely acknowledged and served as a passport to travellers on the route to Suakin.

Relations between the fakis and rulers were not always harmonious. Holy men frequently acted as mediators or protested oppression. An outstanding example of opposition is provided by Hamad al-Nahlan, called Wad al-Turabi, an ascetic who, while on Pilgrimage at Mecca, declared himself to be the mahdi. On his return, he protected the nomad Arabs and the villagers of the eastern Gezira during a great tax-gathering expedition commanded by the wazir of Sultan Badi iii al-Ahmar about the end of the seventeenth century. The episode, demonstrating the miraculous power of Wad al-Turabi, is described at length in the Tabaqat.17 Cult officials of the Funj period are comparatively insignificant.

The reign of Badi iii (1692–1716) was troubled in other respects. He was confronted by a revolt of his minister, Irdab, who appears to have commanded the Funj warriors, and who was supported by the ‘Abdallabi chief. The rebels appointed a new sultan and marched against Badi. Although their forces were much larger, he defeated them and killed Irdab. Another revolt of the Funj took place under his son and successor, Unsa iii, who was deposed in 1720, and sent away. His successor, Nol, was connected on the female side with the Unsab, the previous succession of sultans. His reign, until 1724, was short and peaceful, but under the son who succeeded him, Badi iv Abu Shulukh, power was finally to pass from the hands of the Funj sultans.

In the meantime, a new state had arisen in the west. The Keira sultanate in Darfur began as a tribal kingdom in the mountainous region of Jabal Marra, and emerges into history about the middle of the seventeenth century. We have no indigenous literary sources to chronicle its development. But since the sultanate survived until 1874, and was restored from 1898 to 1916 by ‘Ali Dinar, we are much better informed on Keira institutions than we are on those
of the Funj. The first European traveller to reach Darfur was probably W.G. Browne, who was there between 1793 and 1796. A much more informative account is of Muhammad ibn ‘Umar al-Tunusi, who dwelt there from 1803 to 1811. Shortly before the overthrow of the sultanate, it was visited by the German traveller, Gustav Nachtigal, who left a valuable record of its historical traditions and its condition in 1874. Another corpus of traditions was recorded by Na‘um Shuqayr, the Lebanese historian of the Sudan, his principal informant being the inam of the last sultan before the Egyptian annexation. In the last few years, the range of primary source-materials on the Keira sultanate has been significantly extended by the publication of land-charters, a work still continuing. These, like their counterparts from the Funj sultanate, do not antedate the eighteenth century.

In the Keira sultanate we can see more clearly than in the Funj the expansion of a tribal kingdom into a Sudanic empire, accompanied by the evolution of the rulers from African divine kings to Muslim sultans, and by the progressive islamization of their institutions and subjects. The ascendancy of the Keira was preceded by two semi-legendary tribal power structures, traditionally and conventionally represented as the dynastic kingdoms of the Daju and Tunjur. The Keira clan and the rulers of Wadai are represented as the successors of the Tunjur rulers. The original centre of the Keira was in the northern part of Jabal Marra, whence successive waves of expansion made them dominant over the rest of the hill-country and the surrounding plains. The first of their rulers known to us was Sulayman, who probably lived in the second half of the seventeenth century, and whose reign coincided with (or caused) a tribal split, part of the Keira (represented as a defeated faction) moving out of Jabal Marra, eastwards into the plains. This group, the Musabba‘at, was to play an important part in the history of both the Funj and Keira sultanates in the eighteenth century. The reign of Sulayman is also traditionally seen as the beginning of the islamization of Darfur.

The principal phase of expansion was concluded in the reign of Sulayman’s grandson, Ahmad Bukr, who died about 1730. This brought the sultanate up against neighbours who could make effective resistance against conquest and absorption: Wadai to the west, Zaghawa nomads to the north, the Musabba‘at to the east. South of Darfur were non-Muslim peoples who provided the slaves that were an important element in the society of the sultanate and the principal article in commerce with the north. On his deathbed, Ahmad Bukr obtained an oath from his magnates securing the passage of the sultanate to each of his sons in turn. This attempt to regulate the succession was, in the event, productive of a series of struggles during the ensuing decades.

Kordofan was a buffer territory between the Funj and Keira sultanates. The eastern part was to some extent within the Funj sphere of influence. Badi  had reduced the kingdom of Taqali to tributary status in the later seventeenth century, while the Ghudiyat tribe in southern Kordofan was closely identified with Funj suzerainty. Their chief bore, like the ‘Abdallabi ruler, the title of manji‘il, and paid tribute to Sennar. Western Kordofan received the Musabba‘at
immigrants, who established a sultanate of their own. Engaged alternatively in warfare against their kinsmen in Darfur and in attempts to conquer central Kordofan, the Musabba’at were a disturbing element to both the greater sultanates. Shortly before the middle of the eighteenth century, ‘Isawi, the sultan of the Musabba’at, defeated the Funj representative in central Kordofan. Meanwhile, a faction of the Musabba’at under Khamis b. Janqal, a son of the previous sultan, had made their way to Sennar, where they formed an element in the forces of Badi iv. Thanks largely to them, an invasion by the Ethiopian ruler, Iyasu ii, was halted at the River Dinder in 1744.

The reign of Badi iv ended in disaster. The reasons for his downfall are implied in the charges made against him by Katib al-Shuna. It seems that he tried unsuccessfully to erect a new monarchy on new foundations. He proscribed the Unsab, the former royal clan his father had supplanted, and granted the lands of the old families to his supporters – the Nuba and the followers of Khamis. It is probable that the earlier risings of the Funj against Badi iii and Unsaa iii had been revolts of free-born warriors against sultans seeking a new military power base in slave-troops. When Badi ii returned from his campaign against Taqali, he settled his captives, many of whom were Nuba, ‘some of them in the east, and some of them in the west; and they built villages surrounding Sennar, like a wall about it’. So writes Katib al-Shuna; Bruce saw these villages when he passed. Their garrisons and the sultans’ slave-troops were no doubt further recruited from the tribute Badi ii imposed on Taqali. A similar shift to reliance upon aliens and slaves characterized the rule of Badi iv’s contemporary, Sultan Abu’l-Qasim of Darfur (c. 1749–77).

As Badi’s reign went on, his arbitrary rule (as the chronicler describes it) became more intolerable. Once more a rising of the Funj took place, but its outcome did not follow the pattern of previous military revolts. The victory of the Musabba’at in central Kordofan had been reversed by a new leader of the Funj forces, Muhammad Abu Likaylik, whom Badi had appointed as shaykh (perhaps meaning governor of Kordofan) in 1747. The commanders of the Funj forces occupying Kordofan were dismayed at the news reaching them of their ruler’s behaviour, and agreed with Abu Likaylik to depose him. The army crossed the White Nile at Alays, where they were joined by the sultan’s son, Nasir. They advanced on Sennar and surrounded the town. Badi was allowed to leave under an amnesty, and Abu Likaylik installed Nasir as sultan (1762). This was the end of the effective Funj sultanate: as Katib al-Shuna remarks:

From that time, the Hamaj held the power to loose and bind. They gained the mastery over the Funj. Shaykh Muhammad slew their magnates, and appointed and removed from office among them. The date was reckoned by the period of the shaykhs of the Hamaj, without reference to the kings.

This was the irony of the revolution of 1762, that it redounded to the success neither of the Funj warriors who had plotted it, nor of the ‘Abdallab, who for over two-and-a-half centuries had represented the Arab element in
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the Funj sultanate. Whoever the Hamaj, the kinsfolk of Muhammad Abu Likaylik were, they were neither Funj nor Arab. His and their victory may be seen as the resurgence of an autochthonous group, now islamized and Arabic-speaking. The Hamaj regency was thus inaugurated.

The withdrawal of the Funj garrison from Kordofan under Abu Likaylik in 1762 presaged loss of the province. The power of the Musabba’at revived under their chief, Hashim b. ‘Isawi, who defeated the Ghudiyat in 1772 and regained control of central Kordofan. The real danger to Hashim came from the Keira ruler of Darfur, Muhammad Tayrab who, at the end of his reign in 1786–87 invaded Kordofan, and perhaps even reached the Nile at Omdurman. Henceforward until the Turco-Egyptian conquest, Kordofan was a dependency of the Keira sultanate.

Muhammad Abu Likaylik was a strong and capable ruler, although illiterate. Eight years after his seizure of power, he deposed Nasir and banished him from the capital. The ex-king plotted with the Funj against the regent, but Abu Likaylik learnt of the conspiracy, and had him put to death. When Abu Likaylik died in 1776–77 he was succeeded in the regency by his brother, Badi wad Rajab. A political crisis ensued in another conspiracy of the Funj with their new king, Isma’il, against the regent, and once again the conspirators were unsuccessful. Isma’il was deposed and sent to Suakin, and his son, ‘Adlan, was installed as king. A still more ominous development took place in 1780, when sons of Abu Likaylik, resenting their treatment by their cousin, conspired with two other malcontents, the ‘Abdallabi shaykh and the governor of Khasm al-Bahr, both of whom had been deprived of office and had joined forces with ‘Adlan. In the fighting that followed, Badi wad Rajab was defeated and killed, and one of the sons of Abu Likaylik, Rajab, assumed the regency. ‘Adlan was now intent on regaining the full royal power, and in 1784–85, while Rajab was on campaign in Kordofan, he carried out a coup against the regent’s brother and deputy in Sennar. Rajab, returning from Kordofan, was killed in battle with the king (November 1785), and the Hamaj dispersed in disarray. Their eclipse was brief. Another son of Abu Likaylik, Nasir, became regent, and moved against Sennar. In 1788–89 the royalist forces were defeated in a battle, and ‘Adlan died (it was said of grief, poison or witchcraft) a few days later.

The ascendancy of the Hamaj, thus restored, was never again lost until the Turco-Egyptian conquest, but it was an ascendancy over a declining and diminished kingdom. For the weakness of the Hamaj regency in this period there were several reasons. Internal rivalries in the ruling clan recurred frequently and disastrously. The Regent Nasir was opposed by his brothers, Idris and ‘Adlan, and after several months of fighting, he was put to death in 1798 by the son of the Regent Badi, to avenge his father. ‘Adlan himself became regent in October 1803, but two of his nephews, sons of former regents, conspired against him, and he was killed in an affray at the end of the same year. One of the conspirators, Muhammad wad Rajab, succeeded him, but his regency ended in anarchy in 1808, when he was killed by his cousin, Muhammad, the son of the Regent ‘Adlan, in pursuit of a vendetta against his father’s killers.
Muhammad wad ‘Adlan then became regent himself, his long rule lasting until 1821, when he too fell victim to a rising headed by his cousin, the son and brother of earlier regents. Shortly before the murder of the Regent Muhammad wad ‘Adlan, in the words of Katib al-Shuna:

The approach of the son of the ruler of Egypt, Isma’il Pasha, had been confirmed to him. He had assembled the notable fakis and others to make enquiries, and had summoned the king of the Ja’aliyyin, Kunjara and other tribes to war, with their rendezvous at Khartoum.25

His death plunged the Funj kingdom into anarchy at the very moment of the Turco-Egyptian invasion.

During these unhappy decades, when the Funj kings were ciphers and the Hamaj regents were destroying themselves in internecine quarrels, their nominal vassals grew in power and intervened in the politics of Sennar. Chief among these vassals were the ‘Abdallabi shaykh, the kings of the Ja’aliyyin and the governors of Khashm al-Bahr. Each of these positions was disputed by rivals within the ruling families, and the kaleidoscopic and transient alliances of their factions with those among the Funj and the Hamaj characterize this last period of the history of the kingdom. One of the most successful was Makk Nimr wad Muhammad of the Ja’aliyyin, who established himself as king in Shendi in 1801–02. Meanwhile, the Majadhib theocracy in El Damer controlled the region around the junction of the River Atbara and the Nile, while Berber was the capital of the tribal kingdom of the Mirafab. Further north, the territories controlled by the Shayqiyya had long since been lost to the Funj.

The sultanate of Darfur, by contrast, was at this period at the height of its power. The warrior-sultan, Muhammad Tayrab, died at Bara on his return from his victorious campaign in Kordofan. A succession struggle ensued, in which the successful faction installed their candidate, a pious posthumous son of Ahmad Bukr named ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid. ‘Abd al-Rahman was sultan at the time of Browne’s visit to Darfur, and the traveller describes him as ‘a man rather under the middle size, of a complexion adust or dry, with eyes full of fire, and features abounding in expression. His beard is short but full, and his countenance, though perfectly black, materially differing from the negro; though fifty or fifty-five years of age, he possesses much alertness and activity.’26

The reign of ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid marked the apogee of the Keira sultanate. Territorially, it was now at its widest extent. The royal court, which under previous rulers had migrated to a succession of sites from the original homeland of the Fur, was now permanently settled east of Jabal Marra and gave its name, El Fasher (al-Fashir), to the capital of the sultanate. Islam was striking deeper roots: ‘Abd al-Rahman had been a faki before he became sultan, and the divine kingship of his ancestors was becoming overlaid with the formalities of an Islamic monarchy. Holy men, among them immigrants from the Nilotic regions, received estates, and supplied the sultanate with religious teachers and clerks in the administration. The country was still almost completely secluded from the lands to the north, although slaves (captured in raids on the pagans of the south) were sent to Upper Egypt. Apart from
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these regular commercial contacts, the first attempts to establish political communications begin about this time. Browne tells us that ‘Abd al-Rahman, on his accession, sent a present to the Ottoman sultan:

It consisted of three of the choicest eunuchs, and three of the most beautiful female slaves that could be procured. The Othman emperor, when they were presented, had, it is said, never heard of the Sultan of Dar-Für, but he returned an highly-ornamented sabre, a rich pelisse, and a ring set with a single diamond of no inconsiderable value. 27

Bonaparte, when in Egypt in 1799, received a letter from ‘Abd al-Rahman, and replied asking the sultan to send with the first caravan two thousand black slaves, over sixteen years old. 28 But this attempt to form an army of black Mamluks came to nothing. Under ‘Abd al-Rahman’s successor, Muhammad Fadl, the Keira sultanate was at last to be brought into violent confrontation with a superior military power.

The early nineteenth century, before the Egyptian conquest, saw the appearance of new influences in the religious life of the Sudan. These were repercussions of that great wave of revival and reform that arose in the heart of Islam during the late eighteenth century, and that produced, among other phenomena, the Wahhabi movement in Arabia. One aspect of the revival was a new activist spirit in the Sufi orders. The Khalwatiyya order, founded in the fourteenth century, took on fresh life in the eighteenth, when missionaries were sent to propagate its teachings in Africa. One of these, al-Sammani (1718–75), established a new sub-order, which was brought to the Sudan about 1800, by a Sudanese, Ahmad al-Tayyib al-Bashir, who had been initiated in Medina. 29 He won many adherents in the Gezira, particularly along the White Nile, for the Sammaniyya tariqa.

Another religious teacher whose followers were to have great influence in the Sudan was Ahmad ibn Idris al-Fasi, who originated from Fez in Morocco but spent much of his career in Arabia, where he died in 1837. 30 Like the Wahhabis, he was a reformer who sought to restore the primitive model of Islam, purged of superstitious innovations. He influenced Muhammad al-Majdhub, when the latter was an exile in Mecca after the Turco-Egyptian conquest. Another disciple was Muhammad ‘Uthman al-Mirghani (1793–1853), who was sent by Ahmad as a missionary to the Sudan. He won an enormous following among the Nubian tribes between Aswan and Dongola, and in 1816–17 reached Sennar. Here he seems to have gained little success, and he left the Sudan, never to return. While on his missionary journey, however, he had married a woman of Dongola, by whom he had a son, al-Hasan.

After Ahmad ibn Idris’s death, al-Mirghani organized his own adherents, in Arabia and the Sudan, as a new order, the Mirghaniyya or Khatmiyya. Further proselytization was carried out in the Sudan by his son, al-Hasan, and the order was favourably viewed by the Turco-Egyptian rulers. But the coming of the Egyptians had brought an important change into the structure of Sudanese Islam, as will appear.