

### **So You're Going to Live in the Sudan, Eh?**

Most people don't like to step outside of their cultural norms. Heck, a majority of us never even get the chance to experience another country or culture, either for lack of resources or lack of interest. But for those of us who have that great privilege and honor of stepping into another world, we must take the necessary steps to ensure that the transition is as smooth as possible. The best way of doing this is by being aware of exactly what culture you are about to step into.

If your destination is the Sudan, I suppose the first things you will need to know are the basics of the country. To start off with let's look at Sudan's geographical location. Sudan is located in Northeastern Africa. Its border countries are Egypt to the north, Libya to the northwest, Chad to the west, and the Central African Republic to the southwest. Its southern borders are the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Kenya. To the east lie Ethiopia, Eritrea and finally the Red Sea<sup>1</sup>.

Sudan's location in Africa means it is somewhat uniquely subject culturally to both the Middle Eastern tendencies in North Africa as well as the more traditional aspects of sub-Saharan African culture. Cultural links such as language, traditions and customs follow accordingly. For our purposes we will be focusing on Northern Sudan which exhibits cultural traits more identified with the Middle East.

Sudan happens to be Africa's largest country in terms of landmass with an area of more than 2.5 million square kilometers, while its population is roughly 35 million

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.arab.de/arabinfo/sudan.htm>

people. The capital city is Khartoum which is centrally located in the country in the province of Kurdufan<sup>1</sup>.

Arabic is the official language of the Sudan; however, because of it's previously mentioned cultural diversity there are also African languages spoken in the south. English is also fairly widely spoken. We will discuss in greater detail the Arabic language later on<sup>1</sup>.

Sudan is run by an authoritarian government. All power is controlled by President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, who has been in power since his military coup in 1989<sup>6</sup>. The vast majority of the Northern Sudanese population is Sunni Muslim<sup>1</sup>. Once again, this will be discussed in a little more detail further on. For now we are just citing the bare facts.

Due to its geographic location, one would expect Northern Sudan to have a very warm climate. And indeed it does. The area of the country north of Khartoum is a desert climate with very warm temperatures and a dry, arid environment. Winter and early spring temperatures average in the mid-nineties (degrees Fahrenheit) during the day and can dip down around the seventies at night. Be thankful, because this is about as "cold" as it gets. Late spring and summer months are consistently above 100 F, with temperatures reaching 120 F during May and June<sup>2</sup>.

There is one particular seasonal event to remain aware of in Northern Sudan. The approach of summer brings with it violent sandstorms. These storms are known as haboobs, during which walls of sand and dust have the potential to reduce visibility to almost zero. Seasonal heavy rain showers also persist during the summer months and last usually until September<sup>2</sup>. Keeping all this in mind, it would seem appropriate to come

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.southtravels.com/africa/sudan/weather.html>

with an abundance of light clothing and an occasional sweater or jacket for nighttime temperatures. Winter coats might be a bit ridiculous to have in this desert climate. It might do well to also invest in protective face garments in case of the dreaded haboobs.

Let's take a moment to focus on the language spoken in Northern Sudan. As mentioned before, Arabic is the primary language spoken; however, English is also spoken fairly widely. The existence of both of these languages can be explained by looking at Sudan's past. Between 1899 and 1955 Sudan was under Egyptian rule; however, this Egyptian rule was part of a joint-rule with Britain<sup>3</sup>. Thus the Arabic national language mixed with a bit of English starts to make a little more sense.

Arabic is an ancient language that looks rather intimidating on paper to English-speaking folk. But fear not! If we focus less on the written alphabet and more on pronunciation it becomes less cumbersome. Arabic is composed of 28 consonants and 3 vowels. Included in the 28 consonants are the ancient but prominent Semitic guttural sounds most identified with a language such as Hebrew or Arabic<sup>4</sup>. These sounds are made by coarsely forcing air through the back of the throat, almost as if you were trying to clear your throat. Most other sounds in Arabic are similar to those found in other European languages such as Italian or French.

For our purposes we will focus less on the alphabet itself and more on pronouncing a few key phrases to help get by in the simplest of interactions. For example, "Hello" is pronounced *Marhaba*. "What is your name?" is pronounced *Maismok*. In response, "My name is..." is pronounced "*Ismy...*" "Yes" and "No" are pronounced *Na'am* and *La*, respectively. "Please" and "Thank you" are *Minfadlik* and

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<sup>3</sup> <http://countrystudies.us/sudan/15.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Comrie, B. The World's Major Languages, 135-36.

*Shukran*, respectively. Finally, “Goodbye” is pronounced *Ma ’assamala*<sup>5</sup>. One should probably know how to count to ten as well<sup>5</sup>:

1	<i>wahid</i>
2	<i>itnan</i>
3	<i>talatha</i>
4	<i>arba ’a</i>
5	<i>khamisa</i>
6	<i>sitta</i>
7	<i>saba ’a</i>
8	<i>tamanya</i>
9	<i>tisa</i>
10	<i>ashra</i>

I suppose we should get to things such as government, health care and education as well, but for now let’s move to things more cultural. For instance, it is important to note the role of women in Sudanese society. As expected from a predominantly Muslim society, women assume a much more traditional role than we might be used to in the United States. Family in general, for that matter, is also ideally more traditional. The family unit is very important in Sudanese culture, with family traditionally being responsible for caring for the old, sick or mentally ill. One could even think of the family unit as the highest form of social capital in Sudanese culture. Unfortunately, with the rise of urbanization in some areas of the country, these tasks which once were a collective family burden have now fallen primarily on women.<sup>3</sup> Mealtime traditionally consists of males and females eating separately, with females eating after the males. Gender segregation exists on other levels as well, such as at festivities and most other social gatherings.

Women experience a shocking amount of subordination in Northern Sudan. In most cases this is consistent with Arab culture; however, it does not dampen the strange

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<sup>5</sup> <http://cecilmarie.web.prw.net/arabworld/arabic/>

and sometimes brutal practices that women must undergo. For example, it is not uncommon for a woman to be subjected to female circumcision at a young age. This consists of sewing shut the reproductive orifice and sometimes carries with it physical and psychological problems for its recipients. This is a shocking but true example of common practices in Sudan that are nearly unheard of in the United States.

Let's move to something a little on the lighter side, like food. As with many other African and Arab countries, hospitality is quite important in Sudan. Important guests are honored by slaughtering a sheep, followed by a multi-course meal of increasing delicacy.

Sudanese are quite famous for their coffee, which is uniquely prepared. Coffee beans are fried in a special pot with charcoal and then ground with cloves and spices. It is then strained and served in special small cups which are quite traditional with Arab coffees.<sup>6</sup>

Sudanese prefer lamb and chicken when cooking meats. Most dishes are served with rice, a staple in the Sudanese diet. A traditional Sudanese meal might contain Kisra, which is an omelet-like pancake that is one of the more popular breads. Another popular cuisine is called Bamia-Bamia which is a stew made from okra and lamb. Desert usually consists of either cut fruit or a classic treat known as Crème Caramela.<sup>5</sup>

The way in which meals are served is also very important in Sudan. Dinner is served on a low, bare table and guests sit on pillows on the floor. A pre-dinner hand-washing custom is very important in this culture. A copper pitcher known as an Ebrig is used to pour water on to the hands of the guests, who then wipe their hands off with a towel.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sudan.net/society/recipe.html>

The Sudanese custom of eating meals does not involve silverware. Rather, giant communal bowls are served in which dinner guests dip large pieces of flatbread to sop up what is inside. A meal consists of four servings: soup, salad, a red-hot spice called the Shata, and dessert. As is evident, meals in the Sudan are very formal and consist of very strict rituals. It would be wise to be as familiar as possible with these rituals so as not to offend your hosts. Mealtime is a good example of how the informal cultural grapevine works in Sudanese culture. Stories and sagas are passed down at the dinner table as families get a chance to spend time together.

Now we perhaps should move on to education. Sudan suffers from a vast shortage of educational resources needed to meet the demands of the country. Urban educational facilities grossly outnumber those in rural areas. Even so, not much is offered in the way of education after primary schools, and this is consistent with most of the country.<sup>7</sup> What little secondary educational schools there are follow a British system, no doubt influenced by the nation's former rule. Another trend in the country is the tendency towards better and higher education in northern areas of Sudan compared to southern areas. This may or may not be a result of Muslim cultural influence.

Sudan does not have a very good record when it comes to healthcare as well. The civil war that has ravaged the country has left virtually no healthcare in some areas. Coupled with this is widespread malnutrition resulting from famine and water shortages. Sudan unfortunately is subject to some diseases which we Americans don't even have to think about such as malaria, dysentery and tuberculosis<sup>3</sup>. These diseases could be battled easily with adequate healthcare, but unfortunately in the lack of it they are free to ravage the country. The Sudan unfortunately is also no stranger to AIDS. While this disease is

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<sup>7</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education\\_in\\_Sudan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_Sudan)

more prevalent in the south, it is slowly migrating north via evacuees and the use of unsterile needles in major cities.

Sudan has, in principle, free healthcare. However, due to the ever-increasing lack of doctors and medical personnel the free healthcare is often negated by the fact that sick people just can't find help at all. There have been efforts by the World Health Organization and other groups like Doctors Without Borders to provide what help they can to the dire healthcare situation in Sudan<sup>3</sup>. However, much work has yet to be done to continue the effort in the country.

On a lighter note, Sudan is not bereft of cultural holidays. It is important to note, however, that because of the intense cultural diversity of the country, not all holidays are universally celebrated. To highlight just a few Sudanese holidays that one might experience during an extended stay, January 1 not only is New Year's Day but also the Sudanese Independence Day. February 10 marks the Islamic New Year, April 6 is known as Uprising Day, April 21 is Prophet's Birthday, June 30 is National Salvation Revolution Day and in parts of the country that apply, Christmas is celebrated on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December.

We are drawing to a close in our exploration of Sudanese culture. However, it is important to note the affect the Sudanese culture has had in our own country. In Chicago, Sudanese culture can be grouped together with the broader influence of Middle-Eastern culture in general. We are fortunate enough in Chicago to have a large Middle-Eastern population with broad influences that can be seen quite close to home. We need look no farther than our own Albany Park neighborhood and Lawrence Ave. to witness the impact of Middle-Eastern culture in our society.

This culture provides quite a few support services to the local community. Chief among these are food establishments that serve Middle-Eastern cuisine such as kebab, falafel or hummus. Local Arab markets provide groceries and the opportunity to purchase Arab cuisine for preparation at home. A popular Middle-Eastern novelty among Arabic people and the younger crowd is smoking hookah, a flavored molasses-like tobacco smoked out of a water pipe<sup>8</sup>. This recreational activity is provided by many local Middle-Eastern owned hookah lounges as well as stores that allow you to purchase the items yourself. Finally, there are many other Middle-Eastern owned and operated services such as attorney's offices, laundry mats, gas stations, liquor stores, etc. All told the Middle-Eastern population has a broad affect on the local community.

While the Sudan has the potential to be a satisfying place to live it would be foolish to overlook some very blatant challenges facing someone who calls the Sudan their home. Let's pretend that you do not have to face the challenges that a normal Sudanese person battles every day such as famine, destruction of crops, disease, unsanitary living conditions or unhealthy water. There is still the weather, complete with blistering heat and vicious haboobs.

Then let's not forget the civil war and genocide that has ravaged the country. Regardless of whether or not your hometown is in Darfur, the genocide and civil war that go on unceasingly provide cause for at least some concern. No matter how you look at it the Sudan is not the safest or most welcoming environment.

Regardless of what dangers may or may not lie in your path during your time there, the Sudan is nevertheless a country rich with culture and tradition, and that culture

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<sup>8</sup> Linton, C. The Ethnic Handbook: A Guide to the Cultures and Traditions of Chicago's Diverse Communities., 355.

and tradition deserve understanding and respect. It is up to us to honor another country's customs no matter how bizarre or uncomfortable they may seem. With the right amount of preparation and planning, one can hope to spend an enjoyable and taboo-free time in any nation, even the Sudan.

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Part of my information came from an interview with Sam, the manager of North Park Hookah on Foster Ave. on 7 December 2005.