

A Black Power in the Blue Nile: A Military History of the *Funj* Sultanate of Sinnār 1503-1821

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Abstract

Funj, a dark skinned people of Arab origin located in the northeastern part of the present day Republic of Sudan went into political alliance with the Abdullāb (an ethnic group in the area) the peak of which was the establishment of a conglomeration in the late 15th century. In 1503, the Funj through wars of conquest took over the mantle of leadership, which subsequently led to the establishment of the Funj Sultanate with its capital at Sinnār. Despite the military strength of the Sultanate of Sinnār however, historians give it little, or no concern and thus, this paper studies the military history of the Funj laying emphasis on the historical formation of the Sultanate's military, method of drilling, weaponry, wars and expeditions, coups and counter-coups, the introduction and impact of its military reforms, as well as, the coup of 1762, which played an important role in the decline of the Sultanate in 1821. Built on both oral and written sources, the paper argues that even the available written sources treated the history of the Funj from the periphery mainly placed within the context of other political entities that had flourished in the region located east of the Blue Nile. The paper equally observes that a study of this nature does not only expand the boundaries of the military history of the Funj, but also, lessons can be deduced from the Sultanate's history, especially that revolving around the strength and weaknesses of its military formation.

Introduction

Military history is often one of the most neglected areas of the historical studies as most historians give currency to other branches of history viz; intellectual, political, economic, social to mention, a few. However, studying the military history of empires, kingdoms, sultanates, and caliphates is of paramount importance for it encourages bellicosity, it shows why some wars are won and others lost, it gives hope and courage to the soldiers and promotes liberty, civic patriotism, and international order¹. The Funj Sultanate of Sinnār is one of the political entities whose military history has been neglected by historians. Most of the available works on the Funj concentrate heavily on the political, economic and social developments of its history.

¹ Paul Herbert and Michael Noonan (ed.), *American Military History: A Resource for Teachers and Students* (USA: Foreign Policy Research institute, 2013), 11.

In view of the above submission therefore, this paper examines the historical development of the Funj's military structure, which included the foundation of the military with particular reference to the cavalry and the infantry, types of weapons, their war fare and strategies used during conquests and expeditions, as well as the reasons for mutinies in the army, coups and counter-coups, civil wars, factors leading to the disintegration of the military, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, which paved way for the easy conquest of the Funj by the Egyptian army under the leadership of Muhammad Ali, among other important issues.

The Establishment of the Funj Sultanate of Sinnār

The Funj, a dark skinned people, embraced Islam in the first decade of the 16th century. Though they claimed ancestry from the Arabs, some Sudanese historians refuted this view². In partnership with the Abdullāb, the Islamized Funj achieved a sense of unity and political stability, which paved the way for the establishment of the Funj Sultanate of Sinnār in the first decade of the 16th century (1503) with its capital at Sinnār. It was with the efforts of its Sultans that Islam and Muslim civilization spread to the rest of Sudan³. Though claiming an Arab descent, earlier writers traced the origin of the Funj to the Shilluk⁴. According Metz:

At the same time that the Ottomans brought northern Nubia into their orbit, a new power, the Funj, had risen in southern Nubia and had supplanted the remnants of the old Christian kingdom of Alwa. In 1504 a Funj leader, Amara Dunqas, founded the Black Sultanate (As Saltana az Zarqa) at Sannar. The Black Sultanate eventually became the keystone of the Funj Empire. By the mid-sixteenth century, Sannar controlled Al Jazirah and commanded the

² Hasan Yusuf Fadl, *Studies in Sudanese History* (Khartoum: SUDATEk Limited), 31. See also, Peter Holt and Martin Daly, *A History of the Sudan: From the Coming of Islam to the Present Day* (4th Ed.) (London: Longman, 1986), Peter Holt, 'Egypt, the Funj, and Darfur', in *The Cambridge History of Africa, 4: From c. 1600 to c. 1790*, Richard G. (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 14-57.

³ Hasan Yusuf Fadl (2003). *Studies in Sudanese History*, 31.

⁴ Bruce James, *Travels to Discover the Sources of the Nile*. Vol. II, (London: Edinburgh, 1805), 63-94. See also, Arkell Anthony John, 'Funj Origins', S.N.R, XV, 201-250, Arkell Anthony John, *A History of the Sudan from the Earliest Times to 1821* (London: Athlone Press, 1961), Nalder Leonard Fielding, 'Funj Origins', S.R.N, XIV, 63-64, Crawford Osbert Guy Stanhope, *The Fung Kingdom of Sennar* (London: Gloucester, 1951), 147-155, Peter Holt, 'A Sudanese Historical Legend: The Fung Conquest of Soba', *Bulleting of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XXIII, part 1 (1961): 1 and Busayli Abdul-Jalil, *Ma'alim Tarikh al-Sudan Wadi al- Nil* (Cairo: Darul Ghad, 1955), 28-34.

allegiance of vassal states and tribal districts north to the third cataract and south to the rainforests⁵.

The Funj Sultanate encompassed the Blue Nile and extended as far as the borders of Egypt to the North and eastwards up to the Nubian mountain and the River Sobat and from the Red Sea bringing under its jurisdiction, the Khordofān and to the borders of Darfūr in the west. The Sultanate was versed in terms of education/scholarship, Sufism (mysticism), which was strengthened by the introduction of *Tariq al-Qawm* (The path of the people) by Sheikh Tajuddin al-Bahari⁶, economy, land policies and sound military formation. It had impact over Donqolah, Fūr and Darfūr⁷.

It should be noted that the beginning of Muslim civilization in the Funj sultanate of Sinnār situated in the present day North Eastern Sudan was marked by the conquest of Egypt in 642⁸. From that time onwards, the Muslim Arabs had ample opportunities to successfully penetrate the Sudan via Aswan, a frontier town. This move was mainly taken to check-mate the periodic attacks of the Nubians and the Beja on the Upper Egypt. This relationship paved the way for a treaty between the Arabs and the Nubians and that laid the foundation for the introduction of Islam into Sinnār, and the Sudan in general⁹. The Arab Sudanese relation at that time was concretized by the waves of intermarriages especially amongst the Beja people.

Muslim civilization of Sinnār served as one of the strongest forces that blocked the infiltration of Christianity into the territories of the sultanate, the peak of which was the victory of the former at the first and the second battles of the Ethiopian crusades despite the support given to the latter by King Louis V of

⁵ Metz Helen Chapin, *A Country Study: Sudan* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1991), 22.

⁶ Mustapha Muhammad Wud Dayf Allah (ed.), *Kitāb al-Tabaqāt fi Khusūs al-Awliya wal Salihīn wal Ulama wal Shu'ara'*. (Cairo: Ibrahim Sidaya, 1930), 3-4.

⁷ Hasan Yusuf Fadl, *Muqaddimah fi Tarīkh al-Mamalik al-Islamiyyah fi al-Sudan al-Sharqy*. (Khartoum: SUDATEk, 2003), 53.

⁸ The word 'Sudan', refers to the Land (s) of the 'blacks' south of the Sahara which stretches from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. For more details on this see, Hasan Yusuf Fadl, *The Arabs and the Sudan* (Khartoum: SUDATEk, 2005), 1 and Hasan Yusuf Fadl, 'The Penetration of Islam in the Eastern Sudan', in *Islam in Tropical Africa*. (2d Ed.), Ioan Myrddin Lewis's (ed.), (Bloomington: International African Institute in association with Indiana University Press, 1980), 112-123.

⁹ Hasan Yusuf Fadl, *Studies in Sudanese History*, 29-30.

France¹⁰. This victory was celebrated by the Muslim world especially the inhabitants of Hijaz, India, Sind, Egypt and the Maghrib¹¹. This was achieved because of the Funj's strong military formation, warfare and unshakable belief in its history, which stood firmly to compete with all other civilizations at that period¹².

The sultanate achieved a high level of religious tolerance which could be compared to that of the Muslim Spain. The case of Barber Marcus, a Christian envoy, who was allowed to pass through the Blue Nile unmolested despite the battles fought between the Funj and the Ethiopians, was a classic example¹³. This incidence was preceded by the visit of David Reubeni, a Jewish traveler to Sinnār in 1522¹⁴. This, coupled with the cosmopolitan nature of the sultanate, which gave equal rights to its citizens to pursue their dreams in education, economy, military, religion, to mention, but a few.

The doors of its rulers were open to both the poor and the needy who were coming to submit their grievances¹⁵. This nurtured a unique form of camaraderie between the leaders and the led. More importantly, it paved the way for the cultivation of peaceful coexistence among its citizens and created a sound security network for the betterment of the people.

Scholars were held in the highest esteem to such an extent that one Sheikh Ajīb al-Manjalik was appointed the grand vizier of the sultanate¹⁶. The Ulama (scholars) also served as the advisory council of the government on matters

¹⁰ Al-Makky Hassan, *Al-Thaqafah al-Sinnāriyyah* (Khartoum: Jami'at al-Ifriqiyyah al-Alamiyyah, n.d), 36. See also, Babikir Husayn, *Madhāhir al-Hadārah fī Daulat al-Funj al-Islamiyyah* (Sudan: Dar al- Sudād, 2004), 94.

¹¹ Muhammad Muhammad Ali, *Al-Shi'ir al- Sudāny fil Ma'ārik al-Siyāsah 1821-1924* (Egypt: Maktabat al-Kulliyyat al-Azhariyyah, 1969), 19. See also, Ahmad bn Hajj Ali, *Makhtūtāt Kitāb al-Shūnah fī Tarīkh al-Sultanat Sinnāriyyah* (Alqāhirah: Isah Bābi Halby, 1961), 32.

¹² Nu'im Shaqir, *Jografiyyah wa Tarīkh al-Sudan* (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqāfah, 1967), 415.

¹³ Al-Makky Hassan, *Al-Thaqafah al-Sinnāriyyah*, 37.

¹⁴ Hasan Yusuf Fadl, *Muqaddimah fī Tarīkh al-Mamālik al-Islamiyyah fī Sudan al-Sharqy 1450-1821* (Sudan: SUDATEk, 1989), 54.

¹⁵ According to Sheikh Uthman bn Fudi (1754-1817), a great reformer of the 19th century Hausaland, leadership moves smoothly if the palaces and castles of those in power are not decorated by chamberlains. The absence of this fairness therefore, makes the led more pressurized and aggressive to their leaders, which may inevitably end up in revolutions and the overthrow of governments.

¹⁶ Al-Makky Hassan, *Al-Thaqafah al-Sinnāriyyah*, 38-40.

related to religion, education, law, economy, land, trade and politics. Besides, education was also valued and promoted by the state through the establishment of schools, the enticement of foreign scholars to come and settle the building of mosques, the provision of instructional materials for students, among other important things. It was said that the rulers of the Funj built hostels for its students and pilgrims in Makkah and Egypt¹⁷. Though the hostels are today non-existent, that of Egypt stands still as part of the architectural and historical monuments of the sultanate¹⁸.

In terms of the spiritual dimension of the Funj Sultanate, the major *Sufi* orders were Shādhaliyyah, Sammāniyyah and Khatmiyyah. These brotherhoods were able to establish complex esoteric ways of thinking in an attempt to ascertain as well as consolidate the inner-self referred to as *Maqāmāt* (spiritual attainments), which is strengthened by *Silsilah* (a chain of spiritual authority)¹⁹. The spiritual journey of the *Sufis* is therefore classified into eight stages: *Ābid*, *Zāhid*, *Mutawakkil*, *Sūfī*, *Wāṣil*, *Ārif*, *Muḥaqqaq*, *Mustaghriq*²⁰.

The depth of the *Sufi* philosophy in the Funj later culminated into unique aesthetics and gnosis as it carries with it, the concepts of *Wahdat al-Wujūd* (pantheism), *Al-Kashf wal Ma'ārif* (divulgence), *Fanā'* (spiritual oblivion), among other dialectics. According to the *Sufis* (mystics), the *Turuq* (brotherhoods) are meant for the transformation of the personality of a blind worshipper of God, *'ābid'* through awareness, *taqwā* (piety), to the highest level of spiritual accomplishment and completeness of one's servitude in the face of God, *mustaghriq*. This spiritual attainment is only obtained if a person surrenders his life completely to the impeccability of his *Imam* (spiritual leader). This spiritual journey could only be achieved through the adoption of *zuhd* (complete abstinence to worldly life), which in turn, gives the *zāhid* (abstainer) complete peace of mind and prepares him for the other life. Moreover, the *zāhid* is solely dependent on God (*mutawakkil*). Throughout the history of the Funj, Sufism was an important catalyst for spiritual mobilisation to attain a Divine Truth which is

¹⁷ Interview with Abdallah al-Siddiq, aged 72, Khartoum, 16th July, 2016.

¹⁸ Al-Makky Hassan, *Al-Thaqafah al-Sinnāriyyah*, 40.

¹⁹ Karrar Ali Salih, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*. (Hong-Kong: C. Hurst and Co. Ltd, 1992), 2.

²⁰ Yahya Dahiru, 'Scholarship and Politics in Pre-Colonial Kano' (Seminar Presentation: Faculty of Arts, Kaduna State University, 2012), 11.

the bedrock of religion. The *wāsīl* is a gnosis; the *Ārif* ascertains the divine truth, *muḥaqqaq*, which finally forms the status of the *mustaghriq*.

The Military Structure of the Funj Sultanate

Like most powerful and ancient nations, Sinnar also had a unique military structure. The military apart from ensuring internal stability and the rule of law, they also defend the Sultanate against any external aggression. They also contributed to the expansion of the state mostly through wars of conquest, especially with the Kingdom of Taqli²¹.

Basically, Sinnar had two types of military: the cavalry and the infantry²². The former were armoured horsemen mainly from the nobility. They fought with long broad swords and their horses were properly covered with thick quilts and copper headgears as a form of protection from enemies²³. On the other hand, greater part of the soldiers was infantry mainly mustered from servile origin, especially among the captives. Unlike the cavalry, they used swords, armours and served as permanent standing army protecting fortresses and castles throughout the Sultanate.

According to Abdel-Rahim, the Funj Sultanate was largely characterized by a militant frontier state, particularly due to its proximity to the powerful Christian Kingdom of Abyssinia²⁴. To also show the military readiness of the Sultanate, the Funj army imitated the military structure of the standing army of the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria, as well as the Janissaries of the Ottoman Empire²⁵.

Abdel-Rahim also observes that, the swords used by the Funj army were straight and long imported from Soligen through Suwakin, or Aswan to the Sudan²⁶. He

²¹ Abdel-Rahim Muddathir, 'Changing Patterns of Civilian Military Relations in the Sudan' (A Research Report of the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala, no. 46, 1978), 9.

²² Abdel-Rahim Muddathir, 'Changing Patterns of Civilian Military Relations in the Sudan', 10.

²³ The cavalry rode horses popularly known as 'Dongolawi', bred from a mixed strain of Syrian, European and Arab origin.

²⁴ Abdel-Rahim Muddathir, 'Changing Patterns of Civilian Military Relations in the Sudan', 9, see also, Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands* (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1997), 10-360.

²⁵ Jedrej Charles, 'Ingessana and the Legacy of the Funj: The Consequences of Turkish Conquest on the Blue Nile', *Journal of the International African Institute* 70, no. 2 (2000): 278-297.

²⁶ Jay Spaulding, 'The Management of Exchange in Sinnar c. 1700', in *Trade and Traders in the Sudan*, Manger Leif (ed.) (Bergen: University of Bergen, 1984), 25-85, Jay Spaulding, 'Toward

added that most of the armours and helmets were made of either iron, or copper. However, those of steel he observes were of Mamluk origin. The technology used in the production of chain coats for instance, were popularly known as *Hauberks*, which was quite impressive as no welded steel was seen.

According to some historians like Abdel-Rahim, the Funj horses were properly trained to kneel down like camels so as to allow riders climb in their full armour²⁷. The horses were also adorned with some metallic hooves, especially during wars of conquests. With many polities brought under the Funj, vassal states paid tributes, which coupled with taxes generated within the Sultanate to pay salaries and feed the army²⁸. For example, the animals and grains provided as taxes were mainly consumed by the army and servants of the Sultanate²⁹.

The 1762 Military Coup of Abu el-Kaylik and the Decline of the Sultanate (1762-1821)

Muhammad Abu el-Kaylik was from the Hameg ethnic group and was the founder of the influential family of viziers who indirectly controlled the affairs of the Funj for almost sixty years to the extent of bringing an end to the three hundred years history of the Sultanate in the 19th century. Born in 1127 A.D, few years after the sack of Shendy, Muhammad's childhood days and family background were not adequately documented even though it is believed that he was from a servile origin³⁰.

Tradition has it that, the name 'El-Kaylik' basically means 'red', which was often used to refer to the offspring of Arabs by black mothers due to their lighter skin colour³¹. However, an elaboration of the term 'Abu el-Kaylik' simply means, 'the father of the red'. According to Robinson, Muhammad for his bravery and personal conviction rose through the ranks in the Funj army up to the position of commander of the Royal Bodyguards after the attack launched on the Funj in 1744 by Socinios Yasus 11 (1729-1753), the king of Abyssinia. During that

a demystification of the Funj: Some Perspectives on Society in Southern Sennar, 1685-1900', *Northeast African Studies* 2, (1980): 1-18.

²⁷ Abdel-Rahim Muddathir, 'Changing Patterns of Civilian Military Relations in the Sudan', 9-10.

²⁸ Robinson Arthur, 'Abu El-Kaylik', The Kingmaker of the Fung of Sennar', *American Anthropologist New Series* 31, no. 2 (1929): 242-244.

²⁹ Robinson Arthur, 'Abu El-Kaylik', The Kingmaker of the Fung of Sennar', 242-244.

³⁰ Robinson Arthur, 'Abu El-Kaylik', The Kingmaker of the Fung of Sennar', 242-244.

³¹ Robinson Arthur, 'Abu El-Kaylik', The Kingmaker of the Fung of Sennar', 242-244.

critical moment, Muhammad played an important role in repelling the Abyssinian attack. He was supported by a Durfurian prince, Qannis and Abdullab Sheikh Amin Musmar who mobilized about 4,000 men and took the Abyssinians by surprise along Zekyat of the same year³². The war ended with about 18,000 Abyssinians killed and their sacred relic and insignia taken by the victors. With Muhammad's victory at El-Obeid, he was appointed the governor of Kordofan and remained in power until 1760.

With the growing nature of Sultan Badi's cruelty, some concerned citizens of the Funj sent series of letters inviting Muhammad. In response to such yearnings, Muhammad appointed his brother as the acting governor of Kordofan and marched eastwards incorporating into his army, fighters from Jabel Heneik and Beni Khaled (Khalwada)³³. This reaction ended with the deposition of Sultan and his exile to Suwakin³⁴.

Thereafter, Muhammad assumed the position of a vizier and had therefore indirectly become the overall *de facto* ruler of Sinnar. He also mustered a lot of power to the extent of deposing and appointing Sultans. For instance, with the death of Nasr, his brother Isma'il was appointed as the Sultan by Muhammad. According to an informant, all the sons of Muhammad with the exception of Ali have ruled Sinnar over a 'puppet Sultan'. They also succeeded in retaining all the military power even at the detriment of the Sultan whose forces were no match to that of Abu El-Kayliks³⁵.

With the decline of the Abu el-Kayliks' power, especially during the reign of Adlan, the Sultan, many of them were publically executed at the market place, while many of their women were given out to either Arab or Funj chiefs as slaves³⁶. This incidence had led to serious problems in form of divisions, power struggle and internal crises, which finally culminated into the inevitable weakness of the Sultanate that left it prey to foreign invasions.

Muhammad el-Kaylik's death was no doubt the genesis of the crises that plunged the Sultanate into succession disputes in the royal houses. That was why when Muhammad Ali of Egypt sent his army to invade Sudan under the leadership of

³² Robinson Arthur, 'Abu El-Kaylik', *The Kingmaker of the Fung of Sennar*, 2377.

³³ Robinson Arthur, 'Abu El-Kaylik', *The Kingmaker of the Fung of Sennar*, 236.

³⁴ Robinson Arthur, 'Abu El-Kaylik', *The Kingmaker of the Fung of Sennar*, 240.

³⁵ Robinson Arthur, 'Abu El-Kaylik', *The Kingmaker of the Fung of Sennar*, 242.

³⁶ Robinson Arthur (1931), 'Abu El-Kaylik', *The Kingmaker of the Fung of Sennar*, 242.

his son, Isma'il in 1820, they and were faced with little or no resistance. This was because, prior to the invasion, the Funj army had become very weak, particularly during the reign of Sultan Ranfa who ruled from 1798-1804.

The Egyptian Invasion/Conquest

Historians have put forward various reasons about the Egyptian motive in invading the Funj, which include (1) quest to acquire slaves who would serve as labourers, farmers and soldiers (2) the weakness and internal crises inherent in the Sultanate as reported by the Egyptian spies (3) search for wealth as Sinnar happened to be an important source of gold and silver³⁷. Muhammad Ali sent two Special Forces to conquer Sinnar, Kordofan and Darfur in 1821. The Egyptian army of about 40, 000 men was under the commandership of Ali's son, Khedive Isma'il including 600 Turkish infantry, a detachment of artillery under an American from Massachusetts, some squadrons of Turkish cavalry, 800 Arab irregulars and a contingent of Maghārba volunteers³⁸.

It was said that the Nubian Desert and Abāda camel riders of the Upper Egypt provided effective communication for the conquest³⁹. Muhammad Ali also used propaganda by appointing three notable Islamic scholars including the famous scholar, Sheikh Ahmad al-Salāwi al-Maghrebi who was then appointed a Mufti commanding the Malikites in Sudan so as to lure them to the importance of obedience to the Ottoman Empire which signified a symbol of Muslim power during that time and the irregularities of opposing it in Islam⁴⁰.

The Shagiyyah, who, had already opted out of the Sultanate of Sinnar almost a century before, resisted the Egyptian forces at Kurti and Jabal Daiqa, but were finally defeated by the superior Egyptian fire-power. The last Sultan of Sinnar, Bādi submitted to the Ottomans peacefully and they took over the capital on the 14th of June, 1821⁴¹. Those who resisted under Hassan Wad Rajab, a Hamaj chief were finally run down at the River Rahaj, while Ali wad Timasāh, a cousin of the puppet Mak of Berber, was finally hanged at Sinnar following the order of

³⁷ Hill Richard, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 7.

³⁸ Hill Richard, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, 7-9.

³⁹ Hill Richard, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, 9-10.

⁴⁰ Hill Richard, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, 9.

⁴¹ Hill Richard, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, 10.

Khedive Isma'il. Many people were also killed and left unburied until they stank⁴².

Conclusion

Though many scholars tend to give more credence to the socio-economic and administrative aspects of the history of the Funj Sultanate of Sinnar, this paper laid more emphasis on its military history, which is considered the most important catalyst that ensured not only the establishment of the Sultanate, but also its existence for over three hundred years. This is because the military with its exceptional training and technological advancement provided adequate security to the Sultanate, as well as protected it from external aggressions, especially from their hostile Christian neighbors of Ethiopia. One classic example in this regard was the woeful defeat of the Ethiopian army during their second crusade to do away with Muslim influence in the Sudan. This victory was widely celebrated by Muslims across the globe, particularly those in India, Sind, Egypt and the Maghreb.

The paper equally observed that the fierce and exceptional nature of the Funj army, made it easy for them to defeat most of the adversaries who came their way. This was so due to their discipline, especially as they were equipped with strong and unshakable belief in the Sultanate and its history. The disintegration and final collapse of the Sultanate were directly attributed to internal political, administrative, social and economic problems, which finally left the Sultanate prey to the Egyptian invasion and conquest.

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⁴² Hill Richard, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, 10.

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