

Diversity Tip Sheet

Sudanese Culture: An Overview

History

Since achieving independence in 1956, Africa's largest nation has been governed by a series of military & parliamentary governments, with the Arab north holding power over the black African south. Fundamentalist Islamic law (Sharia) was instituted in 1983, deepening the rift between the Muslim north and the Christian and animist south. Differences in language, religion, ethnicity, along with the power disparity, and valuable oil fields located in the south have led to a brutal and genocidal civil war.

Recent decades have unveiled tragedy after tragedy in Sudan, from human rights violations to religious persecution, from harboring terrorists (Osama bin Laden once made his home in Sudan) to slavery, with Arab raiders from the north taking captive thousands of black southerners, including many children who were forced into military service.

In May 2004, a deal between the government in the north and the SPLA (Sudan People's Liberation Army) in the south was signed, officially ending 20 years of brutal civil war that resulted in the deaths of 2 million people. Unfortunately, the treaty has not brought peace to Sudan. Conditions have continued to deteriorate in Sudan's northwestern Darfur region, where pro-government militias have carried out massacres against black Muslim villagers and rebel groups. Between 200,000 and 300,000 civilians have been killed in Darfur, and more than 1 million have been displaced. The international community has been unsuccessful in persuading the Sudanese government to rein in the Janjaweed militias and end the humanitarian disaster—unmistakably the world's worst—and the tragedy in Sudan continues up to the present.

On Tribes

There are more than 100 tribes in Sudan, each with their own language. Sudanese refugees in the United States are chiefly members of the Nilotic tribes, including the Dinka, Nuer, and Shilluk. Members of different tribes generally communicate in either English or Arabic, and long-standing inter-tribal conflicts may strain relations between them.

Culture

Because Sudan's population is deeply divided by language, religion, and ethnicity, the nation has no uniform culture that unites its people. The Islamic Arab culture of the north has little in common with the black Africans of the south, and the southern tribes also differ from each other in cultural practices. However, nearly all Sudanese refugees are from the south, and the southern cultures do share certain common characteristics. Regional and individual expressions of that culture may vary widely, but the following generalizations may help you better understand and relate to the Sudanese you come in contact with.

- **Scarification:** Facial scarring is an ancient Sudanese custom, and while it is becoming less common today, many Sudanese still possess these tribal markings, which are a sign of bravery and beauty. Each tribe has its own particular markings. The Shilluk have a line of bumps along the forehead; the Nuer have six parallel lines on the forehead; and the Ja'aliin mark lines on their cheeks. Women sometimes have their entire bodies scarred in patterns that reveal their marital status and the number of children they have had.
- **Cattle:** Cattle traditionally played a key role in the culture of many southern tribes. The number of cattle a family owned was a sign of wealth and status. Cattle were used to pay a bride price. Cattle also held religious value for some groups and could be sacrificed in traditional animist rituals. Among the Dinka and other Nilotic tribes, the cattle shed served as a shrine and gathering place.
- **Marriage and Family:** Polygamy was common in the past, though it is much less common today. Marriages are traditionally arranged by the families, and matches are often made between cousins or other relatives. Marriages are almost always made within the tribe. There is generally a significant age difference between husband and wife as the man must be economically self-sufficient before he can marry and must be able to pay the bride price. Extended families often live together under the same roof, or else in nearby. Newlyweds typically move in with the wife's family until they have their first child.
- **Education:** Prior to independence, most schools in the south were established by Christian missionaries, and much of the educated class are still Christians. The government closed all mission schools in 1962 and established Islamic schools teaching Arabic and the Qur'an. The south still has fewer schools than the north, and the literacy rate in Sudan is only 58% for men and 36% for women.

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Culture, Cont.

- **Animism:** Animism is the system of belief ascribing spirits to natural objects such as trees, rivers, and rocks, and attempting to use ritual to manipulate the spirits in order to avoid troubles and achieve health and prosperity. Multiple spirits and gods are believed to control different aspects of life, and the spirits of ancestors are also worshipped and believed to influence daily life. Specific beliefs and practices vary by tribe and region. Wearing amulets for protection is a common practice among most tribes.
- **Music and Dance:** Music and dance are central to Sudanese culture, serving both recreational and religious purposes. Indigenous music is based on the pentatonic scale—a scale with five notes to the octave, like the black keys on the piano—and is distinguished by drumming and complex rhythms, although other percussion and stringed instruments are also used.
- **Gender Roles:** Men and women traditionally led largely separate lives and socialized primarily with members of their own sex, although field work was shared by both men and women.

Resources

Want to learn more about your Southeast Asian friends and coworkers? Here are some great resources to get you started, all available at Rochester Public Library.

- **Emma's War**, by Deborah Scroggins. Emma McCune came to Sudan as a British relief worker and eventually married a rebel warlord. Her story opens a window into the tragedy and conflict of Sudan.
- **The Lost Boys of Sudan.** This award-winning documentary follows two Sudanese refugees on an extraordinary journey from Africa to America. Safe at last from physical danger and hunger, a world away from home, they find themselves confronted with the abundance and alienation of contemporary American suburbia.
- **What is the What**, by Dave Eggers. Separated from his family when Arab militia destroy his village, Valentino Achak Deng joins thousands of other Lost Boys, orphans who survived starvation, thirst and man-eating lions on their march through Sudan to refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. Deng eventually reaches America where he finds new challenges waiting.