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Front cover. General view of Site WNP-J-22\1, Al-Jabalain, White Nile State. Photo by Hamad Mohammed Hamdeen.

Keepers of tradition: preliminary remarks from the ethnographic investigation of customs associated with clothing and authority among Sudanese women

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Introduction

In many cultures, clothing is a powerful form of non-verbal communication that conveys a wealth of information about the wearer's social identity (Barnard 2014; Entwistle 2015). In Sudanese society, traditional attire is not only a reflection of cultural and religious affiliations but also an indicator of wealth, social status, and group membership. Clothing functions as a material repository of tradition, with specific garments and styles often encoded with cultural significance and historical continuity (Abusharaf 2009).This study explores how clothing serves as a medium for expressing and negotiating social relationships, thereby reinforcing social bonds, especially during significant life events such as weddings, funerals, births, and initiation ceremonies (Beck 2013). For instance, bridal *trousseaux* prepared collaboratively by brides and their mothers often include items passed down through generations, strengthening matrilineal ties (El-Tayib *et al.* 2017). Similarly, male prestige in traditional communities is frequently linked to their ability to provide for their families, including supplying clothing, which visibly demonstrates their role as husbands and fathers (Kennedy 2006, 168).

Furthermore, clothing is imbued with meanings that communicate the wearer's identity and values, acting as a transformative medium that delineates sacred spaces and sanctifies both people and places. During Sudanese *zar* ceremonies, roughly comparable to Christian exorcisms, the leading woman, known as the *sheikha zar*, dons a red dress, symbolising the lure for spirits with the colour red representing blood, particularly menstrual blood (Boddy 1989; 2013). Moreover, attire consolidates political systems; in many African communities, leaders and those with significant authority have privileged access to the most valuable and richly decorated garments, using these to assert dominance over other community members (Anawalt 1980).

Given the contemporary Sudanese population's adherence to Islamic cultural norms, particularly regarding women's clothing in relation to ethical and moral values (Abdelhaleem 2008, 72; Fluehr-Lobban 1987, 8), this study also addressed the complex interplay between modern Islamic practices and pre-Islamic, local traditions. This cultural eclecticism, especially prominent in daily life, provides a unique opportunity to study traditions that may have preserved ancient practices. With Sudan's extensive ethnic diversity, variations in fabric, patterns, dyes, and decorations are likely to reflect differences in origin, ethnicity, and culture (Vogelsang-Eastwood 1998, 179; Yvanez 2018a, 85; Yvanez and Woźniak 2019, 5-6, 22-24).

The objective of the current study was to explore the customs surrounding traditional attire and how they signify social status among contemporary Sudanese women. Previous research suggests that women in Nubia traditionally upheld cultural traditions, making them valuable repositories of historical knowledge (Kennedy 2006, 203-222). This research aims to document the rich tapestry of cultural influences and reconstruct their meanings by answering questions about the diversity of attire based on social position, the manifestation of status and group affiliation, attributes of power within attire, the roots and forms of specific clothing traditions, and the evolving practices associated with clothing. Combining ethnographic research with archaeological and historical data, it seeks to examine not only the contemporary culture of

traditional dress but also potential continuities of past traditions. By doing so, the study aims to illuminate how culture is propagated and maintained through attire, offering valuable insights into the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity in Sudanese society (Yvanez and Woźniak 2019, 37-39).

The project has been conducted in cooperation with the project *Soba – the heart of the kingdom of Alwa. The spatial organisation of medieval capital city on the Blue Nile* (funded by the National Science Centre of Poland, grant no. 2018/29/B/HS3/02533) led by Dr. Mariusz Drzewiecki (Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw) and the project *The 'Good Shepherd' of Maseeda. An image in the context of the changing cultural landscape of the Third Cataract of the Nile* (grant no. 2019/35/B/HS3/02440) directed by Dr. Hab. Dobrochna Zielińska (Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw).

Historical background

During Sudan's pre-industrial era, everyday women's clothing predominantly consisted of garments crafted from cured cowhide, including wraparound skirts, loincloths, girdles, and various styles of headwear. Textile clothing was notably rare during this period, with limited evidence for this prior to the Meroitic era, though its prevalence notably increased after the 1st century AD. While wool and linen were the primary fabrics in earlier times, the shift towards cotton became pronounced in the early centuries AD (Yvanez and Woźniak 2019). Cotton textiles, often in the form of large rectangular pieces, were versatile in their use. Wrapped around the hips, they could serve as skirts or long dresses, while draped over the shoulders, they functioned as mantles. However, cotton attire remained accessible primarily to the elite, symbolising status and authority. Tailored cotton garments, such as tunics and trousers, gradually became more common, though tailored clothing remained rare until the Late Christian period (Yvanez and Woźniak 2019, 31). Depictions in Meroitic art typically portray non-elite individuals wearing mid-length skirts or loincloths, often complemented by a rectangular mantle and leather accessories, reflecting ancient dress traditions dating back to the Kerma period. Throughout the medieval period, wool emerged as the dominant fibre, with cotton experiencing a resurgence after the 12th century AD, as evidenced by archaeological findings from various sites across Sudan and Nubia (Yvanez and Woźniak 2019), such as Qasr Ibrim (Adams 2010, 64), Kulubnarti (Adams 1998), Gebel Adda (Yvanez 2018b, 103-123), Hambukol (Grzymski and Anderson 2001), and

Figure 1. Project anthropologist, Ms. Agnes Dudek, trying on a *thawb*, a traditional Sudanese garment (photo by Fatima Edres Ali Mahmoud).

Soba (Vogelsang-Eastwood 1991, 300-308; 1998, 177-182).

Before the Condominium (i.e., pre-1899), the preferred dress for unmarried girls in northern Sudan consisted of a headscarf (arab. *tarha*) and a plain cotton skirt tied with a string, while the chest was often left uncovered (Brown 2017, 88-89). At the beginning of the 20th century, the *thawb* emerged as the predominant garment for Sudanese women (Figure 1). The Arabic term 'tob' or 'thawb' (meaning 'a bolt of cloth') generally refers to clothing, but in Sudanese culture, it specifically denotes an outer, seamless garment measuring roughly 4-4.5m in length and 2m in width. Originally crafted from cotton, contemporary versions often incorporate synthetic fabrics. The garment traces its origins to the late 1700s when wealthy merchants in Darfur clothed their wives and daughters in large swaths of fine imported linen, muslin or silk to demonstrate their wealth and prestige (La Rue 1993). The *thawb* not only serves as clothing but also carries social significance, distinguishing between married and unmarried women – a tradition historically observed until the 1950s and still practiced in some communities today (Brown 2017, 29). The quality of the *thawb* reflects levels of wealth and sophistication, and among the diaspora, it serves as a symbol of national identity. Its versatility extends beyond mere attire; the *thawb* doubles as a makeshift mosquito net, nightdress, pouch for belongings, and even a discreet curtain for breastfeeding in public. In absence of other fitting dress that met British standards of propriety, at the beginning of the 20th century, the wearing of *thawb* was extended to schoolgirls and throughout the rapid social transformations of the following decades was promoted as a safe haven of morality and newly forged Sudanese identity.

The blue-dyed *zarag thawb* was associated with indigo cultivation in the 19th century Dongola Reach (El-Tayib *et al.* 2017, 37). Until the 1960s, it remained the most economical choice, favoured by rural communities in riverine agricultural areas. Subsequently, preferences shifted towards the *krib aswad*, a black voile, or black or brown *farda*. In the 1950s, women typically owned two *thawbs* – the *zarag* for everyday wear and the *abyad*, a white *thawb*, reserved for special occasions like weddings and funerals (Boddy 1989, 93). However, by the late 1960s and 1970s, these were replaced by affordable coloured or patterned *thawbs* imported from India, known as *thawb jeran*, bridging the gap between work attire and formal wear (El-Tayib *et al.* 2017, 56). Until the 1970s-1980s, a woman's wardrobe often featured a fine white voile *thawb* of superior quality, which remained the preferred fashion for elite Sudanese women. Gradually, very pale pastel-coloured *thawbs* of the same material gained popularity, initially perceived as somewhat flashy or associated with tribal regions outside the valley. However, perceptions evolved in recent decades, with vibrant, colourful *thawbs* becoming commonplace for various occasions.

Among the first Sudanese women to join the workforce were midwives, nurses, and teachers. Encouraged by the British administrators, midwives and nurses adopted a formal uniform comprising a cotton dress and plain white *thawb* as a sign of professionalisation and rising medical standards (Brown 2017, 67-68). The white uniforms, required by the British instructors, marked a difference and superiority over the local *daya* – a traditional midwife with no medical training – and imparted a certain social authority. White *thawbs* with blue scarves identified midwives as imperial agents whose movements should not be questioned. Later on, white *thawbs* were adopted by teachers and became associated with similar respect. In the 1920s and 1930s women's acheivements and associated prestige were already marked by dedicated garments, such as the striped *thawbs* called 'The Schoolmistress' Ribs' or 'The Doctors' Ribs' (El-Tayib 1976, 306; Brown 2017, 83). To this day, school mistresses retain the white *thawb* as a symbol of professionalism and respectability in their profession (El-Tayib *et al.* 2017; Brown 2017, 68).

Keepers of Tradition

The current study involved six weeks of anthropological fieldwork conducted within selected Sudanese

communities, each representing distinct ways of life: rural Miseeda in northern Sudan and Soba East in the suburbs of Khartoum. Miseeda is located in the 3rd cataract region and its population belongs to the Mahas, a sub-group of the Nubian people inhabiting the area of Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan along the banks of the Nile (Adams 1977, 44-64). Meanwhile, the Mugharba tribe, allegedly descended from the Moroccans who migrated to Sudan in the 15th century, constitutes the core of the local Soba East population (Hassan 2002, 242). Additionally, it is important to note that Soba East is home to a significant number of immigrants, particularly from South Sudan and other neighbouring countries. This diversity adds richness to the community and undoubtedly influences local cultural dynamics and transformations. However, given the focus of our research, the interviews were intentionally restricted to individuals of Sudanese background.

Data collection occurred through semi-formal individual interviews as well as informal individual and group discussions.[1] Beyond structured home visits, information was gathered in relaxed settings such as neighbourly gatherings over coffee, sweets, or food, as well as in marketplaces or other communal settings. Approximately 40 interviews were conducted, though the exact number of participants remains indeterminate due to the fluid nature of group contexts. Family members or neighbours often spontaneously joined interviews, adding depth to the discussions. The interviewees primarily consisted of adult women, with a few older teenagers also participating. All interviews were conducted by Agnes Dudek, a cultural anthropologist, with assistance from Fatima Edres Ali Mahmoud from the Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Tourism and Archaeology, University of Shendi.

Preliminary observations

Our preliminary observations reveal that traditional attire plays a crucial role in communicating social identities and cultural values among Sudanese women. In both studied communities, authority and status were predominantly associated with age and specific garments. Older women, for instance, held certain privileges, such as the opportunity to wear a white *thawb*, which carried significant symbolism associated with purity and authority (Boddy 1989, 54). Colours hold considerable significance for Sudanese culture, with white considered *Sunna*, a colour favoured by the Prophet (Abdelhaleem 2008, 73; El-Tayib *et al.* 2017, 48).

In Miseeda, the *thawb* was the favoured garment (Figure 2), whereas in Soba, the *abaya* (a simple, loose over-garment) was the preferred attire. In the rural context of Mahas, only older women are allowed to participate in the Sufi ceremonies on Friday and they are distinguished by the wearing of a white *thawb*; younger women may eat and pray at the mosque, but only the older can remain and participate (Boddy 2013, 445; Fluehr-Lobban 1987, 136). On a daily basis, the women did not wear an *abaya* and rarely covered their heads. In contrast, most of the teachers at the local school wore the *abaya* and only the headmistress and the oldest among teachers still wore white *thawbs*. Certain colours, especially white and red, definitely held significant authority within the community. White was typically reserved for esteemed roles such as teachers or elders, while red symbolised ceremonial events like the *jirtig* wedding ritual and the headwear (*tarbush*) worn by leaders during *zar* ceremonies.[2] Apart from grandmothers or teachers who have the

[1] Before the interview began, each participant was informed about the purpose, conditions, and any potential risks associated with taking part in the study. The interviews were recorded on a voice recorder, with prior consent from the participants. The only personal data collected during the study were gender, age, and ethnic background of the participants, as well as the voice recording. To anonymise personal data, each participant was assigned an ID number (replacing their name), which prevents identification based on the collected data. The interviews were stored as recordings, and the data obtained from them are in the form of handwritten notes. The collected data will be stored on digital media until the research results are published. The study obtained approval from the University of Warsaw Rector's Commission for Ethics of Scientific Research Involving Human Subjects beforehand.

[2] *Zar* ceremonies are rituals to appease and celebrate invisible anthropomorphic beings of the mortal world, who can take possession of the human bodies, producing or intensifying human ailments; for more information see Boddy 1989; 2013.

Figure 2. Fatima Edres Ali Mahmoud interviewing one of the study's participants, an inhabitant of Misseeda, Mahas region,

privilege of wearing a white *thawb*, a midwife also traditionally arrives at her delivery wearing the same garment, which she then removes before assisting with the delivery. Within the Mahas community, there exists a cultural aversion towards 'glitter' and shiny clothing, with these items being perceived as inappropriate except for occasions such as weddings or other significant events. Additionally, women were viewed as custodians of specific traditions, which they were responsible for protecting. To fulfil this role, they adopted various practices, such as decorating the gates and interiors of homes with drawings that symbolised protection, including images of the crescent, star, cross, and other shapes passed down since ancient times. This protective role was further evidenced by the wearing of gold rings (*jiney*), believed to offer protection against malevolent forces. Emerging beauty ideals now encompass a preference for a 'white' complexion accompanied by dark eyes and lips, a departure from previous practices such as scarification (*shulukh*), dyeing the lower lip black, and accentuating black eyes. These modern beauty standards, especially embraced by young women, reflect a form of modernity and adherence to contemporary fashion trends.

Conversely, insights gathered from the Soba region painted a distinct picture (Figure 3). Among younger women, there was a preference for the *abaya*, attributed to its comfort, while the *thawb* was typically reserved for domestic or ceremonial events. Notably, there was meticulous care taken in maintaining *thawbs*, reflecting a deep respect for tradition and personal presentation. Clothing choices are increasingly influenced by both fashion trends, such as coordinating leggings with the *abaya* for a stylish look, and considerations of comfort. Additionally, prestige is often associated with factors like the quality of the fabric or the garment's place of production, with a notable emphasis on owning a *thawb* crafted in countries like Italy or Switzerland – particularly among those who have the financial means to afford such luxury items. Social stratification is discernible based on individuals' sources of income. Additionally, customs originating from Eastern Sudan (such as 'Indian' *farda*) resonated strongly, highlighting a nuanced regional identity. In contrast to Miseeda, women in Soba adhered more strictly to modest dress codes, often veiling themselves with *hijabs* or *burqas*. A skirt or dress is suitable attire for meeting family or friends, whereas an *abaya* is commonly worn when visiting the market. There's a heightened emphasis on cultivating physical beauty, particularly through practices such as skin bleaching, 'bathing' in incense-laced smoke (*dukhan*), which gives a woman a slightly tanned look, and employing natural methods for skin softening. Weddings emerged as significant events, marked by a fervent desire to uphold customs and traditions.

Figure 3. Fatima Edres Ali Mahmoud with one of the interviewed women from Soba, Khartoum stat (photo by A. Dudek).

Interestingly, both men and women were perceived as custodians of tradition. Despite a strong sense of Sudanese identity, in Soba there seemed to be a certain disconnect concerning ancestral traditions, indicating a potential gap in cultural continuity. Contrary to what one may assume, the women residing in the metropolitan suburbs are actually more conservative compared to the rural community of northern Sudan. Their conservatism is largely driven by their strong adherence to their faith and the principles of Islam. In contrast, in the northern region known as historical Nubia, a deep-seated affinity to local tribes, believed to be indigenous, takes precedence over other aspects of identity, such as religious affiliation, despite many identifying as Muslim (Kennedy 2006, 1-18). Women in this region often assert that certain customs have roots predating Islam and consider themselves the custodians of these traditions – a claim supported by the ongoing practice or preservation of some traditional customs among the region's oldest inhabitants. For instance, it is common to hear of newborns being marked with the symbol of a cross shortly after birth, typically drawn with dark kohl on their foreheads. Additionally, a cross may be drawn on the wall of the birth room for protection, a practice clearly reminiscent of Christian customs predating the spread of Islam in the region. Another example is that some of Misseeda's oldest inhabitants still recall a tradition where, after giving birth, they would bury their placenta by the Nile as an offering to the angels of the river (Kennedy 2006, 104-113). The belief in these supernatural beings residing in underwater cities remains prevalent among the Nubian community. Many more such examples can be cited, reflecting the rich tapestry of traditions and beliefs that endure in the region.

Conclusions

The *thawb* is considered traditional Sudanese attire, despite its relatively recent history. While it can be worn casually at home, the *thawb* is typically reserved for ceremonial occasions such as weddings, even when an *abaya* is worn outside, for example, for school or work. It is evident that, in terms of continuity and connection to historical narratives, the *thawb* and many other pieces of clothing worn by women today have no direct linkage to garments worn in the past. However, our research has highlighted the continuity of practices and the mindset of the people.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the enduring cultural practices and transformations within Sudanese communities, particularly among women. Throughout Sudanese history, clothing has served as more than just attire; it has been a means of communication, reflecting social status, cultural identity,

and religious beliefs. Our research underscores the significance of traditional attire in shaping individual and communal identities, from the historical reliance on garments crafted from natural materials to the modern preference for the *thawb* among Sudanese women. We found that while there is a certain continuity in cultural practices, there are also notable shifts influenced by factors such as globalisation, urbanisation, and economic status. The preference for certain garments, colours, and beauty ideals reflects evolving societal norms and individual aspirations.

Importantly, our research highlights the continuity of certain practices across generations. However, the inter-generational transmission of these traditions and the perceptions of different age groups regarding traditional attire are areas that warrant further exploration. The ways in which clothing marks specific statuses in a woman's life and how these are perceived by the community are rich with potential insights. Our study underscores the significant role that traditional attire plays in shaping and communicating social identities and cultural values among Sudanese women. While this research has primarily focused on the current practices and historical continuity of traditional dress, it is important to note that the inter-generational transmission of these practices and the perceptions of different age groups warrant further investigation. The ways in which clothing marks specific statuses in a woman's life and how these are perceived by the community are areas rich with potential insights. We acknowledge that exploring these aspects through inter-generational interviews and specific lines of questioning about age groups could yield interesting and valuable results. Indeed, these dimensions are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance of attire in Sudanese society.

Our study also underscores the importance of considering regional and socioeconomic differences in understanding cultural practices. While some traditions are deeply rooted in specific communities, others may evolve or fade away over time. The contrast between the conservatism observed in metropolitan suburbs and the preservation of ancestral traditions in historical Nubia exemplifies the complexity of cultural identity and continuity in Sudanese society. Prior studies suggest that women in Nubia were entrusted with preserving traditions and cultural practices, potentially making them the primary custodians of historical knowledge. This study served as a preliminary exploration within a broader ethnographic inquiry into the persistence of daily customs and traditions among contemporary Sudanese women, forming part of a comprehensive examination of women's lived experiences in historical Nubia. Moving forward, further research is needed to explore the nuances of cultural practices and their implications for social cohesion, identity formation, and community resilience. By engaging with local communities and drawing on interdisciplinary approaches, we can deepen our understanding of Sudanese culture and contribute to efforts aimed at preserving and celebrating its rich heritage.

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