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The Sultan Ali Dinar Museum, el-Fasher.
A window on Darfur’s history

Pieter Tesch

The Sultan Ali Dinar Palace Museum in el-Fasher (Plates 1 and 2), the historical capital of the Sultanate of Dar Fur1 and now the state capital of North Darfur, is not only important as a provincial museum, but also houses a nice collection of antiquities from the Middle Nile region. Brought together in this regional museum are collections focussing on the pagan Kushite and Christian Nubian civilisations of the distant past as well as those from the recent past, including the regalia and memorabilia of Sultan Ali Dinar (1898-1916) (Plates 3 and 4), the last independent monarch of Dar Fur – the Land of the Fur. The artefacts from his reign clearly illustrate the character of Dar Fur as a Muslim sultanate as well as an African kingdom. In fact, the museum offers a window on the history of Darfur from the region’s last manifestation as an independent political entity in modern times to its prehistoric roots.

The first European traveller to visit the region and describe it was William George Browne in 1793-1796 (1799). He was trying to follow in the footsteps of James Bruce, who had travelled to the Funj Sultanate and the Blue Nile a few years earlier. However, Browne was not allowed to travel further into the sultanate because of trouble with its vassals in Kordofan who had allied themselves with the Funj. As a result he was confined to el-Fasher at the foot of Jebel Marra (Edwards 2004, 272; Insoll 2003, 131; Udal 1998, 119-125).

Ali Dinar was the last independent sultan of Dar Fur. He was killed by a British military expedition in 1916 after he heeded the call for jihad by the Ottoman Sultan against the British. He had been angered by Anglo-French negotiations

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1 El-Fashir was founded as a permanent capital around AD 1791-92 (AH 1206).

2 Fasher or Fashir can refer to the ‘palace’ or the court in front of the palace.
over disputed territory between Wadai and Darfur after annexation of this area by the French. This region was one over which the Dar Fur sultans traditionally had claimed suzerainty.

Ali Dinar Zakariya, a member of the Keira clan that had ruled the Fur people since the late 16th – early 17th century, fought in the battle of Omdurman on the Kerari plain in 1898 among the troops from Darfur of the Khalifa Abdallahi Mohammed el-Ta’ishi. Having survived the slaughter, he managed to make his way back to Darfur. In agreement with the remnants of Madhist forces there, he was proclaimed sultan. He was the grandson of an earlier Fur sultan, Mohammed al-Fadl. His grandfather, despite losing the conflict with Mohammed Ali for Kordofan in the 1820s during the Turco-Egyptian conquest of Sudan, managed to avert, for the Fur Sultanate, the fate of the Funj Sultanate in the Nile Valley. Dar Fur was eventually incorporated into the Turkiyya in 1874 after the Khedive Ismail felt he needed to curb the powers of Zubeir Pasha in the west. Following the Fashoda crisis in 1899, Britain and France could not agree about the border between their newly acquired possessions in the central and eastern parts of the historical Bilad al-Sudan, the future Chad and Sudan, from the Nile-Congo watershed northwards into the Sahara. As a result, Dar Fur was allowed to become independent with Ali Dinar as sultan, recognising nominally the Anglo-Egyptian authority in Khartoum (Udal 2005, 381, 442, 477, 491, 533; Holt and Daly 2000, 88-91, 93, 96, 110-111).

Following the ravages of the last quarter of the 19th century, Sultan Ali Dinar reconstructed the capital el-Fasher, restored family tombs and enclosed sites at Tora in the Fur heartland of Jebel Marra, and reburied one of his predecessors, Sultan Zachariah Ali, in a qubba in el-Fasher (Plate 5). The affection of the Fur people for Jebel Marra is still enormous and Tora is regarded as their spiritual home. Apart from the palace of Ali Dinar, the qubba of Zachariah Ali is one of the few remaining historic structures left in el-Fasher. There is also a former arsenal constructed of mud brick, which is still being used as a women’s prison and is, therefore, in danger of alteration as new structures are being built within it and without.

Ali Dinar built a new palace for himself in the style of the colonial villas constructed in Khartoum after 1898. It has very thick walls to keep the heat out and overlooks the seasonal lake in the centre of the town that is fed by wadis during the rainy season. The building that now houses the museum was constructed by specialist builders from the Nile Valley and master craftsmen from Egypt between 1911 and 1912. However, in spite of its name, it was not actually Ali Dinar’s residence, but his seat of government, with the throne hall, at its centre. This has been restored to its former glory and now functions as the main gallery for Ali Dinar’s regalia and memorabilia (Plates 3 and 4).

Ali Dinar’s private residence consisted of a traditional Fur compound of tukls (round mud houses) and a square, thatched building, divided into three, housing his private rooms, that was located at the side of the palace. In between the compound of the private residence and the palace was a square, flat-roofed mud and fired-brick building, known as the coffee house, where the Sultan informally met his advisers and traditional rulers and chiefs of the Fur as well as allied peoples from outside the capital. It was here that he made himself available to petitioners and supplicants (Plates 6 and 7).
It is no coincidence that the museum was opened in 1977 during a temporary cessation of the civil war in the south and a time of national reconciliation and cooperation (Plate 8). Sultan Ali Dinar is a national hero in modern Sudan both for having fought the British in the Mahdist army and as the last independent sultan of Dar Fur. He is also a potent symbol for the special identity of the Fur people within Sudan as well.

Mohamed Mussa, regional director of NCAM in Darfur, and the Keira Clan (Plate 9) for the hospitality extended to me during my stay in el-Fasher during April 2007.

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