

‘Shama will not dance’: University of Khartoum politics, 1964–69

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During an election campaign at the University of Khartoum, the Democratic Front, a leftist political alliance made up of student communists and other leftist students (‘democrats’) chose to hold a cultural party (El Tayeb 1971: 42–3). This party was to have various events, including a play and poetry, as it had in previous years; however, in addition, students were to perform dances from different regions of Sudan. Of these dances, *Ajako*, a traditional dance from the Kordofan region, gained such prominence in the rhetoric surrounding the event that the ensuing conflict is often referred to as the ‘*Ajako* incident’ (Abdel Fadl 1998: 78–80). Before the event, students affiliated with the Islamic Movement (Ar., *al-Harakat al-Islamiyya*) (see note 4 below) within the student union and within the university at large made it clear that they did not accept its legitimacy and would shut the event down should the dance proceed. Then, reportedly as the drums and dancing began, a member of the Islamic Movement, Abdel Rahim Ali, stood up and shouted to the crowd that the proceedings must be stopped (*ibid.*: 79). This prompted a conflict within the examination hall in which students fought, some using sticks and makeshift weapons they had brought from outside, while others simply used material that they had to hand, including the chairs in the hall.¹ The fighting extended out of the examination hall, with students running towards the young men’s barracks dormitory and the student cafeteria, where the conflict continued.² Along this path in the middle of the fighting, a left-leaning student, Sayed Abdel Rahim al Tayyeb, was killed, likely trampled by the crowd. While the authorities opened up investigations into the student’s death, they were unable to find sufficient evidence to conclude who was responsible (*ibid.*: 80).

Student life within the university, as well as the terms of the political conflict that led to this riot, serves in many ways as a microcosm for the debates of Sudanese national politics. At the same time, this event illustrates the ways in which student politics served as a forum for the radicalization of national politics, with student political groups able to pressure their political parties to take particular positions and effect their concerns and priorities. In order to best understand these issues, this article will begin with an overview of associative life at the University of Khartoum and the role of cultural associations. It will then explain the events of the public dance controversy, discussing the terms of the debate as well as its aftermath.

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¹Interviews with Omer Sir Elkhatim, 27 January 2015, and Suliman Muhammad Ibrahim, 13 January 2015.

²Interview with Omer Sir Elkhatim, 27 January 2015.

Associative life at the University of Khartoum

Elevated to the status of a university in 1956 at independence, the University of Khartoum was not only Sudan's first and most prestigious educational institution, but the pinnacle of its education system, which was slowly expanding to include more primary schools across the country. The British had established Gordon Memorial College, the university's predecessor, in 1902 on the 'reconquest' of Sudan in order to create a governing elite that could serve the mid-level bureaucratic needs of the protectorate. This was undertaken in coordination with the University of London, and the teaching there was consequently primarily in English. By the time of independence, a small number of secondary schools – three for men and one for women in the north – were designated to train students to attend the University of Khartoum. Slow attempts were also made to expand the system, though largely at the lower levels of education. Those who attended the University of Khartoum were therefore well placed to continue to a career within the newly independent state's governing apparatus. Activities students pursued in this context were viewed by all those present as significant, not only because they taught students key skills in organizing or decision making, but also because the relationships students established among themselves were to continue after university. These same students were expected, both by their peers and by their mentors, to go on to play a role in the decision-making processes of the state.

The *Ajako* incident took place within a student associative environment marked profoundly by political affiliation, although these political affiliations were not mentioned explicitly in university regulations or structures. Khartoum University Student Union (KUSU) was explicitly responsible for the governance and support of student life on campus. KUSU's constitution stated in its objectives that, among other things, it sought 'the promotion and co-ordination of athletic and social activities of the students', as well as 'the maintenance of communication between the students and the authorities of the university in other than academic matters' (El Tayeb 1971: 19). As a mediator between the interests of the students and the university administration, KUSU was thus responsible for a range of activities. These included not only the management of academic and cultural societies that mounted events on the university campus, but also the maintenance and oversight of the student dormitories where all students then lived free of charge (*ibid.*: 19–20).

The union itself was composed of forty members, of whom ten were nominated by the union to take on the roles of the executive committee and directly oversee particular aspects of student life. The union was elected using a proportional, list system of representation, in which student alliances presented lists of twenty students. Students would then vote for twenty candidates, either from the same list or from multiple lists (El Tayeb 1971: 16–17). The entire student body could vote in these elections, and they had a relatively large turnout; in 1969, 91.08 per cent of students voted, and this was not seen as unusual. In this system, representation in the union inherently required compromise. While the executive could carry out the day-to-day functions of student affairs without debate, secure in their representation of the most populous political strains of the union itself, no single party was able to dominate the entire union (*ibid.*: 18). Even a popular group garnering a majority of votes within the university elections would gain only twenty seats

within the union, meaning that general elections would require the assent of at least one other political group in order for a decision to be reached. This system was formal, but necessitated interaction and negotiation between different political parties, even while encouraging political mobilization.

While the student union certainly governed student activities and student life, it was best known for its national political involvement. The union's constitution listed not only goals relating to student life, but also the goal of 'giving great consideration to the general national issues' (El Tayeb 1971: 19). In accordance with this dynamic, the student lists provided to the university were organized along political lines. The university made no direct provision for political organizations; however, student political organizations were recognized as associations within the university, and were overseen, like cultural and academic societies, by the union (*ibid.*: 20). Theoretically, any student group could put forward a student list for the elections; indeed, the names of the associations were not included on the voting lists themselves. However, it was common knowledge that each list represented a particular political association within the university (*ibid.*: 16). These political associations within the university were largely student branches of political parties that existed outside. They were not officially recognized as political parties; rather, they existed in the university as student associations, similar to cultural associations and those that promoted particular activities (*ibid.*: 20). For the national political parties, these student groups were a means of recruiting and mentoring influential youth who were seen to be the future of public life in the larger state. For students themselves, the link between student life and student politics and national politics gave their debates and decisions greater perceived importance while also allowing student leaders to position themselves among their peers and within the leadership of their political party with an eye towards advancement after university.

Although the names and parties themselves were the same as those outside the university, the sympathies of the students within the University of Khartoum did not mirror exactly the political sympathies of the nation. Outside the university, the Democratic Unionist Party³ and the Umma Party, sectarian parties supported by the Khatmiyya and Ansar religious sects respectively, garnered great support and gained majorities within the national parliament. They were influenced by the significantly smaller Islamic Charter Front and Communist Party, both of which had gained a small number of seats in parliament in 1965 (Holt and Daly 2011: 122–9). These parties' political strategy – and particularly the strategy of the Islamic Charter Front – was to work in coalition with one of the larger sectarian parties in order to gain greater political influence (El-Affendi 1991: 74–84). Inside the university, such a strategy was unnecessary. Sectarian parties with regional strongholds had relatively few supporters within the university and were marginal political actors, while the Islamic Charter Front and the Communist Party held great sway and were seen as ideology-based parties (El Tayeb 1971: 50).

³The Democratic Unionist Party had formed in 1967, after the People's Democratic Party, a purely sectarian party supported by the Khatmiyya, rejoined the National Unionist Party. The large numbers the party commanded were a product of their sectarian support.

Indeed, the dominant political debate within the university was one between the Democratic Front, a leftist alliance between the Communist Party and other leftists with communist leanings, and the Islamic Movement, a group whose origins lay with the Muslim Brotherhood and that linked itself to the Islamic Charter Front.⁴ Both of these political currents were established in the late 1940s in secondary schools, and while they expanded their membership beyond educational institutions, the core of their support remained at the University of Khartoum (El Tayeb 1971: 47–50). In addition to these parties, the political environment of the university also hosted a range of other parties, including the Socialist Union (sometimes discussed as the ‘neutral’ or ‘independent’ student party, depending on the time period), the Arab Socialist Front, an Arab Nationalist political party, and the Student Welfare Front, a party established exclusively within the university rather than nationwide, with the aim of supporting students from the south (*ibid.*: 45–50).⁵ These parties rarely won many seats, although at times a particular small party might gain more seats depending on political circumstances both in and outside the university (Abdel Fadl 1998: 60–77). Student political life was dominated in this context by a series of ideological debates that inflected issues governing student activities and daily life. While the decisions themselves were often small in scale and of minor importance to the national parties to which students claimed affiliation, the ability to work through these decisions empowered students and allowed them to stake positions with relation to the politics of the day.

Cultural activities in student life

Student political associations put on events on a regular basis, particularly in the run-up to the student union elections; however, they did not exist separately from other cultural and academic associations. Rather, their influence extended to these other associations, which they used to recruit and maintain member interest. This was apparent in different ways within all political organizations, but it was most pronounced for the Democratic Front and the Islamic Movement, whose supporters were numerous enough to afford a range of activities (to meet the diversity of student interests and motivations). Indeed, other than sports, most student associations divided along political lines, so that, while students might have interests outside politics, their decision to participate in an activity within the confines of the university was a political statement, albeit a relatively small one. In the process, this created a social environment in which one socialized primarily with

⁴The Islamic Movement went by different names at different periods and in different settings. It began with the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1940s, but altered its name in different settings depending on its political allegiances and the structure of the organization. Outside the university, the Islamic Charter Front was the active political party; however, inside the university, many at this time referred to the movement as ‘the Islamic Trend’, and many of those I interviewed referred to the organization with different names. I choose to use the Islamic Movement to speak broadly of the Islamist student association that was present within the university, since it was most recognizably described by that name by those who participated in the organization during this period, and the name stresses its continuity with the broader Islamist movement in Sudan.

⁵The Student Welfare Front eventually changed its name in 1970 to the African Nationalist Front (ANF) in an attempt to project a larger, nationalist political vision.

students one agreed with politically and in which one's political identity was easily seen, not only through one's participation in elections but also in the clubs to which one belonged.

During the 1960s, the Democratic Front was best known for cultural associations focused on drama and the arts. Most artistic endeavours, particularly involving theatre and music, took place with the support of the associations called *Fikra Tagadami*, or Progressive Thought, and *Thaqafa Watani*, or National Culture. These groups were associated with the communist and social democratic portions of the Democratic Front respectively, as was explained by Omer Sir Elkhatim, a Democratic Front member from 1968 to 1973 who was involved in cultural and theatre activities on campus.⁶ While in theory these associations were divided on ideological grounds, the collaboration of social democrats and communists within the Democratic Front, in addition to the similar nature of these associations, meant that in practice student participation in the two groups tended to overlap, and they were seen as an umbrella for theatre and other cultural activities. These associations did not really keep records of members; instead, they functioned on a largely informal basis, offering support to upcoming cultural activities and participating in broader festivals that were organized by the Democratic Front (El Tayeb 1971: 42–3).⁷ In addition to these two larger cultural associations, the Democratic Front was also known for its participation in other cultural initiatives, including an association related to film, another explicitly related to theatre, and a third devoted to folklore, or *funun sha'abi*.⁸ In practice, these groups operated separately from politics on many occasions; indeed, judging by many of their future careers, the students participating in them were genuinely passionate about theatre, music and art in general, and they took care to list themselves as members of both organizations rather than focusing exclusively on the political dimensions of their work.

Funding for these associations came not from the Democratic Front but from the student union directly. These organizations were aligned informally with political parties through the association of particular individuals.⁹ Cultural groups were also meant to encourage further activity and engagement with student politics, appealing to the passions of independent students in the hope that they might join because of the activities. Suliman Muhammad, a Democratic Front member at the University of Khartoum, explained the informal nature of this recruitment, noting: 'It was not intended to be a political work, but it was one of the tools to attract independents and other parties. Yes, we'll give you something good, programmes and activities which others will not do.'¹⁰

The Islamic Movement, too, had cultural organizations, although these were distinctly religious. Abdel Rahim Ali, a major figure in the Islamic Movement during the late 1960s, noted that before he was involved in the explicitly political aspects of the Islamic Movement, he participated in a group called the Islamic

⁶Interview with Omer Sir Elkhatim, 27 January 2015.

⁷It was also described in great detail by Omer Sir Elkhatim, 27 January 2015.

⁸Interview with Suliman Muhammad Ibrahim, 13 January 2015.

⁹Interview with Omer Sir Elkhatim, 27 January 2015, on the workings of these cultural associations and their relations to the theatre.

¹⁰Interview with Suliman Muhammad Ibrahim, 13 January 2015.

Thought association. This association used to organize lectures and debates with speakers, from both Sudan and abroad, to improve political dialogue within the university.¹¹ Like the Democratic Front's associations, this group was technically independent and was overseen by the student union. Nonetheless, it had a distinctly political bent. Students within the Islamic Thought association would organize political lectures and made a point of inviting current politicians to speak at the university. Ali noted as a primary example a lecture organized in either in 1965 or 1966 in which they invited the major politicians of Sudan to come and speak together at the university on the subject of the execution of some Muslim Brothers in Egypt. Included among those invited were Ismail al-Azhari, Sadiq al-Mahdi, Ali Abdel Rahman and Hassan al-Turabi, all of whom were prominent politicians on the national scene.¹²

In the case of a lecture series, the links between cultural activities and political ones were obvious; however, the Islamic Movement also contained less explicitly political groups whose focus was more exclusively on religion. Indeed, the women in the Islamic Movement with whom I spoke tended to emphasize these cultural, religion-oriented groups as a central aspect of their membership of the Islamic Movement. Kalthoum Abu Gasim, who was a member of the student union in 1972, spoke vividly about the activities of the Islamic Movement with regards to Qur'anic reading circles. Women from the Islamic Movement – relatively few in number at that point at the University of Khartoum – would meet in the women's dormitory to read and analyse the Qur'an and lead prayers. She characterized this as 'more of a social group than a political group', almost as a group of friends who would spend time with each other, joining the young men for other lessons and lectures on religion at times but often spending time apart.¹³ Amna Bedri, whose involvement in the Islamic Movement largely began in 1974 and extended to the student union, also spoke of the social and cultural components of these activities. She noted that, while she was involved in the political aspects, she often also handled the social elements of the movement, including organizing a party for incoming students in order to attract new members. Additionally, she made reference to small religious reading circles, referred to by the Islamic Movement as 'families', where members would meet regularly to read and discuss the Qur'an.¹⁴ This 'family' structure is consistent with the original organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which was later exported to Sudan (Mitchell 1993: 195–200), and speaks to the grass-roots community building that the Muslim Brotherhood undertook. Unlike in Egypt, however, this grass-roots community building in Sudan largely occurred among students rather than more widely. Religious study circles, like the more public lectures, were meant to create a sense of community and engage students, encouraging them to participate further in the Islamic Movement in the future.

These overlapping associations, while informal, had a profound influence on student life and served to strengthen political organizations while simultaneously promoting division and a degree of polarization within the student body. Because

¹¹Interview with Abdel Rahim Ali, 9 March 2015.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Interview with Kalthoum Abu Gasim, 1 March 2015.

¹⁴Interview with Amna Bedri, 18 March 2015.

the connection between cultural activities and politics was so strong, students were reluctant to join groups that were not associated with their party of choice, regardless of the appeal of the activity itself. Balghis Badri, a student at the time who was active within the student Umma Party, commented that for students affiliated with political parties with a smaller following within the university, this often militated against particular activities. She explained that, while in secondary school, where, particularly for women, student associational life was less polarized along political lines, she had enjoyed theatre and had participated in plays. When she first arrived at the university, however, she found that the Democratic Front ran the major theatre group on campus, and she felt that she could not join given her politics. At one point, another student, seeking to create a separate theatre group, approached her and she was initially excited about joining, until one of her colleagues informed her that he was a member of the Islamic Movement, and that the theatre group would thus be associated with another political strain. Politics, she noted, 'would stop me from joining any kind of cultural activities if it is dominated by either one of these two groups. It was clear in cultural activities.'¹⁵

Whether aligned with the Democratic Front or the Islamic Movement, such cultural associations did not function entirely separately from politics in their decision making. Rather, they often collaborated with their respective political entities in order to plan events, or at least to encourage their members to attend such events. This dynamic was most pronounced during the student union election season, when the political parties sought to organize events to appeal for student votes and to encourage student participation in the union for the coming year. During the years leading up to the *Ajako* incident, it was common practice for the Democratic Front to hold cultural festivals in order to reach out to student voters. These festivals were organized by *Fikra Tagadami* and *Thaqafa Watani*, which were responsible for organizing and putting on the events themselves; however, the decision to hold them at that particular time was a direct response to the political season of the university.¹⁶ The timing of the cultural festival remained constant for the Democratic Front and the cultural associations, but the programme and its scope changed each year depending on the interests of the students involved – particularly the students in the cultural associations. Sidgi Kabalo, an organizer with the Democratic Front, noted that in the years prior to the *Ajako* incident, the cultural festival had included poetry and theatre, but it had never included traditional dances. This addition had been sought the year before at the last minute, and, because of opposition faced by the Islamic Movement, it was decided that it should be included the following year, when there would be more time to prepare.¹⁷ This process underscored the extent to which association activities promoted politics and political mobilization, yet divided the student body, excluding some in the process of winning over unaligned students.

¹⁵Interview with Balghis Badri, 19 March 2015.

¹⁶Interview with Sidgi Kabalo, 20 January 2015.

¹⁷*Ibid.* This was also noted by Suliman Muhammad Ibrahim (13 January 2015).

Public dance controversy

From the beginning, the organization of a public dance was seen by all those involved in student life as an expression of politics.¹⁸ The programme was arranged in the autumn, at the beginning of the academic year prior to the union elections. This was done explicitly to raise the profile of the Democratic Front among students and garner support prior to the elections.¹⁹ Student organizers did not plan to discuss politics during the event as part of the programme itself; rather, the event would allow students to meet each other and discuss politics informally afterwards.²⁰ Since such campaign events had been typical in previous years, this was not seen as unusual until Democratic Front students were confronted by the opposition of the Islamic Movement. Members of the Democratic Front viewed this opposition as a challenge, and proceeded with the performance, knowing that a confrontation would be likely to occur, but not expecting any, or much, violence.²¹ While none of those interviewed explicitly mentioned the significance of that challenge to them, the Democratic Front's decision was consistent with the power struggle inherent in the upcoming elections. By proceeding with an election event that their rivals opposed, Democratic Front members not only were able to launch an event meant to gather supporters, but also proved their strength when pitted against the Islamic Movement. Democratic Front members also tended to emphasize their right to hold such an event; many mentioned the fact that the university administration had approved their event and that they were thus entitled to go forward with it, regardless of the feelings of the Islamic Movement.²² They viewed the Islamic Movement's opposition to the event as simply an opposition to their politics and their right to campaign, rather than as an instance of opposing a specific public activity. This is evident in the characterization of Reel al-Sham Muhammad Tomsah, or 'Shama', a Democratic Front member and student at the University of Khartoum from 1966 to 1970, who danced at the event and who explained: 'I knew from the beginning that these people were against the Democratic Front. They were against any activity.'²³

For members of the Islamic Movement, this event spoke both to inequalities and internal politics at the university and to broader ideological concerns. Members of the Islamic Movement stated publicly that they opposed a public dance in which women performed in front of mixed company (Abdel Fadl 1998: 79). Such opposition was articulated as opposition to violations of tradition. 'The opinion was that, for the first time, dancing was being organized by a political group, and that wasn't right ... Sudan is a conservative place, and it wasn't

¹⁸No one I interviewed contradicted this view. While it was a cultural event, it was recognized by all points on the political spectrum as political too, meant to reinforce Democratic Front election activities.

¹⁹Interview with Sidgi Kabalo, 20 January 2015.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Interview with Suliman Muhammad Ibrahim, 13 January 2015.

²²Interviews with Sidgi Kabalo, 20 January 2015, Suliman Muhammad Ibrahim, 13 January 2015, Omer Sir Elkhatim, 27 January 2015, and Reel al-Sham Muhammad Tomsah, 21 February 2015.

²³Interview with Reel al-Sham Muhammad Tomsah, 21 February 2015.

going to be nice if the university said, “OK, we organize dances,”” noted Abdel Rahim Ali, who represented the Islamic Movement in negotiations with the Dean of Student Affairs. At the same time, this opposition to dancing did not extend to all dances everywhere. Other dances were customarily staged in different regions of Sudan; indeed, Islamic Movement students often encountered dances, performed within other communities and at different events (particularly weddings), without actively opposing them. Abdel Rahim Ali continued: ‘The concern was with the moral aspect of mixed dances in the university. These were not allowed in Sudan at that time except in wedding houses, and usually it meant among families. So it wasn’t seen as an ordinary thing to happen.’²⁴ Thus, while the dances themselves were considered ‘traditional’ by the Islamic Movement, the setting in which they were performed was seen to change their meaning. These same girls, dancing within their own community outside Khartoum, were viewed by the Islamic Movement as doing something ordinary, whether they objected to it or not. It was through performance in a new setting, in front of men who were not from their home villages, that this mixed dancing became objectionable to them. The opposition, in this context, represented not just opposition to mixed dancing, but opposition to a changing society with different gender relations.

While members of the Islamic Movement all phrased their opposition in primarily moral terms, there was also a concern among student leaders that it was unfair as a campaign tactic. Gotbi al-Mahdi explained the creation of the dance by stating that: ‘Instead of holding rallies and telling people what they stand for and listening to responses from the audience, they decided to hold ... dancing parties and things like that, because they were losing on that front, and so they started this new kind of campaign.’²⁵ Islamic Movement members thus saw the dancing event not only as morally objectionable but also as a sort of ‘dirty trick’ that appealed to the irrational side of student voters’ decisions and encouraged them to vote for non-ideological reasons.

Objecting to the dance, then, served not only to stop an activity they viewed as morally questionable, but also was a way to preserve the pluralistic university atmosphere. ‘We thought that within the university, the political struggle of the different parties should be confined to political and ideological and intellectual campaigns, so we went and complained to the administration, and we said that this is not right for an intellectual environment in the university,’²⁶ Gotbi al-Mahdi continued. Abdel Rahim Ali also spoke on this issue when he noted that, while the Islamic Movement was aware that these dances were traditional in other contexts, ‘[i]f the politics of the university were allowed to go that way, it would mean a completely different course of action. It meant, of course, not just competition in politics.’²⁷ This view was even evident in some of the proposed solutions to this issue. Al-Tayeb Zain al-Abdin noted that, when he was stating his opposition to the decision to shut the event down using force, he argued instead

²⁴Interview with Abdel Rahim Ali, 9 March 2015.

²⁵Interview with Gotbi al-Mahdi, 10 March 2015.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Interview with Abdel Rahim Ali, 9 March 2015.

for it to be separated from politics entirely, since the fundamental problems came from its role in the campaign, not the dance itself.

You should go and address the students. Now we are approaching an election. In an election, we have political differences and intellectual differences. That is what should be discussed. To dance or not dance, music or no music, it is not part of our differences. So in an election, you go and present your programme, political programme, intellectual programme. On the basis of that, you should be elected or not elected by students. So if you bring dance and music, you are just trying to get away from the real issues, which are different ... If they did it in another occasion, other than the election, it's alright, that's something else, but not during this election, and it's coming after two or three days.²⁸

Yet both the position and actions of the Democratic Front and those of the Islamic Movement were political. The Democratic Front, in seeking to create a dance event in which women referenced dances particular to different regions of Sudan, sought to put forward a specific presentation that used women's public activities as a symbol of a greater 'nation' with which they hoped to identify in order to garner votes. The Islamic Movement opposed the event in the face of a changing university environment, in which women's roles were changing, as was the nature of politics. Both of these efforts served as a response to social changes within Sudanese society as a whole, as both men and women were moving to Khartoum in larger numbers and were participating in educational and political endeavours outside the rural environments in which they had previously been present.

'Traditional' dances and university diversity

The dancing incident discussed was primarily focused on politics; however, the role of traditional dance in the event gave significance to issues of diversity within the university. The explicit focus on *Ajako* in particular, as well as the rumours about and attitudes shown towards dances from Kordofan, help illustrate the ways in which students related to the customs of rural areas of Sudan, as well as the image students had of certain parts of the country. This is most prominent in the ways in which those present discuss the dance event today, although it seems to be consistent with how students discussed the event at the time. According to Shama, one of the women who performed the dances at the university, the performance programme was designed to include a number of dances from all parts of Sudan, not just the *Ajako* dance. Indeed, dancers were not dancing *Ajako* when the violence took place (and did not plan to dance *Ajako* at all); rather, the dance portion of the event began with a different dance from Kordofan called *Simbilay*.²⁹ The focus on *Ajako* in the discussion of the event

²⁸Interview with Al Tayeb Zain Al Abdeen, 17 March 2015.

²⁹Interview with Reel al-Sham Muhammad Tomsah, 21 February 2015. A copy of the event's programme surfaced recently on social media and lists *Ajako* as a dance to be performed, along with a number of other dances from Kordofan and the Northern region. At the same time, both Shama and others I spoke with after this research was concluded all note that there had been no plans to dance *Ajako*. It is entirely possible that the organizers of the dances and those doing advertising for the event were not communicating closely on this point.

therefore highlighted not a particular dance, but dances from a particular region – that of Kordofan. Indeed, Shama commented that the line-up for the performance had not been determined when the Islamic Movement voiced its opposition to the event, using the dance of *Ajako* as its shorthand for the dancing as a whole. In response, the dancers chose to give prominence to dances from Kordofan, performing them before dances from other regions.³⁰ After the event, the Islamic Movement issued a statement in which they noted their opposition to the *Ajako* and *Mahas* dances, dances from Kordofan and the Northern region.³¹ The language of the conflict thus pointed not to politics, but rather to a shared exoticization on the part of the student body of particular regions of Sudan, regions that continued to be marginalized politically and that sent very few students to university in Khartoum.

The student body at the University of Khartoum during this period had become significantly more diverse than it had been under colonial rule; however, there were still particular geographical biases in representation. Students at the time predominantly came from Khartoum, Blue Nile and Northern provinces (24.1, 29.3 and 21.9 per cent of the student body respectively) during the year 1969–70, meaning that over three-quarters of the student body still came from three central provinces (El Tayeb 1971: 26).³² In contrast, far fewer students came to the University of Khartoum from Kordofan; only 9.5 per cent of the student body registered as being from that region, and, of these, even fewer were women. In 1969, female students made up just 9.6 per cent of the student body (*ibid.*: 25). While university statistics do not disaggregate student origins by gender, it is highly likely that these female students hailed mainly from Khartoum or nearby, since families in the centre were more likely to support women's education and encourage their daughters to attend university. It makes sense, then, that of the roughly half a dozen dancers for the event, most were from the central areas. Shama notes that, while she is from Kordofan and was raised in the town of Bari, all the others were from Khartoum or central Sudan. Shama said that she remembered only one other female student from her home town within the University of Khartoum.³³

The plan was to have the dances, albeit from different regions of the country, performed by all the students. Those from the relevant regions taught their own dances to those from elsewhere. Shama herself had taught the other dancers, both male and female, the proper moves for *Simbilay* during the rehearsals.³⁴ It is unclear based on discussions with students what regions exactly were to be represented by the dance performance. While Kordofan and northern (*shemaliya*) dances were mentioned by multiple former students who either attended or helped prepare for the performance,³⁵ no one discussed explicitly whether dances from other regions – whether in the south, east or west of the country – were included

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Al-Ayam*, 10 November 1968.

³²Blue Nile Province in this period was larger than the current Blue Nile state and would have included Sennar as well as Gezira state.

³³Interview with Reel al-Sham Muhammad Tomsah, 21 February 2015.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵This point was made most prominently by Reel al-Sham Muhammad Tomsah (*ibid.*), but Omer Sir Elkhatim (27 January 2015) and even Gotbi al-Mahdi (10 March 2015) also mentioned

and to what degree. Based on the diversity of the student body, it seems likely that Kordofan and eastern Sudan would be represented in student performances more prominently than other marginalized regions. Kordofan and Kassala provinces made up significant minorities within the student body, with 8.7 per cent coming from Kassala, which meant that cultural associations were more likely to find at least one or two students from the region who would know dances and songs that could be performed. In contrast, only 3.5 per cent of the student body came from all three of the southern provinces of Sudan (Upper Nile, Equatoria and Bahr al Ghazal) combined, and another 3.5 per cent came from Darfur (El Tayeb 1971: 26). This meant that, while these regions were of interest to the student body, the number of students present at the university was miniscule, and the chances of finding a student willing and able to lead his or her colleagues in a dance performance were even smaller.

Given these dynamics, it is no surprise that the prominence of a young woman from Kordofan participating in the dance would be noted and mentioned by those involved. Shama was mentioned by name by other members of the Democratic Front as the primary dancer at the event.³⁶ Shama herself reported feeling as if she were the target of the bulk of attacks regarding the dance. She recounted that the Islamic Movement described the event in extremely personal terms, and claimed that the Islamic Movement even printed a leaflet stating that '*lan tarqas Shama*' or 'Shama will not dance'.³⁷ Such statements cannot be verified, since the leaflets from this event were destroyed a long time ago, and even the 'wall newspapers' (daily papers produced by students and posted on the walls of the university) are unavailable. Members of the Islamic Movement, for their part, do not remember the discourse from this event being conducted in such personal terms. They maintain that the issue was not the region of origin of the dance or even the particular dance itself, but rather the phenomenon of mixed dancing within the university.³⁸

While such claims cannot be verified either way, it is clear that the opposition to the dance became very personal. The Islamic Movement campaigned outside the university to bring students' parents to the university to oppose the upcoming dance. 'We told them this is what was happening. You brought your girls to an educational institution, and this should not happen, and many parents were furious that this was happening.'³⁹ Such attempts would likely become personal, since the number of women at the university was small and the parents targeted would thus need to be quite specific. Shama noted that students from the Islamic Movement approached her father and requested that he forbid her to dance. Her father, a supporter of the Umma Party and a low-level government-sanctioned 'traditional' leader in the native administration, refused to interfere,

Northern state. The recently published programme also advertises both Kordofani and northern dances.

³⁶Omer Sir Elkhatim (27 January 2015) and Balghis Badri (19 March 2015) mentioned her explicitly. Others who were not at the university at that time but knew of the event, including Ihsan Gaddal (24 January 2015), mentioned her by name as well.

³⁷Interview with Reel al-Sham Muhammad Tomsah, 21 February 2015.

³⁸Abdel Rahim Ali (9 March 2015), Gotbi al-Mahdi (10 March 2015) and Al-Tayeb Zain al-Abdin (17 March 2015) all noted this in unambiguous terms.

³⁹Interview with Gotbi al-Mahdi, 10 March 2015.

maintaining that her activities were her own decision. At this point, the Islamic Movement approached one of her brothers and likewise entreated him to come to the university, but he too refused. While these attempts to convince Shama's family to oppose the event were unsuccessful, other attempts bore fruit. After Shama's family decided not to interfere, the father of the only other female student from her home town approached the university administration, asking that the dance not occur.⁴⁰

Students at the University of Khartoum had preconceived ideas regarding different regions of Sudan, and these ideas likely shaped the discussion on the dances and the focus on Kordofan. Students both on the left and the right of the political spectrum had absorbed attitudes and notions about the rural societies outside Khartoum. Such attitudes were not only displayed within the student body but were also prevalent within academia and among the educated elite as a whole. During the colonial period, the British government designated the Nuba mountains a specific geographic zone, where people they viewed as black and pagan were to be converted to Christianity. In doing so, the colonial government defined this population in contrast to Arabs, describing them as 'unpredictable' and 'primitive' (Abdelhay 2010: 204–6). These attitudes were absorbed not only by the colonial administration but also by later governments, as well as by academics in the region. Indeed, Atta Battahani notes that many discussions of 'under-represented culturally oppressed and economically exploited nationalities' within Sudan's peripheries consider their societies to be 'traditional primitive societ[ies] intrinsically backward, or else as communities belonging to a primitive stage through which the developed areas and countries have passed' (Battahani 2009: 22). Such attitudes were likely internalized in the colonial education system as it fostered an Arab and Muslim identity for elites, one that built on legacies of slavery in the region and racialized inequalities fostered by the slave trade (Sharkey 2003; Troutt Powell 2003). Given the small population of students from rural areas outside the centre, these attitudes were not easily challenged among the student body within the university setting. Shama noted that, after the dance event and riot had taken place, rumours spread that she had in fact danced topless.⁴¹

These rumours persist to this day among people who were not at university at the time. This image of naked, or at least primitive, dancers would have been of particular concern to the Islamic Movement. As noted by one Islamic Movement student leader, dances from this region were seen as especially indecent, although he had no memory of this specific dance being emphasized.⁴² Such concerns would thus encourage the Islamic Movement to focus on that particular dance in their criticisms of the event above all others, since other dances were seen as less objectionable. While the Islamic Movement's opposition to the dance event was rooted in its position regarding the role of women on campus and within society, it is clear that the Islamic Movement, as well as a large portion of the student body of all political affiliations, had internalized negative, chauvinistic views of the Nuba mountains. Such attitudes had their origins within, and were further perpetuated and strengthened by, the lack of diversity on the

⁴⁰Interview with Reel al-Sham Muhammad Tomsah, 21 February 2015.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²Interview with Gotbi al-Mahdi, 10 March 2015.

University of Khartoum's campus, which allowed students only a limited understanding of life outside the central areas of the country.

The aftermath of the riot and the response of outside political parties

The dance riot had an impact on the upcoming student elections, but, more significantly, it influenced discussions beyond the university. During the parliamentary period in which the incident took place, electoral and legislative politics were largely dominated by the political dealings of the sectarian parties – the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party – with the Islamic Charter Front and the Communist Party influencing national discourse both inside parliament and within influential constituencies (Holt and Daly 2011: 122–6). In this context, political parties not only felt pressure to respond to student violence within the university, but also took heed of the connections between their student wings at the university and their more general membership, as represented in parliament and among the general public, particularly among the educated elite who could vote for parliamentary 'graduate seats'. The fact that a violent incident could occur centred around two parties with a national standing, parties that had seats in parliament, albeit only a few, reflected badly on the politics of the state as a whole and implied a level of incivility that was seen as unacceptable as well as a decline in the quality of future political leaders.

Prior to the performance, the event was viewed by the university at large, as well as by the political parties outside the university, as an internal student campaign matter, of minimal importance. At the same time, it was followed closely by both students and other political operatives, and all responded to it negatively, condemning the violence. Students in particular spoke most strongly about this. Their condemnation came not only in the form of writing on the subject, much of which is no longer available, but also via election results. The Democratic Front won overwhelmingly in the student union elections, gaining sixteen seats out of a possible twenty (Abdel Fadl 1998: 77). These results were considered by all those interviewed, within the Democratic Front as well as the Islamic Movement, to be a direct rejection of the violence that had occurred. The Islamic Movement was blamed for this, and many independent voters who might otherwise have considered voting for the Islamic Movement were put off by the violence infringing on their student life. Some commented that, while they had not sympathized politically with the Democratic Front, they had attended the event not as a political statement but in order to see dances from their home towns and were disappointed when the performance was stopped.⁴³

For many close to these events, whether students themselves or junior lecturers at university, this incident subsequently shaped their discussions and their approach to politics and cultural activities. Several activists I spoke with informally linked the 1968 dance event to the beginning of Abadamak, the theatre group that was started in the late 1960s. One Democratic Front member from the period commented to me that, prior to these events, he had not seen the

⁴³ *Ibid.*

political importance of cultural activities, but afterwards he began to participate in them.⁴⁴

Members of other political parties that were represented in smaller numbers within the university were also put off by this violence. One member of the African Nationalist Front, the political party supporting the interests of southerners, reported that, although he was still at Rumbek Secondary School in Omdurman at the time, he heard about the event from his colleagues at university. The Student Welfare Front, as it was then called (El Tayeb 1971: 45–7), was opposed to the violence, viewing it as an attack on the university's freedom. Members of the Umma Party, whose constituency within the university was small, despite quite a large presence in state politics, were uncomfortable with the violence and considered the event to be the responsibility of the Islamic Movement. One member commented that, for her personally:

It was shocking that there are now trends of a new Islamic ideology that were to be imposed on us, that what the Sudanese do is wrong. From that time, I started to think that if there is going to be, we are not going to be interested in it, because they have this face of also an exclusionary thing.⁴⁵

Such discomfort explains why, on 10 November, these parties, along with a number of others, signed a joint statement denouncing the disruption of the event and condemning the violence that ensued.⁴⁶

The political parties whose students had participated were aware of the tension prior to the event. Rabi Hassan Ahmed, who worked in the Islamic Movement outside the university, focusing on student affairs and coordinating with Islamic Movement students, noted that he was aware of some tension before the event and recalls having a conversation about it. At the same time, he did not give the students any particular advice, and had not even realized the event was still due to take place until after the incident had occurred.⁴⁷ The Communist Party, which supported student party members participating in student politics within the Democratic Front, was aware of the event but viewed it as a student affair. As such, they did not prioritize the event, and they viewed it as being of minor importance.⁴⁸

The day before the event, *Al Ayam* published a description of it on its 'Youth and students' page. This piece stated that the evening would include theatre and folkloric dance, although it also discussed the political dimension.⁴⁹ The day after the event, the violence was noted in serious terms, making the front page of *Al Ayam*, with the university's public statement included within the paper.⁵⁰ Over the course of the week, the event received significant coverage by the

⁴⁴Interview with Abdullahi Ali Ibrahim, 25 February 2016.

⁴⁵Interview with Balghis Badri, 19 March 2015.

⁴⁶*Al-Ayam*, 10 November 1968. The statement was signed by ten political parties, including the Communist Party, various socialist groups, the Democratic Unionist Party, the Umma Party, the Student Welfare Front and an independent student group.

⁴⁷Interview with Rabi Hassan Ahmed, 4 March 2015.

⁴⁸Interview with Yusef Hussein, 30 March 2015.

⁴⁹*Al-Ayam*, 6 November 1968.

⁵⁰*Al-Ayam*, 8 November 1968.

admittedly leftist paper, including an opinion piece by a mainstream political writer reacting to the violence within the university.⁵¹ While the politics of the violence was seen as an internal matter, those outside the university were concerned by the violence, viewing it as a departure and a disgrace to a well-respected institution. In the process, they also commented on the issues involved, making statements on their views of the state.

The Communist Party denounced the violence, but considered the event to be a student affair. The Islamic Movement outside the university also denounced the violence, seeking to distance itself from the actions of Islamic Movement students. According to Gotbi al-Mahdi, an Islamic Movement student activist at the time, Hassan al-Turabi, the movement's leader at that point, wrote a piece for an Arabic newspaper in which he stated that the objections and actions of the student Islamic Movement were improper and did not reflect the Islamic Movement as a whole.⁵² While such a statement sought to improve the image of the Islamic Movement, it also sought to be consistent with the actions of the political parties. These were largely passive when it came to internal university politics, except when such politics made it on to the front page of the newspaper.

The effects of this conflict and its aftermath were felt for quite some time afterwards and affected political operatives who were not even located in Khartoum. A monthly security report for November 1968 from Equatoria Province commented: 'There were some party skirmishes between the Islamic Front and the Communists, since the Communist central committee instructed its committees to mobilize the regions against the Charter Front regarding the university incident.'⁵³ While it seems unlikely that the communists were particularly successful in gaining traction in the south on this issue, the events at the University of Khartoum did prompt activity, discussion and even skirmishes among political activists outside the university – even those far away, who presumably had other concerns.

Conclusions

In some ways, student politics at the University of Khartoum was a microcosm of national politics, located on the fault line between the Communist Party and the Islamic Movement, parties that have consistently challenged each other. Both would eventually come to power in subsequent eras, with the advent of President Nimeiri's May Revolution in 1969 and the Ingaz regime in 1989. In this particular instance, the debates and conflict that arose spoke to fundamental issues of power, ethnicity and gender in ways that would play out later on a larger scale, as questions of national identity in the face of civil war and the status and role of women in a shifting society took on prominence. At the same time, student politics and activists were not simply lower-status subsidiaries of their political parties, taking direction from the central party on all issues. While the outside parties certainly had a prominent role, particularly for larger, national events, the university functioned as an independent, safe space where students controlled

⁵¹*Al-Ayam*, especially 10, 11, 12 and 13 November 1968.

⁵²Interview with Gotbi al-Mahdi, 10 March 2015.

⁵³South Sudan National Archive, EP 36.J.5, 1967–1969 (BTD225), p. 262.

their environment and governed their interactions and associations with each other. This space allowed for student political groups to experiment with different policies and to make independent political statements without major interference from their respective parties outside the university.

In the process of doing so, students were able to develop their own political positions and make larger statements about the state. While certainly taking their cues from their outside political parties, student political groups had room to disagree with them on university-specific activities. On an occasion such as the 1968 dance riot, these views and statements would spill out to the national stage, pressuring national political parties and forcing them to respond. It was in this manner, then, that student political groups were able not only to reflect dynamics across the state, but also to serve as a site of radicalism, with student political groups pressuring their respective political parties and encouraging them to mobilize along different lines, addressing their issues.

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Abstract

In 1968, the Democratic Front organized a folkloric dance recital at the University of Khartoum as a prelude to the upcoming student union elections, a recital that was opposed by the Islamic Movement. This dispute culminated in a riot in which a student was killed, an event referred to as the 'Ajako incident', which is discussed as the first recorded instance of inter-student violence at the university. Drawing on newspaper accounts from the time, secondary sources and first-hand interviews with participants, this article explores the clashing political and moral ideologies at stake within the University of Khartoum, and their links and affective power in

relation to Khartoum politics more widely. In the process, it argues that the student political sphere did not simply function as a mirror to the wider political environment, but rather as a mobilizing ground for ideologically based parties, allowing more radical youth groups to influence national dialogues and put pressure on national political actors.

Résumé

En 1968, le Front démocratique organisa un récital de danse folklorique à l'université de Khartoum en prélude à des élections de syndicats étudiants, récital auquel s'opposait le Mouvement islamique. Ce conflit provoqua des émeutes qui firent un mort parmi les étudiants. Premier cas recensé de violence entre étudiants à l'université, cet évènement appelé « l'incident d'*Ajako* » est le sujet de cet article. S'appuyant sur les faits rapportés par la presse de l'époque, sur des sources secondaires et sur des entretiens avec des protagonistes, cet article explore les idéologies politiques et morales qui s'affrontaient à l'université de Khartoum, ainsi que leurs liens et leur pouvoir affectif au regard de la politique de Khartoum plus largement. Ce faisant, l'article soutient que la sphère politique étudiante ne fonctionnait pas simplement comme le miroir de l'environnement politique plus large, mais plutôt comme un terreau mobilisateur pour les partis à base idéologique, qui permettait à des groupes de jeunes plus radicaux d'influencer le dialogue national et de faire pression sur les acteurs politiques nationaux.