**Sudanese**

**PRONUNCIATION:** soo-duh-NEEZ

**LOCATION:** Sudan

**POPULATION:** 25 million

**LANGUAGE:** Arabic; English; 100 distinct indigenous languages

**RELIGION:** Islam; Christianity; indigenous beliefs

**1 • INTRODUCTION**

The history of the Sudan, "Land of the Blacks," has been predominantly one of invasion and conquest. The earliest known events date back to 750 BC .

Between the years of 1898 and 1956 the Sudan was ruled primarily by Great Britain. The present boundaries of the People's Republic of the Sudan were finalized during this period by agreements between the British and other European nations trying to establish interests in the region. They largely disregarded local tribal, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. This disregard has been responsible for much of the contemporary political upheavals and distress in the Sudan. The country has been sharply divided between north and south, and people from the south have struggled unsuccessfully to either secede or gain a voice in the government.

In the forty years since independence (1956), three periods of parliamentary rule have alternated with three of army rule. The longest period of stability and prosperity was during the administration of Jaafar Nimeri (1969–85). In the first ten years of his presidency, Sudan's economy boomed. By the early 1980s, however, Sudan faced recession, drought, and political instability caused partly by large numbers of refugees from neighboring countries. Opposition to Nimeri quickly mounted when he introduced a severe form of the *Shari'a* (Islamic law). He was ousted in a peaceful coup (overthrow) in 1985. However, after a brief period (1986–89) of democratic rule the army once again seized power. The country has since become increasingly isolated, both politically and economically. The civil war shows no sign of abating (as of 1998). Innocent bystanders from both north and south have lost their liberty and even their lives for attempting to disagree with the government's harsh interpretation of Islamic rule.

**2 • LOCATION**

The People's Republic of the Sudan is the largest country in Africa. It is located in the northeastern part of the continent along the Red Sea and borders Egypt, Libya, Chad, the Central African Republic, the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Democratic_Republic_of_the_Congo.html) (former Zaire), Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Its landscapes include rocky desert, [savanna](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Savanna.html) (grasslands), and mountainous rain-land. Its most important physical feature is the Nile River, which traverses the entire length of the country.

The Sudan has a population of approximately 25 million, with almost 600 distinct ethnic or tribal groups. The country remains predominantly rural, but towns have expanded rapidly since the Sudan gained its independence from Britain in 1956.

**3 • LANGUAGE**

Arabic is the official language of the Sudan. Many other languages continue to be used in the home. At Independence, it was estimated that one hundred distinct languages were spoken in the country. Today, all educated people speak the local or colloquial form of Arabic—the language of government, schools, and of most northern Sudanese. In the south and west, English is spoken alongside the variety of indigenous languages, of which Dinka is the most widespread.

**4 • FOLKLORE**

The Sudanese have a rich and varied [folklore](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Folklore.html) that embodies much of their indigenous wisdom. It continues to be passed on orally, at least in the countryside. Stories center on human rather than animal or supernatural themes. A favorite character in Muslim Sudan is Fatima the Beautiful. She outwits a variety of male relatives and rivals in a series of amazing feats. She usually ends up marrying the man of her choice, and often vindicates her whole family as well. Umm Ba'ula, the mother of bogeys, is a supernatural figure in warning stories told to small children. She bears a large basket for carrying away disobedient children.

**5 • RELIGION**

Sudan is now an [Islamist](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Islamism.html) state, and the majority of its population is Muslim. Islam was introduced to the northern Sudan by Arab traders in the seventh century AD . Islam coexisted for many centuries with an earlier branch of Christianity, though Islam ultimately absorbed it. Many peoples, particularly in southern and western Sudan, are not Muslim. Some are Christian, and others continue to practice indigenous beliefs.

**6 • MAJOR HOLIDAYS**

The major holidays in the Sudan are religious holidays. In Muslim areas, the celebrations at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan and to mark God's sparing of Ishmael (the *Eid* of Sacrifice) are most important. They are marked with special foods, new clothes, and family visits. The birthday of the Prophet (the *Moulid* ) is also celebrated. In Christian areas, the major holidays are also religious events. The day independence was gained from Britain is officially recognized on January 1.

**7 • RITES OF PASSAGE**

The major rite of passage for most children in northern Sudan is circumcision. It is routinely performed on both girls and boys between the ages of four and eight. (Female circumcision is often referred to by outsiders as "female genital mutilation" and is becoming an international human rights issue.) After circumcision, gender segregation becomes marked. Young girls help their mothers and aunts with domestic chores and childcare. Young boys spend more time with male peers and enjoy a greater freedom.

Marriage is celebrated with great ritual even in poor neighborhoods. It is at least partly arranged, seen as an alliance between families rather than simply between two individuals. Payment of bride-price by the groom's family to the bride's family is an essential part of the marriage process.

**8 • RELATIONSHIPS**

The Sudanese are intensely social people. Greetings are warm and often effusive. Accompanied by handshaking, the Arabic greeting *Izeyik* is exchanged, followed by inquiries about each other's health, *Qway-seen?* (Are you well?), to which the standard reply is to thank God— *Al-humdulilah.*

When greeting a man outside her own family, a woman is expected to keep her eyes down. In public, a woman generally assumes a more modest manner than within her home. The Western concept of dating is virtually unknown in Muslim parts of Sudan.

**9 • LIVING CONDITIONS**

Although Sudan is regarded as one of the poorest countries in the world, its people have long found ways to accommodate their harsh environment. In the rural areas of the north, the mud-baked flat-roofed houses remain cool even in the hottest temperatures. In the south, conical grass huts provide warmth and safety from heavy rains and more variable climates. In towns and cities, housing ranges from European-style villas to make-shift huts and lean-tos ( *rakuba)* .

**10 • FAMILY LIFE**

The family is at the heart of Sudanese life. Large families are universally desired. Women's roles are primarily those of homemaker and mother. An emphasis on male offspring and the male line is found throughout the country. Families are overwhelmingly patrilineal (tracing descent through the paternal line) and [patriarchal](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Patriarchy.html) (ruled by men). While nuclear families (husband, wife, and children) are becoming common, extended families are still found and are often polygynous (with more than one wife).

With the imposition of the *Shari'a* (Islamic law), patrilineal, patriarchal families and increasingly limited women's roles are the trend of the 1990s.

**11 • CLOTHING**

Western-style clothing (long trousers, with a shirt) is commonly worn by Sudanese men in professional workplaces. Elsewhere they prefer traditional dress: long pastel-colored robes *(jalabiya),* a skullcap *(tagia)* and a length of cloth *('imma)* covering their head. Laborers wear [baggy pants](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Wide_leg_jeans.html) *(sirwal)* covered by a thigh-length tunic *(ragi).* Women in public today are bound to wear Islamic dress. For much of the [twentieth](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/20th_Century_Fox.html) century, this was simply a 30-foot (9-meter) length of material *(tob)* wound around their body. Today it also includes an Islamic shawl *(hijab)* pulled over the head, and may include a sort of heavy overcoat *(chadur)* common for women in Iran. In the privacy of their own homes, women simply wear light dresses.

**12 • FOOD**

For most Sudanese, the staple food is *durra* (sorghum), used to make breads and porridges. These are eaten with various types of stew, beans, lentils, and salads. Sheep is the favorite meat. Meals are eaten communally and by hand from a round tray on which various bowls of food are surrounded by breads used for dipping. Meals are segregated by gender.

**13 • EDUCATION**

Quranic schooling, based on memorizing the Quran (or Koran, the Islamic holy book), has a long history in the Sudan. Secular (nonreligious) formal education goes back only to the early twentieth century and is still not universal. Adult literacy (ability to read and write) is only 30 percent.

**14 • CULTURAL HERITAGE**

The cultural heritage of contemporary Sudanese is particularly evident in their music. Singing, drumming, and dancing are indispensible to any major celebration. Western, Arab, and Indian, as well as African, performers have become popular through film, television, and radio.

Sudan's greatest novelist is Tayeb Salih. His novel *Season of Migration to the North,* which draws on his country's colonial experience, has been translated into many languages.

**15 • EMPLOYMENT**

Despite massive migration to urban areas since independence, many Sudanese continue to work in agriculture. This includes both subsistence cultivation—growing sorghum, vegetables, peanuts, and beans for family consumption—and commercialized agriculture.

Agricultural work in Muslim areas is subject to gender segregation. In poorer families, females usually carry out tedious tasks such as picking cotton while males perform the heavier work of clearing the land, digging irrigation ditches, and planting. In families more comfortably situated, women are expected to work only inside the home.

**16 • SPORTS**

Like many African countries, Sudan has a love affair with soccer. Most small boys learn to play, even if they have to use a wooden ball. Among the educated, tennis and (to a lesser extent) volleyball are played. Sudanese regularly compete against other African countries in most major sports but have yet to develop the resources for Olympic competition.

**17 • RECREATION**

Television has become very popular throughout the country. Even in rural areas, the men's club usually owns a TV that village children are able to watch. Among the most popular programs are nightly soap operas *(musalsal)* and Islamic programs.

Open-air cinemas, found in all the towns and larger villages, are attended by mainly male audiences. Women spend their spare time visiting with friends and family, attending celebrations, or simply chatting quietly.

**18 • CRAFTS AND HOBBIES**

Before marriage, a girl learns how to use specific homemade [cosmetics](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Cosmetics.html) including incense, oils, smoke-baths, henna decoration, and perfumes. These are believed to enhance sensuality. Throughout the country, people employ charms or amulets to stimulate fertility, as well as to decorate themselves. The most elaborate folk craft is basketry.

**19 • SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

Since independence, the Sudan has undergone a series of upheavals that have intensified in recent years. The major problems stem from divisions between the Arab Muslims of the north and the Negroid, non-Muslims of the south; and the political and cultural domination of the whole country by the government. A civil war that broke out in 1983 shows no sign of abating as of mid-1998.

[Desertification](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Desertification.html) (increasing barrenness of the land) and widespread hunger are other problems. As crops wither on the stalk, whole villages have been abandoned and large numbers of animals have been left to die. Food shortages are common. In addition, there have been massive relocations of people to larger villages, to towns, and even outside the country.