



**Marie Grace Brown.** *Khartoum at Night: Fashion and Body Politics in Imperial Sudan.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. 240 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-5036-0264-9.

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How do bodies record history and place? What kinds of stories can we tell that emphasize the performed political capital, or “strategic choreography,” of women’s bodies and the fashions that adorn them as they move through the world? Marie Grace Brown’s beautifully written monograph, *Khartoum At Night: Fashion and Body Politics in Imperial Sudan*, is a history of northern Sudanese women’s bodies in motion during the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899-1956).

In the first English-language monograph to focus on women as actors in Sudanese history, Brown nimbly weaves the quotidian movements of Sudanese women back into a historiographical tapestry that has previously kept them “fixed at home,” unconnected to the political world around them (p. 174). To do so, she engages with interdisciplinary feminist scholarship focusing on the connections of “the intimate and the global” headed by scholars such as Antoinette Burton, Tony Ballantyne, and Ann Laura Stoler (pp. 6-7). Throughout the book, Brown treats flesh as a subject of historical inquiry—one that was sometimes messy, unruly, and occasionally bursting out of the confining seams of empire.

*Khartoum at Night* is as much a history of fashion as it is a history of the body. It shows how a “spectrum of fabrics, poetic names, body cuts

and tattoos [can] offer invaluable remnants of women’s historical experience,” particularly in a field that had previously thought the lives of Sudanese women were lost to the archive (p. 178). Invested in giving attention to the “physical sensibilities of the historical experience,” Brown presents a “fully fleshed”—or fully clothed—account of the ways in which tobe-wearing Sudanese women experienced imperialism on dangerous streets, in government classrooms and sterile birthing rooms, in activist meetings and high-end clothing shops, and through the ways in which they styled their bodies and hair in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (p. 175).

A major methodological contribution of this book is Brown’s unusual archival source: the tobe—a rectangular piece of cloth worn by Sudanese women as an outer wrapping when outside of the home, or when in the presence of unrelated males. *Khartoum at Night* “spins the yarn” of how a mere bolt of cloth associated with domesticity and gender responsibility in Sudan during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries became a means for northern Sudanese women to claim their rights to the public and highly politicized spaces under Anglo-Egyptian rule. The book follows the tobe from its entanglements with the “trappings of empire” during the early years of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium and its role in

the growing threads of change in the first half of the twentieth century to its place as a fashion commodity connecting independent Sudan to global markets from the 1950s forward (p. 146).

The origins of the tobe date back to the eighteenth century when merchants in Darfur dressed their wives and daughters in large pieces of imported cloth (usually muslin, linen, or silk) as a sign of wealth. By the twentieth century, the tobe “transitioned from a luxury item to an everyday garment” worn by women of all classes and social statuses (p. 10). Tobes were gifted to women of all classes by family members to record the onset of puberty, weddings, births, and other monumental events of a women’s reproductive life. The tobe also signaled Khartoum’s newly forged connections to an expansive and globalized economy, as high-cost tobes were imported from Japan, India, England, and Egypt, and cheaper cotton tobes were produced locally.

Following the tobe as it acquired layers of meaning in twentieth century, Brown shows that the development of fashion in Sudan under imperial rule followed a different trajectory than that of other places in colonial Africa. Scholars such as Timothy Burke and John and Jean Comaroff have shown how imperial reformers in Zimbabwe and South Africa imposed Europeanized standards of dress and hygiene to discipline native bodies that were thought to be indecently exposed and dirty. Africans responded by misusing European styles to perform hybrid identities and imagine new senses of self. In contrast, Sudanese women were resistant to European fashion—considering the dresses worn by British women to be immodest—and always chose to wear the tobe in public. Additionally, British administrators embraced the tobe as a “critical component of the modernizing projects of girls’ education, and medical training” which resulted in school girls and women working in newly professionalized fields, such as nursing and teaching, donning the tobe as a uniform

to “craft an image of progress tempered by modesty and tradition” (p. 10).

Brown’s use of the tobe as archive adorns the more traditional historical documents and photographs, such as those in Durham University’s Sudan Archive, with hints of color and flair. She demonstrates masterfully how scholars can use nontraditional sources to supplement the archive in ways that honor practices and experiences not recorded elsewhere. Tobes are records of both national and personal history, which were “touched, desired, and consciously worn on display” (p. 177). Moreover, collections of tobes, and their unique names, reveal the broad landscape of signs, symbols, messages, and developments that occurred in Sudan between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—from the introduction of a new post office to the launch of Sputnik in 1957.

As with all archives, the kinds of stories that the tobe can tell are limited. The tobe does not tell the story of women in southern Sudan whose experiences and fashions were influenced by British administrator’s 1927 Southern Policy, which intentionally cut southern Sudan off from the nationalist influences of the north. The south featured diverse styles of dress that did not include the tobe. In fact, British officials and Sudanese nationalists sent tobes to women in the south as a part of efforts to reform their unclothed, and uncivilized, neighbors.

To show how the tobe charted moments of sociopolitical rupture and memory under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, each chapter of the book is named after a tobe produced during the period under discussion or one that exemplifies the topic highlighted in the chapter. Chapter 1 introduces us to Sudan during the uncertain beginnings of British imperial rule by way of a tobe named “The Post Office Pen,” after a tool necessary to connect Sudanese women and men to the farthest reaches of the British Empire. The pen also signified experiments in girl’s education under imperial and Sudanese reformers at the turn of the twentieth

century, namely needlework houses and the Rufa'a Girls School. Reformers believed that a European-style education was essential to bringing women out of the harem and producing women who were eligible matches for a growing number of European-educated Sudanese men. The Rufa'a Girls School, opened by Sheikh Babakir Bedri in 1907, inspired the Sudan Government to establish the first state-run primary school for girls in 1911. In rural areas, needlework homes run by Egyptian and Syrian women taught women to sew and cook, along with Arabic and the basics of arithmetic. It was not until the 1920s, however, that girls' education would fully take root.

In the second chapter, "Forty White Tobes," the white tobe becomes the uniform of female students trained at the Midwives Training School (MTS) under the purview of "The Wolves," British nurses Mabel and Gertrude Wolff. Brown brings a fresh perspective to the by now very familiar story of the MTS. In light of the imperial state's flourishing interest in girl's education, the midwife was a new class of female medical worker trained in obstetrics and gynecology in the early 1920s. As such, the crisp, white midwife's tobe was a "physical manifestation of new medical practices" (p. 70). In this period, Sudanese reformers and imperial administrators focused their energies and resources on replacing the untrained local midwife (*daya*) as the "gatekeeper on women's sexual and reproductive worlds"—literally and metaphorically (p. 45). *Dayas* historically carried out the procedure of "pharaonic circumcision," or genital cutting, on young girls between the ages of five and ten. A *daya* was then needed again to assist in childbirth once the young girl married and became pregnant. However, Brown stresses that female genital cutting was neither the only event in a women's reproductive life nor the most important. It was just one part of a "sophisticated system that guarded and guided women's bodies" in imperial Sudan (p. 49). In this chapter, she moves away from the highly fetishized discussions of female genital cuttings that frequent writings on

the subject in the West to weave the history of the MTS and of the Sudanese women it employed through an array of objects and individuals that circulated in what she calls the "intimate economy of northern Sudanese women's productive households and reproductive partnerships" (p. 51).

Material objects, like tobés, underwear, and intricately braided hairstyles, prepared Sudanese women for the critical moments in their reproductive lives. As the professionalization of the midwife progressed in the 1920s and 1930s, medical tools and prescription drugs would join this arsenal. Service women other than the *daya* and midwife—namely hairdressers and slaves—were essential agents in this intimate economy, although the former have received much more attention due to their role in the process of female genital cutting. Hairdressers (*mushatas*) were invited to a woman's house to style her hair into the braided style, *mushat*, for special events such as weddings, births, and other holidays. This hairstyle could be glimpsed when the tobe slipped back or was placed coyly on a woman's head. The *mushata* was well fed and well compensated, an indication of her importance in the intimate economy. Moreover, the hairdresser served as an essential cultural broker between women of all classes, as her customers came from varying walks of life, and the initial installation of braids, which took days and required regular maintenance visits to her customer's home, allowed her ample access to gossip and information on the currents of women's lives.

"The Schoolmistresses' Ribs," a tobe likely worn by graduates of Trinity College in Khartoum, celebrated the advancements made in girls' education during the interwar period and serves as the title of chapter 3. Brown shows that the tobe shielded the bodies of young schoolgirls as they ventured out of the home, on their walks to school, and in the semi-public space of the classroom. When Ina Beasley, the newly appointed

British Controller of Girls' Education arrived in Khartoum in 1939, she pinned the domestic sciences at the heart of her curriculum. She demanded that each girl learn to sew as a way to combat immodest (read: traditional) dress. Domestic lessons, like sewing, were bodily lessons, and imperial education did not solely impact the minds and hearts of its subjects, but was a "physical experience that laid claim to hands, hair, mouths, and genitalia" (p. 88). Imperialists, like Beasley, thought that introducing cotton clothing, which required regular washing and constant upkeep, would inspire an overarching personal discipline and hygiene that the leathers, grasses, and animal skins of more traditional Sudanese garbs could not. Yet, as the *tobe* slowly freed women's bodies from the necessity of a male chaperone, their well-dressed and disciplined bodies were subject to new obstacles. The tucks and folds of these clean, new trappings needed to be mastered first. Schoolgirls clumsily tripped over their *tobes* on the way to school. Teachers found it difficult to write on chalkboards and struggled to carry out demonstrations.

Lectures on the subject of female genital cutting also forced female students to reconcile the realities of their bodies with the moral and ethical judgments of British administrators and school teachers. Despite the hopes of British administrators like Mabel Wolff that modern medicine would curb or eliminate female genital cutting, the procedure did not diminish in popularity or cultural significance during the interwar period. The practice of "pharaonic circumcision" was replaced with a modified procedure approved by the Sudan Government—usually referred to as "government circumcision" (p. 66). This did not stop schoolteachers from tailoring lectures around the subject, placing the burden of reform on schoolgirls—many of whom were already circumcised or would undergo the procedure in the next few years. Brown stresses, however, that it is not important to quantify whether the practice of circumcision slowed or was eliminated altogether.

er. Rather, she begs us to consider the discomfort schoolgirls may have felt upon hearing the imperialists' harsh criticism of their most intimate parts.

Body lessons were not only learned in the classroom. Women became subject to risk of new kinds of violence as they entered the predominantly male political sphere. These challenges are tackled in chapter 4, "Women's Voice," in which the *tobe* places us at the front lines of the Sudanese nationalist movement. Women were active members of political parties, marched in the streets to commemorate the Agreement of Self-Government, joined strikes, turned to journalism to establish a presence for themselves in nationalist politics by using the pen to amplify women's voices in magazines like *Sawt al Mar'a* (The woman's voice). All of these events occurred in the shelter of the *tobe*, which "shielded activist bodies while making space for radical demands" (p. 137). Female Sudanese pioneers and politicians in women's movements such as the Sudanese Women's Union, the Republican Sisters, and the League of Cultured Girls used fashion strategies to "define a space for themselves between local standards of authenticity and imperial measures of modernity" against the backdrop of the Sudanese nationalist movement in the 1950s (p. 135).

Activists, such as Fatima Ahmed, stressed the importance of the *tobe*, and not European-style dress, as a symbolic garment for the women's movement and Sudanese indigenous feminist movement. The *tobe* "echoed the protective spaces and objects" that held deep meaning in the intimate economies of the home (p. 134). It allowed activists to present themselves as not only bound to their nuclear families as it did in chapter 2, but bound to a concept of family that now included the nation-state. Male nationalists similarly used dress to navigate "local standards of authenticity and imperial measures of modernity," some wearing the traditional *jallibaya* and others adopting Western-style shirts and pants to show their de-

sire to overturn British imperial and display their “readiness to rule” (p. 135). However, the shelter of the tobe was not foolproof. Female activists were always at risk of violence in making their voices heard and bodies visible in nationalist politics. Men’s anxiety about women’s access to public and overtly political spaces played out violently on women’s bodies. Women activists were harassed verbally and physically in the streets by strangers, and at home by male relatives. Some cases, such as that of schoolteacher and author Malak al Dar, ended in death.

The final chapter, “Khartoum at Night,” explores the tobe as a means of political commentary and economic possibility in independent Sudan. Brown chose to name the final chapter—and her monograph as a whole—after this popular 1950s tobe to chart the transformations that took place in Khartoum during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the second half of the twentieth century, Khartoum was no longer a remote outpost of empire, or a city broken by warfare and famine, but a central node in the world of “immense and intimate change” where women used “the political pleasures of their bodies to articulate global lessons of politics and cosmopolitan space” (p. 147). Postindependence Khartoum boasted dance halls, cinemas, parks, and shops filled to the brim with imported European goods, especially fashionable clothes. Fashion provided women a means of participating in the “uneven and complex processes of nation building and global citizenship” after Sudanese independence (p. 160). The tobe, in particular, remained popular in this period and became a living archive of Khartoum’s current events. Aware of the tobe’s role in the fashion and politics of Sudanese society, the high-end tobe manufacturers like Tootal, Broadhurst, and Lee solicited suggestions for tobe names from regional women’s groups to reference local topics of interest and popular politics. The names would then be stitched into the garments in English and in Arabic and sold to women who wore them on their “cosmopolitan adven-

tures.” Adventures that could only be found on the streets of Khartoum at night.

If there is any criticism to be leveled against this book it is that Brown’s exceptional analytical insights and flawless writing made writing a review that captured the book’s kinetic energy a truly difficult task. This book will make an excellent addition to undergraduate and graduate courses in a range of fields, including but not limited to the history of the modern Middle East, North Africa, and East Africa; women’s and gender studies, material culture and body history; and the history of imperialism and colonialism. Brown writes that *Khartoum at Night* “seeks to honor the ways in which Sudanese women told their own stories in the swing of their hips” (p. 14). It is of the opinion of this reviewer that she succeeds—with style.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-amca>

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