

BOOK REVIEW

Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Tūnisī. *In Darfur: An Account of the Sultanate and Its People*, vols. 1 and 2. Edited and translated by Humphrey Davies. New York: Library of Arabic Literature, New York University Press, 2018. Maps. Notes. Glossary. Index. \$40.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1479876389.

There are only a handful of historical materials in Arabic such as travelogues or similar narrative reports based on first-hand observation of the eastern Sahara-Sahel region, and indeed of the *Bilād al-Sūdān* in general. Many texts address this vast space and long stretch of time in other genres, but there are few or none like this one under review. Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Tūnisī’s *In Darfur: An Account of the Sultanate and Its People* is a unique work for several reasons. It is a nineteenth-century *riḥla*, filled with adventure, personal experiences, and valuable descriptions of court politics, the “manners and customs” of locals, flora and fauna, and quite literally “the lay of the land” in the still-independent Darfur at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, it is fascinating for the way it was probably composed. Is the author speaking for himself, or is it also the work of a close collaboration? Whatever the case, it also adds to our understanding of how local scholars and European orientalists collaborated and how lines sometimes blurred—between teacher and student, between writer and editor, between original and translated or abridged copy.

In certain accounts of the region, Islam is said to have been introduced as the “state religion” in Darfur by Sulayman Solongdungo (r. circa 1650–80). In the following 150 years there were dynastic disputes and civil wars along with an expansion of the polity and administrative innovation. Darfur remained an independent entity until it was invaded in the late 1870s (by the infamous Zubayr Pasha), restored in 1898 by Alī Dinār, and finally defeated by the British in 1916. It was then that it became part of “the Sudan” as we have come to know it in the twentieth century. This work sheds some light on the history of this vast space, specifically on a decade of court politics (and probably beyond) in the early nineteenth century. Al-Tūnisī (1790–1857) lived in Darfur between 1803 and 1811, during the reign of Sultan Muhammad al-Faḍl. Insofar as he is the sole author reporting on his experience, he relates what he saw and heard as well as relevant hearsay about earlier intrigues and

from various quarters, sometimes from the private chambers of the rulers themselves.

Al-Tūnīsī came from a respected *sayyid* family of Tunis with a tradition of learning and teaching. Cairo was central to the family tradition of study, and Al-Tūnīsī himself was attracted to this metropolis. His father, ‘Umar, had taught in Darfur and was serving in some administrative role for the ruler when the author arrived there. Al-Tūnīsī left Cairo in 1803 at the age of fourteen in search of his father, whom he had not seen for about seven years. The first part of this work is therefore not directly about Darfur but rather about the author’s family and their movements—his grandfather, uncle, and father in particular—and then his decision to go to Darfur after news came that his father could be found there. He does indeed meet his father. But the encounter is brief, for the father soon thereafter undertakes a trip to Cairo, leaving the son behind to take care of his (the father’s) affairs.

The distance Al-Tūnīsī has to cover by camel is vast, but he makes it seem rather effortless. There are, of course, hardships, but the routes that he traversed were by then fairly well-trodden by traders, among whom were often also teachers and Sufis. Volume One (about 200 pages of Arabic with English translation and extensive notes) covers the author’s life, family relations, and travels until he reaches Darfur. Volume Two (roughly 270 pages of Arabic and English, recto and verso, with notes), on the other hand, is a kind of gazetteer for the region, giving a detailed record of the political system, its “tribes” and languages, and the lay-out of the capital and other spatial arrangements, with a separate chapter on marriage and eunuchs, followed by one on maladies and commerce, and a final chapter on plants. These sections are interspersed with relevant sketches. The depictions of the layout of the court and polity are potentially of great value, but nothing is mentioned about who did the drawings or when they were done. All the chapters in Volume Two contain narratives of encounters or gossip—sometimes intriguing, funny, and even salacious—and extensive and detailed descriptions, not without the judgements of the writer. A large number of local linguistic terms are given for a range of practices, offices, and products. So Volume Two is a veritable dictionary of terms and of multiple aspects of a largely Muslim society, at least at or around the court, but with a great deal of fluidity in its practices. Most of these varied topics cover only a few lines or a few paragraphs, while some others are extensive. The specialist reader is aided by an extensive index to the work, and the accompanying glossaries are equally helpful.

In Darfur is the result of a collaboration between ‘Umar al-Tūnīsī and the French medical doctor Nicolas Perron (1797–1876), who arrived in Cairo in the late 1820s and was appointed director of the newly created Medical School in 1839. He returned to France in 1846 but would continue to cross the Mediterranean thereafter, including a return trip to Cairo in the 1850s. During his time in Egypt he studied Arabic, and al-Tūnīsī was his tutor for around six years. This work, it seems, is partly a result of that interaction. In his excellent introduction to this work, the translator takes us

through the stages in the production of various works attributed to al-Tūnisī and especially how this work might possibly have been produced. Its title in its extant lithographic form is *Kitāb tashhīdh al-adhhān bi sīrat bilād al-'ārab wa-l-sūdān* (“The book of the honing of minds through consideration of the condition of the land of the Arabs and the blacks”). There is no manuscript of this work, but lithograph copies were made of which two versions exist, one for the Arabic market and one for the French orientalist readership.

As already noted, in this publication the Arabic text is included—in a beautifully designed font with the English translation on facing pages. The translation is most readable and fluent, yet it also follows the text closely. The arrangement of Arabic and English side by side makes it extremely valuable for research, particularly for the historian, the Arabist, and for teaching purposes on the whole. If a reader with knowledge of Arabic is interested, s/he is able to consult the Arabic with ease. The entire text is translated, including all the Arabic poetry; al-Tūnisī tried to show his erudition by quoting often, sometimes longish lines of classical Arabic poetry. The translator has done an impressive job in his translation of all of these. There are only a few cases where the sources of the lines are not supplied in the footnotes. This is the first published and complete English translation, and given that this is a parallel text publication, it is also the first time in decades that the Arabic work is again within easy reach. An edited version was first produced by Khalīl Maḥmūd Mus'ad and Muṣṭafā Muḥammad 'Asakīr in 1965, and as such has long been out of print.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Collins, Robert O. 1999. “Africans, Arabs, and Islamists: From the Conference Tables to the Battlefields in the Sudan.” *African Studies Review* 42 (2): 105–23. doi: 10.2307/525367.
- Donaldson, Coleman. 2020. “The Role of Islam, Ajami Writings, and Educational Reform in Sulemaana Kantè’s N’Ko.” *African Studies Review* 1–25. doi: 10.1017/asr.2019.59.
- Kishani, Bongasu Tanla. 2001. “On the Interface of Philosophy and Language in Africa: Some Practical and Theoretical Considerations.” *African Studies Review* 44 (3): 27–45. doi: 10.2307/525592.