

# NUBA MOUNTAINS STUDIES WORKING PAPER 2

## **“Nuba” – A historical perspective on changing and contested notions**

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

A great part of today's federal state of South Kordofan, in the Sudan, has been called the Nuba Mountains by writing-related people for some centuries now. The meaning covered by the name is ambivalent: 'Nuba' most often described Black African people, whose definition tightened in parallel with the distinction and naming of other groups in a semantic geographic sphere that covered, first, changing parts south of Egypt (early Roman and Arab geographers) and, later, the undiscovered regions of Sudan (European travellers). During the struggle for colonial control in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the political turmoil in the second, the original exonym 'Nuba' gradually turned into an endonym, which is nowadays commonly used by the those who are designated by it.

The distinction of exonym and endonym is used here to trace the usage of a specific signifier ('Nuba') for members of a social grouping whose existence is subject to – changing or even situational – interpretations. The subsequent positioning of this grouping through variable reference points, embedded in the naming, still informs present ethno-political discourses. On this basis, it is shown that the consequences of naming have more often than not been non-trivial or even of essential importance for those to whom the name has been given and/or who chose to give it to themselves.

It is not the aim here to trace this naming in all its detail, since a thorough reproduction of what is historiographically known at the moment is beyond the intended length of this paper; a good point to start such a reconstruction is Stevenson's historical chapter in *The Nuba* (1984), the text 'History of the Nuba' posted on a website by Nanne op't Ende,<sup>2</sup> Ille (2016) and, to some extent, Husmann (1984). The sources discussed there, together with additions by the author, form the basis of the following section that summarizes the exonymic history of the name 'Nuba'.

### 'Nuba' as exonym

It is important to note that most writers of the period before the 19<sup>th</sup> century dealt with the region discussed here, later known as the Nuba Mountains, as an unclear geographical space beyond mapped areas, if at all, while terms similar to 'Nuba' were part of social mapping in areas more or less directly known. This started in early geographical writings in Greek connected to Roman military expansion, where Nubae were mentioned for regions south of Merowe.

Erastotenes (ca. 276 – ca. 195/194 BC) was reported by Strabōn (64/63 BC – ca. 24 AD) in *Geōgraphiká* to speak of Nubae as a large group living west of the Nile

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper has been presented to the workshop "Diversity management in the Sudan" at Ahfad University for Women, Omdurman, 26-27 August, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> <<http://www.occasionalwitness.com/content/nuba/01History01.htm>>, accessed 8 March 2016.

at Merowe organized into several kingdoms (Book 17, Section 2), while Strabōn himself rather grouped them with Troglodytes, Blemmyes (today called Beja) and Megabari south of Egypt as a few nomadic people (Book 17, Section 53). Klaudios Ptolemaios (ca. 90 – ca. 168) mentioned Nubae in Volume 4, Chapter VII of *Geographike Hyphegesis* (about 150) as one of the groups living in 'Ethiopia south of Egypt' in a mountainous area between the Gulf of Aden and the Nile, among others north of the Blemmyes.<sup>3</sup>

Some centuries later Procopius Caesarensis (ca. 500 – ca. 565) wrote in *De Bello Persico* (Book 1, Section 19, Line 27-37) that both Blemmyies and Nobatae were one of the more populous groups occupying an area between Axum and Elephantine, the southern edge of the Roman Empire at that time, adding later that they believed in the Greek gods. He described the position of the Nobatae as close to the Nile, especially after they relocated from other areas following a treaty with the Roman Emperor Diocletian, who wanted to convince them by gold payments to stop attacking Roman outposts, reportedly without success.

From these fragments, one can see that very different social groups were designated by similar-sounding names, also considering probable historical changes and wrong or biased information.<sup>4</sup> The latter is not only a relevant possibility because all of these writers dealt with secondary observations, but also because especially Strabōn and Procopius wrote from a strong pro-Roman political standpoint, from which these areas were examined as a potential threat and/or targets for occupation.

However, the areas which were mentioned up to now are much farther north than today's Nuba Mountains. So another line to be observed are references that permit speculations about whether the Nuba Mountains as geographical region were meant by them. This includes a number of geographers writing in Arabic, such as Abu al-Ḥassan ʿAlī al-Masʿūdī (ca. 896 - 957), Abu al-Qāsim Ḥawqal al-Naṣībī (d. 977) and Taqīyyu al-Dīn ʿAlī al-Maqrīzī (1364-1442). Masʿūdī described in *Murūj al-Dahab*, apparently based on an account collected by one Aḥmad bin Ṭūlūn from an Egyptian Copt, that Nūbā were camel and other livestock owners ruled by a king along with ʿAlwa and Makuri. A major tribe living south of them was called K(a/u/i)na, while the southern people in general were called *sūdān* (Masʿūdī 957/2005: 264). Ibn Ḥawqal wrote both about *balad al-nūbā* as the southern edge of Egypt (Ḥawqal 977/1996:

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that mountains are one of the main reference points in Ptolemaeus' atlases, of which only the indices were preserved. Unfortunately, there is only one English edition of Ptolemaeus' work, the 1932 edition by Edward Luther Stevenson, which has been largely discredited since (Diller 1934).

<sup>4</sup> Further examples discussed in the aforementioned references are an inscription of the Axum ruler Ezana (330 – 356 AD) found in Merowe, and several passages in Gaius Plinius Secundus' *Naturalis Historia* (77-79 AD). The former spoke of violent attacks on black and red Nuba, among others, between the Blue Nile and the Atbara rivers (Kirwan 1937: 50-51, see also Stevenson 1984: 31 for further sources). Plinius Secundus used the term Nubaei to refer to peoples on Mount Libanus in Syria (Book 6, Chapter 32) and Ethiopian Nubaei to refer to the people of the town Tenupsis at the Nile, north of Merowe (Book 6, Chapter 35).

126) and mentioned *al-jibāliyyūn*, which were not far and ruled from Dongola (Stevenson 1984: 32). Spaulding concluded

these folk to be forefathers of the diverse peoples of Nubian speech west of the Nile, some now extinct, who until recently included communities based upon the *jibāl* (mountains) of Ḥarāza, Abū Ḥadīd, Umm Durag, Katul, Abū Tibr, Kaja Serruj, possibly Meidob, and the speakers of "hill Nubian" in the extreme north of the Nuba Mountains. (Spaulding 1998: 48)

Another southern area, beyond a desert region, was a "vast district with innumerable villages, various peoples speaking different languages, which cannot be counted and whose frontier cannot be described" (translated in Vantini 1975: 166), which Spaulding regarded as "an appropriate introduction to the ethnic labyrinth of the Nuba Mountains" (Spaulding 1998: 49).

The debate on older sources of the root '-nb' furthermore included references back to ancient Egypt, as for instance Kirwan (1937) who considered hieroglyphic and Coptic sources for the old Nubian endonym and Arabic exonym with this root. Op 't Ende's treated hieroglyphic sources as "charming nonsense", with reference to Keane (1885) as authority, but Keane's discussion of the issue is just as much marred by presuppositions of directions of migration and diffusion, and a misreading of Ptolemaeus as speaking of Kordofan in his reference to Nubae.

However, it is not this ongoing maneuvering through scientific references by scientists that this article is about, but the position of those references in matters of identification outside circles self-identifying as scientific. The significance of these historical links concerns their associating the root -nb with a basic assumption that those denoted by '*nūbā*' constitute a low hierarchical level for those who denote, for instance slaves of gold mines (Ibrahim s.a., 9). Stevenson summarized that "'Nuba' in various forms has been used to describe peoples south of Egypt from whom at different times slaves were drawn" (Stevenson 1984: 31). Arkell even went so far to claim, without giving a clear argument for it, that 'Nuba' came "from a word in their own language which means 'slaves'" (Arkell 1961: 177), 'own' being in this case Nubian speakers, while Nadel (1947) recorded that no group he studied as Nuba had this word in their language.

These short fragments indicate not only how the distinction of exonym and endonym was made significant in the discussion of origins; they also show the difficulty of drawing historical lines without a constant reference point, to places, to groups, to political entities. The links between what are today called Nubian kingdoms and the Nuba Mountains require a level of linguistic and archaeological discussion not intended here.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note, however, that these historical

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<sup>5</sup> One of the most recent attempts to initiate thorough archaeological studies of the area was done in 2006, mostly in Tegali, conducted by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums in Sudan and the Institute of Anthropology and Archaeology, Pultusk School of Humanities, Poland. Curiously, the writers of a pre-published paper on these studies claim this to have been the first archaeological work in the region, thereby ignoring at least British colonial activities, such as the

reconstructions have been and still are very much a contested matter, inviting many presumptions about the huge gaps left by available documentation.<sup>6</sup>

The years between the fall of Nubian and other kingdoms and the 19<sup>th</sup> century give a much richer picture, especially of the developments in Greater Kordofan, but since no historical account is planned here, the reference to MacMichael (1912/1967), Stevenson (1984), Ewald (1990), Spaulding (1998) and their sources has to suffice for the moment.

For the purpose of this paper, pre-20<sup>th</sup> century European travel reports<sup>7</sup> and geographical work represent best the changing semantic boundaries of the term 'Nuba' from a blurry designation of black people in unchartered regions to the population of the mountains between approximately 10° to 12° N, and 29° to 31° E, including people migrating or taken from there. In Stevenson's understanding, it was a much broader name 'Nuba', that was adopted by the 'Arabs' – another ethnonym covering a complex set of social groups – as a name for "negro or negroid peoples further south as they become acquainted with them" (Stevenson 1984: 2), which subsequently also informed the usage of the name by European travellers. It is interesting that those Europeans are also the only source referred to by Stevenson, in order to document such a usage, and a closer reading shows that the name was not given in exactly the same way by those different authors.<sup>8</sup>

The processes of changes in naming have not been a straightforward evolution of geographical knowledge; 'Nuba Mountains' was not the only name used for the region and "[t]here were also instances in the 1800s of the term *Barabra* being used [...] to refer to people in the Nuba mountains" (Trout Powell 2003: 227 fn43), a confusion discussed by Seligman (1917: 402). But also the successive change of references to 'Nuba' was not a uniform, generally distributed one. This may be seen starting with James Bruce's<sup>9</sup> reference to 'pagan Nuba' being soldiers of the *mak* of Sennar, settled around the capital when he visited in late April 1772:

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findings of Arkell, after 1938 Commissioner for Archaeology and Anthropology (further examples are given in Stevenson 1984: 31). Although not directed at historical reconstruction, the work of Hodder (1982) should have been mentioned.

<sup>6</sup> Coordinated efforts of archaeological, historical, linguistic, genetic and social studies in this direction have not come about. See for instance Robin Thelwall's personal communication to Nanne op 't Ende that the present linguistic timeframes, suggesting the settlement of today's Hill Nubian speakers at the northeastern areas of the Nuba Mountains during a period of unspecified contact with the then dominant Nubian kingdoms of northern Sudan (ca. 500-1400), do not provide much certainty without further evidence from archaeology, oral traditions, genetic studies, climate and economic history (<http://www.occasionalwitness.com/content/nuba/01History01.htm>, retrieved 8 August 2014; cf. Thelwall and Schadeberg 1983, Thelwall 2002).

<sup>7</sup> There is a palpable gap of non-European writings and documents from that period, which cannot be filled with the material available for this article. A short discussion of Arabic terms further down has to suffice to support the point made here.

<sup>8</sup> The depiction of the Nuba Mountains by European travelers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been more thoroughly discussed in Ille 2011, albeit with a focus on the history of the mountain Shaybūn.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce, James (1730-1794): Scottish traveller in Ethiopia, later British consul in Algiers, author of the book *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1772 and 1773* (1790).

They are either purchased or taken by force from Fazuclo, and the provinces to the south upon the mountains Dyre and Tegla. Having settlements and provisions given them, as also arms put in their hands, they never wish to desert, but live a very domestic and sober life. Many of them that I have conversed with seem a much gentler sort of negro than those from Bahar el Aice, that is, than those of whom the Funge, or government of Sennaar, are composed. (Bruce 1790: 419-420)

Some more characterizations from his 5 five day stay are given, including physical appearance and the indication of religious change in the second generation of settlers in direction of Islam, but without a large impact on preferences for moonlight dances and pork (Bruce 1790: 420-421). In any case, there is here a clear classification of a black, mostly non-Christian and non-Muslim population, and there is also a reference to both Fazugli at the border of today's Ethiopia and the Nuba Mountains in present usage – including the outlier Jabal al-Dā'ir.

Burckhardt,<sup>10</sup> the author quoted by Stevenson, wrote that “[t]he name of Nouba is given to all the Blacks coming from the slave countries to the south of Sennaar”, who were brought by “free Arab tribes” from mountains south of Sennaar’s territory and who he further characterized as “idolaters”, “middle class between the true Blacks and the Abyssinians”, “colour [...] less dark than that of the Negroe” etc. (Burckhardt 1819: 311).

In Cailliaud’s<sup>11</sup> description some years later, this ‘class’ became part of a racial class system, which organized people in Sennar according to colours, namely yellow, red, Sudan blue, green, ‘El-Kat-Fateloem’ – between yellow and green – and finally *‘abd* or Nuba: “Ce sont des peuplades nègres venues de l’ouest, et qui habituent les montagnes du pays de Bertât, où ils vivent isolés” (Cailliaud 1826: 274). Apart from his complete concentration on outer appearance, Cailliaud quotes Arabic names for these classes, giving an indirect hint as to whose naming is reproduced, especially since Cailliaud came along with the Ottoman troops under Ismā‘il Kamil Pasha.

There is also different usage of ‘Nuba’ not just from time to time, place to place, informant to informant, writer to writer, but also in the process of translation into different languages. In German, as Stevenson noted,

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<sup>10</sup> Burckhardt, Johann Ludwig (1784-1817): also called Ibrāhīm Ibn ‘Abd Allāh, Swiss traveller, after adoption of Muslim life style visited Mecca and other places in the Middle East and North Africa, author of the books *Travels in Nubia* (1819), *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land* (1822), and *Travels in Arabia* (1829).

<sup>11</sup> Cailliaud, Frédéric (1787-1869): French explorer of Africa, professional gold worker, participated in the last expedition of Isma‘il Kamil Pasha to Fazughli and Sinnār, author of the book *Voyage à Meroë: au fleuve Blanc, au-delà de Fazoql dans le midi du royaume de Sinnâr à Syouah tc.* (1823-27).

writers of the last century used 'Nuba' (adj. 'nubisch') for both [Nuba and Nubian]: Reinisch's Nubian grammar of 1879 is called Die Nuba-Sprache, while Lepsius, in his Nubische Grammatik (1880), another grammar of Nubian, speaks of the 'Nil-Nuba', though he also uses 'die Nubier', the term preferred by modern writers. (Stevenson 1984: 2)<sup>12</sup>

Rüppell<sup>13</sup> was one of the first of those writing about the Nuba Mountains based on an actual visit to the region, and his usage of ethnonyms shows the classification of 'Nuba' as larger frame for different, but still uncertain groups. In his view, small isolated tribes inhabited the mountains of Kordofan; at another point he used the word 'nation' (Rüppell 1829, VIII). He wrote that he had given up on identifying them all, because of the many contradictions in the statements he received, but he identified four main languages: Koldagi, Schabun, Takele, and Deier (Rüppell 1829, 152-153). In the appendix, he added a vocabulary of seven 'Nuba languages': Darfur, Schabun, Fertit, Dgnke, Takele, Schilluk, Koldagi (Rüppell 1829, 370-371), which shows that 'Nuba' was only a rough designation of the more or less known 'non-Arabs'.<sup>14</sup>

The contrary direction, where the name was used narrower than in later usage, can be found in Arthur T. Holroyd's writing, who visited Kordofan in 1836 and 1837 no further south than Malbes and published a vocabulary of the "inhabitants of Jebel Nubah", whom he identifies as very similar to Rüppell's "Koldagi" (Holroyd 1839, 191), thus referring to only one of the groups and languages existing in the region. Another traveller, Pallme<sup>15</sup>, shows another usage of 'Nuba', who he differentiated as the "biggest tribe" in the region from the 'Negroes' of Takele, Kodero and Schabun; the latter seemed to him to have "basically one language" (Pallme 1843/2002, 116, translation by author).

It is not necessary to go through many more examples, especially since a further appraisal of these travellers would demand a careful reconstruction of how they acquired their information. Therefore, the geologist Russegger<sup>16</sup> may serve as a last example of somebody, who visited the region, again with Ottoman troops. Adopting the term 'Nuba' as a general designation for non-Arab people in the

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<sup>12</sup> In Arabic, there exists today a certain convention to speak of *nūbīyūn* and *nūbā*, whereby the latter sometimes ends with *alif*, sometimes with *ta marbūṭa*, the former more often connected to Nubians, the latter to the Nuba of the Nuba Mountains.

<sup>13</sup> Rüppell, Wilhelm Peter Eduard Simon (1794-1884): German naturalist and explorer of north-eastern Africa, numerous zoological and ethnographical collections, 1817 in Aswān (Egypt), 1822-27 travel through Sudan to Kordofan, 1830-34 in Ethiopia.

<sup>14</sup> This continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century even inside the region, and Nadel noted in his 1947 publication *The Nuba* that "[o]nce or twice I [...] heard the Dinka referred to as 'Nuba'" (Nadel 1947: 2).

<sup>15</sup> Pallme, Ignatius: Bohemian merchant and traveller, author of *Beschreibung von Kordofan* (Travels in Kordofan, 1843) about a journey in 1838-39.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Ritter von Russegger (1802-1863): Austrian geologist in state service, 1836-38 with Thomas Kotschy exploration journey to Cilicia, Syria, Egypt and Sudan under orders of Muḥammad <sup>c</sup>Ali.

region, excluding the people of Tegali, he further distinguished two different worlds for Nuba north and south of a natural border which consisted of a chain of mountains from Jabal al-Dā'ir to Tagali. The northern world was marked by disintegration and subjugation by the Egyptian rulers, the southern world was a place of freedom and independence with little, isolated states and *mukūk* as rulers. This structural analysis caused Russegger to come to a socio-political conclusion:

The little separated Nuba kingdoms have no relations of federation with each other, but each of them is isolated, either doesn't care about the others at all or is even constantly at war with its neighbour. From this political phenomenon and the natural wildness of the Nuba people results their weakness; for if they were to form a federation of states whose elements provided mutual protection against external enemies, I don't believe, that Egyptian troops would ever have raided the land of the Nuba Negroes regardless of their firearms. (Russegger 1844: 173, translation by the author)<sup>17</sup>

In general, the 19<sup>th</sup> century overall changed the specificity of ethnonyms in geographical work and general usage, and both in Mahdist documents and British intelligence reports during the period of 1885 to 1898 the combination of Nuba and Nuba Mountains was a consolidated notion. It was during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, that the generalization of '*al-nūbā* / the Nuba' in the *jibāl al-Nūba* / Nuba Mountains was more and more questioned by ethnographic work, while an endonym 'Nuba' only started to develop and grow in strength especially in the frame of ethno-political struggles. Both processes are the subject of the following two sections.

### **'Nuba' as ethnographic term**

Ethnicity has been one of the grand themes of Nuba Mountains studies. The process of ethnic identification in the Nuba Mountains has been discussed in a small number of ethnographic monographs. Partially overlapping with these, the impact of political and administrative history on ethnic relations was subject to a much broader body of literature, as well as the impact of migration and land conflicts on ethnic identity. Recent years saw a greater focus on the role of ethnicity in violent conflicts, also discussed as an issue of genocide.<sup>18</sup>

In this section, a loose, tentative line will be drawn from early 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographies, represented by the works of the Seligmans and Nadel to the post-independence works of Stevenson in the 1960s and Baumann, Rottenburg, and Manger in the 1980s and 1990s. These mostly originate from research in a social anthropological tradition and will be briefly examined for their positioning towards

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<sup>17</sup> Stevenson made a similar assessment more than 100 years later about the establishment of British colonial rule, "as the different hills did not combine and therefore pockets of resistance could be dealt with piecemeal" (Stevenson 1984: 61).

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of literature, see the preface of Ille 2013 and Ille 2016.

the ethnonym 'Nuba'. Neither an appraisal of their social analysis nor a genealogy of scientific debates is the aim here, but rather the referential extent of the term 'Nuba'.

Apart from other more specific articles, the work of Charles G. Seligman and Brenda Z. Seligman was drawn together for two encyclopedic entries on 'the Nuba', one for the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Seligman 1917), another one for a book on the *Pagan tribes of the Nilotic Sudan* (Seligman & Seligman 1932/1965). In the latter, sources and limits of information on the people of the Nuba Mountains are constantly presented, as well as socio-cultural and other variations at different points of observation. Since 'the Nuba' had been chosen as the topic of the chapters, some general framing was necessary, – a necessity to outline the object of study that Nadel and Stevenson also faced in their monographs, and, with more specific ethnic groups, the ethnographies of Baumann, Rottenburg and Manger as well.

One basic distinction made by the Seligmans was, similar to Russegger, the differentiation between the northern hills, exposed to outer influence, and the southern hills, having been mostly isolated before the time the two researchers visited them, in 1912. This "cultural isolation" was seen in nakedness and the lack of circumcision, two elements believed to change very early with Muslim influence, apparently the only kind of cultural influence the Seligmans took into account. The history of 'the Nuba' is seen coupled with a "Dar Nuba, the country of the Nuba, [which] occupies [now] only a portion of the southern half of the old kingdom" (Seligman & Seligman 1932/1965: 366), meaning Kordofan. Apart from a narrow understanding of cultural variation, the Seligmans thus saw beyond the diversity they encountered not only a historical social entity, but even a socio-political territorial organization, a kingdom, unifying those denoted as 'Nuba', and it remains unclear based on what such an entity was perceived.

The publication on the Nuba Mountains by Siegfried F. Nadel, which still is the most quoted, was described in the foreword by then Governor-General of the Sudan as an "anthropological study [...] of the Nuba, a congeries of primitive pagan tribes who inhabit the hilly country in the south-west of Kordofan" (Nadel 1947: xi). It was initiated by the then Governor of Kordofan Province, who "felt that the material advance of the Nuba was outstripping their mental and cultural advance" (Nadel 1947: xi). In fact, a debate about the people of this region as previously untouched natives formed part of British colonial discourses about the right way to deal with 'the Nuba', which had as much to do with constructs of 'pure culture' and 'natural development' as with a reaction to asymmetries in economic power in relation to Nile Valley-based traders. However, the resulting policy had lasting consequences, the extent of which is the issue of numerous publications (for recent assessments, see e.g. Willis 2003, Abdelhay 2010).

This colonial discourse was not without differentiations and differing voices (Gillan 1931; Henderson 1953: 41-98); in any case, the colonial frame of Nadel's subsequent research has been thoroughly criticized in recent decades. The validity of this criticism is not of interest here, it has merely to be noted that the only extended ethnographic monograph from that time was deeply entangled with these discourses

(Faris 1973) and Nadel had to actively relate himself to them in order to be permitted to do his research (Henderson 1953: 496-500).

Although it is mostly unsatisfactory to try to pinpoint differentiated social studies on singular formulations, there are important directions of Nadel's overall depiction that need to be recounted here, especially since those general statements tend to be what is picked up most in debates beyond social analysis. So it has to be noted that Nadel chose to speak, in spite of the title of his book, about 'the Nuba peoples' in his introduction, sometimes also 'the people of the Nuba Mountains' (Nadel 1947: 1). Concerning the Seligman's racial categorization, he hurries to specify that

[t]he Nuba peoples appear as a racial unit (or sub-unit) when compared, on the basis of physiological measurements, with those other large racial divisions. Considered by themselves, they present a far from homogeneous or pure racial unit; [i]f we leave aside physical characteristics and turn to ethnic divisions, the internal differentiation becomes even more marked. (Nadel 1947: 1)

This indication of a possible differentiation from others *and* within the Nuba peoples is not the last of his specifications though. Nadel goes on to say that 'the Arabs' used 'Nuba' as a collective name and that its usage by others had stabilized, "largely, I imagine, under the influence of accepted Government nomenclature" (Nadel 1947: 2). Most significantly, he added:

This does not mean that no concept expressing the racial or ethnic unity of these Negro hillmen *vis-à-vis* Arabs or Nilotic tribes exists. But it is both more vague and more narrow than the concept implied in the name Nuba. The Nuba groups refer to the racial or ethnic unit to which they belong by the term 'Hill peoples' (e.g. in Otoro or Moro) or 'Black peoples' (in Heiban). The range of this concept is determined by the concrete experience and knowledge of a particular group rather than any general conception of racial differences and distribution. (Nadel 1947: 2)

It is important to note the positional, situational, relative quality of the developing endonym 'Nuba' Nadel claims here, which will be important in the reasoning described below. There are also the beginnings of racial, ethnic and linguistic differentiations, which are among the analytical categories through which the concept of 'the Nuba' is scrutinized in later writings.

In most subsequent social anthropological studies, groups formed on the basis of territorial proximity in the Nuba Mountains are called 'hill communities' after Nadel (Nadel 1947: 24). A statement originally made about the Otoro is also true for the other groups; specifically that "repeated movements, the natural growth of one or the decline of another settlement, keep its boundaries fluid" (Nadel 1947: 88). However, Nadel's verdict that most migrations that took place until his time were "on a very small scale" (Nadel 1947: 5) was arrived at on the basis of very limited historical information, and in a situation and at a time when new socio-cultural

elements were actively migrating into the social life he described. Rather differently, the few existing studies focusing on pre-colonial history (e.g. Husmann 1984, Spaulding 1987, Ewald 1990, Ille 2011) describe a dynamic relation between 'inside' and 'outside'. The undisputed image of a (historically and ideally) 'pure and remote culture' can still be found in the accounts of occasional visitors publishing in popular media (e.g. Riefenstahl 1973-1976/2006, Castiglioni & Castiglioni 1977), but it became much rarer in social studies based on long-term anthropological fieldwork and historical research.

Stevenson noted in his study on *The Nuba People of Kordofan Province*, originally written in 1965, that

[o]ne might comment that, even applied to Nile Nubian speakers, the name 'Nuba' has only partial historical justification, since it has been attached to various groups in the Nile valley, and it is improbable that it was the Nubian speakers' name for themselves. The above extract illustrates a further confusion in the minds of many writers between ethnic stock, cultural group and linguistic division [...]. In spite of obvious objections, it is hardly possible to avoid the use of the name 'Nuba', firmly established as it is now used by the administration and by the people themselves. (Stevenson 1984: 3)

In other words, the ethnonym 'Nuba' had at this point made the full transformation from a vague, imprecise name for many, mostly not directly encountered people to a constantly used name, both in public affairs and in the identification of a social group by its own members. Stevenson also continues Nadel's usage of 'Nuba peoples' rather than 'the Nuba', in reference to the many differences among these peoples that make it inappropriate to speak of one ethnic, or more general, one cultural group.

Still, he identified contradictions between exonymic and endonymic usage of the term. He gives the example of the people of Tegali, who had been classified as Nuba in the 1955/56 census, but mostly refused this classification for themselves. A negative connotation was also perceived by other groups, such as the Shawabna, and what Stevenson calls "the more educated", such as schoolboys and graduates, who "tend to reserve it for those they think of as rustic hill-dwellers: for them 'Nuba' is the reverse of a status symbol" (Stevenson 1984: 3).

In spite of Stevenson's own specification, he has been cited, especially in some non-social science studies, as a reference point to claim a fixed, uniform entity called 'Nuba'. For example, a 1987 study by physical anthropologists refers to both Nadel and Stevenson to support their statement that

[t]he Nuba people appear as a distinct tribal group, when compared on the basis of physical features with other large tribes in Sudan [...]. They remained isolated from the surrounding areas [...] represent a human enclave of relatively pure negroid origin [...] [and] were not influenced by Arabs, Islam, or Christianity until the beginning of this century. (Bayoumi and Saha 1987: 380)

These and other erroneous readings of previous studies were the basis, on which they also had no hesitation to generalize blood sample analyses from a specific group, Mandal, to all Nuba.<sup>19</sup>

However, Stevenson ended his historical narrative with an outlook, which nicely captures not only the issue discussed in the last section, but also the process, which was much more foregrounded by the next generation of anthropologists:

The Nuba peoples are to-day perhaps more Nuba-conscious, i.e. more conscious of themselves as a regional entity, desirous of having their proper share of education and employment and economic progress, and more consciously aware of their need to have a voice in the nation's affairs by electing members to Parliament who will make sure that their interests get a fair hearing. Once they are convinced of this they may be ready to take the next step and go beyond their regional concerns to think much more of the welfare of the country as a whole. (Stevenson 1984: 75-76)

Looking in a similar direction, the anthropologist Baumann published a version of his doctoral dissertation under the name *National integration and local integrity. The Miri of the Nuba Mountains in the Sudan*. It belongs to a number of monographs discussing specific ethnic groups that may be put under the heading 'Nuba'; avoiding the necessity to justify or simply presume speaking of an entity under this name.

However, as Stevenson had noted, the active, frequent usage of the term 'the Nuba' made it impossible to ignore the term in favour of other concepts. So Baumann engaged the question of 'Nuba-ness', but now as something undergoing different processes of interpretation. He makes sure to speak of 'Nuba groups' who "are not [...] a homogeneous group" (Baumann 1987: 8), stressed with reference to Stevenson the cross-cutting character of linguistic and other cultural elements and diagnosed that "it is as yet a matter of judgement on selective criteria whether there is a social or cultural framework shared by the Nuba at large" (Baumann 1987: 9). He also pointed out, again, that being Nuba was not just originally an exonymic ascription, but that it was a negative or at least othering distinction, "and the necessity to define Nuba in contradistinction from 'Arab ha[s] a direct bearing on the processes of regional and national integration" (Baumann 1987: 9).

The issue of integration into a larger societal context was also among the main concerns of Rottenburg's (1991) and Manger's (1994) studies, again rather with a focus on specific ethnic groups to fill ethnographic gaps, but also in relation to a

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<sup>19</sup> Another example for the underpinnings of scientific assumptions can be found in a genetic study of 1999 aiming at historical conclusions (Krings et al. 1999), where Nuba have been classified as southern Sudanese based on assumed categorical cultural and linguistic differences between Egyptians, Nubian and southern Sudanese as fixed groups. The basis of this classification is one source, the 1996 Ethnologue of the Summer School of Linguistics, which even in 2014 had only a fragmentary account of Sudan languages and did not provide a significant cultural analysis. The genetic study is thus an example of high analytical effort for collected data and low analytical effort for assumptions guiding this collection, continuing – with more sophisticated technology – the racialized speculations of earlier physical anthropology (e.g. Seligman 1910; Mukherjee, Rao and Trevor 1955).

changing, contested notion of 'Nubanness'. Rottenburg, based on research among the Lemwareng (Moro) of Lebu, approached this through the concept of *Akkreszenz* (accretion), which tries to capture the complex process by which what was 'outside', foreign, becomes 'inside', familiar. While Rottenburg's study thus retains the diffuse notion of 'Nuba', which resulted from the history of the term and people denoted by it, his focus was the "unique dynamics of adjustment and distinction" (Rottenburg 1991: 16, translation by author) in the region – the observation that

[...] the political landscape and the related consciousness are not characterized by the drawing of stable and reliable boundaries that are strengthened under threat, but flexible and unstable alliances that are shifting under threat. (Rottenburg 1991: 16, translation by author)

But cultural translation, as it may be called, is not merely a playful, experimental process, but marred by existential struggles, which became, since the 1980s and in fact since long before, a fundamental part of 'being Nuba'. This observation has become an inevitable element of social studies that take contemporary developments seriously. Manger, for instance, already put *The integration of the Lafofa Nuba into Sudanese society* into the title of his publication, but although his introduction of the study acknowledged cultural complexity and variation, as did the anthropological studies before him, his frequent usage of 'the Nuba' pointed to a more general look at the way people he talks about are perceived and treated:

[T]he Nuba have not only been faced with threats to their physical and economic survival. Their survival as different cultural groups is also at stake. [...] An important element of the conflict [that erupted in 1983] is the definition of the Sudanese identity, and the application of the *sharia* dramatized to people of southern Sudan, as well as northern groups such as the Nuba that their identity was at stake and that their position as equal citizens in their country was far from settled. (Manger 1994: 9-10)

In other words: Although detailed social studies on people living in or coming from the Nuba Mountains reveal not just a wide variety of ways people deal with their everyday lives and what social institutions are brought to bear when conflicts arise, they would miss an essential part of these lives if the connotations of being perceived and treated as part of 'the Nuba' are ignored.

Saavedra aptly described the necessity to pay attention to these connotations, especially now, after decades of embattled approaches to identities:

In the mid-1990's, this has contributed to the spread of civil war to the Nuba Mountains. There has been a "hardening" or a politicization of identities. While an identity may be an archetype and not reflect the realities of many or even most persons potentially included within that identity, the politicization of the identity allows it to be an active factor in peoples' lives. (Saavedra 1998: 223-224)

It is in this tension of notions that 'Nuba' as ethno-political endonym has to be seen.

## **'Nuba' as ethno-political endonym**

Nowadays, there are a wide range of strategies to deal with the question of "the" Nuba. In academic discourses, Nadel's differentiation of 'Nuba' as a general name for people in and from the Nuba Mountains as a region and actual cultural complexity of people living and coming from there, supported by Stevenson, has mostly been adopted.<sup>20</sup> While the previous usages may be misread as dealing with problems of accurate description – they are actually just as much embedded in the politics of naming as what follows – this final section focuses on processes of self-designation that have mostly been connected to questions of cultural survival.

This touches on the politics of representation, in which the representations discussed up to now are part of intellectual resources in an ongoing negotiation of cultural value, some more and some less influential. This negotiation, as has been indicated, is not merely some kind of relative ranking, it is deeply connected to the possibility to legitimize a certain way of living. Since the ways of living have, as has been shown as well, been seen as everything but homogeneous among the people living in and coming from the Nuba Mountains, what is the ethno-political term 'Nuba' based on?

Before this question is discussed, some background on this ethno-political movement has to be given. Once again it is beyond the frame of the paper to present a historical reconstruction, so only some major landmarks can be recounted. Battahani (2009), for instance, argued that political engagement of Nuba peasants was strongly connected to British colonial agrarian policies and post-independent Sudanese state institutions. This was specified through the example of the state-based Nuba Mountains Cotton Industry (NMCI, later Nuba Mountains Agricultural Corporation, NMAC) and the pressures it put on peasant livelihoods in combination with an exploitative tax system. The coercive character of its agrarian development programme, supported by the World Bank in the 1960s, both prompted and undermined the emergence of the Nuba Mountains Farmers' Union (NMFU) in the 1950s. This also came in the wake of anti-colonial mobilization, and the union to some extent superseded ethnic categories, different from another political movement:

In 1953, a largely urban group of Nuba government employees participated in the re-establishment of the Black Bloc (BB), an organization originally formed in 1938 by the intelligentsia of the less developed areas of Kordofan and Darfur in response to the formation of the Graduate Congress by their counterparts in the North in the same year. (Battahani 2009: 242)

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<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that many Arabic writings about the Nuba Mountains appeared over the years as well (e.g. Amin 2002, Hālid 2002, Aḥmad 2008), most of which took notice of Nadel's and Stevenson's publications, but not of social studies that took place afterwards and were not published in Arabic (in difference, for instance, to Šurkyān 2006).

The existence of different possible bases for mobilization, purely economic or socio-economic, i.e. with inclusion of ethnic criteria, thus led to competing strategies, especially after the beginning of civil war in 1955 which "provided the Nuba peasants with the chance to see for themselves the possible effect of an all-Nuba movement against the Northerners" (Battahani 2009: 246). In the beginning, with the formation of the Nuba Mountains General Union in 1957, the inclusive direction took precedence, but was accompanied by exclusive organizations, such as the Nuba Youth Club and the Nuba Sons, as well.

Abbas (1973) argued this in a broader sense of a 'black consciousness' and differentiated blacks in the North, such as Nuba and Funj, and those in the South, the former of which were regionally, and thus in a sense ethnically divided, maintaining underground political organizations with "social activities as a legal front":

Thus the Social Organization of the Nuba Mountains maintained branches in Kordofan Province and in the capital. The organization paid the poll tax of an impoverished member, helped at times of bereavement, arranged funerals and mourning parties and so on. (Abbas 1973: 36)

During the democratic period from 1964 to 1969, this took the form of the General Union of Nubas, whose purpose was, among others, "the unity of all the Nuba, revival of the Nuba Mountains Province, [...] parliamentary representation of Nubas by Nubas [...] and eventual black rule over the whole country" (Abbas 1973: 37). The failure to change policies by parliamentary means, however, soon led to the founding of several secret organizations, some of which came together as the United Sudanese African Liberation Front shortly before the military coup in 1969. The text ends with a diagnosis, which might easily stand for a statement about the post-CPA era:

The Addis Ababa agreement offers nothing to the non-Arab Sudanese in the north. The twists and turns of General Nimeiry's policies - inspired by a strong will to survive - have done nothing to inspire confidence that he is determined to correct the basic injustices in Sudan. Ministers have even stressed that the right of local self-government will not be extended to regions in the north because there is no evidence of a demand for it. The message is clear: only open rebellion will be accepted as evidence of local discontent. And it is likely that having used western black troops in the past to try and crush the southern struggle for freedom, the Khartoum government will be able to rely on southern black troops to crush any future uprising in the non-Arab north. (Abbas 1973: 43)

With Philip Abbas Ghabush's text, the field of self-representation has been entered. It is important to note, however, that the 'consciousness' that is described here is not just the basis, but also the result of political movements, begging the question, who exactly is mobilising here. In an interview shortly before his death, Yousif Kuwa Mekki reflected on a personal emergence of a 'Nuba consciousness' that can be read

parallel to the organizational politics described above (Ende 2001). But it is the way he referred to the term 'Nuba' that is relevant here.

In his words, 'being Nuba' was an existing reality, which simply was needing to be brought to consciousness, as "[o]nly when we came out of the Nuba Mountains, to the north or south or west, we learned that we are all Nuba". Nuba appear here as socially homogeneous group, allowing statements such as: "In the Nuba society we don't think of women as in any way inferior to men". This was not treated as a contradiction to the tension between the exonym and the endonym, or at odds with a reference to Nadel's study through which he "learnt to know about [him]self". It was also not embedded in the account of a 1977 Nuba conference at the University of Khartoum, an exclusive conference of not more than forty participants by invitation, whose outcome he described as follows:

There were two things we wished to tackle, because they will always work against us: religious differences and tribal differences. Of course we have a lot of tribes. [...] And we have Christians, Muslims, non-Muslims and so on. The main result of that conference was the foundation of Komolo, or Youth movement, through which we wanted to work for the political rights of the Nuba. (Ende 2001)

This was also the core movement for recruitment inside the region for achieving "some equality, some services, so that people could feel that they were belonging to the same country", which was first channeled into parliamentary work and, upon frustration about the way parliamentary politics went, into participation with the SPLM.

On several levels, the politics of representation had turned here into a struggle for *The right to be Nuba* (Rahhal 2001), as a book published by the organization Nuba Survival formulated it. On the battlegrounds of these identity politics (Manger 2001), the boundaries between exonyms and endonyms became less and less relevant, as being discriminated or killed as a Nuba overshadowed differentiated thinking about what being Nuba actually meant and how it related to the targeted individual's social reality. The fact that this reality is fought over in vicious circles of violence supported rather a 'hardening' than a 'softening' of stances (Ille et al. 2015).

At the same time, the fact that those struggling for emancipation of 'Nuba' had to determine who and what they were fighting for meant that they could not escape politics of representation as well, namely the basic question of who speaks (and decides) for whom. In another interview with Yousif Kuwa Makki, he defended SPLM cultural politics with a highly ambiguous and partly paradoxical sentence:

We have to unite the Nuba people somehow. As long as they are divided, as long as they are ignorant and primitive, other people will decide their fate....But I'm not without doubt... (Ende 2007, quoted after Fuller 2008)

In other words, the change from exonym to endonym has not dissolved the issue of cultural ascriptions, their history and their future. This can be seen in the resolutions

of the first All Nuba Conference in Kauda (December 2002), where not only the ethnonym 'Nuba' was not an issue of debate, but where the question of representation was treated as solved:

- 4.1 Nuba people see themselves as having a unique ethnic, cultural, linguistic and geographic identity which distinguishes them from all other peoples in Sudan and which is essentially of African origin. [...]
- 4.4 Oppressive practices of any sort, even if "traditional", should be discontinued (e.g. female circumcision). [...]
- 4.8 Political unity and vision must be strengthened, while continuing to prioritise democracy. [...]
- 4.10 The SPLM/A should be given a clear mandate to represent Nuba in the present ongoing IGAD negotiations.

## **Conclusion**

The Nuba Mountains have throughout the traceable history been characterized by a certain unsteadiness, which contrasts with the steadiness of its defining physical feature, the mountains themselves. Although some of its hill communities remained more or less untouched for extended periods, documented traces of its history are full of movement: inter-communal warfare, slave raids, militarily enforced 'peace' and resettlement, civil war and flight, with the addition of religious missions, labour, educational and professional migration, and occasional tourism. The concomitant dynamics of manifold movements and survival through isolation have nurtured a complex relationship between social worlds, in times of Turkish whips and Nubian traders as well as in times of Antonov bombers and mobile phones.

Considering such a history, it is a political decision to treat 'Nuba' as one continuous social group, because 'Nuba' is an exonym which developed into an endonym over a long period of time. A historiography of 'Nuba' will have to take issue with this process if it is not intended to produce projections directed by the aim of establishing a connection to a pre-determined point in the past, i.e. a predefined goal of representation.

Historiography mostly develops from centres or points of documentation, which are taken as representations of what was there. This is connected to the presumption that what was not documented was not historically significant or at least cannot be assumed to have happened. This means that new sources are read related to pre-existing documents. These are mostly written documents designed to represent and last; thus structures of centralized powers with an interest to produce and dominate documentation have a higher degree of perceptibility. With a predefined goal of proving historical significance, historiography will try to establish a connection to these centres of 'historically significant' documentation.

For a historiography of the Nuba Mountains, the question of historical significance is not a trivial issue of manipulating documentation to enhance the

cultural value of a certain group. The existential threats connected to identifying Nuba as inferior and without a history have made speaking about the past marred by violent politics in the present. Simply avoiding speaking about a 'real' ethnic, cultural, or linguistic significance of the term 'Nuba' ignores such politics just as much as a blind claim of an unquestionable reality depicted by 'true' representations of Nuba.

Against this backdrop, this paper traced the changes of meaning denoted by 'Nuba' throughout documented history, including the accretion of a positive, endonymic meaning during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in opposition to the often pejorative exonymic denotation of 'uncivilized / inferior hill-dwellers'. Both directions are carried on up to the present and thus followed those belonging to the region in one way or the other into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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