



Muhammad Ali Jerban

## A MAN OF HUMOUR. OBITUARY OF MUHAMMAD ALI JERBAN

### Muhammad Ali Jerban was a man of humour!

He entered this world sometime around the year 1940, during a time when World War II raged across the globe and the Sudan Armed Forces participated on the liberation of the Empire of Ethiopia from the Italian occupation. The exact date of his birth was nowhere recorded, as in those days nobody in the countryside of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan felt the necessity to do so. However, when we last met in Wad Ben Naga in Autumn 2022, Muhammad was firmly confident that he had already turned over 80 years of age.

Muhammad was born into the large family of Ali Jerban and his wife Ain Saad Hamed Wad Amouna, who both originated from the Naga region, in the eastern hinterland of Wad Ben Naga. As was usual in those days, Muhammad received no formal education and remained illiterate until his later days. And yet he approached life with practical intelligence and endless curiosity.

In his late teenage years, Muhammad witnessed the demise of the colonial rule in Sudan. On 1 January 1956, the Republic of the Sudan declared independence from the United Kingdom and Egypt and joined the family of sovereign countries of the world. In her first years, the new republic and her public services underwent through the process of Sudanisation.

In the antiquities service, British archaeologist Peter L. Shinnie, was replaced by his French, i.e., non-British, colleague Jean Vercoutter, who eventually handed over the office to Thabit Hassan Thabit, the first Sudanese to preside over government corporation. In 1958, Thabit followed on original plan of Vercoutter and initiated excavations at the archaeological site, located in the vicinity of present-day village of Wad Ben Naga.

Muhammad's father, Ali, was amongst the workmen who Thabit hired during his excavations. Ali must have earned Thabit's trust, as he was inaugurated as the archaeological site's first *ghaffir* ('guard' in Arabic) following the establishment of the archaeological protected land in Central Wad Ben Naga.

It is from this time on that Ali and his descendants received their nickname turned surname – *Jerban* –, meaning 'a broken pot'. The metaphor related to Ali's extraordinary generosity towards guests visiting the site and his willingness to give, even when nothing was left for his family and himself.

Ali was a character known and remembered by many who crossed his path. In that respect, Muhammad took after his father and further spread the good name of the family.

The Jerban family lived in a house built in the middle of what, through the generations, developed into a neighbourhood called Jarabeen, which derived from the family name. The neighbourhood, situated on a slightly sloping terrain south of a small *khora* ('seasonal brook'), has been since inhabited by families of Muhammad, his brothers and their sons.

Following his father's wishes, Muhammad pursued a military career. He served in South Sudan during the First Sudanese Civil War (1955–1972) and as such participated on the infamous military confrontation between the Sudanese armed forces and the Ansar, i.e., the disciples of the Mahdi, on the Aba Island in 1970.

Soon after he retired from the army in the early 1970s, Muhammad obtained a license to operate a *dukkan* ('a small shop') at Jarabeen, in the immediate vicinity of which he spent the following decades of his life. His illiteracy sharply contrasted with his brilliant numeracy, as he smoothly ran family businesses, including the *dukkan*.

The end of military service also meant the time for establishing a family. Muhammad married three times. The two first marriages remained without children and ended in divorce. In around 1975 when Muhammad was in his mid-thirties, he finally found lasting companionship with his third wife Gisema Suleiman Mustafa Ahmed. Gisema, grandcalled affectionately today as *al-Hajja* by the neighbours and other villagers, gave birth to five daughters – Najwa, Shadia, Rasha, Saadia and Malaka – and four sons – Yassir, Hussein, Faisal and the youngest child Ezzadin. Unlike their parents, all children received education in grammar schools which are located five minutes' walk north of the family house. The oldest son and heir, Yassir, inherited his father's profession and served in the army during the final years of the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005).



Muhammad Ali Jerban with his wife Gisema.

In terms of internal politics, Muhammad's life was dominated by the eras of Presidents Ga-faar Nimeiry (in office 1969–1985) and Omar Bashir (in office 1989–2019), a native from the nearby village of Hosh Ben Naga (frequently mistaken with Wad Ben Naga). During their times in office, Sudan and its people experienced many ups and downs, which would take up hundreds of pages in books of history and dozens of headlines in the news to describe. Muhammad accepted all the changes with a pragmatic optimism enhanced by an ever-present laughter. And indeed, with the years following the end of the Second Civil War came the hopes and promises of a better future.

The end of January 2009 brought him an unexpected change. Representatives of the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums together with a delegation of the National Museum of the Czech Republic visited the site with the prospect of initiating new excavations at the site. Muhammad was at the head of the gathering that formed around the cars in which the delegations arrived. True to his family's reputation, he soon entertained all visitors in front of his *dukkan*.

New archaeological works at Wad Ben Naga began only eight months later in September 2009. Muhammad and his brother Said, who had taken over the responsibilities of the *ghaffir* after his father Ali had passed away in 2008, became intermediaries between the archaeological team from a distant country and the local community. Muhammad's *dukkhan* has become the main source of provisions for the expedition and a meeting place between the locals, expeditions and guests coming to see the ancient monuments of Wad Ben Naga.

Muhammad welcomed in his *dukkhan* and served cold drinks and hot tea to several distinguished guests from Czechia, including a bishop of Prague, a head of the European Union Delegation in Sudan, a deputy chairman and other members of the Senate of the Czech Republic, and last but not least a mayor of Wad Ben Naga's twinning town of Otrokovice.

Muhammad's smiling face that frequently broke out into laughter appeared in two documentary movies about Czech archaeological works at Wad Ben Naga, namely *Na cestě Merojským ostrovem* (On the Road Through the Island of Meroe, 2012) and *Dobrodružství archeologie* (Adventures in Archaeology), namely the episode *Súdán – skrytá krása* (Sudan – The Hidden Beauty, 2018).

Muhammad, when we first met, was already a *haji* ('a respected old man'), although he labelled himself as an *ajüz* ('an old geezer'). He had countless grandchildren, who – together with their cousins, schoolmates and friends – used to hang around his *dukkhan*. No wonder it usually took Muhammad a while to remember a particular grandchild's name, when asked about.



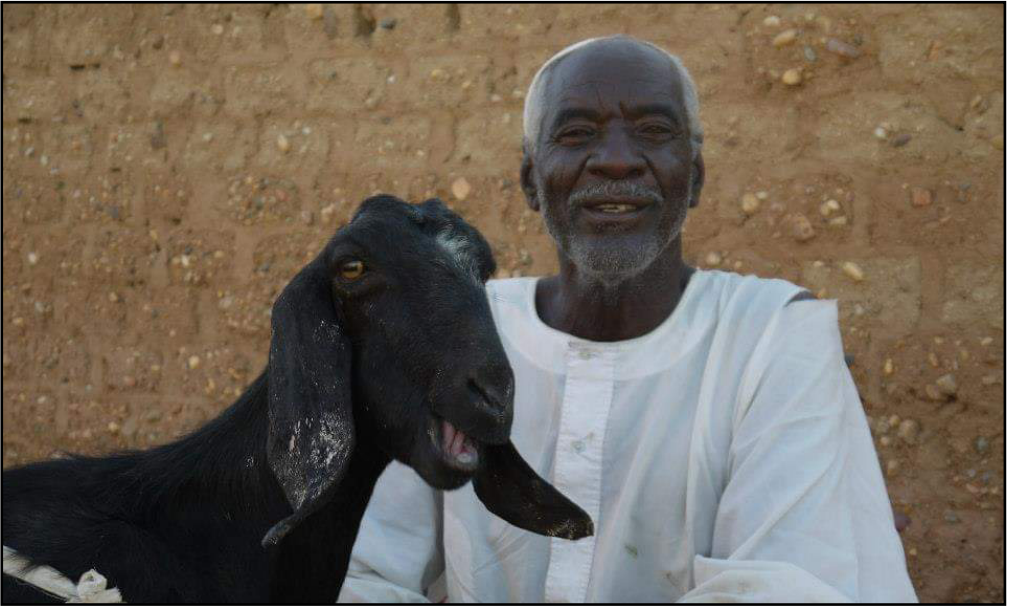
Muhammad Jerban, his sons and grandsons.

In connection with running the *dukkhan*, Muhammad frequently travelled to Shendi to acquire goods for retail. If people from Shendi knew at least one person from Wad Ben Naga, it was most likely him. Several times, in the marketplace or at the bus station in Shendi, I would hear his voice telling stories and discussing rumours, accentuated by his loud laughter. Business took him occasionally all the way to the capital city of Khartoum. He much enjoyed all these



travels which gave him opportunity to meet and talk to distant family members and friends, as well as total strangers.

Besides running the shop, Muhammad took care of the fields his family irrigated on the eastern bank of the River Nile, located some fifteen-minutes' walk from his house. He also took care of his herds for whom he built a small shelter under an acacia tree just within the sight from his *dukkan*. Muhammad was fond of his animals, especially of his *khomār abyot* ('a white donkey'), named Blanca, or his '*anz barqa* ('a spotted goat'), named As-Sura, who he kept for years, as she always delivered twin kids per litter.



Muhammad Jerban with his spotted goat As-Sura.

Muhammad's life as I witnessed in its past fifteen years was based on a pleasant seeming monotony and a relaxed rhythm of life set by cycles of day and of year. During the daytime, the positioning of his *angareb* (a type of bed widely popular in Sudan) in the shades of his *dukkan* and other building surrounding it fulfilled the role of a local sundial and helped one orientate through the temporal course of day. His loud voice and laughter, heard hundreds of meters away from his *dukkan*, served the same purpose. The shade of the *veranda* ('a porch') in front of his *dukkan* was a scene of many happy moments filled with verbal and non-verbal humour that helped to break language, cultural or any other barriers between him and his guests.

Muhammad was truly a man of humour. He could improve one's mood with just a look or through shouting his favourite exclamations, including his usual address to the members of the archaeological mission: '*Khawadja tamaam? Khawadja kwayyis?*' ('Foreigner, how are you? Foreigner, are you doing well?') or '*Khawadja tamaam! Khawadja kwayyis!*' ('Foreigners are fine! Foreigners are good!'), depending on the intonation.

But life brings both joys and worries. Following the cessation of South Sudan on 9 July 2011, the Republic of Sudan lost most of its oil fields, and the country's mining industry turned its eyes north towards the auriferous regions around Abu Hamed. Many men, including those from

Wad Ben Naga, succumbed to the gold rush and went to spent months away from their families in search of the precious metal. While men searched for the gold, women and elderly had to take over the everyday businesses of the village. Muhammad's sons went to Abu Hamed repeatedly. One day, his son Hussein did not return from the trip to the north, as the car bringing him and other men back to Wad Ben Naga ran into an accident, in which Hussein fell victim. The loss of a child broke the back; it could only be mended with patience and faith.

In 2018, the Sudan Revolution broke out and heralded the overthrow of the Omar Bashir regime. Transitional governments were instituted but failed to provide political and economic stability to the country and fulfil the expectations of the revolution.

In this situation, at the beginning of 2023, Muhammad was diagnosed with a serious disease. His treatment proceeded well until 15 April 2023, when the War in Sudan started between the Sudan Armed Forces and their allies against the Rapid Support Forces. The war affected Muhammad's life as it has affected lives of tens of millions of other Sudanese. Muhammad faced his final years with bravery, even as illness set in. As result of destructive actions of war, many hospitals and medical facilities closed or had to restrict services they provided due to the lack of medical and other supplies. Treatment of Muhammad's disease could not proceed as planned and as needed in Shendi. Despite efforts to relocate him to Merowe, his time eventually came.



Muhammad Ali Jerban taking an afternoon nap on his angareb.

Muhammad returned to the God on 11 November 2023 at his home surrounded by his family at Wad Ben Naga. He was buried at the local cemetery close to the train station, where his other family members had been laid to rest. May peace be upon him!

To God we belong and to Him we shall return!

إنا لله وإنا إليه راجعون

Pavel Onderka