

Bells and beads

Illuminated by spotty lighting as the generator kicked in and out, members of the Kadugli tribe gathered on a large open field on the outskirts of town, celebrating another day with music and dance.

"It is just a family celebration," said Mohamed Rahal, the Mek or traditional leader of the tribe, sitting in the first row of onlookers enjoying a live band in Kadugli, the capital of Southern Kordofan State. "It is just another happy day."

While members of the Khartoum-based Nuba band Autar Jebel were playing a bowl-shaped drum called *sorek* or *kalem*, along with traditional guitars, others clad in colourful clothes and beads were dancing.

Women's necks and shoulders were adorned with *suksuk*, a sophisticated structure of mainly yellow and red beads, while men wore the same decoration as head dresses, hanging from the sides of their faces.

Dancers had donned dresses with African print. As they moved, *kushkush* or iron bells tied to their ankles chimed to the rhythm of the music.

The Kadugli belong to the Nuba family of tribes, who originally came from the far north of present-day Sudan to settle in Kordofan's mountainous area now called the Nuba Mountains, the Mek said.

"Our ancestors came here more than 400 years ago," said Mr. Rahal, adding that it was the Nuba who had had begun

farming the largely arid area and that agriculture was still their main source of livelihood.

Nuba farmers grow two of Sudan's main export commodities, sesame and cotton, as well as sorghum, *phool Sudani* or ground nuts. They organize large festivities at harvest end and perform various dances, including the *kambala* and *bukhsa*.

Equipped with large buffalo horns and wearing palm leaves tied around their waists, Nuba perform the *kambala* dance on diverse occasions, ranging from a boy becoming an adult to the onset of the rainy season. The horns symbolize strength and power, values greatly prized by the tribe.

Dancing the *bukhsa*, women and men shuffle around in a line taking small steps, while men wave sticks and hold shields fabricated from hardened cow's hide.

According to the tribal leader, men without shields would traditionally not be fought. "When two people have a quarrel, they use the shield to fend off hits from the wooden stick," Mr. Rahal said, adding that courting a woman was among the main causes of a fight.

"If you wanted to touch my girlfriend, she would tell me and I would then challenge you to a fight," the Mek explained. "But if you beat me three consecutive times, you will take the girl."

Just a few decades ago, women of the



largely Muslim Nuba were not allowed to leave the house during the day, said Mr. Rahal. When they did, they wore the *burqa* or full-body veil. Today, however, Kadugli women are encouraged to attend school and freely choose their husbands, although the Mek acknowledged that arranged marriages still happened.

The tribal leader proudly mentioned that one of their old customs, female genital mutilation (FGM), had been fading. Along with facial scarrings, FGM had been prohibited and the younger generation of girls were uncircumcised, he said.

Southern Kordofan, home of the Nuba, was the first Sudanese state to pass a law prohibiting the harmful practice of FGM in 2008.

Eszter Farkas
Photos: Paul Banks

Top: Kadugli tribe members dancing the *kambala* in Kadugli.

Bottom: Nuba dancer wearing *suksuk* (beads) and holding a leather shield at a celebration in Kadugli.

