Studies of the post-colonial state in Africa have relied too often on a hard and fast distinction between state and civil society, official discourse and the public sphere. Questioning both the gloomy premise of an absolute space of discipline in the former and the utopian idealism of a pure and unfettered democratic space of deliberation in the latter, my paper seeks to interrogate the continuing salience of the state/public sphere distinction on both conceptual and empirical grounds. Drawing off recent literature on the state from anthropology and political theory, while adding ethnographic observations from the Sudanese experiment with the Islamic state into the mix, my paper will seek to question the location of both the state and the public sphere in modern autocratic nations in Africa. Through a close ethnographic reading of contemporary Islamic poetry—an under-examined dwelling place for both the state and the public sphere—and its flourishing through the efforts of both state and non-state actors in Sudan, I will examine how state projects become spaces of creative deliberation and how the public sphere comes to rely on modes of subjectivation central to state ideology. In doing so, I hope both to put into question the coherence of these central categories of 21st century political analysis, as well as to lay bare the complicated inner-workings of a rich genre of Islamic expression that has played an important role in projects of Islamic political reform throughout history.