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Towards social progress and post-imperial modernity? Colonial politics of literacy in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1946-1956

Iris Seri-Hersch*

'Why people should be literate! Relating this to the ideal of democracy and the promotion of social life'.¹

This is how a civil servant of the British Sudan Government advocated the spread of Arabic literacy among Sudanese adults early in 1950, when giving a communication on the organisation of adult literacy campaigns at a conference hosted by the Institute of Education in Bakht er Ruda.² The idea of promoting literacy on a mass scale was part of a new set of educational policies elaborated in late colonial Sudan. These were the result of both local developments and wider political, ideological, and economic processes unfolding in the British Empire during and after the Second World War. Situating Sudanese colonial politics of literacy within local and imperial contexts, this paper focuses on two key-issues: What were the purposes and uses of literacy in the eyes of colonial authorities in the Sudan? What means were used to spread and perpetuate literacy skills among Northern Sudanese people?

There is no single definition for the term *literacy*, whose meaning significantly varies in different historical periods and cultural contexts. For my purpose, I shall use it in a narrow sense, namely the ability to read and write in a given language. This is the meaning referred to

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Notes

¹ Note by Hasan Afandi Ahmad Yusuf on the Organisation of Adult Literacy Campaigns in the Sudan in 1950, 1 January 1950, SAD 671/2/42.

² Located next to the town of Ed Dueim (White Nile south of Khartoum), Bakht er Ruda is the site where a small teachers' training college was founded in 1934, which developed into a fully fledged Institute of Education during the 1940s and 1950s. For the history, functions, and achievements of the Institute, see the book by its first principal: Vincent L. Griffiths, *An Experiment in Education 1930-1950: an Account of the Attempts to Improve the Lower Stages of Boys' Education in the Moslem Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1930-1950* (London: Longman, 1953); and 'Uthmān Aḥmad al-Amīn, *Bakht al-Ruḍā, sittat 'uqūd fī masīrat al-ta'lim: 1934 / 1935-1994 / 1995* [Bakht er Ruda, six decades of education: 1934 / 1935-1994 / 1995], 2nd ed. (Khartoum: Maṭba'at Jāmi'at al-Khartūm, 2007).

by officials in late colonial Sudan.³ Central to my argument is the dual nature of literacy as both a type of knowledge and a technical skill giving access to other categories of knowledge.

The study draws upon various primary sources in English and Arabic, including notes and reports by officials of the Department/Ministry of Education of the Sudan Government, private and official correspondences, prospectuses of the Institute of Education, magazines for newly literates, publications by leading educationalists of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, reports by the Advisory Committee on Education in the [British] Colonies, and British colonial journals. The nature of this archival material led me to confine the enquiry to the Northern Sudan, although literacy in Arabic also began to be promoted in the South during the last imperial decade.⁴

This research intends to make an original contribution to the historiographies of both the modern Sudan and the British Empire, as well as provide innovative insights into the history of education of a region which has drawn little scholarly attention. The Sudan under Anglo-Egyptian rule (1899-1956), in particular, presents several features that can account for its persistent marginality in academic works. Located at a geographical and cultural crossroads between the Arab-speaking Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, it is more often left outside than fully included in these constructed entities.⁵ Moreover, the Sudan's anomalous legal status as a 'Condominium' –a territory simultaneously administered by two powers- has frequently excluded it from studies on British colonies and protectorates. Although it was formally attached to the Foreign Office, it enjoyed a form of colonial rule similar to other British possessions in Africa.⁶

There is an extensive historical literature dealing with educational issues in British and other imperial contexts, some of which incorporates the latest theoretical trends in (post)colonial studies.⁷ Few of these works, however, offer detailed analyses of the ways in

³ The above-mentioned report on adult literacy campaigns states that a 'very low standard' of literacy was aimed at, which implied the 'ability to read simple Arabic slowly and to write ones [sic] name and a simple message comprehensively, but not necessarily correctly.' Note by Hasan Afandi Ahmad Yusuf, SAD 671/2/36.

⁴ In the Condominium era (1899-1956), Northern provinces included Northern, Kassala, Blue Nile, Khartoum, Kordofan and Darfur. Southern provinces included Bahr el Ghazal, Upper Nile and Equatoria. See map below.

⁵ The Sudan has also been depicted as a rare borderline case between English-speaking and Arabic-speaking Africa. See Ali Mazrui, 'The Multiple Marginality of the Sudan', in *Sudan in Africa*, ed. Yusuf F. Hasan (Khartoum: Khartoum University Press [hereafter KUP], 1971), 240-255.

⁶ Peter Woodward, *Sudan, 1898-1989: the Unstable State* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1990), 15, 18; J. M. Lee, *Colonial Development and Good Government: a Study of the Ideas Expressed by the British Official Classes in Planning Decolonization, 1939-1964* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 77.

⁷ On British Africa, see for instance Kenneth King, *Pan-Africanism and Education: a Study of Race Philanthropy and Education in the Southern States of America and East Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); Penelope Hetherington, *British Paternalism and Africa, 1920-1940* (London: F. Cass, 1978); Clive Whitehead,

which specific policies were implemented, especially with regards to pedagogic materials and teaching methods. Research on the particular theme of literacy in colonial contexts remains scarce, with the notable exception of three recent studies tackling literacy issues in Nigeria, the Gold Coast, and Zanzibar, allowing for some interesting comparative insights.⁸

From ‘native education’ to ‘mass education’ and ‘community development’

A brief sketch of educational policy in British colonial Africa until the Second World War is useful to understand and contextualise later developments taking place both in the Empire and in the Sudan. Although education policy and practice were neither consistent throughout the colonial period (late nineteenth century – early 1960s) nor uniform across the vast territories of British Africa, several broad trends can be outlined. Until the end of the First World War, missionary societies were given a free hand to manage educational affairs, often according to predefined zones of influence.⁹ During the 1920s and 1930s, the Colonial Office became increasingly concerned with educational issues, establishing an Advisory Committee on Native Education in Tropical Africa in 1923.¹⁰ ‘Native Education’ became a major battlefield for the competing interests and visions of colonial authorities, missionary

‘The Historiography of British Imperial Education Policy, Part II: Africa and the Rest of the Colonial Empire’, *History of Education* 34, no. 4 (2005): 441-454; Peter Kallaway, ‘Welfare and Education in British Colonial Africa and South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s’, *Paedagogica Historica* 41, no. 3 (2005): 337-356; Michael Omolewa, ‘Educating the “Native”: A Study of the Education Adaptation Strategy in British Colonial Africa, 1910-1936’, *Journal of African American History* 91, no. 3 (2006): 267-287; Aaron Windel, ‘British Colonial Education in Africa: Policy and Practice in the Era of Trusteeship’, *History Compass* 7, no. 1 (2009): 1-21; on British India, see Clive Whitehead, *Colonial Educators: the British Indian and Colonial Education Service, 1858-1983* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003); Tim Allender, *Ruling through Education: the Politics of Schooling in the Colonial Punjab* (Elgin, I. L.: New Dawn Press, 2006); Sanjay Seth, *Subject Lessons: the Western Education of Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Michael S. Dodson, *Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture: India 1770-1880* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); on the British Empire, see Clive Whitehead, ‘Education in British Colonial Dependencies, 1919-1939: A Re-Appraisal’, *Comparative Education* 17, no. 1 (1981): 71-80; Brian Holmes, ed., *Educational Policy and the Mission Schools: Case Studies from the British Empire* (London: Routledge & Paul Kegan, 1967); James A. Mangan, ed., *‘Benefits Bestowed’? Education and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); James A. Mangan, ed., *The Imperial Curriculum: Racial Images and Education in the British Colonial Experience* (London: Routledge, 1993); on education in various imperial contexts in the modern era, see Philip G. Altbach and Gail P. Kelly, eds., *Education and the Colonial Experience*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984); Antonio Novoa and Marc Depaepe, eds., *The Colonial Experience in Education: Historical Issues and Perspectives* (Gent: CSHP, 1995).

⁸ Michael Omolewa, ‘Programmed for Failure? The Colonial Factor in the Mass Literacy Campaign in Nigeria, 1946-1956’, *Paedagogica Historica* 44, no. 1/2 (2008): 107-121; Kate Skinner, ‘“It Brought Some Kind of Neatness to Mankind”: Mass Literacy, Community Development and Democracy in 1950s Asante’, *Africa* 79, no. 4 (2009): 479-499; Corrie Decker, ‘Reading, Writing, and Respectability: How Schoolgirls Developed Modern Literacies in Colonial Zanzibar’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 43, no. 1 (2010): 89-114. Whereas Omolewa focuses on colonial policy, Skinner and Decker highlight student perspectives.

⁹ Hetherington, *British Paternalism*, 111.

¹⁰ According to a recent study of British colonial doctrines of development, the scarcity of indigenous labour, especially in East Africa, prompted colonial officials to devote increasing attention and resources to the ‘human side’ of development. See Joseph M. Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), 117-143.

societies, American philanthropic foundations, Western anthropologists, and African leaders.¹¹ Two main policy tendencies developed in the interwar period against the background of an international debate on the respective merits of ‘academic’ education (literary education based on Western knowledge and methods) as opposed to ‘progressive’ education (child-centred curriculum based on the ideas of John Dewey¹²). In British Africa, the proponents of ‘adapted’ education emphasised rural life and indigenous cultures with a view to preserve local communities from the ‘detrimentalizing’ effect of a European curriculum.¹³ Defenders of a more literary type of education, which included many Africans and famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in the latest part of his life, criticized ‘adapted’ education as a conscious attempt to marginalize Africans socially and economically in order to perpetuate colonial rule.

Most important for our purpose is the gradual emergence, between the two world wars, of colonial and missionary discourses on development and welfare. Up to the 1930s, relatively few social services were provided in the colonies, for in a pre-Keynesian era the state did not see itself as responsible for the health, welfare and education of its subjects / citizens.¹⁴ Promulgated in 1929, the first Colonial Development Act aimed at increasing British colonial trade rather than stimulating social development. Following the great economic depression in world trade, social unrest in Europe and in the colonies, as well as public debates over the nature and meaning of colonial rule, pushed state authorities towards a greater engagement with social and educational matters.¹⁵ Drawing upon the philosophy of ‘adapted’ education and models of technical education implemented in American Negro colleges, Jeanes schools were opened in Kenya, Nyasaland, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, Liberia and Zanzibar between 1925 and 1938.¹⁶ Many Africans resented their rural emphasis and their ‘no English’ policy; they preferred academic schools leading to higher education. Jeanes staff nonetheless did a pioneering work in the field of what would later be labelled as

¹¹ Windel, ‘British Colonial Education’, 6; Kallaway, ‘Welfare and Education’, 341.

¹² See his *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

¹³ Kallaway, ‘Welfare and Education’, 342-4. ‘Academic’ education, which had prevailed in British colonial India, came to be seen as a root cause of political agitation and was thus discarded by many colonial officials in Africa. See Hetherington, *British Paternalism*, 113-4, 117-9; King, *Pan-Africanism and Education*, 155.

¹⁴ Whitehead, ‘Education in British Colonial Dependencies’, 75; Kallaway, ‘Welfare and Education’, 346.

¹⁵ The role and responsibilities of colonial rulers in Africa were discussed by critics, historians and anthropologists such as William M. Macmillan, *The Cape Colour Question: A Historical Survey* (London: Faber & Gwer, 1927), Norman Leys, *A Last Chance in Kenya* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931), Lucy Mair, *An African People in the Twentieth Century* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1934), Bronislaw Malinowski, ‘Native Education and Culture Contact’, *International Review of Missions* 25 (1936): 480-515, Margery Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria* (London: OUP, 1937), William M. Hailey, *An African Survey: A Study of Problems Arising in Africa South of the Sahara* (London: OUP, 1938), and Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (London: OUP, 1940).

¹⁶ King, *Pan-Africanism and Education*, 150-176.

'community development'. They cultivated pupils' pride in African history and society at a time when it was often dismissed as either unsuitable or irrelevant, and sought to combine African traditional methods with Western knowledge to produce an adapted curriculum which focused on agricultural and technical work.¹⁷

Inter-European politics in the years just before the outbreak of the Second World War played a significant role in the reorientation of British imperial policy towards decolonisation. In 1936-1939, the political controversy arising from Hitler's demand for the retrocession of the ex-German colonies posited British statesmen as defenders of the British Empire on moral grounds. Willing to distance themselves from Nazi imperialism, they advertised, and actually advanced, their promise of greater freedom and self-government for their African dependencies.¹⁸ British imperial discourses and practices also shifted as a result of growing pressure from African nationalist movements, the rise of the Labour Party in Britain (a strong opposition force in the 1930s, a partner in the government coalition in 1940-1945, and the governing party in 1945-1951), and the independence of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon in 1947-1948.

The tranquil assumption of the long-term character of colonial rule, held by most Britons in the interwar period, gave way to a conception of empire as an outmoded system that had become difficult to sustain and justify.¹⁹ Promoting scholarly research in Africa, the 1940 and 1945 Colonial Development and Welfare Acts marked a new era of colonial commitment to development issues. The application of anthropological knowledge to policy-making, however, was controversial, and no systematic research was conducted in education.²⁰ The Colonial Office report on *Mass Education in African Society* (1943) clearly reflects how colonial declared objectives had shifted from 'responsibility for law and order' to a broader concern for social life, the standards of living of indigenous populations, and self-government. The three main aims of colonial government were defined as:

- (1) *The improvement of the health and living conditions of the people;*
- (2) *The improvement of their well-being in the economic sphere;*

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Margery Perham, *The Colonial Reckoning* (London: Collins, 1961), 49.

¹⁹ Lucy Mair, 'Anthropology and Colonial Policy', *African Affairs* 74, no. 295 (1975): 191-5; Whitehead, 'Education in British Colonial Dependencies', 74; For critics of empire in Britain and their impact upon colonial policies, see Nicholas Owen, 'Critics of Empire in Britain', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Vol. IV: the Twentieth Century*, ed. Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 188-211.

²⁰ Lee, *Colonial Development and Good Government*, 80-3. The Sudanese case is in line with the argument that colonial authorities conducted numerous experiments in education without investing in educational research *per se*. Bakht er Ruda provides an excellent example.

(3) *The development of political institutions and political power until the day arrives when the people can become effectively self-governing.*²¹

The 1945-1949 period witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of new recruits in the Colonial Education Service (CES), who were trained at the Colonial Department of the Institute of Education in London.²² Expressions such as ‘mass education’ and ‘community development’ became very popular throughout the British Empire, and pervaded the discourses of colonial policy-makers and lower-rank officials alike. The 1948 Cambridge Conference on African Initiative defined mass education as

*‘a movement designed to promote better living for the whole community, with the active participation and, if possible, on the initiative of the community, but if this initiative is not forthcoming spontaneously, by the use of techniques for arousing and stimulating it in order to secure its active and enthusiastic response to the movement’.*²³

Thus, mass education was conceived as a set of methods which could be used to promote development in any field such as agriculture, health, social welfare, and education. Its declared aim was to prepare African peoples either to govern themselves or to take a full share in the government of their countries.²⁴ This new, self-labelled ‘progressive’ colonial policy posed social and economic improvements as prerequisites for the achievement of what it considered to be the fruit of social and political maturity: national independence. Putting this view into effect, civil servants in various parts of the empire initiated projects which they documented in a growing number of colonial journals.²⁵

In that context, literacy became a central issue, for it was henceforth perceived as an indispensable tool of social advancement and political modernity. Founded in London in 1945, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) made the worldwide promotion of literacy one of its major goals, convening the first World Adult Education conference in Elsinore, Denmark in 1949.²⁶ The same year, the editor of the

²¹ Colonial Office, Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, *Mass Education in African Society*. Colonial no. 186 (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1943), 4, BW 90/58, NA.

²² For the evolution of recruitment to the CES in 1921-1961, see Whitehead, *Colonial Educators*, 88.

²³ ‘Community Development’, *Corona: the Journal of His Majesty’s Colonial Service* 1, no. 2 (March 1949): 4. Arthur Creech Jones, Secretary of State for the Colonies from 1946 until 1950, actively promoted such policy. See his ‘Foreword by the Secretary of State’, *Corona* 1, no. 1 (February 1949): 3-5 and ‘Foreword to the Mass Education Bulletin’, *Mass Education Bulletin* 1, no. 1 (December 1949): 1-3. See also Robert D. Pearce, *The Turning Point in Africa: British Colonial Policy 1938-1948* (London: F. Cass, 1982), 90-131.

²⁴ ‘Community Development’, 5. ‘Mass Education’ and ‘Community Development’ were sometimes used as synonyms in colonial discourses, but the latter was usually viewed as a more comprehensive development strategy than the former. See Lee, *Colonial Development and Good Government*, 166-7; Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert*, 192.

²⁵ Such as *Oversea Education* (launched in 1929), *Mass Education Bulletin*, *Community Development Bulletin*, and *Corona* (three journals launched in 1949).

²⁶ Omolewa, ‘Programmed for Failure?’, 111-2.

Colonial Service's journal stressed that '*the achievement of literacy is essential to progressive citizenship*'²⁷; therefore, a mass literacy campaign would always be included in any mass education scheme.

Sudanese politics of education in the British imperial setting

Despite its Condominium status, the Sudan was actually ruled by a British administration from the time of the Anglo-Egyptian conquest (1899) until independence (1956). The British did not encounter some kind of hypothetical 'oral' society when they occupied the country. An educational system had existed in the Northern Sudan since the Islamisation of the country in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Networks of *khalwas* (the Arabic *khalwa* designates a Koranic school in the Sudanese context) taught Arabic reading and writing, simple arithmetic, the Qur'an, and religious sciences.²⁸ In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman-Egyptian regime (1820-1881) expanded educational facilities by adding new *khalwas* and opening a few elementary state schools. Catholic and protestant missions also established several schools in the main towns of the Northern Sudan.²⁹ In the Mahdist period (1881-1898), *khalwas* became the pivotal educational institution in the Sudan; state-sponsored and missionary schools created under the previous regime were abandoned. By 1899, there were about 1,500 *khalwas* 'scattered all over the [N]orthern Sudan, providing literacy and Koranic learning to almost 60,000 children'.³⁰ What portion of this educated group became and remained truly literate in the long-term? With few opportunities to practise reading and writing outside school, most of them would probably relapse into illiteracy after their education. Yet it has to be stressed that the society in which colonial authorities sought to promote literacy in the 1940s and 1950s had known written technologies of communication³¹ for a long time, even if literates always formed a very small proportion of the general population in the Northern Sudan.

²⁷ 'Community Development', 4.

²⁸ On Sudanese *khalwas* see al-Mu'tasim Aḥmad al-Ḥājj, *Al-khalāwī fī-l-Sūdān: nuḥūmuhā wa-rusūmuhā ḥattā nihāyat al-qarn al-tāsi' 'ashar* [The *khalwas* in the Sudan: their organisation and description until the end of the nineteenth century] (Omdurman: Markaz Muḥammad 'Umar Bashīr li-l-Dirāsāt al-Sūdāniyya, 2005).

²⁹ Mohamed Omer Beshir, *Educational Development in the Sudan 1898-1956* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 12-21; Nāṣir al-Sayyid, *Ta'rīkh al-siyāsa wa-l-ta'līm fī-l-Sūdān* [The history of politics and education in the Sudan], rev. ed. (Khartoum: Dār Jāmi'at al-Kharṭūm li-l-Nashr, 1990), 7-23.

³⁰ Mohammed K. Osman, 'The Rise and Decline of the People's (*Ahliya*) Education in the Northern Sudan (1927-1957)', *Paedagogica Historica* 19, no. 2 (1979): 356. The total population of the Northern Sudan at that time was about two millions. See G. Ayoub Balamoan, *Peoples and Economics in the Sudan, 1884 to 1956* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for Population Studies, 1981), 115.

³¹ The expression 'technologies of communication' is from Ruth Finnegan, who usefully deconstructed categorizations related to 'oral societies' and 'written cultures' in her *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

In the Condominium era (1899-1956), educational ideologies and policies evolved according to policy-makers, political aims, ideological outlooks and financial limitations.³² Until the 1930s, education policy was mainly directed at training a tiny Sudanese literate class for minor posts in the state administration. Over the years 1899-1946, government spending on education never outweighed 4% of the Sudan Government's annual expenditure. In the last colonial decade, however, investments in education more than tripled, reaching 13,5% of the annual expenditure in 1956.³³ Sudan's division into two defined regions (North and South) with regards to educational affairs predated the administrative policy of separate rule.³⁴ Indeed, from the early years of British rule the Northern Sudan was gradually equipped with a government system of education, whereas the South was split up into several zones of influence in which Christian missions managed educational matters without much government interference until the 1940s.

[Figure 1 here]

The social demand for more extensive education services grew increasingly loud in the 1930s. Educated Northern Sudanese repeatedly called for the expansion and improvement of the education system in the local Arabic press and in memorandums addressed to the government. In 1934, an intellectual writing in the *Fajr* magazine criticized the 'ruralisation' policy promoted by colonial educationalists, urging the government to revise the educational aims and pedagogic contents of the Gordon Memorial College (GMC) so as to make it into a proper secondary school on the British model.³⁵ Three years later, an article in the same paper suggested improving the education of the sons of sheikhs, sending Sudanese students to Egyptian universities, increasing the number of pupils admitted to the GMC, and obtaining

³² Important historical studies on education in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan include Beshir, *Educational Development*; Lilian P. Sanderson and George N. Sanderson, *Education, Religion and Politics in Southern Sudan: 1899-1964* (London: Ithaca Press and Khartoum: KUP, 1981); Fadwa 'Abd al-Rahman 'Alī Ṭaha, 'Abd al-Rahman 'Alī Ṭaha 1901-1969 bayna al-ta'lim wa-l-siyāsa wa-'Arbajī [Abd al-Rahman Ali Taha 1901-1969: between education, politics and Arbaji] (Khartoum : Dār Jāmi'at al-Khartūm li-l-Nashr, 2004); El-Fatih Mahgoub, 'Secondary Education in the Sudan, 1905-1955: A Historical Review with Special Reference to Political and Social Influences' (master's thesis, University of London, 1966); Osman, 'Rise and Decline'.

³³ Beshir, *Educational Development*, 195-6.

³⁴ Known as the 'Southern Policy', the practice of separate development for the South was proclaimed in 1930 and officially abandoned at the Juba Conference in 1947. See Beshir Mohammed Said, *The Sudan: Crossroads of Africa* (London: Bodley Head, 1965); Mohamed Omer Beshir, *The Southern Sudan: Background to Conflict* (London: C. Hurst, 1968); Robert O. Collins, *Shadows in the Grass: Britain in the Southern Sudan, 1918-1956* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).

³⁵ Muḥammad Aḥmad Maḥjūb, 'Fī al-ta'lim' [On education], *Al-Fajr* 1, no. 11 (1 November 1934): 471-7. Established in 1902 as Sudan's first government post-elementary school, the GMC became the nucleus of the University of Khartoum in 1945. See Sudan Information Service, 'Khartoum University: Its History, its Birth, its Mission', special issue, *News Bulletin* (Khartoum), 10 August 1956.

British recognition of Sudanese post-secondary certificates.³⁶ In 1939, the Sudan Schools Graduates' Congress submitted a Note on Education to the Sudan Government, which reviewed the educational system and made proposals for far-reaching reforms at all levels. The authors of the Note, all GMC graduates, emphasized the vital importance of extending literacy skills to 'all or most of the boys of the Sudan' for the 'progress' of the country.³⁷

The signing of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty had immediate repercussions upon the government's educational policy. The text stated that Egyptians should be considered for appointments in the civil service if qualified Sudanese were not available. Reluctant to encourage a strong Egyptian presence in the country, the British were now inclined to provide an increasing number of Sudanese with suitable training.³⁸ Moreover, the report of the De La Warr Commission (1937), which investigated education in British East Africa, was highly critical of Sudan's system of education and urged for more government investment.³⁹ As a result, an educational plan covering the years 1938-1946 for both Northern and Southern Sudan was drafted and approved by the Governor-General's Council. In 1935, the Colonial Office's Advisory Committee on Education had published a memorandum stressing the need for adult education in order to prevent social disparities between young educated people and their elders.⁴⁰ Under the influence of this memorandum, the 1938-1946 plan recommended the development of adult education in the Sudan. The Second World War, however, postponed implementation until 1944, when experiments in adult education were launched by Bakht er Ruda Institute of Education. They included boys' clubs, local publications bureaus, youth magazines and agricultural schemes.⁴¹ The first Publications Bureau was opened in Bakht er Ruda in 1946 and transferred to Khartoum the following year. Its Anglo-Sudanese staff produced youth magazines, adult education pamphlets, children's booklets, literacy materials, and schoolbooks in Arabic.⁴²

The reshaping of the relationships between Britain and her immense colonial empire during and after the Second World War had significant implications for Sudanese politics and

³⁶ Furawi, 'Fī al-ta'lim: ba'da iqtirāḥāt 'amaliyya' [On education: some practical suggestions], *Al-Fajr* 3, no. 4 (16 April 1937): 101-4.

³⁷ 'Graduates Congress Note on Education' in Beshir, *Educational Development*, 237-253.

³⁸ Collins, *Shadows in the Grass*, 234.

³⁹ See Final Report of the Makerere - Khartoum Commission on Education in the Sudan, 5 October 1937, SAD 665/2/28-86.

⁴⁰ Colonial Office, Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, *Memorandum on the Education of African Communities*, Colonial No. 103 (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1935), CO 847/3/15, NA.

⁴¹ Beshir, *Educational Development*, 136.

⁴² Robin Hodgkin, 'The Sudan Publications Bureau: Beginnings', *Oversea Education* 19, no. 3 (1948): 694-8. A Publications and Translations Bureau was inaugurated in Juba (Southern Sudan) in 1948.

education. In the 1940s, (Northern) Sudanese nationalism was sharply divided into two rival camps: those who sought to achieve Sudanese full independence through pragmatic cooperation with the British competed with those who advocated some form of political union between Egypt and the Sudan.⁴³ These factions were closely connected with well-established Sufi orders. The independentists were led by Sayyid ‘Abd-al-Raḥman al-Mahdī, the son of a revolutionary leader who had overthrown Ottoman-Egyptian rule and established an independent Mahdist state in the Sudan in 1881-1885.⁴⁴ Sayyid ‘Alī al-Mīrghanī’s Khatmiyya (a Sufi order that had been allied with Sudan’s Ottoman-Egyptian rulers a century beforehand) lent its support to the unionist cause. The educated elites began articulating their claims through the new political institutions that appeared in the 1940s: parties (the unionist Ashigga and the independentist Umma) and the Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan (1943-1948).

Towards the end of 1945, Egypt requested from Britain to renegotiate the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, which had left the ‘Sudan Question’ (the issue of sovereignty over the Sudan) unresolved. Negotiations in Cairo in March 1946 were unsuccessful, each side clinging to diametrically opposed interpretations of the 1899 Condominium Agreement. With a view to thwart Egyptian ambitions of a politically united Nile Valley, the British Governor-General of the Sudan, Sir Hubert Huddleston, reassured the Advisory Council that the objectives of his government were to build up the organs of self-government with the aim of eventual independence.⁴⁵ An agreement was reached a few months later by the Egyptian Premier Minister, Sidqi Pasha, and the British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, according to which the contracting parties committed themselves to ‘*the well-being of the Sudanese, the development of their interests and their active preparation for self-government and consequently the exercise of the right to choose the future status of the Sudan.*’⁴⁶

⁴³ The rich scholarly literature on Sudanese nationalism cannot be presented here; major works include Muddathir Abd al-Rahim, *Imperialism and Nationalism in the Sudan: a Study in Constitutional and Political Development, 1899-1956* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); Afaf Abdel Majid Abu Hasabu, *Factional Conflict in the Sudanese Nationalist Movement, 1918-1948* (Khartoum: Graduate College, University of Khartoum, 1985); Mahasin Abdelgasir Hag el-Safi, ed., *The Nationalist Movement in the Sudan* (Khartoum: KUP, 1989).

⁴⁴ On the Sudanese Mahdist state and the neo-Mahdist movement, see Peter M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881-1898: a Study of its Origins, Development and Overthrow*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); Gabriel R. Warburg, *Islam, Sectarianism and Politics in the Sudan since the Mahdiyya* (London: C. Hurst, 2003); Iris Seri-Hersch, ‘Nationalisme, impérialisme et pratiques patrimoniales : le cas de la Mahdiyya dans le Soudan post-mahdiste’, *Egypte/Monde arabe* 5-6 (2009): 329-354.

⁴⁵ *Proceedings of the Fifth Session of the Advisory Council*, 17-21 April 1946 quoted by Abd al-Rahim, *Imperialism and Nationalism*, 157. Although Sudanese self-government was a clearly stated colonial objective in 1946, British officials thought it would not be realised before twenty years.

⁴⁶ Abd al-Rahim, *Imperialism and Nationalism*, 154. The Sidqi-Bevin Protocol was subjected to different interpretations, which hampered effective negotiations. In 1947, the UN Security Council also failed to solve the

Several administrative and educational steps meant to prepare the Sudan for self-government were enforced in the next few years. A ‘Sudanisation Committee’ was set up in 1946 to devise plans for the replacement of British by Sudanese officials.⁴⁷ In 1948, the Department of Education was turned into a Ministry of Education headed by Sudanese educationalist ‘Abd al-Raḥman ‘Alī Ṭaha. He became the competent authority in all educational matters which had previously been handled by the British Governor-General and Director of Education.⁴⁸ Mixed teams of British and Sudanese educationalists started experimenting with various pedagogic methods and literary materials designed to spread and perpetuate literacy among Sudanese elementary ex-pupils and illiterate adults. Efforts to propagate literacy in the Arabic language were undertaken in both the Northern and the Southern Sudan.⁴⁹

Literacy as a catalyst for social change and moral elevation

The first question this paper addresses focuses on the precise objectives of the new colonial policy with regards to mass literacy. How did British and Sudanese educationalists conceive the purposes and uses of literacy? Two types of aims can be inferred from their reports, correspondences and articles: explicitly declared aims and implicit aims.

Explicit aims

First, literacy was deemed desirable for its own sake, and this is apparent in the 1950 report on adult literacy campaigns.⁵⁰ In this regard, literacy fulfilled the symbolic function of representing a certain kind of society, considered as ‘civilised’, ‘advanced’, or ‘modern’. The ability to read and write was viewed not so much as a skill *per se* but rather as a yardstick for social progress.⁵¹

A second important declared aim of literacy was the possibility of self-identification. In an article published in *Corona*, the British director of the Sudan Publications Bureau, Robin

Anglo-Egyptian dispute. A final settlement became possible only after the July 1952 Revolution in Egypt, with President Muhammad Naguib accepting the principle of Sudanese self-determination.

⁴⁷ See Heather J. Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 73-94.

⁴⁸ Beshir, *Educational Development*, 177-8; ‘Alī Ṭaha, ‘Abd al-Raḥman ‘Alī Ṭaha, 141.

⁴⁹ In 1949, the Ministry of Education decided to unify the Sudanese educational system and extend the teaching of Arabic to the South. See Beshir, *Educational Development*, 174-7; Martin W. Daly, *Imperial Sudan: the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, 1934-1956* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 341-2. The language issue had crucial educational, political, and ideological implications that deserve a separate analysis.

⁵⁰ Note by Hasan Afandi Ahmad Yusuf, SAD 671/2/39.

⁵¹ The symbolic function of literacy has been highlighted by Harvey J. Graff, ‘The Legacies of Literacy’, *Journal of Communication* 32, no. 1 (1982): 13-14.

A. Hodgkin, noticed that ‘to learn to sign one’s name instead of thumbing it is a great achievement for any illiterate and, to him, well worth the effort [of participating in a mass literacy campaign]’.⁵² The ability to identify oneself by writing one’s name involved crucial changes not only for literate people, but also for illiterates who had just managed to learn that specific skill. I would argue that the expression of personal identity through signing⁵³ contributes to integrate the individual into a literate community, while radically transforming his/her relations with the bureaucratic administration of the state. Both the medium of expression and the mark representing personal identity are modified in the process. In the case of thumbing one’s name, the body itself leaves its mark on the paper, resulting in a digital imprint, an innate, physical, and intimate feature of one’s individuality. Body and identity tend to be merged together. In the case of signing, the gesture of writing mediates between one’s body and personal identity. It produces a written name, which represents one’s social identity, constructed through human agents since the time of birth. Signing his/her name allows the individual to have both his/her social identity and competence recognised. Therefore, people able to sign their names could expect to be addressed by colonial authorities with increased respect.

Hodgkin also referred to the teaching of literacy as an activity which offered an opportunity to prevent social ills. In his piece, he explained that the enrolment of ‘*simple literates*’ in mass literacy campaigns gave them the occasion to help ‘*their fellowmen*’⁵⁴ and valorise their skills. According to Hodgkin, the spread of literacy could be used as a great lesson in civics, while giving a task to young Sudanese suspected of potentially disturbing the social order.

Finally, another explicit goal of literacy linked the ability to read and write to global social developments. In his report, Hassan Ahmed Youssif presented adult literacy as ‘*a spearhead for social reconstruction*’.⁵⁵ He attributed to literacy great psychological powers which could encourage Sudanese populations to cooperate in other spheres of

⁵² Robin A. Hodgkin, ‘Literacy Experiment in the Sudan’, *Corona* 1, no. 2 (March 1949): 15.

⁵³ For the analysis of various uses and meanings of signature, see the articles collected in *Sociétés & Représentations: Ce que signer veut dire*, no. 25 (2008/1); Decker reports how in the late 1940s a Zanzibari girl joined a rural school by writing her name on the roster against her parents’ will: Decker, ‘Reading, Writing, and Respectability’, 102.

⁵⁴ Hodgkin, ‘Literacy Experiment’, 15.

⁵⁵ Note by Hasan Afandi Ahmad Yusuf, SAD 671/2/39.

'development'.⁵⁶ In this case, literacy was not so much a progress in itself than a useful means of propaganda to achieve deep social and economic transformations.

Implicit aims

Besides explicitly declared aims, the literature produced by colonial officials in the last imperial decade teaches us about implicit aims, revealed by the intended and practised uses of literacy in the Northern Sudan. In this category, the first and most obvious goal of literacy was the spreading of knowledge and know-how. This was achieved through the publication, diffusion and use of books, which were much lacking until the late 1940s.⁵⁷ In addition to school libraries, a postal library was established in order to provide teachers from isolated schools with books in Arabic.⁵⁸ On the pupils' side, primers and follow-up literature for newly literates were produced by the Publications Bureau in increasing numbers during the 1940s. They circulated types of knowledge designed to stimulate behavioural changes conforming to specific social conventions and scientific principles. Manuals of social conduct included moral stories about health, drink and how to achieve a happy marriage, whereas scientific practical knowledge was transmitted through books on agriculture and hygiene. Some material was meant to broaden the newly literates' horizons and general knowledge, such as historical stories and travel accounts.⁵⁹ The important point regarding the diffusion of such types of knowledge is that it aimed at transforming Northern Sudanese people into a society of healthy, moral, cultivated and productive individuals according to British standards.

While reading implied the acquisition of knowledge, it could also be pursued for the sake of pleasure and entertainment. Humorous stories for young literates were part of the follow-up material prepared by colonial educationalists.⁶⁰ Hence, reading was considered as a legitimate and even worthy leisure activity. Although reading skills could be associated with growing individualism, they were sometimes used as a catalyst for social oral interactions. Printed 'discussions sheets' were intended to stimulate collective thinking and debates among

⁵⁶ Ibid. The Gezira area, where a major agricultural scheme for cotton production had been launched in 1925, was a privileged target. See Ahmad A. Sikainga, *'City of Steel and Fire': a Social History of Atbara, Sudan's Railway Town, 1906-1984* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), 11.

⁵⁷ The writings of Vincent L. Griffiths, principal of *Bakht er Ruda* from 1934 until 1950, emphasize the dearth of books as a recurrent problem. See Griffiths, *Experiment in Education*, 4, 34, 139.

⁵⁸ In 1948, the postal library added to its collection a hundred newly published books in Arabic, some of which were edited by the Philosophical Society of Egypt. Babikr Muhammed Ahmad, 'In the Air', 1948, 23, SAD 959/7/19-33. In 1954, 194 masters and 135 mistresses were members of the library. Each one could freely borrow 20 to 40 books every year. The Institute of Education, *Bakht er Ruda: Twenty Years Old* (Khartoum: Publication Bureau, 1954), 18.

⁵⁹ Note by Hasan Afandi Ahmad Yusuf, SAD 671/2/37.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

newly literate Sudanese.⁶¹ This activity possibly aimed at developing the participants' ability to think and argue critically.

In the global sphere of social interactions, literacy appeared as useful for handling distant communications. One of the books used in mass literacy campaigns was unambiguously entitled *How to write a letter*. The 1950 report on literacy campaigns stated that '*the ability to write and read letters is a dear aspiration of the illiterate*'⁶², highlighting it as a shared goal of the authorities and the population. As a new means of communication, letters certainly involved important changes in the relations between the individual and the state. A literate Sudanese could receive a personal letter from the state bureaucratic machinery, which underlay a formal, anonymous but more direct relation than in the case where a human intermediate was necessary to communicate the message. Social relationships were also transformed by the expanding use of letters, because written ideas and information could be exchanged between distant places. People physically remote one from another were linked by new social connections created through the written media.

Propagating literacy among Sudanese children and adults

The second issue I tackle is related to the means used by colonial authorities to spread and perpetuate literacy skills among Northern Sudanese children and adults. They can be split into three categories: schools, mass literacy campaigns and follow-up literature. Both campaigns and follow-up literature were new instruments elaborated during the last imperial decade; they shall therefore lie at the core of this analysis.

Schools

The educational system developed by the British in the Northern Sudan was based on three types of basic schools teaching literacy skills: khalwas, sub-grade schools, and elementary schools. The khalwas taught Arabic literacy, the Qur'an (memorisation), Islamic law (*fiqh*), Sufi teachings and simple arithmetic. Between 1918 and 1930, a growing number of these 'private' Koranic schools enjoyed state subsidies.⁶³ However, their number greatly

⁶¹ By January 1950, fifteen different 'discussion sheets' dealing with '*topical affairs*' in easy Arabic had been printed in large formats. Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Beshir, *Educational Development*, 60. The 1930s witnessed heated debates among British officials about the best policy to adopt towards khalwas, whose development had been connected to native administration policies in the 1920s. See Province Education Officers Handbook, 193[?], CIVSEC1/17/1/1, Appendix III, NRO; W. D. C. L. Purves, Governor Halfa to V. L. Griffiths, Education Department, Commenting on Griffiths' 'Note on Khalwa Policy in Halfa', 17 April 1934, SAD 904/4/1-5.

decreased between 1930 and 1956, as funds were primarily devoted to the opening of government schools.

Sub-grade schools existed as from 1934 and were conceived as two-year elementary schools. Initially held to be a provisional measure, they aimed at teaching literacy in areas which could not finance full elementary schools. They were considered as forerunners of future elementary schools and came to concurrence established khalwas.⁶⁴

Elementary schools taught boys aged 7-11 a four-year syllabus in the Arabic medium, which in the 1930s consisted of three main subjects (religion, Arabic, and arithmetic) and several subsidiary subjects (geography, history, hygiene, agriculture, veterinary knowledge, object lessons and handwork). The acquisition of literacy skills was done through reading, written and oral composition, dictation, grammar, and recitation.⁶⁵ The number of elementary schools considerably expanded during the Condominium, especially in the period 1946-1956.⁶⁶ It should not be overlooked that khalwas and government schools coexisted, sometimes in competition with various non-government schools officially categorised as 'mission schools', 'community schools', 'Ahliya schools', 'Egyptian Government schools', and 'private schools', which contributed to spread literacy in Arabic, but also in other languages such as English, Italian, or Greek.⁶⁷

Mass literacy campaigns

Starting in 1948, literacy campaigns were initiated in the Northern Sudan in the wider framework of adult education projects.⁶⁸ Several official reports and articles show colonial efforts at planning, organising, and evaluating literacy schemes in great details. For instance, the plan for launching mass literacy campaigns included the following steps: producing follow-up literature for adults, testing the drafts of all new booklets on '*local illiterates*' at

⁶⁴ Beshir, *Educational Development*, 133.

⁶⁵ Province Education Officers Handbook, 193[?], CIVSEC1/17/1/1, Appendix II, NRO.

⁶⁶ In 1946, 22,015 boys and 7747 girls attended government elementary schools in the Northern Sudan, whereas in 1956 there were 76,996 boys and 26,581 girls, an increase rate of more than 300% in ten years. See Sudan Government, *Annual Report of the Education Department* (Khartoum: McCorquodale, 1946), 28; Beshir, *Educational Development*, 208.

⁶⁷ 'Community' schools were established in the North by and for ethnic or religious minorities such as Copts, Greeks and Armenians. 'Ahliyya' schools, also known as 'native' or 'people's' schools, appeared from 1927 as a result of Sudanese local initiative. For more details, see Osman, 'Rise and Decline', 358. The annual reports of the Education Department include statistics for all types of schools.

⁶⁸ Experiments in adult education were first conducted at Um Gerr, a small agricultural settlement south of Ed Dueim, and were then extended to the Gezira area. Men were taught crafts and civics, while women were instructed in needle-work, cooking, washing, and child welfare. See V.L. Griffiths to C.W.M. Cox re Development of the Literacy Programme and Progress at Um Gerr, 31 January 1947, SAD 670/10/70; Memorandum by V.L. Griffiths to the Governor, Wad Medani on Gezira Adult Education, 28 November 1949, SAD 671/2/29-31.

Bakht er Ruda, teaching and equipping teachers with literacy materials for ‘*field experiments in different parts of the Sudan*’, launching a ‘*pilot campaign*’ in Ed Dueim ‘*in an attempt to kill illiteracy in one town*’.⁶⁹ Hodgkin depicted illiteracy as a curse to eradicate, as if dealing with a dangerous disease. The use of such a terminology is interesting, because illiteracy was made analogous to germs that are physically present in a human body, although the word actually refers to the *absence* of a competence. Attempts at rationalising and institutionalising literacy policies resulted in the emergence of new functions within the colonial administration. Hence, the 1950 report devoted much room to the ‘*administrative machinery*’⁷⁰ required to manage the campaigns. A Literacy Committee was to be set up for supervising ends, a Literacy Organiser would be responsible for the general organisational aspects, and four Literacy Officers would run campaigns in Atbara, Ed Dueim, El Obeid, and in the Gezira.⁷¹ The specific functions of each official were detailed in the report.

How was the first campaign run in Ed Dueim? What teaching method was used to spread literacy among adults? Hodgkin produced an informative memorandum in November 1948, a few weeks after the campaign had begun. He stated that 1700 copies of the experimental edition of the primer (*Miftāḥ al-Maʿrifa*, ‘the key to knowledge’) and 1500 copies of the second-level book (*Bāb al-Maʿrifa*, ‘the door of knowledge’) had been printed.⁷² The campaign had been publicised for two weeks by teachers and officials from the Publications Bureau, who collaborated with the local education committee. A shop sold books and writing material on Ed Dueim’s main street. It also functioned as an enquiry bureau and publicity centre. A popular event organised by the town boys’ club marked the opening day of the campaign: plays, speeches, and songs were performed in front of more than a thousand people. Special literacy songs were sung for the occasion, which Hodgkin judged as useful means of propaganda to mobilise the masses.⁷³

The town was divided into six sections, each one being the centre of a literacy circle (‘halaga’ is the Sudanese Arabic term used in British sources, from the literary Arabic term

⁶⁹ Note by R.A. Hodgkin, Publications Bureau, Education Department, on ‘Preliminary Work in Mass Literacy in the Sudan’, with Covering Letter from C.W. Williams, Director of Education, 5 January 1948, SAD 662/11/8.

⁷⁰ Note by Hasan Afandi Ahmad Yusuf, SAD 671/2/40-1.

⁷¹ Ibid. Why did the main Sudanese towns (Khartoum, Omdurman) not appear in these campaigns? Educationalists working for the British Sudan Government put special emphasis on rural areas and smaller towns. The launching of literacy campaigns in big towns may have been avoided on practical as well as political grounds.

⁷² Memorandum by Hodgkin on ‘the Initiation of the Dueim Literacy Campaign’ for the Director of Education, 16 November 1948, SAD 896/10/1. The titles of both primers explicitly refer to literacy as a skill which literally ‘opens’ access to other categories of knowledge.

⁷³ Ibid.

halaga for ‘circle’ or ‘ring’). Each halaga had a president (a local notable), a secretary (responsible for book distribution and practical arrangements), and two ‘murshids’ (literally ‘guides’, usually elementary schoolmasters enrolled as pedagogic advisers). The method used to teach literacy was adapted from the Laubach method, which had been elaborated by a missionary working in the Philippines in 1930. Involving voluntary teachers, the Laubach method aims at teaching adults to read and write in their own language according to the slogan ‘Each one teach one’.⁷⁴ People would be grouped in pairs, one teacher with one pupil. Once literate, the pupil would become a teacher himself. The final goal was to make the whole community literate. In Hodgkin’s view, literacy campaigns could act as ‘*an atomic chain reaction*’ if they could rely on ‘*a good supply of graded literature, enthusiasm and a voluntary organisation of educated advisers and stimulators* [sic]’.⁷⁵ A halaga meeting involved between forty and a hundred people sitting on the floor around a central pressure lamp. It was a place where individuals of different ages and various social backgrounds voluntarily mixed together. Besides procuring literacy skills, the halagas played an important socialising role. Indeed, colonial officials had initially imagined that people would meet in pairs once or twice a week during their spare time. However, participants much appreciated ‘*the buzz of activity, the bright light and the informal atmosphere*’⁷⁶ of collective meetings, which became daily social gatherings. Special postcards bearing the Laubach slogan in Arabic were issued for the newly literates, who were encouraged to send them to friends across the Sudan.

[Figure 2 here]

A few weeks after the beginning of the campaign, Hodgkin anticipated some main obstacles to the spreading of literacy among Sudanese adults. First, lack of light was presented as a serious difficulty. Pressure lamps and sufficient supplies of paraffin were hard to obtain, being the primary item of expenditure in a campaign.⁷⁷ Second, insufficient funding, which consisted of local donations and revenues from the shop, posed some problems: should the teachers and pupils pay for their books? The financial question raised the central issue of defining access to literacy as either a universal right, or a privilege for

⁷⁴ Martha A. Lane and Leah B. Walter, ‘The Laubach Literacy International Instructional Program’, *SIL International: Partners in Language Development*, 24 September 1999, <http://www.silinternational.net/lingualinks/literacy/ImplementALiteracyProgram/TheLaubachLiteracyInternational.htm>.

⁷⁵ Note by R.A. Hodgkin, SAD 662/11/7.

⁷⁶ Memorandum by Hodgkin, SAD 896/10/2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, SAD 896/10/3.

those who could afford it.⁷⁸ Third, the shortage of volunteer teachers, though unavoidable, endangered the whole system.⁷⁹ While ex-pupils of the elementary level were easily recruited, people with higher education offered no more than theoretical approval. Hodgkin recommended directing propaganda efforts at the literate classes, to whom involvement in a literacy campaign should be presented as a '*patriotic duty*'.⁸⁰ Lastly, he recognised the limits of colonial civil servants in popularising literacy campaigns. Even if they were '*like a powder train which [could] set off a much bigger charge*', they could not liberate the '*latent energies*' of the masses if these did not exist.⁸¹

How efficient were the first literacy campaigns conducted in the Northern Sudan? 1755 persons participated in four campaigns during the year 1949, of whom more than 1400 (ca. 80%) reached the basic level required to obtain a certificate of literacy.⁸² Besides granting newly literates an official recognition of individual skills and social prestige, such certificates may also have been used as a bureaucratic tool to improve the colonial state's knowledge and management of the Sudanese population. Each campaign lasted between two and a half and three and a half months. Was it sufficient to transmit lasting literacy skills to illiterate adults? Tests were conducted at Ed Dueim after an eight-month break and produced the following results: 60% of newly literates had managed to maintain their standard, 15% had improved their standard, and 25% were '*gradually slipping back to illiteracy*'.⁸³ Thus, the first mass literacy campaign ever realised in the Sudan appears as a fairly efficient enterprise, with 75% of the participants having either maintained or improved their literacy skills in the year following the campaign. It had an impact not only on the Sudanese, but also on the shaping of colonial policies in the broader British Empire. Indeed, the campaign was discussed in the

⁷⁸ The funding of campaigns run in 1949 was divided into three equal parts between pupils (bought their books), locally collected donations (for lamps and other stationeries), and government funds (for the salaries of Literacy Officers and their assistants). To make a person literate in a campaign cost 25 Egyptian piastres, much less than what the government invested to make a pupil literate in a sub-grade school (three or four British pounds). See Note by Hasan Afandi Ahmad Yusuf, SAD 671/2/37; Griffiths, *Experiment in Education*, 143.

⁷⁹ This problem also affected Nigerian mass literacy campaigns at the same period, see Omolewa, 'Programmed for Failure?', 118.

⁸⁰ Memorandum by Hodgkin, SAD 896/10/3. The patriotic motive is interestingly –and perhaps unexpectedly– used by a British colonial official in order to secure Sudanese literates' participation in a mass education project. This exemplifies the complexity of British colonial discourses and policies in the Sudan, which were made of dissonant voices and actions. Although the Sudan Government had declared self-government as an aim to be achieved within a loosely defined time framework, the active encouragement of patriotic feeling among Sudanese populations, associated with potential anti-British sentiments, was not in its interest.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, SAD 896/10/4.

⁸² Note by Hasan Afandi Ahmad Yusuf, SAD 671/2/36. In the Gold Coast, a much wider literacy campaign was conducted in 1952, involving 15'520 adult learners in the Ashanti region alone. See Skinner, "It Brought Some Kind of Neatness to Mankind", 481.

⁸³ Note by Hasan Afandi Ahmad Yusuf, SAD 671/2/36.

Colonial Service's journal (*Corona*) and presented as a model of community development scheme.⁸⁴

Looking back after forty years, Hodgkin reflected on the limits of the mass literacy campaigns he had contributed to initiate in the Sudan. According to his view, success was restricted by the lack of powerful ideological/religious motivation and the fact that neither the students nor the army were enrolled on an organised basis. In the last imperial decade, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan was not '*totalitarian*' enough to undertake truly successful mass education work.⁸⁵

Follow-up literature

*'At the time of the opening of our Publications Bureau [1946] some 10,000 children were leaving [N]orthern Sudan elementary and sub-grade schools every year, having learnt to read Arabic a little. **The vast majority of them never read again.** A stranger might well have thought we were crazy. Neither reading nor character received any further attention; the most the system was accomplishing was to select a minority [less than 10%] for further education [in intermediate and secondary schools]'*.⁸⁶

The scarcity of Arabic books in the Sudan, and especially the nonexistence of children's books, motivated colonial educationalists to produce youth literature suitable for Northern Sudanese teenagers.⁸⁷ The Publications Bureau undertook the writing and publishing of youth magazines meant to prevent newly literates from relapsing into illiteracy. Both 'nation-wide' and provincially based magazines served as privileged modes of circulation and perpetuation of literacy skills in late colonial Sudan. Access to written materials had always been restricted in a vast territory which lacked good communication facilities. Local production was numerically limited until the creation of the Publications Bureau. Moreover, both local and foreign publications were subjected to rigorous British censorship.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ 'Community Development', 5.

⁸⁵ Robin A. Hodgkin, 'The Sudan's Publications Bureau', *Sudan Studies* 2 (1987): 10. Hodgkin raised the crucial issue of the ways in which top-down reforms are implemented: through forceful imposition or gradual transformation? A famous successful case is Mustafa Kemal's brutal overnight introduction of the Latin alphabet in Turkey (1928). With regards to literacy campaigns in late colonial Nigeria, Omolewa ends up with perhaps too simplistic a conclusion relating their failure to the basic interests of the colonial state, which were inherently opposed to the provision of a 'liberating and empowering tool for the subjugated peoples'. Omolewa, 'Programmed for Failure?', 119.

⁸⁶ Griffiths, *Experiment in Education*, 139 (emphasis added).

⁸⁷ Griffiths stressed that 119 Egyptian children's books had been tried in Sudanese boys' clubs. Their different cultural background and excessively high standard of classical Arabic had made them unpopular with the teenagers.

⁸⁸ Circulation of several Sudanese papers and magazines was as follows: 1700 for *Ḥaḍārat al-Sūdān* (1938), 1500 for *Al-Fajr* (1935), 2500 for *Al-Nīl* (1935). See Mahjoub Abd al-Malik Babiker, *Press and Politics in the*

Youth magazines fulfilled a variety of functions which transcended the technical and pedagogic aspects of practicing literacy skills in Arabic. They were vehicles of social, political and ideological representations which frequently aimed at transforming the readers' perceptions and behaviour. They were also social networks nurtured by intensive communication between the editor and the readers, and between the readers themselves. Eventually, they constituted public platforms of expression for young literate Sudanese. I shall briefly exemplify this functional plurality through two magazines, *Al-Şibyān* ('youth') and *Āfiya* ('vitality').⁸⁹

A weekly magazine for 'book-starved'⁹⁰ ex-elementary pupils, *Al-Şibyān* started to be produced in December 1946. It was important both qualitatively (as the first magazine of this kind to appear in the Arab world⁹¹) and quantitatively (circulation increased from 10,000 in January 1947 to 20,000 in 1953, as compared with the maximum circulation of 5000 for the most popular Sudanese paper at the same period⁹²). Colonial educationalists sought to circulate it as widely as possible; therefore the magazine was run at a loss. Distribution was made through intermediary schools and local merchants in the whole Sudan. *Al-Şibyān* enjoyed a very positive reception by people of all ages⁹³, and offered a highly diversified content: Sudan and world news, humorous stories, illustrated tales, games and riddles, strip cartoons, moral fables, historical tales, letters from readers and reactions of the editor, double-page for girls (advices on educational matters, stories related to great women, sewing or cooking instructions), scientific articles, and stories from the Qur'an.

[Figure 3 here]

All the following examples are taken from issue no. 21 (26 September 1947) of *Al-Şibyān*, the single pre-1956 issue whose whole content I had access to. In various columns the

Sudan, 1920-1945 (Khartoum: University of Khartoum, 1985), 27, 31, 39. For the first Press Ordinance issued by the Sudan Government (1930), see *Ibid.*, 125-8. The weekly *Al-Sūdān* published in Cairo by a Sudanese merchant was prohibited in the Sudan from December 1944 until June 1945 because of its allegedly pro-Egyptian stance. See Control of Local + Foreign Press Publication, Prohibited Papers, 'AL SUDAN' (Egyptian), CIVSEC 1/36/3/7, NRO.

⁸⁹ In the period 1946-1952, youth magazines were also launched in the Beja area (Eastern Sudan) and in the Southern Sudan. See *Afiya*, a Newsheet Issued by the Education Committee, Darfur, no. 1 (January 1951), SAD 534/16/1 and no. 5 (1952), SAD 534/16/5.

⁹⁰ Hodgkin, 'Literacy Experiment', 13.

⁹¹ 'Alī Ṭaha, *Abd al-Raḥman 'Alī Ṭaha*, 100.

⁹² Griffiths, *Experiment in Education*, 140. For numbers showing the rapid increase in the circulation and consumption of newspapers and magazines in Britain in the years 1937-1952, see the conclusion of Richard Hoggart's classic book *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957).

⁹³ Hodgkin, 'Sudan's Publications Bureau', 9.

magazine conveyed political representations which tended to make it appear as ideologically independent from the Sudan Government. For instance, the government's stance on Sudanese political issues was presented as only one position among a number of conflicting viewpoints. Criticism levelled by Khartoum newspapers and the Egyptian government against British plans for developing parliamentary politics and 'Sudanising' the administration were evoked in the news' column.⁹⁴ In addition, a rubric entitled 'The theatre of heroism' (*masrah al-buṭūla*) included an article on the American president Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) and his famous fourteen points, mentioning the peoples' right to self-determination. This column conveyed the image of a weak and suffering Europe ruined by two world wars.⁹⁵ These truly startling elements once again highlight the complexity and heterogeneity of British colonial discourses in the Sudan, as well as discrepancies between theoretical liberal orientations and more authoritarian political practices. If the magazine refused to act as a tool of government propaganda, it did not spare criticism towards Sudanese political actors. Leading political parties were blamed for their factionalism and inability to form a unified Sudanese leadership when dealing with international bodies such as the United Nations.⁹⁶

Other articles aimed –explicitly or not- at fostering changes in individual and collective attitudes. Two short tales used anti-heroic characters to underscore negative traits: stupidity, inattention, vanity, the inability to adapt to new circumstances, ignorance, and mental rigidity. These were moral faults to be proscribed if one wanted to lead a successful life.⁹⁷ Positively viewed, the ability to think and argue in a critical way was greatly encouraged in several columns. For instance, an article on the Institute of Education encouraged the reader to enquire by himself/herself about Bakht er Ruda and form his/her own opinion on the subject.⁹⁸ Elsewhere, the editor warmly welcomed constructive criticism of the magazine on the part of individual readers. As an instrument of community development, this issue of *Al-Ṣibyān* published articles dealing with children's education, Sudanese ceramics, and the benefits of mechanised agriculture and local light industry.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ *El Sibyan*, no. 21 (26 September 1947): 3, unclassified material, SAD 422/7.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4. The article referred to unionist (Ashigga) and independentist (Umma) politicians, who sent delegates to New York after the failure of the UN Security Council to solve the Anglo-Egyptian conflict over the 'Sudan Question' in September 1947.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12-13. The tales were entitled 'The merchant and the idiot' and 'The idiot and the shrewd'.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16, 18, 22. The article on agriculture dealt with hemp and jute, drawing its scientific authority from the writings of Dr. Tothill, ex-Director of Agriculture in the Sudan.

The magazine worked as a social network through a rubric called ‘The post counter’ and other pages devoted to games, riddles and jokes sent by readers. By establishing connections between one transmitter (the editor) and multiple receivers (the readers) and among the readers themselves, the written media enabled the formation of an imagined community of young literates located in various parts of the Sudan.¹⁰⁰ This ‘nation-wide’ community of readers shared stories, jokes, and personal experiences on an unprecedented scale.¹⁰¹ Beyond the exchange of short messages, *Al-Şibyān* occasionally acted as a platform of expression for young literates. In issue no. 21, the editor praised his young readers for taking an active part in the elaboration of the previous issue.¹⁰² Hence, the Publications Bureau gave young Sudanese an opportunity for literary and social empowerment by letting them shape their own magazine.

Produced in and for the Darfur province in 1951-1952, the quarterly *‘Āfiya* fulfilled similar functions. With the help of the magazine, the local Education Committee sought to develop and maintain Arabic literacy skills of two particularly vulnerable groups: Darfurian pupils whose mother-tongue was not Arabic and ex-pupils who had returned to their isolated villages.¹⁰³ In its first issue, the magazine explicitly evoked additional purposes: spreading news about Darfur, the Sudan, and the world, as well as ‘*accurately transmitting true history*’.¹⁰⁴ In fact, most of the subsequent issues included a column entitled ‘The history of Darfur’ written by the Governor of Darfur (K.D.D. Henderson), who conferred it a scientific aura by relying on the notes of a contemporary scholar.¹⁰⁵ Acquiring knowledge about their province, their country and the broader world could give readers a sense of belonging to various human communities. Another declared aim of *‘Āfiya* was to convey useful guidelines for fighting against diseases and ‘*similar social problems*’.¹⁰⁶ The second issue published a call for cooperation in the fight against meningitis, charging young Darfurian literates with

¹⁰⁰ I refer to Benedict Anderson’s famous work on the development of nationalism as resulting from the formation of ‘imagined communities’ through shared media written in vernacular languages. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991). Hodgkin emphasized the high popularity of this rubric one year after the launching of *Al-Şibyān*: Hodgkin, ‘The Sudan Publications Bureau’, 695.

¹⁰¹ *Al-Şibyān* entertained a much wider community of literates than any other contemporary Sudanese publication for three reasons: its higher and more widespread circulation, its accessible level of Arabic, and the diversity of its contents.

¹⁰² *El Sibyan*, no. 21 (26 September 1947): 19, SAD 422/7.

¹⁰³ *Afia*, no. 1 (January 1951), SAD 534/16/1. Non Arabic-speaking inhabitants of Darfur included the Fūr, the Masālīt, and the Zaghāwa.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ G. D. Lampen, who published articles in the academic journal *Sudan Notes and Records* in 1933 and 1950.

¹⁰⁶ *Afia*, no. 1 (January 1951), SAD 534/16/1.

the crucial responsibility of getting informed and passing on directives to illiterate people. They were to play the role of a communication channel between provincial authorities and the population. The quarterly acted as a tool for reforming perceptions and social practices in a way that eased the implementation of colonial hygienist policies. Finally, *ʿĀfiya* also provided its readers with entertaining rubrics and opportunities for expressing themselves in its columns.¹⁰⁷

[Figure 4 here]

Conclusion

Colonial politics of literacy in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan were part of a broad scheme of social engineering which anticipated the post-imperial era. Affecting private and public spheres of life, literacy played a multifaceted role in the parallel processes of British colonial disengagement and Sudanese national empowerment. Colonial educationalists assigned to the diffusion of literacy skills an idealised function of ‘enlightening’¹⁰⁸ the administered people. In practice, the state could communicate with an expanding portion of the Sudanese population using written and printed media, which facilitated the implementation of colonial policies. On the societal side, the activities of reading and writing fostered a new kind of individual autonomy while enabling connections between distant people, easing the emergence of new imagined communities. Reading as a leisure activity became increasingly common in the Sudan. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, British and Sudanese educationalists conceived these various functions and uses of literacy as essential ingredients of social progress and post-imperial political modernity.

To view British decolonisation of the Sudan merely as the result of a struggle opposing Sudanese nationalists to British officials would be misleading and inaccurate. In the educational sphere, it involved a complex process jointly conducted by British and Sudanese civil servants over a decade. The astonishing mixture of cultural references contained in *Al-Šibyān* is an interesting feature of such dynamics.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, British colonial discourses and policies in the Sudan did not constitute a coherent whole. ‘Conservative’ and

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Enlighten’ was a term frequently used by colonial officials, whose enlightenment ideologies echoed missionary discourses in some regards. See for instance Memorandum by V.L. Griffiths, SAD 671/2/29-31. Asante participants in literacy schemes in the Gold Coast also referred to the concept of ‘enlightenment’ as reported by Skinner, “‘It Brought Some Kind of Neatness to Mankind’”, 482.

¹⁰⁹ Issue no. 21 included articles on international politics, Sudanese news and proverbs, columns on the president Wilson and on Jeanne d’Arc, tales from 1001 nights, anecdotes on British and French habits.

'progressive' attitudes often coexisted, even when colonial retreat had become an accepted principle. As Griffiths recalled in a book published three years before Sudanese independence: '*We [educationalists] began the appeal to patriotic motives before the Government had accepted the dominant position of the educated or the idea of "self-government in our time"*'.¹¹⁰ For the most part of the Condominium education had been used to maintain the colonial regime; it came to fulfil the opposite aim under the impulse of educationalists such as Griffiths, Hodgkin, and 'Abd al-Raḥman 'Alī Ṭaha, whose experimental work, though solidly rooted in colonial thought and practice, projected the Sudan into post-imperial politics.

By the time of independence (1956), the combined action of schools and literacy campaigns had elevated the literacy rate of the Sudanese population up to 13,5% (23% men and 4% women).¹¹¹ The regional distribution of literacy skills, however, was extremely uneven. Indeed, the inhabitants of Khartoum Province enjoyed many more educational opportunities than the rest of Sudanese society: in 1956, 23,6% of the province's adult population had attended at least an elementary school, as compared with 7,2% in Northern Sudan, 5,6% in Blue Nile, 4% in Kassala 2,3% in Kordofan, and 1,2% in Darfur for the Northern Sudan, and 4,5% in Equatoria, 1,9% in Bahr al-Ghazal and 1,1% in Upper Nile Province for the Southern Sudan.¹¹² Although government efforts to spread literacy intensified in the post-independence era, bringing the Sudanese literacy rate up to 61,1% in 2003 (71,8% men and 50,5% women)¹¹³, regional disparities in education, coupled with policies of cultural homogenization through Arabization and Islamization, played a major role in the successive conflicts opposing Khartoum-based regimes to Sudan's multiple peripheries in the southern, western and eastern parts of the country.

¹¹⁰ Griffiths, *Experiment in Education*, 114.

¹¹¹ Beshir, *Educational Development*, 212; in 1939, GMC graduates put the Sudanese literacy rate at no more than 1%, a number that may be exaggeratedly low. See 'Graduates Congress' in *Ibid.*, 237.

¹¹² First population census of Sudan 1955/1956 quoted by Lilian P. Sanderson, 'Conflict, Education and New Awareness in the Southern Sudan (1898-1956)', in *Conflict and Harmony in Education in Tropical Africa*, ed. Godfrey N. Brown and Mervyn Hiskett (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), 112.

¹¹³ UNICEF, 'Sudan – Statistics', http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/sudan_statistics.html#42; Index Mundi, 'Sudan Literacy', <http://www.indexmundi.com/sudan/literacy.html>. On literacy policies in the postcolonial era see Wizārat al-Ma'ārif, al-Kharṭūm, *Mulakkhaṣ nashāṭ maḥū al-'ummiyya wa-ta'lim al-kibār bi-l-Sūdān 1959* [Outline of literacy activities and adult education in the Sudan 1959] (Khartoum, n.d.); Edwin C. Carlson, 'Getting Good Reading Out to the People in the North Sudan', in *Toward World Literacy: The Each One Teach One Way*, ed. Frank C. Laubach and Robert S. Laubach (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press: 1961), 142-7; Abdel Salaam Mohamed Sidahmed, 'Illiteracy: At This Rate...', *Sudanow* (February 1981): 9-13.