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## Ordinary Sudan, 1504-2019: From Social History to Politics from Below

Elena Vezzadini, Iris Seri-Hersch, Lucie Revilla, Anaël Poussier, Mahassin  
Abdul Jalil

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## Ordinary Sudan, 1504–2019

# Africa in Global History



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## Volume 6

# Ordinary Sudan, 1504–2019



From Social History to Politics from Below  
Volume 1

Edited by  
Elena Vezzadini, Iris Seri-Hersch, Lucie Revilla,  
Anaël Poussier and Mahassin Abdul Jalil

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# Acknowledgments

This book developed out of an international conference in Paris in December 2019, exactly one year after the outbreak of a series of major protests in Sudan that are now known as the December Revolution. The vigorous discussions that unfolded in Paris were part of a broader context in which hopes for political change and democracy – stirred by the fall of President ‘Umar al-Bashīr in April 2019 – were still very much alive, before they were seriously challenged by a military counter-coup in October 2021.

We would like to thank all the participants in the conference and the University of Chicago in Paris, which hosted the event. These two volumes are much more than conference proceedings, however: some of the initial participants did not remain on board, while other colleagues joined our adventure later. Our warm thanks go to all the authors and anonymous reviewers in France, Sudan, South Sudan and elsewhere across the globe, whose time and efforts were critical for the successive revisions of the chapters of the book. The editorial team consists of five scholars, some of whom did not know each other very well at the beginning of the process. We have worked hard together for three years, with a deep commitment to the ideas that lie behind this book. We have been extremely lucky to come across each other, and it has been a real dream team to work with.

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*Elena Vezzadini, Iris Seri-Hersch, Lucie Revilla, Anaël Poussier and Mahassin Abdul Jali. Paris, Aix-en-Provence, Bordeaux and Khartoum, April 2023*

## Note on Arabic Transliteration

In this book, Arabic terms are generally transliterated according to the system used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Variations occur where it has been considered important to convey the pronunciation of Sudanese spoken Arabic. Therefore, ق is alternately transliterated as “q” or as “g”; ذ may appear as “dh” or “z”; ث as “th” or “t”; and vowels and diphthongs vary according to local practice. Names of people are transliterated, whereas toponyms and ethnic names are given in their English most common form (e.g. Khartoum, Darfur, El Obeid, Deim, Baggara, Beja). Place names whose occurrence in English is scarce or non-existing are partially transliterated, using “al-” rather than “El” and “Jabal” rather than “Jebel” but omitting diacritics (e.g. al-Damir, Hay al-Zihur, Jabal Marra). Arabic words that have become frequent in English are usually not transliterated (e.g. Islam, Sharia, sheikh, qadi, jihad). In the index, Arabic names starting with an *ʿayn* have been written without it so that they are ordered alphabetically (Abd al-Laṭīf, ʿAlī rather than ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, ʿAlī).



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Iris Seri-Hersch, Elena Vezzadini and Lucie Revilla

# Introduction: Bringing Ordinary People Back into Sudan Studies

As this book was being completed, the United Nations Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (2022) published yet another report on grave violations committed against Sudanese children by government forces and armed rebel groups. Although Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and journalists have regularly studied the disastrous consequences of ongoing conflicts for ordinary people living in Sudan and South Sudan, the scholarship on the region has more often than not focused on elite groups – reflecting a bifurcation between development and human rights studies on the one hand and academic work on the other. By contrast, this volume starts from the premise that the study of “exceptionally normal” men and women (Grendi 1977) is worth pursuing and has far-reaching implications for understanding Sudanese history and politics. The contributors to this book contend that “ordinary people” have been major actors in the historical transformation and political dynamics of greater Sudan.

This perspective posits that ordinary men and women are forces that have interacted with the state in important ways, contributing to its creation or resisting its power. Indeed, men and women have worked with and within successive state apparatuses since the formation of the Funj and Darfur Sultanates in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, contributing to the daily functioning of authoritarian regimes as embodied by the sultanic, Ottoman-Egyptian, Mahdist, Anglo-Egyptian, and post-independence states in Sudan. It was also the people who brought about the collapse of dictatorial rule through popular uprisings on several occasions, from the Mahdist Revolution of 1881–1885 to the October Revolution in 1964, the Intifada in 1985, and more recently the December Revolution in 2018–2019. Here, however, we are not interested in ordinary men and women solely for their power to make and unmake political orders.<sup>1</sup> In our view, social history is a radical project in that it uncovers how captivating, engaging, and moving the study of ordinary lives can be – what Heather J. Sharkey calls “unsensational history” or the “quiet history”<sup>2</sup> of the everyday – as reflected in the many chapters of this book that bring out ordinary worries and passions: asking a local holy man for a charm as a remedy for infertility, helping give birth, playing

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1 On Sudanese orders conceptualised as both institutional configurations and social practices, see Calkins, Ille and Rottenburg 2014.

2 E-mail conversation between Heather J. Sharkey, Iris Seri-Hersch, and Elena Vezzadini, 1 October 2022.



manly games while drinking alcohol, going to the cinema, disobeying teachers at school, and so on.

In this introductory chapter,<sup>3</sup> we first outline the historiographical and political contexts in which this book was written. We then move on to theoretical and methodological considerations: namely, what does ordinariness mean, and what are the ways in which we – as a collective of authors – practice social history and analyse politics from below? In the last two sections, we present the structure of the book, highlighting a number of central issues that criss-cross individual topics and disciplinary boundaries.

## Situated Research *On* and *In* Sudan

Despite its crystallisation in the early 1980s, the region-centred field of Sudan Studies still attracts few scholars in the broader context of African or Middle Eastern Studies (Seri-Hersch 2015). The common perception of Sudan as an in-between zone rather than a historical centre, its anomalous status as an Anglo-Egyptian Condominium in the colonial era (1899–1956), its recurrent civil wars and political strife since independence, and its local economic difficulties may partly account for the relatively small number of specialists inside and outside Sudan and South Sudan. The partition of Sudan into two states in 2011 prompted fresh reflections on the field. At the time, we – three female historians from the “Global North” – proposed a “manifesto” by urging scholars to pay attention to non-elite actors and women, grass-roots and local history, the environment and the arts, oral sources, and interdisciplinary studies of culture, politics, and society (Sharkey, Vezzadini and Seri-Hersch 2015). We also argued for the ability of scholars to transcend the changing boundaries of the nation-state to unearth the past and present connections that have continuously shaped Sudanese history. This book is an attempt to answer this call to move forward in these directions and chart new intellectual terrain. By bringing together historians and social scientists, it seeks to make a contribution to an exciting trend of recent, multidisciplinary research that focuses on the situated practices of ordinary individuals and institutions in the Sudanese legal, social, economic, and political spheres (Casciarri and Babiker 2018; Casciarri *et al.* 2020; Franck, Casciarri and El Hassan 2021). By espousing a *longue durée* time-

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3 Our thanks go to Heather J. Sharkey for her insightful comments on an earlier draft.

frame, it also aims to highlight innovative approaches to the writing of the region's social history from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to today.<sup>4</sup>

This scientific conversation, which started out as an international conference in Paris in December 2019,<sup>5</sup> has developed in the midst of major political upheavals. In the wake of the 2011 secession of South Sudan, the two Sudans witnessed growing internal conflict. Whereas in South Sudan this took the shape of an ethnicised civil war from 2013 onward, conflict in the North (that is, in the Republic of the Sudan) appeared in the form of resurgent tensions in the “marginalised” areas (Darfur, Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile, Eastern Sudan) and economically-driven popular protests in the main towns in 2013 and 2016, before giving way to a more structured revolutionary movement (Deshayes and Vezzadini 2019). The “December Revolution” in Sudan (2018–2019) led to the removal of President ‘Umar al-Bashīr in April 2019, seemingly ending a thirty-year long era of military dictatorship (1989–2019). In September 2019, the formation of a temporary government based on a shaky alliance between military and civil leaders marked the beginning of a “transitional” era that was supposed to lead to legislative elections in 2022 (Bach, Chevillon-Guibert and Franck 2020).

The context in which the contributors to this book initially developed their thoughts was therefore both euphoric and uncertain. As the months passed, it became increasingly clear that the Supreme Council headed by General ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Burhān (which included five military and five civil members) overshadowed ‘Abdallāh Ḥamdōk’s civil government. The coup d’état organised by al-Burhān on 25 October 2021 and the subsequent arrest of Ḥamdōk and his resignation as Prime Minister in January 2022 were a blunt confirmation that the country was heading into a counter-revolutionary phase rather than moving towards the reestablishment of a parliamentary system, the previous manifestation of which had preceded al-Bashīr’s coup (1985–1989). The return of ex-members of the former ruling National Congress Party (NCP) to senior political positions completed the *déjà vu* tone of the Sudanese situation, suggesting parallels with the situation in neighbouring Egypt after ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Sisī’s military coup in 2013, but with one crucial difference: the general lack of legitimacy and widespread unpopularity of al-Burhān’s government. At the time of writing, groups called “revolutionary committees” were organising almost daily civil protests such as strikes, boycotts, and marches all over the country. They lasted for months after al-Burhān’s coup, in spite of the numerous casualties inflicted by the army on protesters and the various

---

4 On the evolution of historical scholarship on Sudan and of Sudan Studies more broadly, see Kapteijns 1989; Spaulding and Kapteijns 1991; Kurita 2014; and Seri-Hersch 2015.

5 See the conference programme here: <https://www.ehess.fr/en/colloque/towards-new-social-history-sudan> (2 May 2022).

retaliatory measures taken by the regime, such as sackings, purges, and arrests.<sup>6</sup> The volatility and violence of this political configuration have shaped the dynamics of knowledge production and circulation in Sudan and beyond.

On the one hand, several new archival initiatives have developed out of a sense of urgency to collect testimonies and preserve rare materials, whether they relate directly to the December Revolution or concern more remote events in Sudanese history. These initiatives, which involve both foreign and Sudanese scholars, include projects sponsored by the French Research Institute in Khartoum (CEDEJ) such as the Sudan Revolution Archive and the Archives of Women's Movements in Sudan.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the aim of the former is to collect, archive, and share photographs, videos, texts, drawings, and songs produced during the recent revolutionary events (December 2018 to April 2019), the latter seeks to locate written and oral materials on women's movements produced between 1940 and 2010. Another series of major projects has benefited from support from large institutions such as the British Library or the Swiss Aliph Foundation, in partnership with a host of Sudanese organisations. The most impressive of these is undoubtedly the Sudan Memory Project, which has led to the digitisation of hundreds of thousands of items, most of which are held by Sudan's National Records Office (NRO). These items include precolonial and colonial manuscripts, documents, photographs, films, objects, and artworks. Documents from private collections, such as photographs of street art from the December Revolution are also included in the Sudan Memory Project.<sup>8</sup> Another outstanding project is the digital archive of the Sudanese Trade Unions.<sup>9</sup> This archive includes about 10,000 images of rare and fragile material that has been collected directly from trade union leaders, thereby providing access to an impressive number of new sources for the history of labour in Sudan. When taken together, these archival endeavours deserve particular attention, as they bring the digital humanities more firmly into Sudan Studies, renewing pioneering efforts made since the early 2000s, mainly through the Sudan Open Archive (Rift Valley Institute).<sup>10</sup> These various projects are of great potential significance for future research on Sudan, not only because it is a country where climatic and material conditions pose serious threats to the preservation of paper and electronic

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6 Tensions were ongoing at the moment when this introduction was being finalised in the autumn of 2022. See: "Security Forces Disperse Fresh Anti-Coup Protests in Sudan." *Sudan Tribune*, <https://sudantribune.com/article266077> (4 November 2022).

7 See <https://cedejsudan.hypotheses.org/2687> and <https://cedejsudan.hypotheses.org/3474> respectively (2 May 2022).

8 <https://www.sudanmemory.org/> (2 May 2022).

9 <https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP218> (2 May 2022).

10 <https://sudanarchive.net/> (2 May 2022).

records (Deegan and Musa 2013), but also because physical access to institutional archives and private collections is extremely arbitrary, and depends on a variety of political and social contingencies.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the transformation of Sudan's political landscape has affected the ways in which we as scholars reflect on our topics of enquiry. Although the impact may have differed according to individual subjects and sensibilities, it would be wrong not to acknowledge the significance of current politics, in addition to particular individual social positions regarding Sudan, on the production of knowledge itself. These interactions between “field realities” and scholarly discourses on them are part of a wider context in which the global economy of knowledge remains characterised by glaring inequalities. More than sixty years after the political decolonisation of African and Asian countries – and even longer since the independence of Latin American countries – the main resources for knowledge production and dissemination continue to be unevenly distributed across the globe. Indeed, most academic institutions, fundings, scholars, and publications are concentrated in North America and Europe, shaping scholarly norms in the international arena. Collaborations among scholars from the “Global North” and their colleagues in the “Global South” often rely on a division of labour that favours the northern partners (Landau 2012). The publishing industry plays a central role in maintaining these knowledge inequalities (Collyer 2018).

As editors of this book, we acknowledge, and even assert, the situated nature of our project, but we cannot deny that we had to find a compromise with these structural inequalities. The concept of “situated knowledge” assumes several different meanings and layers here. First, although the contributors come from all over the world, the project relies entirely on the support and financial resources of academic institutions located in the “Global North.” We are aware of the fact that Sudan is not situated outside the global dynamics of knowledge production, something that has made it difficult for local scholars to be heard in the international arena.<sup>12</sup> Thus, we have sought to produce a book that is sensitive to academic inequalities, and we have attempted to address them in the best possible ways. One of our primary aims was to provide an international forum for Sudanese scholars who usually write and teach in Arabic. In this spirit, several of the chapters were written in, and then translated from, Arabic. The book also seeks to enrich scientific conversations among Sudan scholars from different academic traditions in Sudan, South Sudan, France, the United Kingdom, Italy,

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<sup>11</sup> See the chapter by Mahassin Abdul Jalil in this book. For a comparative perspective on the limited accessibility of state archives in Egypt and the various strategies developed by scholars to tackle this obstacle, see Ghazaleh 2019.

<sup>12</sup> One recent publication casts light on pre-eminent Sudanese and South Sudanese intellectuals from various generations, many of whom are part of the “national pantheon” without having gained international recognition (Kadoda and Hale 2022).

Germany, the United States, and Japan. In so doing, it deliberately includes a few chapters that lie at the intersection between “standard” academic writing – at least according to accepted international norms – and politically or socially engaged texts. The authors of these chapters are, or have previously been, actors in the configurations they analyse; as such, they provide interesting insider perspectives that contribute to our understanding of social and political dynamics. In any case, scholars are never located totally “outside” their subjects of enquiry, despite their efforts to distance themselves from them; their experience as human beings, citizens of specific states, graduates of certain educational systems, travellers, and professionals inevitably has a bearing on the knowledge they produce. Thus, we argue that the relative position of social scientists on the continuum between “internal” and “external” observation should be reflected upon rather than being ignored or discarded.<sup>13</sup> This book makes room for variations in style and posture, assuming individual subjectivities against over-uniformising trends that tend to impoverish academic writing.

Second, this book is intellectually situated in the social theories that blossomed from the 1980s onwards, during the heydays of postmodernism, deconstructionism, subaltern studies, and postcolonial studies. Even though some of us may have only been partially affected by these trends, and most of us have not stayed with them, one of the basic elements of our project has been an acknowledgement of the existence of power relations at all levels in the process of knowledge production. The theoretical orientations of this book will be discussed at greater length in the next two sections.

Third, our theoretical and methodological choices are shaped by our being situated inside the multidisciplinary field of Sudan Studies, and by our willingness to react to certain of its most salient features: first of all, its powerful exceptionalist bias, as Sudan is often presented as being “one in a kind”, and disconnected from larger global trends. Likewise, Sudan’s history over the long term tends to be interpreted primarily through the Arabisation paradigm and a specific hierarchisation of Sudanese “tribes”, both of which owe a great deal to the administrative work and intellectual production of British colonial officials (Seri-Hersch 2020). Lastly, many observers and Sudan experts, in the past as much as today, espouse a determinist vision of the country’s recent history, projecting on to the past a present that is framed solely in terms of violence and failure, hence transforming a complex history into a “teleology of disaster” (Vezzadini 2012; Seri-Hersch 2015: 28–29).<sup>14</sup> In this book, we

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<sup>13</sup> For insights into the insider/outsider debate among social anthropologists, see, for instance, Gouirir 1998 and Forster 2012.

<sup>14</sup> One example of these tendencies is the book by Peter M. Holt and Martin D. Daly ([1961] 2021), which has been reedited at least seven times between 1961 and 2021. See Worldcat.org, <https://www.worldcat.org/en/title/1289831524> (4 November 2022).

argue strongly against this academic tradition as we seek to paint a very different picture: of an ordinary Sudan, deeply embedded in global and regional dynamics, where ordinary people make their own history; and of Sudan as a field the study of which keeps on revealing surprising, fascinating, and thought-provoking social and historical realities.

The intersection of these positions, together with the opportunities and limitations delineated by our academic situations and personal stories, is what has led to the preparation of this book. On the one hand, it is uneven in terms of both its geographical coverage and gender focus: South Sudan is under-represented, a fact that is undoubtedly linked to the composition of the academic community that has produced this work. Second, around a third of the entire book is dedicated to gender-related issues, be it through the lenses of history, political science, or anthropology. Indeed, this is a response to one of the most flagrant absences in Sudan Studies – the gap between the central role of women as agents in history and politics and their underrepresentation as the subjects and objects of academic scholarship. On the other hand, the book resolutely engages with the problem of how people made or make, and how they unmade or unmake, the places and political regimes in which they live or lived, using all the means at their disposal to achieve this end, from writing in newspapers to taking part in local associations that supported the regime, and from enlisting in the army or the police and going to the cinema to make a statement about modernity. In close connection with this wide variety, we advocate for the need for methodological approaches that are as interdisciplinary and open as possible.

In conclusion, the thematic and methodological diversity of this book reflects the story that lies behind it: it is an intellectual story of a group of scholars situated at the junction between broad academic currents and the smaller – but multi-disciplinary – field of Sudan Studies. It is also the outcome of social dynamics and practical factors, as research in Sudan and South Sudan involves tremendous challenges and material constraints, from the general problem of access to the field and archives – which became acute during the Covid-19 global health crisis – to that of writing a scholarly piece while your country is undergoing a revolution followed by a counter-coup.

## **Ordinary People and Practices in Modern Sudan**

As we noted above, this project is about the writing of histories of “ordinary” Sudanese people, but “ordinary” is a tricky term here. To use the words of feminist theorist Joan Scott, it includes people who have been “omitted or overlooked in accounts

of the past” in “normative histories” (Scott 1991: 776).<sup>15</sup> Tellingly, her seminal article “The Evidence of Experience” opens with a quote by the novelist Samuel Delany in relation to his homosexuality. This immediately brings out something that is also reflected in the table of contents of this book: the fuzziness of the category of “ordinary people”, which here encompasses a broad range of Sudanese actors including educated women, soldiers who travelled to Mexico, policemen, cinema spectators, politicised homosexuals, Islamist women, and Beja groups from Eastern Sudan. How “ordinary” were these people in relation to their social world and beyond, and in what sense can marginalised identities be characterised as “ordinary”?

Various definitions of “ordinary” in history and the social sciences will help clarify our stance. The concept of ordinary people as “those who [a]re excluded from the realm of officialdom, subjects as opposed to rulers” (Te Brake 1998: 2), which has been commonly used by social historians over the last seventy years, is relevant but a little too static, and displays a simplified dichotomy between rulers and the ruled. Reflecting on the evolution of ordinariness as a discursive category, literary critic Raymond Williams has pointed to its fundamental ambiguity. Indeed, the notion oscillates between its Latin-derived sense of “something done by rule or authority (. . .) [or] by custom” – namely, “the expected, the regular, the customary” – and the somewhat unfavourable meaning of someone or something that is uneducated, inferior, or limited. These two divergent definitions of ordinariness share a common feature:

The expression “the ordinary people”, whether used flatteringly or dismissively, is usually an indication of a generalized body of Others (. . .) from the point of view of a conscious governing or administrative minority” (Williams [1976] 2015: 170–71).

This is precisely one of the meanings endorsed in this book: the notion of “ordinary individuals” does not refer to some hypothetical natural state of regularity – or, in the opposing version, to a stable situation of singularity, exceptionality or “Otherness.” Rather, “ordinary people” are those who are perceived as such by the governing elites, who view them as individuals who lack power or are undeserving of any special gaze, for whatever reason this may be. These people may be women, they may belong to sexual, racial, or religious minorities, or they may just be seen as banal executors of the normalised violent hand of the state. The concept of ordinariness should also be grounded in history and in specific contexts: in an important book on the development of a “popular” form of Egyptian nationalism before the 1919 mass uprising against British domination, historian Ziad Fahmy has taken

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<sup>15</sup> This book focuses on human actors but we are aware that the animal world and objects should deserve attention too. For a critique of anthropocentrism in Sudan Studies, see Sharkey, Vezzadini and Seri-Hersch 2015: 7.

the concept of ordinary people towards a more sociocultural understanding. In his view, ordinary Egyptians in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Egypt were people from all backgrounds who shared the daily use of colloquial Arabic as opposed to the literary language (*fushā*). They produced, performed, and consumed cultural artefacts that were accessible to a predominantly illiterate Egyptian society – the satirical press, vaudeville plays, recorded songs, and colloquial poetry (Fahmy 2011: xi-xiii).

As scholars, we use ordinariness in the context of the critical reappraisal of Sudan Studies discussed above. From this perspective, the history of “ordinary people” is – once again in the words of Joan Scott, and perhaps counterintuitively – a “history of difference,” of what is overlooked and omitted; this is the “obliterated history” discussed by Mahassin Abdul Jalil in this book. The lack of attention to ordinary people harkens back to the colonial era (1899–1956) and to the structure of British rule in Sudan, which worked – as it did elsewhere in the colonial world – through the co-optation of local leaders (Abushouk 2010; Bühner *et al.* 2017). In the colonial records, non-elite actors only became visible when they were perceived as a threat, as in the 1924 revolution or the strikes of 1948–1950, and even then, attention was mostly focused on the “ringleaders” of anticolonial actions, while other activists, on the rare occasions when they were mentioned, were disparagingly described as “riff-raff” (Vezzadini 2015: 234).<sup>16</sup> In the eyes of the British administrators, ordinary participants were not worth using any more words on, because they were seen as being manipulated by the “real” perpetrators of the day, be they Egyptian nationalists in 1924 or Sudanese Communists in the late 1940s.

Our approach in this book seeks to counterbalance the deep-rooted scholarly inclination to focus either on elites or on impersonal structures, a trend that is due not only to the greater accessibility of sources that document elite groups, but also to the fact that academics still hesitate to see history and politics as being inhabited by “the average person in the street”, to use the words of a Sudanese female journalist writing in the 1950s (see the chapter by Elena Vezzadini in this book). This is somewhat paradoxical, given the fact that Sudan is one of the rare countries in Africa that experienced multiple mass civil non-violent uprisings throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of which led to regime changes: in 1924, when thousands of people defied the colonial order; in 1948–1950, when waves of strikes and demonstrations paralysed the major urban centres, accelerating the pace of independence (1956); and then in 1964, 1985, and 2018–2019, when revolutionary uprisings brought an end to the successive authoritarian military regimes led by Ibrāhīm ‘Abbūd (1958–1964), Ja’far

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<sup>16</sup> By the time of the great strikes of 1948, the workers taking part in the demonstrations were systematically homogenised by the use of the word “crowd”, at best a “peaceful” one. See the entire file, FO 371/69236, The National Archives, Kew, UK.



al-Nimayrī (1969–1985), and ‘Umar al-Bashīr (1989–2019) (even though al-Bashīr’s enduring Islamist dictatorship had seemed to be impossible to oust). And yet very little is known about the structures of political mobilisation from below during these revolutionary episodes. Similarly, we still have only a very partial understanding of how ordinary people contributed to the creation and maintenance of these authoritarian regimes.<sup>17</sup> Here, therefore, “ordinary” stands as a signpost for social actors who certainly had entirely different destinies, lives, aspirations, dreams, and situations, and whose histories we need to know better, write about, and circulate. In this sense, “ordinary” is a situated signpost of the current gaps and absences in the existing scholarship. Its analytical flexibility points to a long road ahead for historians and social scientists in order to bring people back into history, structures, economy, and politics.

## From Social History to Politics from Below

In the sub-title of this book, we deliberately use other fuzzy categories such as “social history” and “politics from below”. Indeed, their vagueness or political connotations have stirred up lengthy debates. This section aims to clarify the meanings we attribute to these concepts.

A number of scholars have exposed the ambiguity – or even the opacity – of social history as a branch of historical enquiry. It started out as a project to “enlarge[e] the scope of history” (Zunz [1985] 2014: 4), an aim that is best expressed by George Macaulay Trevelyan’s famous definition of it as the “history of a people with the politics left out” (quoted in Tilly [1985] 2014: 11), and it has indeed had the contradictory aspiration of being at once “total history” (*histoire totale*) – that is, a narrative that encompasses all aspects of the lives of individuals<sup>18</sup> – while at the same time focusing on specific aspects of people’s lives that historians had previously ignored.<sup>19</sup> This

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<sup>17</sup> For some recent studies on popular resistance to the ruling colonial or post-colonial order, see Vezzadini 2015; Curless 2013; Berridge 2015; Deshayes and Vezzadini 2019; Bach, Chevillon-Guibert and Franck 2020; Elgizouli, Hussain and Moss 2021. On accommodation with or participation in the established regime see Seri-Hersch 2017; Salomon 2016; Revilla 2020; Mahé 2020.

<sup>18</sup> As exemplified by works such as *L’homme médiéval* (Le Goff [1989] 1994) or Fernand Braudel’s *La Méditerranée* ([1949] 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Some examples taken from what is known as the third generation of French Annales historiography are the history of “banal objects” (Roche 1997), the history of senses (Corbin 1994, 1998), the history of bodies (Corbin *et al.* [2005] 2016), and the history of emotions (Boquet and Nagy 2015; Corbin, Courtine and Vigarello 2016); or that of normative social categories such as hygiene and dirt (Vigarello 2008), as part of a broader trend of social history conceived as “the history of mental-

scholarship has been accused of fragmenting and compartmentalising the narration of the past (Dosse 1985, Joyce 1995). According to Olivier Zunz ([1985] 2014: 7), for instance, historians “have lost their ability to recapture the totality of the past” through “a unifying framework.” In addition, the emergence of new topics (such as the history of “banal objects” and emotions) has made it necessary to develop new methodologies as well as creating a need for – and the ability to handle – alternative sources drawn from literature, the press, images, cartoons, judicial records, and even monuments and ruins, and last but not least oral history (Portelli 1981). In short, some historians were pushed out of their comfort zone of state archives, and bemoaned the demise of master narratives like those produced by British imperial histories at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Winks 1999: 4–16).

However, the critique of social history as a contradictory endeavour that tends both to fragment *and* totalise the past fails to take its historical development into consideration; indeed, in different places and at different times, social historians have adopted incommensurable methodologies in their treatment of the past. This is especially striking if one compares Fernand Braudel’s *La Méditerranée* ([1949] 2017) with E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* ([1963] 1980), Carlo Ginzburg’s *Il Formaggio e I Vermi* (1976), Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* ([1983] 2002), or even Charles Van Onselen’s *The Small Matter of a Horse* ([1984] 2008), one of the main figures of South African social history. The juxtaposition of these titles offers a clear image of the transformation of, and dissonances in, the field of social history. These canonical works were unavoidably shaped by the context in which they were produced, which was itself related to the political and intellectual developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the bloody ideological and political battles that coincided with the rise of totalitarian regimes leading to the outbreak of the Second World War; the decolonisation movements across Asia and Africa in the 1950s and 1960s; the Cold War and its global repercussions; and the world economic and political crises stirred up by the structural adjustment programmes of the International Monetary Fund after the late 1970s.

These stages of the “short twentieth century” (Hobsbawm 1994) went hand in hand with the rise and fall of successive intellectual paradigms. Between the two World Wars, social historians discovered interdisciplinarity and showed great in-

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ities” (*histoire des mentalités*, see Ariès [1978] 2006). These pioneering works by French social historians have inspired similar approaches in other national contexts, although they have often been labelled in the Anglo-Saxon world as “cultural history” because of their focus on representations. French works include fewer grand narratives than the trend of cultural studies, since they tend to be grounded more firmly in specific sources and periods of time. On the history of dirt as a cultural category, see, for instance, the contrast between Vigarello 2008 and Sivulka 2001.

terest in the social sciences – above all sociology, but also economics, demography, geography, and to a lesser extent anthropology. Many expressed a positivistic fervour about the possibilities opened up by this encounter that was so much a feature of the Annales School (Revel 1979). After the Second World War, and with the beginning of the Cold War, the relationship between historians and their national communist parties had a powerful impact on the direction taken by social history in their respective countries. Contrary to what happened in France, the “Thompsonian” moment in the United Kingdom coincided with an outspoken denunciation of Stalinism. After Khrushchev’s disclosure of Stalin’s crimes, hundreds of Marxist intellectuals like Thompson left the British Communist Party, which led to the creation of the New Left (Saville 1994; Palmer 2002). And yet for Thompson, Marxism remained a critical analytical tool that needed to be reinvented (Thompson [1978] 2008). He scorned the French structuralist version of Marxism as formulated by Louis Althusser, a philosopher who represented everything he disliked, who remained loyal to the Communist Party and theorised a form of historical materialism governed by power structures that left no space for people. Instead, Thompson coined a number of concepts that would become central to much of the subsequent social history literature, such as agency, history from below, and experience – first and foremost that of workers. The renewed Annales School<sup>20</sup> and the British History Workshops were paralleled by currents of social history in other countries of the Global North, such as the American “new” social history, the Italian *Microstoria*, or the German *Alltagsgeschichte* – the history of everyday life. Although their affinity to neo-Marxism was sometimes tenuous, they all predicated the need to start out from individual or community worldviews and everyday lives in order to grasp new, and often hidden, evidence of particular historical processes (Gardner and Adams 1983; Ginzburg and Poni 1981; Ginzburg, Tedeschi, and Tedeschi 1993; Crew 1989; Eley 1989). They also shared an interest with British New Left historians in the categories of experience and agency. In the meantime, the History Workshop’s theoretical and methodological “toolkit” travelled far and wide, contributing to a broader rethinking in the historical field of a number of postcolonial countries from South Africa to India.<sup>21</sup>

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20 The intellectual heirs of the Annales School developed a radically different take on social history. In the old Annales view, long-term historical mechanisms (climatic and economic changes across several centuries) encompassed, but also explained, “events” such as wars, treaties, and the birth of new nations, which were major topics of interest. The French “new social history”, on the other hand, focused on embodying history into subjects – as can be observed from its interest in senses, bodies, and emotions (Le Goff *et al.* [1978] 2006).

21 On the specific impact of the History Workshop in India and South Africa, see Bonner 1994 and Chandavarkar 1997.

The next paradigm shift in the social sciences was reflected in the post-modern and linguistic turns, which were also linked to the growing influence of intellectuals from previously colonised societies. These trends forced historians to consider the narrative and power-laden character of history writing, or, according to the enlightening formula of the late Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, to keep in mind “an irreducible distinction and yet an equally irreducible overlap between what happened and that which is said to have happened” (Trouillot 1995: 3). The traditional claim made by historians about their ability to depict historical truths was sifted through radical postmodern deconstructive readings. In spite of the violence of this critique, which some European historians misrepresented as a death sentence for the discipline (Chartier [1998] 2009), it did provoke some profound rethinking. From Foucault to subaltern studies, it became impossible to ignore the question of power and the way historically-situated unequal relationships affect the production of any authoritative knowledge. This led to an increasing awareness that established historical narratives are produced from the point of view of dominant groups in terms of gender, race, and class. Nothing was left untouched: even the core notion of “experience”, which had been so crucial for the previous generation of social historians, was passed through the postmodern sieve (Scott 1991).

Some feminist theorists produced significant attempts to overcome the impasse of radical deconstructionism. For instance, Donna Haraway (1988) argued that while any scientific representation of the past is partial, there are also situated and partial views – notably from “below”, from the dominated, subaltern groups – that are crucial for debunking master narratives, a thesis that echoed the famous Black feminist manifesto known as the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977).<sup>22</sup> In a seminal article on situated knowledge, Haraway maintained that there are

specific *ways* of seeing (. . .) there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds (. . .) I would like to suggest how our insisting metaphorically on the particularity and embodiment of all vision (. . .) allows us to construct a usable, but not an innocent, doctrine of objectivity. (. . .) The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. (. . .) Positioning implies responsibility for our enabling practices (Haraway 1988: 582–83, 585, 587).

By contrast, she defined non-situated, “unlocated knowledge” as the vision of “the master, the Man, the One God, whose Eye produces, appropriates, and orders all difference” (Haraway 1988: 587). We have quoted from her text extensively because it highlights a number of central issues in the intellectual project underlying this book. First, she reminds us that searching for the perspectives and experiences of

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<sup>22</sup> The text is available here: [https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition\\_Readings.pdf](https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf)

subaltern actors and combating their lack of visibility in written sources leads to a “usable but not an innocent” science of history. It is “not innocent” because the writer is aware that production conditions have a direct impact on results. At the same time, this science is “usable” in the sense that it is political, and it can become a powerful toolbox for struggle (see the chapter by Yoshiko Kurita in this book). Indeed, a perspective “from below” has two formidable advantages. First, this viewpoint discloses not only the processes by which ordinary people are erased from dominant narratives about the past, but also the specific form of oppression they suffer (Combahee River Collective Statement 1977). Secondly, it reveals the rich and complex life-worlds of “ordinary” social groups. Several scholars have described the vibrant cultural lives of slave and ex-slave communities in Sudan (Sikainga 1996; Makris 2000; Kenyon 2012). In the same spirit, most of the chapters in this book explore, or seek to reveal, perspectives “from below”.

Similar rethinking processes have affected other disciplines besides history across the human and social sciences. In different ways, political science has also been transformed by reflexivity, deconstruction, and an increasing diversification of research subjects away from state-centred processes and analytical categories (the organisation of state institutions, the dynamics of party politics, the nature of various types of regimes) towards a growing scholarship on “politics from below.”<sup>23</sup> In the context of this epistemological reconfiguration, the agency of subaltern and marginalised actors has been scrutinised, from the foundational approach of James Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) and *Domination and the Art of Resistance* ([1990] 2009), to Asef Bayat’s notion of the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” in *Life as Politics* ([2010] 2013: 43–55), to the ground-breaking understanding of subaltern agency – in this case that of women – in Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* (2012). These works, like many others, have sought to grasp the silent but active participation of dominated groups in the definition of power relations.

Here, too, various concepts have seen different waves of popularity, from the notion of “civil society” to “grassroots”. While the notion of civil society is closely linked to the development of liberal political theory – despite its Gramscian roots –, the category of grassroots organisations is as empirically connected with socialist regimes celebrating popular sovereignty as it is with conservative political orders romanticising “the energy of the masses” in order to do away with pluralistic debates. This dual political instrumentalisation is very much embodied in Sudanese modern history. The idea of mobilising society as a whole was endorsed by the Mahdist state

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23 See Bonnecase and Brachet 2021, as well as a foundational text for African political studies by Jean-François Bayart, Achille Mbembé and Comi Toulabor (1992).

(1885–1898) for the sake of an ongoing jihad (seen as necessary warfare against any non-Mahdist group or state, including Muslim ones). From the 1940s, it was used by the Sudanese Communist Party before being reappropriated in an authoritarian perspective by the May regime (1969–1985) and later by the Islamist regime (1989–2019), which borrowed part of its ideology from al-Qadhdhāfi’s “state of the masses” (*jamāhīriyya*) and its distorted interpretation of direct democracy (Musso 2015). The “politics from below” approach has drawn these notions out of their normative shell by proposing other analytical frameworks such as “popular modes of political action” that seek to unearth the participation of multiple actors in the shaping of politics at all levels (Bayart, Mbembe, and Toulabor 1992; Constant-Martin 2002). This theoretical turn is not merely concerned with people acting on the margins of the state: scholars have also suggested a renewed approach to studying the informal ways in which various elites legitimise their domination (“politics of the belly”, see Bayart [1993] 2009). In other words, this academic trend calls for a relational analysis of politics that includes the study of social movements, for which scholars have often adopted sociological or anthropological approaches to analyse the issue of participation.<sup>24</sup>

Strikingly, the vast amount of research labelled as politics from below, subaltern studies, the history of daily life, or microhistory mostly blossomed in the 1980s (Bayart 2021). When taken together, these analytical perspectives pose a serious challenge to the relevance of disciplinary separation and labels that remain prevalent in the fields of anthropology, social history, and political sociology. Going beyond normative definitions of politics, for instance by using the concept of infrapolitics (Scott [1990] 2009), allows scholars to study the very conditions that make the institutionalised version of politics possible. In Marxist terms, this would mean analysing the “infrastructure” of official politics.

However, as some have already noted, analyses “from below” may lead scholars to undervalue the role of elites and the state apparatus in shaping politics or to reproduce romanticised images of the dominated, who are then seen as being naturally driven by creativity and resilience in the face of a violent state. This mistaken reading may also rest on a teleological perception of the “revolutionary subject”. Although relevant in some ways, this critique overlooks the complexity of hegemony that this stream of research has sought to address, following Antonio Gramsci’s seminal work (Gramsci [1948–1951] 1971), or the many attempts to draw attention to all the people who make a state work on a daily basis (Hull 2012; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014). The concept of hegemony makes it possible to move

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<sup>24</sup> For a general perspective on social movements in Africa and the Middle East, see Ellis and Kessel 2009; Beinin and Vairel (2011) 2013.

far beyond the formal limits of politics by examining how dominant ideologies are reappropriated by a range of different social groups without presuming what the dominated will make out of them. This is also a useful starting point when it comes to analysing how politics is anchored in daily life, as conceptualised by the philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1958). This multidisciplinary thinker has been rediscovered by geographers and anthropologists in recent decades: his theories offer a helpful way of trying to understand the sometime discrete presence of politics in seemingly familiar environments and everyday interactions.

Several scholars have also called for a shift in attention from the analysis of corruption and predatory mechanisms – which the “politics of the belly” literature in African Studies (Bayart [1993] 2009) has tended to overemphasise – to a serious consideration of the processual crafting of political ideas in which ordinary actors are engaged on a daily basis. Historians of political ideas still encounter difficulties with giving up their focus on “well-known nationalist anti-colonial male elites” who are viewed as legitimate intellectuals and political theorists (Mondésire 2021). And yet, paying attention to local intellectuals in the sense of “thinkers who wrestled with issues in philosophy, politics, history and culture but who were not part of mainstream academic or cultural institutions” (Barber 2015) opens up new research avenues that challenge the classification of intellectuals according to colonial or Western criteria and acknowledge the complexity and heterogeneity of knowledge production in Sudan.

## The Structure of the Book: Volume I

This book is divided into two volumes and six parts. The central theme running through Part 1 is the question of the links between history and (past and present) politics. The three chapters reveal the multi-layered nature of this issue and its infinite implications. Yoshiko Kurita reminds us that the division between social and political history is an artificial one, and that some of the most seminal works in social history were the outcome of a highly political project of showing how radical changes were enacted by ordinary people in revolutionary times. From a different perspective, Mahassin Abdul Jalil notes how by simply sitting inside an archive it is possible to observe the ways in which not only a political regime but also social conventions and norms define the opportunities for writing history, especially which history and whose history it is possible to write. She also shows, however, that deliberate acts of obliteration – as in the case of an administrator deleting a line or “whitewashing” a wall or a document – very often leave evidence of the intention to destroy, thus not only testifying to an episode of violence and an injustice that

call for redress, but also opening up the possibility for historians and citizens of “fanning the spark of hope” (Benjamin [1942] 1968: 255) that at least a part of this past may be recovered, in the same way as a scar bears witness to a wound.

Part 1 begins with the chapter by Kurita, a scholar who has had a tremendous intellectual impact on a generation of Sudan scholars, just as she has among Sudanese intellectual and activist milieux. Indeed, this entire project is heavily indebted to her and to the “spark of hope” her work has generated inside Sudan. In her life’s work, just as in her chapter, she has sought to demonstrate the political and historical overlapping between the centre and the periphery, describing people from marginalised areas not as victims but as agents who have had a crucial revolutionary impact at all the critical junctures of Sudanese history, from the Mahdist revolution to that of 2018–2019, a point that is reiterated by many contributors to this book. One case in point is represented by the women who took part in the December Revolution, as illustrated by Safa Mohamed Kheir Osman in her chapter. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that female activists continued to play key roles in the revolutionary committees that fought against the counter-coup establishment in 2022. Osman casts light on the fact that this participation is the result of an accumulation of experiences that began much earlier, and is rooted in the history of a women’s movement that had its origins at the time of decolonisation. She continues by describing the radical changes that have affected the political commitment of women over time. While women’s movements did not necessarily endorse a feminist agenda in previous civil uprisings, gender issues and claims based on gender rights have been at the core of women’s mobilisations since 2018. The third chapter of this section moves the cursor back to history, more precisely to the craft of historians and their main concerns – sources. Abdul Jalil adopts Trouillot’s paradigm on the “layers of silences” (1995) to give several poignant examples of the operation of obliteration and the production of a hierarchised knowledge of history (“celebrated” versus “tarnished” history). She describes several layers of this erasure process, from the way traces of events are physically deleted before they can “make it” into an archival collection to deliberate actions of obliteration by archive keepers and then by historians when the documents reveal something of the past that contradicts the current social norms, as in the cases of prostitution and homosexuality (see also the chapter by Willow Berridge in Part 4).

The three chapters in Part 2 reveal in a very nuanced and fascinating way how women are agents and historical actors whatever the patriarchal order in place at a given moment may be. The three chapters resist any temptation to write “romances of resistance” (Abu Lughod 1990), and analyse the violence of the patriarchal order and how women participated in it. They also intersect gender inequalities with class and racial discriminations, demonstrating that the heaviest burden was borne by the most vulnerable women, first of all by female slaves. And yet these texts do



not depict women as passive in any sense; instead, they shed light on how women interacted with the patriarchal order and shaped it, using it for achieving their own gains, and at times managing to reform it by manipulating the “rules of the game”. For instance, the chapter by Amel Osman Hamed on women and holy men during the Funj period (1504–1820) shows how these men were at the heart of a religious system that promoted gender inequality, both materially – by nurturing a redistributive system that heavily favoured men – and symbolically – by defining religiously-grounded ideas that associated femininity with weakness, dependence, and vulnerability. This contribution also reminds us, however, that the social power of holy men was dependent on women. Hamed’s main source, the *Ṭabaqāt Wad Dayfallāh*, is full of stories of women asking for good deeds and sheikhs being able to perform miracles to help them thanks to their *baraka*. Women therefore played an active role in constructing the religious world of holy men. In other words, even though women may have depended on sheikhs for their spiritual or concrete needs, sheikhs depended on women for recognition of their holiness and their miraculous powers.

The second chapter, by Elena Vezzadini, focuses on the link between women, politics, and the press. Starting in 1950, at a time of political turmoil, Sudanese female journalists, many of whom would become founding members of the Sudanese Women’s Union (SWU) in 1952, began to write articles in the political press, which had hitherto been written by and for men. They wrote texts about women’s necessary contribution to national liberation and the “women’s problem”. When reading their articles, it is striking at first sight to note the denigratory lexicon used by female journalists to refer to ordinary Sudanese women, insisting for instance on female “backwardness”, ignorance, and an inability to make an intellectual contribution to the national debate. On closer sight, however, one discovers that by making small, yet crucial, discursive shifts, these female intellectuals made their texts profoundly subversive. While on the one hand accepting the principle of men’s superiority and patriarchal control over women, they appropriated this standard to demonstrate that the situation of women was the result of men’s flaws. By failing to work in the best interests of women, men had failed in their patriarchal role. In 1956, these discourses eventually came to embrace the idea of gender equality. Vezzadini interprets this change as the result of a general shift in sensibilities prompted by the synergic efforts of female and male intellectuals who worked together to construct a consensus through the press on the desirability of a new social and political role for Sudanese women.

The appropriation of the “rules of the game” is also central to the chapter by Abir Nur on the Sudanese General Women’s Union (SGWU). The SGWU was the largest women’s NGO in Sudan under the *inqādh* regime, or rather it was a “government-organised non-governmental organisation” (GONGO) that according to offi-

cial figures included six million Sudanese women. Nur observes that membership of this organisation represented an important opportunity for women from both the elites and the popular classes. She shows that unlike the top of the SGWU hierarchy, which embodied ideal National Islamic Front (NIF) women, a high proportion of the less privileged members were unmarried and childless, something that was – and still is – lived and seen as a social stigma. However, by committing to the organisation, they not only placed their “natural feminine” vocation for caring in the service of God, but also earned respectability for their piety that remedied the social stigma associated with their unmarried situation.

The chapters in Part 3 focus on armed men between global connections and local practices. Adopting a similar perspective, Heather J. Sharkey and Massimo Zaccaria investigate transnational histories of military labour on the eve of and during the age of “high” European imperialism: that is, from the 1860s until the First World War. Whereas Sharkey reconstructs the individual trajectories of Sudanese soldiers who took part in the French invasion of Mexico (1863–1867), especially that of ‘Alī Jifūn, Zaccaria analyses the social composition of various local and colonial armies in Sudan and the Horn of Africa from the 1880s on, arguing that there was a transnational market for Sudanese artillery men. Both authors contribute to reinserting Sudan in a global history, while also highlighting the agency of Sudanese and Eritrean actors in choosing to enlist in the army that offered the best terms of service (Zaccaria) or providing their own accounts of their experience (Sharkey). By so doing, the authors link not only geographical spaces that are usually considered separately (Sudan, Egypt, Algeria, France, Mexico, and the US; and Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Libya, and Congo), taking into account French, Italian, British, German, and Belgian colonial policies, but also various historiographical traditions and archival materials. Even though Sharkey’s micro-scale type of analysis contrasts with Zaccaria’s more regionally-based, quantitative approach, these studies converge at two additional points. First, they provide ample evidence of European racial-cum-scientific constructions of Sudanese men in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as supposedly immune to disease and particularly fit for warfare, making them a much sought-after resource. Second, they demonstrate that military recruitment abroad created significant opportunities for upward mobility for Sudanese individuals who often had a slave history: their experience in neighbouring or faraway countries and the acquisition of a specific expertise allowed them to obtain official recognition by being awarded the French *Légion d’Honneur* (Sharkey) or to build professional military careers in Northeast Africa (Zaccaria).

As Sharkey and Zaccaria persuasively show us, the modern history of Sudan owes much to synchronic developments in the Nile Valley and beyond as the world entered a new phase of interconnectedness in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet modern Sudanese institutions such as the state police have also been signifi-

cantly shaped by the cumulative weight of past experiences in the same territory, as Ammar Mohamed Elbagir Ibrahim makes clear. In his chapter, he examines the police's evolving functions, recruitment methods, structure, and source of authority from the advent of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899) to the later years of the al-Bashīr regime (2015). Studying both legislation and real practices, Ibrahim reveals interesting tensions between a military pattern of policing (prevalent between 1899 and 1925 and again from 1970 to 2008) and a civil model based on a sharper distinction between army and police duties (1925–1970). Over the course of more than a century, Sudan's police force expanded not only in size (relative to the overall population) but also with regard to its prerogatives, which after 1992 extended to civil defence, prisons, customs, and wildlife control. As a former member of the Sudan police, Ibrahim is in a unique position to identify several crucial problems of historical and contemporary relevance, such as the delicate position of Sudanese police officers at the time of the decolonisation struggle in the 1940s and 1950s, or the state's instrumentalisation of legislation to extend the powers of police officers, especially in the context of Khartoum's war in Southern Sudan and Darfur after 1999. That the police have been used as a repressive tool to maintain the regime, defeat rebel movements, and silence political opponents rather than as a means of protecting the rights and lives of ordinary citizens – a fact that is acknowledged and deplored by the author – is not surprising in the authoritarian contexts of colonial and independent Sudan. But Ibrahim's call for the development of critical analyses within police circles in order to redefine the relationships between the police and the state, as well as the police and society at large, may reflect a broader self-reflection on the nature of Sudanese institutions in the post-2019 era.

## The Structure of the Book: Volume II

Part 4 deals with urban life, queer history and leisure during the time of Anglo-Egyptian rule. The chapters in this section offer fresh insights into Sudan's colonial past, focusing on social and cultural issues, mostly in urban milieus, although the rural world also appears in Brendan Tuttle and Joseph Chol Duot's study of mobile cinemas. The studies show how valuable a flexible approach to periodisation can be. For instance, it is clear from Marina D'Errico's chapter that research on the making of the "triple" capital city (Khartoum, Khartoum North, and Omdurman) needs to look back to well before 1899, be it in 1885 for Omdurman or in the 1820s for Khartoum. At the other end of the colonial time span, Tuttle and Duot explore the production, distribution, and consumption of films in Southern Sudan at the

critical juncture between the late Condominium years and the early post-independence era. The transversal issues in this section include the ways public and private spaces were discursively defined and materially produced in colonial Sudan; the multifaceted struggles over acceptable social practices and forms of leisure in the public sphere, be they in the area of neighbourly relations, the sale and consumption of alcoholic drinks, intimate relationships and sexuality, or cinemagoing; as well as the existence of heated moral debates and the centrality of legislation as a state regulation tool at a time when policy-makers were predominantly Christian British and to a lesser extent Muslim Northern Sudanese *men*.

D’Errico examines the spatial and social transformation of Omdurman from the foundation of the Mahdist capital (1885) until the early 1950s. She argues that while the town was a new religious and political centre, it shared important similarities with the Funj capital of Sennar (that is, an enclosed “royal” quarter) and with Ottoman cities across the Middle East and North Africa (the physical centrality of mosques, the autonomous organisation of neighbourhoods – often on an ethnic basis – and the building of houses rather than streets). Her detailed study of the exterior courtyard house, which was widespread in Omdurman (including the Khalifa’s house), points to the various functions of courtyards in everyday life and over several generations: they served not only as passageways and meeting areas, but also as building areas and mobile borders of properties that could expand or shrink depending on family dynamics. Population growth led to increased housing density in Omdurman, where traditional openings in house fences (*nafāj*) played a key role in clustering processes. Indeed, the opening or closing of *nafāj* contributed to the reshaping of private, semi-private, and public spaces at a neighbourhood level. D’Errico then discusses the settlement of Sudanese from “peripheral” areas and slave backgrounds in Omdurman (mainly in ‘Abbasiyya, al-Mawrada, and Abu Rof), and compares the building of ties of solidarity among these newcomers to similar processes in Khartoum’s Deims. Finally, she seeks to assess the social impact of British urban policies, especially that of the 1910 Master Plan (which reflected a dual approach towards “backward” Omdurman and “modern” Khartoum) and later operations of demolition and population relocalisation carried out between the 1930s and the 1950s.

In his chapter, Ahmad Alawad Sikainga explores British colonial attempts to control the behaviour of their Sudanese subjects, focusing on the struggles over the production, consumption, and sale of alcohol in the Condominium era. Drawing on Sudanese ethnographies of the *indāya* (drinking house), colonial archives held at Sudan’s National Records Office (NRO), and Arabic newspapers, Sikainga outlines the ancient history of alcohol manufacturing in pre-Islamic Nubia, stressing its continued social importance in various areas of Sudan up to the modern era. He then analyses the restrictive British alcohol laws and links them to the common colonial

perception of alcohol as a health hazard, a social ill, and a possible political threat. The long-lasting distinction made by the authorities between Sudanese and foreign consumers and the differentiated policy towards local liquors such as *marīsa* and *ʿaragī* on the one hand and imported alcohol on the other – the former often being criminalised while the latter was permitted – are very telling in this regard. British officials attempted to co-opt Sudanese religious sheikhs and community leaders in their fight against the production and use of alcohol (especially *ʿaragī*) by Sudanese people, instrumentalising Islam to delegitimise it or make it illegal. This did not yield significant results, however: Sudanese consumers developed their own strategies by circumventing colonial laws (they obtained their liquor through licensed European or Egyptian individuals), protesting in petitions and newspaper articles, evading police controls, moving their drinking places, or limiting their collaboration with the authorities. Sikainga incisively shows that internal British debates on liquor policy intersected with considerations on Sudanese social stratifications. For instance, several towns that were thought to be “sophisticated” were defined as “wet areas” in 1939: beer and light wine could only be sold to Sudanese in these particular towns. The chapter also includes quantitative data on bars, alcohol supplies, and prosecutions of *ʿaragī* distillers in the 1940s, and ties alcohol issues in with the political and economic context of the Second World War.

Willow Berridge offers an innovative analysis of British and Sudanese attitudes on non-normative forms of sexuality in the colonial era. In contrast to the restrictive laws on (Sudanese) alcohol, the British did not criminalise homosexuality, unlike in India, and despite commonly-held homophobic and transphobic views among British officials in Sudan. Berridge interprets this paradox by suggesting that criminalisation might have exposed “scandalous” behaviour within the British administrative elite itself (mentioning the specific cases of Geoffrey Archer and Douglas Newbold) or even same-sex relations across the colonial divide (Ramsay). This exposure would have posed a threat to a colonial racial hierarchy that was based on the deployment of white hypermasculinity. The chapter demonstrates that homophobic discourses served both colonial and anti-colonial narratives, as various actors sought to “externalise” queerness and use it for delegitimising ends. British officials such as Henry Jackson attributed homosexuality to Egyptian influences – especially in the post-1924 context – and tended to medicalise it (Reginald Davies), fearing its spread in Sudanese schools and prisons. A part of the Northern Sudanese elites, in particular the neo-Mahdist allies of the British, seem to have supported official attempts at outlawing consensual homosexuality in 1925. Bābikr Badrī perceived effeminate men (*mukhannathīn*) as a threat to the social order. Hence, British and Sudanese queerphobia converged in the perception of male-bodied prostitutes as a threat to the existing order. However, as Berridge astutely points out, there were also Sudanese judges and teachers who asso-

ciated homosexuality with British culture, using a queerphobic rhetoric to criticise the colonial education system and the import of supposedly British foreign norms into Sudan.

The last chapter in Part 4, which stands out for its focus on Southern Sudan, studies the development of cinema at the time of decolonisation. Tuttle and Duot argue that films were not only a means of control for the late colonial state, which sought to draw mass rural audiences more firmly into the empire through a new kind of “modern” visual propaganda; they also stirred up British anxieties about how Sudanese audiences would interpret the films they watched. The chapter raises the issue of their intended aims (were they educational, political propaganda, or for leisure?), and shows how screenings had the practical effect of creating communities of viewers, exposing them to distant places inside and outside Sudan. Tuttle and Duot analyse the debates prompted by private applications to open commercial cinemas in Kordofan and Southern Sudan. British and Sudanese officials discussed censorship issues at length, which led to the development of specific legislation on cinema, beginning with the 1949 Cinematograph Ordinance. Finally, the chapter uses the Juba Picture House as a case study to trace the material history and social memories of cinemagoing in the 1960s and 1970s, drawing on interviews with the older generation. Tuttle and Duot’s analysis brings out the fundamental ambivalence of cinema as a medium and space that could be used not only to create and control audiences, but also to emancipate, subvert, and distract literate and illiterate people alike. Yet neither the screenwriters, directors, and producers nor the technicians who projected the movies – let alone the state officials concerned with censorship – were able to exert any control over “what was going on” in people’s minds and between viewers during or after screenings.

Part 5 of the book examines various aspects related to the history of labour in Sudan, starting from the colonial era and ending with the 2018–2019 revolution. The variety of themes, methodologies, and approaches in this section reflects the enormous diversity of working situations, labour relations, and work experiences. To this we must add the consideration – which may perhaps be an obvious one – that according to the type of sources used, either closer to the point of view of the workers or to that of their employers, analyses of labour relations vary widely. Two of the chapters in this section, the first on the history of midwifery in the Nuba Mountains, and the second on a working-class neighbourhood in Khartoum (Deim), are by anthropologists who have blended oral history and anthropological methods. The historical narrative they have crafted therefore seeks to reflect on the experiences, motives, and trajectories of the workers. On the other hand, the chapter on industrial relations in Barclays Bank and the study of the Borgeig scheme are both based on sources produced by (British) employers and do not carry the workers’ voices; however, historians still have much to learn about labour relations from

these sources, both in their interstices and silences, as well as in their unique ability to cast light on the construction of labour hierarchies.

In spite of their differences, these contributions all share a common thread – the overlapping between social hierarchies and labour relations – as they explore groups at the opposite ends of social hierarchies. Harry Cross studies a category of workers – employees of Barclays Bank – who were the best paid in the whole banking sector, a situation that was related to the status of Barclays as the imperial bank of Sudan. He explores the process that led to the unionisation of the workers, which took place at least a decade and a half after the first great wave of trade unionism in Sudan (1948–1958). He connects unionisation to structural changes in the bank associated with decolonisation, and then to the civil revolution that accompanied the fall of ‘Abbūd’s regime (1964), as well as to the employees’ demands for higher salaries to counter inflation, but also to their request that employees whom they perceived as non-Sudanese – Greeks, Syrians, Armenians, and Egyptian Copts – should be dismissed (and then replaced by “true” Sudanese men and women, according to this perspective). While the Sudanisation of jobs may have been justified in the name of economic nationalism, the author interprets this process as the manifestation of a racialised and gendered vision of who should hold senior positions in the bank, and as an expression of the economic entrenchment of the dominant elites.

Similarly, in his study of the Borgeig scheme in the 1940s, Enrico Ille explores collusion between colonial rulers and local elites, whose power had been consolidated with the turn to the “native administration” system, and who came to be the main economic winners of the scheme. The local population contributed very little to the running of the scheme, of which they were supposed to be the main beneficiaries, even in terms of labour. As they refused to work on it, the labour force had to be found elsewhere, and came to be made up of men who had been induced to work by varying degrees of coercion, from prison conscripts to “imported workmen” from inside and outside Sudan sent by other government departments.

By contrast, Barbara Casciarri explores urban identities in one of the oldest working-class neighbourhoods of Khartoum, al-Duyum al-Shargiyya, or Deim. She traces the history of the area from its construction during colonial times to the present day. She describes the socio-professional transformation of its inhabitants, dedicating considerable space to the voices and self-representations of the Dayāma, the inhabitants of Deim. These people were central actors in the powerful labour movement that developed in the late 1940s, but their ideological and social formation had begun much earlier. Being Dayāma means first of all being connected to this history of working-class resistance. At the same time, because of the historical connection between wage work, marginalised areas, and old slave reservoirs, this neighbourhood stands out as a profoundly multi-ethnic site, a feature the inhabit-

ants proudly embrace. Being Dayāma is an identity fashioned from a shared history of resistance not only against colonial rule, but also against Sudanese elites who claimed an “Arab” identity and connived with the colonial system and later with the successive authoritarian regimes. The Dayāma have been involved in an organised fashion in all the various civil revolutions up to the latest one in 2018–2019, which the author also includes in her analysis.

Finally, Mariam Sharif’s chapter covers another category of marginalised actors, that of professional women in the health sector living and working as midwives in the Nuba Mountains, one of the areas most hard-hit by Sudan’s civil wars (1955–1972 and 1983–2005). She explores the history of the profession since the 1970s and its evolution during the second phase of the civil war, the 2005 peace agreement, and the independence of the South in 2011. She also offers a careful analysis of the training, which was a blend of formal education, accumulated knowledge from past midwifery training systems, and communal knowledge. Thoroughly reported interviews likewise reveal how these workers developed strong professional identities and the pride they took in their work. Ultimately, Sharif explores how in the context of daunting structural constraints associated with the civil war such as a lack of basic medicines, the midwives developed creative practices and innovative methods to handle difficult deliveries. In this way, she demonstrates a point that is also made in Casciarri’s chapter: a situation of marginality and material constraints does not deter people’s agency, and should not prevent scholars from being sensitive to it. Residents of the Deims and Nuba midwives not only coped with difficult situations, but also developed powerful identities – urban and/or professional – that made them feel like and represent themselves as “ordinary heroes” who worked every day to bring about changes in the lives of Sudanese people through their militant or professional commitment. Thus, while the first two chapters of Part 5 describe different moments and actors in the construction of hegemonic elites, the two subsequent ones remind us that being at the margins is not a synonym for being passive subjects; on the contrary, it can generate proud, passionate, and powerful identities.

The chapters in Part 6 study the ways the Sudanese state has been produced, claimed, and contested on a daily basis by a variety of social actors, men and women alike. They include ruling elites such as military commanders, ideologues, and education officials; political activists from peripheralised areas; residents of popular neighbourhoods in Omdurman; and high school students. The authors adopt historical and sociological approaches to explore two eras of self-coined Islamic rule in Sudan: the Mahdiyya (1885–1898) and the *inqādh* regime (1989–2019) almost a century later, as well as a briefer era of parliamentary politics opened up by the 1964 revolution (1964–1969). The four chapters ask the same central question on slightly different terms: how have state institutions and ideologies been projected



on to society, and to what extent and in what ways have state institutions, practices, and discourses been incorporated by Sudanese social groups from various regional communities, generations, and classes?

Anaël Poussier's chapter seeks to understand the ways in which the Mahdī's *da'wa* resonated with Sudanese populations. Using state documents produced by the treasury in Tokar, the correspondence of Emir 'Uthmān Digna, and petitions sent to the provincial administration, he examines how Mahdist ideology shaped the lives of local communities in Eastern Sudan in the late 1880s and early 1890s. He argues that the Mahdī's egalitarian doctrine and call for social justice sustained popular mobilisation, structured the state administration, and was appropriated by ordinary members of the Mahdist community around Tokar. He also refutes the common vision of the supposed "corruption" of Mahdist principles under the rule of Khalifa 'Abdullāhi (1885–1898), showing their resilience after the Mahdī's death in June 1885. In so doing, Poussier nuances the British colonial depictions of the Khalifa's regime as an arbitrary power based exclusively on violence. His study explores how the uprooting of people and the collection of war booty respectively induced by *hijra* (migration to a Mahdist centre or community) and jihad led to the development of a system of resource redistribution among commanders and ordinary fighters. It sheds new light on the inner workings of the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan. The counting of fighters was crucial, as were state attempts at controlling the movements of men across large areas through forced migration (*tahjīr*) and the granting of *laissez-passer*. But the administration also needed to feed Mahdist fighters and their families who had lost their livelihoods as a result of resettlement, and therefore provided monthly allowances in the shape of grain, money, and clothes. The Mahdist local authorities shaped social life by regulating marriages, defining the status of female captives, and engaging in charity acts and burials, paying special attention to widows. They also settled disputes within the local community in Tokar. Yet these provincial authorities remained answerable to the Khalifa in Omdurman, who regularly sent delegates to the East.

Moritz A. Mihatsch studies three regional movements based in the Nuba Mountains, Darfur, and Eastern Sudan in the post-1964 revolutionary context in order to understand the post-colonial transformation of subjects into citizens. The central issue he tackles is the meaning of citizenship during the 1964–1969 parliamentary era. Drawing on personal interviews and some of the scarce published sources, Mihatsch traces the history of the General Union of the Nuba Mountains (GUN), the Darfur Development Front (DDF), and the Beja Congress. He argues that these organisations contributed towards carrying out the decolonisation process in Sudan's geographical peripheries because they increased the ability of individuals to exercise their legal rights as citizens in a democratic state, albeit a short-lived

one. Activists from the three movements were elected as deputies in the 1965 parliament, which helped them forward the interests of their constituencies. Although there were differences in terms of political strategy (the GUN and the Beja Congress ran as distinct parties in the elections, whereas the DDF sought to influence deputies who were members of other parties such as the Umma and the Communist Party), the three regional movements voiced similar demands. They requested some devolution of power to the provinces, opposed the phenomenon of “exported candidates” from Khartoum, and asked for state investments in their “underdeveloped” areas. Hence, the 1964 revolution opened up the possibility of new political imaginaries. Mihatsch’s study demonstrates how the inhabitants of regions characterised by high illiteracy rates began to claim a space in the state, contributing to a bottom-up process of state-building led by the first generation of Nuba, Darfuri, and Beja university graduates.

Moving to more recent times, the chapters by Iris Seri-Hersch and Lucie Revilla explore how power, knowledge, discipline, and social relations interacted with each other under the Islamist *inqādh* regime. Seri-Hersch tackles the nexus between schooling and violence in the so-called “transitional” era from the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) until the secession of South Sudan in 2011. These years were characterised by formal military appeasement – notwithstanding the bloody conflict in Darfur – and heightened political uncertainty. The chapter analyses a seemingly paradoxical subject that was taught in Sudanese high schools – military sciences (*‘ulūm ‘askariyya*) – at a time when the North and the South were supposed to have pacified their relations after decades of civil war. It sheds light on the ways the *inqādh* regime sought to produce and reproduce itself through the education of its prospective citizens. Al-Bashīr’s government strove to avoid the partitioning of the country by using ideological indoctrination, disciplinary control over bodies, and the recruitment of teenagers and young adults into the paramilitary and armed forces. Starting out from the observation that despite being a central tool in any peace-building process, education was totally absent from the CPA, the study assesses the significance of military sciences by linking it to the broader militarisation of education carried out by the regime from the early 1990s and to the authoritative nature of textbook discourse. Seri-Hersch argues that the course in military sciences sought to produce consent to instituted forms of violence by narratively dissociating war and violence, praising the role of the army in Sudanese history, and silencing information about the civil wars in the South and Darfur. She raises the strong connections between military instruction, Islamist worldviews, and Sudanese nationalism. However, implementation of the curriculum varied according to locations and teachers, as shown by interviews with ex-students. Rather than being passive, students – including girls – exercised some agency, for instance by avoiding “jihadi” songs.

Lucie Revilla unpacks the “civilisational project” (*al-mashrū‘ al-ḥaḍārī*) promoted by the state apparatus in the later years of al-Bashīr’s regime. Her chapter focuses on the social trajectory and political involvement of ordinary men and women who became affiliated with the ruling NCP at some point: members of popular committees (*lijān sha‘biyya*), volunteers in the popular and community police (*shurṭa sha‘biyya wa-mujtama‘iyya*), and members of the “native administration” (*idāra ahliyya*). Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two neighbourhoods of Omdurman (al-Fath 2 and al-Fitihab), the study examines how the NCP’s Islamist ideology materialised in the daily lives of the Sudanese popular classes, going beyond elitist readings of the *inqādh* regime. Revilla identifies the emergence of an intermediate “moral class” of Sudanese with migrant or nomadic backgrounds who were co-opted by the state’s *tamkīn* (empowerment) policy and who contributed to spreading Islamist ideals in their neighbourhoods. They received a religious education in *khalāwī* and universities that actively promoted gender segregation and the “Islamisation” of knowledge; they used to take part in state-sponsored Ramadan activities and circumcision ceremonies. Some obtained access to land ownership or became civil servants. In this way, formerly lower-class people benefitted from upward mobility, as they were appointed to senior positions in the state administration or the party’s apparatus. The chapter also brings out the diverse ways in which ordinary citizens appropriated, recast, and embodied “Islamist” moral values. The meanings associated with *multazim-a* (being engaged in, and committed to, the service of the local community and maintaining self-control), *tanwīr* (the duty to “enlighten” the masses through the implementation of the Public Order Laws), and *adab* (a type of civility based on rationality, cleanliness, and modesty) are all cases in point. Ultimately, Revilla argues that the *inqādh* regime did not entail a wholesale withdrawal of the state; rather, it expanded state power through a dense network of mass organisations with roots in the neighbourhoods. The “civilisational project” yielded mixed results after the overthrow of President al-Bashīr in April 2019, as former adherents of the regime began to espouse various positions: whereas some made efforts to distance themselves from the NCP or even joined pro-revolutionary forces, others expressed ambivalence or maintained loyalty to the fallen regime.

This book is at once the result of a multidisciplinary dialogue and an invitation to pursue further research on ordinariness, social interactions, and power relations in the making of modern Sudanese societies. We hope that it can inspire scholars to take up this challenge while also contributing to the structuration and visibility of Sudan Studies.

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Part 1: **Social History, Political Engagement  
and Archival Issues**



Yoshiko Kurita

## Chapter 1

# Re-examining the “Sources of the Sudanese Revolution”: Discussing the Social History of Sudan after the December 2018 Revolution

“Sources of the Sudanese revolution” is an expression used by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Nugud (Secretary-General of the Sudanese Communist Party from 1971 to 2012) in the 1990s. What he meant by this was the need to explore the historical roots of revolution: that is, the legacy of the Sudanese people’s struggle throughout history.<sup>1</sup> In the context of the present political situation in Sudan (the outbreak of the December Revolution in 2018, the fall of the Bashīr regime and the subsequent revolutionary developments, which are still under way), the question of the “roots of the Sudanese revolution” has obviously become very real and tangible, in the sense that we are witnessing new expressions of revolutionary energy by the Sudanese people on a daily basis. This chapter is an attempt to revisit the “sources of the Sudanese revolution” at this particular moment in time, based on this sense that we are witnessing a highly crucial stage in the struggle of the Sudanese people.

## Prologue: Social History Versus Political History?

When we talk of “social history”, we often imagine it to be in contrast with “political history”. But is this dichotomy between “social history” and “political history” relevant? This is the first point that must be re-examined before we begin our discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> This idea was expressed by Nugud in his writings in 1996. Needless to say, the concept of the “Sudanese Revolution” itself needs re-examination now, after the independence of South Sudan (2011), and we might talk instead about the sources of “Sudanese Revolutions”. Evidently, the concept of the “Sudanese Revolution” was based on the vision of Sudanese Marxist thinkers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who, while admitting the existence of different sources of revolutionary inspiration, were still determined to achieve a single “Sudanese Revolution” in the future, which was to be the culmination of all the previous revolutionary experiences in Sudan. The same idea is revealed in the title of a well-known document issued by the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) in the 1960s, *al-Mārksiyya wa-Qaḍāyā al-Thawra al-Sūdāniyya* (Marxism and the Problems of the Sudanese Revolution). See *al-Ḥizb al-Shuyūʿī al-Sūdānī* (1967) 2008.

In fact, if we go back to E.P. Thompson's classical work on social history *The Making of the English Working Class* (Thompson [1963] 1991), we see that it was a study of the radical tradition of the English masses in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Again, if we examine the preeminent works by French social historians such as Georges Lefebvre ([1947] 1989) and Henri Lefebvre (1965), we note that they are in-depth studies on the French Revolution, as well as the Paris Commune, among other topics. When we go back to the starting point of social history, therefore, we find that the original intention was to examine the "historical roots of revolution". Social history started as a "social history of revolution", so to speak, and was therefore very radical and political from the beginning.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, when we come to the case of Sudan (especially if we take into account the significance of what has been happening in Sudan since December 2018), we sense that the issue – that is, the need to read social history as a "study of revolution" – is even more actual and crucial, because what happened in Sudan in 2018–2019 was truly significant and impressive: ordinary people overthrew one of the most dictatorial and oppressive regimes in modern Africa and the Middle East.

We might examine its importance in comparison with the 1964 "October Revolution", or even with the Mahdist movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1881–1898). The October Revolution has often been described as the "most important event in the political history of modern Sudan after the Mahdist movement."<sup>3</sup> If we compare the ongoing revolution (the December 2018 Revolution) with the October Revolution, however, we could argue that while the October Revolution was a ground-breaking event in Sudanese history, the current revolution is even more impressive because of its scale and the perseverance of the people, and because of the greater difficulty of the circumstances surrounding it. General 'Abbūd's regime (1958–1964), dictatorial as it was, was not as oppressive and inhuman as that of 'Umar al-Bashīr's National Islamic Front (NIF) regime. Also, in the 1960s, the international conjuncture surrounding revolutions and national liberation movements in the third world in general was more favourable, while the current Sudanese revolution has taken

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2 Needless to say, this is not to deny the other important aspects observed in the course of the development of "social history", such as its interest in unchanging (rather than changing) elements in society, and hence, the far-sightedness, so to speak, of its perspective, and its interest in family history, demography, gender, mentality and so on. It is noteworthy, however, that even in these cases, the attitude of social historians, who apparently avoid "politics" in a narrow sense, is based on an expression of a desire for an in-depth grasp of the meaning of the course of human history in the long-term, and is often based on a radical political consciousness.

3 See *al-Ḥizb al-Shuyū'ī al-Sūdānī* 2010: 30. This remark by the SCP is interesting in itself, as it reveals that the Mahdist movement, religiously motivated as it was, has been highly esteemed by the Sudanese Marxists as an anti-imperialist struggle.

place in a totally isolated, and even desperate, situation. This revolution might therefore be even more significant than the October Revolution, and it may be the “most important political event in Sudan” since the Mahdist movement.

There is also something very special and unique about it, in the sense that it is literally “the people’s revolution”, a revolution by ordinary people. It may be true that the key concepts of the revolution such as “political general strike” (*iḍrāb siyāsī*) had already been advocated by eminent revolutionary thinkers such as ‘Abd al-Khāliq Maḥjūb (1927–1971) and his colleagues in the Sudanese Communist Party, and again, the idea of “New Sudan” based on citizenship was presented by John Garang (1945–2005) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM). What is remarkable, however, is that in the course of the current revolution, the heritage of all these “revolutionary predecessors” and their experiences, aspirations and ideas were suddenly revived, lived and shared by ordinary Sudanese people. Watching scenes from Sudan on television during the revolution (in which demonstrators raised their slogans proudly, were interviewed by foreign news reporters and explained their position calmly and convincingly), one had an impression that every participant had suddenly begun to talk and behave as if he or she were ‘Abd al-Khāliq Maḥjūb, John Garang, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Nugud or Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm (1930–2017, a prominent member of the SCP and the first female MP in Sudan). It is as if everyone suddenly reached the stage of revolutionary thinkers, and consequently what had been advocated by Maḥjūb and Garang became common sense for ordinary people. Such a phenomenon, rare as it might be, can sometimes take place, especially in the time of a great revolution, we might assume.

This reminds us, incidentally, of an expression used at the time of the Mahdist movement, that everyone who participated in this movement had the “*rutba* (status) of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī” in the eyes of God (Abū Salīm 1990: 338). ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī (1078?–1166) is a highly revered figure in Sufi circles, being generally regarded as the founder of the oldest Sufi *ṭarīqa* in the Muslim world, the Qādiriyya. In the context of the Sudanese Mahdist cosmology, al-Jilānī functioned as an intermediary between Prophet Muḥammad and the Mahdī, always present at the spiritual meetings (*ḥaḍra*) the Mahdī had with the Prophet. Still, in the course of the Mahdist movement, there was a sense that “everyone was ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī”.<sup>4</sup>

Something similar happened in Sudan in 2019, when everyone was ‘Abd al-Khāliq Maḥjūb, John Garang, or Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm. What mattered now was the feel-

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4 On the significance attached to al-Jilānī in the context of the Mahdist ideology, see also Abū Salīm 1990: 77–81. The Mahdist official uniform, the patched jacket, is also connected with al-Jilānī’s image, as we will discuss later.

ings and actions of ordinary women and men, and not of the traditional political leadership. In this sense, too, we might argue that the idea of social history, which explores the experiences and aspirations of ordinary people, has become something very actual and crucial.

## I Glimpses of the “Sources of the Sudanese Revolution”

Having emphasised the importance of exploring the popular roots of revolution, I will now offer evidence from the historical experiences of the Sudanese people and their significance. Needless to say, what follows is not meant to be a comprehensive survey, just glimpses drawn from some potentially interesting examples.

### 1 *Ṭabaqāt Wad Ḍayfallāh* as Records of “Everyday Ways of Resistance” in Pre-Modern Sudan

As we know well, *Ṭabaqāt Wad Ḍayfallāh* (*Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt fī Khuṣūṣ al-Awliyā’ wa-l-Ṣāliḥīn wa-l-‘Ulamā’ wa-l-Shu’arā’ fī al-Sūdān*), which was compiled by Muḥammad al-Nūr bin Ḍayfallāh around 1805, is the most essential reading for the study of pre-modern Sudanese society (Ḍayfallāh 1985). Containing biographies of the prominent Sufis (270 entries) who lived in the days of the Funj Sultanate (from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century), the book is rich with information about the social and economic situation in pre-modern Sudan as well, and has been extensively used and analysed by historians, both Sudanese and non-Sudanese (Hasan [1967] 1973; McHugh 1994).<sup>5</sup>

When we examine this very famous text from the point of view of social history, we discover that it is about the “Sufi way of resistance”, according to which, for example, Sufis made a “gesture” of disobedience towards the Funj ruling elites, or acted as an “intermediary” (*shafā’a* or *ḥajz*) between the local people and the Funj authority, thereby protecting the rights of the people. We find that the decisive factor underlying this whole process was hunger (famine), as demonstrated by an anecdote according to which a certain distinguished Sufi turned the bark of a date tree into

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5 The importance of the *Ṭabaqāt* as an indispensable source of the nature of Sudanese society used to be understood by British colonial officials as well, as Harold MacMichael’s work reveals (MacMichael [1922] 1967). The significance of Sudanese studies by colonial administrators will be discussed later.

silver in order to save the people.<sup>6</sup> Another Sufi, when asked by a visitor “which is the greatest name of Allah?”, took him to the kitchen, where food was being prepared for the poor.<sup>7</sup>

Another important point is that women played a crucial role in pressuring Sufi sheikhs and forcing them to do something about social justice. There are interesting anecdotes in the *Ṭabaqāt* in which women protest against social injustice (lack of food, heavy taxation and the gap between the classes, especially in the time of famine), even by insulting and provoking the sheikhs, and succeed in pressuring them to show a gesture of “a Sufi way of resistance”<sup>8</sup> (see also the chapter of Amel Osman Hamed in this volume).

## 2 The Emergence of the Modern Sudanese State as a Colonial State and the Beginning of Popular Protests: the Mahdist Movement

The geopolitical entity known as “modern Sudan” was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of its invasion and conquest by the Ottoman-Egyptian regime of Mehmet Ali and his successors (*Turkiyya* in Sudanese Arabic, 1820–1881). It is remarkable that as soon as this colonial state came into being, there was an outburst of popular protests against colonial oppression and exploitation, of which the Mahdist movement was the most important and successful. According to Muḥammad Sa’id al-Gaddāl, a Sudanese historian who published several important works on the subject, the Mahdiyya was the first fully-fledged revolutionary movement in modern Sudan (al-Gaddāl 1985, 1986, 1993).

We cannot analyse all the aspects of the Mahdist movement, which are complicated and manifold, in this chapter, but it is impressive to observe how it revitalised the “Sufi way of resistance”. The Mahdists adopted the “*jubba muraqqa’a*” (patched jacket), which had been the symbol of asceticism, poverty and equality in traditional

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6 An anecdote concerning Shaykh Muḥammad b. ʿĪsā b. Ṣāliḥ al-Ja’lī al-Bidayrī “Suwār al-Dhahab”, no. 230 (Ḍayfallāh 1985: 348).

7 An anecdote about Shaykh Idrīs (great grandfather of Shaykh Muḏḏawī b. Barakāt b. Ḥamad b. Idrīs), no. 223 (Ḍayfallāh 1985: 361).

8 It is reported that, when a disciple of Shaykh Idrīs b. Arbāb, who was on an errand for his shaykh, tried to buy a sheep from a reluctant village woman, she refused, and when he insisted, she protested, saying: “Are the strong grabbing from the weak? Take it away from me, but I won’t sell it to you.” Apparently, this shocked the shaykh, who had intended to buy this sheep to feast his guests (Ḍayfallāh 1985: 58–59). Again, when it happened that on the inauguration day of Shaykh al-Gaddāl as the *khalīfa* of his order, tax collectors entered the village and began levying animals, a woman came to the shaykh, who was dressed for his inauguration ceremony, to protest, mocking him, which forced him to take an action to resist the tax collectors (Ḍayfallāh 1985: 81–82).



Sufism, as their uniform. As we have seen, the image of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī was revitalised and used as a source of inspiration.<sup>9</sup>

The Mahdist movement not only revitalised the image of the traditional “Sufi way of resistance”, which goes back to the days of the Funj Sultanate, but also appealed to a more “Islamist” discourse, so to speak, connected to the waves of Islamic reformism that were prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Middle East, frequently invoking concepts such as Sharia (Islamic law) and *bid’a* (heretical innovation). On closer examination, however, we find that these concepts also were reinterpreted and given specific implications or concrete content, reflecting the social problems caused by colonial oppression in 19<sup>th</sup> century Sudan. For example, in the context of the Sudanese Mahdist discourse, the most typical case of *bid’a* practiced by the Turkiyya regime was the levying of *dīqniyya* (a poll tax) in the Western provinces, which was much resented by the local population (Abū Salīm 1990: 180–181).<sup>10</sup> Again, even the concept of *hijra* (immigration) – the *hijra* to the Mahdī – which was of the utmost importance in the Mahdist movement, can be interpreted as an extension of a pattern of popular reactions towards colonial exploitation that were actually observed in Northern villages many years before the advent of the Mahdist movement: people were beginning to flee from their villages to avoid the heavy taxes imposed on *sawāqī* (waterwheels, sing. *sāqiya*) by the Turkiyya government.

For the purposes of making a comparison with the current revolution in Sudan, a more impressive aspect may perhaps be that the Mahdist leadership was very conscious from the outset of the importance of alliances (or coalitions) between different social and regional forces. Thus, for example, the Mahdi made a *hijra* to the Nuba Mountains in the earliest stage of his movement. He instigated Southerners such as the Dinka to drive the “Turks” away from their land, promising them

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9 For the significance of the patched jacket (*jubba muraqqa’a*) in the context of the Mahdist ideology, see the description of a spiritual meeting (*ḥaḍra*) in which, curiously enough, al-Jilānī himself expounds on the issue (Abū Salīm 1990: 80–81). It is interesting to note that, here, in the course of the *ḥaḍra*, one of the Mahdī’s disciples (the Khalifa ‘Abdullāhi) complains to al-Jilānī that the *jubba muraqqa’a* is now “denied and shied away from” by the people. For the original implications of the *jubba muraqqa’a* and the changing attitudes of the people in pre-modern Sudan, see also Ḍayfallāh 1985: 176, 193, 218. It reveals that while the patched jacket was the symbol of asceticism and stood for poverty and aloofness from worldly affairs, it subsequently came to be associated with somewhat negative connotations, and was even disdained, especially by the wealthier Sufi “establishment” such as the Shādhiliyya shaykhs.

10 While the official position of the Turkiyya government was that the *dīqniyya* (poll tax), which was mainly imposed on the nomadic populations in Western provinces such as Kordofan, was not *jizya* (a tax levied on non-Muslims, *dhimmi*, in accordance with Islamic law), the Mahdists considered it as such, and hence condemned it, arguing that the imposition of *jizya* on Muslims was *bid’a*.

self-rule in the future.<sup>11</sup> The choice of four *khulafā'* (“caliphs”, sing. *khalīfa*) is very impressive in itself. One of them, Khalīfa Muḥammad Sharif, a cousin of the Mahdī, was from the North (*awlād al-balad*), but the rank of the first Khalīfa was given to Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi, a Baggara from Darfur province. Another was Khalīfa ‘Alī wad Ḥilū, from the nomadic tribes in the Gezira. There was even an attempt to recruit a *khalīfa* from Libya in view of the future campaign to liberate Egypt from British occupation. The existence of a Darfur factor, and of conscious efforts to make an alliance between different “marginalised areas”,<sup>12</sup> is remarkable.

The idea of alliances between peoples of different marginalised areas actually dates back to the 1860s, as demonstrated by the famous mutiny by *jihādiyya* (slave soldiers) in Kassala in 1864–1865. It is reported that the mutineers organised themselves into four different groups: “Dinka”, “Nuba”, “Fur” and “Muwalladīn” (that is, people from the marginalised areas brought up in the North) (Shuqayr [1903] 1981: 240–241).<sup>13</sup> This bears a striking similarity to the SPLM.<sup>14</sup>

It is significant that from the 19<sup>th</sup> century – that is, from the very outset of the emergence of modern Sudan as a colonial state – the alliances between different social and regional forces were regarded as a “cornerstone” of the revolution, and great importance was attached to them.

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11 For the initial Mahdist attitude towards the Dinka, see Shuqayr (1903) 1981: 411. This attitude seems to have been welcomed by the population of the South, and they actually rose up against the “Turks” (Shuqayr [1903] 1981: 414).

12 As we will see, it was in the course of the popular struggle against the dictatorial regime in the 1990s that the concept of “marginalised areas” (*al-manātiq al-muhammasha*) finally crystallised. It was as a result of intellectual efforts, first by the Sudanese communists in the 1970s and 1980s and then by the SPLM in the 1990s, that the question of unbalanced development (that is the gap between “the centre” and “marginalised areas”) was understood to be one of the fundamental problems of the Sudanese state. In retrospect, however, we see that the question of the growing gap and the contrast between the centre (the North, and especially Khartoum as a stronghold of colonial administration) and the other less developed (or underdeveloped) areas (such as the Western provinces, which had been conquered more recently, and whose populations were socially more nomadic) in Sudan as a colonial state had been recognised from an earlier period, and people were conscious of the problem. The choice of *khulafā'* from different areas and social groups is in itself a reflection of this awareness.

13 For the mutiny by the *jihādiyya* soldiers in Kassala, see also Sikainga 2000.

14 On the nature of the SPLM and its composition (the existence of battalions based in different areas such as the South, the Nuba Mountains and Darfur), see Garang 1987. The significance of the idea of the “New Sudan” advocated by the SPLM in the 1990s will be discussed later.

### 3 The Significance of the 1924 Revolution (the White Flag League Movement)

As for the 1924 Revolution, a number of scholars, both Sudanese and non-Sudanese, have made considerable contributions (Bakhīt 1972; Abdin 1985; Kurita 1989, 1997; Vezzadini 2015). We will confine ourselves here to pointing out some of its most conspicuous aspects.

One of the most interesting of these is the insight shown by its leadership into the *regional* context surrounding the movement, and a sort of strategic thinking in the idea of a “joint struggle” by the people of neighbouring countries. Thus, the White Flag League (which played a central role in the 1924 Revolution) simultaneously advocated the causes of Sudanese nationalism and the “unity of the Nile Valley” (unity between Egypt and Sudan), in view of the fact that both Egypt and Sudan were under British occupation and were the victims of British imperialism.

This idea was eventually inherited and developed by the communist movement in the 1940s, when young communists in Egypt and Sudan worked in close cooperation, and the slogan of “*kifāh mushtarak*” (the joint struggle) of the Egyptian and Sudanese peoples was adopted by the Egyptian Movement of National Liberation (EMNL). The young Sudanese communists who were active in the EMNL subsequently founded its counterpart, the Sudanese Movement for National Liberation (SMNL), today’s Sudanese Communist Party.<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note in this context that the founding members of the SCP, such as ‘Abd al-Khāliq Maḥjūb, al-Tijānī al-Ṭayyib Bābikr and Khālida Zāhir, were the generation of sons and daughters of the 1924 revolutionaries. A sense of continuity with the 1924 Revolution can be observed among them, especially in the case of al-Tijānī al-Ṭayyib.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly enough, however, sympathy between Egyptian and Sudanese revolutionaries and attempts at cooperation had existed even in the 1880s at the time of the Mahdist movement. It is reported that when Alexandria was bombarded by the British in the course of the ‘Urabist Revolution in Egypt, the people of Sawakin (which was also a port city) were deeply concerned. There was an attempt at solidarity with the ‘Urabists on the part of local population, led by ‘Uthmān Digna, who was later to become a famous Mahdist commander. For their part, ‘Urabist intel-

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<sup>15</sup> On the history of the SCP, see Kurita 2019. For the genesis of the concept of the “joint struggle (*kifāh mushtarak*) of the Egyptian and Sudanese peoples” advocated by the EMNL, see al-Sa’id 1987: 737–738.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Tijānī al-Ṭayyib Bābikr, a leading communist activist, was a son of al-Ṭayyib Bābikr, who had been a member of the White Flag League and was an active participant in the 1924 Revolution, becoming the leader of the League in Shendi. For al-Tijānī’s esteem for the role of his father’s generation in the national liberation struggle, see his defence before the military court held in 1982 during the Nimayri period (Bābikr 1982: 26–27).

lectuals such as Ya‘qūb Ṣannū‘, an Egyptian Jewish journalist better known as Abū Nazzāra, expressed support for ‘Uthmān Digna when, in the course of the Mahdist movement, its military activities in Eastern Sudan intensified in 1883–1884.<sup>17</sup>

The 1924 Revolution is also important because it was the first one in which educated young “professionals” played a leading role. The so-called “effendis” (government officials and army officers), who played an essential role in the 1924 Revolution, were the precursors of the young professionals (lawyers, doctors, engineers and university professors) who have played a central role in subsequent Sudanese revolutions such as the October Revolution and the December 2018 Revolution.

#### 4 Struggles after Independence

Sudan has also witnessed popular struggles and revolutions since independence. This is because the Sudanese state’s colonial structures – an oppressive and undemocratic state apparatus coupled with unbalanced economic development – were inherited, and even reproduced after independence. In this sense, the Sudanese people’s struggle for the democratisation of the Sudanese state can be regarded as an extension of their national liberation struggle.

When we examine these revolutions, we need to pay special attention to the role of the working masses (workers and peasants), such as the railway workers and the tenants of the Gezira cotton plantation. Ahmad Sikainga’s work on Atbara is important in this context. Whereas researchers in the field of Middle Eastern Studies in the 1990s tended to concentrate on the so-called “Islamist” movements as the only meaningful and successful mass movements in this region, Sikainga stressed that even in Middle Eastern and Muslim countries like Sudan, secular and democratic social forces such as workers played important political and social roles (Sikainga 2002: 177–179).

The culmination of the popular struggle after independence was, of course the October Revolution in 1964. While the most comprehensive narrative of the October Revolution was produced by the Sudanese Communist Party, its name *Thawrat al-Shab* (“The People’s Revolution”) points to the fact that the revolution was not the product of a specific political or social group, but rather the result of a continuous struggle by a variety of social forces that comprised nearly all the strata of Sudanese society: workers, peasants, professionals, students and women (al-Ḥizb al-Shuyū‘ī

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<sup>17</sup> For the interaction between Sawakin and Alexandria during the ‘Urabist revolution, see Jackson 1926: 23–24. For the positive attitude shown by Ya‘qūb Ṣannū‘ towards the Sudanese Mahdist movement, see, for example, Abū Nazzāra, 3 March 1883; and 27 October 1883.

al-Sūdānī 1964). Although the revolution itself took place in October 1964, it had actually started earlier, because it was the outcome of a struggle that had been constantly under way for many years since independence in 1956. Two decades after the October Revolution, the *intifāda* (popular uprising) of 1985 took place; again, this was the result of many years of struggle against the dictatorial Nimayrī regime (Niblock 1987; Fawzy-Rossano [1978] 1981; Berridge 2015).

## II The Remarkable Features of the December 2018 Revolution

The most striking feature of the December 2018 Revolution is that the Bashīr regime, which was one of the most oppressive regimes in the Middle East, with its overwhelming state apparatus for violence and suppression, was overthrown by the ordinary people, by common citizens, notably young people and women. This was a highly impressive and positive phenomenon, but it might at the same time have been a result of the fact that the country's traditional political leadership had been weakened and then destroyed by the Bashīr regime throughout its 30-year dictatorial rule, and had virtually disappeared. It was because of this disappearance of traditional leadership that ordinary citizens were finally compelled to confront the state directly. This was, therefore, simultaneously a very remarkable and very desperate situation. Paradoxically, since the state had a monopoly of all the military and security resources, non-violence became the only weapon left to ordinary citizens. A parallel might be drawn here with Gandhi's pacifist strategy in the anti-colonial struggle of the Indian people; since the colonial state monopolised all means of violence and held too much power, and there was therefore no room for an armed struggle, non-violence became the only alternative for the ordinary people under colonial rule.

Both young people and women played conspicuous roles in the movement. As to why women were so active, and why they rose up and took part in politics, it was firstly because they had no choice, considering the dire economic situation and the hardships in daily life caused by the Bashīr regime's policies. As Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm used to say, "politics enters the kitchen" whether you like it or not. Politics do not leave you alone.<sup>18</sup> Then there was the question of the so-called "Islamist" ideology and "Islamist" values advocated by the regime, which especially targeted women and violated their human rights. The Bashīr regime oppressed every citizen

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<sup>18</sup> An expression used in her speech at a political meeting in 1987 (during the democratic period after the 1985 *intifāda*) at Khartoum University, in an address to students. For the experiences of Fāṭima A. Ibrāhīm, both as a pioneer woman activist and as a leading member of the SCP, see Ibrāhīm n.d.

and violated the rights of every Sudanese, but, as half of the population, whose rights were especially violated in the name of “Islam”, it was women who became most keenly conscious of the oppressive nature of the NIF regime.

Women are also important as the mothers and sisters of the *shuhadā'* (“martyrs”) – the victims of the dictatorship who had been arrested, tortured and killed by the Bashīr regime. In the course of the revolution, the families of the *shuhadā'* (such as the victims of the violent suppression in September 2013) took an active part in demonstrations. It is interesting to observe certain similarities with Latin America, where in countries like Chile, for example, the families of the victims who were oppressed by the Pinochet regime have played an important role in the democratisation process. Women played their roles as the mothers and sisters of political victims, but in the course of the current revolution women themselves eventually became victims, as many were, as we know, killed, or beaten, tortured and sexually abused.<sup>19</sup>

Another important point that has been revealed in the course of the revolution is that the fate of the “marginalised areas” such as Darfur, the Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile, and that of the popular struggle in the centre (Khartoum) are now inseparable. For 30 years, the Bashīr regime suppressed democratic movement in the centre and, at the same time, violently repressed the people of marginalised and underdeveloped areas such as the South, the Nuba Mountains and Darfur, waging war on these areas and carrying out genocide. It was as a result of this policy of the Bashīr regime that the fate of the marginalised areas and the democratic movement in the centre ultimately became inseparable, as the same forces that committed genocide in Darfur were now killing demonstrators on the streets of Khartoum.<sup>20</sup> Violence has therefore now reached Khartoum. Darfur and other battlefields of the so-called “civil wars” in the marginalised areas have now all been brought back into the centre, Khartoum. For this reason it was inevitable that in the course of the revolution, the call for democracy and the call for peace were one and the same. One of the most popular slogans during demonstrations was “*ḥurriyya, salām, 'adl ijtimā'ī*” (“Freedom, Peace, Social Justice”). As the “Declaration of Freedom and Change” signed in January 2019 made it clear, the main purpose of the revolution was to stop all the “civil wars” in Sudan (Sudanese Professionals Association 2019). This shows that experiences of war and genocide are important sources of revolution, but perhaps this is nothing new.

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<sup>19</sup> In the course of the bloody suppression on 3 June 2019, women were especially exposed to excessive violence. See Association of Sudanese Lawyers & Legal Practitioners in the UK 2019.

<sup>20</sup> In addition to the atrocities committed against the protesters by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF, *ex-janjawīd*) in June 2019 (Rābiṭat al-Muḥāmin wa-l-Qanūniyyīn al-Sūdāniyyīn fī Bariṭānyā 2019), it was reported that the *janjawīd* were actively involved in the bloody suppression of popular demonstrations on the streets of Khartoum in September 2013.

Since it has now been more than 100 years after the Mahdist movement, it is difficult to imagine the feelings of the people who took part in it, but if we look closely, it strikes us that the situation was just the same. The history of the Turkiyya in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was one of colonial conquests: the North was conquered in 1820–1821, the Nuba Mountains (South Kordofan) and the South were invaded and finally, in the 1870s, Darfur was first conquered by al-Zubayr Pasha and eventually officially incorporated into the territories of the Turkiyya. The Mahdist movement started at precisely this point. Let us ask ourselves and try to understand what the experiences of the Sudanese people were throughout all these eventful years of colonial conquests in different parts of the country. What were the experiences of Khalifa ‘Abdullāhi? Why did the peoples of the Western provinces participate in the Mahdist movement and migrate all the way to Khartoum to take part in the siege of the city?

In the case of the 1924 Revolution as well, we must pay more attention to the meaning of the series of military campaigns in Sudan during the early days of the Condominium. This was by no means a peaceful period. Military campaigns against local protests were going on continuously in areas such as the Nuba Mountains (for example, the uprising led by Feki ‘Alī) and the South, and Darfur was re-conquered in 1916 as a result of a military operation against its last sultan, ‘Alī Dīnār, which can also be seen as part of the First World War.<sup>21</sup> So we might pose such questions as: what did ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, the leader of the White Flag League in the 1924 revolution, witness in the Nuba Mountains, Darfur and other areas when he was serving there as an army officer? What were his feelings as both a Sudanese and a member of the colonial army at the same time?

### III Images of “Sudanese Society” Contested

In the conference that formed the basis of this book, we addressed the topic of “Sudanese society” (*al-mujtama‘ al-sūdānī*), and in this chapter I have chosen to discuss the “Sudanese revolution”. Needless to say, however, we are faced with a fundamental question: is there such thing as Sudanese society? And this gives rise to another question: is there such a thing as a “Sudanese revolution”?

We must start from the basic fact that modern “Sudan” was created, as we have seen, as a result of colonial invasion and conquest. Sudan came into being as a colonial state, and is therefore by definition artificial, lacking in unity and both politically and economically unbalanced. At the same time, however, although Sudan

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21 On the series of military actions carried out against the peoples of the “marginalised areas” in the early Condominium period, see Daly 1986. In the case of the South, especially, see Johnson 1994.

came into being as a colonial state, there have been continuous efforts and struggles to build a democratic “Sudanese nation (*umma sūdāniyya*) or “Sudanese society”, which is not – and cannot be – homogeneous, but is based on the concept of citizenship (that is, it is open to everyone, irrespective of race, religion and gender), democracy and justice.

The concept of the “Sudanese nation” as advocated during the 1924 Revolution might be regarded as an example of such an effort. While the British colonial administration was already beginning to introduce a divide and rule policy based on the dichotomy between “Arabs” and “blacks”, and trying to deny the existence of a Sudanese nation, the participants in the 1924 Revolution sought to overcome this dichotomy, regarding themselves only as “Sudanese”.<sup>22</sup> The leader of the White Flag League, ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, whose mother was a Dinka, was in a sense the embodiment of this sort of Sudanese nationalism.<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note in this context that the famous book by Ḥasan Najīla, *Malāmiḥ min al-Mujtama‘ al-Sūdānī* (Glimpses of Sudanese Society), is in effect essentially dedicated to the memory of the 1924 revolution and a homage to the martyrs to the ideal of a democratic Sudanese nation.<sup>24</sup> The vision of the “New Sudan” (*al-Sūdān al-jadīd*) advocated by the SPLM and later adopted by other democratic forces in Sudan can be regarded as another example of this effort.<sup>25</sup>

If we become aware of the existence of the ideological struggles over “what is Sudan” and “what is the nature of Sudanese society”, we discover that even academic knowledge about Sudanese society (or societies in Sudan) inevitably has its own political implications and has played a role in the colonial context. Anthropology in particular has been in a rather sensitive position, because while anthropologists conventionally tended to focus on the study of traditional societies and traditional social institutions such as “tribes”, their studies sometimes served as a tool of the “indirect rule” and “native administration” policies introduced by colonialism.<sup>26</sup>

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22 When the participants in the revolution were asked about their *jins* (race) during their interrogation in prison, they initially tried to reply that they were only “Sudanese”. See al-Sayyid 1970: 59.

23 On the concept of “Sudanese nation” as expressed in the course of the 1924 revolution, the nature of the White Flag League and the social background of its leader, ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, see Kurita 1989, 1997.

24 See Najīla (1959) 1972. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm (‘Abd al-Raḥīm 1952) is another instance of a historian who expressed an interest in writing the social history of Sudan.

25 It is noteworthy that the concept of the “New Sudan” initially advocated by the SPLM was later also adopted during the struggle against the Bashīr regime by political forces in the North, and became the official policy of the National Democratic Alliance. See Garang 1987; National Democratic Alliance 1995.

26 On the subject of the subtle relations between anthropologists and colonial administrations, the case of Edward E. Evans-Prichard has been analysed in some detail by Douglas Johnson (especially in



After independence, however, some Sudanese anthropologists became aware of the danger of this colonial aspect of their own discipline, and produced works – especially in the 1970s – that analysed “tribal” societies in depth, radically deconstructing the very concept of the tribe (see Ahmad 1974).<sup>27</sup>

The colonial and reactionary tendency to invoke “traditional” social institutions such as “tribes”, arguing that they are the essence of “traditional Sudanese society”, still persists today. If we look for an example from among the most recent political developments since the outbreak of the present revolution, we might even find one in the 2019 Constitutional Document. Its Article 23:5 stresses the importance of representing the interests of “*mukawwināt al-mujtama’ al-sūdānī*” (components of Sudanese society) such as “*al-ṭuruq al-ṣūfiyya wa-l-idārāt al-ahliyya*” (Sufi orders and native administrations [tribes]) in Sudanese politics.<sup>28</sup>

#### IV A Social History of Counter-Revolution

At the beginning of this chapter, I pointed out that social history began as a “social history of revolution” and stressed its innately political nature, but here I should also stress another point: the necessity for a social history of “counter-revolution”, namely historical studies on the social roots and backgrounds of counter-revolutions. E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* is a masterpiece of the social history of revolution, but it also deals with the question of “counter-revolution”. Examining the nature of Methodism, Thompson revealed how the advent of this religious sect, which became active in early 19<sup>th</sup> century England, can be regarded as a sort of counter-revolution against democratic movements like Chartism.

If we wish to explore the possibilities of a “social history of counter-revolution” in the case of Sudan, following Thompson’s approach, it might be meaningful to analyse the National Islamic Front, for example, or the question of *ṭā’ifiyya* (sectarianism) from this point of view.<sup>29</sup>

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terms of Evans-Prichard’s attitude towards C.A. Willis, a British colonial official). The career of H.A. MacMichael, who was a colonial official and an “expert” on Arab tribes in Sudan (see MacMichael [1922] 1967), is another interesting case.

<sup>27</sup> For a more recent attempt to analyse the nature of “tribe” and its political and social function in Sudan from a Marxist viewpoint, see Khidr 2016.

<sup>28</sup> See “al-Wathīqa al-Dustūriyya li-l-Fatra al-Intiqāliyya li-Sanat 2019” 2019: 15–16.

<sup>29</sup> On the history of the Muslim Brothers in Sudan and the ideas of Dr. Ḥasan al-Turābī, see Aḥmad 1982; El-Affendi 1991. While these works tend to concentrate on conveying the thoughts and ideas advocated by Islamists and the history of the Islamist organisations as explained by

If we want to go deeper, perhaps we need to examine the “roots of counter-revolution” that exist in the very heart of a revolution (or somewhere very close), because if one really wants to destroy a revolution, it must be done not from the outside, but from within, from its very base, from where the social and economic crisis exists in its most condensed form. In the case of Sudan, we see that the condition of the “marginalised areas” and the social forces connected with these areas can be crucial factors, both in a positive and negative sense. For example, is it not possible to study a person like “Ḥemēdtī” (Muḥammad Ḥamdān Dagolō) – the *janjawīd* leader, who now leads the Rapid Support Forces and is a member of the military council – from the perspective of social history? A study of Ḥemēdtī, who is of Baggara origin in the West, a Rizaygat, and has quite unexpectedly come to play a decisive role in central politics in Sudan, might prove quite interesting, and may shed new light on the question of who Khalifa ‘Abdullāhi was.

Again, we might examine the importance and (possible) danger of the armed movements in marginalised areas. Although the resistance by the people of these areas is quite justified and they have been playing a positive role in the revolutionary process, there are also risks, since history teaches us that these movements often develop their own logic as armed groups, are easily manipulated by regional or global actors and sometimes show separatist tendencies, eventually destroying the unity of Sudan. This is in contrast with the importance of *unarmed* movements by the people of marginalised areas, who in spite of oppression by the central government, have chosen not to take up arms, but to struggle in nonviolent ways, in alliance with democratic forces in the centre.

Finally, if we want to consider a “social history of counter-revolution”, we must examine regional and global contexts as well. I will give some examples. If we are to examine the nature of NIF as a case study of “counter-revolution”, we must try to locate our analysis within the regional context as well. This is because, as we know well, the emergence of this sort of “Islamist” force is not an isolated phenomenon in Sudan, but was part of similar developments observed in the Middle East in the 1960s and 1970s. We must therefore pay attention to the dynamics of revolution and counter-revolution in the Middle East as a whole.

Another example is the question of the colonial roots of the Arab *janjawīd*, which is a different topic, but one that might be of interest. Even when we are dealing with an apparently local phenomenon like the *janjawīd*, we are sometimes surprised to find out that this form of mobilisation of tribal militia was initially tried out by the British as well, and thus has a colonial background. In the course of the Nyala upris-

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them, we might need to make more effort to locate these discourses in the context of the current Sudanese political map.

ing in 1921 (led by the Feki Suhaynī), the British colonial authorities mobilised “Arab friendlies” under the command of the Taaisha and the Beigo tribal leaders, supplying them with “tea and sugar” to keep them awake during the anticipated attacks. Of course, this is not directly connected with the current *janjawīd*, but it reminds us that the *janjawīd* is not something new that was invented by an uncivilised African dictatorship like the Bashīr regime, but that the same method was tried by the colonial administration as well.<sup>30</sup>

We might also pay attention to the phenomenon of “administrative pilgrimages” (an expression initially used by Benedict Anderson) of colonial officials and hence that of the transmission of counter-revolutionary measures in the empire. Reading *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* by Ilan Pappé, an Israeli historian, we are surprised by the rather unexpected information that the Haganah (the main pre-state Zionist militia, which played a major role in what Pappé described as the “ethnic cleansing” of Palestine in 1948) was initially organised and trained by a British officer called Wingate. This was not Reginald Wingate himself, but a son of his cousin, Orde Charles Wingate, who had also served in Sudan before going to Palestine, and had been engaged in military operations there (Pappé 2006: chapter 2). Similarly, if we examine the history of the first large-scale popular uprising in Palestine (1936–1939) and its suppression, we come across British officers who had been in Sudan in 1924, such as Hubert Huddleston.<sup>31</sup> So it turns out that the 1924 revolution in Sudan and the popular uprising in Palestine were suppressed at the hands of the same people.

Furthermore, if we take into account this phenomenon of “pilgrimage” of colonial officials within the empire and the transmission of counter-revolutionary measures and ideas, there is a possibility that the dichotomy between the “Arab” and “non-Arab”, which was an attempt at racial classification for colonial purposes, was transplanted from Sudan to Palestine. As we have seen, in the case of Sudan, the dichotomy between “Arabs” and “blacks” was initially stressed by the British colonial administration in order to destroy the 1924 revolution, and as Sikainga has shown in his book *Slaves into Workers*, later developed into a more sophisticated racial policy for managing the labour market in a colonial state.<sup>32</sup> In the case of Palestine, although the initial nature of the problem was not “Arabs versus Jews” (because the

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30 On the Nyala uprising and the use of “Arab friendlies” (tribal militia) by the colonial administration, see: “Niyala Uprising, 1921”, Darfur1/19A/102, National Records Office, Khartoum, Sudan.

31 Huddleston, who was responsible for the suppression of the mutiny of the Sudanese battalions in 1924, later served in Palestine during the popular uprising of 1936–1939. H.A. MacMichael himself, who held the office of High Commissioner of Palestine from 1938 until 1944, had been in Sudan and accumulated his expertise on the “Arabs”, as we have seen.

32 On the implication of “racial” classifications introduced in Condominium Sudan as a method of managing the labor market, see Sikainga 1996.

indigenous Palestinians included Arab Muslims, Arab Christians and Arab Jews), but a conflict between the local inhabitants and the Zionist settlers, it increasingly came to be portrayed in the course of the British mandate as an “Arab-Jewish conflict”, thereby racialising the concept of “Arab” in the process. If we examine the careers of British colonial officers in Palestine, we discover that in the context of the British Empire, colonial experiences in Sudan and Palestine were more interlinked than we might imagine, with transmissions and interactions between the two regions.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, we posed the question of the relevance of a “social history of Sudan”. We might safely conclude it by arguing that the perspective of social history is important, and almost indispensable, for the study of the history of Sudan, especially for examining the question of the “sources of the Sudanese revolution”, the historical backgrounds of popular movements in the country. We have seen how by introducing the perspective of social history, the classic literature on Sudanese history, such as *Ṭabaqāt Wad Dayfallāh* and the Mahdist proclamations, can be read and interpreted in a new light. These texts tell us about the roots of popular resistance in Sudan, about how ordinary people, including women, struggled in search of social justice, and had recourse to various ways of resistance.

If we look at the history of popular movements in Sudan since the Mahdist movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we discover that although “Sudanese society” did not exist *a priori*, since modern Sudan itself was a colonial and artificial state, there have always been struggles by ordinary people who have tried to unite in the face of oppression, achieve social justice and build a democratic society in which everyone can live together, including the populations of “marginalised areas”, despite differences in race, religion and gender. We might argue that if “Sudanese society” exists, it does so in the midst of these struggles by the people.

It is important to note at the same time that popular movements in Sudan have not taken place in isolation, but always in complicated regional and international contexts, inspired by developments in the outside world, and learning lessons through this process. Building regional solidarity has been an important issue in revolutions in Sudan, as the strategy of “joint struggle” with the Egyptian people, advocated by the 1924 revolution and later developed by young communists in the 1940s, reveals. Regional and international factors are also important when we examine the nature and dynamics of “counter-revolutions” in Sudan, the study of which would be another interesting topic of a social history of Sudan.

Since December 2018, Sudan has been in the midst of revolution, and we are daily witnessing dramatic political developments and an almost unprecedented outburst of revolutionary energy on the part of the Sudanese people. Our knowledge of the historical roots of popular movements in Sudan acquired through the perspective of social history helps us gain an insight into the nature of this revolution, and enables an in-depth understanding of the significance of resistance by different forces such as women and marginalised areas. An examination of the social history of Sudan has tremendous potential. It teaches us about the heritage of the popular struggles that have unfolded throughout the history of this country, and about the richness, depth and complexity of these struggles. It teaches us, too, about the challenges being faced, and about the contexts in which these struggles have been taking place.

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Safa Mohamed Kheir Osman

## Chapter 2

# Sudanese Women's Participation in the December 2018 Revolution: Historical Roots and Mobilisation Patterns

## Introduction

Sudanese women's participation in politics is by no means a recent phenomenon: it extends back through history to the women who held power in the ancient Kingdom of Napata (850–750 BCE) (Daf'allāh 2005: 34); however, women subsequently experienced periods of virtual silence until the emergence of formal education at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at which point the educated women of the time took on a major role in fostering women's participation in public life.<sup>1</sup> As a result of their constant struggle from the mid-1940s onwards, they acquired numerous political rights – the right to vote and stand for election in constitutional, grassroots, trade union and administrative institutions, organisations, and agencies, and to vote in referenda (al-Nīl 1998: 81). As a result of this, women were able to vote in the elections for the 1954 Legislative Assembly – a first step on the ladder towards achieving full political rights. Their situation continued to develop, and in 1964, they won the right to vote and stand as candidates in graduate constituencies. It was during this time that one of the leaders of the women's movement was elected to parliament. Women became politically empowered: they joined political parties and in some cases succeeded in reaching important positions in these parties, despite the many objections from clerics and voices of the Islamist constituency who had been opposed to women since they first began demanding rights. The advancement of women continued to make strides: they acquired economic as well as various legal rights, and took part in all the uprisings against military regimes from the October 1964 Revolution against Ibrāhīm 'Abbūd to the December 2018 Revolution against 'Umar al-Bashīr. They participated in order to protect both their own rights and those of all Sudanese people, standing against all forms of economic, political, and social injustice and oppression across all aspects of Sudanese life.

Women form one of the largest segments of society most afflicted by military regimes, especially during times of civil war in productive areas and regions where

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier draft of this chapter was translated from Arabic by Cadenza Academic Translations. The final version benefitted from input from Iris Seri-Hersch.



the economic situation is dire. Arbitrary policies cause suffering for all members of society, men and women alike; however, we are referring specifically to women here since during the recent wars in South Sudan and the Darfur and Nuba Mountain regions, it was women who suffered by far the worst, with gang rapes by armed militias and their children being killed, while also still having to bear the burden of supporting a family.

A dominant feature of all military regimes in Sudan is the implementation of laws that restrict society and freedoms. The May Regime (1969–1985) imposed decrees based on Sharia law that were known at the time as the “September Laws” of 1983, and which were applied in a discriminatory fashion against many people, but were particularly strict with regard to women. Among their various regulations, these laws restricted the movement of women in the streets and prohibited them from travelling without a male companion. However, the laws only remained in force for a few short years before the Sudanese people rose up in April 1985, and put an end to the existing military rule. Then came the Islamist “salvation” regime (*inqādh*, 1989–2019), which was protected by loyal elements of the Sudanese Army, who seized power from the established democratic government. The new regime introduced numerous laws to limit freedoms, and suspended all political parties, trade unions, and other institutions, and hunted down the opposition. A great number of voices fell silent, either killed or thrown in jail.

The Public Order Law (known as the “Community Security Law”), which was passed in the early 1990s, is one of the most significant laws that were tailored specifically for oppression and control, especially of women. Its aim was to keep women within a framework that corresponded to the ideological will of the authorities. This began with the power to impose penalties at the discretion of the law enforcement agencies, specifically public prosecutors or soldiers charged with implementing the law. It permitted, for example, interference with a woman’s freedom to choose the type, size, length, and even the cut of her clothes, and prohibited them from holding certain jobs (such as working at petrol stations or restaurants, and selling food or tea). Many women were flogged, arrested, and verbally abused while walking in the street or at work, and in 2008, forty-five thousand women were arrested for clothing-related offences under the Public Order Law in Khartoum alone (African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies *et al.* 2015: 13).

In addition, this government enacted multiple articles under the personal status laws that discriminated against women, such as laws restricting a woman’s freedom to travel with her children without permission from her husband and discriminatory legislation covering child marriage and divorce proceedings. The government also failed to implement a law criminalising female genital mutilation, a practice that was carried out on up to 86% of females across most age groups in

2014 (Khalid 2020). The government also brought in restrictions on the freedom of political expression by banning the work of political parties that had female members, and women who belonged to these parties were often arrested. It also imposed restrictions on any ideological and intellectual attitudes that deviated from the social and religious norm.

The enduring exclusion of Sudanese women from prominent roles in society only intensified their passion for fighting against the discrimination they faced. They confronted it in various ways, in initially small but subsequently increasing numbers, although in recent years the increase has not been extensive enough to lead to real social change around these issues. Change was never a straightforward matter, however, especially if we consider the reality of the situation in which these women lived. Some were able to make use of the educational opportunities that had been made available to them earlier on, as a result of which they began to organise themselves – especially those with a formal education (Maḥmūd 2002: 249). Similarly, some women involved in the struggle for rights had benefited from the opportunities offered by institutions such as the political parties that supported women's liberation and access to rights. They also had a strong support base, most importantly in the fight taken up by the institutions of the Sudanese Women's Union (SWU, *al-ittiḥād al-nisā'ī al-sūdānī*) to oppose any efforts to undermine women and to combat campaigns against women's access to rights. Sudanese women took this issue very seriously, making demands for the right to education, work, and equal pay, helped by an increase in educational opportunities for girls and the large number of women entering the sphere of public action. As a result, the advancement of women became an unavoidable reality.

The relatively large level of female participation in the government during the *inqādh* regime can be seen from their work in the ruling party's offices and secretarial departments. Some women, like Sumaya Abū Kashwa in the Ministry of Education (2013–2018), were appointed as ministers, while others held senior government positions. However, we find that the presence of women in these positions was limited to those loyal to Islamist ideology. Female representation in parliament reached 30% after women secured 128 seats in the 2015 elections thanks to a quota system established by an amended electoral law (*Sudan Tribune* 2014). Nevertheless, their participation sparked a controversy over whether their membership in the National Congress Party (NCP) actually offered any benefit to their political and legal empowerment. Some believe that it made perfect sense for female supporters of the *inqādh* regime to pursue only the interests of their party and government, and since they were not working to prevent the oppression of women, it also follows that they did not support a law to define the legal age of marriage, or the 2010 draft child protection law outlawing female genital mutilation. Others, on the other hand, are of the opinion that the influence of conservative religious groups

inside and outside the NCP was one of the obstacles to the success of attempts to reform these laws (Tønnessen and al-Nagar 2013: 5).

From December 2018 to April 2019, life in Sudan was dominated by widespread protest movements and mass demonstrations involving most sectors of society. The unrest began in Maiurno, close to the city of Sennar in Sudan's Blue Nile state, on 6 December 2018, when school students staged a protest against bread shortages and disruptions to public services. From there, the uprising spread to Damazin on 13 December, and then to Atbara on 19 December, where the protests were again led by students. On 23 December, the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) announced a march on the Republican Palace on 25 December. Initially their demands were for higher wages for workers and various economic reforms, but these changed to a call for President 'Umar al-Bashīr to step down. The marches continued, with all layers of Sudanese society joining the demonstrations night and day until the regime fell in April 2019. Despite the strictness of the Islamist authorities in Sudan and their brutal treatment of protesters (including murder, detention, and torture), it was the non-violent nature of the popular movement that saved it from oppression. In the end, with their dramatic sit-in outside the army headquarters, the Sudanese people succeeded in ousting al-Bashīr.

This chapter aims to explore the participation of Sudanese women as leaders rather than followers in the revolution that swept their country from December 2018 to April 2019. We will present the roots of female activism by examining the instances in which women participated in earlier political and social resistance movements in Sudan after independence in 1956. We will also reflect on the impact women's involvement in the 2018 revolution has had on the social and cultural perception of women in Sudan. To this end, we have gathered data on women's participation from the various bodies and organisations that led the movement, and have attempted to trace their presence in the marches, protests, strikes, sit-ins, and other acts of protest that were widespread in Sudan between December 2018 and April 2019.

We have used two types of sources for compiling our data. The primary sources include in-depth interviews carried out by the researcher with three female leaders of the political and professional bodies that were at the forefront of the revolution (such as the SPA and the Forces of Freedom and Change [FFC]), news articles and reports published on the revolution in Sudan between December 2018 and April 2019, and the researcher's personal observations as a witness at many of these events and as an active participant in some of them. The most valuable secondary sources for the data used in this chapter include books, studies, and newspapers covering the political mobilisation of women at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the periods of anti-colonial struggle, resistance against the first period of military rule, the October 1964 Revolution, resistance against the second period of military

rule, and the uprising of April 1985. The process of documenting the December revolution is still in its early stages, however, and this has led to some issues with collecting data. In addition, it is methodologically challenging to understand a political process that is unfolding at the time of research and writing. As a result, interviews, along with newspaper and social media reports, have formed the basis for this chapter. The research process is ongoing.

## Female Education, Political Activism, and Trade Unionism in the Colonial Era

The consistent participation of women in Sudanese political movements is evident across every period of history. Women have been engaged in politics and the management of public affairs ever since the time of the ancient kingdoms, when they held positions of power and royalty. Furthermore, during the Funj Sultanate (1504–1821), women performed numerous social and religious roles that also had an influence on political life (Muḥammad 2018: 31). Some benefited from the modernisation of education brought about by the Ottoman-Egyptian rule in Sudan (1821–1885). During the Mahdiyya period (1885–1898), women also participated in military matters: there is a good deal of evidence of this, for example the case of Rābiḥa al-Kināniyya, who supplied the Mahdist army with intelligence that helped it avoid defeat at the hands of Rāshid Bey Ayman (Maḥmūd 2010: 11).

This situation continued into the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899–1956), which also saw the beginning of formal education for girls and their gradual admission to schools. This gave rise to the development of female education and the opening of educational institutions. Women graduated as teachers, midwives, and nurses (Sanderson 1975; Sharkey 1998), and began to engage in public action. Education was the key factor in propelling the development of women's participation in the nationalist movement against Anglo-Egyptian rule. Women began to have a more visible role in many areas of anti-colonial activity. One example of this is the 1924 Revolution. It was led by the White Flag League (*jam'iyyat al-liwā' al-abyaḍ*) against British rule, with the goal of liberating Sudan from colonial subjugation and uniting it with Egypt, as declared by 'Ubayd Ḥājj al-Amīn, who was vice-president and one of the founders of the League. The League was swiftly eradicated (al-Gadḍāl 2002: 440), but there is evidence of women's participation in the 1924 Revolution, specifically when Āmina 'Arafāt and al-'Āzza Muḥammad 'Abdallāh (the wives of 'Arafāt Muḥammad 'Abdallāh and 'Alī 'Abd al-Laṭīf respectively) stood up against inspecting soldiers and protected and hid or destroyed secret political documents in their husbands' possession. They also took part in clandestine actions for the

White Flag League, delivering secret messages, which was extremely important for linking the groups of the nationalist movement, and sewing flags ahead of demonstrations (Vezzadini 2015: 81, 168). Al-Āzza, the wife of ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, also took part in one of the demonstrations triggered by the one organised by students of the military college in 1924 (al-Şāfī 1974: 373–422). Many women played a part in the 1924 Revolution, including Batūl Muḥammad ‘Īsā (Badrī 1984: 162), who later became the Assistant Director of the Midwifery Training School.

This period saw the emergence of what became known as “literary salons”, gatherings of poetry and singing hosted by women during which those attending also discussed politics. Because they were run by women, the salons were all called “Fawz’s Salon” (*ṣālūn Fawz*) or “Fawz’s House” (*dār Fawz*), after the woman’s name “Fawz”, regardless of the salon owner’s real name. The salons functioned as forums for literature and politics, and were led by artists such as Khalīl Faraḥ, as well as poets and members of politically active societies of the time, such as the Sudanese Union Society (*jam‘iyyat al-ittiḥād al-sūdānī*) and the White Flag League (Ismā‘īl 1990: 14–19). They would publish pamphlets and hand them out in secret on the streets of Omdurman (Ya‘qūb 1991: 36). According to Susan S. Ismā‘īl (1990: 16–19), a salon owner would engage in the discussions irrespective of her basic education, expressing her ideas in clear and plain language. Some researchers and historians of this topic have argued that Fawz, rather than being a woman, was the name of a house set up by the Sudanese Union Society to receive guests from outside Khartoum (al-Ḥājj 1998: 165), but this does not alter the fact that women participated in the gatherings at this house. In addition, Fawz was not just the name of this house alone – other such houses in Omdurman associated with specific women had the same name, and similar places were also founded in Khartoum (al-Ḥājj 1998: 165).

The simultaneous emergence of feminist organisations and political parties is evidence of women’s early engagement in political activity. In some cases, this took the form of trade unionism, as was the case with the Nurses’ Union (*niqābat al-mu-marriḍāt*). Indeed, nurses played a significant role in regularly standing up for their union rights and for freedom and equality in schools, as well as demanding the same freedoms and rights as male nurses and supporting the nationalist movement. Female teachers also demanded that a union for female teachers be created. This was established in 1948 as the Cultural Union of Women Teachers (*ittiḥād al-mu‘al-limāt al-thaqāfi*), which became the Union of Women Teachers (*niqābat al-mu‘al-limāt*) in 1949, and was recognised by the government of the time before being officially registered in 1951 (Maḥmūd 2002: 259–260).

Doctors Khālidā Zāhir and Zaruhi Sarkissian (the first female students to join the medical school at Gordon College) took part in the University of Khartoum’s first student demonstration to protest against foreign rule and demand independence. In 1946, Khālidā Zāhir became one of the first women to join the Sudanese Com-

unist Party (SCP) – a date that marks the beginning of organised political action by women. At this time, they also participated in demonstrations against the Bevin-Sidqi Agreement in 1946, which adopted an ambiguous stance on Sudan's political status (mentioning both Sudanese-Egyptian unity and the validity of the 1899 and 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaties until Sudanese self-determination). Khāliḍa Zāhir and Rifqa Bahtā – the head of the midwifery school in El Obeid – were also arrested because of the part they played in the 1948 demonstrations against the Legislative Assembly. Zāhir was a leading member of the Students' Union (*ittiḥād al-tullāb*) at the end of the 1940s and in the early 1950s, and was also an important presence at meetings held by the Graduates Congress (*mu'tamar al-kharijīn*) (Uthmān 2017). The zeal of these women served as the basis for the creation of bodies that advocated for women's rights and gave a voice to the different issues concerning women.

In the early 1940s, women's associations came to the fore and took responsibility for affairs specific to women, such as home economics, literacy, and the like. At the same time, these associations were an early blueprint for the Sudanese women's rights movement and women's participation in public action. The associations were led by educated, open-minded women with progressive ideas about women's rights. For instance, literacy classes for women were set up by a large number of women who were concerned with female education. The focus on these classes played a prominent role in addressing major shortfalls in girls' education,<sup>2</sup> enabling them to become engaged in public action and to demand many of their economic and political rights. The League of Cultured Girls (*jam'iyyat al-fatā al-muthaqqafa*), founded in 1947 (ʿAbd al-ʿĀl 2010: 38), was an important example of these associations at the time. Despite its short time in existence, it provided the stimulus for the subsequent creation of numerous charitable organisations, such as the Association for the Advancement of Women (*jam'iyyat tarqiyat al-mar'a*), which was formed in 1948. The Sudanese Women's Union (SWU) was founded in 1952 (al-Gaddāl 2016: 21) and opened up membership to all women. The SWU advocated for economic rights and the women's right to educational opportunities, and called for a fight against customs and practices that were deemed to be harmful to women. It also sought to foster women's national consciousness. Thereafter, many of the SWU's members began to demand political rights, especially since the Legislative Council elections came shortly after the SWU had been established. Disputes began to appear within the SWU, however, the most pronounced of which were the political differences

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2 Enrolment in government elementary schools in the Northern Sudan was three times lower for girls than for boys: 7,747 versus 22,015 in 1946, and 26,581 versus 76,996 in 1956 (Seri-Hersch 2011: 346n66).

that emerged after members who were united by Islamic tendencies split from the SWU, arguing that women could not seek political rights and this demand deviated from the norms of current Sudanese society as they saw it. Despite the fact they had left the SWU, these women continued to demand women's rights through other organisations, which suggests that the dispute was actually between the political right and the political left. The SWU played a commendable role in addressing and advocating for women's rights and the various economic, political, and social rights they subsequently achieved. After submitting petition after petition to the international supervisory commission for elections of the Legislative Council, the SWU was given the right to vote in graduate constituencies in 1953 (Badri 1984: 123). This was limited to female secondary and higher education graduates, however, but despite their small number the vast majority of those eligible took part.

The activities of women's organisations began to take on new forms, as was the case with the Association for Women's Awakening (*jam'iyyat al-nahḍa al-niswiyya*),<sup>3</sup> which staged a women's march in support of the Anglo-Egyptian agreement on Sudanese self-government on 13 February 1953. The march went from Khartoum to the Mahdī's tomb in Omdurman, and large numbers of women took part in it, and so it represented a significant episode for the period (al-Amīn 2017: 77): indeed, it not only demonstrated women's desire to escape the economic, political, and social constraints that bound them, but also showed that they were capable of participating in all kinds of political events at the time.

## Resisting the First Military Regime and Entering Parliament (1958–1965)

The first military regime (led by General Ibrāhīm 'Abbūd, 1958–1964) abolished Sudan's earliest democratic government, reducing people to poverty and pawning them off to foreign powers. The civil war, which had begun with the Torit mutiny in 1955, intensified in Southern Sudan: villages were burned, attempts were made to force Islam on people, and military courts were set up to try members of the opposition (Ḥasanayn 2018). The SWU played an important role in the resistance against this first military regime. It worked to mobilise women from different sectors against the regime's policies through political education at conferences and

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<sup>3</sup> The Association for Women's Awakening was a branch of the SWU in Khartoum that broke away under the leadership of Na'māt al-Zayn, an SWU member.

through the statements, articles, and cartoons mocking the regime it published in its magazine, *Şawt al-Mar'a* ("Woman's Voice"), which was widely distributed across Sudan. The government dissolved all associations (including women's associations), political parties, unions, and opposition newspapers for fear they would act against the regime. Meanwhile, the SWU increased its demands for political, economic, and social rights before it was disbanded in 1959 ('Abd al-Raḥmān 1995: 27). However, *Şawt al-Mar'a* was still published and continued to demand women's rights in articles written by a wide range of women. It became the only available instrument of expression at the time because it was registered in the name of its founder, Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm rather than the SWU ('Abd al-Fattāḥ 2014: 105), and as it was held in the name of an individual rather than a specific organisation, the regime was unable to close it down.

In 1964, Sudanese women participated in the October Revolution, which was instigated by the people against the 'Abbūd regime. They participated in political action at different levels, and were active in mass political action through attending conferences, demonstrations, and strikes, and by taking part in underground political activities such as distributing pamphlets and organising demonstrations. Two of the SWU's leaders became representatives in the Professional Front alongside other female representatives of various political parties. The Professional Front was a nationalist body that brought together the leadership of the political parties and representatives of public and professional groups and other sectors set on leading and guiding the nationalist resistance movement after the success of the revolution (al-Amīn 2017: 98). Moreover, as Nafisa Aḥmad al-Amīn (2017: 97) has noted, women also took part in the Judiciary March, which was made up of judges, legal professionals, and elected representatives, and which announced a general political strike. Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm, Su'ād Ibrāhīm Aḥmad, Sāra al-Fāḍil of the Umma Party, Wişāl al-Şiddīq, and Maḥāsīn 'Abd al-'Āl were some of the female leaders who took part ('Alī Ṭāhā 2020: 544), and alongside a number of female doctors, they were at the forefront of the march (Thompson 2020: 109).

The SWU staged marches and presented petitions demanding improvements to women's status. Inspired by its vision and plan, crowds of women filled the streets alongside women from the political parties, taking part in the demonstrations and strikes calling for total rejection of the military regime. A great many female students from secondary schools, the Khartoum Technical Institute, and universities across the country also participated in the movement, which resulted in their being suspended. Some schoolgirls from Khartoum Secondary School and Omdurman Secondary School were even expelled. During these protests, Bakhīta al-Ḥafyān of Omdurman was killed by a bullet, and many other women were also injured (Şāliḥ [1965] 2013: 293). Women at home and in places of work came out in response to the movement on the street, which had escalated after the authorities used live



bullets to stop students holding a conference at the University of Khartoum. Female university students joined in the opposition against the police, fighting the authorities by filling the streets, chanting and ululating to stir up the impassioned crowd, and providing assistance to the revolutionaries. Indeed, a number of women and girls were seen filling pots with water to give the demonstrators something to drink. Women also helped to erect barricades and fill Molotov cocktails alongside the men, and faced arrest and even being dismissed from their jobs for debating politics at work.<sup>4</sup> Some sources report that women were also part of the Constitutional Drafting Committee (‘Uthmān 2017: 36; see also Maḥjūb 2004: 4). It might be argued that women had begun to reap the fruit of their persistent demands for political rights – demands that were the product of the highly active women’s associations at the time.

From the 1924 Revolution, when women began to engage in union actions and participate in anti-colonial resistance and demonstrations, to the creation of the SWU in 1952, which took the lead in advocating for women’s political and social rights, all of this formed the core of women’s participation across many areas. Thereafter, women joined modern formations such as political parties, associations, unions, leagues and so forth. With their participation in the October 1964 Revolution, women’s political action was deployed on a broader scale. Women won a large share of their rights, including political rights, as a result of determined efforts that had begun before independence. Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm was the first woman to be elected to parliament in 1965. This victory was of great value in helping women to be granted further rights, such as to stand for election and vote in graduate constituencies and to vote in geographical constituencies. Approval was given to many of women’s demands to amend laws concerning female workers and others relating to the Sharia courts. However, no amendments were actually implemented in practice before the inception of the second military regime.

## **A Contrasting Picture of Women’s Rights under the May Regime (1969–1985)**

The second military regime (1969–1985, which is also known as the “May Regime”) began completely dismantling all the existing feminist bodies, including the SWU, which had played such a considerable role in the resistance movement against the previous military government and had been re-legalised after the October 1964

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<sup>4</sup> Fāṭima S. al-Dīn, *Al-Sūdān al-Jadīd*, 14 November 1964, p. 6.

revolution. In their place, the regime set about forming its own bodies, such as the Sudan Women's Union (*ittiḥād nisā' al-Sūdān*) and the Socialist Union (*al-ittiḥād al-ishṭirākī*), which boasted many female members. The dissolution process saw the arrest of several women, some of whom were given arbitrary sentences and brought before military courts for the first time in Sudanese women's political history. Women were also subjected to preventive detention in their homes, a fate they had also suffered under 'Abbūd.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, their resistance continued. In the late 1970s, a group of women led a demonstration to the seat of government in Khartoum, where they submitted a petition demanding a review into price rises and the high cost of living. The authorities rounded up the women who had filed the petition and threw them in prison. Women also led demonstrations calling for the release of political prisoners (al-Gaddāl 2016: 83). Nevertheless, the fact that by the end of the 1970s women had acquired a great many rights, including the right to full suffrage in all constituencies, graduate and geographical alike (Maḥmūd 2002: 277), could actually be seen as a point in favour of Ja'far al-Nimayrī's regime.

By the time of the April 1985 uprising against al-Nimayrī's regime, women had become more aware of their political, economic, and social rights. The increase in the number of educated women played a large part in their access to decision-making positions in unions and political parties. Society's view had also changed very much, as was clear from women's participation in all forms of resistance. Women were prominent and influential members of political parties and also worked in the professional and unionist bodies that led the popular movement against the regime, as well as leading the trade union assembly through the uprising (ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ 2014: 118). They took part in demonstrations and strikes through their places of work and their unions, and engaged in regular acts of civil disobedience, suffering detention and brutal treatment at the hands of the regime as a result.

It is worth making the point here that female participation in popular movements to overthrow military regimes in Sudan was largely unconnected with specific women's issues. Rather, their activism was more closely associated with the general circumstances of the protest movements in terms of high living costs and a deteriorating economy. This can be demonstrated, for example, by comparing the active participation of women in the 1985 uprising, with the conditions faced by women under the May Regime between 1969 and 1985. For Sudanese women, the May Regime was a period of significant progress in acquiring many legal and political rights, in particular those relating to personal status laws and full suffrage in geographical constituencies. Women became well represented in parliament (the

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5 "News and Comments." *Ṣawt al-Mar'a*, no. 72, 1962, National Records Office (NRO), Khartoum, Sudan.

“People’s Assembly”), for which a quota of 25% had been set for admission. Even though the quota was not met and reached only 9%, this was still a notable development in access by women to the top levels of state legislative power. Table 1 below illustrates the proportion of women who entered parliament during this period (‘Abd al-Fattāḥ 2014: 116):

**Table 1:** Proportion of women’s seats in parliament under al-Nimayrī’s regime.

Assembly	Number of Members	Number of Women	Proportion of Women
First People’s Assembly (1973)	225	11	4.9%
Second People’s Assembly (1974–1977)	250	12	4.8%
Third People’s Assembly (1978–1980)	304	17	5.6%
Fourth People’s Assembly (1980–1981)	368	18	4.6%
Fifth People’s Assembly (1981–1984)	153	14	9.2%

The May Regime also saw the first woman to be appointed as minister when Fāṭima ‘Abd al-Maḥmūd was named Minister of Social Affairs in 1976 (al-Amīn 2017: 131), and several others followed suit. However, the promulgation of the Sharia-inspired September Laws towards the end of this period (1983) contributed towards women being relegated to the status of second-class citizens (Abdel Halim 2009: 392).

## Protesting against the Marginalisation of Women in Islamist Sudan (1989–2018)

The third era of democratic rule in Sudan (1985–1989) came to an end with the coup by the National Islamic Front (NIF) in June 1989. The NIF arrived in the wake of an Islamist and Arab nationalist project that brought suffering across a broad range of society, including women. Their presence in the country’s power structures – the Legislative Councils and the National Assembly – was of no use whatsoever for furthering the cause of Sudanese women, and nothing was achieved in the area of legislation regarding women. They continued to be excluded from certain jobs, while their appointment to others was limited to regime loyalists who would only voice conservative views, as dictated by the conditions for joining the ruling party. Laws imposed the hijab across all state institutions and for all women, regardless of religion. As part of the policy to militarise the country, women were also forced to take part in military training (see the chapter by Iris Seri-Hersch in this book). The most significant new legislation was the Public Order Law, the drafters of which

took great pains to ensure that women remained within a certain framework, in line with the ideological will of the authorities as part of their “Civilisational Project” (*al-mashrū' al-ḥaḍārī*). Women had to follow purported Islamic rules regardless of their intellectual orientation, and to accept the dictates of Islamic laws. They suffered from poverty, with 46% of the population of Northern Sudan and 57.6% of the rural population living below the poverty line (*al-Jihāz al-Markazī li-Iḥsā'* 2009). This was the result of marginalisation, weak development programmes, and the ravages of the ongoing civil wars in Southern Sudan (1983–2005) and Darfur (from 2003). But it was women who bore the greatest burden, having to take care of their families in addition to being displaced from their homes and being forced to work in marginal jobs, for example as tea sellers, one of the most fragile jobs in the informal sector, where women are exposed to violence and abuse from the general public and public authorities alike (ʿAbd al-ʿĀṭī and al-Ḥasan n.d.: 513).

Various forms of female resistance against the regime began to surface after the formation of the Women's National Democratic Alliance (WNDA, *al-tajammu' al-nisā'ī al-waṭanī al-dīmuqrāṭī*), a branch of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the most extensive feminist opposition against the regime (ʿAbd al-ʿĀl n.d.), in January 1991. The WNDA was made up of women affiliated to the opposition parties that were members of the NDA and female representatives from the other women's opposition organisations and associations. The NDA and its female activists staged a number of protests, most notably against the Public Order Law, in addition to numerous other protests at different times in solidarity with political prisoners. These women also took part in demonstrations against the high cost of living and the unjust sentencing of citizens. The women's struggle also continued in the workplace, on minority issues, in the countryside and in cities, from exile abroad, and in camps for displaced persons. Fāṭima Ūshīk, a doctor who took part in the December 2018 Revolution, said in an interview:

I was directly affected by the *inqādh* regime. My father lived outside Sudan for many years, which meant I lost my support. I demonstrated against the regime's systematic practice of marginalisation and the decline in health, education, and the economy in Eastern Sudan. I also protested against policies like the Public Order Law, put in place by the patriarchal authorities and the abuse suffered by girls (*Niḍātuḥā* 2020: 5).

Women continued to participate in acts of protest against the government as part of the many popular uprisings that took place throughout al-Bashīr's regime. Not long before the December 2018 Revolution, a large number took part in the demonstrations that flared up against the *inqādh* regime in September 2013 in response to the government's raising the price of bread and staple goods because of the disastrous economic situation. The demonstrations were suppressed, however, and some members of the women's movement died.

## The Multifaceted Participation by Women in the December 2018 Revolution

It was social media that lit the fuse that sparked the December Revolution, initiating calls for people to take to the streets as a sign of rejection of the *inqādh* regime. The date and time of the demonstrations were arranged and organised on social media by groups such as *Girifna* (“We Are Fed Up”) and Sudan Change Now, which used these platforms to spread calls for protest (Deshayes 2019). As is clear from their history, however, these sites had begun their resistance activity several years before the revolution, and their members were predominantly young men and women who rejected the status quo. Women also played a significant role here by creating feminist groups on Facebook to post and share events of the revolution such as demonstrations and sit-ins.

A different line was taken when women began exposing corrupt members of the regime by publishing evidence in documents and files. These groups worked to monitor and document abuses carried out by the security forces and elements affiliated with the regime, as well as members of the security forces who had arrested, imprisoned, and tortured revolutionaries. Indeed, the revolutionaries depended on these groups monitoring these loyalist elements just so they could be protected from them. *Minbarshāt* (“Extreme Love”) is one of these Facebook groups that played a significant role in feeding information to the revolution and revolutionaries. The main purpose of *Minbarshāt* came to be revolution, whereas initially it had been a women’s support and discussion group.<sup>6</sup> It became known as the “security force of the revolution.”<sup>7</sup>

Calls for demonstrations shared on these social media groups reached the highest possible number of Sudanese people, especially women. All women who were arrested were asked about their relationship with *Minbarshāt* and about the people responsible for posting on it, in an attempt to stop the group’s work. Individual initiatives also began to emerge, such as those working to supply drinking water, face coverings against tear gas, and anything else that might be needed to confront the security forces’ attempts at suppression. The SPA specified the location

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the BBC article by Zeinab M. Salih entitled “Letter from Africa: How ‘Cheating Husbands’ are Linked to Sudan’s Protests.” BBC News, 20 February 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47291511> (25 May 2022).

<sup>7</sup> A quote from the same article, which also states that members of the security forces were so afraid of *Minbarshāt* that they took to covering their faces so as not to be identified. This indicates that working in the security forces at this time was a humiliating and shameful affair.

for most marches, and women would upload photos of supplies to the Facebook groups as an invitation for others to prepare – and to compete in doing so (see Figure 1 below).



Figure 1: Minbarshāt Facebook Page (26 June 2019).

Minbarshāt	منبرشات
26 June 2019	٢٦ يونيو، ٢٠١٩
The success or failure of the 30 June march rests on you!	نجاح او فشل موكب ٣٠ يونيو واقف عليك انت
How did you support the march? Let's all send messages to our families in Sudan	بماذا دعمت الموكب؟ ارح كلنا نعلن ونرسل رسالة نصيه لاهلنا في السودان
#March30June	#موكب30يونيو
Write a comment . .	اكتب تعليقًا . .

One of the most striking symbols of the Sudanese revolution was the sound of ululation (*zaghārīd*)<sup>8</sup> produced by one of the women taking part in the march (these women became known as *Kandakāt*<sup>9</sup>: “Nubian Queens”) to announce that the march was beginning and that marchers could begin chanting slogans. This was an extremely infuriating sound for the security forces, who continued to arrest every woman who might potentially ululate, as well as every girl or woman present in the vicinity of the demonstrations, throughout the days of unrest and protest. On the other hand, ululation also has social and psychological connotations, which had an impact on all participants, both men and women. It is not only linked with the December Revolution but, as some researchers have shown, it can also be traced back to the marches of the 1924 Revolution, when women ululated during the demonstrations (Aḥmad 2019) staged by students from the military college and attended by citizens of all kinds.

While women were being arrested in large numbers because of the ululating, it did not mean they were discouraged or abandoned the revolution. On the contrary, it only spurred them on to continue, and with greater fervour. They had become more highly respected and valued by a society that had previously viewed women’s participation with suspicion and doubt and as something abnormal. Indeed, many girls who took part in the revolution and who were interviewed by the Sudanese Organisation for Research and Development (SORD) echoed the words of one young woman: “A great many of the demonstrators were women and girls, even though they feared the abuse they would suffer – they were extremely brave” (*Niḍāluhā* 2020: 9).

During the days of uprising and unrest, calls emerged for women to wear a white *thōb*,<sup>10</sup> the traditional women’s robe across large areas of Sudan. This was a declaration of the power of women’s participation in the revolution, and women appeared in many protests wearing a *thōb*. This recalls the previous uprisings of October 1964 and April 1985, when women also wore a *thōb* as an expression of nationalism and Sudanese identity. The symbolism of the white *thōb* dates back to the female workers who wore it in demonstrations during the October Revolution, since it was the official uniform for government offices, schools, universities, and hospitals, as well as being

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8 Ululation is a sound made by Sudanese women as an expression of joy. It was used to arouse the fervour of warriors. In the ancient kingdoms it was associated with religious rituals, and it also existed in many of the neighbouring states.

9 This was inspired by the word *kandaka*, which recalls the title given to queens of the Sudanese Kingdom of Meroë (350 BCE–350 CE), a period in which women enjoyed a high status in politics and the public sphere.

10 The *thōb* (robe) is a light piece of fabric (white or multicoloured) around four metres long, which women wrap around their bodies and over their heads.

the official clothing for professionals such as doctors and nurses. During the October Revolution, Sudanese nurses wore a white dress when they led the funeral procession of the martyr Aḥmad al-Qurashī, a student at Khartoum University. White *thōbs* were worn from the beginning of the December 2018 Revolution, and many feminist activists and women active in politics dressed this way during the first central demonstration on 25 December 2018. Among the many implications, it shows that female government workers were also engaged in the revolution. Many women working in feminist organisations view the *thōb* as a symbol of the feminist movement from the 1950s, as one woman pointed out in an interview:

We went out to demonstrate on 25 December and chose Sayyid 'Abd al-Raḥmān Street as the starting point. I was the leader of the march because many of the girls and women knew and trusted me. I was wearing a white *thōb* because of its associations and significance, and because we had agreed that every professional would wear their official uniform. I announced the beginning of the march by ululating (*Niḍāluhā* 2020: 15).

Students at Ahfad University for Women also agreed to wear a white *thōb* in the demonstrations held by the University. From then on, the garment became inextricably linked with the demonstrations in the eyes of many young women, even though there was some fear that it would be a reason to be arrested by the security forces. One protestor, Ālā' Ṣallāh, was wearing a white *thōb* as she recited a revolutionary poem during the sit-in, and in doing so became a paragon of Sudanese women's revolutionary spirit.<sup>11</sup>

Other initiatives created by women included writing certain phrases on leaflets and pamphlets to announce the marches or to declare the goals of the revolution. Women paid for this out of their own pockets, as one woman said in an interview:

My involvement in the revolution began with writing banners, joining demonstrations and marches, making barricades, and burning tires, all the things that most revolutionaries did, and I would also post videos and messages on Facebook. I have been involved in resistance activity since the September 2013 demonstrations (*Niḍāluhā* 2020: 19).

Before the marches began, one of the women would draw a map and share it to announce the demonstration route. In addition, mothers would show their support by preparing and supplying food and water, even protecting demonstrators inside their homes from being questioned by the security forces. In some cases, this went so far that women were physically attacked, and one woman was shot dead in her home by a live bullet during demonstrations in the city of Atbara.

The power of 'Umar al-Bashīr's regime, which had lasted for nearly thirty years, declined over the course of the revolution, particularly in relation to women's

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<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Salah 2021.



issues. There was a shift in its prevailing attitudes, which had previously only dealt with women in the context of their participation in the ruling NCP and government agencies. All women who were unaffiliated with the NCP or the regime faced a glass ceiling, and their roles in the public sphere were diminished. During the revolution, many alternatives emerged to these discriminatory attitudes, which had previously been formally expressed in slogans such as “a woman’s voice is *awra* [indecent]” (a reference to the *inqādh* regime’s Islamist background), which aimed to discourage women from raising their voices to chant. This became “a woman’s voice is *thawra* [a revolution],” to express the fact that women could use their voices to show that they did not accept their situation (see Figure 2 below).



**Figure 2:** Street artwork by Alaa Satir, Khartoum.<sup>12</sup>

This is a girls' revolution!	الثورة دي ثورة بنات. . .
Come on girls, stand strong!	هوي يا بنات أبقوا الشبات

During the feminist movement of the 1960s, women wrote articles in magazines and newspapers under pseudonyms, afraid of their real names being made public. Nafisa Kāmil (a pioneer of feminist activism who set up the Charitable Women’s Association of El Obeid, the first such association in Sudan) published many news-

<sup>12</sup> Source: Diab 2020: 22.

paper articles, which she would sign off with the letters N.K. (Kāmil 1997: xiv–xvi). This was also the case for other pioneers of the feminist movement. On the other hand, Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm, who presided over the SWU until her death in 2017, would ask women writing in *Şawt al-Mar'a* not to conceal their names, as a way of pushing back against the “indecent” argument and boosting their self-esteem. Women therefore wrote for the magazine under their real names (Ismā'īl 1990: 36): second names spelled out in full accompanied by an initial for their first name, rather than only two initials (see Figure 3 below).

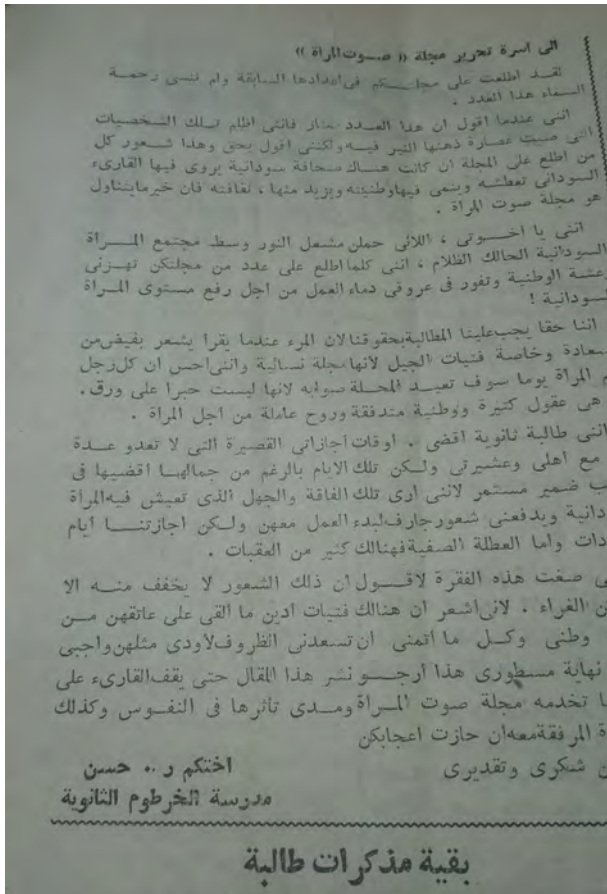


Figure 3: Signature of a female author at the bottom of an article in *Şawt al-Mar'a*.<sup>13</sup>

13 “Your sister, R. Ḥasan, Khartoum Secondary School”. Lone Paper, *Şawt al-Mar'a* Box, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

On 6 April 2019, following a widespread popular movement that had lasted for several months, the demonstrations arrived at the army headquarters, where opposition forces announced that they would stage a sit-in until the regime fell. Crowds of Sudanese people flocked to the site in an attempt to force the authorities to give up power. Women played a prominent role, and were a constant presence as active participants in all areas, including protecting citizens at the site by setting up checkpoints, providing literacy classes to homeless children, and providing medical care at clinics located at the sit-in. They were also involved in spreading awareness by holding conferences, forums, and political talks, as well as sourcing and preparing food and drink.

The presence of women at the sit-in was therefore noticeable rather than discreet. They worked from tents belonging to various feminist organisations and associations, educating people on women's rights for equality and their demands to abolish laws the *inqādh* regime refused to repeal. They achieved this by holding seminars and daily programmes and showing documentaries about the women's movement. Demands were also made for Sudan to sign the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979), which the regime had refused to ratify after expressing reservations about some of its articles. During the sit-in, a number of these feminist organisations and associations worked to raise awareness around the CEDAW and present these articles for discussion. It is worth mentioning here that before the December Revolution, women had already staged multiple protests against the regime's failure to ratify the CEDAW. Despite repeated attempts by the authorities to disperse the sit-in, the women stood firm and determined and, even though some were killed at the site, they did not falter in their determination to achieve what they were fighting for, and remained committed to the resistance until the regime fell.

In Sudan, preparations for the month of Ramadan, which involve preparing different types of local foods and juices, begin far in advance. Since women are responsible for this, they began preparations for that year during the sit-in. Both inside and outside the site, women from various parts of the capital took it upon themselves to make meals and drinks for the people who were fasting, as well as those who had come from every part of Sudan to take part in the sit-in: women travelled from as far away as Wadi Howar, in the most westerly region of Sudan, carrying supplies for the protesters, and from the South, the East and the North, all in support of the revolution. They did all of this in the belief that they had to support the protesters until the regime fell.

On 11 April 2019, the Sudanese army issued a statement declaring the removal of al-Bashīr and announcing the end of his political regime. The Sudanese people, women among them, went out in jubilation, and filled the air with triumphant chants and ululations. Negotiations with the Military Council and the Forces of

Freedom and Change began on 13 April to transfer power to civilians. Women were represented in the negotiating delegation by Mervat Ḥamad al-Nīl, who was the negotiator representing the FFC. In an interview with the newspaper *al-Intibāha* (Ramaḍān 2019), talking about the alliance of civil society organisations, she said that although women had been significant participants in the protest movement, this was not reflected in their presence at the negotiating table and in subsequent leadership positions in the transitional government. Furthermore, in an interview with Alma Ḥasūn (2019) of BBC Arabic, she said she had already been part of the negotiations for several months and that initially some of her colleagues had deliberately been at odds with her, before taking her seriously and listening to her.

To conclude what we have discussed so far in this chapter, it is worth stating that attempts to document women's participation in the events between December 2018 and July 2019 should not be limited to such a general scope of research. During this period, large numbers of Sudanese women took part in a great many initiatives, which should be researched and documented on their own merits. With the help of the internet, plus a little scholarly effort backed up by methodologies and theories, it may be possible to arrive at a greater understanding of the nature of women's political activism during this time.

## **Women's Leadership Roles and Gender Relations during the December Revolution**

Following our general overview of women's participation in the December Revolution and our discussion of their considerable presence across all elements of the movement – at marches, sit-ins, and protests – we will now examine the leadership role they played during this revolution. A leadership role may be defined as a particular person holding a position through which they are able to influence a particular group via their ideas and opinions, where on the basis of their position, this person takes decisions and formulates policies that are then implemented. Women's participation at this level of leadership is nothing new in the history of Sudanese uprisings. Indeed, during the October 1964 Revolution, women were part of the Professional Front, which led the protest movement at the time. Women were also present during the uprising of April 1985, as part of the leading bodies affiliated to the unions, as well as being members of the political parties. More recently, women have held numerous leadership positions in Sudan's latest grassroots movement. This began with women taking positions such as these in the opposition parties during the period before the protests began: positions that thereafter formed part of the bodies that created the FFC. One such example is Dr. Iḥsān Faḳīrī of the

Doctors Committee, who has said that she was one of the first women to sign the Freedom and Change Charter (Faḡīrī 2020). Similarly, Maryam al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī (vice-president of the Umma Party) was part of the coordination council for the FFC – the highest authority in the revolution’s leadership structure – and Hanādī Faḡl, a member of the central committee of the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP), was arrested at the beginning of the revolution.

Women also occupied leadership positions in civil society organisations, lobbying organisations, and professional and other groups, which together later formed the SPA – the body that led the mass movement up until Sudan’s transition agreement. One of these women is Qamariyya ‘Umar, a teacher at the Belgian Sudanese Technical School, a member of the SCP, vice-president of the executive office for the Sudanese Teachers’ Committee (*lajnat al-mu‘allimīn al-sūdāniyyīn*), and rapporteur of the secretariat for the SPA (which played a key role in bringing together the other entities representing professions and other groups under the FFC). She took up the latter role in January 2019.

Among Qamariyya ‘Umar’s leadership functions, she was responsible for monitoring the implementation of decisions, keeping track of expenses, and overseeing all the duties of the SPA’s secretariat. She referred to this in an interview with the author of this chapter: “The secretariat rapporteur is the person who links together all the offices, since the offices all submit their reports to the rapporteur. The rapporteur is also responsible for handling and monitoring expenses”<sup>14</sup>. She also said that Dr. Īmān Muṣṭafā was in charge of the SPA’s shadow committee – an alternative, precautionary, and confidential committee set up by the SPA’s leadership to fill any potential leadership gap if the SPA’s leaders were to be arrested by the authorities. Īmān Muṣṭafā was the point of contact between the secretariat and the shadow committee, communicating everything that happened in the secretariat to the shadow committee so that it would be up to date with the operations of the SPA and aware of any directives and decisions adopted by its affiliated bodies. Qamariyya ‘Umar also told us that Dr. Wamḡa Kamāl had been responsible for the SPA’s regulatory office, a post she occupied in the period before the majority of the SPA secretariat’s declared members were arrested. She was in charge of this critical office from January 2019 until the fall of the regime.

Female leaders of the SPA also included Doriya Muḡammād Bābīkr and Tamāḡīr al-Ṭarīfī ‘Awaḡ al-Karīm, who worked in the executive office for the Sudanese Teachers’ Committee, and Iḡsān Faḡīrī and Hiba ‘Umar, who were leaders in the Sudan Doctors Legal Syndicate (*niqābat aṭibbā’ al-sūdān al-shar‘iyya*). Women also made up 50% of the leadership of the Sudan Alliance of Democratic Lawyers (*tahāluf*

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14 Qamariyya ‘Umar. Interview with author, Khartoum Bahri, 14 November 2019.

*al-muḥāmin al-dīmuqrāṭiyyīn*), although this was not reflected in the Alliance's representation in the SPA's secretariat and council. Female lawyers from the Alliance also played a role in the SPA's supporting offices, as did Nūn Kushkūsh in the SPA's regulatory office, Sāmiyya al-Hāshimi in the union office, and Manāl 'Awaḍ Khūjali on the legal committee. Qamariyya 'Umar was also a rapporteur for the coordination council of the FFC. She said in her interview that there was another woman with her, but she was arrested before she began working at the council. Qamariyya 'Umar's participation in the movement was not only in terms of leadership and organisation; she had also been an active participant in protests and other forms of opposition since the *inqādh* regime took power. She said: "I always take part in the protests and demonstrations, including protests by the SPA, by feminist groups and by groups protesting against price rises and declining living conditions."<sup>15</sup>

Overall, this illustrates that women most definitely had a notable presence in the leading bodies of the December 2018 Revolution, which in turn shows that women have played a very influential role in these protest movements at both the grassroots and leadership levels. Women have taken approximately one-third of the seats in the SPA's leadership council, a high proportion when compared with women's previous participation in such positions. Indeed, as we reported above, the SPA is the main group in the FFC coalition, and many of its female leaders came to the fore during the revolution.

In another interview with Hiba 'Umar about her leadership position in the Doctors Legal Syndicate (many of whose female leaders were part of the SPA's secretariat at different times) she said that her influential role in the Syndicate compelled the security forces to arrest her in the early days of the unrest.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Mervat Ḥamad al-Nīl from the Civil Forces Assembly (*tajammu' al-qawwā al-madaniyya*) – a platform for civil society organisations representing social groups, women, young people, regional affairs, public figures, and lobbying groups (*Civil Forces Assembly* 2019), as well as a signatory to the Freedom and Change Charter – said in an interview that she had begun working with the opposition against the *inqādh* regime a long time earlier, and added:

I have been engaging with civil society in all public initiatives to bring down the regime since 2012. I was the media coordinator for the HIRAK Initiative, which began after the protests called by the Communist Party in January 2018. And I was chosen by the Civil Forces Assembly from a selected group among others from the Forces of Freedom and Change to negotiate with the Military Council on the transition of power.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Qamariyya 'Umar. Interview with author, Khartoum Bahri, 14 November 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Hiba 'Umar. Interview with author, WhatsApp, 12 October 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Mervat H. al-Nīl. Interview with author, WhatsApp, 1 November 2020.

It is worth noting that although women reached the highest levels in many professional and political organisations that together led the non-violent grassroots movement in Sudan until the fall of the regime, this does not mean that the path to the top was a bed of roses, or that it satisfied all women's demands. Indeed, it also saw its share of internal fights, conflicts, and hidden rejection, as Mervat Ḥamad al-Nīl mentioned in an interview with the author of this chapter: "Gender discrimination existed as part of the Military Council's negotiations with the Forces of Freedom and Change, even by some of the civil forces who were representing them."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Qamariyya 'Umar faced numerous issues due to being a woman and occupying a critical role in the SPA. She was harassed by one of the members of the secretariat, who mocked her ability to manage her job as secretariat rapporteur and refused to accept a woman in this post, yet at the same time, she also experienced solidarity from other members.<sup>19</sup>

When we look at all the official spokespeople for the SPA and the FFC, men clearly dominate the public front of these organisations. Nevertheless, the SPA also included among its spokespeople Dr. Sāra 'Abd al-Jalīl, president of the Sudan Doctors Union UK, and Nuḥā al-Zayn, the SPA's spokesperson and representative abroad. Perhaps the idea here was not to expose women to the brutal treatment of the security forces, despite the fact that it was inconsistent with participation by women in all forms of resistance activities and demonstrations against the regime.

Another important aspect of women's participation in the December Revolution is the part they played in the resistance committees (*lijān muqāwama*), which were defined by the SPA as groups of citizens of all ages united in grassroots neighbourhood formations aimed at creating and following through on change, while incorporating all age groups and ensuring equal representation for both sexes to the extent possible.<sup>20</sup> These committees started to become visibly active in September 2013 with their calls for civil disobedience. The majority of their activities were centred around neighbourhoods and focused on supplying and organising the resistance movement. They worked in secret, hidden from the eyes of the security forces and members of the regime. Many women joined these committees, and since neighbourhoods are the women's sphere of activity, it was they who took to galvanising the community: planning, organising, and spreading calls inside the neighbourhoods for marches and sit-ins. A female member of the resistance committees said in an interview that "there are a lot of women in the resistance committees,

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<sup>18</sup> Mervat H. al-Nīl. Interview with author; WhatsApp, 1 November 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Qamariyya 'Umar. Interview with author; Khartoum Bahri, 14 November 2019.

<sup>20</sup> See Sudanese Professionals Association (Facebook group), available at <https://www.facebook.com/SdnProAssociation>.

which is evident from their participation in the committees' activities, especially at a local level. However, not many women are involved in coordination."<sup>21</sup>

From the time of the first protests of the December Revolution, many women were subjected to preventive detention. Detentions were particularly numerous in the case of female supporters of groups and political parties opposed to the *inqādh* regime; thousands were detained during the revolution and physically and verbally abused. In some cases, they were detained for nearly five months. Many female doctors belonging to the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors (*lajnat aṭibbā' al-Sūdān al-markaziyya*, part of the SPA) were also detained. Indeed, the number of arrests against women in the December Revolution surpassed that of previous uprisings. In the 1964 revolution, women were interrogated and physically and verbally abused, but there were no preventive detentions in the sense the term is understood today. Similarly, in April 1985, only a few women were detained, and they were not held for long. This is in contrast to what happened during the December Revolution, which demonstrates that the scale of women's participation in this uprising exceeded expectations to the extent that it frightened the regime.

Women's participation in the December Revolution was plain for all to see; however, there are certain features of it that indicate poor levels of awareness around both women's capacity for achievement and their influential position in society. During the unrest, some people doctored photos of officials and leaders of the NCP to make them look like women, complete with a headscarf, *thōb*, and makeup. This was their way of devaluing these men, as well as being an obvious expression of both disdain towards, and the inferiority of, women. What is more, members of the security forces were referred to as "*mara*" – which in Sudanese Arabic means "woman" – to describe them as cowards, as is clear from this chant, which was aimed at degrading al-Bashīr, and which was widespread at this time: "Leave, al-Bashīr you son of a woman (*yā Bashīr wad al-mara*)! Go away! You can't stop our revolution!"<sup>22</sup>

The chant was heavily criticised, and there was an outcry, with calls for it to be stopped immediately. This was also the case with other chants that were deemed to be insensitive to issues of gender and sex, with demands to use other sayings, slogans, and chants to counter these sentiments. In our interviews, a number of women expressed their rejection of these slogans, as well as the chants that reduced the role of women to marriage. One woman said: "I didn't like hearing or using this chant: 'We've toppled our government, now we want our *Kandakāt*.'"<sup>23</sup> When-

<sup>21</sup> Manāl al-Jilī. Interview with author, Khartoum, 1 November 2019.

<sup>22</sup> A threat shouted by the Sudanese in an attempt to devalue al-Bashīr by saying he has a woman for a mother, calling on him to retreat and saying he is incapable of quashing their revolution.

<sup>23</sup> Here, they are saying that they have ousted 'Umar al-Bashīr's regime and now want to marry the *Kandakāt*: that is, the women who took part in the uprising.



ever I heard it, I would stop and tell them ‘we didn’t come here to get married, we came here for rights and dignity’” (*Niḍāluhā* 2020: 60). Indeed, women’s own resistance against the stereotyping of women was plain to see both during and after the December Revolution: they stood powerfully in defence of their rights in a complete feeling of equality with men.

## Conclusion

The participation by women in Sudan’s recent peaceful grassroots movement is associated with an accumulation of experiences that stretches back through history. Women went out to oppose both the Ottoman-Egyptian and Anglo-Egyptian colonial regimes, and continued their fight until independence. Women also protested against the three post-independence military governments, which demonstrates that there are also many parallels with women’s methods of resistance and mobilisation in past uprisings, of which the events of the December 2018 Revolution were an extension.

Many women have risen to prominence as leaders throughout history, whether through their participation in opposition bodies or by raising awareness of the need to fight and resist using the positions they occupied. The SWU strove for women’s leadership, and to encourage others to work and organise with them. In this way, the SWU was able to leave a clear mark on the 1964 October Revolution. In terms of public involvement and female leadership in the revolution’s commanding bodies, two leaders of the SWU were part of the Professional Front – the group leading the uprising at the time. Moreover, women had a sizeable involvement in the demonstrations and protests in April 1985 across many of Sudan’s cities and rural areas. They were also a very strong presence in the Union Assembly, which was in charge of directing this uprising. Subsequently, in December 2018, numerous feminist groups emerged to bolster the popular movement and its leadership bodies by producing numerous female leaders, both on the street and in the higher organs of these bodies. Likewise, female participation exceeded expectations in the SPA, where women held around a third of the seats on the executive council. Therefore, the increasing female leadership in the command systems of these revolutions has drawn on an important legacy of mass mobilisation against dictatorships in Sudan. The December Revolution began in several towns, cities, and villages beyond the capital – including Maiurno, Damazin, al-Nuhud, Gadarif, Atbara, al-Damir, and al-Hasahisa – before spreading across the country in a way that differed from previous uprisings. As a result, the study of women’s participation in this movement requires an examination of all the regions in which women had an influential role

and went out to demand change. It is still also necessary to document what took place in the hometowns of all the women who travelled great distances to take part in the revolution and the sit-in outside the army headquarters. These questions form a rich and exciting research agenda.

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Mahassin Abdul Jalil

## Chapter 3

# From the Terraces of Celebrated Narratives to the Cellars of Tarnished History: Obliterating Knowledge in Sudanese and Arab Historiography

## Introduction

This chapter seeks to shed light on the challenges facing the production of a form of historical knowledge that is defined as scientific and how it is used and consumed, especially in conservative – or indeed autocratic – political systems.<sup>1</sup> It asks the question of how historical knowledge becomes an essential part of social and political struggles. It also studies the measures that political, social and even academic authorities enforce in order to divide and classify the past: on the one hand, there is a history that is celebrated and acclaimed, under the spotlights of academic and social institutions; and on the other, there is a history that is tarnished, hidden or obliterated, which I refer to in this chapter as the cellar of tarnished history. As defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, to obliterate is “to remove utterly from recognition or memory.” It may also be defined as to move, modify, completely remove or partially distort, erase or “destroy utterly all trace, indication, or significance of” physical or intellectual material, or to replace such material with others or render it invisible. A further meaning is “to make undecipherable or imperceptible by obscuring or wearing away.”<sup>2</sup>

I have specifically chosen to use the term “obliteration” because of my reservations about using other terminology that is already generally established in social knowledge and more specifically in discussions of historical knowledge: terms such as “turning a blind eye” and “the history of marginalised groups”, and everything on the spectrum between these two concepts. “Turning a blind eye” points to a process of effacement that simultaneously plays out at a conscious and subconscious level, whereas here “obliterated” carries the sense of an existence or history

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1 The first draft of this chapter was translated from Arabic by Cadenza Academic Translations. The final version benefitted from input from Elena Vezzadini and Iris Seri-Hersch.

2 “Obliterate,” Merriam-Webster, accessed 20 November 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/obliterate?src=search-dict-hed#synonyms>.

that has been *deliberately* hidden, distorted, erased or fully or partially confiscated, the substance of which has been tampered with orally or in writing, or twisted and given a different meaning; or a history of what may be socially taboo, which is merely alluded to behind a linguistic smokescreen of metaphors or other figurative speech. It is a suppressed history, but it is one where the actors are nonetheless aware of the mechanism by which it is suppressed, and are capable of resisting it, so that the obliteration may be only temporary.

The chapter will be developed in five sections. In the first, I discuss some theoretical considerations of history as a social artefact, a knowledge that is not only informed by power structures, but also shapes and informs them in turn. Moreover, history overlaps into social values and moral codes, and this feedback effect has several layers of impact on the writing of history. The sections that follow start out from Michel-Rolph Trouillot's seminal work and analyse how his theory on the "four layers of silences" is accurately mirrored by the practices of historical writing in Arab, and more particularly Sudanese, historiography. I have chosen Sudan as the main area of focus of this study, but it will also refer to the Arab world in general as an area governed by analogous political and social contexts. A specific section will be dedicated to each of these layers.

This chapter is grounded in my twenty-year practice as a Sudanese historian based in Sudan, and follows an approach that is both theoretical and practical. It is a reflection on not only the multiple layers of obstacles and the constraints faced by professional historians in Sudan, but also the possibilities opened up by social history when it is written by – or through the perspective and experiences of – marginalised actors.

## Theoretical Considerations: History as Social Knowledge

Because of its highly contentious nature and the interwovenness of facts and narratives, historical knowledge lies at the edge between social sciences and humanities. According to the historian and epistemologist John Tosh, this liminality is an essential characteristic of historical knowledge (Tosh 2015: 43):

But the truth is that history cannot be defined as either a humanity or a social science without denying a large part of its nature. The mistake that is so often made is to insist that history be categorised as one to the exclusion of the other. History is a hybrid discipline which owes its endless fascination and its complexity to the fact that it straddles the two. If the study of history is to retain its full vitality, this central ambivalence must continue to be recognised.

This leads us to reflect on the connections between history and the social sciences. Firstly, these connections are obvious in social history. According to the *Annales* School, and as outlined in particular by Marc Bloch, historical study should explore the full anthropological and social dimensions of humanity (Kawtharānī 2000). Secondly, the strength of the connection between history and the social sciences is clear from the inspiration it takes from the methodologies of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and even psychology. Thirdly, at a deeper level, historiography is governed by context: in other words, social structures and subsystems<sup>3</sup> infiltrate and have a deep influence on the production of historical knowledge, as this chapter will demonstrate.

There are several different layers associated with the observation of the inherently social nature of historical knowledge. One is connected to the social background of the producer of knowledge, the historian. Historians seek to produce historical truth along a broad spectrum of possible meanings given to this term of “truth”. Yet within this space they may have a bias towards their specific social sphere and the individual choices determined by their affiliation to it. Historians come from a particular social position and attitude. They are both historical actors and actors in history, and as such they represent the consciousness of a specific group and elite who produce historical knowledge. Edward Carr echoed this observation, arguing that accepting “basic facts rests not on any quality in the facts themselves, but on an a priori decision of the historian” (Carr 1987: 11). This, Carr argues, is a decision to turn these basic facts into so-called “historical facts,” and since it is historians who decide on their arrangement and selection, it is impossible to maintain that the facts speak for themselves. Indeed, “the belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of this historian is a preposterous fallacy” (Carr 1987: 11). Basic facts only become historical events because of the meaning attributed to them by a historian or by any person qualified to produce authoritative statements about the past. Historical anthropology provides a contemporary example of this in the case of the Shilluk people (also known as the “Chollo”), one of the oldest agricultural societies of Southern Sudan. In the story of their origin, the Shilluk believe that they emerged from fertile matter on the day the eternal cow split and gave the earth a part of its body, Nyikang, the messenger of civilisation and stability, the spiritual father of the Shilluk and the

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<sup>3</sup> According to Talcott Parsons, a subsystem is any social unit within a social order that serves a specific function through a complex system whose constituent parts aim to create solidarity and stability. Similarly, a subsystem, or unit of social function, may be defined as a specific group of actions and interactions between mutually connected individuals. See Parsons and Shils (1951) and Sharrok *et al.* (2003).



founder of their kingdom. This account is the place where the Shilluk's entire oral history begins and to which it returns. Every bloodline that does not trace back to this eternal cow, Dean Aduk, is therefore not an accurate reflection of the story of the Shilluk people according to the way they recount it and according to the legitimate interpretation of history among the Shilluk (Deng 2005).

The second layer concerns the overlapping between moral codes, values and history, an issue to which I will return several times in the following sections. For the moment, suffice it to say that according to the established moral values of a certain epoch and society, there is a past that is seen as “impure” and a past that is “immaculate,” a past that may be polished and embellished and a past that may be suppressed and silenced. The past may also become a tool for attributing culpability, which is something I observed first-hand when studying post-slavery relations in Sudan. Yoshiko Kurita also remarked on this in her research into the Sudanese political elite at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She noted how the assignment of guilt for past actions was an active component of the conflict between political elites (tribal and religious leaders, and some intellectuals who supported them) on the one hand, and the new elite of educated and materially privileged people, which also included children of former slaves, on the other (Kurita 2004). In short, it can be argued that when a collective becomes conscious of its historical self, it does so from an essentially sociological perspective.

Thirdly, following in the footsteps of Marc Bloch, the present and the past are in a constant oscillatory movement, each being persistently present in the other, but through a number of endless and elusive forms (Bloch 1962). The recall of specific fragments of all the existing evidence about a certain past event is often closely related to the historian's contemporary circumstances (Connell-Smith and Lloyd 1972: 41), and with the circumstances of all layers of society. The present is a moment charged with social contradictions and contrasting interests, and so all groups naturally seek to affirm their authority in the present by invoking the past – with the past representing a repository of powerful symbolic capital. Likewise, conflicting identities fight over both history and memory to affirm their superiority in the present and the past alike, whether this is a superiority in terms of class, politics or morality and so forth. What is more, formerly powerful groups who have lost their power will strive to assert some form of supremacy in relation to the past, just as currently dominant groups will also go back through history to ascribe themselves a sense of ancient glory.

To conclude, the influence of the social subsystems on historical knowledge may be directly illustrated across three areas:

1. The use and re-use of history, which naturally leads to vastly differing conclusions on the same historical arguments, and highlights the functional roles history plays in the social conflict – a functionality that has a dialectical rela-

- tionship with the forms and parameters of this conflict. Likewise, there is also evidence for this influence in the relationship between authority (political, social and so on) and the production and reproduction of historical knowledge.
2. The methodology by which historical knowledge is constructed. Constructing historical knowledge as a scientific discipline is a process that is influenced at all stages by the social structures and subsystems, as I will explain further below.
  3. The influence of historical knowledge on social reality, and vice versa:
    - a) the measures an authority devises (whatever its position or social status) to define what is remembered and what is forgotten;
    - b) the collective memory's penetration of the historical discourse;
    - c) history's active role in affirming social identities, which is reflected in the extent to which a certain group perceives that it has a distinct and shared history.

In the later parts of this chapter, I will give practical illustrations of each of these points. In order to do so, I organise my demonstration by adopting the famous “catalogue of silences” of the late Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995). In his seminal work on history and memory, Trouillot listed four crucial moments in which silences and omissions influence the production of history: the moment in which “basic facts” – to use Carr’s terminology – take place; the moment in which data are collected (archiving); the moment of remembering and producing narratives; and finally, the moment of reflecting and writing on events by an entity that is recognised as having the authority to give an accurate version of the past, which Trouillot referred to as the instance of making history (Trouillot 1995). These moments are similar to the threefold division of Paul Ricoeur (for which he is indebted to Michel de Certeau), which splits the production of historical knowledge into the following phases (Ricoeur 2009: 136, 138):

1. The documentary phase, which “runs from the declarations of eyewitnesses to the constituting of archives, which takes as its epistemological programme the establishing of documentary proof”;
2. “The explanation/understanding phase”;
3. The representative phase, where the discourse is put into a literary or written form and where the historian’s intention is plainly stated.

These three phases are not based on a chronological order; rather, they represent interconnected methodological stages of the complete process of a professional historian’s work. Out of all the stages, with regard to the final phase – the written production of the historical discourse – Ricoeur emphasises that writing “is the threshold of language that historical knowing has already crossed, in distancing

itself from memory to undertake the three-fold adventure of archival research, explanation and representation” (Ricoeur 2009: 138).

Returning to Trouillot, his four phases denote key stages in the construction of historical knowledge. Indeed, these are moments when knowledge is formed and then successively renewed. In the following sections, I will describe how Trouillot’s four stages are powerful interpretative lenses through which to read the production of historical knowledge, not only in the Sudanese context, but also more broadly in the Arab world, Egypt and Palestine being other cases in point.

## Trouillot’s First Moment: Turning Basic Facts into Historical Events

What makes a fact worth being recorded? When does it become a historical event? What of facts and events that concern ordinary people? This issue has been a hotbed of historical debate for decades, as expressed even in literary pieces such as Bertolt Brecht’s famous poem “Questions from a Worker Who Reads History” (1935):

Who built seven-gated Thebes?  
The books keep the names of kings.  
Was it kings who hauled the chunks of rock?  
And Babylon, destroyed and redestroyed,  
Who built and rebuilt it all those times?

Many of the questions asked in this poem have been at the heart of the preoccupation of historical schools such as the British History Workshop or the French *Annales* School. They have also been addressed to a great extent in academic debates, such as in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s 1988 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak 2010). This critical philosophical inquiry described how the exclusion of subalterns is made possible by the absence of their voice in both history and the public sphere. In addition, it described how this exclusion has a direct impact on the value of historical knowledge that is generated from a subaltern voice.

One of the most blatant cases in point on how “basic facts” that concern subaltern actors rarely “make it” to be considered to be historical traces is women’s history. In most societies where relations among social subsystems were, and continue to be, governed by a patriarchal system – in Arab countries, for instance – women have typically been removed from history because their “basic facts” – especially those of ordinary women – were considered not to be worth recording, as if there were no social and political need for a history of ordinary women. This results in an absence of data on the conditions of women, which is the inevitable

result of the restriction of women's role in the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, according to Sheila Johansson:

Most women feel that their sex does not have an interesting or significant past. However, like minority groups, women cannot afford to lack a consciousness of a collective identity, one which necessarily involves a shared awareness of the past. Without this, a social group suffers from a kind of collective amnesia, which makes it vulnerable to the impositions of dubious stereotypes (Johansson 1976: 15).

By way of a recent example, I would highlight the important work by the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers and the Centre for Arab Unity Studies published under the title *Al-Nisā' al-'Arabiyya fī al-'Ishrīniyyāt: Ḥuḍūran wa-Haw-iyyatan* ("Arab Women in the 1920s: Presence and Identity"), as well as the papers presented at the Women and Memory Forum (WMF) based in Egypt in 1998<sup>5</sup>. The common feature of most of these works is the reference to a scarcity of sources on the history of women, to the extent that the research eventually reaches an impasse, as explained by one of the researchers:

When I decided to research the role of women in the 1920 Revolution in Iraq and the beginnings of political consciousness for Iraqi women, I had no idea I would come up against a paucity of sources. Those supposedly grand and distinguished male historians took great care to record when okra was first cultivated in Iraq and how Baghdadis first became acquainted with drinking coffee, but they did not stop for long (or for short, for that matter) to examine the condition of women in Iraq. They skipped over crucial issues at the core of scholarship on Iraqi society (Sunbul *et al.* 2001: 337).

Bayān Nuwayhid al-Ḥūt has echoed this in her study of the experiences of Palestinian women who took part in the resistance in the 1920s: "Even though women were very active, there is hardly any mention of them in the records and history books on the period of the British Mandate in general and specifically that of the 1920s" (Sunbul *et al.* 2001: 308). Women acted, protested and fought against colonial rule together with men, but while men's political action became a "fact" worthy of historical note, that of women did not, reflecting their invisibility amidst a patriarchal context that erased their independent agency. And as their action was not worth noting, there was also no point in collecting witnesses, texts and other evidence, keeping documents to save them from destruction and preserving them in archives for later reuse.

Another example of the silences that may intervene at the level of "basic facts" is the participation by ordinary people in events that are perceived as politically

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<sup>4</sup> Reference here to the modern history of women implies both that modern history is itself a distinct field and that national archives contain a relatively large amount of material on modern history, but that women and their lives are generally absent as a subject.

<sup>5</sup> On the WMF project see: <http://www.wmf.org/eg/en/>.

momentous and ground-breaking – revolutions, independence struggles and regime changes. Popular participation in events such as these may very well generate a multitude of traces, but in many cases they are immediately erased and destroyed. One case in point is the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Despite the fact that various social actors felt an urgent need to reinterpret history on the basis of new revolutionary ideals, many traces of the revolution were immediately and paradoxically erased (Izz al-Dīn 2016: 204). According to Muḥammad ‘Izz al-Dīn:

The day after Mubarak fell, many people came out to clean Tahrir Square, as if the remnants of the revolution were blemishes that had to be urgently removed. On the morning of February 12, thousands of young men and women arrived carrying brooms and facemasks and began cleaning away the rubble left over from the revolution’s battles, the smoke from which still hung in the air. It was a miserable spectacle that day. Large numbers of activists from civil society and charitable organisations, and middle-class youth – the main groups who took part in the revolution – worked together to eliminate all physical traces of the revolution and dump them in rubbish bags. They removed graffiti from shopfronts and from the walls around Tahrir Square in Cairo, al-Qaed Ibrahim Square in Alexandria, and other squares in other cities. These groups saw history as no more than a space to be cleaned up and polished (Izz al-Dīn 2016: 209).

A similar situation occurred during the December Revolution of 2018–2019 in Sudan, specifically the sit-in that took place between 6 April and 3 June 2019 in central Khartoum, which became a real-time memory battleground. For instance, there were displays at the site of the protest celebrating the spoils the revolutionaries had taken from the state, and there was a special tent dedicated to documenting reports of torture in the prisons of the newly-ousted regime. Likewise, people spoke out on virtually all the available platforms at the sit-in, relating their personal experiences and first-hand testimonies. In addition, the revolutionaries devised their own ways of preserving this historic moment in writing and artworks, and the memory and historical symbolism of the sit-in’s location were discussed at evening gatherings. However, when the sit-in was broken up, all the walls were painted over with white paint – literally a whitewashing of history.

A third and final example of “facts” and actors that do not yield archivable “traces” is connected to the many instances, especially in authoritarian regimes and ultraconservative social systems, where these “traces” are destroyed because they might pose a threat to the social existence of individuals. The security context may force people to protect themselves from past, present or future dangers posed by the context. The quickest solution is to be shrouded in silence, or to destroy or erase documents. This is the case with Palestinians living under occupation<sup>6</sup>: decades of

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<sup>6</sup> Identities that are marginalised and excluded from the official memory (and have an oppressed history) invent special tools to protect their historical selves. This may include denying the official memory and questioning its ideas (i.e., a form of counter-oppression).

oppression have led many Palestinians to burn and destroy their personal archives and papers, such as the martyr ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ḥusaynī, whose possessions and papers were all burned in 1967. ‘Urūba ‘Uthmān (2018) has described the condition of memory and the Palestinian archives by noting that:

Control of the archives [by the occupier] does not always take the form of the direct plundering [of records]. On occasion, it impels Palestinians to subdue their own impassioned voices towards an archival discourse that supports the occupier’s national sovereignty. This has the function of uniting and strengthening the occupier’s society on the one hand, and instilling in Palestinians the sense of their complete inability to engage with their own narrative without first engaging with this archival discourse on the other hand.

These are three examples of how traces of the actions and voices of political or social subaltern actors do not find their ways into archives. While this level of silence already hampers the writing of the history of countless ordinary actors, it is but the first possible way in which the social and political context determines the possibility of remembering the past.

## **Trouillot’s Second Moment: Collecting Evidence, Creating and Handling Archives**

The process of collecting historical evidence and documents and keeping them in an archive depends on the evaluation of the historical value of these traces. It is clearly not possible to preserve everything, and so an established procedure exists for destroying material that has been assessed as being marginal and of no historical worth (Roper 1977: 153). The construction of any archive is a distinctly exclusionary process. Every exclusion is an expression of a form of hegemony, which in turn is an expression of a specific social subsystem and power configuration. The authority to keep or destroy also derives from the network of relations that govern this subsystem and the tools of social control ingrained within it. We may argue here that acts of selection and exclusion simultaneously reflect the nature of social alliances and the overlapping of the distinct interests of each stage of social and/or political transformation. The following general discussion will examine some of the problematic features that characterise the construction of archives as repositories for memory. I will present various examples as evidence, with a focus on the state of certain Arab archives, particularly those that were set up during the colonial period.

Because the national archives of many Arab (and African) countries were established during the colonial era, they were founded by administrative bodies that reflected the contemporary patterns of political hegemony. For instance, as Elena

Vezzadini (2012) has noted, the first national archive in Sudan (now the National Records Office) was created during the colonial period as a tool of the British administration. After the First World War, many powers were devolved to local leaders. Accordingly, colonial officers began to file information on all notables in urban and rural areas, particularly on religious figures, more than any other social group, as potential allies and as colonial intermediaries. The intelligence services kept many lengthy files on the history, ancestry and relationships of religious families, as well as those of urban and rural leaders. On the other hand, files on people from lower social classes began to be stored when these actors came to the attention of the administration in the framework of political agitation. The descriptions and judgments contained in these files, like the records of the so-called “rabble,”<sup>7</sup> clearly reveal a prevailing will that sought to select opponents who were socially and class appropriate.

The selectivity that characterises the making of any archive presents an ongoing issue. An archive is not permanent and fixed; it exists in a state of continuous deletion and addition. Its contents are also at risk of intentional destruction and control for political purposes. One example of this is the moment of a regime change, when suppressing the history of oppression and the memory of autocracy becomes tantamount to a suppression of the authorities’ oppression itself. When an authoritarian regime falls, one of the first places to be physically dismantled is often archives, or the institutional sites that represent the public memory of authoritarian regimes. During the Egyptian Revolution, the public came together to erase and burn remnants of the oppressive authority. Among the scenes from the revolution was the burning of written memories of dictatorship: from criminal records at the Galaa Court Complex and police reports in the suburbs and working-class neighbourhoods to files at the National Democratic Party headquarters – everything went up in flames (‘Izz al-Dīn 2016: 205). The same thing happened in Sudan after the fall of the regime of Ja‘far al-Nimayrī (1969–1985), and then again after the fall of the so-called “Salvation Regime” (*inqādh*) of ‘Umar al-Bashīr in 2019. Despite placing an emphasis on non-violence, the Sudanese protestors in 2019 attacked the headquarters of the security services in Port Sudan and Kassala, and the National Congress Party office in Atbara was set on fire. However, the erasure of records is often carried out by the archival institutions themselves. This is especially the case where archival documents contain unmistakable and overwhelming evidence of the accountability of the government for a certain event. This is precisely what happened with certain British Colonial Office records and files relating to Palestine at

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7 Their description as “rabble” should be questioned, as for instance it was also applied to people who attended higher education. Lord Cromer, talking of higher education, called it “the industry of the rabble” (Daly 1980).

the end of the 1940s; files that were most likely destroyed to cover the actions of the British during the turbulent period of the Mandate, as John Tosh has argued (2015).

In times of political transition, archives stand out as a battleground for the struggle between different ways of thinking. At such moments, the various competing parties attempt to recast the archives to assert their power and political and social dominance. In the same way, just as repressive regimes seek to impose their hegemony on the archives, when extremist ideologies acquire power, they look to extend their control over all repositories of historical memory. This can be seen in the way the so-called “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” (ISIS) destroyed artefacts that had stood as testimony to the greatness of human civilisation for more than five thousand years.<sup>8</sup>

Even in quieter times, the authorities that oversee archives restrict access through a barricade of administrative policies and bureaucratic obstacles to ensure that they keep a firm grip. These obstacles, which are especially present in authoritarian contexts, represent a barrier to scholarly research. Egyptian historian Khālid Fahmī went so far as to say that the Egyptian archives’ regulations “impede [the ability of] independent thought and study to understand modern Egyptian history or to present different readings of [the same] subject. Indeed, there is an unwritten rule to not provide access to documents on subjects that have already been studied” (Fahmī 2010). He went on to explain the increasing complexity of procedures by saying:

We are living in a police state; not only does the government wield its power by killing, torturing, imprisoning and forced disappearance but what ensures the continuation of this power is that it holds the monopoly of the discourse and the narrative. The Egyptian state is protective of how it sees itself and what is said about it.

It is clear, therefore, that the laws and regulations of certain archives continue to represent a non-democratic framework for knowledge. Even the modest provision of a time limit for lifting confidentiality does not apply to all documents, some of which remain closed for additional periods, depending on the political and social context. The more democratic and open the conditions are, the more likely it is that there will be a fixed time limit and that this will be adhered to. On the other

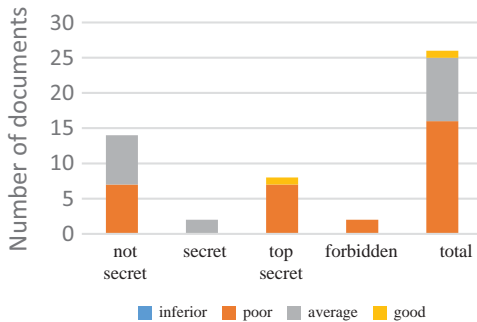
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<sup>8</sup> Another example is from Nazi Germany. The chapter on the customs of war in its army’s war conduct manual stated that “war cannot be conducted merely against the combatants of an enemy state but must seek to destroy the total material and intellectual (*geistig*) resources of the enemy” (Tuchman, quoted in Knuth 2006: 164). This led Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels to cheerfully declare at a Berlin book burning the success of his directive to eradicate relics of the past: “And thus [students] you do well in this midnight hour to commit to the flames the evil spirit of the past. This is a strong, great and symbolic deed—a deed which should document the following for the world to know – here the intellectual foundation of the November Republic is sinking to the ground, but from this wreckage the phoenix of a new spirit will triumphantly rise” (Schreiber 2015: 57).



hand, the more dictatorial and undemocratic the regime, the more likely it will be for this expectation to vanish into thin air. This is especially the case where an undemocratic political system is combined with the exclusion, marginalisation and segregation of certain segments of society, or in conditions of political and social unrest and instability.

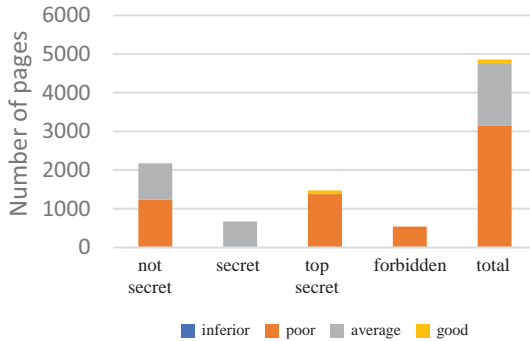
I will now discuss the particular case of the documents on slavery kept in the National Records Office of Khartoum. Access to these records continues to be prohibited even though the most recent of them date back nearly a century. The withholding of records may take multiple forms: access to some documents remains completely forbidden, while others are withheld on the grounds that their physical condition does not allow them to be made available to historians.<sup>9</sup> Slavery records are kept in the Civil Secretary section of the archive. The documents are categorised in two ways: first according to their degree of secrecy, and second according to the document's physical condition. The graphs below (Graph 1 and Graph 2) show that even if the level of confidentiality does not impede access to the document, the historian's access to it will be obstructed by its being considered too fragile to be accessible.



**Graph 1:** Physical condition and confidentiality of slavery records held in the Civil Secretary Collection, National Records Office of Sudan, according to number of documents.

The first thing we might notice about these classifications is their consistency. The confidentiality of the documents has remained unchanged since the archives were founded at the beginning of the colonial period, and the classification of the documents' physical condition has remained unchanged for at least three decades (at least according to the age of the most recent version of the archive catalogue). This is in addition to the fact that some documents with more than five or six hundred pages were all classified by their physical condition under one category

<sup>9</sup> For more examples, see 'Abd al-Jalil (2016).



**Graph 2:** Physical condition and confidentiality of slavery records held in the Civil Secretary Collection, National Records Office of Sudan, according to number of pages.

(for example inferior, poor) – and thereby withheld from access – even if only a very small number of their pages actually required maintenance. This lends weight to the suspicion that the archive authorities are complicit in not maintaining (what are for them) problematic documents or not disclosing their maintenance policy, and as a result they remain concealed for a protracted amount of time. At best, they may be made privately available to some scholars, and such a decision must be at the discretion of the authorities.<sup>10</sup>

What is more, it is the archive’s custodians who are responsible for editing the records and deciding what should be deleted and what is of interest to be kept, as in the example below.

This document (Figure 4) shows that part of the text has been crossed out, but in a different way from the method used to correct typing errors. This leads us to assume that this deletion was intentional. This is of course related to the sensitivity (and social taboo) of the topic of the text, which refers to homosexual relations between soldiers.

This leads us to conclude that the construction and accessibility of archives are dependent on a number of constraints, as well as on the historical setting. It is these constraints that determine the priorities of what evidence is selected. What is more, after the documents have been placed in the archives, they may be subject – either

<sup>10</sup> Some documents that are hidden and prohibited nonetheless do appear in the writings of some researchers. This is most notably the case of the book of Nugud (2013): *Slavery in the Sudan: History, Documents, and Commentary*. This famous left-wing historian/politician was able not only to see, but also to copy and publish most of the documents access to which was, and still is, restricted.

Notes .

Sodomy appears to be very largely on the increase in the Sudan and is probably far more widely spread than is realised .

(2). At the same time unnatural vice is viewed with the greatest disgust by most of the people in the Sudan : witness the instance of the boy , I think , in El Obeid who committed suicide rather than submit to the overtures of one of the teachers .

(3). This abhorrence is being constantly referred to in articles in the Hadara and all the religious teachers and respectable natives would welcome legislation of the kind proposed .

(4). With the departure of a large number of Egyptians the present time is a suitable for introducing this legislation .

(5). The following instances which have come to my official notice illustrate the extent to which sodomy is rife in various parts of the Sudan and , in particular , the large towns .

(a). In Omdurman in 1913 a wife of an Egyptian officer summoned her husband before me as he had deserted her and was living with her brother . The officer admitted the offence .

(b). In Wad Medani in 1919 an Egyptian ~~sergeant~~ corporal in , I think , the eighth battalion complained to me that he had been degraded to the ranks for refusing to submit to the overtures of one of the Egyptian officers . The affair ~~was reported to the~~ ~~authorities~~ ~~and~~ ~~was~~ ~~not~~ ~~dealt~~ ~~with~~ ~~by~~ ~~me~~ hardly came within my jurisdiction .

(c). In Wad Medani , in 1919, acting on information supplied by the notables and boy scouts I raided the merissa shops and over forty professional catamites were found . ~~There~~ Most of them were dealt with under the Vagabonds Ordinance while many others left for Cesti and El Obeid .

(d). In 1923 in Port Sudan and Suakin . Many of the merchants , particularly those of Suakinee or Arabian origin keep boys instead of mistresses .

(e). In 1924 in Atbara while searching houses of those suspected of political intrigue I found correspondence implicating several of the S.G.R. officials and ~~also~~ an Inspector of Schools in unnatural vice .

(f). Two civilian subnamurs have recently been reported to me for trying to use their police for unnatural vices . Against one there are many complaints but the other C.S.M. is not in this Province .

(g). Sodomy is a peculiarly Egyptian vice and should be stamped out in the Sudan . Once it gets a firm hold it will be very difficult to eradicate . Its spread in Atbara is very largely due to the activities of El Lewa Mohammed Pasha Fadil and his brother Bimbashi Zaki Bey .

Figure 4: A document from the National Records Office of Sudan with redacted text.

directly or by regulation – to having part of their content obscured in accordance with the prevailing values, ideology or mode of hegemony. As a result, the archives are constantly being reworked, and sometimes even attacked. These comments on written archives are also true of oral (audio) archives, although the latter may be a more democratic form. Because of their historical connection to popular culture, they may focus on voices that are neglected in the written archives and dominant academic circles. In many cases, however, the composition of oral archives is an accurate reflection of the social structure and pattern of hegemony in that society. A study of the archives at the African and Asian Studies Institute at the University of Khartoum (one of the largest and richest Arab and African archives) concluded

that the contents of the archives were biased towards groups in the social centre, at the expense of groups on the margins, and that the archives were based on studying the tribe as a social unit rather than studying social classes and groups (al-Ḥājj 2015). Even though this study did not use a gender framework as its basis, it is nonetheless clear that most of its archival material was male-dominated. Most narrators in the oral archives are men, and women are only referenced in relation to the private sphere: the house or social rituals reserved for women, according to the division of gender roles. In addition, except for some rare cases, women are mostly absent from discussions on the public sphere – oral records of the struggle for independence, testimonies about historical political parties, records of momentous events of the Sudanese past such as the 1964 revolution, and so on.

## **Trouillot’s Third Moment: The Birth of History, or the Work of the Historian**

This moment is a crucial one in the work of historians, whose job here is entirely selective, regardless of what methodology or general theory they follow, and whether they adopt a constructive or reconstructive theory (Knuth 2006: 112). The essence of historical research is selection: selecting sources and historical facts and imposing classifications, and selecting themes, frames of reference and figures that represent the social structure and so forth. Because of this, historical knowledge is often criticised for being an expression of the individual historian: that is to say, history is nothing more than the product of the historian’s experience. On the other hand, if we nominally accept this criticism, it may lead us to the more complex epistemological question of how individuals actually form their opinions. Can they be detached from their social roots and their attachment to a social position, which is defined – to a certain extent – by social status, function and an acquired awareness?

Moreover, the link between selectivity and interpretation both influences and is influenced by the historian’s conceptual framework and ideology. The same is true for how historians’ work becomes defined by virtue of their relationship with the key actors of the period they are working on; actors whose history may sometimes help them understand the course of history as a whole. What is more, historians’ view of the function of history also frames their ties to these key actors, as well as to the writing of history. As an illustration, historical scholarship in France wit-

nessed a marked decline in biographical writing, the so-called “biographical idol”,<sup>11</sup> between 1919 and 1938 to the extent that it represented only 7% of academic theses written during this period (Dosse 2013). This was the result of an erosion of trust in the political elite and the authority of individuals in favour of the authority of institutions. On the other hand, the emergence of a new form of biographical history in England, which coincided with the decline of the form in France, may be explained in relation to the rise of workers’ organisations as an active economic and political force. The emergence of this form of biography was also linked to the enthusiasm of activists situated outside academic circles, who wanted to liberate history from its old-fashioned elites, and who pushed for historians to write about ordinary people rather than only representing class in terms of its heroic figures.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, in many countries with a patriarchal social order and ultraconservative social subsystems, including Sudan, biography remains a central subject for many historical studies. For instance, Moroccan scholarship shows a constant fascination with the personal histories of leaders and eulogies of local history at the expense of general history, macro-history and major historical narratives.<sup>13</sup>

In Sudanese historiography, one can recognise two opposing, but equally firm, requirements. First, history is used as an instrument of cohesion and unity for the dominant social units consolidating relationships inside the ethnic group, tribe, clan or the like – what we call *local history*. Second, it is used as an instrument for overcoming the isolation of smaller social units as they move towards assimilation into the broader society, where history is whitewashed with the aim of working to unite the nation in conflict-stricken Sudan. As a result, historians avoid studying certain subjects, especially those connected to social history, out of a fear that doing so would cause social divisions. On the other hand, society may regard certain subjects as unpopular – ensuring they cause a great deal of trouble for the researcher – and exert pressure, so that the study of social history becomes focused on specific rather than general issues. This may be demonstrated in the choices and trends of historical research in Sudan between 1970 and 2003 (Ḥamza and Kamāl 2002), according to the

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11 This is a reference to Francis Bacon, whose view was summarised in the article by François Simiand in which he criticised history and denounced historians’ worship of three idols: politics, individuals and history (becoming consumed in the search for origins). See Simiand (1960).

12 As in the case of a local group in East London who wrote the personal histories of local activists and workers, and compiled these writings in short pamphlets to sell (discussed further in this paper below).

13 Online interview with the director of the Royal Institute for Research in the History of Morocco to discuss the following work: Kabli, Muḥammad. 2011. *Tārīkh al-Maghrib: Tahyīn wa-Tarkīb (Qirā’a Maghribiyya Khālīṣa li-Tārīkh al-Maghrib: Qirā’a min al-Dākhil)* (The History of Morocco: Update and Synthesis [A Pure Moroccan Reading of History: Reading from the Inside]). Rabat: Royal Institute for Research in the History of Morocco.

research topics presented for Master’s and PhD degrees illustrated in the table below (Table 2).<sup>14</sup>

**Table 2:** Subject choices of historical research in Sudan between 1970 and 2003, for Master’s and PhD degrees, per number of research papers written.

	Social history										Manuscript-based		
	Multi-method research	History of education	Cultural	Diplomatic	Social phenomena	Local history	Biography	Military	General history	Urban		Economic	Political
	11	11	20	29	7	<b>40</b>	23	12	1	13	24	<b>183</b>	4

Taking social history as an example, we notice that the researchers’ choices tend to select subjects that maintain the prevailing pattern of social relations. This is particularly evident in local history that has the tribe as its central theme of study. Similarly, the choices of biography also reflect a focus on tribal and religious leaders and their successors among the political intelligentsia. The reasons given by the researchers for justifying their choice of ethnic groups, tribes and personalities as a subject for study, as reported by the majority of scholars, have to do with the leading role these social units and individuals are assumed to have played in political, economic and social history.<sup>15</sup>

The depth of the influence of the social context can be most clearly seen from the way in which social values and moral judgments percolate historical knowledge. The historian’s choices are to a large extent framed by the constraints of social value. Indeed, all historical topics are assessed for their level of interest according to social position. The least important historical subjects are determined by social status, just as the subjects on the margins of society are necessarily also marginalised in terms of historical attention. As a result, the historian’s research tends to focus only on what is socially agreed upon and what is considered to be worthy of a place in the history books. Indeed, “*sifr al-tārikh*” (“the history books”) itself is an expression that in Arabic has come to mean what is selected to be celebrated and taken pride in, as opposed to the root meaning of the word *sifr*: “to unveil, to become clear.” It is through the use of this selective focus that certain subjects become excluded from history. Beneath the terraces of celebrated history there is always a dark recess for a different history – a place for everything that is neglected

<sup>14</sup> The same division applies to most academic curricula in Sudanese universities.

<sup>15</sup> Copies of all the theses are kept in the National Records Office of Sudan.

and considered socially obscene or unacceptable, one that is simultaneously profane and yet impossible to erase, such as the history of slavery, prostitution, homosexuality and so on.

Let us now look briefly at the case of the history of sexuality in the Arab world. Suppression functions here by condemning others to disappear, to be silent and non-existent – affirming that nothing can be said, seen or known (Foucault 1978: 19). In this regard, Michel Foucault quoted Paolo Segneri's remarks on sexuality, when he wrote that: "This matter is similar to pitch, for however one might handle it, even to cast it far from oneself, it sticks nonetheless, and always soils" (Foucault 1978: 19). The same is true of the history of sexuality in Middle Eastern historiography: it, too, sticks and soils like pitch. However, the subject has not always been repressed: on the contrary, a "discursive explosion" (Foucault 1978: 17) around sexuality took place in Arab and Islamic history between the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, associated with the major geographical, economic, social and cultural transformations of the first Islamic empires. It was these transformations that enabled sexuality to enter into "the ceremonious history of the modes of production" (Foucault 1978: 5) with the flourishing of slave markets and the reification of sexuality. Sexuality asserted its originality as a field of study and authorship, and this is expressed by the production of scholars such as Aḥmad al-Tifāshī (1184–1253), whose masterpiece *The Delight of Hearts*, in which he discusses homoerotic sexual intercourse, we may recall.<sup>16</sup>

Yet despite this openness, the subsequent transformations of Arab society and history, in particular political transformations, came to demonstrate an exclusion and decline of the written discourse on sexuality. This sociological issue inherent in scholarship on sexuality has been noted by 'Abd al-Ṣamad al-Dayālamī (2009: 7):

Studying sexuality continues to be incredibly troublesome for ruling regimes. [Studying] Arab sexuality inevitably means recording sexual behaviours and practices that contravene Islamic law, which in turn leads to fundamentalist movements taking the political regimes to court. In addition, Arab regimes themselves link their legitimacy both to the Islamic nature of their rules on sexuality and with Islam in general. Therefore, these regimes prefer not to produce sociological scholarship on sexuality that would naturally expose them to fundamentalist criticism.

Compared to sociology, history has even fewer tools to defend itself against an extremist demagogue intent on erasing the traces of the past.

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<sup>16</sup> See al-Tifāshī (1988). Original title in Arabic: سرور النفس بمدارك الحواس الخمس.

## Trouillot's Fourth Moment: History as a Scientific Discourse

Moving beyond Ricoeur's threefold division of the production of historical knowledge, there exists a final moment that is at once unavoidable and teleological. In it, history becomes a branch of knowledge that can be judged for its scientific nature, and at the same time a product of social consumption, and ultimately a cultural commodity. This has a twofold meaning. It is judged as scientific according to the standards of the academic community and the institutions that control the historical profession on the one hand, and its emergence as a cultural commodity is connected to the social context. Historians find themselves caught between two constraints, that of institutional power and that of social power: the first establishes the conditions for the production of historical knowledge (the writing of history), while the second sets the conditions for disseminating the product to make it an active discourse.

This last section is divided into two parts. First, I discuss the relationship between history and institutional power, especially in authoritarian contexts; and secondly, I return to the question of history as a cultural commodity.

### Writing History in Authoritarian Contexts

According to John Tosh (2015: 32):

The state's interest in historical writing comes not only from the desire to promote a national consensus among its citizens, but also from an awareness that unrestricted historical research has potentially disastrous results. The knowledge that things were not always as they are now implies that things do not inevitably have to remain the same in the future. History may be a base for doubting the ideas and opinions that we readily accept. Indeed, this is the underlying reason why authoritarian regimes have no interest in the writing of history as a harmless escape from the present. Rather, in some cases, the state takes it upon itself to liberate history of this destructive potential.

It is almost extraordinary how well this description can be applied to the position of the Sudan Government after the 1989 coup, following the rise of political Islam in the country. The new government sought to consolidate its so-called "Civilisational Project" by a Presidential Decree, launching a project to rewrite Sudanese history. The preamble to the Decree described the hopes for the project, stressing that the rewriting of history came "as inspiration for this Sudanese civilisation to correct the



course of society and to establish for it a firm ideological and religious foundation.”<sup>17</sup> The committee of academics responsible for creating the draft subsequently advised that the word “guide” should replace “correct” before the Decree was issued.

In this example, the political authority was hoping to intervene in history writing in the interests of its own political programme. This is evident from the invitation that was sent to the members of the drafting committee, which stated: “We invite our scholars, experts and intellectuals to study and revise history according to the methodologies for its preservation, and to find ways for using history to shape our political regime.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, the president was fully involved in defining the committee’s duties, which covered planning all programmes for writing the history of Sudan and implementing the policies of historical writing, while also adopting the methods and tools of modern research.<sup>19</sup> The Sudanese presidency decided that the committee should work under its direct supervision, and demanded that it submit periodic reports of its work to the president personally. The committee also decided to appoint a member from South Sudan to improve its ethnic makeup, despite the fact that this member was less well-qualified than was required for committee membership.<sup>20</sup> The fact that there had previously been no members from South Sudan may be explained by the general marginalisation and absence of the South in the writing of Sudanese history, where the South appears as a distant other, and not as part of Sudan’s historical composition (Seri-Hersch 2012: 398–417).

In the above example, the state sought to openly intervene in the production of historical knowledge by placing its producers under its direct supervision. Even though the government asked them to creatively imagine new directives and policies for the writing of history, it was the new regime that actually determined the framework they had to abide by, as contained in the project’s brief to rewrite history. This same model has been repeated in many other countries with a similar political structure, and becomes most apparent in school curricula, which essentially resemble billboards for each new political era and every pattern of authority.

The arrival and departure of successive political regimes bring with them a constant wave of adjustments to the curricula. For instance, no sooner had the images of Saddam Hussein’s dramatic end faded than a campaign was launched to erase all traces of his pedagogical hegemony. Most of the changes carried out

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17 Republican Decree no. 408 of 1995 Forming the National Committee for Writing the History of Sudan.

18 Invitation from the Minister of the Presidency of the Republic to members of the Civilisation Project Drafting Committee, dated February 14, 1995.

19 Republican Decree no. 408 of 1995 Forming the National Committee for Writing the History of Sudan.

20 This was before South Sudan seceded in 2011.

by this campaign, which was made up of a committee of senior Iraqi teachers and specialists, concerned modifying historical references, including references to hostility between the Persians and the Arabs, and rewriting the history of the Iraq-Iran war.<sup>21</sup> But it is not only the state that revises history books; occasionally it becomes an imperative for various institutions and organisations. For example, following what are known as the Years of Lead in Morocco (a period of repression under King Hassan II), there was a call for a reconciliation with the past. Numerous parties dedicated themselves to achieving this through several institutions that worked independently of each other, including governmental and non-governmental bodies.<sup>22</sup> This is a demonstration of how social necessity, through collective cohesion, pushes both to protect history and to use it for protection through the selective acts of positive remembering and positive forgetting.<sup>23</sup>

In all of these projects to rewrite history, it is clear that the political, social and academic powers are mostly concerned with emphasising their authority in terms of social, religious and moral values, as well as nationalist sentiment. Yet we may also notice the constant, definite presence of social judgment, which influences the writing of history. This leads to history being categorised either as a source of pride, a glorious and heroic history, or as a source of shame and dishonour, a tarnished history that must be removed from the nation's narrative. This binary division also permeates the language of political and academic discourse. For instance, a referendum held in Syria in 1965 under the Ba'ath Party entitled "How should we write our national history?" included a questionnaire of seventeen questions related to what was being discussed by intellectuals and politicians, one of which was: "What flaws devalue our history and should be removed?" (al-Samar 2016). The wording of this question (as underlined here for emphasis) resembles the wording that inspired the Sudanese project for rewriting history, summarised as follows: "Redressing the inadequacies in what has been written and looking for the flaws that have been introduced."<sup>24</sup> These flaws in both examples tend to define the writing of history in terms of value rather than methodology. Yet paradoxically, what may be viewed as flaws in methodology – like the obliteration of history or systematic lying about historical evidence – are in fact applied by the very same parties who call for historical writing to be cleansed of its defects. The authority itself is both a participant and an actor in the writing of history through its institutional control over historical records (their collection, preservation and access). As Hannah Arendt has argued, this amounts to the state being an official liar, since lying is not only covering up the

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<sup>21</sup> For an example of this, see Layth Nātiq (2019).

<sup>22</sup> Interview with the director of the Royal Institute for Research in the History of Morocco.

<sup>23</sup> In the manner proposed by Ricoeur on memory.

<sup>24</sup> Republican Decree no. 408 of 1995.

truth, but rather becomes an absolute eradication of reality, with the total destruction of its records and original documents. Lying is no longer the suspension of reality, but its destruction: what was once historical deception becomes the deception of history itself (Arendt 1972).

Interference by the state (as a superstructure) is not limited to the production of an official narrative of history, however: it may also seek to gain control of all other narratives and ban public analysis and questioning of the official narrative of history. In the most extreme cases, it may also resort to its legislative, executive and punitive tools. As an example from Egypt, in 2017, Member of Parliament ‘Umar Ḥamrūsh (secretary of the Religious Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives) presented a draft law to the House banning the defamation of historical figures. Ḥamrūsh said that the aim of the draft law was to protect historical figures from abuse and to avoid deceiving the nation by presenting a distorted image, which would harm society and undermine young people’s trust in figures from history.<sup>25</sup> The second article of this draft law defined “prominent figures” as people who are part of the country’s history, are in its books and shape the state’s official records.<sup>26</sup> The third article detailed the penalty for insulting historical figures. The draft suggested exemption from this penalty for anyone who was conducting academic historical research. Nevertheless, this draft law invited the political authority to neglect its instruments of soft power – archival regulations and academic research controls and priorities – in favour of those of a repressive, hard power.

We can only conclude here that in carrying out such actions, ostensibly in the protection of history, the political authority is merely seeking to protect its own autocratic constitution. The official narrative is consecrated in the history books published by academic authorities which, as allies of the political authorities, feel that they are invulnerable.

However, other centres apart from those that are considered to be qualified to produce historical knowledge (the academic authorities) are capable of creating platforms for resisting official narratives and producing a parallel discourse. Groups that are not represented in history or have been removed from the narrative often have an acute sense of the need not only to have a past to lean on for protection – as in the case of land rights – but also a past they can use to their advantage. When these groups do not find themselves represented in an official history,

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<sup>25</sup> This draft law was submitted by 60 members of the House of Representatives led by ‘Umar Ḥamrūsh to criminalise the insulting of historical figures. On 8 November 2017, the draft was referred by the Speaker to a joint committee from the Committee of Constitutional and Legislative Affairs and the Committee of Media, Culture and Artefacts.

<sup>26</sup> The draft law was published on the youm7 website on 10 November 2017: <https://www.youm7.com>. However, this page is no longer accessible.

they produce a history of their own, either oral or written. In her book *Awraq 'Āliyya (Family Papers)*, 'Urūba 'Uthmān (2018) illustrates the Palestinian experience of writing history from the perspective of a society controlled in two separate circumstances (first by the Israeli occupation and second because of its marginalised position within scholarship). 'Uthmān describes how a form of history based on reclamation emerged that was opposed not only to the occupation but also to the elitist monopoly of the writing of history:

This social history resisted attempts to freeze history, and became a distinctly social act that only took shape out of the social interactions seen by many as no more than a faint background noise. This history gives life back to the excluded voice, restoring its ownership of a specific experience that gave rise to a more general experience. And in so doing, we reclaim a more nuanced society.

However, these claims to a more democratic history for a “more nuanced society” lead us back to the question of the overlapping between historiography and the social uses of the past.

## History as a Cultural Commodity and Social Struggle

I mentioned at the beginning of this section that a piece of academic history is also an item of consumption. The social context sets the conditions for disseminating the product to make it into an active discourse. Here too, there are several layers to this continuity between historical narrative and society that need to be taken into account.

Social consumers of historical knowledge may come to struggle with actors of this knowledge by interfering with the process of knowledge production. In this battle among the various producers and consumers of history, social values and public morals often play a pivotal role. New actors may join the cycle of historical knowledge production on the pretext that they have a moral obligation to amend it. Various examples will provide a practical illustration of this argument. In 2000, Aḥmad Aḥmad Sayyid Aḥmad published his history of Khartoum (which originated as his PhD dissertation from Cairo University). People rushed to buy it because of an excerpt from a book by the French traveller Guillaume Lejean in 1880 that talks about social behaviour in Khartoum (Aḥmad 2000). A small number of copies of a later edition appeared, with a crossed-out reference to a family connected to a young man who was the leader of a group of homosexuals in Khartoum (see Figure 5). This part was entirely removed from the third edition.

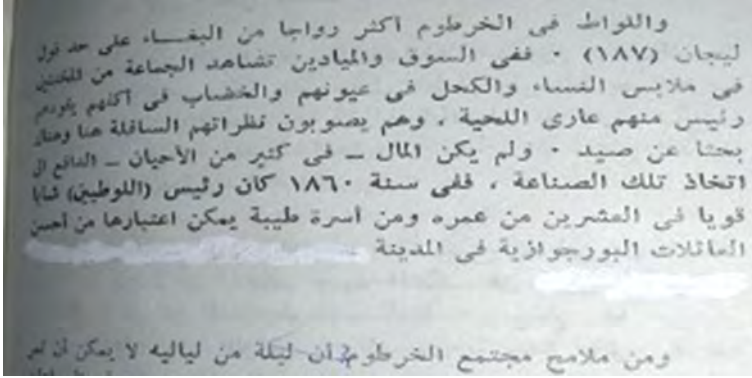


Figure 5: Redacted text in Aḥmad's book *Tārīkh Madīnat al-Khartūm taḥta al-Ḥukm al-Miṣrī 1820–1885*.

According to Lejean (p. 187), homosexuality is more popular than prostitution in Khartoum.

In the markets and public squares groups of men can be seen wearing women's clothes, their eyes made up with kohl, shooting indecent glances this way and that looking for prey.

In most cases money was not the main motivation for this profession. In 1860, the leader of the homosexuals was a young and powerful twenty-year-old man from a family that was one of the town's most highly-regarded bourgeois families [remainder of text crossed out]

واللواط في الخرطوم أكثر رواجاً من البغاء على حد قول ليجان (١٨٧) .

ففي السوق والميادين تشاهد الجماعة من المخنثين في ملابس النساء والكحل في عيونهم والخضاب في أفكهم يقوم رئيس منهم عاري اللحية، وهم يصوبون نظراتهم السافلة هنا وهناك بحثاً عن صيد.

ولم يكن المال – في كثير من الأحيان – الدافع إلى اتخاذ تلك الصناعة، ففي سنة ١٨٦٠ كان رئيس (اللوطيين) شاباً قويا في العشرين من عمره ومن أسرة يمكن اعتبارها من أحسن العائلات البورجوازية في المدينة

[remainder of text crossed out]

In a further example, the Egyptian editor for the Arabic translation (2007) of Johann Ludwig Burckhardt's book (1819) on Northern Sudan, Shafiq Ghurbāl, deleted the Swiss traveller's mention of prostitution in the town of Berber. Ghurbāl cast doubt on Burckhardt's account based on his own knowledge of the people's morality and added a footnote justifying the omission of this section from the original book:

On pages 214 and 215 of the original, Burckhardt gave details of prostitution in Berber. We do not believe that a foreigner such as our traveller here would be capable of knowing such information for certain.

At the same time, the details contradict what he himself had written about the morals of the people.

في الصفحتين ٢١٤ و ٢١٥ من الأصل أورد بوركهارت عن البغاء في بربر تفصيلات لا نظن أن غريباً بكل معاني الغربية كرحلتنا هذا يستطيع أن يكون لديه الخبر اليقين عنها،

وهذه التفصيلات تناقض في نفس الوقت ما أثبتته هو عن أخلاق القوم،

For this reason, and to avoid insulting a people without sufficient knowledge, we preferred not to include these details in this translation.

ولهذا وحرصا على ألا نصيب قوم بجهالة، أترنا عدم إثبات تلك التفاصيل في هذه الترجمة

Through these new actors, a value- and control-based standard of normativity emerges. In the cases shown above, it is the person who acts as an intermediary between earlier historical productions and sources on the one hand and the values of their contemporary society on the other who decides what can and cannot be said.

In addition, a variety of actors situated outside academic institutions who claim authority on narratives about the past are becoming particularly powerful thanks to technological developments. Social media have provided a vital platform for a non-academic audience to take up collecting, writing and evaluating history. This audience has also been enabled to lead debates on what topics of historical knowledge are and are not acceptable, as well as what constitutes fake history. To highlight this point, I reproduce below a selection of contributions from the *sudaneseonline.com* website in response to a post about a Sudanese woman called Zaynab bint Baylā, who lived and worked in Khartoum as a prostitute and rose to high social status during the 1930s and 1940s:

- To the writer of the article about Zaynab bint Baylā,<sup>27</sup> what you’ve written will destroy society.
- Write about whatever you like, your writing is great. But write history as it is, without the frills. Embellishment does not change the facts. Sudan will not progress because its history is fake and embellished.
- Even the *al-Kitāb al-Aswad* (*The Black Book*) – notice they even called it “black” – was banned even though it contains facts that are documented and attestable. Facts that if they are not discussed in public we will not recover. Write and be brave, write because it is your responsibility. Thank you for this post.
- In my opinion, if the historical event is to do with women’s honour, then the matter should not be talked about in order to protect others, and this would please Allah. Particularly since the lady in the article might have grandchildren or other relatives who would be hurt by this and they are not to blame for their relative’s actions. Allah knows best.

<sup>27</sup> Source: “Ḥikāyat al-Marḥūma Zaynab bint Baylā min al-Alif ilā al-Yā’ Tūjad Ṣuwar” (“The Story of Zaynab bint Baylā from A to Z with Pictures”). *Sudanese Online*, accessed 20 December 2021. <https://sudaneseonline.com/board/490/msg/-حكاية-المرحومة-ز-نب-بنت-بيلا-من-الالف-إلى-الياء-توجد-صور-1460163114.html>

- Everything in our history is false and inaccurate. As I've always said, Sudan has no future. It is old and dilapidated and built on lies and delusions.
- Even if you state facts, they accuse you of defamation. Would you be happy only writing what makes people happy?

One last example of the overlap between society, authority and historiography is a recent controversy in Sudan over history textbooks and teaching methods. It revolved around the history syllabus for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, which was created in 2020, a year after the revolution that (should have) marked the end of al-Bashīr's regime, and the mixed reactions towards some of its topics – especially its inclusion of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* as an example of Renaissance art. It should be recalled that these were times of political effervescence and unprecedented feelings of freedom of expression. I outline below some of the positions taken by the different social actors involved in this debate. The Sudanese Academy of Islamic Fiqh, for instance, issued a fatwa banning the teaching of the textbook, stating: "The book contained very serious violations, such as offending the Divine by depicting the body of Allah for students, in unit four, pages 40 and 45."<sup>28</sup> The same fatwa goes on to criticise some of the textbook's lessons:

The book grossly abbreviated mention of Islamic kingdoms and civilisations in a manner that was both disgraceful and did not show the development and links with other historical events within these periods. The book also contained grave errors and inaccuracies that should not be included in the history curriculum.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, the political secretary of the Justice and Equality Movement (a partner in the transitional government of Sudan, connected to its military wing), explicitly demonstrated the political authority's ability to interfere and stop the teaching of this textbook by stating: "So long as we are in government, a syllabus that contains depictions of Allah will not be taught to our children"<sup>30</sup>. There was also intense pressure on the Ministry of Education and the Director of the Curricula Preparation Committee from hard-line religious groups and the Ansar Affairs

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<sup>28</sup> Jamāl 'Abd al-Qādir al-Badawī, "Fatwa bi-Taḥrīm Kitāb Tārīkh Madrasī fī al-Sūdān bi-Sabab 'Lawḥat al-Khalq'" ("Fatwa Bans School History Book in Sudan because of 'the Painting of Creation'"). *Independent Arabia*, 6 January 2021. <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/182711>, accessed 20 December 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Jamāl 'Abd al-Qādir al-Badawī, "Fatwa bi-Taḥrīm Kitāb Tārīkh Madrasī fī al-Sūdān bi-Sabab 'Lawḥat al-Khalq'" ("Fatwa Bans School History Book in Sudan because of 'the Painting of Creation'"). *Independent Arabia*, 6 January 2021. <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/182711>, accessed 20 December 2021.

<sup>30</sup> *Al-Sūdānī*, no. 562, 8 January 2021.

Association<sup>31</sup> in protest against the reduction of lessons on the history of the Mahdist State in Sudan. Both groups used Friday sermons in mosques to denounce the 6<sup>th</sup> grade history textbook, and the Ansar Affairs Association issued a statement attacking the Curriculum Department of the Ministry of Education. Video clips were even circulated of worshippers collecting copies of the book and burning them. A social media campaign was also launched calling for the dismissal of ‘Umar al-Garrāy, the Director of the National Centre for Curriculum and Educational Research (NCCER). One of its hashtags *#Izālat\_al-Garrāy* (*#Remove\_al-Garrāy*) reached 80,000 followers and another in response, *#al-Garrāy\_amal\_al-ta’līm* (*#al-Garrāy\_Hope\_for\_Education*), had 30,000. The campaign against the textbook and al-Garrāy escalated to death threats, which prompted al-Garrāy to come out and defend both the NCCER’s and his own personal position. His response, however, was defensive and unprofessional: “It was they who did the falsifying by showing an image different from the one in the book.”<sup>32</sup> He continued: “Some people took an image from the internet of the original artwork on the Sistine Chapel ceiling and shared it as if it were the same as the image in the book! However, since we are aware that this book is educational, we have removed the image from the text.”<sup>33</sup> He then claimed that what had been written on social media about the book containing nude images was untrue.

This situation also led to the NCCER’s being attacked by academics and intellectuals, as in the case of Toronto-based internet user al-Wāthiq Kamīr, who wrote on his Facebook page: “This painting which the book presents as an example of Renaissance art is no longer Michelangelo’s, but a copy that has been distorted by the National Centre for Curriculum and Educational Research.”<sup>34</sup> The uproar only subsided when former Prime Minister ‘Abdallāh Ḥamdōk intervened and formed a committee to review the curriculum. Ḥamdōk ordered the committee to file its report within two weeks, and to verify that the new curriculum adhered to professional and national standards and that it was suitable for being taught. He said: “Creating curricula

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31 The Ansar Affairs Association represent the Ansar Sufi order (followers of the Mahdī) and acts as the religious wing of the National Umma Party.

32 ‘Umar al-Garrāy (Director of the National Centre for Curriculum and Educational Research), news conference held by Sudan News Agency, 29 December 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFqBLCPUoxc>, accessed 20 December 2021.

33 ‘Umar al-Garrāy (Director of the National Centre for Curriculum and Educational Research), news conference held by Sudan News Agency, 29 December 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFqBLCPUoxc>, accessed 20 December 2021.

34 Al-Wāthiq Kamīr’s comments to ‘Umar al-Garrāy following the news conference, 1 January 2021, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=287061028116288&story\\_fbid=2363461630476207](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=287061028116288&story_fbid=2363461630476207).



demands a broad social consensus.”<sup>35</sup> Ḥamdōk eventually ended the dispute over the history curriculum by officially suspending it.

## Conclusion

How is the work of a historian impacted by the conditions for the production of history in conservative societies and under autocratic regimes? This chapter has sought to reflect on this question, starting out from the case of Sudanese historiography, but also drawing on examples from other Arab – and occasionally European – countries. History as a discipline is situated at a liminary position between the humanities and social sciences, and the present overlaps the past in an indis-sociable way.

Epistemologists such as Paul Ricoeur, Edward H. Carr, John Tosh and Michel-Rolph Trouillot have all pointed out the many intersections between the practice of the historical discipline and the present, including the existential present of the history writer, and the effects of the political situation they are living in. In this chapter, among these various positions, I have taken the approach of the Haitian historian Trouillot as my starting point. His taxonomy of silences is a particularly powerful toolbox because by analysing all the various steps that are the trademark of a historian’s practice and that lead to a historical narrative being socially shared, he casts light on the operations of selection and omission that are both necessary for historiography and mirrors of a certain power structure and social values. Following Trouillot’s model, I have then shown how in the Sudanese case, as in many others, selections and omissions that reflect power structures and social values already start out from the level of “basic facts” – which is worth remembering – according to the social position of the actors. Processes of selection and omission impact not only the creation of archives, but also their access, handling and mis-handling; the organisation of archival data into narratives, as with the choice of topics as historical subjects (which in the Sudanese case is a marked preference for local and political history); and finally the social reception of history books and their consumption in relation to both political necessities and social values, as in the case of the pressure put by society to hide or conceal certain topics for the sake of “social cohesion”.

Finally, I have noted the constant increase in the numbers of writers of history alongside the development of virtual platforms, in which the discussions are not only about a certain historical event, but also about its social value and the need to

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<sup>35</sup> *Al-Sūdānī*, no. 562, 8 January 2021.

retell or conceal it. It has been predicted that the thinker would vanish in favour of the intellectual, and then that the intellectual would disappear in favour of bloggers and virtual activists. The latter are now competitors in the arena of knowledge production, selling and marketing popular cultural commodities of knowledge. These competitors also include people from within the dominant circles who seek to win a larger, virtual space than can be accessed by traditional politics. In the light of what I have discussed here, one may well ask whether the historian will be the next to vanish, and whether the monopoly over the production of history will be curtailed in the interests of the democratisation of knowledge. What will the status of professional historians in Sudan and the broader Arab world be in the coming years and decades, as many of these countries simultaneously undergo authoritarian counter-revolutions and the development of vibrant civil societies, including through the use of digital tools?

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**Part 2: Retrieving Women's Agency in Sudanese  
History and Society**



Amel Osman Hamed

## Chapter 4

# Women in the Funj Era as Evidenced in the *Kitāb Ṭabaqāt Wad Ḍayfallāh*

## Introduction

Muḥammad al-Nūr bin Ḍayfallāh (also referred to as “Wad Ḍayfallāh”) lived in Halfayat al-Muluk between 1728 and 1809.<sup>1</sup> He wrote *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt fī Khuṣūṣ al-Awliyā’ wa-l-Ṣāliḥīn wa-l-‘Ulamā’ wa-l-Shu‘arā’ fī al-Sūdān* (*A Biographical Dictionary of Saints, Holy Men, Scholars and Poets in Sudan*) in the last two years of his life. The book comprises approximately two hundred and sixty biographies of sheikhs, *zuhhād* (ascetics) and *ṣāliḥīn* (holy men) who lived during the Funj Sultanate (1504–1820). It is one of the most important sources of pre-colonial history in Sudan, especially as a source on the Funj period. *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* uses a form of literature that was prevalent in Medieval Europe in the biographical writings (hagiographies) of saints. Its style was also widespread in the Islamic world, particularly in *Ṭabaqāt al-Shu‘arā’* by ‘Abdallāh ibn al-Mu‘tazz (d. 908), *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya* by Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (1327–1370, see al-Subkī 1906), and the *Ṭabaqāt* literature of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī (1492/3–1565). Wad Ḍayfallāh includes many references and quotations from al-Sha‘rānī’s *Ṭabaqāt* in his work (al-Ḥājj 2004).

The significance of Wad Ḍayfallāh’s contribution to this genre lies in the fact that he focused on characteristics that were distinct to Sudan. Much of the book is written in the Sudanese dialect of Arabic. The author remarked that he “wrote it from the depths of his heart” (‘Ābidīn 1972: 32), by which he most probably meant that by writing in such a colloquial style he was making the book easier to understand for the vast majority of Sudanese people, who at the time did not have sufficient resources for understanding – let alone engaging with – classical Arabic. The book has also been of value to many scholars of Sudan’s history, especially the Funj Sultanate (Hillelson 1923; O’Fahey and Spaulding 1974; McHugh 1994), as

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1 An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the Conference on *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt*, Sharqa Hall, 4–5 August 2015, Seminar of Folklore, Institute of African and Asian Studies, University of Khartoum, under the title “Women in *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt fī Khuṣūṣ al-Awliyā’ wa-l-Ṣāliḥīn wa-l-Ulamā’ wa-l-Shu‘arā’ fī al-Sūdān*.” For a more detailed discussion on the role of women during the Funj Sultanate, see Ḥāmid 2001. The first draft of this chapter was translated from Arabic by Cadenza Academic Translations. The final version benefitted from input from Elena Vezzadini and Iris Seri-Hersch.



well as being an important source for studies of contemporary Sudanese culture and the spoken Arabic of this period in Central Sudan (Ḥamad 1992). It also provides glimpses into the lives and society of Sudanese people at this time, including the poor and affluent *‘ulamā’* (Islamic scholars). Finally, and most notably for the purpose of this chapter, the book also makes scattered references to women.

The relevance of *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* for social history can be fully understood in the light of the general features of Sudanese historiography. There is generally a marked imbalance in the periods studied: a considerable amount has been written on the ancient Kingdom of Kush, the Mahdiyya, Turco-Egyptian rule and the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (the first and second colonisation of Sudan), yet there is a dearth of written material about the pre-colonial period. Moreover, Sudanese historiography has been dominated by political and military history, leaving a shortage of material on economic and social history. In the same way, historical writing has principally followed a narrative and descriptive style rather than using a thematic approach or addressing the economic formations and social structures that might enable scholars to study the modes of production and divisions of labour that were common in Sudanese communities at that time. Then, of course, there is also a paucity of studies of women in Sudanese history. However, a number of works on Sudan's pre-colonial history have begun to emerge in the last few decades, specifically about the kingdoms of this era (for example: O'Fahey and Spaulding 1974; Spaulding 2007 [1985]; McHugh 1994). This is in addition to recent scholarship that discusses the history of Sudanese women, particularly during the period in question (see Nugud 1995; ‘Ajūba 2002; al-Ḥājj 2004; Maḥmūd 2012), and a number of important studies on women and gender in Sudan that have appeared over the past three decades (Kenyon 1987; Boddy 1990; Hale 1997; Maḥmūd 2012). In this context, it is clear that, as Jane Hugo (1990: 1–2) has argued:

The work of feminist historians alerts us to the alternative stories possible when researchers ask questions which value rather than marginalize women's contributions to society. Twenty years of feminist historical scholarship has shown that gender, the social construction of sex roles, enters into the telling of history as well as the making of history. 'Once women are the center of attention,' wrote Nancy Woloch (1984), 'the stage revolves . . . [and] history has a different script.' The conventional and familiar subjects – wars, politics, urbanization, and immigration – either recede or reappear in a new light. Events often turn out to have had a different impact on women than men. The pace of history changes, requiring a new time frame, and 'old divisions into political eras no longer have the same significance.' 'A new cast of characters appear.'

This passage accurately illustrates what we mean by women's lack of visibility over the course of history (see also Clifford 1986: 16–20).

Sociocultural anthropologists have come to accept the importance of gender in cultural representations of women within the framework of feminist theory. Pre-

viously, perceptions in this field reflected areas of male experience as a basis for general assumptions about a culture as a whole. Now, however, it is essential to identify the ways in which gender discourses influence the reading of – for example – ethnographic texts, and then assess the ways in which the feminist perspective is excluded. Despite the gender bias inherent in male-oriented texts, gender as a social construct is nonetheless visible in them. Similarly, because women's experiences have largely been excluded from the narrative, men's experiences have largely only been studied as cultural forms rather than being properly studied through the prism of gender.

These considerations are especially relevant to the male-oriented text of *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt*. This chapter will examine the male representations of women as they appear in the biographies of the Sufi sheikhs included in *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt*. On a first reading, the text appears to be somewhat impenetrable and ambiguous, and not at all germane to any of our contemporary concerns. It gives the impression of being an essentialist history, full of fantastical events and *karāmāt* (miracles worked through saints). However, the dialectic of reading this text demands that it be examined in the light of what we know of the context in which it was written. The author was writing specifically for his contemporary readers within the scope of the beliefs of the day. However, we will approach the text from the standpoint of our own contemporary perspectives and beliefs, including gender-related questions of identity, gender relations and gender roles. This will enable us to unlock the potential of the text to cast light on the social history of women and to arrive at a more complete interpretation than a purely literary understanding of it. Through critical reading and interpretation, the text can become a source for evaluating the contemporary reality that produced it. Indeed, this is what is meant by “historicity of the text,” which demands that the original text is preserved as far as possible in its context, language, style, and portrayal of social relations, with the minimum amount of reframing. This approach allows for gaps in the text to be filled, while at the same time preserving the original aesthetics and narrative.

Given that Wad Ḍayfallāh's chief concern was compiling biographies of holy men, it follows that women are only referred to in passing, depending on the biographical contexts. This chapter examines the passages that include references to women and analyses them according to specific themes of gender, while at the same time highlighting other cases in which women are mentioned in the text. With this in mind, our discussion on gender roles and relations will be centred around six themes: women's presence in genealogies; masculinity; women's relations to Sufi sheikhs; women's education; marriage; and finally gendered relations of production and slavery, which is the longest section of this chapter because of the number of references to female slavery and women's “objectification” in the *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt*. The aim of this approach is to provide a reading of the text that places women

as the focus of a historiographical analysis from the perspective of social history, women's studies and feminist theory.

## Women's Identities: The Question of Genealogies

In spite of the prevalence of the patriarchal social order that predominated in Sudanese Muslim inheritance laws during the period in question (and even much later), it is quite baffling that in most of his biographies, Wad Ḍayfallāh made sure to cite the lineage of sheikhs from both their fathers' and mothers' lines. For example, Sheikh Hajū wad Ḥammād is also referred to as Hajū ibn Batūl al-Ghabshā' (Abd al-Salām 2008: 134), here citing his mother, Batūl bint Bānaqā al-Ḍarīr (the sister of Ya'qūb, founder of the Ya'qūbāb Sufi family), who was also known as Batūl al-Ghabshā'. She is mentioned twice in the book: once in the biography of Sheikh Bānaqā al-Ḍarīr and again in the biography of Sheikh Hajū wad Ḥammād (Abd al-Salām 2008: 134). In addition, Sheikh Muḥammad bin Sarḥān (known as "Ṣughayrūn") is referred to as "Ibn [the son of] Fāṭima bint Jābir, who combined learning, work, *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence] and Sufism. He studied *fiqh* under his uncle Sheikh Ismā'īl bin Jābir, who gave him permission to teach, and he acquired the same standing as his uncles in learning and virtue" (Ḍayfallāh 1971: 235). The mother of Sheikh Ṣughayrūn, Fāṭima bint Jābir, is mentioned in the text as having defended her son against King Zamrāwī, who attempted to kill him after relatives had incited the king to act against him. According to the text, after Fāṭima bint Jābir intervened, King Zamrāwī lost consciousness, and was only able to recover at the hands of Sheikh Ṣughayrūn (Ḍayfallāh 1971: 235).

Wad Ḍayfallāh traced the matrilineal descent of some sheikhs to their mothers by following their names with "son of," followed by their mother's name, or "son of a Sudanese [woman]" (Nugud 1995: 6). Further examples include the biography of Sheikh Muḥammad wad Qūta (a renowned *faqīh* in the Gezira region), which reports that Āmina bint Ṣughayrūn married Musallam al-Ḥalanqī and gave birth to the future mother of Muḥammad wad Qūta. Significantly here, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* only mentions Muḥammad wad Qūta's lineage from his mother's side, as "Qūta bint Āmina bint Fāṭima bint Jābir" (Qūta daughter of Āmina daughter of Fāṭima daughter of Jābir) (Ḍayfallāh 1971: 362). In addition, the book cites the fact that the northern branch of the Ya'qūbāb clan all descended from al-Sayyida Zaynab Naqāwa, the sister of Batūl bint Bānaqā al-Ḍarīr. Elsewhere, the biography of Sheikh Muḥammad al-Musallamī Jidd al-Farḍiyyīn states that the sheikh was succeeded by his sister's son, Ibrāhīm al-Farḍī, who married the sheikh's daughter, and that the succession continued thereafter with Ibrāhīm al-Farḍī's children and grandchildren through

his daughters (Ḍayfallāh 1971: 173). In another example, the biography of Sheikh Abū Dalīq mentions that when he was near death, he chose his daughter ‘Ā’isha to succeed him over his son Ḥusayn (Ḍayfallāh 1971: 9, 91, 108). Here, Wad Ḍayfallāh also made sure to cite Sheikh Muḥammad al-Musallamī’s lineage from both his father’s and mother’s side.

Another sheikh who became widely known by his mother’s name is Sheikh Ḥamad wad Umm Maryūm, who was referred to as “Maryūm” after his mother (al-Ṭayyib 2010; see also Ḍayfallāh 1971: 69, 78, 234). Similarly, Sheikh Khūjalī ‘Abd al-Raḥmān was known by his daughter’s name (“al-Jāz”), and Sheikh Ḥamad wad Abū Ḥalīma’s name was also a reference to his daughter – “Abū Ḥalīma”, meaning “father of Ḥalīma.” Indeed, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* refers to sheikhs’ daughters just as much as their sons, and notes that the daughters of sheikhs would raise their children in the manner of their fathers, such as the seven daughters of Sheikh Aḥmad Abū Danāna, who all bore sons who themselves became sheikhs of great renown (Ḍayfallāh 1971: 45–46).

Besides being mentioned in genealogies, the mothers of saints or the female founders of clans came to be instrumental in the success of their offspring. They gave birth not only to saints, but also to their reputation for holiness. The author cites several instances of mothers praying for their children: for success and power, and to have good and decent offspring. For example, Wad Ḍayfallāh mentions that the prominence of the Awlād Jābir clan stemmed from the prayers of their mother, Ṣāfiyya. The story goes that when Ṣāfiyya arrived and discovered her oil had been spilled, she said to her sons: “May Allah make you as strong and firm as a stake driven into the ground” (Ḍayfallāh 1971: 114). *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* also contains references to mothers who witnessed the *karāmāt* of their children and whose accounts were preserved in writing, thereby contributing to their consecration. This points to the high regard given to these women’s accounts. For example, in the biography of Sheikh Bānaqā walad ‘Abd al-Rāziq Abū Qurūn, the sheikh’s mother witnessed him as a child saving his uncle from drowning while at a distance from him: “He used his foot, which his mother noticed was wet, to save the boat from sinking as he lay on his wooden bed” (Ḍayfallāh 1971: 72).

It is clear in *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* that Wad Ḍayfallāh had a keen interest in citing both the patrilineal and matrilineal lineages of the sheikhs, as well as mentioning the names of their sons and daughters. Nonetheless, he only rarely delves into the lineages in any great depth, as in the biography of Sheikh Abū al-Ḥasan bin Ṣāliḥ al-‘Awdī, in which he writes: “His mother was Ḥūsha bint al-Shaykh al-Zayn and his maternal grandmother was Zahrā’ bint Idrīs ibn al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān bin Jābir” (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 31). Similarly, in the biography of Sheikh Muḥammad bin Musallam, known after his mother, Qūta, the author writes: “Musallam’s father is from the Ḥalanqī family of the people of Walad Asīda, and his mother is Qūta bint

Āmina bint Fāṭima bint Jābir” (Qūta daughter of Āmina daughter of Fāṭima daughter of Jābir) (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 224). There are several possible reasons why the lineage of certain sheikhs is traced through their mothers, whether it was out of respect, or because of the widespread belief that blessings are passed down through the mother. In some instances, what is more, the author distinguishes free mothers from enslaved mothers in the sheikhs’ lineages.

The significance of this extends beyond the question of marriages. The implications raise an important theme in social history: the debate among scholars on matrilineality and patrilineality in the kingdoms of Nubia in the Middle Ages, and later during the Funj Sultanate. Several scholars (such as Giovanni Vantini and William Adams) have claimed that the maternal line was dominant in the medieval kingdoms of Nubia. Others, however, point to the dangers of a generalisation of this kind, especially when used by anthropologists, and argue instead that the king’s lineage was in fact traced through his father (Spaulding 2004: 413–418; see also Vantini 1975 and Adams 1977). These scholars argue that the assertion of matrilineality might lead to false historical conclusions about the primacy of women’s authority and, by extension, the prevalence of a gender-equal society – that is, a society in which women had the freedom to marry and divorce and to choose where to live with their husbands, and freedom of ownership and independence. Such a system did not exist in the society of Sennar.

This perception has dominated traditions of structural-functional anthropology in Africa in studies of kinship systems. Even though since the time of the founder ‘Amāra Dunqas (1504–1534), the Funj sultans had indeed pursued the maternal line of inheritance to the throne, this changed in 1720, when a patrilineal system of succession took over. Thereafter we find no evidence of the influence that women in a matriarchal society enjoy.

## Masculinity and Femininity

The *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* is a useful tool for understanding concepts of manhood and masculinity. The definition of masculinity as part of gender relations in Funj society essentially referred to everything that a man thought and did: that is, masculinity was everything women were not and did not do. By this definition, a man is the person who gets a woman pregnant, provides for those under his care and protects his family. According to interpretations of gender ideology, men represent musculature, whereas women represent reproduction and domesticity. These meanings are evident in the words and phrases used in *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* to diminish the masculinity of certain men. Indeed, it can be argued that some men were given

something of a female identity whenever something was perceived to go wrong with them, or when they were seen to be at the margin of society or outsiders. For example, Sulaymān al-Zaghrāt used to wear a *jubba* tunic with a *raḥaṭ* skirt and ululate (hence his name) – thus acting in a way associated with female behaviour and dress code. Likewise, Sheikh Idrīs wad al-Arbāb used to wear a *firka* shawl, and earned the moniker “*Abū firka*”, “the man wearing the *firka* shawl.” ‘Awn al-Sharīf Qāsim (1985: 441) cites a further example from Sudanese cultural history of a man whose nickname was “the one who wears a *raḥaṭ* skirt.” Other occurrences are described as exceptional by “mixing” feminine and masculine worlds. Below we will see the example of knights who would menstruate, or the word “*khalṭ*” (“mixing”), which came to mean childbirth caused by severe pain for any pregnant being (Qāsim 1985: 366).

On the other hand, expressions of masculinity, manhood and bravery in cultural encounters are often attributed to Sufis and authoritative figures, and comprise everything from intercessions to saintly miracles. One such example is Ḥamad al-Naḥlān, who is described as using his *karāmāt* to stop the sultan’s soldiers from attacking by causing them to menstruate:

The attackers all [stopped] to put on trousers, because they were menstruating, and hid under his [the sheikh’s] bench. They said: ‘We are in the protection of Allah and of you, oh Sheikh.’ He said to them: ‘Stop what you have come to do,’ so the soldiers left and disbanded (Ḍayfallāh 1971: 165).

In the above example of Ḥamad al-Naḥlān, the sultan’s soldiers became emasculated and took on feminine attributes when they began to menstruate, while the sheikh’s male qualities were exaggerated as a form of hypermasculinity. Issues of masculinity and the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity at this time became evident in the cultural encounters between men and women, rulers and subjects, masters and slaves, and the Sufis and the authorities. The same issues would emerge later between the coloniser and the colonised.

On the other hand, depictions of bold and courageous women are largely absent from *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt*. Women are presented mainly as mothers, maidservants and assistants of the *fuqahā*, as slaves and concubines, though there are some representations of women as rebels striving for their freedom and rights, seeking to reverse prevailing gender roles to perform the same functions as men through education and by becoming *fuqahā*. However, most of the representations indicate the inferiority of women and their vulnerability and subjugation to a patriarchal society that had already segregated the sexes and confined women to a limited role. This memory is expressed in contemporary popular sayings which, while used to praise the virtues of masculinity and chivalry, also evoke women’s subordination to men, such as: “*al-ma’mūn ‘alā banūt fariḡhu*” (“he who protects the girls of his town”) “*muqni*’

*al-kāshifāt* (“he who covers up unveiled women”), and “*ashā al-bāytāt*” (“he who gives supper to hungry girls”).

## Women’s Relations with Sufi Sheikhs

I will now examine a case in point that illustrates the gender order of society: women’s relations with sheikhs and Sufis. These were strong relations, and they included all women, whether they were free or enslaved. Indeed, women would turn to sheikhs for a variety of reasons, the most important of which were to redress grievances, to seek protection, to find a treatment or a cure, for intercession or consultation and to ask Allah for guidance (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 121).

This is illustrated in the biography of Ribāṭ and Rikāb, which mentions that Salīm ibn Ribāṭ cast a spell on the daughter of Qandīl al-‘Awnī, who was unwell. When she recovered, her father married her off to this same Salīm ibn Ribāṭ. She gave birth to a boy named ‘Awn, and ‘Awn fathered Jābir, who had four sons who all became Sufi sheikhs (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 107). In a similar fashion, Salīm cured the daughter of the church head when she fell ill. The biography of Sheikh Khūjalī bin ‘Abd al-Raḥmān bin Ibrāhīm says that “Fāṭima bint ‘Ubayd became so sick that she almost died, but Sheikh Khūjalī cast a spell and she recovered. And here the sheikh said: ‘I am the victor, I fought the angel of death for the soul of Fāṭima bint ‘Ubayd, and he left it to me’” (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 113). There were other such instances, for example a woman who awoke from a state of insanity as soon as Sheikh Khūjalī cast a spell on her (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 42), and an infertile woman who came from Qarri to see Sheikh Ibrāhīm walad Barrī, who cast a spell on her, and she later gave birth to a son (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 68).

A further demonstration of the relations between women and holy men focusing on healing, is the episode involving Sheikh Ḥasan wad Ḥasūna, who was known thereafter as “*ṭabbāb al-majnūna*” (“the mad lady healer”):

He cured a sick girl in exchange for an ounce of gold, of which he said: ‘They brought the sick girl and laid her down under the bench’. Then he said to her mother: ‘Dress her in her *raḥaṭ* skirt.’ And she dressed her daughter so, then he said to her: ‘Get up.’ And then he said to the girl’s mother: ‘Clap for her as she dances and topples over on to that seated mystic [or scholar, or poor man] (*faqīr*)’ (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 70).

*Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* also notes that Sheikh Ḥasan wad Ḥasūna was able to bring the dead back to life, as he did with the daughter of the chief of al-Khashāb. Umm Qayyima, the girl’s mother, came to the sheikh and said:

'Master, my daughter has died. [ . . . ] Please could you wrap her in a shroud for me.' The sheikh approached, looked at her, then said: 'Your daughter is well, she is not dead. Get up.' The girl's body shook as her soul re-entered, then she stood up (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 72).

What is more, women would also ask sheikhs to grant them acceptance and bring them good luck, as in the case of a woman called Mahiyūba, whom the author describes as a servant:

She came to Sheikh wad Ḥasūna and said to him: 'Write me a spell so I may be accepted and popular.' So the sheikh wrote on a piece of paper: 'Mahiyūba's red and upturned *ḥamūza*<sup>2</sup> plays *hūba* with her on the islands of Nubia.' And with this [talisman] the woman gained fortune in abundance (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 119).

*Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* is also full of instances of women asking sheikhs for intercessions or to redress their grievances. Among the many examples is Sheikh Dafa'allāh bin Muḥammad al-Kāhili al-Hadhli:

When he was close to death, he became very ill for several days. . . . The people sat, men and women, all waiting for him either to get better or to die. When he recovered, he said to his aunts and sisters: 'Be of good cheer Hanūnābiyyāt [referring to his female relatives], I will ask Allah to forgive your sins on Judgment Day!' (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 97)

As indicated above, the sheikhs would also provide protection to women. This is illustrated in the biography of Sheikh al-A'sar bin 'Abd al-Raḥmān bin Ḥamdatū, which reports:

All his children were girls who were committed to apprehending [disreputable] mystics [or scholars, or poor men] (*fuqarā*). One day, late at night, a *faqīr* came to ask for his dinner, but he lingered for longer than usual with dishonourable intent. When the girl passed him his food, the *faqīr* grabbed her hand and then just by touching [the girl's skin, which was under the sheikh's saintly protection], he fell unconscious (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 19).

By the same token, women would also turn to sheikhs to redress their grievances, as in the case of a woman whose camel was stolen by Sālim al-Fazārī. Al-Fazārī took the camel to give as an offering for guests that had come to Sheikh Idrīs wad al-Arbāb. It was a time of high prices, and al-Fazārī had asked the woman to sell him the camel, but she had declined. He insisted, but she refused, telling him: "The strong take from the weak. Take it, for I will not sell it to you." And so he took the camel. The following day, the woman complained of the injustice to Sheikh Idrīs. The sheikh gave her all the gifts his guests had brought him, which included ten oxen laden with pearl

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2 This is a form of talisman or spell in which certain words are added purely for rhyming purposes (like *ḥamūza* and *hūba*).



millet, a number of camels branded with rings, a bag full of money and a horse (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 33–34).

There are also clear instances in *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* of women turning to sheikhs on matters relating to the political authorities, and the sheikhs responding to their appeals. For example, Wad Ḍayfallāh wrote that at the beginning of their rule, the Funj forced the Arab tribes to support their soldiers by providing food, and obliged each tribe to provide them with milk, and a specific group of people to provide them with *fatīr* (unleavened bread). The soldiers arrived on the first day of Sheikh Muḥammad al-Gaddāl's succession as *khalīfa* (the head of a Sufi *ṭarīqa*), and finding no milk, they killed all the calves. A woman from the tribe came to al-Gaddāl as he was having his hair cut and said: "Ever since you became *khalīfa*, we have seen neither fortune nor happiness, only destitution. The leader of the soldiers has slaughtered the calves." At this, al-Gaddāl went into such a strange state that his hair sliced right through the razor in the barber's hand. When the Funj Sultan heard of this, he removed the soldiers from al-Gaddāl's tribe (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 58).

Women would also appeal to sheikhs about general issues that adversely impacted their daily lives, as in the instance of the woman who sought the advice of Sheikh Badawī about a cow. She told him: "I am a widow with children, and my children's cow has left us to go and fend for itself [so we have no source of food]." The sheikh helped her solve this problem (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 83). *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* also contains numerous references to the roles women held working for sheikhs and Sufis, chief among which was as a sheikh's maidservant, singer and poet (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 96). Women would widely praise the sheikhs who answered their requests, particularly those relating to treatment.

Women from all social classes turned to the sheikhs for assistance – free women and slave girls, as well as noble ladies from the royal court. Wad Ḍayfallāh cites the account of Kamīr, daughter of the King of Funj, who went to Sheikh al-Khalīl al-Rūmī seeking protection for her brother, who had become king after the death of their father but had then lost the throne, and his sister feared that her brother's slaves would kill him. The sheikh said to her:

'Your brother is a corrupt tyrant,' to which she replied: 'I will bring him to you to repent for his oppression and corruption.' She brought her brother to the sheikh hidden, dressed in a woman's robe, and then this king, Bādī al-Aḥmar walad Ūnsa, returned to his throne.

However, the relationships between women and sheikhs did not come without a cost. The women would pay the sheikhs either with money or gifts in kind in exchange for their requests being granted. For example, when Sheikh Ḥalālī ibn al-Shaykh Muḥammad bin ʿIsā Suwār al-Dhahab was close to death, his wife asked him to give guidance to their son. The sheikh showed her to al-Ḥaḍarī ʿAwda, and after he died she gave al-Ḥaḍarī ʿAwda her bracelets and anklets, which he knew were of great

worth. Al-Ḥaḍarī 'Awda answered her prayers, took her son under his wing and taught him (al-Ḥājj 2004: 134).

In conclusion, examples such as these show on one hand the relationship of dependency and subordination between women and the sheikhs of whom they requested intercession and fulfilment of their wishes, as women tended to be in a position of requesting rather than of beholding religious powers. On the other hand, they also reveal women's agency by the very number of occurrences in which women sought help from sheikhs; in other words, women were essential actors in the religious universes of the sheikhs, actively engaged in religious performances and systematically present in the religious sphere of holy men within a religious world that was all but male-only. Finally, women needed the sheikhs as much as the sheikhs needed women to consecrate their own religious reputations.

## Female Education

A common form of private education during the Funj Sultanate was the *khalāwī* (Quranic schools, sing. *khalwa*) in addition to contributions from the sheikhs, the *fuqahā'* and the *'ulamā'* (al-Ḥājj 2004: 63; see also 'Abd al-Majīd 1949 and Beshir 1969). The education system varied between the different regions of the Funj state based on each region's level of economic, social and educational development. Mohamed Omer Beshir (1969) has shown that it was the regions on the banks of the Blue and White Niles (between Khartoum and Sennar) that acquired some form of education between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the *khalwa* being an important traditional feature of social life. However, only a handful of girls attended these *khalāwī* alongside the boys, and this style of education remained unchanged during the period of Turco-Egyptian rule from 1821 (al-Ṭayyib 2010: 343–344). *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* contains references to the fact that gender segregation was prevalent in classes at the *khalāwī*. Sheikh Dafa'allāh al-'Arkī, for instance, would spend half the day with the girls and half the day with the boys.

Education was highly stratified within a patriarchal framework in which elements of class, race and ethnicity were all involved in defining and establishing gender relations, which were characterised by the inferiority of women. Education was a male privilege in a society in which the sexes were segregated, and the opportunities available to men were not available to women. However, there were a few cases of women attending the large religious schools, and some ordinary women studied at *khalāwī* with the men. Various experiences of women who excelled in education have reached us through references in *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 47). Fāṭima bin Jābir (the mother of Sheikh Ṣughayrūn) is one of the women who made

her own way in life to rid herself of the moulds of traditional gender roles, while at the same time excelling in education and self-realisation. Indeed, Fāṭima bin Jābir is referred to as being the equal of her four brothers in learning and religion. According to Wad Ḍayfallāh, she “was responsible for twenty-four *fuqarāʾ*, to whom she taught the principles of religion” (al-Ṭayyib 2010: 243–244; see also Bashīr 1983: 36). Similarly, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* cites ‘Ā’isha bint al-Gaddāl as “‘Ā’isha the *faqīra* [the female *faqīr*], i.e. the *faqīha* [the female *faqīh*],” and it was ‘Ā’isha who taught Sheikh Khūjālī Abū al-Jāz (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 121).

Towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a number of women came to the fore in education and *fiqh*: figures such as the mother of Sheikh Bānaqā al-Ḍarīr, as well as his daughters Batūl and Zaynab Naqāwa. Batūl and Zaynab made a strong impression among the Ya’qūbāb, as they had both memorised the Quran and had undertaken an intense study of their religion under their brother Sheikh Ya’qūb. Batūl al-Ghabshā’ (whom I mentioned earlier in this chapter) is also specifically mentioned as being an *‘alima*, a *faqīha* and an *‘abida* (a worshipper). Her reputation so surpassed that of her husband, Sheikh Ḥammād, that her son was referred to by her name, as “Hajū ibn Batūl.” Batūl al-Ghabshā’ tended towards ascetism and withdrawing from the public, and lived off her proceeds from writing out copies of the Quran. Indeed, Batūl acquired her epithet “al-Ghabshā’” (“a dark night”) because of the vigour of her ascetism, austerity and worship (which would last long until the night).

Batūl al-Ghabshā’ had married Sheikh Ḥammād only to please her brother Sheikh Ya’qūb – she herself did not want to marry. She spent eleven months in solitary worship, and when her husband complained to her brother about this, Ya’qūb threatened to divest Batūl of her faith if she did not fulfil her expected role as a woman. Following this threat, Batūl went to her husband and became pregnant with the future Sheikh Hajū, but not before having first tricked her brother into thinking she was infertile and threatening to make all women sterile. Batūl al-Ghabshā’’s name is mentioned twice in *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt*: once in the biography of Sheikh Bānaqā al-Ḍarīr and again in the biography of Sheikh Hajū wad Ḥammād ibn Batūl al-Ghabshā’ (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 38).

The experience of Sheikh Ḥamad wad Umm Maryūm represented a significant development in the education and protection of women, especially with regard to the legal conditions of marriage and the fight against female genital mutilation (FGM). The *khalāwī* of Sheikh Ḥamad had far more women than men; moreover, Sheikh Ḥamad would liberate slaves and then send them out as proselytisers. His initiatives during this period set a new benchmark for social awareness that was aimed at social reform. Sheikh Ḥamad also paid significant attention to women’s education: he constructed *khalāwī* and accommodation for them on the banks of the Blue Nile (in an area that stretches from north of the Blue Nile bridge to the Directorate of River Transport in Khartoum North). Most of his followers were from two tribes west

of the White Nile: the Fazara and the Bani Jarar. One of his female students praised him with these words:

Our father in the patchwork tunic  
 Of independent judgment and irrefutable religious authority  
 Our father who prevents grave sins and evil acts  
 Our father who made the Fazara women *faqā'ir*  
 (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 39).

I will now examine two examples that show that women's access to education was not on an equal footing with men to highlight the stratification in education as well as its cost for all levels of society, particularly the overwhelmingly poor majority. Firstly, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* mentions that “the mother of Ḥalāli ibn al-Shaykh Muḥammad bin 'Īsā Suwār al-Dhahab handed over her bracelets and anklets as payment for her son's education,” and that “her son attained a very high level in learning, religion and virtue” (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 177; see also Nugud 1995: 60). Secondly, Wad Ḍayfallāh states that when the *khalwa* fell into ruin at the time of Shaykh Idrīs ibn al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥmān bin Jābir, his wife, the Queen of Kajabi, asked him to send his students to her so that she could teach them at her home. The *fuqarā'* refused, however, saying that “with the beautiful servant girls coming and going all around us, we fear they would corrupt our religion”, and so they went their separate ways (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 69; see also Nugud 1995: 58).

## Marriage

One of the main functions of the *fuqahā'* in society during the Funj period was to regulate issues of marriage, divorce, *'idda* (the period a Muslim woman must wait after the death of her husband or her divorce before remarrying) and inheritance. Wad Ḍayfallāh's focus in compiling his biographies was on the vulnerable and weak, and yet the text is devoid of any personal lived experiences of women. As a result, we have to construct our analysis of the topic of marriage from the perspective of a masculine text. The Sufi establishment would help men and women to choose suitable partners. For instance:

Sheikh Dafa'allāh sent one of his students to Sheikh Salāmat al-Ḍubābi where he came across a modest girl who wore her veil at all times. Sheikh Dafa'allāh told him to marry this daughter of Salāmat al-Ḍubābi, that his life would be full of blessings with her and that she would bear four children (Ḍayfallāh 1971: 146).

In other cases, a father might choose a husband for his daughter, as happened with Sheikh 'Abdallāh Ṣabūn, who was a slave owned by a woman from the tribe of al-Qa-

li'a. He was "a bachelor, whose sheikh presented his daughter, Umm Nāss Ḍawwīn, for him to marry. But 'Abdallāh Ṣabūn refused, saying 'a slave cannot marry his mistress'. The sheikh replied: 'I have not found a better match for her than you'" (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 194). Likewise, Idrīs walad al-Shaykh Sarḥān married the daughter of al-Ḥājj Muḥammad Sarḥān, Fāṭima, of the Awlād Jābir family after having been told that:

"Those sheikhs have a pious sister called Fāṭima, she is an *'ālīma* with twenty-four *fuqarā'* under her tutelage. Why not marry her?" To which Idrīs replied: "The sister of these sheikhs is under her father's care." So he went and asked for the girl's hand, to which her father agreed, and they were married (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 194).

There is scant mention in *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* of the experiences and voices of ordinary women regarding their married lives in general. One of the few examples appears in the biography of Sheikh al-Hamīm. When Sheikh al-Hamīm married Abū Yazūda's two daughters in Rufa'a, the second daughter wept and said: 'I will not marry him when he is already married to my sister,' and she refused to arrange her hair for him, but Salmān al-Za'rāt forced her to accept the marriage (al-Ḥājj 2004: 87). In another case, Sheikha Batūl al-Ghabshā' only acquiesced to getting married to satisfy the wishes of her brother Sheikh Ya'qūb (al-Ḥājj 2004: 79), as mentioned above. Wad Ḍayfallāh also gives the following example:

When Sheikh 'Abdallāh walad al-Shaykh Fāyid and his brother Ḥammūda asked Sheikh al-Maḍwā to marry their mother, they said to him: 'Our father has passed away, leaving behind our mother who is young, beautiful and rich. Would you come with us and marry our mother in return for teaching us?' Sheikh al-Maḍwā accepted the offer and, along with the *fuqarā'* under him, went with the brothers and married their mother, whose name was Khawla (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 107).

However, Wad Ḍayfallāh states here that Khawla only accepted the marriage after first refusing many times.

Similarly, Sheikh Ḥamad wad Umm Maryūm was concerned with matters of social control, especially in the field of marriage. For instance, he would command anyone who came to him for repentance not to marry off their daughters or girls under their care to an immoral man, a man who constantly threatens divorce or who practices extortion or usury. He forbade men from associating with women and warned against looking at them, fearing temptation. He also ordered that women should not undergo FGM (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 164). It could be argued that Sheikh Ḥamad's appeal here was the first of its kind in this society. Indeed, he warned people of the harm FGM caused. He was just as committed to the rights and feelings of all his wives, and out of respect for them, he built each a house designed so that none would face any of the others.

On the other hand, women had to respect their husbands. When Sheikh Ḥasan wad Ḥasūna's sister married, the sheikh gave her the following advice: "Harsh words will not bring men's affection. Only kind words and gentleness soothe me. The water floods towards the easy-going" (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 94). In the same context, Sheikh Faraḥ wad Taktūk gave this advice to his daughter when she came to ask her father for divorce because she was angry with her husband. The sheikh listened and said:

Satisfy his rights  
And clean his shoes  
It's Allah who will stop your husband's abuse.

He then gave his daughter's husband the following advice (al-Ḥājj 2004: 110):

Feed her well  
Alleviate her concerns  
Treat her well and you'll see positive returns.

A further example of the contempt reserved to women who disobeyed their husbands can be found in the biography of Sheikh 'Abd al-Maḥmūd al-Nūflābī. It discusses the case of a woman called al-Ḥusna (or al-Ḥasana) of the Jaali tribe, who was married to the sheikh, but he divorced her after she asked to join the *khalwa* with the *ḥayrān* (associates of the sheikh). Ḥusna complained to Sheikh Ḥamad wad Umm Maryūm, telling him that "Abd al-Maḥmūd has treated me unfairly. He forced me to give up the agreed deferred price of the dowry." The account goes on to say that a fire broke out, and when it reached Sheikh Ḥamad's *khalāwī* he said: "This is all Ḥusna's doing" (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 227).

The dominant social system in Sennar was characterised by polygamy and the keeping of concubines. The system was founded on economic and social structures that were a product of how the make-up of Funj society had developed over time. The political authority followed the Funj system of marriage, which was oriented towards a dual matrilineal system that manifested itself in a preference for marrying maternal cousins. Women were a means of legitimising succession as rulers, even though it was the men who exercised the actual power. High-level political positions were filled by marrying into the sultan's family. Marriage outside the royal family or having children by concubines was considered socially improper, however, but it was perfectly possible for the high class of nobles to choose their wives from a broader circle of women. Naturally, therefore, it was the leaders who had the greatest number of wives – according to some sources, the sultan had 600 wives, the regional ruler had around 200 and the provincial ruler had approximately 30 (Smilyanskaya 1989: 69). We find that such practices were slightly different among Sufis, although polygamy and concubines were still

the rule. There are several biographies of sheikhs that refer to polygamy, as in the case of Sheikh Ḥamad wad Umm Maryūm (Spaulding 2007: 63-70). The same was also true of Sheikh Muḥammad al-Hamīm, whose biography mentions that “he had ninety wives, and married Sheikh Bānaqā Abū Ya’qūb’s two daughters, Kaltūm and Khādimalāh, as well as both daughters of Abū Yazūda in Rufa’a” (Ḍay-fallāh 2009: 82).

Sufi sheikhs such as Ḥamad bin Ḥasan Abū Ḥalīma and Ḥamad wad Umm Maryūm, among others, would also issue fatwas on matters of marriage and divorce. The biography of Sheikh Ṣughayrūn al-Shaqlāwī says that “he would allow a woman who had been divorced three times to return to her first husband without marrying again. Sheikh ‘Abd al-Gādir bin al-Shaykh Idrīs reproached him for this, saying: ‘You are turning everyone into illegitimate children’” (al-Ḥājj 2004: 109). This can be read in conjunction with another case in which the judge Dashīn annulled all marriages carried out by Sheikh Muḥammad al-Hamīm (Spaulding 2007: 95-96), which points to the conflict that existed between the Funj knights and the *fuqahā’*. It was a period of transition in Sennar, with jostling between two overlapping socio-cultural systems that culminated in the eventual dominance of the *fuqahā’* and the *ulamā’*, especially in the teachings and basic rules of Islam on matters such as marriage, inheritance and the family.

The leaders of religious communities in the Funj period applied a system that fostered the inequality of wealth and status among their subjects. They provided support in terms of liability and control for the people who were the most competitively disadvantaged by the phenomenon of *kūra* marriage. Under this system, young men who were too poor to afford the costs of marrying in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were given so-called “*banāt al-bayt*” (“house girls”) as wives. These were girls of marriageable age from the lowest levels of society who had been given away by their fathers as children to be raised under the care of a religious leader. As an example of this, Spaulding (2007: 96) mentions “Jamālallāh bin ‘Alī, who gifted his daughter ‘Ā’isha to the *faqīh* Ṭāhā ibn al-Shaykh Kūjalī as a charitable offering for Allah and His Prophet and seeking reward in the afterlife.” These women were classed as “vulnerable members” in the religious leader’s community, a term that referred to the people who were under the leader’s care: the elderly, the physically disabled, minorities and women.

The sheikh was fully responsible for these people, a duty he discharged by transferring ownership from the woman to a minor and appointing another person to act as an agent and guardian for this new owner. The agent was in control of the guardianship, arranged the girls’ marriages and managed their portion of the dowries they received from their husbands (Spaulding 2007: 96). In essence, according to Fāṭima Bābīkr Maḥmūd (2012: 196), both unmarried girls and the girls under guardianship would willingly place themselves in the care of the sheikh. However,

*Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* does not offer any additional details that might contradict the historical documents used by Spaulding (1982a, 1989, 2004) on these gender relations, especially with respect to private and public relations, the marriages of this class of women and sexuality, among other matters.

## The Gender Division of Labour and Female Slavery

Funj society was dominated by patriarchal cultures and gender ideologies that had their origins in class and racial hierarchies, as well as other cultural factors. The political structures were both formed by, and themselves had an influence on, the social relations around marriage as well as the gender relations of the dominant classes – especially the ruling class, the nobles, the Sufis and the *fuqahā'* – and in a society such as this, women occupied an inferior position to men (al-Ḥājj 2004: 66; Spaulding 1982a; Maḥmūd 2012: 185). Inequality in gender relations was the norm, as were disparities and discrimination between women who were owners and women who were slaves.

Gender inequality also affected labour relations. *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* does not contain much information on the division of labour and the role of women in work, but studies of other sources have shown that a gender division of labour was predominant during this era, particularly in agricultural, herding and the crafts. Women did take part in some agricultural work (such as cleaning and preparing the land, ploughing, sowing seeds, cutting grass and harvesting), but this was in addition to other typically female domestic tasks such as preparing food, grinding grain (with a tool called *marḥāka*), childcare, making household utensils, building houses, spinning yarn and weaving. In pastoral communities, women played a role in taking care of sheep, camels and cattle and breeding chickens, as well as making fabrics (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 82). As a rare illustration of this in the *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt*, a woman is mentioned who “was one of the daughters of Walad Sa'īd. She brought Sheikh Ḥamad al-Naḥlān a robe that was worth three hundred, and said to him: ‘Master, I spun it with my hands, and brought it to you so you can cover yourself against the cold’” (al-Ḥājj 2004: 110). In spite of the paucity of sources, the impression is that in this society, women worked harder than men to perform a wide variety of occupations both inside and outside the home.

In contrast to the lack of information on the work of non-elite freeborn women, there are numerous references in *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* to the work done by servants and concubines who were engaged in the service of the notables, the sheikhs and their wives. Female slaves are referred to in *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* by various names: *al-raḳīq* (the slave), *al-'ama* (the slave girl), *al-khādīm* (the servant), *al-sūdāniyya*



(the black or Sudanese woman), *al-sarārī* (the concubine), *al-ḥawārī* (the follower) and *umm walad* (“mother of the son” – a title given to a concubine after she had given birth to her master’s child).

To analyse the role of slaves in the Funj economic system, and of female slaves in particular, it is necessary first to examine the dominant relations of production. In this pre-capitalist era, the majority of the population earned their living through a direct relationship with the natural environment (agriculture and herding) rather than an organised connection with economic production. Distribution of surplus products was not carried out by means of economic relationships, but by taking the product directly from the producer in the form of a land tax for the state and large landowners (Spaulding 2007).

Some studies have gone into great detail about the varied economic sources for the Funj state, as well as the opportunities for economic exchange that existed among the population (see, for example: Walz 1978; Kapteijns and Spaulding 1982). These opportunities included local exchanges of goods and services produced within the community itself, interregional trade in local markets and trade in the sultan’s market, which involved exchanging domestic goods (particularly gold, ivory and slaves) for foreign goods imported from abroad (al-Ḥājj 2004: 50). This illustrates the fact that the yield of farmers and shepherds was not converted into goods to be sold in large markets, which means that the rural (subsistence) economy did not develop from a simple rural consumer economy into a goods economy at a sufficient enough pace to accumulate capital. It was the rulers, nobles and merchants who were the primary consumers of the surpluses from agricultural labour. The main role of this class was to accumulate capital and reproduce the Funj system of rule based on feudalism and slave labour. Despite the fact that production based on extorted taxes was predominant during the Funj Sultanate, the contribution to material production made by slaves (both men and women) was also a significant factor in the accumulation of the nobility’s capital.

Slave women would work in a plethora of different occupations. Smilyanskaya (1989: 19), for example, has shown that they were engaged in farm work on their masters’ land. They bore a double burden, however, as they would also manage the domestic tasks of cooking, childcare, cleaning, laundry, pottery and weaving. Among the wealthiest families, they would provide entertainment for the husbands and masters of the ruling families, merchants, clerics and wealthy farmers. One of their duties was to attend to their mistresses’ appearance (for example, by making local perfumes), to arrange their hair and entertain them if they were bored (Maḥmūd 2012: 200).

Owing female slaves was more complicated than owning male slaves because they were more expensive. Women cost more because of the types of duty they performed, including sex, housework and farm work. Sex was unpaid, and any wage

a female slave might receive in return for work went straight to her owner (Nugud 1995: 136). Additionally, women even began to be used as payment for dowries. They had become a possession, to the extent that multiple men would share one woman as their concubine, with the men's social ranking determining the time they were allotted. If the woman became pregnant with the child of the most senior man, he would remove her from this exchange system (Spaulding 2007: 107-8). As for slave concubines of the ruling dynasty, the children of these relations would be separated from their mothers and raised at the sultan's court before later being conscripted into his army. In this way, by producing rulers for the Funj Sultanate, women contributed towards propagating the sultan's family (Maḥmūd 2012: 23). This type of slave production persisted for the benefit of all classes, nobles, rulers, merchants and even *fuqarā'*, who also demanded (and were granted) the right to own slaves.

We will now present various examples from *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* so that we will be able to better understand women's inferiority in gender relations as expressed by the relationships between sheikhs and their slave concubines. First, there is the example of Sheikh Ribāṭ wad Ghulamallāh, who was deceived by the al-Sawarda tribe. They had married off one of their concubines to him, tricking him into believing she was a free woman, but after she gave birth to his son Salīm, the al-Sawarda revealed to Sheikh Ribāṭ that the woman was actually a servant. The sheikh complained to the judge, who ruled that the son was free, but obliged the sheikh to pay his son the value of his mother in order to free her. When Salīm came of age, he asked to marry his cousin, the daughter of Rikāb. She initially rejected him because he was a slave, but eventually agreed when it became apparent that he had a virtuous character (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 78). Similarly, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* mentions Sheikh al-Nūr bin al-Shaykh Mūsā and the story of a slave girl who was an *umm walad* (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 38). Elsewhere, Sheikh Ismā'īl Ṣāḥib al-Rabāba's mother, an *umm walad* called Jabra Safarnāwna, was given to Sheikh Makkī the Sultan of Tagali. She became pregnant and gave birth to Ismā'īl Ṣāḥib al-Rabāba (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 39).

The number of slaves a person owned reflected their status in Funj society, all the more so for female slaves. We can find further examples of the strong presence of women in this male-oriented environment in Theodor Krump's contemporary account of the reception of a provincial leader, the Mānjil of Qarri, at the court in Sennar.<sup>3</sup> He describes a flamboyant and theatrical celebration in which the sultan's procession was led by three hundred female slaves dressed in silk skirts, with the rest of their bodies on show, their arms decorated with silver bracelets and their hair bedecked with silver pieces and beads, with all the pieces of jewellery ringing

3 Spaulding 1974: <https://www.kean.edu/~jspauldi/krump2seven.html>.

against each other musically. In a similar instance, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* mentions that Sheikh Ḥasan wad Ḥasūna said:

‘At Ramadan, one hundred and twenty slave girls came wearing *firka* shawls, *daqnus* and shining clothes, and carrying torches. Their sleeves were adorned with pure silver bands on the front and the back. Each girl followed the other, moving closer, wearing beaded earrings and carrying bowls. And behind each slave girl came another, wearing on her arms bracelets of silver and on her feet a pair of brilliant shoes.’ (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 69)

Likewise, Ismā‘īl Ṣāhib al-Rabāba, “whenever the mood would strike him, would pace about his courtyard and bring along girls and married couples to dance as he played the rabab. But the *fuqarā’* would try to stop him when he was in such a state, as the women and men all cheered along to the sound of the rabab” (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 39–41).

The higher the owners’ social standing, the more slaves of both sexes they had. For example, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* records that when Sheikh Ḥasan wad Ḥasūna had guests he would have approximately one hundred and twenty slave girls serving food. The sheikh was known for the number of slaves he owned, and he would explain why he had so many visitors by saying “People come to see my boys and girls” (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 690; see also Nugud 1995: 58). Wad Ḍayfallāh states that on the occasion of his sister Fāṭima’s marriage, Sheikh Ḥasan wad Ḥasūna gifted her four young women as maidservants (Ḍayfallāh 1971: 146). In a similar case, Wad Ḍayfallāh refers to the concubines of Sheikh Muḥammad al-Hamīm who would travel with him (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 194): “He had ninety wives and stole a maidservant called Zurayqa from the people of Arbaji and kept her as a concubine.” Arguments would break out between his concubines and his freeborn Arab wives. In one such instance, his concubines sang these words to disparage one of the sheikh’s Arab wives:

The sheikh worships Allah and curses Satan  
He is dutiful to Ḥalima and seeks her forgiveness.

Not only were enslaved women oppressed and exploited in gruelling domestic work, and used as means of trade or payment in transactions – for paying taxes, for freedom or a portion of a dowry – but there was also a common practice in society at the time of slaves dedicating themselves to Sufi sheikhs in return for spiritual blessings in carrying out essential tasks. For example, Fāṭima bint ‘Ubayd pledged herself in the name of Allah as a slave to Sheikh Khūjalī after he had cured her illness (Ḍayfallāh 2009: 107). There is also the case of Sheikh ‘Awda bin ‘Umar Shakkāl al-Qāriḥ who, when an infertile woman came to him asking for the ability to give birth, demanded that she give him her slave girl, her bracelets and her anklets. The woman agreed,

and the sheikh said to her and her husband: “I give you a son then I give you a girl to take care of the house” (Dayfallāh 2009: 164).

*Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* provides many examples of women’s inferiority and subordination to men in Funj society. It is by examining the disparity of women’s status based on class, race and culture that we can determine just how complex the composition of this society was, as well as how many different levels of identity there were for women at the time. For instance, there were free women who took both female and male slaves, as we see in the account of Sheikh al-Hamīm’s daughter, who married a man from the court of the Bānaqā family. When her husband procured concubines, as was the custom for dignitaries, his wife

chastised him for doing this and demanded he let all his concubines go. But when he did not, she acquired some boy slaves for herself and said to her husband, ‘If you release your concubines, I will release my slaves. Or else, we will both be in same situation.’ Then her husband let his concubines go. (al-Ḥājj 2004: 110–111)

To sum up, men kept slave women as concubines, employed them in domestic work as servants or for farm labour and would also sleep with them as their wives (Spaulding 1982a and 1988; Nugud 1995). Women were treated as a commodity to be sold and bought, a currency, a source of earnings and a means of trade, which men – the rich, noblemen and merchants alike – relied on for profit, for conducting their business and for making a living. As Bell Hooks (1992: 23) has argued:

When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other.

These examples clearly demonstrate that so long as women are under the yoke of slavery they have no freedom in their bodies. Not only was gifting women and slaves as part of the dowry a gross indignity for the women, but an even greater and more oppressive degradation was the custom of one female slave being owned by multiple men, or being exploited as material and physical labour (‘Ajūba 2002: 81).

## Conclusion

In order to analyse the social position of women during the Funj era, along with the types of lives women led, this chapter has reviewed a masculine text in which women in no way take centre stage, in the absence of any other sources, such as women’s diaries and biographies, that might have offered details of their lived

experiences and voices at this time. There is a general dearth of information about women in pre-colonial Sudan during this period of history, because of a prevalence of scholarship that focuses on politics, military affairs and personalities rather than structures, society and economics. Within these limited parameters, it was necessary to adopt a new approach in which women are the subject of historiographical analysis. To this end, this chapter has followed an approach based on feminist theory and gender perspectives in order to assess the status and identity of women and gender relations, as well as gender roles and cultural representations.

Each of these female-versus-male gender relations was inherently unequal: women were seen as marginal and inferior to men in roles in which they were vulnerable, submissive and exploited. It is important to point out here that the intention behind the gender approach based on feminist theory adopted in this chapter is not that the conflict between the sexes should replace class conflict. Rather, the study of women here requires a combination of factors that include class, race, ethnicity and sexuality, as well as other cultural strands, with the aim of analysing women's identities, and gender relations and roles. In particular, by examining class, race and ethnicity, this chapter has also revealed the multiple forms of oppression women faced as members of this society. The forms of discrimination and oppression in gender relations consisted of the exploitation, prostitution and degradation of women as inferior and weak. Jay Spaulding (1982a; 1982b; see also Wheatcroft 1996) has pointed to this aspect of social and class discrimination, arguing that in Sennar, class was inherited through the nobles, the general public and the slaves, but that the roles and status of each class in society varied greatly. However, Spaulding also recognised that the particular status of women in any social group must necessarily be considered separately (Spaulding 1982a). We have noted the oppressive practices of giving away female slaves as offerings and marrying off women to nobles, *fuqahā'*, sheikhs and merchants. We have also seen the commodification of female slaves as currency for trade, to be sold and bought, and their exploitation as a method of reproduction for the political authorities by using them to bear children to be future soldiers to sustain the Sultanate's army. This same practice was also prevalent in ancient Athens and Rome, where slave children were employed in the armies of the empires. Likewise, the Ottomans instituted the practice of *devshirme*, which was a system of levying child slaves as part of their right to claim one-fifth of the war booty. The children levied by the Ottomans would be used to fill the elite corps of Janissaries and to form part of the Sultan's personal guard.

However, all this should not hide the strong presence women still maintained in masculine spaces with the sheikhs and at the ruling court. My examination of *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt* has demonstrated that there was a clear relationship between sheikhs and women that manifested itself through various identities as wives, con-

cubines, maidservants and worshippers. This is especially significant, since the Sufi establishment continued to be a safe haven for vulnerable women, who used it as a channel for solving their problems and redressing their grievances. What is more, this phenomenon has continued to exist – relatively speaking – up to the present day, with a great many women continuing to pay frequent visits to living holy men, as well as visiting the tombs and shrines of dead ones. On the other hand, it was also a relationship of oppression in many cases. For instance, it was a widespread practice during the Funj era for Sufi scholars to help to return female slaves to their masters after they had rebelled and attempted to escape. Moreover, the text's focus on racial differences and cultural or class distinctions does not indicate any form of congruency in women's identities; rather, it is the many contrasting identities of women that have become clear in terms of gender relations: free women versus enslaved women, rich women versus poor women, and so forth.

Men were the rulers, the heads of the family, the *fuqahā'*, the landowners and the merchants, whereas women's roles were limited to producing children and doing housework and farm work. This strict segregation and discrimination in gender roles in work was also characterised by the segregation of the sexes in both the physical and social spheres. Consequently, it was sex that determined the division of labour, in which women were unable to cast aside their feminine roles of housewives and mothers, compared with men as the heads of family. Women's contribution to material production was overlooked. Under this system of gender division, it was almost impossible for women to reverse the gender roles and, for example, become a *faqīha* for a man. But this is exactly what Batūl al-Ghabshā' did: she fought to overcome this obstacle and become a *faqīha*, and as such, she is a living illustration of the importance of engaging with and analysing the lived experiences of women when studying their history. Batūl devoted herself completely to her goal and rejected the traditionalist roles of women such as marriage and childbearing.

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Elena Vezzadini

## Chapter 5

# Emancipation through the Press: The Women’s Movement and its Discourses on the “Women’s Problem” in Sudan on the Eve of Independence (1950–1956)

## Introduction

In 1950, members of the radical left founded two newspapers in Sudan:<sup>1</sup> *al-Sha'b* (“The People”) and *al-Ṣarāḥa* – a title that might be translated as “frankness” or “honest blunt speaking.”<sup>2</sup> A short time later, their editors created columns for women, most of which were written by female journalists. These columns appeared with increasing frequency during the tumultuous period leading up to the country’s independence, especially after 1952, the year the Sudanese Women’s Union was founded. The general story behind the foundation of the women’s movement is fairly well known (Hall 1977; Brown 2017; Sharkey 2003a; Hale 1997; Anis 2001; Ibrahim 2010; al-Gaddāl 2016; al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2017). This chapter focuses on its first steps through the traces it left behind in the press by considering two interrelated issues: first, the considerable, if not radical, discursive change in the debates around gender relations, the “problems of women,” and women’s role in Sudanese nation-building; and second, the connection between the female journalists and their reading and listening public. In fact, the texts on “women’s issues” (*nisā’iyyāt*) impacted the sensibilities of a far wider gendered audience than just the men and women who were actually capable of reading these columns, triggering a shift in gender relations with regard to both representations and practices.

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1 An earlier and shorter version of this chapter was published in French (Vezzadini 2020). I thank the two reviewers for their input and help in improving it, as well as Iris Seri-Hersch for her thoughtful comments and careful reading.

2 The translation of these articles in Arabic from the Sudanese press of 1950s is no simple undertaking and I began the task many years ago. I would particularly like to thank two scholars for their valuable linguistic assistance over the years: Arabic literature professor Aziz El Aloui (University of Paris 8) and Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir, a language specialist based in Omdurman. A note on the transliteration of names: I have chosen to adopt the Sudanese form of common Arabic names: thus, Khālḍa and not Khālida, and ‘Āzza and not ‘Aziza.

In order to build this argument, this chapter will follow two different directions. The first involves a description and analysis of gendered readership in what was a politically very intense context in which changes occurred at a very fast pace, much more quickly than the colonial rulers had expected. In 1950, few Sudanese would have imagined achieving partial independence just three years later, and full independence in 1956. The first part of this chapter therefore describes the political situation, the landscape of the nationalist political press during these years, the approach of the press to gender issues and the readership and its gender and class differences, and concludes with a discussion on the impact of the press on the construction of gendered political sociabilities. It will also present the sociological profiles of the female journalists and members of the women's movement.

The second topic of this chapter is the discourses on women's role in nation-building and how they changed over time. It is my belief that the changes were not just connected to political developments, but were also made possible by the fact that female journalists were 'educating' their readers to accept their presence in the political arena and to consider their voices to be legitimate. Article after article, drop by drop, readers and listeners became more acquainted with women's voices, which also allowed these voices to become bolder. This theme is developed in the second part of this chapter, which is much longer than the first so that adequate space can be dedicated to these texts.

I have made a conscious decision not to connect discourses on the "women's question" in Sudan with those that had begun to circulate (rather earlier) in the Arab world in relation to the development of nationalist movements there; these have been thoroughly studied in seminal secondary literature, for instance on Greater Syria and Egypt, not to mention other imperial contexts such as Bengal or Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> This is not because such a comparison is uninteresting or superfluous; rather, it is because so little is known about women's intellectual and social history in Sudan at the time of independence that I have preferred to use the limited space available in this chapter to prioritise the study of the historical press and the light it casts on gender relations.

A final element of discussion concerns my sources. The bulk of them consists in about fifty articles from three newspapers – *al-Ṣarāḥa*, *al-Sha'b* and *al-Ra'y al-Āmm* ("The Public Opinion") – that were published during the period in question (1950–1956), and are kept at the National Records Office (NRO) of Sudan. They have been supplemented with the sparse secondary literature on the women's

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<sup>3</sup> A selection of works: on Greater Syria, see Thompson (2000); on Egypt, see Baron (2007, 2010); Badran (2001); Badran and Cooke (2004); on Bengal, see Sen (1993, 1997); Sarkar T. (1992); Sarkar M. (2001); and on Nigeria, see Lindsay (1999) and Oladejo (2019).

movement and with the memoirs and essays published by leading female activists of the 1950s (Ibrāhīm 1985, 1996; Maḥmūd 2008; Badrī 2002, 2009; Amīn 2011). However, the use of historical newspapers raises a number of methodological questions for social history, especially considering that there were very few male readers in Sudan – and still fewer female ones – at that time. In other words, why should we bother about the press? Does this attention to texts not risk increasing the historiographical over-representation of the literate elites, thereby contributing to the marginalisation of other histories and other actors? This debate hints at the unresolved tension between social and intellectual history, which has been much debated among historians (see for example: Wickberg 2001; Weiss 2019; Hunt 2014). However, a history of readership in Sudan at the time will hint at the fact that the press was not an instrument by and for the elites; instead, it was truly the voice of the various actors in the political arena, which experienced an unprecedented opening-up in the 1950s.

## 1 Gender, the Press and Politics

### 1.1 Politics and the Press

Sudan had been under Anglo-Egyptian domination (the Condominium) since 1898, but it moved rapidly towards independence after the Second World War (Daly 1991; Beshir 1974). In 1952, a coup d'état in Egypt by the Free Egyptian Officers brought Muḥammad Naḡīb to power (followed by Gamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir). Naḡīb renounced Egypt's sovereignty over Sudan, an act that rendered its status as a Condominium void, and as a result of powerful pressures from Sudanese political parties and political mobilisation, Great Britain was forced to bring its domination to an end. Accordingly, on 12 February 1953, the last Anglo-Egyptian treaty was signed sanctioning a three-year transition period within which to transfer power to the Sudanese. On 1 January 1956, Sudan became the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence.

From the time of the end of the war, the local political scene began to simmer and grow in complexity. There were two large so-called “traditional” parties, the Umma Party (founded in 1945) and the National Unionist Party (the NUP, which founded in 1952, although an older pro-Khatmiyya party, the Ashiqqa, had existed since 1943), each of which was under the patronage of a religious leader: in the former case, it was 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Maḥdī, a descendent of the founder of the Mahdist state (1885–1898), and in the latter it was 'Alī al-Mīrghanī, the leader of the Khatmiyya Sufi brotherhood (Abu Hasabu 1985). Other political groups emerged

during the same period. For the purposes of our discussion, the most important of these was the Sudanese Movement for National Liberation – which would soon be renamed the Sudanese Communist Party (Ismael 2012). But many others also came into being, including the Liberal Party, which was formed by politicians who were originally from South Sudan, the Socialist Republican Party, the Islamic Charter Front, the Black Block and the Beja Congress (officially created in 1957), to name just a few. This reflects the politicisation of new actors who began to demand representation in the Sudanese political arena (see Moritz Mihatsch's chapter in this book).

Male wage-earning workers, whose intellectuals had a major influence on the women's movement, were among the most significant of these new actors. Following approval of the laws on the creation of trade unions in 1948, unionism underwent a massive expansion. According to a colonial report, the unions recruited between 70,000 and 120,000 members between 1948 and 1950.<sup>4</sup> Between 1948 and 1951, more than 77 unions were founded, including the first women's union (for female teachers, in 1950). The birth of the trade union movement coincided almost exactly with its anti-colonial political radicalisation (Vezzadini 2017), and waves of general strikes and demonstrations paralysed the country.

In direct relation to the political ferment, the press experienced unprecedented development. Every political group sought to establish its own newspaper so it would have a privileged space in which to voice its positions. For example, *al-Sūdān al-Jadīd* ("The New Sudan") was the organ of the Khatmiyya even before the NUP was founded, and *al-Umma* was the voice of supporters of the Mahdī family. In 1951, there were seven daily newspapers and fourteen periodicals in Arabic, plus several foreign language newspapers (Galander and Starosa 1997; Babiker 1985; al-Nūr 2014; Ṣāliḥ 1971). As for male Sudanese wage workers, their voices were expressed by the foundation of papers such as *al-Āmil* ("The Worker"), *al-Ṣarāḥa* and *al-Sha'b*. *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, a magazine published twice a week, was created in 1950 and edited by 'Abdallāh Rajab, a self-taught anti-imperialist intellectual inspired by socialism.<sup>5</sup> *Al-Sha'b*, a bi-weekly created in 1950, was also close to the unions, but was even more outspoken than *al-Ṣarāḥa*. Another newspaper of reference was *al-Ra'y al-Āmm*, which was founded by Ismā'īl al-'Atabānī in 1945, and was one of the rare daily newspapers that claimed not to be affiliated with any political party. Of a more moderate outlook, it nevertheless occasionally carried articles about the

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<sup>4</sup> "Development of Trade Unions in Sudan", in Letter from Robertson to Allen, 1.11.1950, London, LAB 13/480, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), Kew, United Kingdom. See also Fawzi (1957: 92–102).

<sup>5</sup> For more information on these newspapers, see Vezzadini (2016). I would like to thank Mahassin Abdul Jalil for talking to me about this magazine for the first time.

labour movement, and also covered the debates on women and nationhood, even though it did not publish any articles signed by female journalists until 1956. Unlike *Al-Sha'b* and *al-Ṣarāḥa*, it did not have a dedicated women's column until the same year. Further research is necessary in order to discover more about the circulation of these newspapers, and how this rose and fell over time. So far, only fragmentary information is available: in the *al-Sha'b* issue of 4 September 1957, we read by chance that it was selling 6,000 copies at the time; and *al-Ra'y al-Āmm* had an estimated circulation of 4,000 copies in 1956 (Kramer *et al.* 2013: 74).

Among the new actors who were beginning to claim a political voice were North Sudanese professional women. I will be discussing their profiles at length below; for now it is sufficient to mention that it is no coincidence that the first women's journal, *Bint al-Wādī* ("The Daughter of the [Nile] Valley", 1946–1949) appeared during this period.<sup>6</sup> However, as we shall see below, this magazine was short-lived. From 1950, it became possible for female journalists to be published in major political newspapers such as *al-Ṣarāḥa* and *al-Sha'b*. Not all were open to women, however, and it was in the pages of the left-wing press that they were able to find space, in line with the editors' ideological opening to female political participation.

## 1.2 Gendered Readers and Listeners

Today, the printed press is but one among many of the technologies that spread information, but in the 1950s, Sudanese citizens had virtually no source other than the press if they wanted to be informed about international and national news. There were really no alternatives, except for the only Sudanese radio station, Radio Omdurman, which was created in 1940. It only broadcast for a few hours a day, however, few people owned radios, and last but not least, it was an organ of the colonial authorities. It is interesting to note that radio programmes were transcribed and published in a popular magazine called *Hunā Omdurmān*, which shows that in its early years, radio was seen as a technological extension of the press. Unlike Radio Omdurman, the press was a relatively open forum. According to the historian Mahjoub Babiker, the British government adopted a tolerant attitude towards the press from the 1940s. He quotes a circular letter from the Civil Secretary dated 11 March 1944 in which the press was defined as "a valuable safety-valve for the escape of suppressed emotions" (Babiker 1985: 97).

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<sup>6</sup> This periodical can no longer be found. For an account of its early days, see Hall (1977). For an anthology of the early female writers, see 'Abd al-Qādir (1965).

In Sudan, as in many other countries of the Middle East (Ayalon 1995: 154–59), the circulation of newspapers went far beyond those who knew how to read.<sup>7</sup> Reading was a collective activity: once a copy had been obtained, it was read aloud to a small audience in cafés, clubs, stations, markets or private circles. The newspaper was then passed from hand to hand, from one circle of listeners to another, and so a single copy could be read by dozens of people (Ayalon 1995: 158–59). In villages far from the capital that were connected by the railway line, villagers went to the station to wait for newspapers to be delivered.<sup>8</sup> In this way, newspapers were an essential part of the creation of political sociabilities in spite of the high illiteracy rate. It is also worth mentioning that the price of newspapers was very affordable in Sudan: both the bi-weekly *al-Ṣarāḥa* and *al-Sha'b* cost 10 *milimāt* in 1950; to give a rough comparative idea, in the “Living expenses of household budgets for 1935–36” notebook, we find that this corresponded to the daily cost of bread.<sup>9</sup> In 1947, the Labour Commissioner to Sudan, Mr Audsley, stated that the monthly pay for “labourers generally”<sup>10</sup> was LE 1.800 (that is, Egyptian pounds) – to which at that time the government added a 70% cost of living allowance, for a total of about LE 3. Considering that each pound was equivalent to 100 piastres (*girsh*, Sudanese Arabic of قرش) and each *girsh* was equivalent to 10 *milimāt* (sing. *milim*), we see that the cost of these newspapers was 1 piastre, which seems largely affordable in relation to monthly wages.

Reading was also a social activity for literate Sudanese women: it was customary to read to the rest of the family, and literate women often tried to teach their family circle to read and write. In the case of women, however, this social reading was not performed outside the home. In 1950s Muslim Sudan, segregation between the sexes and relegation of women to the home were strictly enforced in the families of notables, civil servants and officers, and of medium and large merchants. As the women who were able to read and write came overwhelmingly from this group, their reading rituals, of which we know very little besides this segregation aspect, were performed in private. In her recollections, Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm, a pioneer of the women’s movement, noted that in her family, it was her mother who read the newspaper to her father, who was an educated, pious and politically sen-

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7 The most detailed description of these aural audiences can be found in Ayalon (1995: 154–59); for a comparison with Turkey, see also Beeley (1970).

8 Information on the social use of the press in Northern Sudan is grasped from the oral accounts of participants in the nationalist movement in the 1920s; see Vezzadini (2015: 51–55).

9 “Living Expenses of Household Budgets for 1935–36”, Sudan Archive Durham (SAD) 579/9/19. Sudan underwent an important wave of inflation after the Second World War. This question has been extensively treated by Fawzi (1957), esp. Chapter XI, but see also Serels (2013) and Young (2018).

10 “Note by Mr Audsley, Labour Commissioner, on Sudan”, 15/04/1947, FO 371/63088, TNA, Kew, UK.

sitive teacher, every day.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, I have not been able to find accounts of men reading to their spouses, but considering the number of women who were initiated into politics by their brothers at that time, one might imagine that this included some reading.<sup>12</sup> The home was therefore the place where literate women were politicised, which happened through exposure to the press and contacts with the family circle.

This was not the case for the majority of Sudanese women, however. First, many worked outside their homes, although the existing studies do not allow us to refine our sociological analysis much further than this (Salih 1989; Maglad 1998; Pitamber 1999). Women from the popular classes were visible in many urban public spaces because of the jobs and tasks they performed: for example, domestic workers roamed the streets to fetch fuel or water, while others worked in markets or in the street selling many different handcrafted products, crops or horticulture products, or preparing food and drinks. The public visibility of urban working women was highly stigmatised in the social imaginary of the “middle class”: exposing oneself to men’s gazes was associated with prostitution and a lack of respectability, and women’s work was equated with slavery and/or poverty (Spaulding and Beswick 1995; Sikainga 1996). In the body of texts studied in this research, the idea that women went to work exclusively out of poverty and dire need was a recurring one, as we will see.

As far as it is possible to grasp from the scant available evidence,<sup>13</sup> working women did not socialise or discuss politics with men in public spaces,<sup>14</sup> which means that women had only limited opportunities to listen to the articles that were being read aloud among groups of men. This illustrates the gender and class limitations of politicisation associated with the press: while it may be true that a newspaper’s readership extended well beyond members of the elite or middle class, the audience from the popular classes seems to have been essentially male. Working women had limited exposure to the political messages in the press,<sup>15</sup> and only mobi-

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11 Ruwān al-Ḍāmin, Interview with Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm, *Al-Rā’idāt*, al-Jazeera, 9 July 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/39nzh5> (May 12, 2022).

12 This point is made in several biographies, such as the interview with Fāṭima A. Ibrāhīm quoted above, and is also mentioned in the story about Khaldā Zāhir (Zahir 1997: 21).

13 Mostly taken either from the quoted secondary literature on women at work, or from anthropological studies such as that by Willems (2007).

14 There is no room here to enter in the debate about the private/public spaces of Middle Eastern women, so I have not problematized these terms in order not to overburden the chapter, even though they merit further discussion. For some contributions, see Thompson (2003), Keddie and Baron (2008), Joseph and Slyomovics (2011).

15 One important exception, which deserves an entire chapter to itself, is high-class prostitutes. According to Heather Sharkey, “some of the women most active in literary activities in the 1930s



lised rarely, at least in the visible sphere of the anticolonial movements. Instead, it was literate women who spoke up in the newspapers, and who left textual traces in the national and press archives.

### 1.3 *Al-Rā'idāt*

The first women to acquire visibility in Sudanese politics are still dubbed today by Sudanese as *al-rā'idāt*, the pioneers, a title that emphasises the collective perception of their exceptional character. One example is Khālida Zāhir (1926–2015), one of the founders of the women's movement. Born in Omdurman, she founded the first Sudanese women's association, *rābiṭat al-fatayāt al-muthaqqafāt* (the Association of Cultured Girls) in 1946 with Fāṭima Ṭālib Ismā'īl, who was a pupil of the Teacher Training College in the capital at the time (Muhammad 2012). Khālida Zāhir was one of the first two women to graduate from the Kitchener Medical School as a doctor (Zahir and Zahir 1997).

The unusual nature of her educational career can only be understood if we take a brief detour into women's education in Sudan. Even though it undoubtedly increased in the second half of imperial rule in Sudan (Brown 2017: 48), a well-known British report on education in Sudan affirmed in 1937 that “with the educated Sudanese the gap is becoming unbridgeable between the two halves forming the pillars of home life” (quoted in Brown 2017: 86).<sup>16</sup> In a country that had an estimated population of about ten million inhabitants in 1948 (Niblock 1987: 90), there were just 37 pupils at the only public secondary school for girls in the country (which opened in 1945) in that year, and 265 in 1956 (Beshir 1969: 28; Sanderson 1961: 92). Private schools alleviated the sore lack of places in public schools, and in 1956 Sudanese private (*ahliyya*) intermediary schools included 900 girls (Sanderson 1975: 243). Even at the elementary and primary levels there was huge gap: in 1952, there were 37,443 boys at elementary level in public schools and 9,455 in non-governmental schools, compared with 14,183 girls in public schools and 3,466 in private institutions (*Report on the Administration of the Sudan for the Year 1951–52*: 94–95).

Before the Second World War, the colonial authorities viewed the professional training of women as incompatible with Sudanese society and also as a waste,

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and 1940s had been sex workers who were able to circulate with educated men” (mail conversation, 11 July 2021). A dissertation on the history of prostitution is currently being prepared by Mahassin Abdul Jalil, one of the editors of this book.

<sup>16</sup> On the politics of education in late colonial Sudan, especially history teaching, see Seri-Hersch (2018).

because women married early and would not work after marriage. After the war, in part in view of the increasing number of girls passing the entrance exam for the Gordon College who had been educated at private schools (such as Unity High School, Comboni College, and the Coptic School, see Sanderson 1975: 243–44), the government had to acknowledge the birth of a (tiny) group of professional women.<sup>17</sup> However, none of them came from the only governmental secondary school, which was characterised from the start by serious shortcomings in terms of curricula and personnel (Brown 2017: 113). In 1951, all the pupils went on strike to protest against poor teaching and the lack of qualified staff. This historic strike was one of the founding narratives of the women’s movement, and involved figures like Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm and Ḥājja Kāshif Badrī, who remained at the forefront of the women’s movement for their entire lives (Ibrāhīm 1985; Badrī 2009; Brown 2017: 113–117).

In many aspects, the “pioneers” had exceptional profiles. First of all, they belonged to unusual families who were not necessarily part of the established elite of the Sudanese society. For instance, Khālda Zāhir’s father was a Darfuri officer who had taken part in the 1924 Revolution. According to Hall (1977: 263) “both Fatima Taleb and Zainab al-Fateh admit to having had exceptionally progressive-minded fathers who believed in girls’ education and encouraged their daughters to develop their talents and abilities.” Similarly, Khālda Zāhir’s father not only encouraged his daughter to enter the medical profession, which had hitherto been a masculine fief, but also supported her in a number of uncommon choices, such as marrying for love against the advice and wishes of the rest of the family (Zahir and Zahir 1997: 22). In the case of other militants, we know that their families accepted the fact that their daughters would not marry, or would marry late, or chose a man of their choice, contrary to the customs of the time: for example, Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm married the well-known trade union leader al-Shafī’ Aḥmad al-Shaykh in 1969, when she was about 40.<sup>18</sup> Finally, these families accepted their daughters’ political exposure. Khālda Zāhir, for instance, was the first woman to join a political party – the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP), which was actually the only one open to women at the time – but she was also the first woman to make a political speech in public and to be arrested for her political activities (Badrī 2009: 176; Zahir and Zahir 1997: 21–22). Some women, such

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<sup>17</sup> The first woman was admitted to university in 1945, but ten years later, in 1956, no more than 40 women were registered (Niblock 1987: 134).

<sup>18</sup> “Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim Obituary.” *The Guardian*, 21 August 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/21/fatima-ahmed-ibrahim-obituary>. This newspaper gives 1928 as her year of birth and 1969 as the year of marriage, but elsewhere we find 1930, or even 1933 as birthdates (El Gizouli 2017).

as Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm and Ḥājja Kāshif Badrī, also joined the SCP very early on, braving the systematic harassment by local and colonial authorities against it.

On 17 January 1952, ‘Āzza Makkī ‘Uthmān organised a meeting to celebrate winning a literary competition on the “women’s issue” run by *al-Ṣarāḥa* newspaper (for different versions of this event, see Maḥmūd 2008: 152; Badrī 2009: 176; Brown 2017: 117). This historic meeting became the founding moment of *al-ittiḥād al-nisā’i al-sūdānī*, the Sudanese Women’s Union (SWU). Fāṭima Ṭālib Ismā’īl was elected as its leader, and Thuriyyā Umbābī as its Secretary. These first participants met again at the end of the month, and formed a fifteen-woman executive committee that also included representatives from the Nurses’ Union and the Female Teachers’ Union.<sup>19</sup> The prominent role of members of the Nurses’ Union in the executive committee was an acknowledgement of their outstanding anti-colonial commitment: in fact, the first women to openly take part in an anticolonial demonstration were female nurses, in 1951. Even the British colonialists saw it as a momentous event. The telegram that described it was entitled: “First Women Demonstrators”, and continued, “Nurses at Khartoum Hospitals took part in demonstrations. This is the first time in the history of the Sudan that women have taken part in public demonstrations.”<sup>20</sup>

The visibility of women both through the press and by the foundation of the first women’s organisation challenged the symbolic gender order of the time. Nafisa Abū Bakr al-Milīk (born in Rufa’a in 1932) recounted the social code these women began to break and the violence this provoked. She related that members of the *Ittiḥād* always had to be accompanied when they walked in the streets because men would try to strike them with sticks. When the SWU was founded, none of the members could go to the clerk’s office in person to register the association, because no Sudanese women entered public buildings at that time (Maḥmūd 2008: 156). According to Ḥājja Kāshif Badrī, “a woman was not expected to set foot out of the house except on two occasions – one to go to her husband’s house after marriage and two, to her grave after death” (Badrī 2009: 71).

The anti-colonial struggle and nationalism offered new tools for shattering female seclusion. The visibility of the militants was justified as having a political objective: it was impossible to join the nationalist movement without being present and visible in it. Devotion to the nationalist cause should not be viewed as being opportunistic, however: at the time, nationalism in all its different forms was an ideology that was shared by all political orientations. However, these mili-

<sup>19</sup> Memories of Nafisa Abū Bakr al-Milīk, quoted in Maḥmūd (2008: 151–59).

<sup>20</sup> Anonymous telegram, 26.8.1951, FO 371/90229, TNA, Kew, UK. Tellingly, the second demonstration was not organised by the Sudan Union but by the Association for Women’s Awakening. See the chapter by Safa Mohamed Khair Osman in this volume.

tants grasped the emancipating potential of this discourse, which enabled them to draw on a repertoire of powerful arguments to refute their invisibilisation in the public realm.

## 2 Discourses on the Women's Question

### 2.1 Introduction: From the 1930s to 1950

The female journalists who sought to contribute to the debates about nation-building had to do so amidst a highly misogynistic discursive repertoire. In two seminal articles, the historian Heather Sharkey describes how women's issues were being debated as early as the 1930s (Sharkey 1999, 2003a). In particular, she analyses two famous literary magazines, *al-Nahḍa* ("The Renaissance", which was published between 1931 and 1932) and *al-Fajr* ("The Dawn," 1934–1937). Despite their opposite political connections, the contributors – who were exclusively male – expressed the same beliefs: women were "obstacles to modernisation" and "symbols of backwardness", and pending the "civilization" of women, there would be no national emancipation (Sharkey 2003a: 64). In other words, women were responsible for the failure of the national project in Sudan. These highly negative descriptions are peculiar if we compare them to other Middle Eastern contexts in which women were central to nationalist myth-making. To give but one famous example, in colonial Egypt, "the peasant woman" was one of the symbols of the nation, incarnating values such as resistance to colonisation, innocence and tradition (Baron 2007: chapter 3). In the Sudanese press of the time, similar female ideal types seem to have been conspicuous for their absence.

The first journalists to sign articles with female pseudonyms appeared in the 1940s. The decision to use pseudonyms was common to much of the women's literature of these times, in the Arab world and beyond (Baron 2007; Booth 2001; Ducourneau 2019). It echoes the well-known Islamic saying that "*ṣawt al-mar'a 'awra*", "the voice of the woman is nudity" (Salomon 2020: 36), as well as the norm that banned pronouncing the name of a woman publicly.<sup>21</sup> This means that the names of women journalists are hard to identify until 1956.

In a little-known, but fundamental, work because of its access to sources that seem to have been lost, the historian Marjorie J. Hall analysed the beginnings of this women's journalism (1977: 252–53). According to Hall, women journalists in

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<sup>21</sup> This is one of the reasons why women were usually called by the name of the sons (but occasionally also the daughters) they bore, like Umm al-Nūr or Umm Maryam.

the 1940s who contributed to *Bint al-Wādī* focused on the practical problems of the female Sudanese upper and middle class of the time. They gave advice to their readers on issues such as “culinary hints, home and childcare, and the creation of a cordial domestic atmosphere” (Hall 1977: 253); but also the interior decoration of homes, the recommended soft tone of voice to be adopted when speaking to one’s husband, and so on (Hall 1977: 252–53). Despite their lightness, these texts all noted that there were problems in the couple, and it was the women who needed to take responsibility for mending them, as it was they who were seen as its cause. Other newspapers and magazines such as *al-Sūdān al-Jadīd*, *al-Kurdufān*, and *Hunā Omdurmān* carried similar articles on women’s domestic problems (Hall 1977: 252 sq.).<sup>22</sup> For example, women were chastised for not being able to keep their homes up properly.

Beginning in the period being studied here, as I have mentioned, *Bint al-Wādī* ceased publication, and the female authors now began to target the political press, in parallel with the opening of dedicated columns in *al-Sha’b* and *al-Šarāḥa*. Here, they took the model of older magazines such as *Hunā Omdurmān*, with its *rukn al-mar’a* – woman’s corner – but with entirely different themes and lexicon. The story of this appearance is now lost, and it is not possible from the available sources to know how the contacts between the editors-in-chief of *al-Sha’b* and *al-Šarāḥa* and the women who were willing to write political pieces were established. From the start, the writers’ objective was to deal with “the problems of the Sudanese woman” (*mashākil al-mar’a al-sūdāniyya*)<sup>23</sup> in the framework of the struggle for national liberation, in the same way as the writers of *al-Fajr* or *al-Nahḍa*. This time, however, women were authors, and not only the objects of the texts.

Several formal elements should be noted about these columns. First, women were not the only contributors – the writers were of mixed genders. Second, they followed a heterogeneous, but frequently dialogic, format, in the sense that several texts took the form of real or imaginary responses to previous column articles, or even articles published in other newspapers or heard on the radio (and transcribed in *Hunā Omdurmān*). Finally, the space offered to these articles was limited – often just two or three columns on one page, and rarely any more than

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22 In the late 1940s, even *Al-Šibyān*, which was a weekly pedagogical magazine for children, and which had an exceptional circulation of 10,000 in 1947, and up to 20,000 in 1953, included a double-page targeting female teenagers and women (“*šafḥāt Naḥīsa*”). It typically included stories on great women, advice on matters of education and marriage, sewing and cooking instructions. See Seri-Hersch (2011: 351).

23 This is the title of the anonymous article published in the column *rukn al-mar’a* in *al-Sha’b*, 20.01.1951, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

that. Their monthly frequency varied considerably, from two or three in a single month to nothing for several months.

In the following sections, we will examine some of these texts closely, and track their evolution over time, distinguishing two major phases: a first marked by what I call a subversive mimesis (sections 2.2 and 2.3); and a second marked by open opposition (section 2.5). In between, I will also illustrate the position of some progressive male intellectuals with regard to “the woman’s question” (section 2.4) and their role in the evolution of political sensibilities.

## 2.2 The “Candid Girl”

When the columns by female journalists began to appear in political newspapers, the theme of the role of women in the process of national liberation became – once again – central to the debate, as had been the case with the journalistic discourses of the 1930s. The writers accused “the Sudanese woman” of being responsible for the country’s dire state. However, in spite of the apparent proximity between these and earlier discourses on women, profound differences soon became discernible.

On 18 April 1950, the first article in the *nisā’iyyāt* (women’s issues) column appeared in *al-Šarāḥa*. It was written by *fatā šariḥa*, a “candid girl”, who edited the column for its entire first year. The opening article, which was entitled “Hey man! Hey woman!”, was a lengthy text that stated the programme, mission and objective of this literary space.<sup>24</sup> The “candid girl” addressed both “the Man” and “the Woman,” and explained their roles in the development of the country. Addressing “the Man” first, she begged “him” to raise the level of women:

You, who are aspiring to freedom and glory, you who are seeking a happier and more luxurious life, do you know that your wings are still broken? And that you will not be happy and fly in the world of freedom unless your wings are safe? These questions are addressed to you, Sudanese man, as your state is akin to that of a bird with a broken wing.

You have reached a remarkable level of sophistication [*ruqā*], you know your obligations and your rights and you try to raise the level of your country, then you seek a freedom that only those who truly understand it deserve to get. Indeed, you can be a skilful politician or a competent administrator, but you are still to a certain extent paralysed. And you will never obtain what is yours completely unless you remedy this deficiency – which you already know, is the backwardness [*ta’akkkhur*] of woman, or your broken wing.

This vile creature [*makhlūqa dhalīla*], who is ordinarily imprisoned in her own home, toiling under the burden of slavery – you call her backward [*ta’akkkhur*]. [. . .] You do not trust her,

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24 Fatā Šariḥa, “Ayyuhā al-Rajul, Ayyatuhā al-Mar’a.” *Al-Šarāḥa*, 18.4.1950, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

you oppress her and maybe even more than that, which leads to the disintegration of family ties and the misfortune of the progeny. What is your stance, oh man, regarding that woman whom you've wronged with your behaviour, and who will, from today, raise her voice high complaining through this column, and she will not spare you until she fully restores all her rights, and earns the prestigious position she deserves. [. . .]

And we should all cooperate, women and men, to treat this disease [*dā*], not only towards the backwardness [*ta'khīr*] of the Sudanese woman but also because there are complicated social issues that are difficult for both women and men to solve if they deal with them separately. From now on, therefore, let us make our slogan "God is with the group." [. . .] And we will create together that highly-esteemed Sudanese woman, the daughter of the Sudan that both you and she dream of, and the mother of future men. Indeed, with this you will raise the status of the Sudanese household and build the glory of this nation.

Then she addressed "the Woman":

Hey, woman, isn't it about time you woke up from your deep sleep [*nawmiki al-'amīq*]? Don't you know that you are in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? The era of the atom? The time of idleness, hesitation and fear is long gone. It's time you did your duty in the best way possible. The age when the worth of a woman was measured by the number of servants surrounding her and how little she moved is now long gone. Wake up from your sleep, as opportunities are now accessible for you. You will have this newspaper through which you can broadcast your complaints and find what interests you, whether you are a wife, a student or a teacher. We will restore your once oppressed rights, not only from the man but from any other entity, whether it be an organization or an individual, and it will uncover what was hidden from you – from customs you believed in, nay, you worshipped. We will clear up for you what is good from what is bad, and so on. And do not be embarrassed to raise your voice high in this newspaper, and do not fear the wrath of man because he will also aid us in our study of this problem, and – God willing – we will not be disappointed in him.

But do not get carried away and think that this column will only contain campaigns against the man, against his oppression, injustice and sometimes narcissism. No, because there will be campaigns against you, to lead you to a happier life, because you are centuries late [*muta'akhhira qurūnan*] compared to the current times, and we will make you catch up to the caravan of civilisation [*sa-nalḥaquki bi-l-qāfila al-mutaḥaddīra*]. Trust that we will not turn you into a joke by turning you into a foreigner. We will simply make you a correct, civilised [*mutaḥaddīra*] Sudanese woman, no matter how much you gain in knowledge or class. Otherwise, woe unto you!

There are several elements in this text that cannot escape our attention. First, and most obviously, there is the difference in the description of men and women: men are described as capable and skilled, "high" creatures – compared to birds – able to understand the meaning of freedom. At the opposite end there are women, who are described as tardy, retrograde, idle and kept in a servile state. And yet the writer reminds us that women are (partly) in this condition because men "wronged" them by confining them to the prison of the house. In other words, both men and women

are represented as being responsible for the situation. The writer reassures her readers that the column is neither a “campaign against the men,” nor an attempt to “foreignize” women – that is, to follow a model of development that is not “Sudanese”: elsewhere, she calls women the “daughters of the Sudan.” Instead, her aim through the column is the creation of a “correct” [*ṣaḥīḥa*] and modern woman, which for the writers, as the subsequent issues make clear, is a process entirely connected to female education. A second element that comes to light is the core role agency plays in this article. Everybody is called on to be an actor in this reform and to overcome the paralysis that the terrible situation of women can inspire. In spite of their slumber, women are capable of awakening and claiming their rights. The third and last element to note is the metanarrative about the press. For the journalist, *nisā’iyyāt* is much more than a space by and about women. It is a tool of struggle, a means of fighting for women’s intellectual and material conditions, by offering both a place to expose men’s abuses, and one where women’s inaction and backwardness can be chastised, especially in relation to their “worship” of “bad customs.” On the other hand, the editor adopts a patronising – if not denigratory – tone that expresses superiority and condescension in relation to these “slumbering” women, in this way situating herself closer to her definition of masculinity than to the feminine pole.

I will now move on to the question of *al-‘ādāt* – here in the sense of customs, mores –*bāliyya* – obsolete, or retrograde.<sup>25</sup> Some months later, in fact, the “candid girl” began a cycle of articles targeting directly this theme. In one introductory text, she defined them as “a manifestation of backwardness that goes against the development of the human being”, adding that “unfortunately there are many of such customs. In reality this limits our society and its freedom and it inhibits the march towards progress [*al-sayr fī ṭarīq al-taqaddumiyya*].”<sup>26</sup> In subsequent issues, she addressed the rituals connected with two momentous times in the life of Muslim Sudanese women: funerals and marriages. In the text dedicated to funeral rituals, she wrote:

Men, thanks to education, have abandoned most of these obsolete rituals, but women are still holding on to them, and here we can find the vast difference between the funeral settings of men and those of women.

On the men’s side, there reign silence and words of condolence and encouragement, which recall life and death and the fate of all beings.

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<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that the theme of female pharaonic circumcision, a practice that was condemned by the British (Boddy 2007), was never directly mentioned in these texts.

<sup>26</sup> Fatā Ṣarīḥa, “Al-‘Ādāt al-Bāliyya [the obsolete customs].” *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 8.9.1950, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.



However, if we cast our sight towards women, we are confronted with the sour truth, the holding tightly on to obsolete [*bāliyya*], heinous [*shantī'a*] rituals that contradict the teachings of Islam and diminish the strength of the Sudanese community. Therefore, they should be fought and eliminated [*al-qaḍā' alayhā*].

The rituals that women follow are the display of exaggerated sorrow for the death of the departed, a loud and tangible display that, of course, entails practicing the arts of screaming [*ṣurākh*], wailing [*'awīl*] and austerity. While performing these rituals, women forget about the relatives of the deceased and the harm that will befall them due to these acts.<sup>27</sup>

The article continues with a negatively charged description of the perniciousness of female burial rituals, which are described as heinous, an absurdity [*sakhāfa*] and ugly [*bashā'a*], and reveals a competition among the women for the loudest expression of – false – grief. Finally, two solutions for fighting them are proposed by the “candid girl”:

Firstly, men must take a very firm position towards these ceremonies and with the women during these occasions, by not allowing them to perform rituals like “*al-manāḥa*” [the wailing performed at funerals]. This would be a temporary solution to the problem. The second way, and the final solution, will be the spreading of education among women.

Here, much as in the first essay, men are represented as rational and more developed at an intellectual, emotional and moral level, and are contrasted with women’s “retrograde” attitudes. The “candid girl” also mobilised gendered religious and racial arguments: the “obsolete customs” recalled those of “some old African tribes”, were non-Islamic and were the opposite of the Islam of men, whose behaviour complied with perceived notions of orthodox Islam.<sup>28</sup> On the women’s side, the condemnation is definitive, and there is no space for empathy or understanding, except for the women who are the victims of these rituals.

Why did the “candid girl” provide such a derogatory description of women? The misogyny of the first waves of feminist writings is not just a characteristic of Sudan; it is a global trope.<sup>29</sup> Here, I will offer two considerations that are context-specific, however. The first female authors participated in a debate for which

27 Fatā Ṣarīḥa, “Al-Aṭrāḥ wa-l-Ādāt al-Bāliyya [miseries and obsolete customs].” *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 6.10.1950, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

28 We can also understand this argument in the light of the Islamic reformism that was becoming increasingly common in the urban centres of Muslim Sudan through institutions such as the Islamic Courts (Ibrahim 2008). Nevertheless, it should be observed that in the sample studied, religious arguments never become central; rather, they are mobilised as one among many rhetorical ‘bullets’ used by the movement to stir up readers.

29 To give just two examples, these aspects have been studied in the cases of Simone de Beauvoir (Dietz 1993 and the whole special issue) and Mary Wollstonecraft (Gubar 1994).

the argumentative groundwork had been constructed much earlier, as seen, which had the essential backwardness of women as its premise. Because they were publishing in newspapers by and for men, it is difficult to imagine how these journalists could have carried out a radical departure, when the very fact that felt entitled to write political pieces was a tremendous novelty.

But there was another question, too, which becomes clear if one reconsiders the discussion about the gender of the audience and the profiles of the journalists. We have seen that the majority of Sudanese women had little or no access to the press, and thus had negligible exposure to the political and pedagogic programme that lay behind most publications of the time. The first female journalists were therefore confronted with the thorny problem of how to capture the attention of illiterate women. One solution was to try to reach them through the men in their family circle. For this purpose, they sought to use all possible means to sensitise, move and shake their male audience in order to co-opt them into the mission of modernising women. This explains certain mystifying features of the articles during this first period, in particular the fact that in many texts, female journalists – and not only the “candid girl” – described women’s woes from a seemingly masculine point of view.<sup>30</sup>

However, a more radical discourse was already detectable between the lines of the same article, one that questioned the responsibility of “the man” for the catastrophic situation of women. This theme came to the fore as early as the second article on women’s issues published in *al-Ṣarāḥā*.

### 2.3 The Oppressed Woman – *al-Mar’a al-Maḥlūma*

The second article in the *nisā’iyyāt* columns was published only two weeks after “Hey Man, Hey Woman,” but was very different from the first. It was an autobiographical account by a narrator who signed herself “the oppressed woman” and who entitled her piece “Oh man, this is how you behaved unfairly towards me.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> As in the story, which is quoted at length in Vezzadini (2018), of a man wishing to marry who goes through the ordeal of marriage rituals, and end up being penniless and abandoning his bride. The story, written by a female journalist, is narrated from the point of view of the groom. While she describes the feelings of deception of the man at length, the point of view of the deserted wife is absent from the narration.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Mar’a al-Maḥlūma, “Hākadhā Janayta ‘Alayya, Ayyuhā al-Rajul.” *Al-Ṣarāḥā*, 28.4.1950, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

From the start, the narrator claimed that male domination could ruin the life of a woman: “Perhaps you believe that I am unfair, oh man, if I accuse you of acting unjustly towards me, but my position will become clear to you when I tell you the story of my life, which you dominate in all its phases”. Her story continues:

Since I was a little girl, your domination [*saytaratuka*] over me has manifested itself in the image of the father. He forbade me from being educated, because in his view, [education] would spoil me. He then decided to marry me to a husband whom he determined was appropriate, but I do not know what pleased him about that man, whether it was his money or his position.

The man who joined his life to mine does not trust me, and he does not share his life with me, his sweetness and his bitterness. The discord between us moves slowly forward. And I saw my rights taken away from me, and because of this I neglected my duties [as a wife] and became bored with life.

As the story continues, the husband decides to take a second wife, whom he treats very differently:

You are guilty towards me, oh man, when you are a father and you marry me with this man who knows nothing about the rules of married life, then you are guilty towards me another time in the image of this man who builds a second marriage on the basis of justice as a Muslim. But where is the justice, oh God? Really, he is the man farthest from justice. How huge is the difference between me and the new wife, and how vast is the difference between the children he had with me and his children with her.

Here, the “oppressed woman” contrasts her notion of religious justice – here defined as acting in the true interests and for the well-being of the other – with the justice of the Islamic courts, which legislate over marriages and yet allow such abuses to occur.

Her husband’s neglect increases to the point where he abandons her, moves to another city with his second wife and leaves her alone and with no resources, and with responsibility for the children. They grow up restricted and in poverty, do not go to school, and end up “not knowing the taste of life.” Only one of them succeeds in securing a respectable position for himself. However, when he marries, instead of taking care of his mother, his new wife chases her out with no objection on her son’s part. The article concludes:

I am now an old woman, and I am shaking this life off my hands so that I can leave it without sadness. I will never know what it means to be helped, since I was little at my father’s house, and then at my husband’s. [. . .] My husband showed disrespect to me, and my child repudiated me as a mother. What is left after this? What is worse than this injustice [*zulm*] and oppression [*jawr*], oh man?

In this burning condemnation of men’s domination over the lives of women, the first-person narrator not only tells her story, but also recounts all her feelings and

emotions in regard to the injustices she has faced throughout her life. This narrative strategy creates an impression of intimacy, as if the writer is surrendering herself to her confidants-readers, saying what lies at the bottom of her soul. In turn, this reinforces the feeling that the story is true, a fact the editor of the column seeks to consolidate with the words “conforms to the original” [*tābiq al-aṣīl*] just before the “oppressed woman” signature at the foot of the article. Unlike the majority of other articles in *nisā’iyyāt*, the story is offered with no introduction or comments on the part of the editor, as if she wished to let the “oppressed woman” speak without filters.

Three months later, the “candid girl” mentioned that she had received a letter from a certain A. A. Muṣṭafā, in which he rejected the “oppressed woman’s” accusations.<sup>32</sup> This time, the editor adopted a writing strategy contrary to the one we have just described, seeking to distance the readers by not quoting the letter directly and merely summarising it. She thus reported that Muṣṭafā considered that only “Eve” was responsible for the “unhappiness of the family”. The woman was a “speckled snake” [*al-ḥayya al-raqā’a*], unstable [*tamalmul*] and malicious [*dahā*], and she continues:

He says that a man who does not educate his daughter does so because he himself is not educated, and that if he marries a second time it is because his first wife does not accomplish her duty, and therefore it is unfair to accuse the man of this behaviour since he is just trying to make himself happier. [. . .] Man is innocent of what he is accused of and women are the sole cause of the misery of society and of man and of themselves.

The “candid girl” responded to the letter in this way:

I believe you should accept the accusations made against men, just as we have accepted that the man is the master of the family and its protector, the one who dominates it, especially because the family situation in our country is different from other countries in relation to the level of women. So if there is someone who has to be held accountable for the unhappiness of a family, would it not be the man?

From this exchange, we can conclude that the “candid girl” was deploying a strategy of subversive mimesis that consisted in showing her adherence to conventional middle class social norms reflected in Islamic family law (Fluehr-Lobban 2013) by accepting the patriarchal order of the household and showing wifely obedience. But while men were the heads of the family, the logical consequence of this was that they were responsible for the well-being of its members as well as providing for their tangible and intangible needs – such as education – in exchange

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<sup>32</sup> “Barid li-l-Fatā al-Ṣarīḥa [letter to the candid woman].” *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 11.7.1950, NRO Khartoum, Sudan.

for their obedience. Precisely through these arguments, it was easy to demonstrate the responsibility of men for the situation of “backwardness” of Sudanese women. Their dire state was a bitter testimony to how men had failed in their patriarchal role. Moreover, this patriarchal organisation was situated in a timeline, which meant that it was not linked to any intrinsic feminine trait, and as such was potentially modifiable.

## 2.4 “A Historic Day in the Lives of Sudanese Women”

As we have seen, *al-ittiḥād al-nisāʾi al-sūdānī*, the SWU, was founded in January 1952. By then, many progressive male intellectuals had become convinced of the necessity for a women’s organisation. An article in *al-Ṣarāḥa* dated September 1951 described a meeting of Khartoum University College<sup>33</sup> students that concluded with a brief speech on the need to found a women’s union: “Male and female students took part in the discussion, [. . .] and one of the female students suggested establishing a connection between men and women with the aim of raising the level of women in society.”<sup>34</sup> Later on, the various stages that led to the foundation of the SWU were extensively covered by the press. After its birth, all the three newspapers discussed here – including the moderate *al-Raʾy al-ʿĀmm* – devoted laudatory articles to it. *Al-Ṣarāḥa* dedicated the entire front page of its 1 August 1952 edition to various aspects of the women’s “problem” alongside the foundation of the new society.<sup>35</sup> The presence of women’s issues on the front page of the newspaper was exceptional, because women’s columns were generally relegated to the middle pages. The enthusiasm of the press concealed the great difficulties encountered by the “pioneers” in establishing their association and making it work. The militants’ memoirs describe a daily struggle to exist as an association and to expand its area of action.

Here, I will focus on a text that is especially illustrative when it comes to understanding these questions. Less than a month after the SWU had been founded, a long editorial appeared in *al-Raʾy al-ʿĀmm* entitled “A historic day in the lives of

<sup>33</sup> The Gordon College was officially renamed Khartoum University College in 1951 and University of Khartoum in 1956.

<sup>34</sup> “Qarārāt li-Tanzīm al-Mujtamaʾ al-Nisāʾi [resolutions in favour of the organisation of the women’s society].” *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 25.9.1951, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

<sup>35</sup> The first page of this edition of *al-Ṣarāḥa* also included a drawing representing women’s emancipation, which is commented on by Brown (2017: 126).

Sudanese women.”<sup>36</sup> Tellingly, this was not the day on which the SWU was established, but a literary evening held at the Students Union Club in Khartoum on 21 February 1952. The event was organised by Muḥammad al-Nuwayhī, an Egyptian teacher of Arabic literature at the Gordon College<sup>37</sup> who a few months earlier had launched a literary competition asking writers to write pieces about the role of women in the Sudanese national movement. The competition was won by ‘Āzza Makkī ‘Uthmān, and the meeting in her home to celebrate this victory led to the foundation of the SWU. The evening at the Students Union Club was to be a sort of continuation of the competition at which the organiser of the evening, al-Nuwayhī, asked contributors to comment on the statement that “Sudanese women cannot currently take part in the battle for [national] liberation because of their illiteracy.” In other words, it was a debate on girls’ education. It is important not to lose sight here of the difference between how participants experienced the evening – of which we only know fragments – and what was reported in *al-Ra’y al-‘Āmm*.

Muḥammad al-Nuwayhī started the event off by reviewing the texts sent in for the literary competition. The newspaper reported that these were all in favour of women’s education. Various suggestions were made as a means of improving women’s situation, such as encouraging their participation in literary clubs and fostering greater involvement in their husbands’ social lives as a way of being exposed to a more stimulating milieu.

Following these first readings, al-Nuwayhī opened the discussion up to those in attendance. The guests came from the cream of the male intellectual scene, plus a small number of female members of the SWU (whose names were not reported, again in contrast to the men, who were all called by their names, as known personalities). All kinds of ideological orientations were represented. Sa’d al-Dīn Fawzī, who at the time was a professor of economics at the University of Khartoum, and was later to become a celebrated economic and social historian, stated that the women’s movement was not premature, and that it was a sign of the progress of the country. Then there were positions such as those of al-Zubayr ‘Abd al-Maḥmūd

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36 “Yawm Tārīkhī fī Ḥayāt al-Mar’a al-Sūdāniyya.” *Al-Ra’y al-‘Āmm*, 21.2.1952, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

37 On the intellectual universe of the time to which al-Nuwayhī belonged: Sharkey (1998, 2003b, 2020) and Seri-Hersch (2011). On the fascinating life of this intellectual, see the page dedicated to him in the Arabic encyclopedia Areq: [https://areq.net/m/محمد\\_النوبيي.html](https://areq.net/m/محمد_النوبيي.html) (accessed on 10/6/2022). Born in a small Egyptian village, he became a fervent disciple of Ṭaha Ḥusayn, and was given the opportunity to earn a PhD in classical Arabic literature at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, before travelling back to Egypt and then to Sudan, where he established the Department of Arabic language at the Gordon College. Several studies have been dedicated to him, such as Green 1986. Even if it was probably written by Muḥammad al-Nuwayhī himself, the article was not signed.

and a certain al-Maghribī, both of whom were professors of religious sciences. They made the point that women's education and employment were permitted by Islam, and were even necessary in order to maintain gender segregation, because if a woman fell ill or wished to be educated, it had to be possible for her to be assisted by female professionals. Another *ʿālim* promised that he would develop this position giving an entire lecture on the status of women in the Islamic religion. Other intellectuals debated whether economic development would lead to women's advancement or if it would have to precede it as a precondition. It was only at the end of all the speeches that the floor was handed over to the women of the SWU. The speeches of two of them were reported, and one was described as "the girl of the evening" (*fatāt al-layla*) because of her boldness. She addressed the question of segregation: "the narrow-minded person's fear of mixing [*ikhṭilāṭ*] shows that he doubts the strength of the Sudanese woman and lacks trust in her, but it also means that he is accusing the Sudanese man of being dishonest and immoral."

The convergence of opinions described in this text conflicts with Ḥajja Kāshif Badrī's recollections of the same event. She mentions a bitter debate between defenders and opponents of women's education, and the insistence of the opponents on treating it as a religious prohibition: "This was the first time the women had appeared at such a meeting with men to defend their rights. A hot religious debate from the opposition side led by Shawki El Assad took place, as they tried to defend their position through Islamic doctrination [sic]" (Badrī 2009: 179).

Instead, in our article, only one of the participants came out openly against women's education, and it is extremely interesting to observe the narrative strategies used to describe his position. In the first place, he is – tellingly – nicknamed as "*al-rajīʿ*", "the reactionary", which is also the title given to the paragraph. Second, the paragraph in question is very short, and starts directly by stating: "The public at the event disagreed straightforwardly [*ṣarīḥa*, from the same root as the newspaper title] with professor Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Shaykh." It then goes on to list his ideas, which were to limit education for women, strengthen and give priority to religious education and avoid mixing between men and women.

This sheds light on the literary strategies put in place by the progressive press for setting the stage for a fiction, that of the existence of a general consensus around the women's question. First, the author placed the only truly dissident opinion outside the discourse through a series of narrative strategies that deprived it of intellectual legitimacy. At the same time, he was keen on giving space not only to liberal intellectuals, but also to conservative positions that were based on religious considerations, but still stated that women's education was permissible. In this way, the author created the illusion that all the legitimate political authorities had reached agreement on this issue. The aim of this textual fabrication was to convince a far wider audience than the participants in the "historical event," that composed by the

readers and listeners of *al-Ra'y al-Āmm*. Audiences with different political sensibilities – conservatives and progressives alike – would have been able to identify with one or another of the positions described in the text, uttered by the most authoritative voices of their time, while at the same time being led to agree on the fact that women's education was not only permissible, but henceforth a national necessity.

## 2.5 New Discourses on Emancipation

In the years that followed, *al-ittihād al-nisā'i al-sūdāni* chose the newspapers studied here as privileged platforms from which to describe the association's activities. Some examples are the creation of a women's clinic and the organisation of a yearly women's and children's festival.<sup>38</sup> These events and the media coverage they were given brought new members to the SWU, who in 1954 were estimated to number 400.<sup>39</sup> Through the press, the movement also asked women from other milieux to join them, hence articles such as "The word of the Women's Union to village girls" or "From the Women's Union to indigent girls."<sup>40</sup>

The call to "village girls" (women living in the rural areas) was already indicative of a shift in the discourses about gender relations: "You who are there in the villages, you don't know much about us, and we here, we only know what is brought by the press about you."<sup>41</sup> It is the man who fills the pages [of the press] with his opinions and his problems. My comrade [*zamilatī*]: the time has really come for us to know each other better."<sup>42</sup> Here, the anonymous author outspokenly expressed her awareness – and criticism – of the fact that women journalists were occupying a masculine space. In the meantime, the core of this message was about the most fundamental mission of the SWU, to reach out to and connect with groups of women outside the small circle of the educated female elite.

This attention to vulnerable groups should be seen at the light of a historical juncture at which all the political movements with connections to nationalism were attempting to base their legitimacy on popular, non-elite support, and were

38 Al-Duktūr Muṣṭafā al-Sayyid, "Ḥawla 'Iyādat al-Ittiḥād al-Nisā'i [on the Women's Union's clinic]." *Al-Ra'y al-Āmm*, 30.4.1953; "Mahrajān al-Mar'a wa-l-Ṭufūla Tashhaduhu al-Alāf [thousands of people watch the women's and children's festival]." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 25.8.1953. Both in NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

39 Ibrāhīm Yass, "Al-Ittiḥād al-Nisā'i [the Women's Union]." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 8.6.1954, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

40 "Min al-Ittiḥād al-Nisā'i ilā al-Fatāt al-Ba'ṣa." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 15.8.1952, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

41 Literally: "what is brought by the vehicle of the press."

42 "Kalimat al-Ittiḥād al-Nisā'i ilā Fatāt al-Aqālīm." *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 1.8.1952, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.



concerned with building a sense of nationhood by seeking to represent and co-opt heterogeneous political actors – who, as we have seen, were entering political life. However, it also reveals a change in political orientation within the SWU. Ḥājja Kāshif Badrī writes that the Union's first leader, Fāṭima al-Ṭālib, resigned before the end of her one-year term (Badrī 2009: 179). According to Badrī, this was because of her disagreements with the other members of the executive committee, a majority of whom were close to the SCP, and indeed Fāṭima al-Ṭālib later joined the Islamist movement. Although it sought to remain open to other political sensibilities, the movement was noteworthy for the increasing influence of Marxism, a tendency that came to its apogee with the leadership of Fāṭima Aḥmad Ibrāhīm from 1956.<sup>43</sup>

The growing visibility of the SWU and its increasingly left-wing stance led to significant changes in both the form and content of the articles female journalists wrote in the press, as can already be seen in the above quote. In *al-Ṣarāḥa*, the fictional figure of the “candid girl” disappeared after 1952 and was not replaced. Discussions about how women should accept domination by – and obedience to – their tutors, fathers, brothers, husbands and sons were eclipsed by other topics. One enlightening example of this is an article signed by “Miss N., a member of the Union” in 1953.<sup>44</sup> For Miss N., the condition of women had seen drastic deterioration since prehistoric times, when the means of subsistence changed from hunting and gathering to farming and cattle breeding – a discussion that shows the breadth of her reading. Men began to control the means of production, she continued, and women became a form of property “similar to any other property”:

Historians treat this crumbling of rights that women have experienced and their subjugation to men as a decisive defeat. [ . . . ]

Each time [women] fail to provide for themselves, they will be relegated to a mere piece of property possessed by men, and under the yoke of their desires.

She also maintained that the situation had only been aggravated by colonisation, which took advantage of women's backwardness to prevent the nation from advancing. Here, men's relationship with women is not only one of domination, but “possession” – as with slaves – of a “piece of property”. This relationship is no longer something to accept and interiorise, but the result of a “decisive defeat,” to be fought against by women providing for themselves, that is by working. Another example is

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<sup>43</sup> For a list of SWU heads, see Maḥmūd (2008: 159). Fāṭima A. Ibrāhīm headed it in 1956–58, followed by Khālda Zāhir (1958–1963), and then Fāṭima A. Ibrāhīm again from 1963 to . . . 2006!

<sup>44</sup> Al-Ānisa N., “Al-Mar'a al-Sūdāniyya, Naḥwa 'Ālam Jadīd [the Sudanese woman, towards a new world].” *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 9.9.1953, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

an article signed by a certain Ḥayāt Muṣṭafā in 1956<sup>45</sup> – we should note in passing that from this year on, journalists began signing their articles by their names. Ḥayāt Muṣṭafā tackled the question of women’s participation in the Sudanese parliament. A small number of women had obtained the right to vote in 1953, but this was subject to age (they had to be over 25) and educational criteria (having the secondary school certificate) (Willis 2007).<sup>46</sup> What is more, women had still not gained the right to be elected as members of parliament. This ineligibility was the object of Muṣṭafā’s attack:

We demand our right to present ourselves at the next elections for one simple reason, which is that our community should be fully represented in the bodies that govern it. We make up half the nation, and nobody can deny that. If people see a difference between the lives of men and women it is because of the awful intervention of colonisation, which put women in a much lower position than men; but we are on the point of eliminating colonisation once and for all.

In her plea, the author bases her claims on the principle of democratic representation, which underlies the concept of equality of rights between men and women. She not only attributed women’s position of inferiority to the impact of colonisation (something the “candid girl” had already alluded to), but also went further by affirming that once independence had been achieved, the subjugation of women would come to an end.

A final example of this discursive change is the response by an anonymous woman journalist in August 1956 to a talk on Radio Omdurman by a certain “Dr Bukhārī.”<sup>47</sup> He had claimed in this broadcast that Sudanese women served the nation better “from inside their homes, by bringing up their children,” and had also objected to the idea of opening kindergartens to allow women to go to work. The female journalist replied:

Dr. Bukhārī admits that work would make women financially independent, which will later undoubtedly lead to freedom in terms of both personal income and the economy of the country. Does the doctor believe that women do not wish for this financial liberation, which lies at the heart of their problems, and which, once achieved, will guarantee her freedom and equality, and will relieve her of the oppression she suffers due to the fact that she cannot carry out a professional activity? How can this equality be established if women do not work? [ . . ]

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45 Al-Ānisa Ḥayāt Muṣṭafā, “Ḥaqq al-Mar’a fī al-Intikhāb. Hal Huwa Muṭālaba bi-Akthar min al-Lāzim? [women’s right to elections: is this demand an excessive one?]” *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 8.1.1956, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan. The first woman to be elected to parliament was Fāṭima A. Ibrāhīm in 1965.

46 Considering the rarity of this certificate, only a few hundred women could actually vote.

47 “Al-Mar’a wa-l-ʿAmal. Iʿtirāḍ al-Duktūr Bukhārī [women and work: the objection of Doctor Bukhari].” *Al-Ṣarāḥa*, 12.8.1956, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

He also rejected the idea of constructing kindergartens. He stated that modern medicine does not support such an intervention and recommends that the mother raises her children personally. [. . .] He used prostitutes [*‘āhirāt*] and criminals as examples and said that upon psychological analysis the reason for their corruption [*fasādihum*] is their upbringing away from the enveloping care and affection of the mother.

I say to the doctor, with all due respect, that my knowledge of medicine does not surpass that of the average person in the street, but even so I can still say with certainty to those who share his opinion that the cause of this problem is exactly the opposite. Moral degradation is mainly caused by material problems, as we see in our reality in Sudan: you see that those who fall into the abyss of evil are usually driven by purely economic problems. When one becomes economically free, one will also be intellectually [*aqliyyan*] and psychologically [*nafsiyyan*] free [. . .]

Does the doctor believe that all mothers are capable of raising their children properly? Of course not! Specially here in Sudan, where the majority of women have absolutely no knowledge of correct children’s education, and where all they have is charades and silly stories that stuff the child’s mind with superstitions [*khurāfāt*] and harmful delusions [*awhām dārra*].

For the writer, women’s problems were caused by their exclusion from the world of remunerated labour. Segregation in their homes made them economically dependent on a male family circle that could arbitrarily withdraw its support, as the “oppressed woman” had written six years earlier. However, the author did not believe that it was a man’s affair to solve these problems, but insisted on the agency of women, on their role in obtaining financial independence, which was seen as the most important path to intellectual and spiritual freedom. It is also interesting to note the debate between the portrayal of women as a cause of moral decay (“prostitution and crime”) if they are removed from their children and the idea that professional educators protected children from their uneducated mothers, and that in society, this “moral decay” was instead a function of “material problems.” Last but not least, the building block of her argument in support of female work was the principle of equality: “How can this equality be established if women do not work?”

The demand that women should be able to enter the labour market on the same terms as men is a classic theme of the bourgeois feminist movement globally. Here, too, like many feminist writers dubbed as “bourgeois,” the author of this article is silent about the fact that the vast majority of Sudanese women already worked outside their homes, and thus contributed financially to their households (and non-institutional kindergartens existed through the extended family). What is the reason behind this silence? Reading from the Sudanese context, the author was first of all concerned with the stigmatisation of women’s remunerated work – without making any distinction for the type of labour. In maintaining that – any – work was a source of happiness and self-respect, an antidote to crime, prostitution

(which interestingly is not seen as a form of labour) and moral decay, she sought to change the value of feminine work and to fight the norm of middle- and upper-class seclusion. In this way, she indirectly addressed the stigmatisation of women who were already working, campaigning in favour of the idea that feminine work may be read not as a negative social fact but as a positive norm.

To conclude, the press articles from this later period reveal how both the discourse on the issue of women and the political sensibilities of the audience of readers and listeners were transformed. The outspoken texts and essays on the backwardness of women were replaced by programmatic articles in which the SWU described its work, projects and propositions, and in which journalists were not afraid to engage more explicitly in a “battle of the sexes.”

At the same time, the SWU also became less dependent on a male audience of readers as it attempted to spread more widely among women. First, it sought to expand its circle of members and create regional branches outside the capital, and then it multiplied its social activities: it organised evening classes for women – according to Badrī, fifteen night-schools for women’s literacy were founded between 1952 and 1958 (Badrī 2009: 91) – prepared yearly “women’s week” fairs and founded clinics and nurseries. Female literacy rates grew exponentially during this period, even though they continued to affect only a tiny minority of women. Despite the fact that their activities were restricted by their limited financial resources, by social resistance and by internal divisions, what they still managed to achieve permitted the SWU’s members to come into direct contact with – and make themselves visible among – a growing number of ordinary women who were still underexposed to the world of the press.

## Conclusion

This chapter has described the participation of women intellectuals in the nationalist debates of Sudan on the eve of independence through their contribution to the Sudanese political press. It casts light on the importance of the press in the history of the women’s movement, and on how women’s contributions represented a powerful emancipatory strategy for them. At this historical juncture, Sudanese nationalist politicians invited all social actors to fight together to achieve national liberation, in spite of their differences in origins, class and gender. But for educated women, participating in the struggle meant demanding – and obtaining – political visibility. For the first time, they claimed to be best placed to design solutions for what they saw as the state of catastrophic backwardness of women, and the favoured platform for achieving that was writing to newspapers, a space that was

at the same time relatively secure, but also very powerful, considering the press's political importance at the time.

In order to interpret the contents of the articles authored by women journalists, as well as how they changed over time, I have sought to study them in the light of the issue of their readership. In the first sections of this chapter, I described Sudanese gendered reading habits, and in particular the fact that a newspaper's readership could extend far beyond people who actually knew how to read, even though the audience of listeners remained essentially male. This meant that the first women activists had limited opportunities to reach a female audience directly. In addition, the political legitimacy of these women writers still needed to be constructed. They had to fight against the stigmatisation associated with the public visibility of women, and to struggle to be accepted as interlocutors in the political space. All these elements converge to explain the nature of the texts published between 1950 and 1952 in particular, in which female journalists sought to address, stir up and jostle a male audience of readers and listeners through a form of strategic mimesis. Far from being self-referential and closed within the problems of a female bourgeoisie, these texts were directed towards the expectations and sensitivities of a male audience, in accordance with their fundamentally pedagogical nature. In spite of this mimesis, women writers were still able to introduce revolutionary notions into their texts, such as the contingent nature of male domination or men's failure to perform their patriarchal role.

This sensitivity – or even subordination – to a male readership evolved quickly in the 1950s and 1960s as women activists became increasingly integrated into the progressive intellectual milieu. This was crucial for a number of reasons. At a very practical level, these changes gave the women movement more visibility in newspapers. In the case of the SWU, we have seen that its creation was largely announced, covered and supported by Sudanese intellectuals writing in the press. Events were organised that created the fiction of a general consensus on women's increasing national responsibilities. This led ordinary readers to become accustomed to the women's movement, and to gradually stop questioning whether it was needed, and whether or not it was legitimate. The consolidation of the movement, on the other hand, meant that women journalists stopped endorsing denigrating discourses tailored for a male audience, and instead sought to build bridges with ordinary and vulnerable women.

In the end, other kinds of discourse emerged to replace the previous ones: on the one hand, they took up the causes of the struggle against inequalities between women and men in a Marxist-inspired economic and political framework, and on the other they promoted a new model of "the Sudanese woman," who was not only educated but also a worker who was economically independent from her companion. This shows us the embeddedness of writers and their audiences and their

mutual influences: the female journalists of the 1950s played an essential role in sensitising individuals to their struggles, and at the same time the form and content of their writings changed as these sensitivities came to accept their presence in the public space.

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Abir Nur

## Chapter 6

# For the Sake of Moderation: The Sudanese General Women's Union's Interpretations of Female "Empowerment" (1990–2019)

On 21 November 2019, the Humanitarian Affairs Commission (HAC), a core department of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Development, issued a decree stipulating that twenty-four non-governmental Sudanese organisations that had supported the *inqādh* regime (1989–2019) or had been closely connected with the former ruling party would be struck off the official register and have their activities suspended and their bank accounts frozen.<sup>1</sup> Among these organisations were the Sudanese General Women's Union (*al-ittiḥād al-‘amm li-l-mar’a al-sūdāniyya*) and at least two of its partners.<sup>2</sup> This eagerly-awaited decision by supporters of the “December Revolution”<sup>3</sup> has been condemned by the organisations affected as a political manoeuvre devoid of any legal standing. The decision was perceived by many as an indicator of change and a symbol of the potential of the current transition process to instigate changes. It seems to impose a new path for Islamist-led charity organisations and their members.<sup>4</sup>

Women's organisations are at the forefront of this nebula, and yet they remain largely neglected by the social sciences. More specifically, they have not garnered

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1 ‘Umar al-Bashīr's regime, called “the Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation” (*qiyādat thawrat al-inqādh al-waṭānī*) by its leaders, formed an alliance between segments of the Armed Forces (military officers) and the National Islamic Front to organise the coup d'état on 30 June 1989. *Al-inqādh* is the widely used generic name for the thirty-year long Islamist regime in its various manifestations. All the interviewees' names have been changed, the only exception being Rajā’ Ḥasan Khalifa, whose public notoriety and important contribution through her writings made it appropriate to reveal her identity. She herself expressed her desire to be quoted in this research. All translations from Arabic and French into English are the author's.

2 The Centre for Women's Studies (*markaz dirāsāt al-mar’a*) and the Working Women's League (*rābiṭat al-mar’a al-‘amila*).

3 This was the name given to the popular uprising that started in December 2018 and led to the downfall of ‘Umar al-Bashīr's government and the formation of a transitional government tasked with facilitating the passage to democracy through elections to be held in late 2023 or early 2024.

4 All the interviewees' names have been changed, the only exception being Rajā’ Ḥasan Khalifa, whose public notoriety and important contribution through her writings made it appropriate to reveal her identity. She herself expressed her desire to be quoted in this research. All translations from Arabic and French into English are the author's.

the attention of the international aid industry. Most of the literature on the development and humanitarian industry and that focuses especially on gender and development in Sudan tackles specific programmes that target women in conflict zones, such as peace construction programmes in Darfur or the Nuba Mountains, and they are mainly carried out by international development agencies.<sup>5</sup> Very few studies shed light on the history of social and humanitarian commitments in Sudan, and even fewer on women-led NGOs or those with a large female presence that contribute to a reading of the social history of the country, particularly that of women. Numerous studies have focused on the history of the women's movement in Sudan between the 1950s and the 1970s, however, but they tend to present the Sudanese Women's Union (*al-ittihād al-nisāʾ al-sūdānī*) exclusively as the major, and perhaps only, protagonist in the Sudanese women's movement up to the present day.<sup>6</sup>

Mainstream feminist approaches<sup>7</sup> towards studying women's history betray a prescriptive nature that sets the emancipation and liberation of women from structures of male domination as its main objective. Women who do not explicitly oppose patriarchal structures in society are therefore often framed in these studies as lacking agency and depicted as passive subjects. However, as Saba Mahmoud (2001: 210) has highlighted, agency is not consubstantial with resistance to relations of subordination; rather, it is "a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create (. . .) [carrying] less a sense of passivity and more that of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement." By studying the Egyptian "piety movement" that flourished during the 1990s, she demonstrates that

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5 Studies such as these have become more prolific since the 1990s. They tend to describe marginalised women from war-torn areas as "vulnerable" and as "natural" peacemakers, and highlight their role in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Examples of this writing are evident in several master's and PhD theses that explore this topic and were consulted by the author in September 2019 at Ahfad University (Omdurman) and at the Sudanese National Records Office.

6 Most academic writing about contemporary Sudanese women's movements focuses on women's resistance to colonial and authoritarian regimes. *Al-ittihād al-nisāʾ al-sūdānī* (the Sudanese Women's Union) occupies a dominant position in this literature in this regard. Both former members of the country's first women's union and researchers have written extensively about the history of the organisation and its leaders, from its genesis to its underground work under the rule of the National Islamic Front and abroad under the NCP, also covering its activities during the short-lived democratic periods (for the most important of these, see Ibrahim 1996; Maḥmūd 2002; al-Gaddāl 2016; al-Amīn 2017; Badri & Tripp 2017).

7 Mainstream or liberal feminism is the main branch of the global feminist movement, which is defined by its goal of achieving gender equality through political and legal reform within a framework of liberal democracy, based on Western paradigms. For an African critique of mainstream feminism, see Oyewumi (1997).

investigating any Islamist movement<sup>8</sup> puts the researcher in a rather delicate position, as has sometimes been the case for this author. Researchers find themselves under constant pressure to denounce human rights violations committed by Islamist movements throughout the world. Paradoxically, the global public condemnation of Islamist movements – especially in the American context immediately after September 2001 and the French context post-2015 – has given birth to a large and growing body of literature that investigates Islamist ideologies and political Islam. This traditional theoretical approach has also gained currency in Sudan (Sidahmed 1996; Gallab 2008; Berridge 2017) to the detriment of empirical studies that explore and analyse the structures and culture of the organisations and the practices of actors involved in the Islamist movement. This choice reflects the difficulty of gaining access to these spaces and interlocutors in Sudan under the highly security-laden atmosphere of *al-inqādh* rule.

This chapter adopts an approach to the study of women’s organisations that focuses on a version of activism that does not follow the mainstream feminist orientations. Sondra Hale’s (1992, 1996a, 1996b) research on the National Women’s Front (*al-jabha al-nisā’iyya al-waṭaniyya*) and Nagwa Mohamed Ali al-Bachir’s (1996) study of the Muslim Sisters (*al-akhawāt al-muslimāt*) have both drawn attention to Islamist women’s agency in interesting ways. They demonstrate how these women negotiate and benefit from the patriarchal norms within the state and the ruling party’s apparatus. However, both scholars focus on an elite formed by a small group of women who held strategic positions in the National Islamic Front’s networks. This is equally true of the work conducted by Liv Tønnessen (2011), who more recently examined the ideologies of Islamic women’s leadership within these organisations and their relationships to political parties. More macro-sociological works depicting Islamic women’s NGOs and their relations to the state have also been carried out, notably by Hala Abdelmagid (2003) and Sāmya al-Nagar (2006). However, too little attention has been paid to “ordinary” women who possess minimal social, economic and cultural capital, although they form the large majority of the members of these structures.

In the light of this gap, this chapter seeks to offer a contribution to the social history of Sudanese women, and more precisely to the forgotten elements of this history and its absent protagonists. In the same vein as Asef Bayat’s research on ordinary people in the Middle East, it presents “subaltern” subjects who live among

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<sup>8</sup> Islamism is the expression of a political project alongside the process and its outcomes in which various domains of social life are invested with signs and symbols associated with Islamic cultural traditions. See Ismail (2003). An Islamic movement or organisation uses frameworks based on interpretations inspired from Islamic sources to justify and legitimise its actions. Islamic organisations claim their inspiration from well-founded Islamic charitable practices.

people who do not share their circumstances, and who discover and generate new spaces within which “they can voice their dissent and assert their presence in pursuit of bettering their lives” (Bayat 2010: 9). The occupation of a women’s organisation located at the heart of the development field, and which supported the regime, by women from diverse sociological backgrounds highlights the importance of the “art of presence” (Bayat 2010) and the agency of marginalised people whose mobilisations are not just limited to loud protests that only represent the tip of the iceberg (Bouilly 2019). While keeping in mind the provocative tone of Gayatri Spivak’s landmark essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), which offers a rather bleak view of the possibility of effective agency, this chapter posits this possibility by attempting to uncover the extent to which the gendered (woman) subaltern partially escapes the silence of subalternity, and thus makes herself heard.

Since its foundation in 1990, the Sudanese General Women’s Union (SGWU) has worked as the *inqādh* government’s first-choice public service provider for the formulation and implementation of gender policies. This umbrella organisation was registered as a voluntary NGO at the HAC offices until its dissolution in November 2019. It had branches in all twenty-five states of the country prior to 2011, when South Sudan became independent, and after then was present in all of Sudan’s eighteen states. According to official figures, the SGWU counted more than six million women throughout the country in its membership<sup>9</sup> and was therefore described by many as a mass organisation (“*tanẓīm jamāhīrī*” in Arabic). While such a large number of adherents might be challenged, it nonetheless provides an indication of the scope of the organisation’s programmes. It was certainly the largest women’s NGO in the country in terms of membership and resources during the time it existed. It included fifteen general desks known as “*amānāt*”, each being in charge of a specific domain such as education, peace-building and political empowerment.

The SGWU’s history is seldom visible or investigated by social scientists because of its close relationship with the state apparatus of the former Islamist regime, and yet an exploration of this kind might offer insightful information about the Sudanese “deep state”.<sup>10</sup> The entity was characterised by several layers of loyalty and proximity to the whole structure of the ruling party, weaving its way through both its upper and lower echelons. The *inqādh* regime controlled the security, economic and public sectors of the state with an iron fist. It also extensively infiltrated civil society and NGOs at different levels. The longevity of ‘Umar al-Bashīr’s government cannot therefore be accounted for solely on the basis of the pressure and coer-

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<sup>9</sup> This was stated by the secretary-general and vice-secretary-general during our interviews. The same figures are also to be found in the SGWU’s 1992 and 2014 association status.

<sup>10</sup> *Al-dawla al-amiqa* in Arabic. On this concept, see Jean-Pierre Filiu (2015) with reference to Syria, Yemen and Egypt.

cion exerted by “parallel state” institutions.<sup>11</sup> Several enlightening studies have indicated as much by illustrating how the Sudanese Islamic state and its power were invested with meaning, and experienced by ordinary citizens who appropriated and reinvented the hegemonic ideology through processes of “subjectivation” that lay outside state institutions (Nageeb 2004, 2007; Seesemann 2005; Willemse 2007; Salomon 2016; Abdel Aziz 2018; Revilla 2020). However, few writers have been able to draw on any systematic research into gender relations and women’s mobilisations, and even when they have, they seem to have favoured explanations that discuss the existence and longevity of women’s organisations – whose policies contributed towards sustaining authoritarianism through their discourses and practices – through the lens of the “Civilisational Project” (*al-mashrū‘ al-ḥadārī*) initiated by the state.<sup>12</sup> Rather than looking at top-down state policies, this chapter investigates the SGWU’s policies and the power relations at play within the organisation, which illustrate how its members express and practice their interpretation of women’s “empowerment” (*tamkīn*). In Sudan, this notion is emblematic of the Islamist ideology adopted by ‘Umar al-Bashīr’s regime. It founded its general policy by attracting the allegiance of loyal partisans working in the civil service in order to consolidate the NCP’s control over state affairs. “*Tamkīn*” practices (Nageeb 2007; Mann 2014) are therefore associated with the *kayzān* (plural of *kōz*, a small metal water cup), a term used metaphorically to refer to members of the Islamist regime<sup>13</sup>, and thus have pejorative connotations in the collective consciousness of the majority of ordinary Sudanese people. The SGWU tried to challenge this perception by recasting this notion on the basis of Quranic verses.<sup>14</sup>

This chapter presents the national and general branch of the SGWU, whose headquarters were located in the Sahafa neighbourhood in Khartoum.<sup>15</sup> Two types

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11 Besides the official institutions, the regime created several parallel national civil and security bodies such as the Popular Defence Forces (*quwwāt al-difā‘ al-sha‘bī*). See Assal (2019).

12 This state project was constructed to shape the behaviour, lives and thoughts of women, among other purposes. It was held that it would “rescue the country from economic and cultural subjection to the West” and was “the brainchild of a narrow elite with a hubristic perception of its purpose as a modernizing vanguard that was not shared by the population at large” (Berridge 2018). For an example of the machinations of this project, see also Verhoeven (2015).

13 This expression was originally used by the Islamist themselves and has been popularised by Hasan al-Turābī, who wrote that “Islam is a sea and we are the cups (*kayzān*) scooping from it”.

14 *Tamkīn* comes from the Arabic word *yumkin* which means “being capable of” and the root *makuna* which means “having influence, control over” and mainly derives from two Quranic surahs: *al-a‘rāf*, verse 10 and *al-ḥajj*, verse 41.

15 The location of the headquarters is particularly significant for highlighting the organisation’s close ties with ‘Umar al-Bashīr’s regime. It was situated a few doors away from the National Congress Party’s (NCP) youth branch and the main office of the Popular Defence Forces.

of “volunteers” worked in it<sup>16</sup>: subaltern office workers, who worked full-time and received a salary, and executives, who divided their time between the organisation and their positions as senior civil servants elsewhere in the state structures. This demarcation implied distinct statuses and was based on class and ethnic parameters that favoured certain individuals. It therefore moulded the hierarchical structure of the organisation, and tended to place wealthy women from the dominant Northern ethnic groups at the forefront of power and authority. My decision to focus on Khartoum also ties in with a desire to tackle the SGWU’s connections with the central state institutions. The capital is the space that reflects the centralised hegemonic political and economic power of the Sudanese state, which became entrenched with the colonial government of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899–1956). This historical process allows us to examine the institutional bonds forged by the Union, especially with the Ministry of Welfare and Social Development, which was charged with all the development and humanitarian programmes developed under the *inqādh* regime.

As previously stated, this ethnographically-inspired contribution focuses on women’s ordinary practices. In order to achieve this objective, I conducted fieldwork in Khartoum over a three-month period (September–November 2019). The collected data is primarily based on in-depth interviews conducted in Sudanese Arabic with members of the SGWU, *in situ* observations and consultation of archival sources. I studied multiple issues of a pro-regime daily newspaper at the National Records Office<sup>17</sup>, as well as the nine issues (1996–2018) of the Union’s magazine *Usratī* (“My Family”). I also visited the HAC offices and gained access to the Union’s association status (1992 and 2014) and registration files containing aggregate reports on the organisation’s activities.<sup>18</sup>

In the final analysis, my research relies heavily on consulting and analysing the rich body of literature produced by the SGWU and its leaders.<sup>19</sup> The data collected

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**16** All members (employees and leaders) of the SGWU were considered to be volunteers. This study focuses on these women, and does not delve into the beneficiaries’ discourses and practices, even though some of the employees were also part of the groups targeted by the Union’s programmes.

**17** *Al-Intibāha* (“The Call to Attention”) October to December 2006; January to March 2009; April to June 2010; March to April 2015. I selected this newspaper from among numerous pro-regime ones because the head of the Union’s executive board used to work in its offices. These issues were chosen arbitrarily either by the National Records Office’s staff or by me. In the case of the 2009, 2010 and 2015 issues, I selected these dates because of important events that occurred in Sudan in these years, specifically relating to the humanitarian and development sector, as well as notorious women rights cases.

**18** This included the registration files for 2001, 2005, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2017 and 2018.

**19** Rajā’ Ḥasan Khalifa, who was one of the founding members of the SGWU, and who held three consecutive mandates as its secretary-general and was a key member of the regime’s Consultative

testifies to the evolution of the Islamist discourse towards a politicisation of private matters under “the personal is political” leitmotiv (Badri and Tripp 2017). Notably, this process is conveyed in the interpretation of the notion of women’s “empowerment” (*tamkīn*), which the wealth of literature on the women’s movement in Sudan has seldom defined. This prevents the reader from grasping the aspect of the tangible forms this empowerment takes in women’s lives. This chapter will therefore attempt to elucidate the evolution of the concept of empowerment within the SGWU. This interpretation of empowerment rests upon both the rhetoric of an Islamic middle way and a nationalist discourse based on “cultural authenticity” that gives birth to “respectable femininity” (Hussein 2017). This chapter therefore focuses on the efforts of successive generations of activists within the Sudanese Islamist movement to reinforce these values.

## An Elitist Approach to “Middle Way” Islam

The lexical field deployed by the organisation changed little between 1990 and 2019. The notions of *tawāzun* or *waṣatiyya* (balance or moderation), *tanāsuq* (harmony), *tamkīn* (empowerment), *tanmiyyat al-mar’a* (women’s development), *musāwā* (equality) and *’adāla* (justice, equity) form a material and linguistic world which in Sudan seems to be particular to Islamic organisations. These notions constitute the ideological parameters of a “middle way” Islam that has been promoted since the 19<sup>th</sup> century by reformist scholars who are constantly seeking to establish a balance between “tradition” and “modernity”.<sup>20</sup> Significantly, the work of the Egyptian theologian and jurist Muḥammad ‘Abduh is worth mentioning among these reformers, as his strong influence is palpable in Ḥasan al-Turābī’s philosophy (Berridge 2017). Members of the SGWU aimed to find a balance between “feminism” on the one hand – which was considered to be a Western ideology that promotes straightforward equality between men and women and defends the absolute liberation of women – and an “extremist”, or rigid, Islamic ideology that maintains a strict

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Council (*majlis al-shūra*) at that time, wrote extensively about the Union. As a former MP and one of the most well-known women leaders in the National Congress Party, her writings offer significant testimonies about Islamist women’s experiences in Sudan, especially for the thirty years of the regime she served. Her contributions are Khalifa (2012a, 2012b, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> This narrative is based on the following Quranic verse: “And it is thus that We appointed you to be the community of the middle way so that you might be witnesses to all mankind and the Messenger might be a witness to you.” (*al-Baqara*, verse 143).



segregation between men and women and continues to claim that “*ṣawt al-mar’a ‘awra*” (the woman’s voice is immodest or shameful)<sup>21</sup> on the other.

The quest for a balance between these two positions is especially well illustrated in a statement by the former secretary-general of the Union published in the December 2018 issue of *Usratī*, in which she writes that the SGWU combats “extremism and terrorism” by asserting that “terrorism and radicalism (*al-taṭarruf*) do not represent a majority phenomenon in Sudan” (at page 7). She condemns the attitudes and behaviour of the religiously fanatical fringe of the Islamic movement, and implicitly also that of the radical feminism endorsed by a few groups in the country whose forms of activism, according to the Union, represent a threat to the core values of Sudanese society at large. Within this framework, members of the Union – and more specifically its executives – mobilised the notion of gender, the “buzzword” of development jargon, as a synonym for women. The global process of gender mainstreaming has contributed to the depoliticisation and neutralisation of the concept of gender through an exercise that simplifies its complexities. This simplification is the striking result of selective readings of feminist objectives and ideals and scientific research on gender (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2007). The aim of this exercise was to popularise the concept, making it more attractive to the general public, and this is what Rajā’ Ḥasan Khalīfa, the famous founding member and three-time secretary-general of the SGWU, as well as a prominent MP and key figure within the NCP, proposes in her work. During our interview at her home in Omdurman she told me:

I do not reject the notion of gender. I just think we need to take this Western word and try to make sense of it and apply it in Sudan by “Sudanising” and “Islamising” it.<sup>22</sup> This popularisation and recasting is essential in order for the masses to accept it.” (30 October 2019)

Since the 1980s, Sudan has seen a proliferation of interventions by foreign NGOs, especially European and North American organisations. They operate in areas affected by drought and famine, providing food, relief, and medical assistance. They also engage in long-term development programmes in different regions of the country, mainly in the fields of water and sanitation, education, and health, with a strongly “gen-

<sup>21</sup> This expression is notably used by the *Anṣār al-Sunna* group in Sudan to prevent women from engaging in public debates and politics. The protagonists of the “December Revolution” reversed this expression making it “*ṣawt al-mar’a thawra*” meaning “a woman’s voice is a revolution”.

<sup>22</sup> This stance is very similar to attempts by early 21<sup>st</sup> century Sudanese scholars and educationalists to “Islamise” certain characteristics and behaviours associated with the Western world (including critical thinking, human rights, information and communication technologies). See Seri-Hersch (2015).

dered” approach. According to the United Nations Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for Sudan (2001) about fifty international NGOs were operating in the country in the early 2000s. These included Save The Children UK, Doctors Without Borders, Care International, Oxfam and the International Rescue Committee, alongside more than twenty UN agencies (including the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the UN Development Programme and the World Health Organisation). INGOs significantly scaled up their operations in war-torn areas, in the Nuba Mountains after 2002, because the government had blocked any external aid to this area between 1989 and 2002, and in Darfur from 2004, where the UN-OCHA Situation Report of March 2009 noted the presence of more than 16,000 national and international humanitarian workers in the region.

The progression of foreign NGOs operations slackened off in the wake of the Sudanese government’s decision to expel 13 INGOs in March 2009. The staff of these organisations made up 40% of all aid workers in Sudan. The government supposedly filled this vacuum by bringing in 200 Sudanese aid groups. This political response to the International Criminal Court’s warrant for the arrest of ‘Umar al-Bashīr drastically altered the modus operandi of foreign NGOs in the country. The first generation of Islamist activists in the Union, represented by Rajā’ Ḥasan Khalifa, supported the regime’s policy of limiting the influence of INGOs, and called for a “Sudanisation”<sup>23</sup> of development projects targeting women as recipients and actors of aid, within an Islamic framework that promoted women’s *ijtihād* (independent reasoning, one of the four sources of Sunni law). The younger generation, on the other hand, represented by Nūr, Isrā’ and Nafisa<sup>24</sup>, promoted the introduction of the concept of gender as a new source of legitimacy for their actions in an attempt to find a place within transnational and international networks without abandoning an Islamically approved mode of action founded on the value of complementarity

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23 That is, the replacement of foreign NGOs and development actors with Sudanese ones. This word (*sowdana* in Arabic) also refers to the replacement of British, Egyptian and Syrian officials with Sudanese officials when Sudan was under Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule (1899–1956), especially in the 1940s and 1950s. Sudanisation can therefore mean administrative policies and/or socio-political engagements that (re)claim cultural authenticity.

24 Nūr was the vice-secretary-general of the SGWU and a lecturer at Ahfad University for Women, teaching gender and governance, when we met. As a partisan of the Umma party along with her highly politicised family, she has been engaged in charity and social work within traditional organisations run by Šādiq al-Mahdī’s family for many years. Isrā’ was the head of the SGWU training programmes, and joined the organisation in December 2018. She described herself as a *šūfiyya*, a member of the Khatmiyya order, and a supporter of the Democratic Unionist Party. Nafisa, who joined the Union in the late 1990s, was a consultant for the Union and an executive in the NCP when we met; she had previously been a minister and a personal advisor to ‘Umar al-Bashīr.

between men and women, which itself originates from the concept of *‘adāla* (justice or equity).

According to the Union’s interpretation of this term, men and women have distinctive rights and duties within society. Alongside their other responsibilities, men have the obligation to be “*qawwāmūn*”<sup>25</sup> over women. In the discourse presented by these activists, this means that men have the duty to protect and provide for women. This interpretation of *qiwāma*<sup>26</sup> seeks to bring private matters into the public sphere so as to allow women the opportunity to hold their husbands, fathers or brothers accountable for their failures to fulfil what are articulated as their duties and responsibilities. Men’s obligation to provide financial support to women is championed by the Union’s executives, who represent an influential social and political elite in Sudan, as a tool for women’s empowerment. The sociological backgrounds of these executives are for the most part fairly homogeneous: they generally come from wealthy families (a notable exception is Rajā’ Ḥasan Khalifa, whose trajectory of upward social mobility is unique within the Union). On the whole, they have master’s degrees as a minimum academic qualification, and in fact most of them have PhDs. For instance, Nafisa defended a thesis on the role of rural women in the development of Sudan at the University of Khartoum, and Rajā’ Ḥasan Khalifa defended her thesis, which was published in 2016, at the Islamic University of Omdurman, (Khalifa 2016). All these women, with the exception of Isrā’, who is divorced, are the spouses of senior civil servants and often also prominent members and leaders within the NCP. These women worked as university teachers, engineers and lawyers before being promoted to prestigious positions in the public administration thanks to their commitment to the SGWU, which operates as a professionalising body.

These representatives of the Union claim that women have no legal or Islamic obligation to provide for their families, and can therefore keep their earnings for “personal self-care”. This narrative is particularly elitist, as it only affects men whose financial standing enables their female relatives to depend on them financially. In reality, the proportion of the Sudanese population who can engage in financial arrangements such as these is small. According to the Food and Agriculture

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25 Based on the following Quranic verse: “Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially. (. . .)” (*al-Nisā’*, verse 34)

26 The main stance of these Islamist activists is to reject the interpretation of *qiwāma* as giving men permission to exercise authority over women, who are obliged to obey them. However, one of the interviewees, a middle-class employee of the Union, strongly supported the idea of a man’s authority within the household and by extension in society. She argued, for instance, that women needed authorisation from male relatives to leave their homes.

Organisation, about 60% of the Sudanese population was living below the poverty line in 2009.<sup>27</sup> The economic circumstances that led to this percentage manifested themselves in the 1980s and resulted in an exponential increase in women's work. Women therefore increasingly became financially responsible for households, as was the case with Sāmya, who worked as a secretary in the SGWU. She had fled South Kordofan with her family to settle in a popular neighbourhood on the outskirts of Omdurman, where her father worked as a day labourer. Rising unemployment rates and work insecurity in Sudan generally lead women like Sāmya, who have very few economic and social resources, to “volunteer” in non-profit organisations to earn small incomes<sup>28</sup> in order to provide for their families. The interpretation of *qiwāma* in the sense described above also obscures an intersectional reading of gender relations that takes class and financial prowess into consideration, since poor men who cannot satisfy these obligations are stigmatised and accused of being “bad Muslims”. It may be that class, more than gender, is an inescapable criterion in the Sudanese Islamic state for access to rights and responsibilities.<sup>29</sup>

The increased, presence of women in the paid workforce was nonetheless promoted by the SGWU's official narrative, which displayed women's access to the labour market as the ideal means for women's empowerment. This approach falls within the United Nations' call for women from the Global South to increase the workforce, ultimately sustaining the capitalist order through a rhetoric based on the “liberation” of women.<sup>30</sup> This highly abstract enthusiasm encouraging subaltern women to access paid labour does not, however, tackle what happens to them on the ground, and does not concern itself with the human quality of their lives, which often remain unaltered in the process.<sup>31</sup> In any event within the SGWU, this eagerness to work only applied to classical liberal professions that were deemed “respectable” and “honourable” by the elites. Women's trades should, first and foremost, be compatible with their primary roles as “good” spouses and mothers, or to rephrase it: “family comes first, job second” (Radhakrishnan 2009: 202). Once again, the Union's model of the “working woman” only seemed to be suited to elites from the upper and middle classes because they have sufficient revenues to delegate

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27 The Sudan Institutional Capacity Program (FAO), “Poverty in the Sudan”, Policy Brief of June 2011.

28 Sāmya and her colleague told me that they sold cosmetic products and dishware in their neighbourhoods and within the NGO itself in order to make ends meet.

29 For more on this topic, see Tønnessen (2013).

30 During the Third World Conference on Women, which took place in Nairobi in 1985, the UN had already highlighted the necessity for women to participate in global production. This approach has been sharply criticised by feminists, who denounced a lack of interest in women's liberation demands. Their grievances were mainly articulated around longstanding historical concerns related to land ownership or inheritance laws.

31 This is pointed out in particular by Gayatri Spivak in Sharpe and Spivak (2003).

their domestic roles – housework and their children’s upbringing and education – to other women from the impoverished classes, while they themselves work outside the home. This is precisely what Salma Nageeb addressed when studying the socio-economic inequalities among members of women’s religious groups in Khartoum. Socioeconomic differences lead to significant divergences among these women regarding their capacity to acquire religious and symbolic capital. This means, for example, that the women who become Quran teachers have the resources to allow them to spend numerous hours studying the Islamic corpus, since they are able to hire “Ethiopians [as domestic help]” (Nageeb 2007: 16) to perform their household duties on their behalf.

## “*Al-‘Āfiya Darajāt*”: Towards the Empowerment of the One Per Cent

As mentioned previously, the SGWU promotes “women’s development” (*tanmiyat al-mar’a*) through the concept of *tamkīn*, which translates as empowerment, which the Islamic NGO *Umm al-mu’minīn* (“Mother of the Believers”) defines in the following terms: “enabling unprivileged and marginalised women to manage their lives in a better way. This also includes knowing her religion, rights and duties better” (Nageeb 2007: 11). The “better way” refers to the normative prescriptions of this organisation and others that share its perspectives, including the SGWU, which would therefore know “better” what the beneficiaries of their programmes needed and how they should lead their lives. This top-down, superimposing frame of reference, which tends to set priorities that differ from those that meet women’s needs and demands, is also frequently found in the approaches of INGOs in Sudan, even those professing to be “gender-aware”. Within this framework, these actors are working “for” marginalised people and not “with” them. The unresolved debate about “objective” and “subjective” interests – the former formulated by NGOs and the latter by the beneficiaries of development programmes – raises the issue of choice and consent, eventually conjecturing that women throughout the world will remain controlled by the patriarchal and neo-colonial global order.

The concept of empowerment theorised by Paulo Freire in 1968 (1974) was originally born out of a revolutionary ideology that entails the idea of participation in decision-making processes by oppressed individuals or groups in order for them to gain agency and collectively take power. It has since been espoused by feminists from the Global South to advance the need for women’s economic autonomy, which can only come about through a radical and structural transformation of the processes of production, exchange and distribution of wealth. The term later became

instrumental in the work of international organisations, which institutionalised it in the 1990s, especially the World Bank, which made it central to the concept of development. Stripped of its radical impetus, the word “empowerment” became vague and consensual. What was originally to be a means whereby the oppressed – mainly women – would define their own agenda changed into a top-down process that granted a place in decision-making mechanisms to a very limited group of women.

The markedly individualistic conception of “women’s empowerment” promoted by the neoliberal development agenda emphasises individual responsibility and choice. In particular, this discourse culminates by blaming the poor for their circumstances, as they are considered to be non-enterprising, on the assumption that a system based on the “free market” delivers benefits that can never be achieved through government interventions. This interpretation of empowerment, which has been supported by the Union’s executives since its foundation, relates strongly to what Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser (2019) have described as a “feminism of the one percent”. On the pretext of targeting women on the lowest rungs of the social ladder, the Union’s development programmes have actually advanced the vision of “equal opportunity domination”. In other words: “They want a world where the task of managing exploitation in the workplace and oppression in the social whole is shared equally by ruling-class men and women” (Arruzza, Bhattacharya & Fraser 2019: 2). Far from promoting a radical and profound change in how resources are produced and distributed, the SGWU and its partners have participated in maintaining a status quo that keeps women in dependent and submissive relationships and ultimately benefits the neoliberal development agenda, which, alongside the state’s neoliberal policies “produce[s] and intensifie[s] both the conditions for racial discrimination and for doing and perpetuating gender roles” (Farris 2017: 118). This is achieved by locating marginalised women in the private sphere and employment activities that have traditionally been conceived as vocationally feminine (the care and domestic sectors).

This interpretation of “empowerment”, which results in an absence of policies aimed at empowering women from Sudanese popular classes, is illustrated in several documents produced by the Union. For instance, the August 1999 issue of *Usratī* paid homage to the first “*amīda*” (female General) in the Sudanese national police force, whose appointment was meant to indicate the *inqādh* regime’s progressive position of allowing women to access high-ranking positions that had traditionally been monopolised by men. A leaflet produced by the Union in 2003 on the history of women’s rights in Sudan has Rajā’ Ḥasan Khalifa congratulating ‘Umar al-Bashīr’s government and the SGWU’s work on their “major breakthrough in women rights” with “women accessing prestigious positions such as Supreme Court Judge, Minister and Ambassador”. These appointments were presented by the Union’s executives as

ends in themselves and contributed considerably towards ignoring class inequalities, because the women who access such high-ranking positions are predominantly from urbanised, educated and upper classes, as clearly indicated by the profiles of the Union's executives.

The NGO's interpretation of women's empowerment and its quest for "moderation" are expressed in reformist repertoires of collective action. It promotes an activism that "knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land minds" (Nnaemeka 2004: 378). This form of action is expressed through the words of the Union's vice-secretary-general: "*al-āfiya darajāt*" (literally "wellness comes in degrees"). This Sudanese expression conveys the idea that "Rome was not built in a day" or, in other words, that change takes time, and for this reason one needs to proceed step by step and to compromise in order to achieve one's goals. In Nūr's discourse, it is associated with the word "*maqḅūla*", which means "accepted" or "tolerated", and which seems to be the cornerstone of the interviewees' language register.

The strategy of moderation, compromise and gradual change adopted by the Union is best illustrated by its advocacy for the introduction of a quota system in the form of envisaged reforms to the Sudanese electoral law. A large and growing body of literature has investigated this topic in Sudan, with significant contributions by Samia El Naggar and Balghis Badri. In 2008, the Sudanese Parliament introduced a 25% for women wishing to present themselves as candidates for legislative bodies at all levels. It was implemented for the first time during the 2010 general elections. All the interviewees who mentioned the electoral law stressed the importance of the basic woman's right to participate in politics on an equal footing with their fellow countrymen. However, when asked about the percentage they felt they should claim, they responded that this 25% was a coherent and realistic figure that was appropriate for the time and prevailing circumstances. According to these women, the 25% quota would indeed better suit the socio-political sensitivity of the Sudanese people, who are allegedly in favour of women's political participation on the basis of gender complementarity. The state would therefore require two types of governance, "soft and hard" (Badri & Tripp 2017), represented by women and men respectively. Nūr mobilised this essentialising argument to support the necessity of including at least 60% of women on the Supreme Peace Council (*majlis al-salām*) established by the transition government:

Women are more inclined to gentleness, they are much more pacifist and peace-loving than men. They are prone to solving problems and it is their maternal and caring nature which conditions them to think and behave like that! They have the power and the capacity to spread the value of peace through their essential role in the education of citizens. And you know, women are reliable, you can trust them with nurturing the importance of peace and tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*) in children" (6 October 2019)

The adoption of the codes favoured by the regime without explicitly protesting against the dominant patriarchal narrative symbolises the agency of the Union's members, and more globally of Islamist female activists (Mahmood 2001). They constantly negotiate gender norms through the approach of “committing (oneself) without protesting” (Bouilly 2019). While this electoral quota was advertised by women within the SGWU without any distinction on the basis of socio-economic status, its implementation in Sudan was founded on participation by women from privileged groups, most of whom were related to men who were part of the social elites and had connections to the dominant political parties. Balghis Badri and Samia El Naggat (2013) have offered an insightful analysis of the aims behind the adoption of what appears to be a progressive feminist law. According to them, the quota was passed in order to grant seats in Parliament and give a voice to “a slate of women candidates who are decidedly non-feminists” (40), a category into which the Union's executives seem to fit perfectly. Thus, the 2010 elections eventually put women from socially elite groups – educated, urban and well-to-do, occupying liberal professions and members of the main Islamic political parties (mostly the National Congress Party and the Umma Party) – in power. Clearly, the SGWU promotes a form of “feminism for the one percent”, since as Qamar Habbāni<sup>32</sup> put it in her interview for *al-Intibāha* newspaper (issue dated 24 April 2010), this 25% quota “allows women to fill strategic and prestigious positions”.

This globalised proposal on development and women's empowerment promoted by the SGWU is moulded to comply with “traditional culture”, or as Fadwa El Guindi writes: “Not only is development distinguishable from growth, but modes of development can be distinguished on the basis of whether they are truly indigenous.” (1981: 477) The elites who work in this NGO therefore simultaneously mirror discourses of liberal modernity and local and global politics – as displayed in the previous sections – as well as of piety and nationalism through the promotion of “respectable femininity”.

## The “New Muslim Woman”: A Transnational Islamist Model since the 1960s

In recent years, there has been an increasing body of social science literature exploring the concept of “respectability”. This symbolic signifier of capital and class is constantly sought by the marginalised, who are depicted as dangerous, threaten-

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32 She was in charge of the Human Rights and Legislations National Desk of the SGWU at the time.



ing and unworthy of “respect”. This understanding is used by social elites to establish a distance between themselves and individuals who are seen as lacking respectability, and are classified as deviant and pathological (Skeggs 1997; Hussein 2017). Respectability – and more precisely “respectable femininity” – is thus a standard women aspire to in order to increase their social value and legitimacy. In Sudan, the SGWU plays a particularly important role in tracing the boundaries of this symbolic capital not only through a legal framework imposed by state institutions and party organisations, but also by the implementation of norms the Union has inherited from the National Women’s Front (NWF), a women’s NGO founded in 1964 by the well-known Islamist leaders Su’ād al-Fātiḥ and Thuriyyā Umbābī.<sup>33</sup> My analysis draws from Nazia Hussein’s definition of “respectable femininity”, which she developed based on her work in Bangladesh:

The normative conception of women’s respectability is measured against women prioritizing family above work by performing their domestic, care, and socializing roles and by maintaining moral propriety. (. . .) Respectable femininity is a symbolic capital that women seek in order to gain symbolic profit and class status. (. . .) Respectable femininity is based around particular types of femininity, aesthetics, caring and morals, always seeking to get something “right”; it is articulated as a process through which women add value to themselves. It manifests as behavioral expectations in workplaces, streets and homes (Hussein 2017: 3).

Asef Bayat (2010) has demonstrated that many of the women who were involved in the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 were excluded from the public realm and lost their consequential rights once the Islamic state was instituted. In reaction to this marginalisation, several women’s groups organised themselves to set out an endogenous, albeit abstract, model of the “New Muslim Woman” in the image of the Prophet’s daughter Fāṭima and granddaughter Zaynab bint ‘Alī. Both these women were described as “true homemakers and public persons” (Bayat 2010: 99) by women Islamists who deployed discourses concerning both “progress” and “cultural authenticity”. This is precisely the kind of narrative that has

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<sup>33</sup> Described as the women’s branch of the National Islamic Front as well as a charity organisation (al-Bachir 1996; Hale 1992, 1996a), the NWF seems to have been disbanded in 1989 alongside with other women’s NGOs. Indeed, there is no mention of the organisation in the literature investigating Sudanese Islamic NGOs operating after ‘Umar al-Bashīr’s coup d’état. I could not find any file mentioning this name at the HAC (in September 2019) and the head of the registration office assured me that the organisation had never existed. It is therefore difficult to trace what roles NWF members played after its highly likely dissolution in 1989. However, we do know that Su’ād al-Fātiḥ was one of the founders of the International Muslim Women’s Union in 1996 and had close ties with the SGWU’s leaders. Since the SGWU embodied the Islamist branch of the women’s movement during the three decades of Islamist rule, it is safe to claim that it replaced the NWF in this role.

been promoted by the National Women's Front and the SGWU in Sudan. Both these organisations have mobilised the past as a reservoir of symbols, idioms and languages to invest their social and political projects with authority. Women were notably displayed as the guardians of traditions and the “socializer in the family” (Seesemann 2005). More broadly, within the *umma*, they were charged with preserving the Muslim community's honour against an invasion by Western morals and cultural norms. “Respectable femininity” therefore becomes the incarnation of family, another symbolic capital that is considered the bedrock of Sudanese society.

As discussed previously, according to this approach, women's work outside the home needed to follow fulfilment of their familial roles as spouses and mothers. In this context, it would seem that respecting the boundaries of “respectable femininity” is beyond the reach of subaltern and marginalised women, since for them employment is not an option but a necessity imposed by their material needs. This is partly why there has been an evident over-representation of single women among the financially disadvantaged employees of the SGWU, for whom non-domestic work and a conventional family life seem to be at odds due to their class. The question of marital status and the phenomenon of celibacy within women's NGOs is particularly compelling, and yet far too little attention has been paid to it. Joceline Chabot (2003) has provided an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon in her study of Christian women's unionist activities in France during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her findings draw attention to the justifications offered by these women regarding their marital status, which strikingly resemble those of the SGWU office workers. All expressed the belief that commitment to the organisation is a social vocation for the sake of God, since they are “doing good in an Islamic sense” (Hafez 2011). They felt that their activity enabled them to play a positive role in society, and that this was more readily facilitated by their single status. Since they cannot fulfil an idealised familial role as wives and mothers, these women engage in work based on the values of “care” in order to reinforce their respectability in society. The emphasis on women as care providers stems from historical and symbolic struggles that marginalised women have sought to institutionalise as a fundamental element of attaining “respectable femininity”. This quest for respectability therefore seems to partly account for the presence of socially marginalised women within charity and development organisations in Sudan (among other reasons). However, the norm within the Union is for models of the traditional nuclear family to be represented in the social profiles of its executives, who are all married, with the exception of Isrā'.

Furthermore, as Nazia Hussein has argued, “respectable femininity” is based on particular types of aesthetic, including women's clothing. The model of the “New Muslim Woman” promoted by the NWF and the SGWU favours a type of “modest”

clothing that respects Islamic principles. The veil, for instance, is considered compulsory for any “respectable” Muslim woman. Salma Nageeb rightly emphasises that “women’s rights to education, employment and public participation depended on the observance of certain measures of religiosity, revealed through Islamic dress and abiding by the codes of public gender interaction” (Nageeb 2007: 10). The social control of women’s clothing and bodies, which became part of the *inqādh* regime’s moral crusade, is justified by a theological remit, as well as by a nationalist discourse that promotes the “indigenisation” of the Sudanese people’s customs. Since the 1940s, this narrative has promoted the Sudanese *thōb* (sometimes written *tobe* to convey the vernacular pronunciation in English)<sup>34</sup>, and particularly the white *thōb*, as the national costume and as a formidable weapon against Western imperialism.<sup>35</sup> Drawing on this historical claim, the post-1989 Islamist government imposed the *thōb* as the “authentic” Sudanese and Islamic clothing with the intention of “protecting” women’s modesty and dignity. However, Fāṭima Bābīkr Maḥmūd, who has reviewed African and Sudanese women’s movements (2002), highlights the fact that this garment represents a tool for the cultural and socioeconomic hegemony of a specific ethnic and social group in Sudan. It is, in fact, the symbol of a “respectable” urban elite from the ethnic groups of the Northern-Central Nile Valley, notably Danagla, Jaaliyin and Shawayga. This manifestation contributes to the invisibilisation of the sartorial options of groups from marginalised areas. The wearing of the *thōb* as a political and patriotic statement<sup>36</sup> by SGWU’s members and their predecessors, while rational from their perspective, nonetheless exposes the persistence of a truncated representation of Sudanese history. The *thōb* worn by the SGWU’s executives and Islamist activists is not the same *thōb* that was worn in the 1950s by Sudanese communists, who placed it loosely over their heads, allowing their hair to appear underneath the flowing head covering. Islamist women wear a veil and long-sleeved clingy blouses (known as *karīna* in Sudan) that remain hidden beneath it; it is therefore called the “*ittiḥād al-karīna*” (literally the “long-sleeved blouse union”) by its critics (Figure 6).

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34 A rectangular piece of fabric several metres long that is wrapped around the body and head.

35 Even though the *thōb* was viewed as “native” clothing by colonial administrators in Sudan, it was paradoxically viewed as a “dignified and modest form of dress” (Brown 2017: 11), and girls and women were encouraged to wear it. This was not the case with “native” clothing in other parts of the British empire. See Brown (2017).

36 This explanation was given by Nūr during our interview right after the Consultative Council meeting on October 20, 2019, at which most of the participants were wearing the *thōb*.



Figure 6: Picture taken from the last issue of *Usrati*.<sup>37</sup>

## Perpetuating the Patriarchal Order: Between Inclusion and Segregation

In his 1988 pamphlet, the leading sheikh of the National Congress Party, ‘Abd al-Jalīl al-Nazīr al-Karūrī (1988), wrote about gender relations: “Leaving the house is not leaving the religion”. This is held to be encouragement for women to work outside the house as long as they respect the “appropriate” Islamic norms of decent clothing and conduct. The most striking example illustrating this vision in practice is the attitude of the social programmes of the SGWU and its affiliated associations targeting women street vendors, and specifically tea sellers (*sittāt al-shāy*). The aim of these projects was to change these women’s careers, especially by taking them off the streets, since their presence in the public space is implicitly associated with immorality, as they constantly interact with men who are not “*maḥram*”.<sup>38</sup> These programmes contributed to stripping the tea sellers of their agency, reiterating the impact of the reformist approach adopted by the SGWU.

<sup>37</sup> December 2018: 12. The picture shows SGWU members wearing the *thōb*, protesting in December 2017 against the closure of al-Aqsa Mosque and the United States’ recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

<sup>38</sup> Fathers, brothers, maternal and paternal uncles, husbands and men who have been breastfed by the same woman who has breastfed a woman (who are considered to be brothers). Women are not permitted to marry any of these men, and are therefore not allowed to be alone with them without a chaperone from the *maḥram* categories.

The Union wanted to “include” tea sellers, as well as other “excluded” people, within the development microcosm and to integrate them into the “respectable” labour market in Sudan. The word “inclusion” is a pillar of the rhetoric of “good governance” promoted by international institutions, but in fact it maintains the status quo by proposing merely marginal changes. During our interviews, most of the Union’s executives insisted on the pressing need to assist women tea sellers, notably by protecting them from harassment on the street. This would be achieved by supporting these stallholders in the creation of small businesses that could generate incomes from sources outside the streets. This policy acutely reflects the preferred norms governing gender relations within the SGWU, which aimed to “protect” poor women, who were seen as vulnerable, by helping them preserve their morality. The NGO opted to support programmes to remove tea sellers from the streets and public markets, rather than to tackle the issue of sexual harassment, which is inextricably linked to the country’s institutionalised racism.<sup>39</sup> This mission or “burden”, which is incumbent upon elite women, is inherently constructed on a complex configuration of differences whereby by subverting the driving logic, the claim of the powerful to protect the less powerful can also become an excuse for the former to dominate the latter (Spivak 1988). In the SGWU, this approach also highlights – albeit to a fairly limited extent – the possibility for the “powerless” (in this case the subaltern employees) to claim and dispense rights for and by themselves through the task of protecting and providing for these women street vendors.

Rajāḥ Ḥasan Khalifa and Nafisa justified these projects by claiming that tea sellers practice this “thankless and dishonourable employment only because they do not have any other options”. The Union’s responsibility was therefore to help them, first by improving their material working conditions through the renovation of their stalls, and ultimately by helping them move on to other lucrative activities that were deemed “easier” and “safer” by the NGO’s executives. This maternalistic narrative, which claimed to save poor women and preserve their respectability, is closely linked to what the first issue of *Usratī* magazine (July 1996) conveyed in its section on crime rates and types on the basis of gender.<sup>40</sup> It first reported that women commit fewer crimes than men because of their “natural” predisposition to gentleness, which prevents them from engaging in conflicts or using violence to resolve them where they arise. This idea, which was also expressed by Nūr when mentioning the Supreme Peace Council, contributes towards absolving

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<sup>39</sup> Tea sellers are predominantly from marginalised ethnic groups, mostly from the Nuba Mountains and Darfur. There are also a few Ethiopians and Eritreans, who are vulnerable for different reasons.

<sup>40</sup> The magazine does not provide any source for the statistics displayed in this section.

the patriarchal culture from its foundational responsibility as it tolerates, if not encourages, violence by men, which is displayed as an inherent characteristic of masculinity. The issue then goes on to describe the types of crime committed by women, and identifies three main offences: abortion, selling alcohol and drug trafficking. Whereas men's criminality is presented as "natural" and "innate", women's propensity towards violence is explained away as a result of a lack of education, and especially religious education, as well as the consequence of a perversion ("*inhirāf*") caused by "too much freedom of movement". It is widely believed in Sudanese urban spaces that most of the women who trade alcohol are street tea sellers, and this belief justified the need for the SGWU to control their behaviour and activities.

The Union's executives also argued that the projects targeting women tea sellers were unprecedented. Nafisa even claimed that there was not a single organisation or initiative other than the SGWU that helped and supported these street vendors. In fact, the SGWU was competing with the Union of Female Food and Tea Sellers, a trade union founded in 1990 by 'Awaḍiyya Koko, a tea seller herself, to improve the working conditions of her colleagues on the streets of the Sudanese capital. This organisation specifically combats a form of police harassment (known as "*al-ka-sha*") whereby women are forced to give up their utensils or are forcibly removed from their spots. Surprisingly, this relentless campaign of intimidation, harassment and brutality was never mentioned by the SGWU's members. In 2000, the Governor of Khartoum issued a decree imposing a curfew on women's work outside their homes, which considerably restricted the activity of women in the "informal" sector. These women were consequently subjected to violent reprisals from the agents of official and semi-official morality-enforcing institutions, and from the Public Order Police in particular.<sup>41</sup> Street traders' "unconventional" use of public space through their active presence was seen as a threat, and provoked a conflict with the state. The regime expected users of the public space to navigate the streets passively, by walking, driving or observing, and thus any "active use challenge[d] the authority of the state and those social groups that benefit[ted] from such order" (Bayat 2010: 63). Far from condemning these state-sponsored practices, the SGWU promoted an increased collaboration with the police to fight female criminality, as underlined in the Union's Seventh National Congress report (2004). The aim of this alliance with police forces was to guide unwilling women towards "licit" (*ḥalāl*) activities (Makkāwī 2005: 193). Furthermore, the Union's collaboration with state agents

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<sup>41</sup> This force was established by the Public Order Law of 1991 and disbanded in 2019 after the popular revolt. It had been tasked with regulating the behaviour of men and women according to Islamic Sharia law, which resulted in the arbitrary repression of women, whose behaviour and bodies were under close surveillance and control in the public space.

served the purpose of promoting gender segregation in specific domains. This was notably the case with driving tests, which between 2014 and October 2019 were taken by women at the Union's headquarters where there was a traffic police station. This office, which was "one of a kind in Africa and the Arab world" according to one of the subaltern employees I met, is described by all the interviewees as the fruition of a long campaign by the SGWU to enable Sudanese women to take their driving test under the "best conditions" possible. These conditions included strict gender segregation in this women-only space, where even the police officers carrying out the driving tests were all women. This allegedly allowed women to feel "comfortable" and guarded them from potential sexual harassment by men.

The NGO seemed to want to distance itself from disruptive modes of action and confrontation, and this attitude can best be illustrated by its perspectives on women practicing sports. The Union's members did not generally condemn gender mixing (*ikhtilāf*), as it was allowed during the Prophet's time in Medina, and yet they still promoted gendered physical segregation in specific contexts. Most of the interviewees, for instance, mentioned the women soccer players who appeared in the stadiums of Khartoum in broad daylight in September 2019. Some of them were wearing t-shirts and shorts that revealed their arms and legs, an outfit judged "immoral and indecent" by the Union's members. Nadā, an employee of the public relations office, said that she refused to watch these games because the players' behaviour was not properly "Islamic", as they "exposed the woman's immodesty (*awra*)" (10 October 2019). She advocated for women's right to practice sports, but within an Islamic framework by respecting the norms of "femininity", which included playing in segregated spaces or wearing modest clothing that covered the entire body. Her view was shared by Nūr, who proclaimed that Islam offered women many rights, including practicing any sport they wanted to. The first issue of *Usratī*, which dedicated a section to sports, highlighted this narrative by promoting women practicing sports in segregated spaces and wearing "decent Islamic uniforms". Nūr furthered this idea by stating that sports "do not deform women's bodies", and do not "prevent them from giving birth to healthy children" (6 October 2019). Women are thus allowed to practice sports insofar as it does not jeopardise their traditional maternal role or compromise their positions within the boundaries of "respectable femininity".

## **Conclusion: The SGWU, Emblem of a Mainstream "State Feminism"**

This chapter has demonstrated how the SGWU was located at the intersection of the state and civil society, inhabiting a "modernizing space embedded within, pro-

duced and in turn reproduced by Islamic beliefs and teachings” (Hafez 2011: 60). The gender ideology adopted by this “government-organised non-governmental organisation” (GONGO) (Hasmath, Hildebrandt and Hsu 2019) was promoted by the Sudanese Islamic state. It was founded on the importance of implementing a specific interpretation of Islamic scripture in the social and development fields. This process was carried out by women who were integrated into the political and administrative realms and were considered to be the “guardians” of traditions and the gatekeepers of Sudanese society’s moral fabric. Women’s Islamic NGOs, and particularly the SGWU, were therefore the most privileged allies of the state as regards its gender and development policies.

Between 1990 and 1995, the SGWU organised several conferences in all twenty-five states of the country, gathering professional and academic women together to discuss the situation and rights of Sudanese women. For instance, it held a conference entitled “The Role of Women in the Sudan Salvation Revolution” in 1992 (Abdalla 2009), clearly showing its reformist approach and willingness to be unambiguously part of the new regime and to negotiate with it. The NGO also coordinated the “Women in Development” units, which were founded in 1973 in all the federal state’s institutions. The Union collaborated closely with the Ministry of Welfare and Social Development until 2018 to prepare and implement development programmes, including the famous “*al-qarḍ al-ḥasan*” (virtuous loan<sup>42</sup>) programme, which aimed to alleviate the financial plight of poor families and was funded by the Bank of Sudan and *diwān al-zakāt*, a public institution in charge of collecting and distributing the *zakāt*, a religious mandatory tax in Islam.<sup>43</sup> The NGO’s executives held representative roles during regional and international summits: for instance, it represented the Republic of Sudan at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The SGWU also took part in national ceremonies organised by President ‘Umar al-Bashīr himself, such as the “international women’s rights day” held at the Friendship Hall (*qā’at al-ṣadāqa*) on March 8.<sup>44</sup> The presidential couple was invited to events organised by the Union as honorary guests, including during its ninth National General Congress in 2011, which was inaugurated by a speech by ‘Umar al-Bashīr.

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42 Based on the following Quranic verse: “Who of you will lend Allah a goodly loan which He will return after multiplying it for him manifold? For Allah has the power both to decrease and increase [wealth], and to Him you will all be returned.” (*al-Baqara*, verse 245)

43 This state-managed *zakāt* system was one of the main targets of criticism during the *inqādh* regime, as it was rife with corruption and unprofessional practices that allowed the regime’s leaders to accrue public funds for their own benefit.

44 From the SGWU leaflet published in 2018 on its activities between 2015 and 2018.



The Union's version of feminism that was supported by the Islamist state was also quite blatant. It clearly engaged in its activities through co-optation and clientelist strategies. In the context of the "democratisation" process or political pragmatism undertaken by the Sudanese government from the early 2000s (Mann 2014), the SGWU adopted a similar co-optation strategy around 2010 to deflect threats from other elites in the country who were opposed to the regime and posed a threat to its continuation in power. In fact, the organisation opened up its senior positions to non-NCP supporters such as Nūr from the Umma Party, who joined the Union in 2011 as head of professional training programmes for two terms before being promoted to vice-secretary-general.

The GONGO was also a key protagonist in the regime's patronage practices. It recruited members from a broad range of social classes through clientelist processes that were evident from the personal connections and networks that existed within the organisation. Practices such as these allowed subalterns within the organisation to benefit from goods, public services or housing offered by the executives without going through the regular market criteria. These patronage practices were also to be seen in the alliances forged by the Union. It created and supervised two NGO networks (*Ansām* and *Shumū*), which gathered together hundreds of specialised local charity and development associations, and to which the SGWU gave technical and financial assistance while keeping them under tight surveillance. These networks helped spread the Union's interpretation of gender and empowerment, which seemed to be adapted to the needs and social circumstances of the upper and middle classes, to urban, heterosexual, married, educated women belonging to the dominant ethnic, religious and political groups in the country. These women, who were well represented by the profiles of the NGO's executives, held the frontiers of "respectable femininity" and gave themselves the mission to "protect" vulnerable women, whereas in fact they mostly worked to defend their own class interests, thus contributing to the invisibilisation and exclusion of their subaltern counterparts. In this way, women's agency seemed to be exercised within a rigid normative framework defined by the social elites of the Islamist movement.

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Part 3: **Armed Men between Global Connections  
and Local Practices**



Heather J. Sharkey

## Chapter 7

# The Sudanese Soldiers Who Went to Mexico (1863–1867): A Global History from the Nile Valley to North America

## Introduction

In January 1863, 446 soldiers boarded a French ship on the Egyptian coast and sailed for Veracruz, Mexico.<sup>1</sup> Almost all of these men had been born and raised in Sudan and had joined the Egyptian Army as slaves, whereupon they became Muslims, with new Muslim names. Four years later, in March 1867, the 299 survivors of *le bataillon nègre égyptien* (“the black Egyptian battalion”, as the French authorities called them) sailed from Veracruz to Toulon in France and went on to Paris, where they received honours from Napoleon III, Emperor of the French. After leaving France, they sailed to Alexandria, where the Khedive Ismā’īl reviewed them and Egyptian dignitaries honoured them at a banquet before sending them back to Sudan (Douin 1933 v. 1: 348).

At a time when Egypt was seeking to expand its empire in North-East Africa, some of these Mexico veterans later fought on the Abyssinian (Ethiopian) front. Others served in Darfur and the Equatoria region along the White Nile, which included much of present-day South Sudan and Northern Uganda. Later, after Sudanese Muslims with ties to the Mahdist movement declared jihad against the Turco-Egyptian regime (which had subjected much of Sudan to colonial rule since 1820 in a search for raw materials and slave soldiers for military expansion) (Hill 1959),<sup>2</sup> four Sudanese veterans of Mexico, led by the British general Charles Gordon, died in 1885 at the Fall of Khartoum (Hill and Hogg 1995: 137–40). A few joined the Mahdist side and turned to fighting the Egyptians. In 1896, as Anglo-Egyptian forces

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2 On the history of slave soldiers *vis-à-vis* Egypt, see Lamothe (2011). Biographical sketches of several of these soldiers appear in Hill (1967), although readers should be aware that the rendering of names is inconsistent compared with other sources.



launched their “reconquest” of Sudan, an elderly veteran named ‘Alī Jifūn shared memories of his Mexican years with a British officer, who published ‘Alī Jifūn’s testimony in a London literary magazine, leaving an oral history that is an important source for this study (Machell, 4 parts, 1896).

The remarkable story of these soldiers takes Sudanese history beyond the Nile Valley and beyond the country’s relations with the colonial powers of Egypt and Britain, while making it possible to trace longer arcs between North Africa, Europe, North America, and Western Asia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This exercise illuminates global histories of slavery, race, military formation and empire-building,<sup>3</sup> as well as comparative histories of civil war and religious sectarianism. At the same time, it shows how service in Mexico enabled the Sudanese soldiers to rise in rank in the Egyptian Army while also involving them in formative episodes of Sudanese history. Finally, the careers of these men provide evidence for networks that connected the two Sudans – Sudan and the country that seceded from it in 2011, South Sudan – to Mexico, France and the United States, in addition to Egypt and Britain.<sup>4</sup>

Source limitations pose a challenge for studying these Sudanese soldiers. The French Intervention of the 1860s – Napoleon III’s attempt to install a French-backed monarchy in Mexico – has inspired a voluminous body of scholarship in French, English and Spanish,<sup>5</sup> but the Sudanese soldiers are absent from most Mexican- and French-centred accounts.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, this study places the Sudanese soldiers centre stage by drawing on French military records, including photographs and drawings, lists of the honours bestowed and above all medical files, as well as books and articles about Sudanese and Egyptian military history. Two books are of primary importance: one by the Egyptian prince ‘Umar Ṭūsūn, which was published in Arabic in

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3 On military slavery and its global manifestations across history, see, for example, Brown and Morgan (2006).

4 This chapter forms part of a larger work in progress, which uses life stories to view the global stages of Nile Valley history during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

5 One scholar published a bibliography on this episode in 1970 that cited nearly 300 books, and which did not even include periodical sources! The scholarship has continued to burgeon, while Maximilian and Carlotta still attract popular interest. See Quirarte (1970) and Barker (1979a: xi). For a sense of the topic’s enduring popular appeal in France and Mexico, see Bénit (2016: 197–216) and Duncan (2014: 97–106). Some works blur the line between academic and popular studies, suggesting the topic’s crossover appeal: McAllen (2014).

6 They are missing even in a study of blackness and race in Veracruz, where the Sudanese soldiers were based (Sue 2013). A rare Mexican historian who has registered Sudanese participation in this episode is José Arturo Saavedra Casco, an expert on East Africa, who published an article about the Sudanese soldiers that summarises and reviews the book of Hill and Hogg (Casco 2011: 709–35).

1933 after several years of work (‘Umar Ṭūsūn [1933] 2007);<sup>7</sup> and the other, which was published in English in 1995, by the Britons Richard Hill and Peter Hogg, who spent more than half a century doing their research (Hill and Hogg 1995).<sup>8</sup>

Four sections follow. The first provides historical context, offering a survey of the circumstances that prompted the French intervention in Mexico, the motives that inspired Napoleon III to act and the parallels that connected developments in Mexico to events in North Africa, notably Algeria and Egypt. The second considers how racial ideologies informed French attitudes and responses to a public health crisis caused by a recurring epidemic of yellow fever that afflicted and killed many soldiers based in the port of Veracruz and the military fortress of San Juan de Ulúa. This crisis, which was informed by racial ideologies and assumptions of the era, prompted French military officials to recruit the battalion from Egypt as a way of addressing what they believed to be a shortage of soldiers. In the third section, I attempt to compensate for the French tendency to present the Sudanese soldiers as racial types and disease-resistant supermen by considering their tumultuous lives and careers before, during and after their service in Mexico, paying particular attention to their experiences of violence and cultural displacement. In this section, I rely heavily on the testimony of the veteran ‘Alī Jifūn, which is the only known account from a Sudanese survivor of this campaign. Finally, I conclude the chapter by assessing the role of the soldiers who went to Mexico in forging the transnational histories that linked Sudan and South Sudan to other countries during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with consequences for the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In particular, I draw on the account of an anthropologist who met people in Bor, South Sudan in 2010 who regarded the Sudanese soldiers’ migration to Mexico in the 1860s as the direct precursor of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century Sudanese migrations to “America”, by which they especially meant the United States.

## The French Intervention in Mexico: Europe, North America and North Africa

France’s entry into Mexico in 1861 marked its second invasion of the country in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first, which is variously called the First Intervention, the First Franco-Mexican War, and “The Pastry War”, was in 1838 and 1839, almost two decades after

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Umar Ṭūsūn was working on this book by 1927, as the following article confirms: “Basālat al-Miṣriyyīn fī al-Maksīk.” (1927: 6).

<sup>8</sup> Hogg was already working on this research in 1941 (Kirk 1941: 114).

Mexico had won independence from Spain, when French interests in the country were growing amid instability. Mexican political factions were vying for control, regimes were changing quickly and poverty and looting were rampant (Krauze 1997: 133). The local authorities were unable to maintain public order.

When France first invaded in 1838, it claimed to be defending the interests of French merchants, many of whom had businesses upon which brigands had preyed. By this time, French citizens were trading textiles, wines and luxury items (“*articles de Paris*”) for Mexican mahogany, coffee and cochineal (used to make red dye), while others were running small shops, often among fellow expatriates. French shop owners included the *pâtissier* whose looted bakery outside Mexico City gave the “Pastry War” its name.

By amplifying this baker’s grievance into its *casus belli* in Mexico, France’s tactics recalled the ones the French authorities had used in Algeria several years earlier. In 1830, France had cited the “Fly Whisk Incident” to justify its invasion of Algiers: this was an affront allegedly perpetrated by the local potentate, or Dey, of Algiers, who had insulted a French delegate in another dispute over finances by flicking a whisk in his face. Leaders of the Mexican Republic were aware of France’s actions in Algiers and how they were expanding a zone of conquest into what was becoming a much larger “Algeria.” As Franco-Mexican relations deteriorated, Mexican leaders insisted that they “should not be treated ‘like Berbers or Algerians’ whom the French were preparing to roll over in North Africa” (Barker 1979a: 28–29).

This last detail is worth noting because it suggests historical parallels between 19<sup>th</sup> century North Africa and North America while pointing to the role of allied “speculators, would-be settlers, merchants, military officers and civil administrators” (Ruedy 1992: 52) in driving French imperialism worldwide. It also enables us to make connections between the global entanglements of the Maghreb and the Nile Valley in this period, while suggesting how French attitudes towards members of the “black Egyptian battalion” may have been influenced, for better or worse, by their encounters with Algerians.

From 1858 to 1861, Mexico experienced a civil war that amounted to what the historian Enrique Krauze called a bloody “movement from creole to mestizo” (Krauze 1997: 152). Elites of Spanish heritage or creoles, who had monarchist inclinations and close ties to the Catholic hierarchy, lost power, and men known as the liberals or republicans, many of whom came from mixed Native American and Spanish backgrounds, gained power. In 1861, the liberal Benito Juárez became president, and faced with an economic crisis, halted payments on British, Spanish and French loans. Britain, Spain and France formed an alliance and threatened war. But while Britain and Spain agreed to a repayment plan and desisted, France, under the leadership of Napoleon III, decided to invade in a show of gunboat diplomacy.

Napoleon III, a “visionary half-genius” (Barker 1979a: 144), as one historian damningly called him, had made himself Emperor of France a decade before. Napoleon III dreamt of reviving and expanding France’s empire in the Americas, compensating for territories that France had lost through sale, as with Louisiana, or war, as in Haiti. Napoleon III resented how the United States had expanded its territory at Mexico’s expense by annexing Texas and then, in the wake of the Mexican-American War (1846–1848), seizing lands that became Arizona, New Mexico and California. He also resented the northward expansion of the United States, as in the Pacific Northwest. Looking to Mexico, Napoleon III envisioned a “pan-Latinist” policy that could advance French commercial and political interests in North and South America (Lecaillon 1994: 45–46), while thwarting both U.S. expansion and the advancement of republics and republican ideas (Sainlaude 2017; Doyle 2017).

As he considered his options in Mexico, Napoleon III yearned to claim achievements like those of his role model and uncle, Napoleon I (Carroll 2019: 67–100). He especially admired his uncle’s deeds in Egypt, which French troops had conquered in 1798 and occupied for nearly three years. Famously, when Napoleon Bonaparte first landed at Alexandria in Egypt, he brought with him not just soldiers, but also scholars, who initiated research in fields ranging from botany and zoology to archaeology, especially the study of the pharaonic past (Reid 2002). Dozens of French scientists and scholars, known collectively as the *savants*, together with a team of approximately 400 engravers, went on to publish a series of twenty-six massive illustrated volumes of their findings, called the *Description de l’Égypte* (Anderson and Fawzy 1988: 2, 8). As the 1860s began, Napoleon III hoped to achieve a similar “intellectual conquest” in Mexico (Edison 2003: 459), which had mineral and agricultural wealth and the lure of a civilisational grandeur associated with the Aztecs and their precursors and with architectural wonders like the pyramids of Teotihuacán.

Napoleon III also had other interests in Mexico and the lands directly south. Years earlier, in 1847, he had written a treatise on the feasibility of digging a canal through Nicaragua to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Such a canal, he stressed, would be a boon for the growth of French trade and would block further U.S. expansion. He maintained that the canal would also make Nicaragua a centre of prosperity and grandeur mightier than Constantinople (Istanbul) (Keasbey 1896: 159–62). Indeed, in 1861, as French ships lay poised to invade Mexico, the prospects for a central American canal may have seemed particularly bright, since the Suez Canal – a marvel of modern engineering – was eight years from completion in Egypt, promising to expand global commerce to France’s benefit by connecting the Mediterranean to the Red Sea.

In 1861, the timing for a Mexican invasion also struck French strategists as opportune because a civil war was consuming the United States. Napoleon III and

his advisors knew that the U.S. Civil War would prevent the authorities in Washington, D.C. from asserting the Monroe Doctrine, the U.S. policy of 1823 to block European expansion in the Americas. It would also make it less likely that U.S. authorities would lend moral or material support to liberal Mexican elements – notably Benito Juárez and his fellow republicans, with whom the Americans sympathised. In short, if France was going to move on Mexico, 1861 was the right year to act.

Finally, racial ideologies also played a role in the French Intervention, as the historian Nancy Barker argued in a fascinating article published in 1979 (Barker 1979b: 64–80). Barker’s argument is worth considering here, because racial assumptions later proved to be seminal for the recruitment of the Sudanese soldiers – even if Barker herself (like most non-experts in Nile Valley history) did not note the Sudanese presence.

These racial ideologies functioned roughly as follows: Napoleon III and his advisors, Barker contended, regarded Mexicans as members of an inferior, child-like race who needed a monarchist government and European civilisation to escape from the chaos that had engulfed them on independence. The French in Mexico understood themselves in racial terms, too: they belonged to a “Latin race” that was connected to Mexican peoples linguistically, as speakers of the Latinate languages of Spanish and French, and culturally, through Roman Catholicism. The Latin race, with its Catholic sectarian dimension, challenged the “Anglo-Saxons”, the race of the mostly English-speaking Protestant heirs to British imperialism in the United States (Mauro, Preface to Lecaillon 1994: vi). These ideas converged in a platform known as *la grande pensée du règne* – the “great idea” of Napoleon III’s reign – which had two parts: first, to assert French control in Mexico as a counterweight to Anglo-Saxon dominance further north, and second, to use French influence to secure a civilisational uplift in the Americas. Barker asserted that a belief in French superiority and “contempt for the Mexican people” were integral to France’s racially inspired foreign policy in Mexico (Barker 1979a: 67).

As French troops invaded Mexico in December 1861, Napoleon III advanced his vision for Mexico by seeking to install a Catholic monarchy. He found a candidate in the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian of the Hapsburg family, a cousin of Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom, whose elder brother was the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Josef I.<sup>9</sup> After convincing Ferdinand Maximilian that Mexicans would exult at his selection and that Mexicans genuinely wanted a monarchy, the Archduke accepted the throne in 1863 in return for France’s promise of military and financial support. After landing in Veracruz on 29 May 1864, Maximilian and

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<sup>9</sup> Mexican monarchists had approached Maximilian in 1859 at a point when Napoleon III was renewing his offer.

his wife Charlotte, the daughter of Leopold I, King of Belgium, travelled to Mexico City, where they styled themselves Emperor Maximiliano and Empress Carlota and embraced the pomp of court life.

But the plan was a delusion. Resistance to the monarchy was strong, and Maximilian and Charlotte never enjoyed anything close to the popular support that Napoleon III had claimed they would. Seeking to restore the republic, liberal forces attacked French troops in a series of skirmishes that showed the Mexicans' superior knowledge of local terrains. Meanwhile, relations became tense between the French forces and their Austrian and Belgian counterparts, who had come to support Maximilian and Charlotte, but who were paid less than the French soldiers (Stevenson 1899: 190).<sup>10</sup> Maximilian found himself increasingly at odds with Napoleon III and the conservative, Church-allied creole elites (the “ultra-clerical party”, as one American critic called them) who most ardently insisted on a monarchy (Stevenson 1899: 203–4). Maximilian discovered that he agreed with Juárez and the liberals on certain points, for example on the merits of religious liberty (even for Protestants!) and the legality of secularising some church properties and selling them.<sup>11</sup> He also proved to be more sympathetic to the native peoples than either the creole conservatives or the *mestizo* liberals, in ways that shaped his “indigenist policy” (Mauro, Preface to Lecaillon 1994: vi).

Conditions in Mexico also proved difficult because so many of the Europeans perished from diseases, especially yellow fever, and even Maximilian and Charlotte fell ill. A conspiracy theory – apparently intended to explain the ineptitude of the imperial duo – spread to the effect that “Indians” (that is, indigenous Americans) had been poisoning Charlotte and Maximilian with something that was damaging their brains slowly but imperceptibly (Stevenson 1899: 242). In fact, the emperor contracted a case of chronic dysentery – “he was a physical wreck”, as one contemporary observed (Stevenson 1899: 203–4) – while the empress struggled with depression and mental illness (van Ypersele 1995).

For these varied reasons, the French Intervention proved to be ill-fated and short, and many Mexican troops in its employ, unpaid and angry, ended up deserting to the liberal side, like “rats [that] were leaving the sinking ship” (Stevenson 1899: 201). As the French forces retreated, the Sudanese soldiers, along with the Algerians, protected them from Mexican guerrillas (Crecelius and Crecelius 1976: 85). The Sudanese were therefore among the last foreign soldiers to evacuate in March 1867, three months before liberal fighters captured Maximilian and executed him by

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<sup>10</sup> A fascinating and formidable figure, Stevenson later became a director of the archaeology museum at my institution, the University of Pennsylvania.

<sup>11</sup> British National Archives (London), PRO 30/22/74: Lord John Russell Papers, Correspondence, Mexico, Folios 204–6: P. Campbell Scarlett to Russell, Private, 28 February 1865.

firing squad. With the French Intervention thus at an end, Benito Juárez restored the Mexican Republic.

In a study of the French Intervention that blends approaches from history, literature and mass media, Kristen Ibsen has described two views of this era: a French view, reflecting a tendency to look back on the episode as an “ephemeral anecdote, a footnote in international relations, or a ‘regrettable misunderstanding’ between France and Mexico”; and a Mexican view that saw it as an interruption in Mexico’s quest for nationhood, or as a “scar” on the national mindscape (Ibsen 2010: 151). Approaching this episode, as this study does, through the careers of the Sudanese soldiers who went to Mexico, offers another, Sudanese approach to this story. Those Sudanese soldiers who survived later participated in other historical episodes in parts of what are now Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Egypt. Viewing their lives from an early 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, we can consider these soldiers who went to Mexico to be early migrants to North America (however temporary their sojourn) more than a century before waves of Sudanese migration flowed into the United States and Canada (Abusharaf 2002). Certainly, some people in South Sudan now seem to remember the soldiers in this way, as trailblazing migrants.<sup>12</sup> Moving further back in time, we might see their story within a larger frame of Muslim migrations that began in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and connected an Atlantic world history of African slavery to New World colonisation (Ghazvinian and Fraas 2020). While all these approaches are illuminating, the focus here remains on events in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – the period corresponding with the Turco-Egyptian (1820–c. 1881) and Mahdist (c. 1881–1898) eras of Sudanese history – and their consequences for shaping transnational histories.

Before examining the significance of the soldiers’ Mexican experiences as they pertain to Sudanese history, I will now turn to an examination of French motives for recruiting *le bataillon nègre égyptien*. These motives reflected assumptions about race and health, along with a deep fascination the French authorities harboured towards the Sudanese soldiers. This appears to have translated into good treatment: the Sudanese received attentive care in Mexico, judging from the medical records, while the French government (military officials and later Napoleon III himself) later praised and promoted them. And yet, a romanticisation of the Sudanese soldiers overlooks the hardships they faced before, during and after their Mexican service, in light of the tumultuous and sometimes brutal history that unfolded in 19<sup>th</sup> century Sudan.

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<sup>12</sup> See below for a discussion of Brendan Tuttle’s research in Bor.

## Science, Race and the Description of the Sudanese Soldiers

Inspired by what his uncle Napoleon I had accomplished in Egypt, Napoleon III decided to establish a “scientific commission” in Mexico as part of the French Intervention. It appointed civilian scholars as cartographers, linguists and geologists (who were especially interested in sources of gold and silver), but also encouraged military officers to pursue research, particularly in medicine. The idea of seeking black soldiers from Egypt arose from this medical research.

Public health was a pressing strategic concern. Since the 1640s, the European imperial powers in the Greater Caribbean had been facing the “twin killers” of malaria and yellow fever, which placed ecological limits on their expansion. Yellow fever in particular “powerfully shaped the history of empires and revolutions in the region” (McNeill 2010: 2, 4). According to W. C. Gorgas, a U.S. military surgeon who became involved in eradicating yellow fever in the Panama Canal after 1904, French armies had suffered catastrophically from yellow fever in the Americas. Around 1803, Gorgas noted, one French expedition that Napoleon I had sent to Haiti, bound for Louisiana, lost 22,000 of its 25,000 soldiers to yellow fever in a single outbreak (Gorgas 1915: 273–83).

A military doctor named Jean-Baptiste Fuzier (1824–1880) played a key role in the struggle to investigate and hold back yellow fever in France’s mid-19<sup>th</sup> century empire. Fuzier was a tropical medicine specialist whom the French government sent from China to Veracruz in 1862 to direct its military hospital after its previous director had died from yellow fever. Upon reaching Veracruz, Fuzier contracted the disease himself, but survived. He went on to treat many soldiers suffering from sickness and injury. No ailment was too small to attract his attention, although his interest in yellow fever was paramount, since the problem caused by the disease was, in the words of a French contemporary, “the question which entirely dominates the pathology of Mexico” (Larrey 1864: 5). Fuzier’s notes show that he was grappling with basic questions about the causes and impact of yellow fever. “Where did it come from?” he asked. “When did it first appear? What is the mortality rate? Can it be controlled? Does it arise spontaneously or is it imported?”<sup>13</sup> Scientists may have associated yellow fever with Africa – where the disease, in fact, originated – but in Fuzier’s time they had not yet clearly understood that mosquitoes were its vector. It was not until 1900 that scientists conducting research in Cuba definitively

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<sup>13</sup> Archives du Service de Santé des Armées au Val de Grâce (Paris), Expédition du Mexique (1862–1867) [henceforth Val de Grâce/Mexique], Carton No. 53, Dossier No. 33, File No. 3, “Questions et notes sur la fièvre jaune (1863–1864)” [by Fuzier].



identified what Linnaeus in 1762 called *aedes aegypti* – coincidentally for our story, the “Egyptian” mosquito – as the culprit (Powell, Gloria-Soria and Kotsakiozi 2018: 854–60; Henry, 2016: 1807). Spreading not only yellow fever but also dengue fever and more recently, zika fever, *aedes aegypti* may, according to one recent analysis, qualify as “the most lethal animal” for *homo sapiens* in the world (Powell 2016: 525).

Historians have recently begun to show an interest in Fuzier’s career. His research included not only a study of the “black vomit” (*el vómito negro*), as locals called yellow fever (because of how it caused victims to cough up coagulated blood), but also the excavation and analysis of pre-Colombian art, such as the famous colossal Olmec head of Tres Zapotes. Fuzier produced drawings and watercolours of objects he studied, such as vases from the Mayan site of Campeche in the Yucatan peninsula. Some of his artistic renditions (along with some of the objects they represent!) survive today in the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris (Taladoire and Acosta Nieve 2020:138; Fredj, de Pablo and Fillon 2008).

Strikingly, among his medical records of the Egyptian battalion in Mexico there are some stylised watercolour portraits of individual Sudanese soldiers. The portraits are unsigned, though it is likely (considering his talent for rendering pre-Colombian artworks) that Fuzier drew and painted them himself.

Racial thinking informed the medical research of Fuzier and his colleagues in ways that help explain the recruitment of the Sudanese soldiers. In a list of medical instructions for the French army in Mexico, the leader of the French scientific commission, Baron Félix Hippolyte Larrey (1808–1895), asserted that the various races of humankind present in the country – Native Americans (*indigènes*), creoles (native-born people of European, and especially Spanish, heritage), mestizos (*métis*), blacks (*négres*) and European foreigners – possessed “certain pathological aptitudes.” “So, for example,” Larrey wrote, “while the Europeans submit to disastrous effects in the hot season at Veracruz, the Negroes are completely protected.” (Larrey 1864: 2). In fact, the idea of an innate African immunity – the belief that black people are born resistant to the disease – has held such a powerful grip on certain scientists and historians of science that it has still not been thoroughly debunked, even though, as one scholar recently argued, it is “almost certainly wrong” (Espinosa 2014: 439).

Many French scientists and military authorities accepted the theory of black immunity and believed that African soldiers would be able to resist the yellow fever that had been ravaging French troops in Veracruz (McNeil 2010).<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, in

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<sup>14</sup> I am not sure about the degree to which Fuzier accepted the black immunity theory; my research on this topic is ongoing. Certainly, Félix Hippolyte Larrey, the leader of the French scientific commission, accepted it completely.

1863, they contacted Saʿīd Pasha, the ruler of Egypt, and asked him to loan three battalions of *nègres*, by which they meant soldiers drawn from what geographers in Arabic had long called “*bilād al-sūdān*”, the “lands of the blacks” south of Egypt, which Muhammad Ali and his heirs had been gradually conquering since 1820. Saʿīd Pasha acceded, but sent one battalion, not three. He complied because he valued France as a counterweight to British influence in the Eastern Mediterranean region and wanted to maintain good relations with France. He may have also hoped that the Sudanese soldiers would receive training in French military methods that would later help the Egyptian army (Crecelius and Crecelius 1976: 74).

By the time the Sudanese reached Veracruz early in 1863, other men of African heritage, from Martinique and Guadeloupe in the Caribbean, and from Senegal and Algeria in Africa, were already fighting with the French troops in Mexico (Machell 1896, Part 2: 175–87; Crecelius and Crecelius 1976: 72; Hill and Hogg 1995: 34–35). But the Sudanese, who variously came from Southern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains and Southern Darfur, reportedly had darker skins. A Mexican taken as a prisoner of war near Veracruz, Francisco de Paula Troncoso (1839–1919), saw the Sudanese and described them as not just black but “extremely black”, especially in contrast to the bright white fabric of their Egyptian Army uniforms, which they continued to wear (Hill and Hogg 1995: 43–45). Their colour enhanced their value among the French, who interpreted their blackness as a sign of strength in the face of disease.

Fuzier found the Sudanese soldiers intriguing. He kept meticulous registers, in which he listed the men by name, with details about their bodies such as height and weight, suggesting that many were tall and slim. He noted every wound the Sudanese suffered in Mexico, details of where and when it happened, the treatment they received and the outcomes (such as recovery, amputation or death). In one file he recorded all the injuries and deaths from a single battle, listing the Sudanese soldiers along with other members of the allied imperial forces – including *tirailleurs* from Algeria and Senegal and Mexican creoles – as well as captured Mexican republican fighters.<sup>15</sup> His files do not contain comparably detailed records for Algerian, Mexican and other soldiers, on the other hand. He tracked every sickness the Sudanese soldiers faced, ranging from eczema and conjunctivitis to syphilis. He even noted their diets. Compared with the French soldiers, the Sudanese soldiers received extra rice, with oil and vinegar instead of wine and *eau-de-vie*.<sup>16</sup> During Ramadan, the Sudanese were given rations of rice, meat broth, butter and coffee.

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<sup>15</sup> Val de Grâce/Mexique, Carton No. 55, Dossier 6: Bataillon de Nègres Égyptien, including “Bataillon Nègre Égyptien: taille de 19 entre eux.”

<sup>16</sup> Val de Grâce/Mexique, Carton No. 55, Dossier 6: Rapport sur le Bataillon Égyptien, “Égyptiens, Ramadan” and “Nourriture”.

These notes suggest that French officials attempted to respect the Sudanese soldiers' status as Muslims by giving them extra food instead of alcohol.

Fuzier's notes on the Sudanese soldiers' coughing, fevers and diarrhoea suggest that they experienced these symptoms often, at least during their first year in Mexico, but he rarely diagnosed yellow fever among them. Instead, when Sudanese soldiers died, he typically ascribed their deaths to typhus and dysentery, even though the head of the French scientific commission observed that yellow fever often took typhoid-like forms.<sup>17</sup> In many cases, its associated muscle pains, fevers and headaches make it "easy to confuse" yellow fever with other diseases; it is only when victims begin to vomit black blood or to ooze blood from their nose and ears that the disease is clearly distinguishable, but by then it is generally fatal (McNeill 2010: 33). While the battalion's commanding officer, Major Jabarat Allāh Muḥammad, who had sailed with the soldiers from Alexandria, did receive a diagnosis of yellow fever upon his death in Veracruz in 1863, he was not Sudanese; rather, he was "white", Hill and Hogg have reported, possibly of Syrian origin (Hill and Hogg 1995: 21). Jabarat Allāh Muḥammad's replacement, Adjutant-Major Muḥammad al-Mās, who *was* Sudanese in origin and who came from the battalion, expressed doubts to the French authorities soon afterwards about the supposed immunity of Sudanese soldiers. Muḥammad al-Mās appeared unable to shake the French convictions, even though approximately seventy-one soldiers from his battalion (out of the 446 who had originally sailed) became ill with fever in Veracruz, and sixty-four eventually died of disease.<sup>18</sup>

A recent study by Mariola Espinosa, a historian of medicine, suggests that in areas where yellow fever is endemic and where people have had some exposure to the disease in childhood, its intensity and the fatality rates are likely to be lower when people contract it again, but immunity fades over time. In other words, if the Sudanese soldiers in Mexico exhibited yellow fever-like symptoms, it is possible that they may have contracted the disease before, in the Nile Valley, but that their cases were less severe compared with other people (like, perhaps, most of the French soldiers) who were exposed for the first time. It is also possible (building upon cases that Espinosa describes, notably in Philadelphia, which saw a major yellow fever outbreak in 1793) that French doctors like Fuzier in Mexico clung so tenaciously to the black immunity theory that they were unable or unwilling to diagnose the disease when Sudanese soldiers were manifesting its symptoms right under their noses (Espinosa 2014: 347–53).

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<sup>17</sup> Val de Grâce/Mexique, Carton No. 55, Dossier 6: Bataillon de Nègres Égyptien, Hôpital Militaire de Vera Cruz, Tableau des décès qui ont eu lieu au Bataillon Égyptien du 24 Février au 10 Février 1864 et Le Baron Larrey (1864: 6).

<sup>18</sup> See Hill and Hogg (1995: 29), and Douin (1933, v. 1: 348), who also notes that twenty died in combat, twenty more died from injuries, two disappeared during combat, and twelve deserted.

The French authorities' insistence on the immunity of the Sudanese soldiers proved so persuasive that historians went on to repeat the claims for more than a century. Writing in 1933, for example, 'Umar Ṭūsūn, the Egyptian prince who was the first to chronicle their history, acknowledged the death toll among the Sudanese in Mexico, but observed that they were more robust than the French forces (Ṭūsūn 2007 [1933]: 17). He speculated that poor diet, not disease, had weakened them – a claim Hill and Hogg endorsed by suggesting that the soldiers may have been suffering from a niacin deficiency caused by the prevalence of maize in their Mexican diets and the absence of North African millet (Hill and Hogg 1995: 29). Writing in 1976, Daniel Crecelius and Anahid Crecelius, two American scholars who consulted records in Cairo and Paris, also accepted the French claims, writing that the “Nile troops. . .proved their worth by their amazing resistance to the endemic diseases which decimated the European[s]. . .” (Crecelius and Crecelius 1976: 77). Not one case of yellow fever occurred among them, they continued, during the outbreak of 1863 that struck the Europeans – an outbreak that killed half of the French troops in Veracruz that spring: “They were even immune to diseases that plagued native Mexican troops!” They may have been thinking here of cholera, which also flared up at this time (see also Hill and Hogg 1995: 32). In 1995, Hill and Hogg claimed the Sudanese soldiers' immunity as fact when they wrote that “The Sudanese were brought to Mexico because of their hoped for (and later happily confirmed) resistance to yellow fever” (Hill and Hogg 1995: x–xi)

What scholars know about the history of health in the Sudan makes these claims seem unlikely, even far-fetched. The Sudanese soldiers were not impervious to tropical diseases. The Egyptian military authorities had registered this in the 1820s, soon after the Turco-Egyptian conquest, when nearly half the Sudanese whom they had seized as slaves during raids, and whom they sent on forced marches to Egypt, died from endemic diseases that apparently included yellow fever as well as plague, malaria and typhus (Sikainga 2000: 202). As a mosquito-borne disease, yellow fever (along with dengue fever, malaria and filariasis), remained a cause for concern (and a focus of research) in the Sudan as the 20<sup>th</sup> century began, by which time the British had become the dominant colonial power (Elhadd 2020).

## Real Men, Not Lions and Crocodiles

The French military authorities reported that the Sudanese soldiers experienced a “raging case of homesickness” throughout their entire Mexican venture (Crecelius and Crecelius 1976: 80, 85). It surely had not helped that no one had bothered to tell them at the outset, as they were propelled into Mexico, where they were going, and

why (Nūr 2007: 6–7). The six-week journey from Alexandria on an overcrowded ship was itself traumatic. For some, it marked the first time they had ever *seen* the sea, much less travelled on it (Hill and Hogg 1995: 22).

As early as 1864, the soldiers submitted a petition to the French authorities in Mexico demanding their return to Egypt. Brushing off their complaints as a reflection of their unfamiliarity with French ways and military discipline, the French authorities considered punishing the Sudanese soldiers for insubordination but decided just to ignore their petition because they were doing good work – and because the French were reluctant to let the Sudanese go unless Egypt sent them more “blacks” (Crecelius and Crecelius 1976: 80–81).

The soldiers initially understood neither French nor Spanish. They also struggled to make sense of the Algerians, from whom the French sought help with Arabic translation (Crecelius and Crecelius 1976: 76; Machell 1896, Part 2: 185). Even under optimal circumstances, Sudanese and Algerian dialects would have been dramatically different. Then, too, many of the Algerians were not native speakers of Arabic but rather came from Berber (Amazigh-speaking) backgrounds (Hill and Hogg 1995: 34–35). Most of the Sudanese soldiers were only *starting* to learn Arabic; they had come from diverse communities of Dinka, Nuer, and Nuba among others, where the Egyptian Army raided for slaves, and were relatively recent recruits (Hill and Hogg 1995: 21). Moreover, the Arabic the Sudanese soldiers used in the Egyptian Army would have been a military *lingua franca*, a work in progress that evolved into what linguists now call “Juba Arabic”, after the 19<sup>th</sup> century White Nile garrison town that is now the capital of South Sudan (Johnson 2009: 112–31; Manfredi and Petrollino 2013: 54–65).

Despite their homesickness and difficulties with communicating, the Sudanese soldiers did critical work in Mexico. They guarded the road and railhead that linked Veracruz to Mexico City and ensured safe passage of the mail in between – work that led them into frequent skirmishes with Mexican resisters. They protected important people – the Empress Carlota, for example, and a Vatican nuncio sent from Rome – as they crossed perilous terrain near the coast.

Strikingly, the Sudanese soldiers remained so close to Veracruz (travelling about 30 kilometres inland at the most to positions in Orizaba, Medellín and La Tejería) that they never set eyes on Mexico City (which was about 400 kilometres away).<sup>19</sup> The narrow geographical scope of their service and their absence from the capital probably explain why so few contemporary observers, and later historians,

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Ali Jifūn claimed vaguely that he and his fellow soldiers were in Puebla and Mexico City, but French military records do not support this assertion – a point that led Hill and Hogg to question the reliability of ‘Ali Jifūn’s account, and to suggest that “the old man embroidered his narrative to tell a good story.” (Machell 1896, Part 3: 327–28; Hill and Hogg 1995: 50).

remarked on their presence. An exception once again was the prisoner of war Francisco de Paula Troncoso, who saw them near Veracruz in June 1863. “Finally,” he wrote in his diary, “. . . we reached La Tejeria, where we were received by the wild Egyptians. These are some 150 Negros who, they say, were presented as a gift by the Viceroy of Egypt to the Emperor Napoleon III – what a beautiful present! They are all black, young, very slim and very tall, without military training and as fierce as the crocodiles of their native land” (Hill and Hogg 1995: 45).

The French military authorities sometimes described the Sudanese soldiers as animals, too, in a tone of wonder akin to how British imperialists of the era marvelled over other “martial races” like the Punjabi Sikhs and Nepalese Gurkhas (Streets 2004). In an 1864 letter to the French Ministry of War, for example, the Commander-in-Chief of the French forces described a battle involving the Sudanese soldiers, “whose spirit does not permit them to allow any prisoner to live. . . .” They shone, he wrote, with an ardour that he had never witnessed before. “Their eyes alone spoke their feelings; their bravery was amazing, incredible; they were not men, but lions. . . .”<sup>20</sup>

The fierceness of the Sudanese soldiers may have reflected the violence of their lives prior to Mexico. They had survived enslavement and enlistment into the Egyptian Army and being cut off abruptly from their homelands, families and original linguistic and religious communities. They had faced many battles and traumas. The Egyptian Army and Turco-Egyptian regime, like the subsequent Anglo-Egyptian forces and the associated British-dominated regime, fostered and abetted this culture of casual brutality (Gordon 2019: 65–100; Vaughan 2015).

We can appreciate their lives as real people – not “crocodiles” and “lions” – by turning to the testimony of ‘Alī Jifūn, the soldier who told his story to the British captain Percy Machell in 1896. In his preface to his oral history, Machell called ‘Alī Jifūn, in his pre-Muslim, pre-Egyptian Army days, a “naked savage”, and yet ‘Alī Jifūn’s confidence comes through the account as he asserts his self-worth and dignity.

“I was born at Fashoda, on the White Nile [around] the year 1836,” ‘Alī Jifūn told Machell. His people, non-Muslims of the Shilluk community, had their own sense of cosmology and ethics. The Shilluk believed in a great power, ‘Alī Jifūn explained, “Go-ôk” (Juok), who had made the world and placed people in it (Machell, 1896, Part 1: 33).<sup>21</sup> His Shilluk forebears and kin were “law-abiding people,” among whom “a high standard of morality prevailed,” such that marriage was a permanent status with no options for divorce or polygamy. And yet his early life, as he described it,

<sup>20</sup> Translated in Kirk (1941: 123). See also: Machell (1896, Part 1: 31); ‘Umar Ṭūsūn ([1933] 2007: 19).

<sup>21</sup> On the Shilluk religion and the Great Power or “Juok”, see Seligman (1931: 1–21).

involved incessant raiding and counter-raiding with neighbouring people, amounting to chronic, low-grade war.

“My name in my own country was Lwaldeed [Lualdit],” ‘Alī Jifūn continued. “I was twenty-three years old. . . married and having a daughter of three or four years of age”. One day, he recounted, he left on a raid to take cattle from the nearby Baggara Arab Muslim nomads. The Baggara raided first, wounding and capturing him. They tied him to a yoke attached to an ox, forced him to march for days to El Obeid in Kordofan, and beat him with whips when he faltered. “I understood,” ‘Alī Jifūn said, “that I was handed over to the Government [meaning the Turco-Egyptian colonial regime] as part of the Baggara’s annual tax which they paid in cattle or slaves. . .” (Machell 1896, Part 1: 39–40). He did not explain when and how his name changed to ‘Alī, or the details of his induction into Islam through the military. His narrative simply implies that his life as Lualdit ended at the moment of capture.

In the years that followed, ‘Alī Jifūn served with the Egyptian Army all over Sudan, from Kordofan to Massawa, in what is now Eritrea, on the Red Sea Coast, fighting in raids and reprisals. In one battle in the Nuba Mountains, he recalled, the people of Taqali repulsed the Egyptian Army soldiers so successfully, using only spears and rocks thrown from higher positions, that three-quarters of the Egyptian Army soldiers died (Machell 1896, Part 2: 176).

On another occasion ‘Alī Jifūn described, he and his fellow soldiers raided a non-Muslim community in the Nuba Mountains, taking adult male captives for the army, selecting women as “barrack servants” and then marching to El Obeid, where they sold the children and remaining women at auction (Machell 1896, Part 2: 182). Immediately after this trip to El Obeid, they attacked a community of Baggara Arabs who had been resisting the regime’s demands. The soldiers seized 800 horses, and then exploded mixtures of gunpowder, pepper, salt and spices near caves to force the people hiding inside to come out. The Baggara, like the Nuba, fought back. Five hundred men of the Egyptian Army had begun these two raids against the Nuba and the Baggara, ‘Alī Jifūn noted, but by the time they were done, only two hundred soldiers survived (Machell 1896, Part 2: 182–83).

‘Alī Jifūn’s descriptions fit the contours of Turco-Egyptian colonialism in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Sudan as historians have described it. The regime’s policies entailed large-scale taxation, raids, forced labour (in the Sudanese case through the enslavement of non-Muslim peoples) and mass military conscription (Spaulding 1982: 1–20; Björkelo 1989). Deeply and increasingly unpopular, these policies later generated support in the early 1880s for Muhammad Ahmad, “the Mahdi,” the millenarian jihadist leader who vowed to restore justice as Judgment Day approached. The Mahdist movement began as a simple uprising, although its leaders quickly organised troops and staged successful battles until they ousted the Turco-Egypt-

tian regime in Khartoum in 1885 (Holt 1970; Zulfo 1980). While historians usually describe the Mahdist movement as a revolution, it also involved a civil war among Muslims, and had strong sectarian dimensions. It emphasised competing versions of what an Islamic social order should be, while distinguishing Mahdists from Sudanese adherents of Sufi *ṭariqas* like the Khatmiyya, whose leaders favoured ties with Egypt and became the Mahdists' arch-rivals (Voll 1969).

In retrospect, 'Alī Jifūn's testimony hints at some of the tensions that created the Mahdist resistance. He noted, for example, his own perceptions of the foreignness of the regime, as expressed through the Egyptian Army, when he told Machell: "Our officers at this time were all Turks, including Kurds, Circassians and Albanians. . . ." 'Alī Jifūn also testified to the enormous cultural diversity within Sudan, a factor which then and later complicated efforts to govern. He remarked that upon his enlistment, "I found Sudanese of every kind among my comrades, but no Shilluk [like me]" (Machell 1896, Part 2: 176). His memoir certainly points to the role the Egyptian Army played in building a broadly Muslim, Arabic-speaking, and, in many ways, pan-Sudanese identity by forcing diverse people together.

After describing his initial participation in Egyptian Army raids in the Sudan in around 1860, 'Alī Jifūn noted that the Egyptian Army sent orders directing his battalion to march into Egypt, towards the Mediterranean coast. There, one day, army officials rounded him up along with more than four hundred other men – mostly soldiers, but also some random "blacks" they found working as doormen (*bawwābs*) and servants, or walking on the street (Hill and Hogg 1995: 22) – and stuck them all on the ship bound for Mexico. If his estimated birth year (around 1836) is correct, then 'Alī Jifūn would have been roughly twenty-seven years old when he went to Mexico, and would have been an Egyptian Army soldier, and therefore a Muslim, for just three or four years by this time.

In 'Alī Jifūn's memoir, which appeared in four article-length instalments, only about seven out of forty-six pages cover his service in Mexico. He spent fewer than four years in North America, and longer periods afterwards at different posts in Sudan, including sixteen years on the Sudanese-Ethiopian border alone. His grasp of Mexican affairs seems fuzzy, although we might say the same about his account of Turco-Egyptian policies, which he presents as a series of troop movements and raids for taxation purposes.

On why Sudanese soldiers went to Mexico, he remarked only, ". . . [W]e gathered that France had claims against the Mexican Government which the latter could not or would not admit, and that consequently France and other European Powers had combined to assert their rights by force." They sent for them, he went on to explain, because they were used to living in a hot climate, unlike the French soldiers. He acknowledged the role of sickness, noting that the French soldiers in Mexico frequently fell ill with yellow fever and dysentery, but that "at first we



too suffered a great deal” (Machell 1896, Part 2: 185). ‘Alī Jifūn understood the role of his battalion in Mexico to be not just guarding transport lines, but also uprooting the “bands of brigands with which they were infested” (Machell 1896, Part 2: 185).

‘Alī Jifūn described fighting a counter insurgency in Mexico in ways that recalled Turco-Egyptian techniques in Sudan. But what the Egyptian Army allowed, even encouraged, in Sudan, did not always pass muster in Mexico. In April 1863, for example, a local sniper shot and killed a Sudanese sentry in Medellín, prompting six of the soldier’s comrades to retaliate against the shooter’s village by killing eight Mexican civilians – men, women and children. The French military court-martialled the soldiers, found them guilty of murder and sentenced them to prison terms and hard labour (Hill and Hogg 1995: 46–49).

These six cases aside, Sudanese soldiers generally did so well in Mexico that Napoleon III asked Egypt for more in 1865. Sa’īd Pasha had died by this time, so it was the Khedive Ismā’īl who sent an order for troops to the Egyptian garrison in Kassala, east of Khartoum. Conditions in Kassala were so bad, however, that, according to the historian Ahmad Sikainga, the soldiers there stood poised on “the verge of civil war,” ready to rise up against the Turco-Egyptian regime, which had subjected them to “constant abuse and degradation” and had left them “without rations and pay for months.” “As a result,” Sikainga continued, “the soldiers tried to eke out a living by robbery, bribery, slave dealing and other illegal means,” while yielding the largest share of their loot to officers, who expected to receive it (Sikainga 2000: 213). Without explicitly rejecting Hill and Hogg’s central argument – namely, that the Egyptian Army treated the Sudanese as esteemed soldiers, as a “corps d’élite” (Hill and Hogg 1995) – Sikainga maintained that the Egyptians treated the soldiers abysmally, like the military slaves that they continued to be.

No one in Kassala had heard any news whatsoever about the soldiers who had left for Mexico two years earlier. This is also an important point to make, because when news spread among the soldiers that the Egyptian Army might send them to Mexico, too, they mutinied.<sup>22</sup> Egyptian Army officers responded by massacring about 1,600 men from its ranks, mostly Dinka from Southern Sudan, and executing those who survived. All told, about 2,000 Sudanese men died violently in Kassala in 1865 because of a *rumour* that the army might send them to Mexico. The deaths did not stop there. Officials dumped some of the mutineers in mass graves but allowed the corpses of many others to rot on the ground. Fevers then broke out, killing more people, including the garrison’s commander, Ḥasan Pasha the Albanian (Sikainga 2000: 213; Hogg and Holt 1995: 82–84). Later, the Egyptian authorities suppressed

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22 Douin (1933) cited in Sikainga, “Comrades in Arms,” (2000: 209).

news of the mutiny because they feared that it would discredit them if their French allies found out what had happened (Sikainga 2000: 213).

No more soldiers left Sudan for Mexico. By the time the Egyptian Army was ready to send soldiers, the U.S. Civil War had ended, American officials were threatening France with war if it persisted in “intervening” in Mexico and Napoleon III was already withdrawing his support for the empire of Maximilian and Charlotte, while also making plans for extracting French troops.

## The French Intervention, Mexican Warfare and Careers in the Sudan

The Sudanese soldiers who returned to Egypt received honours and promotions. As they passed through France on their way home, the French authorities held a ceremony for the battalion in Paris and made several of them Chevaliers of the Legion of Honour. A photograph in the Musée de l’Armée in Paris shows one of the recipients of this distinction, a soldier named ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Mūsā, posing for a studio portrait in his white uniform, wearing the Legion’s characteristic ribbons pinned to his chest (see Figure 7 below) (Sharkey, forthcoming).<sup>23</sup> While ‘Alī Jifūn was not one of the Legion of Honour recipients, he later stated that Napoleon III pinned a gold decoration on his chest, too, “*pour valeur et discipline*.” ‘Alī Jifūn also enjoyed a promotion, rising to become a company sergeant major (*bash-shawish*) (Machell 1896, Part 3: 327, 330).

The Egyptian Army celebrated the veterans in Alexandria, but then dissolved the battalion and scattered its members to posts in Sudan. ‘Alī Jifūn ended up with a unit in Massawa for four years, collecting taxes on the Red Sea salt trade. As for the others, Hill and Hogg tried to reconstruct their careers using limited Egyptian Army records but concluded sadly that “all but a few veterans from Mexico lived on in a condition of statistical and biographical oblivion” (Hogg and Holt 1995: 123). Even some recipients of the Legion of Honour disappeared from the records once they returned to Sudan (Ṭūsūn 2007: 81–82).

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<sup>23</sup> Musée de l’Armée (Paris), Centre de Documentation: Cabinet des Dessins, Estampes et Photographies, “Capitaine au Bataillon égyptien du corps expéditionnaire du Mexique, 1867.” This photograph bears the stamp of the Saint Edmé studio in Paris. It is contained in a leather-bound album of drawings, watercolours and paintings entitled “Uniformes de l’Armée d’Afrique.”



**Figure 7:** Capitaine au Bataillon égyptien du corps expéditionnaire du Mexique, 1867. © Musée de l'Armée, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

Hill and Hogg were able to find scattered details about some individuals. A “Major Salih Hijazi of Mexico,” they learned, participated in the Turco-Egyptian conquest of Darfur in 1873 and 1874; in the 1870s, a garrison of 190 officers and men who had been posted to Foweira (in what is now Uganda) “included 76 who had served with [Marshal] Bazaine [head of the French army] in Mexico.” At least three officers from the Sudanese veterans “defected” to the Mahdist side after 1881 (Hogg

and Holt 1995: 127–28). One of these defectors had received the French Legion of Honour: a man named Faraj ‘Azāzī, “a native of Jabal Taqali in the Nuba M[ountains]” (one of the places that ‘Alī Jifūn had described attacking after his enlistment into the Egyptian Army), “stolen as a child by slave raiders who sold him in Egypt” around 1849 (Hogg and Holt 1995: 156).

By the 1870s, the Sudanese soldiers were not the only veterans of wars involving Mexico to have served with the Egyptian Army in Sudan. About fifty American officers accepted appointments in the Khedive Ismā‘īl’s army as well, and served in North-East Africa from 1868 until 1878, when the Khedive’s bankruptcy forced their withdrawal. Scholars who have written about these Americans emphasise that they were veterans of the U.S. Civil War, and came from both the Union (abolitionist) and Confederate (pro-slavery) sides (Crabittès 1938; Hesseltine and Wolf 1961; Covey 2019). In fact, many of them had begun their military careers fighting in the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848 – the war that enabled the United States to expand its southwestern territories at Mexico’s expense, and strengthened Napoleon III’s resolve to attempt his own “great plan” in the region. One such veteran was William Wing Loring (1818–1886), a former Confederate who had lost an arm while fighting in Mexico City, and who participated in Egypt’s attempted conquest of Ethiopia in the mid-1870s.<sup>24</sup> Loring was based for part of his time in Massawa (Loring 1884), the same coastal town in what is now Eritrea where ‘Alī Jifūn served for many years. Whether from Confederate or Union backgrounds, the historian Eric Covey has recently argued, these American soldiers of fortune were often white supremacists who idealised Egypt, denigrated blacks, and welcomed the chance to assert U.S. influence in the Nile Valley at the expense of European imperial powers like France (Covey 2019: 132, 140, 144).

## Transnational Legacies

Looking back at the Sudanese soldiers who went to Mexico, we can trace several transnational histories. For a start, and most obviously, we can identify firm ties between Sudan and the area that seceded in 2011 to become South Sudan. Con-

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<sup>24</sup> In *The Blue and the Gray on the Nile* (1961), Hesseltine and Wolf cite the Mexican War service of many veterans in passing, for example on pp. 2, 4, 10, 12 and 19. They emphasise the Americans’ Civil War service instead, spinning a tale of national reconciliation and heroic postbellum collaboration among former Union and Confederate fighters who commonly promoted U.S. interests abroad.

joined parts of the historical “lands of the blacks” (*bilād al-sūdān*), the two Sudans had strong links to Egypt, not only because of the Nile River, their shared lifeline, but also because of the history of Turco-Egyptian colonialism and its practice of military slavery.

We can also trace connections with France through the French Intervention in Mexico, while also recognising a global history of ideas about race and medicine that played a significant role in attracting the Sudanese soldiers to North America. Judging from a letter the French Consul-General to the United States wrote in 1867, the French government may have hoped that the Sudanese soldiers – many of whom were able to speak French by the end of their Mexican service – would help increase French influence in Egypt (and presumably by extension in Sudan) once they returned (Douin 1933 v. 1: 348). Alas, this did not happen. The Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), which saw the capture of Napoleon III and the fall from grace of Marshal Bazaine (the former commander in Mexico), disrupted France’s grand plans abroad.

Connections between the Sudanese soldiers and Britain, the incipient imperial and colonial power in Sudan, began in the 1870s and continued through the Anglo-Egyptian conquest of 1898. While serving the Turco-Egyptian regime as Governor of Equatoria province in the late 1870s, the British general Charles Gordon encountered several Sudanese veterans of Mexico, and reportedly helped them replace the fading ribbons on the French medallions that they proudly continued to wear. Years later, in 1885, Gordon (who was by then Governor-General of the crumbling Turco-Egyptian Sudan) appointed a Mexico veteran and Legion of Honour recipient, Faraj Muḥammad (Pasha) al-Zaynī, as major-general (*liwāʿ*) in charge of land defences. Promoted to the rank of lieutenant-general (*farīq*), one step below commander-in-chief (*sirdār*), Faraj Muḥammad al-Zaynī claimed “the highest rank ever attained by a Sudanese slave soldier in the Egyptian Army” (Lamothe 2011: 95–96). At least four Sudanese veterans of Mexico died when the Mahdists captured Khartoum; they included Faraj Muḥammad al-Zaynī, whom the Mahdists took prisoner and killed. Years later, between 1896 and 1898, the veteran ‘Alī Jifūn, who was by then a *ṣāgh* (adjutant-major), and who considered himself an “old man” (Machell 1896, Part 3: 492), took part in the conquest that enabled Britain to assert *de facto* colonial control in the name of its ruling partnership, or “Condominium,” with Egypt.

‘Alī Jifūn died from an infection late in 1898 at around the age of sixty-two. Shortly before he died, however, he added one more role – one more claim to fame – to his career: he participated in the Fashoda Incident, in which Sudanese, Egyptian, British and French histories converged amid the European “scramble” for Africa.

The Fashoda Incident was a showdown between the French general Jean-Baptiste Marchand (1863–1934) (who had set off two years earlier from Loango, near the present-day border between Gabon and the Republic of the Congo), and Herbert Kitchener (1850–1916), British commander of the joint Anglo-Egyptian forces that had recently overthrown the Mahdist state. ‘Alī Jifūn, who by this time held the highest rank of any Sudanese soldier in the Egyptian Army as an adjutant major (*ṣāgh qūl aghāsī*, or *sagholaghasī*), joined the contingent that journeyed with Kitchener from Khartoum up the White Nile to thwart French claims (Lamothe 2011: 1). Their destination was Fashoda (now Kodok, in South Sudan), the birthplace of ‘Alī Jifūn, which Marchand had reached months earlier. By this time, Percy Machell, the British captain who recorded ‘Alī Jifūn’s life story, had departed, so we do not have ‘Alī Jifūn’s account of what happened next. In a history of Sudanese soldiers in the Anglo-Egyptian conquest, however, Ron Lamothe observes that ‘Alī Jifūn’s return to Fashoda after nearly forty years of military service in different lands must have been one of the most “improbable” and “incredible” homecomings for a Sudanese soldier of this era (Lamothe 2011: 55).

In Fashoda, the British aimed to counteract any agreement that Marchand had signed with the Shilluk ruler – anything that might jeopardise what Hill and Hogg called the “Egyptian reoccupation”, or rather Britain’s own colonial ambitions. ‘Alī Jifūn probably did some translating between his native Shilluk and his acquired Arabic, and perhaps drew on some knowledge of French and English, too. According to a British intelligence report, ‘Alī Jifūn, with another soldier named ‘Alī Aḥmad, witnessed the declaration by the Shilluk “king” that he had not signed a promise with the French. The Fashoda Incident ended when Marchand yielded to Kitchener, who continued to invoke Egypt’s prior claims while advancing Britain’s own.

With respect to the transnational connections that linked Sudanese history to Egypt, France and Britain in this era, the ties between the Sudan and the United States may have seemed somewhat slimmer at the time, but we should recall that civil wars in Mexico and the United States propelled the chain of events that led the Sudanese soldiers to Mexico, and later American soldiers to Sudan, through the common structure of the Egyptian Army. The paths of the Sudanese veterans and the American mercenaries undoubtedly crossed in the late 1860s and 1870s. For example, Charles Chaillé-Long of Maryland (1842–1917), who had fought for the Union army at the decisive U.S. Civil War Battle of Gettysburg (1863), recalled meeting many Sudanese soldiers in “Fatuka” (now Fort Patiko in Uganda), who loved to tell stories about their Mexico days. He noted, too, that the commanding officer at this station, a man called Baba Tuka, still wore his decoration from the French Legion of Honour (Chaillé-Long 1877: 75–76).

In South Sudanese imaginations, it appears that the significance of Sudanese-American connections has grown stronger in retrospect, judging from what Brendan

Tuttle, an anthropologist, learned while doing research in the garrison town of Bor in 2010. In an interview with an elderly woman from the “Nubi” community descended from military slaves, Tuttle learned that the “memory of those Sudanese taken to ‘America’ who had returned to tell it was still present in 2009–2010.” Bor people continued to talk about their forebears who had served in Mexico, and associated it with emigration to the United States, to “America”. This migration seemed so substantial that, according to another Bor interlocutor speaking in 2009, “half of the population of South Sudan, of the rising generation, is in America already” (Tuttle 2014: 96, 165).

The history of the Sudanese soldiers who went to Mexico did not end in 1867 when they evacuated Veracruz. Nor did it end after they returned to Egypt and the Sudan, even though most of them disappeared from the written records. Their experiences continued to rebound in ways that had consequences for Sudanese history during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup>, while also shaping popular imaginations among the soldiers’ heirs and successors in ways that still surface today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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Massimo Zaccaria

## Chapter 8

# *Bāsh-Būzūq* and Artillery Men: Sudan, Eritrea and the Transnational Market for Military Work (1885–1918)

## Introduction

The criticism that Sudanese historiography has been the victim of a form of “exceptionalism” (Sharkey, Vezzadini and Seri-Hersch 2015: 2–3) that has insulated it from the rest of the region could also easily be applied to Eritrea, a country whose history has been closely framed around the nation-state paradigm (Reid 2001). At a local level, this dual exceptionalism has translated into an inevitable mutual lack of interest between the histories of the two countries. Apart from Italy’s conquest of Kassala in 1894 – and its restitution in 1897 – and the infamous Bevin-Sforza Plan, which in 1949 was one step away from dismembering Eritrea by allocating parts of it to Sudan and Ethiopia, there have been very few occasions in which the two historiographies have entered into a dialogue, and the substantially extraneous way the relationship between Sudan and Eritrea is presented is striking. Even Rex S. O’Fahey’s (2001) attempt to draw attention to the abundant documentation on the history of Eritrea in the Sudanese archives did not enjoy an adequate follow-up. Yet there are many points of contact between the histories of Sudan and Eritrea, and all of them indicate the depth of the links between the two territories.

Against the background of the historical relations between Sudan and Eritrea – a subject that is still waiting to be fully investigated – this chapter starts out from the Sudanese presence in the Italian colonial army, with two main objectives: the first is a result of a need to identify areas that can join the two historiographies together in some kind of dialogue, and the second is to propose an interpretive framework that posits the history of Sudan and Eritrea in a broader dimension. It is not possible to transcend a purely national approach simply by summarising national histories: the trends and processes that require a broader brush so that their overarching implications can be understood must be identified. The history of work-related mobility often allows us to detect this connection between areas. In this chapter, following the example provided by Jan Lucassen and Erik-Jan Zürcher (Lucassen and Zürcher 1998; Zürcher 2013), the actions of soldiers are viewed as a form of labour with a powerful transnational dimension (Collins and Arielli 2013). In North-East Africa, and in particular Sudan and Eritrea, there is no shortage of

stories about the colonial troops from the various states (Scardigli 1996; Volterra 2005; Lamothe 2012; Ofcansky 2013; Vezzadini 2015), just as there is no lack of accounts of individual units or enlistment practices (Salih 2005; Volterra 2012), but the most favoured perspective is generally national, which creates the impression that the establishment of the various bodies was an authentic expression of the territories to which they belonged (Hill and Hogg 1995; Parsons 1999; Volterra 2005; Moyd 2014; Vezzadini 2015). For instance, from this perspective, the *Regio Corpo Truppe Coloniali* [hereafter RCTC] of Eritrea was presumably made up of Eritrean soldiers, just as the Somalian RCTC was made up of Somalis. However, the automatic transposition of categories such as a national army to Africa is problematic, and often risks creating ambiguity. As Jan-Bart Gewald reminds us, a more in-depth analysis offers a more nuanced picture, since “the bulk of armies in Africa’s history have never been national armies”, hence the need for an analysis from a transnational studies perspective in order to obtain a better understanding of the characteristics of military work in North-East Africa (Parsons 1999: 3; Gewald 2009: 105). An analysis of the composition of the various colonial armies in the Horn of Africa in the period between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries reveals very diverse trajectories that problematise their presumed national homogeneity in terms of troop composition. An examination of the regulations of the Italian colonial troops is a particular case in point: for the Eritrean RCTC, the 1893 Regulations specified that up to one-third of recruits could be enlisted into its ranks from outside the colony (Italia, Ministero della Guerra 1893; Vitale 1960, 1: 96). The Somali case is even more significant: the Italian observers recognised that the Somalis had undoubted qualities of courage that they considered to be compromised by a lack of discipline and a religious “fanaticism” that long hindered their inclusion among the ranks of the colonial troops. For this reason, the first Regulations of the Somalian RCTC (1906) established that 70% of the recruits should be of Arab origin (that is, Yemenites), 10% Somalis, preferably from the British Somaliland Protectorate and the Majeerteen Sultanate, and the remaining 20% of “other stocks” (Vitale 1960, 1: 96). Similar data emerge from a statistical analysis of the composition of French colonial troops in Djibouti, where “Soudanais”, *Tigréens*, *Oromos* and *Amharas* were reported to be among the ranks (Jolly 2016: 106). During the First World War, recruits from British Somaliland represented 66% to 82% of the force and, as late as 1947, the Commander of the *Côte française des Somalis* troops boasted of having an actual “*Légion étrangère*” (Jolly 2016: 104–105) in his service.



**Figure 8:** Alessandro Comini, Gunner Company (c. 1912–1913).<sup>1</sup>

The armed forces played a central role in the architecture of colonial power. Without its coercive power, administrations had no way of enforcing their authority over a territory (Killingray 1986; Reid 2012; Moyd 2014). Establishing and maintaining troops was therefore a key objective for all colonial powers. As can readily be deduced from an analysis of the various colonial budgets, huge human and material resources were allocated to the achievement of this goal. In Eritrea, the army was the most important economic sector and the most accessible source of employment for at least two generations of Eritreans. Additionally, military work was one of the major engines of social mobility, allowing its members to strengthen their position and social status.

By identifying and illustrating the military labour market in North-East Africa and then highlighting the role the Sudanese played in it, we can also solve another problem, this time one that is extensively debated among Africanist historians (Klein 2011), and, in particular among those specialising in Sudan: the question of military slavery, an old practice with deep roots in the history of Sudan (Prunier

<sup>1</sup> Author's private collection.

1992; Sikainga 2000: 24). For many historians of Sudan, these men's slave past influenced their histories heavily even after they had been freed, preventing them from being truly liberated. At the mercy of various powers, as Aḥmad Alawad Sikainga writes, "slave soldiers were inherited by the successive regimes that ruled the Sudan" (Sikainga 2000: 26). Douglas H. Johnson – to whom we owe some of the most interesting studies on military slavery in North-East Africa – recalls how a military slave identity "persisted, even if the state did not, and even the state changed [. . .]. It is this very persistence of identification with a patron which makes it possible to claim that the institution continued under colonial rule, even when the formal term and legal status of 'slave' did not" (Johnson 1989: 76–77). Sudanese soldiers enjoyed an ambiguous form of freedom (Johnson and Archer 1988: 147). Other scholars, such as Ronald M. Lamothe, have preferred to make distinctions: although Lamothe admitted that the question of defining the status of these persons was quite challenging and complex, in his view a slave soldier's condition was not a permanent one, and tended to disappear as their military role evolved (Lamothe 2012: 45–46). Might analysing military work by focusing on its transnational dimension allow us to better understand the degree of effective autonomy and agency of the men who joined the colonial armies? To clarify this, in addition to using both published and unpublished sources and referring to the existing literature on the military history of North-East Africa, this chapter uses statistical information extrapolated from the staffing tables of the various colonial armies: documents which, given the importance of the data, often offer a close look at the geographical origins of enlisted men.<sup>2</sup>

The first part of the chapter considers the military landscape in the Horn of Africa in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The second section focuses on the Sudanese presence in the Italian army in the aftermath of the Italian landing at Massawa (1885), and then goes on to outline the geography of military work in North-East Africa, following the evidence of Sudanese employed in the various regional armies.

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<sup>2</sup> The documentation on Italian colonial troops is mainly kept at the Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore Esercito (Rome). Owing to the limited number of places available, this archive is not easily accessible. A precious summary of the preserved materials (38,247 digital images) is available thanks to the commendable work of Alessandro Volterra (2014). Most of the primary sources used in this chapter are held by the Archivio Eritrea of the Archivio Storico del Ministero Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (Rome), and the Regional Archive of Addi Qayyēh (Mendefera, Eritrea). English translation by the author.

## Adopting a Synchronic View

The unanimous opinion is that the Sudanese were highly esteemed for their martial qualities because they had modern training and good operational experience, and because they were a disciplined body accustomed to the use of firearms, which made them especially highly appreciated and very much sought after as soldiers (Vezzadini 2015: 210–214). The peak of their fame was reached when they were used in Mexico in the 1860s, and later during the Anglo-Egyptian re-conquest of Sudan (Hill and Hogg 1995; see also the chapter by Heather Sharkey in this volume). But in order to understand the excellent reputation and presence of Sudanese in various armies as the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century approached, we must consider at least two other equally important factors.

The first was Egypt's gradual loss of power on the international stage, especially in North-East Africa. The battle of Gundet (16 November 1875) and later the battle of Gura (7–9 March 1876) marked the end of Egypt's expansionist policy in the Horn of Africa. In the space of few years, under the weight of a series of severe military defeats and spiralling public debt, Egypt lost important parts of its territories and its independence to Great Britain, which became the hegemonic regional power. The cuts imposed by the *Caisse de la dette publique* (1876)<sup>3</sup> also affected the army, which saw its budget significantly slashed. The defeat at Tel-el-Kebir (September 1882)<sup>4</sup> led to the collapse of the Egyptian army, which was officially dissolved by the Khedive Tawfiq, who entrusted its reorganisation to Sir Evelyn Wood, who was *Sirdār* (Commander in Chief) of the new Egyptian Army from December 1882 to 1885 (Dunn 2013: 153). At the start of its reconstruction stage, the army's total strength was about 7,000, and its main function was to maintain internal order and protect its borders (Besant 1934: 162), but in subsequent years this number increased, and settled at around 12–13,000 men between 1889 and 1891<sup>5</sup> – an extremely small number if one considers that it had numbered nearly 130,000 men in 1832 (Fahmy 1997: 96). Operationally, after the failure of the Gordon Relief Mission (1884–1885, to help Charles Gordon, who had been isolated in Khartoum), the New Egyptian Army adopted an almost exclusively defensive position. With the Mahdist defeat at Tushki [Toski, Tushkah] (3 August 1889) and the subsequent

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3 Established on 2 May 1876, the Public Debt Commission was a joint international commission to control the finances and administration of Egypt. It was formed by Austria-Hungary, France, Great Britain and Italy. It was officially abolished on 17 July 1940.

4 During the battle (13 September 1882) the Egyptian forces, led by Aḥmad 'Urābī Pasha, were decisively defeated by the British Army. The battle enabled Britain to extend its control over Egypt.

5 As for 1889, Sikainga indicates a strength of 12,633 men (Sikainga 2000: 26), and for 1891 Martin W. Daly indicates 12–13,000 men (Daly 1997: 32).



failure of the plan to extend the revolt to Egypt, the situation on the southern frontier calmed down, as did Eastern Sudan. By the turn of the century, therefore, what had been one of North-East Africa's most powerful armies had undergone a major downsizing, and many of its men had been demobilised. However, this was only partially true for the Sudanese soldiers, who were considered to be the best fighting force in circulation, and whose recruitment was therefore especially courted. Between 1884 and 1888, five Sudanese battalions were formed (numbered from the IXth to the XIIIth), representing some thirty per cent of the Egyptian army (Lamothe 2012: 26–28). Further confirmation that the Sudanese battalions were elite units in the Egyptian army can be found in the conditions they were offered, which were particularly good in terms of food, clothing and weapons, while their wages were higher than those their Egyptian comrades received (Lamothe 2012: 73–78).

The downsizing and massive demobilisation of the Egyptian army took place in a context of high demand for military work by the other powers in the region. The Mahdist state (1885–1898) captured thousands of Egyptian soldiers, most of whom were integrated into the Mahdist forces. These slave soldiers coming from the Egyptian army were concentrated into separate units called *jihādiyya*, which were armed with rifles. To prevent them from leaving the country, Khalifa 'Abdullāhi imposed a general prohibition on "Blacks" from doing so (Lamothe 2012: 28; Sikainga 1996: 32). The emergence of the Mahdist state created an insurmountable obstacle between the regions of South Sudan and neighbouring countries, making it extremely difficult to gain access to what had been one of the main recruiting grounds for the Egyptian army. The second country in the region that began a profound reform of its armed forces was Ethiopia, which beginning in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century acquired a massive amount of firearms and tried to establish a permanent regular army (Caulk 1978; J. Dunn 1994). With no lack of men, Ethiopia sought to focus on attracting experts, among whom, as we shall see, were some Sudanese.

Starting in the early 1880s, Italians (Eritrea and Somalia), French (Territoire d'Obock and Dependencies, and later the Côte française des Somalis), English (Somaliland and Imperial British East Africa) and Germans (Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft, DOAG, German East Africa Corporation) made their appearance in the region. Forced to operate in often especially inhospitable environments, these European countries all quickly opted to create corps of colonial troops mainly made up of African soldiers. With this surge in the need for military personnel trained in the European discipline and the use of firearms, demand soon exceeded supply, creating the conditions for lively competition among the various armies seeking recruits. This meant that individuals with decent military experience had a good chance not only of finding employment in one of the security forces that were being formed but in some cases even being able to choose which force to enlist in. This meant moving, and crossing borders in search of the best employ-

ment conditions. Mobility and military work are closely related dimensions. The life stories of many soldiers and their service status paint a picture of great mobility and actual diasporic and transnational lives (Gewald 2009: 108). First, as in the case Elena Vezzadini studied, there were movements within a particular territory and the mobility of Egyptian officers in Sudan (Vezzadini 2015: 225–231), but there was also transnational mobility. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Egyptian army operated outside the country's borders on several occasions, and so it was that Sudanese soldiers formed part of the Egyptian contingent that was sent to Greece in 1823, and two Sudanese regiments were sent to Hijaz in 1835, and later to Syria (Helal 2010: 35–38). In 1853, Governor 'Abbās Pasha made 15,000 men available to the Ottoman army in the Crimean War, including some Sudanese (Dunn 2013: 18). However, the best-known foreign mission of Sudanese troops was undoubtedly the one that took 446 Sudanese soldiers to fight alongside the French in the Mexican war in 1863.

The available biographies of these soldiers all provide a picture of great geographical mobility, as was the case with Farrāj Ṣādiq, who, in addition to Sudan, went to Southern Egypt and Eritrea during his military career, and later, in 1901, travelled to Rome, Milan, Turin, Vienna and Budapest as a servant of a Hungarian doctor (Hope 1951). 'Alī Jifūn, another Sudanese officer whose biography has survived (Percy 1896; Lamothe 2012: 19–21; Sharkey in this volume), was in Sudan, Egypt, Eritrea, Mexico and France, while during his ten-year military career, 'Abdallāh 'Adlān moved between Sudan, Egypt, Eritrea and Ethiopia (Bredin 1961). While in the past foreign service had been determined and mediated by the Egyptian army, however, in this new situation many of these men became entrepreneurs, often deciding to enlist in a particular colonial army on the basis of personal considerations. The level of autonomy was therefore significantly greater, although it was not absolute.

## ***Bāsh-Būzūq* and Artillery Men**

The dynamics and life trajectories we have just illustrated emerge clearly from an analysis of the initial stages of Italy's domination of Eritrea. The Italian Expeditionary Force, made up of 800 soldiers and 40 officers, left Naples on 17 January 1885 under the command of Colonel Tancredi Saletta “for an unknown destination”, and arrived in Massawa on 5 February 1885.<sup>6</sup> Thus began the decisive push for the conquest of the territories that in 1890 were known as the “*Colonia Eritrea*”.

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<sup>6</sup> Another 100 sailors aboard the *Castelfidardo*, commanded by Trucco, attacked and disarmed the Beilul garrison. As early as October 1884, Sir Evelyn Baring (later Lord Cromer) had made it known

As soon as they disembarked, the Italians found themselves facing an Egyptian garrison of a regular unit of about 250 men, a *buluch et taadib* – that is, a correctional company, made up of soldiers who had received disciplinary sentences (Grosso 1931: 495) – which in turn was supported by about 1,000 *bāsh-büzūq*.<sup>7</sup> The garrison offered no resistance. Much more pragmatically, while waiting for Rome and Cairo to resolve the situation, the Egyptian troops continued to garrison the territory in the name of the Khedive, while the Italians did the same in the name of the king of Italy. Starting on 5 February 1885 Massawa began to wake up under two flags, and works on Italian colonial history refer to this period as the Italo-Egyptian condominium.

Arriving in the midst of colonial troops without any experience, the Italians quickly understood how essential it was to proceed with local enlistment so that some of the more onerous routine tasks could be delegated. While waiting to deal with the delicate task of forming their own colonial corps, the quickest and most practical solution seemed to be to recruit some of the men that formally served the Egyptians. On 30 April 1885, therefore, the first 100 *bāsh-büzūq* were recruited under the command of Sangiak (Major) Hassan Aga Osman, an Albanian from Jannina, who had formerly been their commander with the Egyptians (Scardigli 1996: 16). The conditions offered by the Italians – wages, discipline, uniforms, etc. – were the same as the Egyptian had provided (Scardigli 1996: 16). Enlistment was voluntary, and the main incentive was the attractive conditions of service.

On 2 December 1885, “with a small coup d’état” (Mondaini 1927: 44), General Carlo Genè put an end to the singular Italo-Egyptian condominium: the Egyptian troops left Massawa, and all the *bāsh-büzūq* who were still in their service moved to the Italians. At the end of the year, there were 927 *bāsh-büzūq* in the service of

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that the British government “would be happy” if Italy settled in Massawa. This position was also reiterated by the British Foreign Minister.

<sup>7</sup> The name means “hotheads”. The Dutch traveller Juan Maria Schuver, who travelled in Anatolia before arriving in Sudan and Ethiopia, translated it to mean “his head is irregular”: that is, “his head (his chief or officer) was not regularly appointed by the Sultan, but acquired his position by recruiting soldiers independently on his own terms.” See Schuver 1996: 8. By extension, it also means irregular light infantry.

According to historian Marco Scardigli, “the bash-buzuk were organised into *ortù* of 500 men commanded by a *sangiak* or *serbayade* with one or more helpers (*wachil* or *uachil*). The *ortù* was divided into 5 companies of 100 men under the command of a *jusbasci* or a *bimbasci*. The company in turn was divided into four platoons (*buluk*) of 25 men under the command of a *buluk-basci*: these Turkish terms and the same names of the units would survive under the Italians, demonstrating an affiliation of the colonial troops from our army with the *bash-buzuk* and also proving of how the very idea of colonial troops was born Massawa, starting with the lexicon to be used” (Scardigli 1996: 13).

Italy, divided into two horde, one internal, consisting of 200 men with garrison and public security functions, and the other external, with defence duties. Recruitment of *bāsh-būzūq* continued in the years that followed, and by June 1887 their numbers had risen to about 2,000 (Grosso 1931: 495).<sup>8</sup> Referring to the origin of these men, General Saletta wrote to the Ministry of War: “the Basci-buzuk come largely from the districts of Sudan and the African side of the Red Sea, although there are also not a few Abyssinians among them. They are generally recruited from the lowest classes of the population, especially porters or idlers” (Scardigli 1996: 15). There was a tangible Sudanese presence among these troops from the beginning. In the two *halai* (battalions) of the outer horde, the 5th *ṭābūr* (company) was entirely made up of Sudanese.<sup>9</sup> A new acceleration in enlistments took place in 1888, when General Baldissera, a staunch supporter of the use of indigenous troops, was appointed as Commander Superior in Africa. Baldissera reorganised the existing departments and transformed the irregular militia into a regular army (Volterra 2012: 60), proceeding with new enlistments. In his report on colonial troops, Baldissera indicated the “races” to be preferred for enlistment: Assaorta and Sudanese were the best, followed by the Abyssinians, Danakils and Hababs (Scardigli 1996: 42). As for the Sudanese, their ancient hostility towards Ethiopians – of which the last episode in chronological order was the battle of al-Gallabat on 9 March 1889, where Yohannes IV, the King of Kings of Ethiopia, had met his death (Seri-Hersch 2009) – and physical prowess were evaluated positively.

In June 1889, a general reorganisation of the army was carried out in Eritrea. The *bāsh-būzūq* Corps was dissolved and the first regular indigenous troops were formed into an integral part of the army using the best elements. As of 1 July 1889, there were 95 officers and 3,265 men (Vitale 1960, 1: 127). An enlistment notice was published every year and deliberately circulated in neighbouring countries, on some occasions seeming to attract aspiring recruits to Eritrea from relatively distant territories, to the extent that there were even reports of the presence of “Niam-Niam” (Zande) among the men of the RCTC.<sup>10</sup>

The Italian army also equipped itself with a unit that was intended to be made up exclusively of Sudanese. Established in October 1888, the first artillery battery was ordered, with 6 pieces, 5 officers and 169 men (Stella 2005: 9). From the very beginning, the idea was to recruit only Sudanese personnel for the batteries. Of course, the artillery unit found an inaccessible terrain on the Ethiopian plateau

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<sup>8</sup> On 1 July 1885 there were only 191 *bāsh-būzūq* in the service of the Italians, but by the end of 1885 their numbers had risen to 930.

<sup>9</sup> It is noteworthy that most of the terms and ranks adopted by the Italians had an Ottoman-Egyptian origin.

<sup>10</sup> G. B. Raimondo 1901: 85–86 quoted in Volterra 2012: 64.

made up of steep valleys and precipices that hindered the movements of troops and supplies. The artillery was only able to make a limited contribution in such an environment, and had to be content with providing mostly support and protection to the troops (Vitale 1960, 1: 27). An Italian colonial officer with substantial field experience and a keen passion for history wrote that artillery was “. . . the weapon of cautious action and cold immobility in danger” (Vitale 1960, 1: 89). The gunners had to be disciplined, precise, quick and synchronised in their movements, and to demonstrate a cold contempt for danger, but above all they had to have a robust physique, capable of withstanding the fatigue associated with positioning and loading the pieces on mostly rough and steep terrain. These characteristics were very far from what were considered to be the distinctive traits of Eritrean soldiers, who were described by colonial sources as long-limbed, slender and lean, with reduced muscle mass and a nervous temperament (Vitale 1960, 1: 80). When comparing the Sudanese and Eritrean soldiers, Ferdinando Martini, who had visited Eritrea in 1891 as a member of the Inquiry Commission in Eritrea, wrote:

Well, the Abyssinian throws himself into the fray with great ardour: he throws himself into it, so to speak, “with his eyes shut” and his manner of fighting was defined, you know, as “a forward flight”; but as for his endurance, there is not too much to count on. The Sudanese, on the other hand, has less enthusiasm, less impetus, but remains under fire for as long as it lasts, motionless as granite (Martini 1895: 86–87).

Four years later, General Staff Colonel Giovanni Battista Pittaluga made more or less the same remarks in a confidential report on the RCTC of Eritrea, adding a note on their loyalty that sounds decidedly racist today: “. . . with an imposing appearance, a very correct demeanour; a reflective and subdued expression. My impressions were confirmed and illustrated by the battery officers, who assured me that the Sudanese were very strong in manoeuvres, unaware of their valour, attentive, the way faithful dogs can be at signs from their beloved master”.<sup>11</sup> According to the colonial literature, therefore, the Sudanese made ideal artillery soldiers because they were calmer and more robust, and because it was better for the army to entrust the guns to men who had no ties to Ethiopia. The Italians therefore also viewed the Sudanese as a particularly sought-after and appreciated martial race (Streets 2004). For this reason, the 1893 Regulations advised assigning artillery pieces “almost exclusively to young Sudanese . . .” (Vitale 1960, 1: 96).

Being a technical, sophisticated expensive weapons system, artillery needed highly-trained men. In addition to loading personnel, pointers, goniometer opera-

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<sup>11</sup> Giovanni Battista Pittaluga, *Alcune note del viaggio fatto dal Colonnello di Stato Maggiore Cav. Pittaluga nell'Eritrea dal 12 settembre al 16 dicembre 1895*, Museo del Risorgimento di Milano, Biblioteca Archivio del Risorgimento, Archivio di Storia Contemporanea 121, cartella no. 26673, 9.

tors and heliographers were required in order to fire a gun. At a regional level, the Sudanese had been the first to be trained in the use of artillery thanks to the Egyptians, and had gained a reputation as expert gunners. Rumours reached the Italians that these were precisely the reasons that had prompted Negus Yohannes to entrust his artillery pieces to Sudanese. During the battle of Metemma (9–10 March 1889) between the Mahdists and the Ethiopian army, two Sudanese deserted, and informed the Mahdists of Yohannes's death, thus bringing about the final Mahdist victory. These same rumours also had it that among the gunners hired by Menelik there were Sudanese who had previously been in the service of the Italians.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 9:** Alessandro Comini, Artillery Fire (c. 1900s).<sup>13</sup>

Vied for between the Egyptians, the Italians and the Ethiopians, Sudanese artillerymen were a rare commodity. In 1893, in the first Eritrean mountain battery, only

<sup>12</sup> Speech by Arturo Galletti Di Cadilhac, Camera dei Deputati, *Atti Parlamentari*, XIXth Legislature, 1<sup>st</sup> session, 6 December 1895, 2879.

<sup>13</sup> Author's private collection.

71 of the 116 men who formed it were Sudanese,<sup>14</sup> and there was an even smaller number of them in the second battery (46 out of 115)<sup>15</sup>; however, even though in point of fact there was never a prevalence of Sudanese, the mountain artillery nevertheless retained an overwhelmingly Muslim majority.<sup>16</sup>

During the long campaign for the Italian conquest and re-conquest of Libya, the Eritrean RCTC batteries were also called upon to make their contribution. With the establishment of the 3<sup>rd</sup> battery (1913) and the 4<sup>th</sup> battery (1917), Sudanese artillerymen were employed in Libya (Cona 1929: 185–186), where they took charge of training the first Libyan artillerymen (the first Libyan battery was made up of a section of the 1<sup>st</sup> indigenous Eritrean battery) (Vitale 1960, 1: 134). The first Sudanese casualties on the Libyan front were also recorded in the same period: Attai Ibrahim from Gadarif, who served in the 4<sup>th</sup> Eritrean RCTC battalion, died in Libya on 18 December 1913, and in accordance with the regulations, the authorities gave instructions for his family to be informed, sending them the deceased's belongings and the compensation payable in the event of death while in service.<sup>17</sup>

When the Italians landed in Massawa, they did not limit themselves to enlisting the *bāsh-būzūq* they found there. Their attitude was in a certain sense proactive, and having identified the Sudanese as one of the objectives of their recruitment campaigns, they tried to go where this flow of recruits seemed to originate, namely Egypt. The recruitment operation was managed by two Italians who knew Egypt well. The first was Colonel Giacomo Bartolomeo Messedaglia (1846–1893), who had been “*mudir del Dar Fur*” (governor of the Turco-Egyptian Darfur Province) from May to December 1878 and was now a colonel in the Egyptian army. The second “fixer” was Major Carlo Sanminiatelli Zabarella, military attaché in Cairo. It was Messedaglia and Sanminiatelli who had made a wealth of precious information on the Sudanese units in the Egyptian army available to the Ministry of War (Grosso 1931: 498), and so it was they whom Prime Minister Francesco Crispi asked in September 1888 to enlist at least 500 “brave and robust” men between the ages of 17 and 30.<sup>18</sup>

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14 Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale [hereafter ASDMAE], Archivio Eritrea [hereafter AE] 152, “Studi e proposte, 1o Batteria da Montagna, Keren, 8 June 1893”.

15 ASDMAE, AE 152, “Studi e proposte, 2a Batteria da Montagna”.

16 As Alessandro Volterra has pointed out, it was only during the Ethiopian campaign of 1935–1936 that Christian soldiers were admitted to the artillery units. Under normal conditions, however, the indication was that preference was still given to Muslim elements. In 1936, General Alessandro Pirzio Biroli recalled in a letter addressed to all the commanders of the indigenous units: “As far as possible, the artillery should be assigned to indigenous people from the Muslim religion” (Volterra 2005: 160).  
17 E. Sailer to the Government of the Colony, Asmara, January 10, 1913, ASDMAE, AE 610.

18 F. Crispi to the General Diplomatic Agency at Cairo, Rome, 2 September 1888, quoted in Vitale 1960, 1: 177. The conditions of enrolment were detailed as follows: “firm renewable every year,

Crispi was disappointed almost immediately when Messedaglia and Sanmini-atelli telegraphed from Wadi Halfa that they would not be able to obtain more than a hundred men, since the British were strongly opposed to any form of recruitment, and so to unblock the situation it was decided to exert pressure directly on London.<sup>19</sup> From the Italian point of view it was “inamissible [sic] that while all sorts of facilitations were previously granted to us by the British government, today we should come up against unexplainable opposition and mistrust”.<sup>20</sup> Italy’s consternation and irritation stemmed from the fact that the British attitude had immediate consequences on the recruitment campaign that the Eritrea RCTC had just launched: it had set a target of 6,500 men, but ended up with only 2,000 (including 200 from Somalia).<sup>21</sup>

## Soldiering in East Africa

Italy’s chagrin is understandable in a certain sense. Its expansion in the Red Sea had taken place with British consent. At a diplomatic level, London had provided constant support by managing part of the difficult mediation with Egypt, which had sovereignty and control over the territories that were about to be occupied by the Italians on behalf of the Ottoman Empire. Right before the landing, British aid became very practical, as when during the Italian contingent’s stopover at Sawakin, the British handed a map of Massawa to Saletta, who, in the excitement of his departure, had left his copy behind in Italy. This made it hard for the Italians to interpret the sudden rejection over such a marginal issue as recruiting a few hundred men.

What the Italians perhaps could not have known was that with the appearance of the Mahdist state, Sudanese soldiers had become a rather rare commodity, and even after the re-conquest it was never easy to satisfy the request for *askari* (from the Arabic *‘askarī*, which means “soldier” or “military”), so much so that the Sudanese battalions were always under strength (Johnson 2000: 58; Vezzad-

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premium for engagement and dressing Lire 50, daily wage Lire 1.60 with progressive increase after 2 and 5 years firm; *buluc basci* Lire 2.70 and *sciumbasci* Lire 5 and Lire 80 and 200 bonuses respectively. Find them, enlist them and send them to Suez for squads”.

19 Ministry of War to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome, 11 September 1888, quoted in Vitale 1960, 1: 178.

20 Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Embassy in London, Rome, 16 September 1888, quoted in Vitale 1960, 1: 179.

21 A. Baldissera to Minister of War, Massawa, 15 October 1888, quoted in Vitale 1960, 1: 179.



ini 2015: 218–221). Italy's request for 500 men equalled the enlistment quota the British set each year, knowing full well that they were unlikely to reach it (Vezzadini 2015: 218–219).

Furthermore, the Italians were not the only ones to be interested in Sudanese recruits: a few months later, the Germans also asked the British for permission to recruit Sudanese. Germany had begun its expansion into East Africa in 1885, when the *Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft* (German East Africa Company) leased a territory in what is now Tanzania. In 1888, the Germans had to deal with the first case of organised resistance, the coastal rebellion of 1888–1890 (the so-called Abushiri Uprising or Arab Revolt) (Fabian 2013), during which they lost every town except Bagamoyo and Dar es-Salam. Herman von Wissmann of the German East Africa Company was charged with setting up an expeditionary corps to quell the revolt. Unable to find suitable men locally, Wissmann recruited *askari* from other African countries. The bulk of these men consisted of about 600 “Sudanese” recruited in Cairo, and another 400 men recruited in Mozambique, the so-called Shangaan [“Zulu Warriors”].<sup>22</sup> The documentation currently available to us does not enable us to understand the reason that led the British to deny the Italians permission to recruit Sudanese while granting it to the Germans just a few months later.<sup>23</sup> Some reconstructions of this episode have stressed that the “British administrators were only too glad to have them taken off their hands” (Glassman 1995: 250), but considering the obstacles placed in the way of the Italians, this judgment is most likely to be inaccurate. A tentative explanation could be that the British victory over the Mahdists at Tushki on 3 August 1889 may have diminished the British reluctance to allow the recruitment of Sudanese.

The approximately 1,500 soldiers Wissmann managed to recruit between 1889 and 1891 came from at least six countries in North-East Africa, and among these the Sudanese formed the elite. Enlisted mainly in Cairo, the Sudanese troops were well paid and able – at least initially – to rise through the ranks (Kuss 2017: 103), thus finding the opportunity to improve their social and professional status in the German *Schutztruppe*. The wages and conditions of service the German army guaranteed its soldiers of Sudanese origin were a clear acknowledgment of their very considerable and highly sought-after professionalism. Their relatively privileged status was therefore ensured by this form of transnational employment. Relations

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<sup>22</sup> The Shangaan were soldiers from Southern Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique) who were believed to be of Zulu origin, which was considered to be a warlike society at the time, see Bühner 2018: 74.

<sup>23</sup> A possible explanation could be that the British victory over the Mahdist forces at Tushki on 3 August 1889 may have reduced British reluctance to allow the recruitment of Sudanese.

between the soldiers and the German authorities were governed by a contract and a series of guarantees that were scrupulously respected by both parties. The economic incentives were fundamental, but to understand the close link between these men and the German authorities one must also consider that the possibility of maintaining or improving one's position and social respectability played an equally important role. The concept of loyalty was therefore strongly linked to the ability of the contracting parties to keep faith with their mutual commitments.

At the same time as the Germans were consolidating their presence in East Africa, the British were also expanding their sphere of influence in the region. Recruitment was begun in order to build up the military and security forces of the Imperial British East Africa Company. A substantial Sudanese presence in Northern Uganda immediately caught the attention of the British. In 1878, Emin Pasha [the Prussian-born Eduard Schnitzer] was appointed Governor of Equatoria Province (South Sudan) for the Turco-Egyptian government, but the outbreak of the Mahdist revolution isolated Emin and his men in Equatoria, from where they gradually moved further south into Uganda and the Congo. Henry Morton Stanley arrived in 1888 with the "Emin Pasha Relief Expedition" to bring relief to Emin Pasha, and rescued him by taking him to the east coast, but leaving the bulk of his men behind. Of the few soldiers who followed Emin Pasha and H.M. Stanley, the Egyptians and the Sudanese, still being formally members of the Egyptian army, were repatriated to Egypt.

Since several hundred Sudanese soldiers remained in the West Nile Province of Uganda, Emin Pasha, who in the meantime had passed into the service of the German East Africa Company, returned to Northern Uganda in July 1891 with the intention of enlisting his former men into the service of the Germans. The mission ended in failure, and Emin Pasha was told by Salīm Bey, one of their commanders, that because they were still Egyptian soldiers, they were bound by an oath they wished to continue to honour. This episode lends itself to various interpretations, but it is clear that these men had now attained a high level of autonomy, which also entailed the freedom to choose their own future (Johnson 2009: 114). Just a few months later, in September 1891, Salīm Bey was approached by Captain Frederick Lugard (Meldon 1908), who, presenting himself as the deputy and successor of the Khedive, was able to obtain permission to recruit 600 Sudanese (Leopold 2006: 186),<sup>24</sup> while another 70 Sudanese came directly from Egypt (Parsons 1997: 15).<sup>25</sup> In 1894, Major A.B. Thurston brought an additional 350 soldiers of Sudanese origin

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<sup>24</sup> Salīm only agreed to join Lugard's troops after securing the approval of the Egyptian ruler.

<sup>25</sup> In East Africa, the term "Sudani", and later "Nubi" refers to the Southern Sudanese soldiers of slave origins who settled in East Africa. Over time, this group absorbed people from other areas, and so the "Sudanese" label only partially reflects the origins of these men.

from Lake Albert (Johnson 2000: 63). In 1894, Britain declared a Protectorate over the Kingdom of Buganda, and all these recruits joined the Uganda Rifles. After the Anglo-Egyptian re-conquest of Sudan, a number of South Sudanese continued to travel to Uganda to enlist in the Uganda Rifles (Johnson 2009: 117), while others found employment in Kenya guarding the Uganda Railway. Consequently, many Sudanese were incorporated into the East African Rifles [EAR], where in 1897 256 out of 1,050 men (24.38%) were Sudanese, and five years later their numbers had increased to almost half (Parsons 1997: 88).

The continuous enlistments led the British to issue a series of measures to contain the phenomenon. As early as November 1890, Francis Grenfell, Sirdar [Commander-in-Chief] of the Egyptian army, wrote in a letter to the War Office that given the difficulties with finding Sudanese to recruit, it would be wise to write to the representatives of the various powers advising them that it would no longer be possible to enlist Sudanese beyond the Khedivial Dominions (Lamothe 2012: 28–29; Bühler 2018). His suggestion was apparently well received, given the apparent difficulties the Germans had with recruiting Sudanese after this date. An episode linked to the tragic end of Captain Emil von Zelewski is especially significant in this regard. During the Hehe revolt in German East Africa in Lula-Rugaro (17 August 1891), a column commanded by Emil von Zelewski was totally annihilated, leaving 320 *askari*, or two-thirds of the *Schutztruppe*, dead on the battlefield (Gewald 2008: 5–8). There was therefore an urgent need to proceed with enlistments to replace the losses, but the operation turned out to be more complex than expected. On the one hand, as we have seen, the British had decided to oppose these enlistments, while on the other, the international context had changed significantly, and relations between Germany and Great Britain had deteriorated in general (Moyn 2014: 37–38). Recruiters were sent from Dar es-Salam to Aden, Cairo, Massawa and Zanzibar. After complicated negotiations, the British surprisingly allowed some enlistments in Egypt, while the Italians allowed the Germans to enlist Sudanese in Massawa. However, the results of these manoeuvres inevitably fell below expectations, and the Germans were forced to carry out part of their recruitment on the coast of German East Africa (Pizzo 2007: 158–159). By the 1910s it had become very difficult to find Sudanese for German East Africa and the King's African Rifles [KAR] (Bühler 2018: 84). The British were forced to find alternative sources of recruitment somehow, and several hundred Ethiopians were recruited in Addis Ababa in 1908 for the KAR, but the experiment produced mixed results and was discontinued (Parsons 1999: 62). The “hunt” for Sudanese recruits created some tensions even within the British territories. When the Foreign Office asked the Sudanese government to be ready to supply men for the East African or Ugandan Rifles in 1901, Governor Reginald Wingate had a very cold reaction (Daly 1986: 160).

## From Predator to Prey

The fact that the Eritrean RCTC was constantly looking for recruits did not prevent other powers from trying to enlist in Eritrea. On at least two occasions, the Germans recruited men on Eritrean territory, apparently with Italian approval. The first occasion was in 1894, when the Germans were allowed to recruit Sudanese in Massawa. On arriving in German East Africa, Lieutenant Georg Maercker observed tensions between Sudanese from Egypt and those recruited in Eritrea, whom the former considered to be “Shenzi” [barbarians, uncivilised people] (Moyd 2010: 167), but since there was no feedback from the Italian side, it is not easy to decipher this episode. In late 1906, additional Sudanese troops were recruited from Massawa by Governor von Götzen. In this case, we can hypothesise why the Italians allowed enlistment. After its defeat at Adwa (1896), Italy significantly reduced its forces in Eritrea, and between 1900 and 1902 four battalions, a cavalry squadron and an artillery battery were disbanded (Moyd 2014: 256).<sup>26</sup> This reduction involved the demobilisation of a few thousand men, a factor that probably led the Italians to grant permission to the Germans, since the availability of military work made it possible to prevent dangerous pockets of unemployment from forming. Ranging far and wide to be able to enlist as soldiers was still reported to be a recurring practice in 1912. In the same year, writing from distant and isolated Assab, the Regional Commissioner, Dante Odorizzi, informed the Governor General of Eritrea that many inhabitants of Dankalia were emigrating to Ethiopia, Yemen and Somalia, as well as to Kassala and Gadarif, to find employment among the irregular Anglo-Egyptian troops, and even to Dar es-Salam to enlist in the German *Schutztruppe*.<sup>27</sup>

About six months after this communication, the Italian authorities reported suspicious movements of *askari* of Eritrean origin under the Anglo-Egyptian Sudanese army. Within just over a week, nine had returned to Eritrea to visit relatives, which in the eyes of the authorities was a suspicious number that prompted the Eritrean RCTC Commander to urge maximum surveillance of these men so that “. . . they do not make propaganda to induce other subjects to join the Sudanese troops”. It was common knowledge, as even the Italians often resorted to this practice, that licensed soldiers often became the best recruiting agents. To prevent this type of

<sup>26</sup> In 1906 the number of men in the RCTC was 3,839. See Catellani and Stella 2004, 2: 62.

<sup>27</sup> F. Odorizzi to G. Salvago Raggi, 3 November 1912, ASDMAE, ASMAI 115/1/9, “Durata dei distaccamenti di battaglioni indigeni in Libia, 1912–1913”. The term Sudanese underwent a change in meaning during this period depending on the locality. While it is true that in the 1880s “Sudanese” referred only to Black Africans, along the Sudan-Eritrean border region in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it began to be used more as a territorial designation than as an ethnic term. Recruits into the Eastern Arab Corps, which was based at Kassala, increasingly came from the local Beja peoples.

manoeuvre, the authorities in Eritrea published an announcement in Arabic and Tigrinya that obliged all those interested in expatriation to apply for authorisation and await clearance before travelling. The announcement was published using a format that, however simple, says a great deal about the climate at that time: it was sent to all the Commissariats, with a recommendation to publish it at different times to prevent the provision from being perceived for what it was – a ban on expatriation without prior authorisation – in order to “avoid cross-border rumours [in Sudan]”<sup>28</sup> that might induce the Anglo-Egyptian authorities to adopt a similar measure in retaliation. The following month, the Italians, who were struggling to double their two mountain batteries and were looking for men to assign to the artillery units, reported difficulties since the recruitment of suitable Muslims for this service “comes into competition with Sudan”.<sup>29</sup>

In the border area with Kassala, the problem of “counter-enlistments” was endemic and tended to recur in times of tension and difficulty. In July 1917, Lodovico Pollera, Regional Commissioner of Barka, reported that rumours that his Commissariat was about to be transferred to the British and that the Italians were preparing to leave Eritrea were circulating in Kassala. Furthermore, these rumours always reported that Italy was in the process of forcibly recruiting men to be sent to Europe. Pollera wrote that he had begun an investigation to find out who was circulating them, and recommended expulsion and, in the more serious cases, imprisonment for the guilty parties.<sup>30</sup> The investigation failed to shed light on who was responsible, except for the role played by the Eritreans enlisted in the Anglo-Egyptian army, who seemed to have made “. . . hateful and unfavourable comparisons between the administration system adopted in the two countries” during visits to their families.<sup>31</sup> This is what prompted the proposal to prevent the return to Sudan of Eritreans who had enlisted without authorisation in order to prevent “. . . the constant propaganda in favour of enlisting troops in Sudan, which is practiced mainly by means of soldiers who go on leave, and which is not the least cause of the continuous spread of Sudanese influence, especially in the border tribes”.<sup>32</sup>

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28 M. Rubiolo to Commissariato of Adi Caieh, Asmara, 3 July 1913, Archivio Commissariato Achele Guzai, Migration I, “Campo concentramento Addi Caieh”.

29 M. Rubiolo to [Ministry of the Colonies], Asmara, 31 August 1913, ASDMAE, AE 610.

30 L. Pollera Orsucci, Commissariato Regionale del Barca, “Relazione del mese di luglio 1917”, ASDMAE, AE 828, fasc. dichiarazioni guerra.

31 L. Pollera Orsucci, Commissariato Regionale del Barca, “Relazione del mese di luglio 1917”, ASDMAE, AE 828, fasc. dichiarazioni guerra.

32 L. Pollera Orsucci, Commissariato Regionale del Barca, “Relazione del mese di luglio 1917”, ASDMAE, AE 828, fasc. dichiarazioni guerra.

These episodes are by no means of secondary significance: they show how potential recruits evaluated the enlistment conditions of the various armies even in comparative terms, and reserved the freedom to choose when possible. At the same time, awareness on the Italian side of how this type of comparison often guided the choices of the recruits is evident, hence the constant attention to the conditions of service offered by the other colonial armies and their attempts to offer competitive terms. Good service conditions resulted in higher enlistments, as Ferdinando Martini noted in 1896, relating how an Ethiopian soldier was paid the equivalent of 20 lire a year, but all it took to earn 600 lire was to cross the border and enter Eritrea (Martini 1895: 116–120; Amanuel 1988: 254; Volterra 2012: 69). This type of dynamic ended up by unifying many aspects of military work at a regional level, eliminating practices that in the new context inevitably seemed obsolete. Accordingly, lifetime enlistment in the Egyptian army was reduced to ten years after 1903 (Vezzadini 2015: 219), a significant improvement, but still a long way from the yearly contract with the possibility of renewal offered by the Italian army. If they could, soldiers tended to go where terms of service were better, as when in 1910, the KAR underwent forced reductions by discharging many *askari*. The British officers intended to take some of these men back by recruiting them into the KAR Reserves, but the wages on offer were not considered to be competitive, and many *askari* crossed the border to join the *Schutztruppe* (Parsons 1999: 17).

## Charting a Transnational Recruiting Ground

In the period preceding the First World War there was a marked increase in the demand for military work in the Horn of Africa. At a local level, the revolt of Muḥammad ‘Abdallāh Ḥasan (c. 1856–1921)<sup>33</sup> in Northern Somalia and the subsequent arrival of Lijj Iyasu as the Emperor of Ethiopia caused a rise in regional tensions. From a military standpoint, however, the most important event of this period, which led to massive consequences for the region’s military labour market, was Italy’s decision in 1912 to use Eritrean *askari* in the war to conquer Libya, an involvement that lasted about 20 years. The first result of this decision was the doubling of the Eritrea RCTC: in 1911, this corps had just over 4,000 men and four battalions (Catellani and Stella 2004, 2: 84), but two years later the number had jumped to 9,210 men, spread over 10 battalions.<sup>34</sup> This placed enormous pressure

<sup>33</sup> The Sayyid or, for his detractors, “The Mad Mullah”.

<sup>34</sup> ASDMAE, AE 849, “Specchio indicante la ripartizione numerica dei militari indigeni alle armi per paesi di provenienza, 15 luglio 1913”.

on a country that was estimated to have about 330,000 inhabitants in 1911 (*L'economia eritrea* 1932: 43), and in commenting on it the RCTC leaders were aware that a situation such as this “. . . is hard to find in other countries of the world”.<sup>35</sup> In this phase, there were 1,760 non-Eritrean soldiers in the RCTC (19.1%), and among them there were 101 Sudanese (5.7%), of whom 65 in artillery (64.3%), confirming the continuation of a close relationship with this type of weapon.



**Figure 10:** Alessandro Comini, Artillery Battery before deployment in Libya (1912–1913).<sup>36</sup>

Little Eritrea could not give any more; the alternative might be the introduction of compulsory conscription, a measure the Italians preferred not to adopt because they were convinced that it would prove counterproductive.

Meanwhile, the operations in Libya deteriorated until 1914, when the situation precipitated and the Italians were forced into a disastrous retreat to the coast. It was not possible for reinforcements to arrive from Italy because despite its initial

<sup>35</sup> Col. A. Dusnasi, *Relazione annuale*. Anno 1920, Asmara, 1 March 1920. This is a “highly confidential” report on the state of the RCTC (quoted in Volterra 2005: 43–44).

<sup>36</sup> Author’s private collection.

neutrality, the imminence of the First World War meant that no weakening of the national defence system could be permitted. This was such a delicate and complex situation that the risk of losing Libya could not be entirely excluded. In the frantic search for men to send to Libya, the authorities also turned to Eritrean prisons, where foreign prisoners were offered cancellation of their sentences if they accepted enrolment for Libya. According to the Italian authorities, the measure was so enthusiastically welcomed that some detainees “have insistently and enthusiastically begged to be sent to Libya”.<sup>37</sup> So it was that Farrāj ‘Alī of Khartoum, who had been sentenced to one year for theft, volunteered to be sent there.

However, the ultimate solution was found by encouraging enlistment from neighbouring Ethiopia, from where numerous recruits had been taken ever since the origins of the RCTC. In 1913, the recruits from “beyond the border” [Ethiopia] were concentrated in three Eritrean-Libyan battalions (which from 1920 were called *Eritrean-Mixed*), which very soon became the most important element of the Italian army in Libya, both tactically and numerically (Maletti 1927). In December 1925, there were 8,955 men in the Eritrean-Mixed battalions, a substantial number, just slightly higher than the entire RCTC of Eritrea (7,524 men).<sup>38</sup> “Ethiopians” is a term that only provides a partial photograph of the composition of these troops. Some documents will help us better understand this. The colonial bureaucracy was well aware of the importance of the origin of recruits, and it was usually recorded because it made it possible to have a better grasp of recruitment trends. Some of these lists have survived, and they provide an interesting, though not exhaustive, picture. In April 1915, two groups of non-Eritrean recruits from Ethiopia were sent to Libya. When they communicated their departure, the authorities also indicated their presumed nationalities. The first group was made up of 52 recruits, including 12 Ethiopians (23.07%), 16 Yemenis (30.7%), 2 Sudanese (3.8%) and 22 Somalis from Somaliland (42.30%)<sup>39</sup>; a second group of 312 recruits included 133 Ethiopians (42.6%), 31 Sudanese (9.9%), 106 Arabs (most probably Yemenis, 33.9%) and 42 Somalis (13.4%).<sup>40</sup> Also of interest are the numbers relating to the XIIIth Eritrean-Libyan battalion for 1919: of its 843 men, the majority were Ethiopians

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37 V. Fioccardi to Governo della Colonia, Keren, 3 April 1915, ASDMAE, AE 694.

38 “Riepilogo della forza presente nelle varie Colonie alla data 1° dicembre 1924”, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero Africa Italiana, Roma, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, 1, “1.2.1. Riepilogo della forza presente”.

39 L. Talamonti to G. Salvago Raggi, Asmara, 29 March 1915, ASDMAE, ASMAI 115/2, “Reclutamento ascari in Eritrea e Somalia (febbraio-aprile)”.

40 Serra (Cairo) to Ministry of the Colonies, Cairo, 29 April 1915, ASDMAE, ASMAI 115/2, “Reclutamento ascari in Eritrea e Somalia (febbraio-aprile)”.



(84.6%), but there was no lack of Eritreans (7.5%), Yemenis (5.2%) and later on Swahilis (2.4%) (Maletti 1926: 197).

These men usually signed a one- or two-year contract, with the possibility of renewing their term of service. Despite Italian pressure, the soldiers did not always decide to renew their service for Libya. In this case, too, one of the reasons for non-renewal was that given the accumulated experience, their professional profile was significantly heightened, giving them an edge when it came to evaluating alternative offers. In Asmara, the Ethiopian Consul, Wesene Zeamanuel, encouraged Ethiopian veterans of Libya to return home, guaranteeing them quick employment. In 1912, for example, *Alāqa* Gäbru Sankaye was appointed commander of the Addis Ababa urban guard. The men under him were nicknamed *tiribuli* (or *Trinbulee*, *Trubuli*, a distorted form of Tripoli, the Libyan capital) since like him, many of them had served in Libya with the Italian Colonial Army. Other *tiribuli* found work in the Ethiopian armed forces (Dechasa 2017; Schröder 2010; Getahun 2006).

The Italian recruiters looked for men in Yemen, Benadir and Ethiopia. Against the background of this frantic search for recruits there is a minor but significant episode that provides further elements for gaining an understanding of the geography of military recruitment in this region of Africa. In search of new recruiting territories, the Italians turned their attention to Zanzibar, and subsequently to the Belgian Congo. They had been informed that the island of Zanzibar had provided one of the main contingents to the Congo State. Through the offices of the local Italian Consulate, General Cesare Del Mastro suggested putting out feelers for enlisting recruits in Zanzibar to be allocated to Benadir.

But it was the Congo that the Italians looked at with the greatest interest and hope. Here, too, the creation by King Leopold II of the Belgian *Force Publique* (1885) had taken shape with enlistments from outside the country. Together with Zanzibari, the Congo had hired men from Sierra Leone, Liberia and other locations in the Gulf of Guinea. This is why the Italians first explored the idea of recruiting men from West Africa, in this case also by relying on the consular network. In Congo, the preference was to go to the Bangala, Batetela, Hababua and Zande ethnic groups, which were identified as martial races that formed the backbone of the Congo army. Since the Italians needed “a few thousand” men, it was thought that Belgium would not raise any objections since Italy had given Belgium a hundred officers for the *Force Publique* at the time. And it was to one of these former officers that the Italians suggested entrusting the recruitment campaign, perhaps giving him a bonus of some “coloured” non-commissioned officers. The wages offered ranged between 1.5 and 2 lire a day, well above the “few cents a day” paid by the Belgians. In case the Belgian Congo authorities did not cooperate, it was always possible to organise recruitment “in dribs and drabs”, through envoys who would send the recruits to Kisumu, Mombasa, and from there to Mogadishu. The last suggestion concerned the

officers who would command these men. It was recommended that they should be entrusted to the same officers who had recruited them, who would then do their utmost to “dispel the darkness of the mystery in which the distant countries where they must go are shrouded to serve for a few years and whose name they have never even known.”<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

Using the observation that scholars from Sudan and Eritrea have long carried out their research in “splendid isolation” as its point of departure, this chapter has tried to overcome this evident, and at times incomprehensible, limitation by using one single instance, that of the presence of Sudanese in the Eritrean RCTC between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, the RCTC had a constant Sudanese presence among its ranks. In the case of artillery, this was codified in the 1893 *Regulations*, which expressly favoured the recruitment of Sudanese. The fact that there were considerable percentages of men from other territories and colonies among the Eritrean troops coincided with a highly active trend in other African colonies as well. In the extreme case of Somalia, the regulations provided that 90% of the troops had to come from outside the colony. Hence, in many African contexts during this historical phase it is difficult to speak of “national armies”, since a closer look reveals far more fluid situations. To grasp the characteristics of military work in this part of North-East Africa, it is advisable to abandon the hitherto predominant approach based on the study of individual national cases. Instead, it is more effective to modify the dominant spatial framework by analysing the military labour market from a regional perspective.

The data that emerge if this approach is adopted reveal how the profound restructuring and reduction of the Egyptian army took place alongside the creation of various regional and colonial armies: the Sudanese Mahdist forces, Menelik’s Ethiopian imperial army and later on the military needs of the Italians, British, Germans and French created the conditions for a strong growth in the demand for military expertise. In this new context, considerable opportunities opened up for men in Sudan who until a few generations earlier had for all intents and purposes been considered to be slaves. An analysis of the transnational market for military work in this part of Africa reveals the existence of a group that was also made up of slave soldiers who were able to progressively change their professional and

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<sup>41</sup> Report no. 435, 20 March 1914 by the Commander of the troops Maj. Gen. Del Mastro, ASDMAE, ASMAI 115/2, “Reclutamento ascari in Eritrea e Somalia (febbraio-aprile).”

social status in the course of less than a century, passing from a non-elite group to a professional elite. In many cases, their military know-how transformed the stigma that had been attached to their slave origins. They were former slaves, but equally importantly they were a labour aristocracy (Parsons 1999: 5) who played a fundamental role in the functioning of the colonial machine. They represented a class of skilled workers that the colonial powers long vied for, confirming what Myron Echenberg has claimed about the *tirailleurs sénégalais* – that military work contributed towards removing these men from their slave origins, transforming them into a new middle class (Echenberg 1991), a privileged section of colonial society. These men, and in particular the non-commissioned officers, who were those in possession of the greatest level of professionalisation, were the subject of fierce competition among the various armies, which often drove their bids upwards in order not to lose these precious men. It was a constant, and at times frantic, quest that led to increasingly distant territories being scoured as recruiting grounds, as is clearly evidenced by Italy's attempt to recruit in Congo. This episode also sheds light on the strong mobility linked to military work. It had always a characteristic feature of this profession, but in the period under consideration, the territorial mobility of the African military emerges with even greater clarity.

This mobility was linked both to the use of armies outside national borders, as in the case of the Sudanese contingent in Mexico, and to the movement of individuals to market their enlistment. This latter situation recalls what saw some veterans of the American Civil War become protagonists: the reduction in the size of the post-Civil War Federal Army and the fact that it was impossible for ex-Confederates to find employment with the U.S. Army led hundreds of experienced officers to travel to Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa. Between 1869 and 1878, 48 American officers found employment in the Egyptian army (Jesman 1958: 303), and alongside this phenomenon, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some Sudanese began to offer their military expertise to anyone who could offer competitive wages in North-East Africa. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, therefore, a situation was created in which Sudanese soldiers with good military experience could exploit a variety of options that significantly strengthened their decision-making autonomy and, ultimately, their freedom, with at least one important distinction, however: while in the past the link had been between these men and the state, individuals now negotiated their professional skills outside the state, in an often direct relationship between them and the army that needed their military expertise. There may have been mediators and people with whom there was a strong bond and attachment (a local commander), but it is clear that it now became increasingly difficult to talk of slave soldiers, or of the existence of a patron or local commander who imposed his will on these professional soldiers.

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## Chapter 9

# Police Models in Sudan: General Features and Historical Development

## Introduction

The police in Sudan have been an important player in the formulation and maintenance of the country's social and political stability since the colonial era (1899–1956). However, one of the main challenges they are facing at this time is the continuous expansion of their functions and duties without an equivalent development in their professional capacities, especially at a legal and operational level. For example, the police are currently working with the same old-fashioned police oversight mechanism, which relies on internal supervisory bodies, and have completely overlooked the establishment of other external mechanisms such as independent bodies or community-based mechanisms as a modern way of increasing engagement between the police and the community in which they work. Furthermore, despite the increase in police numbers and duties, there is still only one police college, from which all police officers in Sudan graduate. By taking a historical approach, this chapter attempts to analyse the policing model in Sudan following Mawby's (1999: 13–22) paradigm based on functions, structure and source of legitimacy.

Police functions and duties are expanding at an increasing rate. Since its establishment in 1899, the police force's functions have grown dramatically, in addition to the traditional tasks, which generally revolve around the prevention and detection of crime, criminal investigations, general guard services, enforcing executive orders and traffic control. In the 1960s, the passports and migration department was incorporated into the police, and the rescue department was established (Berridge 2011a: 159). Then, during the 1970s, the Central Reserve Forces were established, and finally in 1992, the police became responsible for a much wider set of functions such as customs, wildlife protection and controlling prisons. As will be discussed later in this chapter, Constitutional Decree no. 61 of 1992 established a unified police force. This was a significant departure from traditional police functions, which were customarily limited to fighting crime and maintaining public safety and order (Sālim 2005: 350–362), and the police also became responsible for civil defence, customs, wildlife protection and civil registration.

With regard to the size of the force, during the late 1940s, when Sudan was under the colonial government, it consisted of around 98 senior officers and 5,942



rank-and-file members.<sup>1</sup> In the final years of the Condominium, it numbered about 6,000 senior officers and other ranks (James 1991), approximately one policeman per 1,000 people. Recently, police numbers expanded to 130,000, or 3.6 police officers per 1,000 people. Moreover, during the colonial period and the early stages of the national government, the police had few central departments, including the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and the Traffic Control Department, but today there are over 17 central departments.<sup>2</sup> In addition, as regards the legitimacy of the police, the executive power has continued to be the most powerful source since its establishment: the head of state was the commander-in-chief, and the police fell under the direct command of the Minister of the Interior.

In short, since its establishment, as is the case in many countries, the Sudanese police force has exhibited a constant degree of inconsistency between its functions and its legal legitimacy (Bittner 1967). As a result, it has been unable to carry out its functions and duties under the Constitution and other existing laws properly, a situation that has led to the current problematic relationship between the police and the community.

## The Establishment of the Sudanese Police (1899–1908)

As a result of the Condominium Agreement of 19 January 1899<sup>3</sup> the Anglo-Egyptian regime was established in Sudan. Prior to the Agreement (from September 1898 to January 1899), police duties in Sudan had been performed by the British military police (Abū Ḥarāz 2014: 40). In May 1899, after the establishment of the condominium regime, the Governor-General of Sudan appointed Egyptian military officer Captain ‘Abd al-Jalīl Effendi ‘Iṣmat and 12 other senior officers to establish police forces in the newly-conquered provinces. Shortly thereafter, another Egyptian military lieutenant was appointed as Prisons Officer to take responsibility for prisons

<sup>1</sup> “Police Annual Report, 1947”, 3/1MIC/3, National Records Office [hereafter NRO], Khartoum, Sudan.

<sup>2</sup> Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān. “Al-Murshid al-‘Āmm li-Tashīl Adā’ al-A’māl.” *Electronic Portal of the Ministry of the Interior*. <http://www.moi.gov.sd/murshid.php> (7 August 2022, not available anymore)

<sup>3</sup> Sudan Government, “Agreement between Her Britannic Majesty’s Government and the Government of His Highness the Khedive of Egypt relative to the future administration of the Soudan. 1899, January 19.” Sudan Gazette, no. 1, 7 March 1899, 1–4. Sudan Archive [hereafter SAD], Durham University Library, Durham, UK. <https://libguides.durham.ac.uk/asc-sudan-archive/gazettes> (15 June 2022)

in Sudan.<sup>4</sup> During this period, the police force was entirely controlled by the central government (Sālim 2005: 97). It is worth mentioning in this regard that colonial recruitment of police during this time was far different from the colonial policy in many colonies in Africa such as the Gold Coast (Ghana), Nyasaland (Malawi) and Kenya (Deflem 1994). In Sudan, the recruitment policy was entirely dependent on Sudanese recruits at rank-and-file levels, while the colonial administration first recruited British and Egyptian senior officers, and later began to replace these foreign officers with Sudanese; in 1947, 18 out of the 98 officers were British.<sup>5</sup>

At the time the Condominium was created, the major challenge facing the government of Sudan was establishing the system of local government. This system was sufficiently strong and flexible to allow the colonial government to contain and suppress the uprisings that erupted immediately after the defeat of the Mahdist regime and the death of Khalifa ‘Abdullāhi al-Ta‘āishī – the head of the Mahdist state – on 24 November 1899. The best-known of these uprisings included the resistance led by ‘Uthmān Digna in Eastern Sudan in 1900, the Nuer resistance led by Mut Deng in Southern Sudan in 1902, the uprising led by Muḥammad al-Amīn Barnāwī in the Kordofan area of Western Sudan in 1903 and ‘Abd al-Gādir Wad Ḥabūba’s movement in the Gezira area of Central Sudan in 1908 (Abū Ḥarāz 2014: 42–45). At the time, Sudan was divided into provinces, districts (*marākiz*, sing. *markaz*), towns and villages. The provinces were governed by British military governors assisted by inspectors, as well as Mamurs (from the Arabic *ma’mūr*, which means “officer” or “official”) and Sub-Mamurs at the lower levels of the administrative units.

After the condominium government had successfully suppressed most of the internal disorder in the country, and a degree of stability was achieved from 1905, the Governor-General abolished the police department of the central government in Khartoum (Abū Ḥarāz 2014: 42–45). This decision gave the provincial governors full authority over the police forces in their provinces, including recruitment, training, salaries and all other powers relating to police duties and administration. However, this new measure was short-lived, as a new police ordinance was adopted in 1908.<sup>6</sup> This ordinance and the subsequent general regulations for police (1910)<sup>7</sup> extended the Governor-General’s jurisdiction to all police personnel in all the provinces and other departments, including the prison authority. Article 5 of the ordi-

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4 Sudan Government, *Sudan Gazette*, no. 3, 31 July 1899, 7–9. <https://libguides.durham.ac.uk/asc-sudan-archive/gazettes> (15 June 2022)

5 “Police Annual Report, 1947”, 3/1MIC/3, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

6 Sudan Government, “The Police Ordinance”, *Sudan Gazette*, no. 142, 1 September 1908, 852–857. <https://libguides.durham.ac.uk/asc-sudan-archive/gazettes> (15 June 2022)

7 Sudan Government, “The Police General Regulations”, *Sudan Gazette*, no. 191, 25 January 1910, 376–395. NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

nance also gave the Governor-General the power to issue general regulations for all the police forces in Sudan. However, the same article also ruled that provincial directors, the director of customs and the controller of the harbour could issue special regulations for their own forces without prejudicing the powers of the Governor-General. Police recruitment, salaries and training fell within the responsibility of the provincial directors. The police forces in each province also had their own uniforms according to special provincial uniform regulations, and Article 4 of the 1908 ordinance subjected all police forces in the provinces to the authority of the governor and inspector of each province. It is apparent from this description that the executive was the source of legitimacy for the police force, and that its functions predominantly revolved around maintaining peace and order and suppressing any acts against the colonial regime at a local level through semi-military actions. The government also attributed a similar symbolic role to that of the Egyptian police during its early establishment to the police in Sudan, namely upholding the dignity and authority of the state (Fahmy 1999: 374–377). In addition, the source material gives the impression that the police forces in Sudan at the time (1899–1908) did not form a single institution.

## The 1925 Reform of the Police

After the 1916 defeat of the Fur Sultanate in Darfur and the suppression of the cadets mutiny in 1924 (as part of the White Flag revolution), the Sudanese struggle against the Condominium regime entered a new phase characterised by the consolidation of a new generation of political actors and by civil rather than armed strife. This new political front was led by the Graduates' General Congress, which represented the educated class in society, and by the labour and trade unions, which represented the working class. The role of these two emerging groups in the Sudanese social and political context forced the government to revisit its strategy for dealing with security challenges in Sudan.

In 1924, the Sudan Government decided to seek the assistance of an expert from the Indian police, John Ewart. Ewart was appointed by the government of Sudan after the White Flag revolution broke out in August 1924. Ewart's work represented not only a step towards establishing a policy of centralised police administration, but also a move towards adopting a civil model for the police in Sudan.

Although Ewart was seeking a central policy for the standardisation of recruitment, training, professional conduct and professional practices, his vision differed from the existing situation as regards the nature of the police and their duties. In his report to the civil secretary of the Sudan Government, Ewart focused on two

major points: first, he heavily criticised the legal boundaries of police powers in the 1908 police ordinance and the 1910 police general regulations, claiming that they were inconsistent with the 1899 Sudanese code of criminal procedure. He wrote: “The code of criminal procedure is the true foundation of any system of civil police organization. Moreover, regularized training of the police in their duties in respect of the criminal administration must be based on the code.”<sup>8</sup> His report also criticised the legal framework of the police, even recommending the adoption of a new police ordinance and new general regulations: “A decision on the above point will permit the revision of the present police ordinance and police central regulation. These are both out of date and inadequate to modern recruitment and will have to be remodelled entirely.”<sup>9</sup> For the first time in their history, the police were presented as a civil law enforcement institution rather than a semi-military force for maintaining order. Ewart’s second main point concerned the training of police personnel. He wrote:

Military police and civil police are two essentially different organizations. If the former are required i.e. a force trained to act in formed body and according to military principles against gatherings or communities that are in more or less open rebellion – they and their training must be kept quite distinct from the civil police whose functions are prevention and detection of crime, and preservation of law and order up to and including the suppression of riot.<sup>10</sup>

The distinction between the roles played by the police and the military in maintaining peace and order was clearly explained in the report, which stated that police training should never go beyond how to confront an ordinary riot. Instead, Ewart was concerned about the police’s capacities with respect to crime prevention and detection, and he suggested establishing a police school for commissioned police officers alongside the schools for non-commissioned officers that had been established by G. H. Blumberg in 1916 (Abū Ḥarāz 2014). His report also focused on building the capacity of the Mamurs<sup>11</sup> and police personnel to record all crimes in their areas. To consolidate criminal investigation practices, the report further suggested the establishment of “a body of especially trained policemen employed for

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**8** J. M. Ewart, “Police Training”, report to the Civil Secretary, 19 July 1925, 1, Upper Nile 1/33/263, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

**9** J. M. Ewart, “Police Training”, ordinary document sent to South and Darfur Province Governors and attached to Ewart’s report to the Civil Secretary, 27 June 1925, 1, Upper Nile 1/33/263, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

**10** J. M. Ewart, “Police Training”, ordinary document sent to South and Darfur Province Governors and attached to Ewart’s report to the Civil Secretary, 27 June 1925, 1, Upper Nile 1/33/263, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

**11** Administrative officers had judicial powers at the time.

the assistance of local police in the more complicated cases of their work.”<sup>12</sup> This body would in time lead to the establishment of the Crime Investigation Directorate (CID) in Sudan in 1938 (Abū Ḥarāz 2014: 56). As a result of Ewart’s recommendations, another police ordinance was adopted in 1925, and his vision of the duties and organisation of the police culminated in the adoption of the Police Ordinance of 1928, as well as detailed Police General Regulations.<sup>13</sup> It is worth mentioning that the 1928 ordinance remained in effect until 1970, and was thus the longest-lasting police ordinance in the history of the Sudanese police.

It is clear from this sequence of events that the functions of the Sudanese police shifted slightly from mirroring those of the military police – which focused on disciplining and suppressing any attempt to mutiny – towards civil and legal functions, which derive from the law. In addition, the source of the police’s legitimacy changed somewhat as they became more of a legal institution working in accordance with the law and less of a heavy stick in the hands of the executive power. The structure of the police force also moved away from a decentralised model towards a centrally equipped and trained police force that operated according to a single unified legal framework and a central policy. However, despite all these reforms, the police were still perceived by the public as an institution that served colonial interests. Unfortunately, Ewart’s recommendation did not survive: the new policies softened the grip of the colonial regime on Sudan’s police and opened the door for national liberation ideas to challenge the legitimacy of police practices that supported colonial policy. This will be discussed further in the context of the police strike and the Joda strike.

## The Police and the Early Challenges of Establishing the Post-Colonial State (1951–1964)

During the period between 1952 and 1956, especially as a result of the 1953 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement on Sudanese self-government and self-determination (Daly 1991: 280–302), Sudan went through an intensive transitional process towards and after independence. The new national government faced a number of serious challenges, including the relationship between the North and South, the slow pace of economic development and issues related to civil and political freedoms. The government also

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<sup>12</sup> J. M. Ewart, “Police Training”, report to the Civil Secretary, 19 July 1925, 1, Upper Nile 1/33/263, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

<sup>13</sup> The Police Ordinance 1928, followed by The Police General Regulations 1928, *Sudan Government Gazette*, no. 510, 15 November 1928, 339–360. <https://libguides.durham.ac.uk/asc-sudan-archive/gazettes> (15 June 2022)

had to deal with an accelerating labour movement that opposed the legal framework of the old colonial state, as well as the general environment, which called for the promotion of civil and political freedoms throughout the country.

## The Police Strike

The shift in the colonial regime's policy, which considered increasing the number and role of Sudanese officers in the police force, provided a good environment for a significant proportion of Sudanese senior officers and other ranks to begin thinking about forming a police federation similar to the one they had heard about in Britain. This idea led to what was called "the police strike" several years later (Berridge 2011b). In May 1951, 70 Sudanese police constabularies from Khartoum organised a secret meeting to discuss a declaration of a police constabulary federation. All of them were Sudanese rank-and-file officers who had received education at a primary school level (Abū Ḥarāz 2014: 137–138). Although the meeting was dispersed peacefully, the problem grew to the point where there was a police march in Khartoum North on 5 June 1951. The following day, a strike of all police and prison departments in Khartoum Province was declared (Berridge 2011b). On 8 June 1951, shortly after the end of the strike, the acting Civil Secretary established a commission of inquiry that has come to be known as the Watson Commission. James R. S. Watson was appointed to lead this commission "to enquire into and ascertain the causes of the recent failure of the Khartoum police force to perform their duty."<sup>14</sup>

During the period between the late 1940s and Sudanese independence in 1956, the graduate movement and trade union struggles enjoyed significant successes, especially regarding service conditions and welfare. This situation encouraged Sudanese police officers and other police ranks, who saw their colleagues in the civil service sector successfully gain significant benefits through civil and democratic means the police were not allowed to use. Furthermore, the association of these movements with the struggle for national liberation and independence also prompted Sudanese senior officers and other ranks to think critically about their role and duties with respect to the existing colonial state. From an internal point of view, the Watson report attributed the causes of the strike to grievances among police personnel and unfair service conditions, which had perpetuated and been increasing for a long time.<sup>15</sup> In 1947, under the sub-heading *General Conditions of*

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<sup>14</sup> J. R. S. Watson, Musa Allagabu and Makkawi Akkrat, "Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Police Mutiny in Khartoum", July 1951, SAD 418/1/1, Durham, UK.

<sup>15</sup> J. R. S. Watson, Musa Allagabu and Makkawi Akkrat, "Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Police Mutiny in Khartoum", July 1951, SAD 418/1/4-5.

*the Police*, the annual police report stated: “Police officers continue to nurse their old establishment grievances, in particular their status as compared with the administrative officers.” The report went on to describe the situation among the rank and file: “Dissatisfaction among other ranks is limited largely to a complaint about housing conditions.”<sup>16</sup> These grievances worsened over time and, because of the negligence of the colonial regime, convinced the police constabularies that the only way to improve their conditions of service was to follow in the footsteps of the trade unions.

Although the Watson report acknowledged the legitimacy of the grievances and the poor conditions of police service, it tended to attribute the strike to internal issues such as the leadership skills and the personality of British police officers<sup>17</sup> and largely ignored the effects of the whole social and political picture on the police. The report also denied the right of the constabulary to establish a police federation, describing the situation as a “failure” and, in some cases, as “mutinous”.<sup>18</sup> In conclusion, the Watson report, the subsequent termination of the contracts of two British police officers and the dismissal of a number of Sudanese rank-and-file senior officers and other ranks represented a clear retreat from Ewart’s vision of the police in Sudan, who in 1925 had advocated for a professional and civil force rather than a militarised force blindly following the instructions of the colonial administration.

## The Joda Strike

Joda was a privately-owned pump scheme located south of Kosti in Blue Nile Province. Its 700 tenant farmers had not been paid for the cotton harvest of 1955, and they refused to deliver any more cotton unless they received payment.<sup>19</sup> Supported by the Federation of Trade Unions of the Sudan, the Trade Union of the White Nile Schemes in Kosti organised a strike demanding higher payments, limited working hours, housing and health services.<sup>20</sup> The government tried to negotiate, and when this failed, it put pressure on the farmers by taking administrative and legal measures against their leaders. This eventually led to a violent clash between the farmers

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<sup>16</sup> Police Annual Report, 1947, 3, 3/1MIC/3, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

<sup>17</sup> G. F. Harrison, “Letter from G. F. Harrison to the Civil Secretary Forwarding Comments on the Watson Commission Report”, 3 September 1951, SAD.691/6/31, Durham, UK.

<sup>18</sup> J. R. S. Watson, Musa Allagabu and Makkawi Akkrat, “Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Police Mutiny in Khartoum”, July 1951, SAD.418/1/1-23, Durham, UK.

<sup>19</sup> *Al-Šarāḥa*, no. 721, 17 February 1956, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

<sup>20</sup> *Al-Šarāḥa*, no. 728, 24 February 1956, p. 5, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

and the police, during which three police officers and more than 100 farmers were killed.<sup>21</sup> The police responded immediately by mounting an aggressive campaign against the farmers, and over 600 were arrested. On 22 February 1956, the police arrested an additional 281 farmers, and because of a lack of space in the prisons, they detained them in the local garrison. By the next day, 195 had died from heat-stroke and suffocation because of a lack of ventilation in the armoury.

This incident had a negative impact on the newly-formed post-independence government. Politicians and senior state figures tried to blame the disaster on the police and the leaders of the farmers' trade union.<sup>22</sup> A court was established to try three police officers and three union leaders, but the most significant administrative result of the incident was the abolition of the post of police commissioner, which returned the police to the control of administration officials (provincial governors and district commissioners). This incident also had an adverse effect on the relationship between the police and the public at the time, because it supported the impression that the police were agents of the state working against the public interest. The image of the police as a legal and civil institution was severely harmed, especially after the police commandant in Blue Nile Province refused to release the rest of the farmers, in violation of a court decision.<sup>23</sup> This further fuelled public scepticism about the government's intention to establish a legal and impartial police institution. This situation continued through the first parliamentary regime (between 1956 and 1958) and the military regime that succeeded it (between 1958 and 1964).

## The October Revolution of 1964 and the Return to Parliamentary Government (1964–1969)

In October 1964, a series of intensive demonstrations and widespread civil disobedience succeeded in overthrowing the military government and restoring a parliamentary regime. The movement was led by students, trade unions, professional bodies and others, and was joined only later by the political parties. From the beginning, as Berridge (2011a: 141) puts it, “the police force was cast in this drama in its usual role as the villain of the piece.” The police were held responsible for the shooting of a student during a political forum organised by the student union at the

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<sup>21</sup> *Al-Šarāḥa*, no. 728, 24 February 1956, p. 5, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

<sup>22</sup> *Al-Ayyām*, no. 7599, 23 February 2003, 3–4, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

<sup>23</sup> *Al-Šarāḥa*, no. 728, 24 February 1956, p. 1, 7, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.



University of Khartoum, which was part of the government's new strategy towards the armed conflict in Southern Sudan, which had become endemic since a slow beginning in 1955. Immediately after the resignation of the military regime, harsh criticism was directed at the role of the police and their methods during the period of military rule. Senior police officers, including the Police Director-General, were arrested and forced to take early retirement. In response, police officers submitted a memorandum to the cabinet requesting the appointment of a new Police Director-General and successors to other retired police officers; ratification of amendments to the Police Ordinance, which had been drafted by the police headquarters; and the establishment of a commission of inquiry to investigate the role of police in the killing of the student at the University of Khartoum (Sālim 2005: 283).

The memorandum demonstrated a strong desire to adopt a professional and accountable model of policing. The police's involvement in political sabotage during the military regime and the circumstances of the death of the student during the Khartoum University incident encouraged both police officers and the new ruling politicians to adopt a new model of modern, civil policing that matched the democratic change (Sālim 2005: 283). This model gradually turned the police force towards becoming a law enforcement institution that performed its duties under the effective control of the judicial authority (Berridge 2011a: 153–156). This new model meant that the police had to improve their image and redevelop their relationship with the public. The rescue/emergency police department was therefore re-established and new cars and up-to-date communication equipment were provided for it.

At the time, the Sudanese government was very keen on establishing a modern and professional police force. The protocol of the mutual security relationship between the Sudanese Ministry of the Interior and its counterpart in the Federal Republic of Germany was re-enforced, resulting in the creation of a forensic laboratory in 1965, a telex system for the police that covered all of Sudan's provinces and a system of mobile radios in cars and steamboats. The same year, a police dog unit was established with help from the Egyptian government (Berridge 2011a: 158). In 1967, the Police College started to accept university graduates instead of secondary school graduates, and beginning in 1968, officers were required to pass examinations in order to rise through the ranks. Between 1965 and 1969, the number of reported offences in Sudan rose from 2,159 to 2,608 per 100,000 people (Berridge 2011a: 159), which reflected a development in the police's capability to reach crimes and identify criminals, as well as a tighter engagement between police and citizens.

## Police under the May Regime (1969–1985): A New Formula

On 25 May 1969, a group of military officers overthrew the civilian government. The May Regime, as the new government was subsequently called, remained in power until 1985. The new regime inherited the dual challenges of armed conflict in the South and strong political opposition in the North. However, within three years, it had succeeded in putting an end to the armed conflict in Southern Sudan by adopting a peace agreement signed with the rebel group in Addis Ababa in February 1972. This agreement created a regional government in Southern Sudan, and was enshrined into law by the Regional Self-Government Act for the Southern Sudan in 1973 (Shinn 2004), which ultimately became part of the permanent Constitution of 1973 (Stevens 1976). The regime succeeded in foiling a number of attempted military coups and several other plots to overthrow it, the most serious of which were those of the Mahdist Ansar in 1970, a 1971 coup attempt led by the communists, and the National Resistance Movement invasion in 1976.

By the beginning of 1977, it was clear that the regime had defeated most of its major opponents and imposed a degree of stability on the country. The atmosphere of peace and constitutional stability, along with relative success in implementing the popular local government system in the North, which coincided with the self-government system in the South, encouraged the state to consolidate its achievements by assigning more powers to the local level. This culminated in the Regional Government Act of 1980 and the Local Government Act of 1981 for the Northern part of the country (El-Battahani and Gadkarim 2017: 39). Three levels of governance (central, regional and local) were established, and they have existed in one form or another until today. These three levels expressed a determining influence on the state's policy towards the police in terms of functions, structure and source of legitimacy. The ruling semi-socialist regime adopted a new formula of policing that can be described as a militarised model with a decentralised structure that was explicitly affiliated with the political views of the regime.

The May Regime showed a strong tendency to establish a military model for the police. The long-lasting Ordinance of 1928 was finally replaced by the Police Act of 1970, and for the first time, the police were explicitly defined as a semi-military force in Article (8)(1) of the Act. It also preserved the provision that authorised a merger of the police force, as a whole or in part, into the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) to act as military personnel, and it subjected these integrated forces to military rules. Similar provisions have continued to appear in all subsequent police acts until today. In the same manner, the Police Act of 1977 created a new hierarchical promotion system for senior and rank-and-file officers that was based on ranks and

was similar to the promotion system in the military. In this respect, I should add that both Police Acts (1970 and 1977) explicitly included the post of Police Director-General as an organic component of the hierarchical structure and recognised that this role was held by the commander of the police force, thus implying a chain of command similar to the military. However, this chain was significantly disturbed by the adoption of Republican Decree no. 52 in 1979, which imposed a decentralised mode of administration for the police.

### **Republican Decree no. 52 of 1979: The Fragmentation of the Police Structure**

One could argue that Decree no. 52 was a major milestone in the history of the Sudanese police. It dissolved the Ministry of the Interior and liquidated the Police Headquarters organisation. The Decree itself clearly stated that its intention was to empower the decentralised government system (Sālim 2005: 322–326). Police units were scattered among various departments at both a national and regional level. At the regional level, control and command of the police were placed in the hands of the regional governors. Central police departments were dispersed among other government departments and ministries: for example, the CID was attached to the Office of the Attorney-General (Berridge 2011a: 175) and the passports, immigration and nationality police were annexed to the Ministry of Finance.

As expected, implementation of this decree involved serious practical complications and aroused strong opposition among police officers. The imposition of a semi-military police training method, along with the contradictions between the Decree and the provisions of the Police Act of 1977, caused severe interruptions in the legal and administrative practices of the police at all levels. For example, the 1977 Police Act centralised recruitment policy, training standards, promotion requirements, salaries, armament and financial issues and placed them under the effective control of the Minister of the Interior and the Police Director-General. Dispersal of these sensitive tasks among different institutions at both a national and local level created inefficiencies and uncertainties in everyday management (Sālim 2005: 324–325). Junior police officers who had been trained under the militarised police doctrine for the previous seven years complained that the absolute authority of local administrators (whom they described as “civilians and politicians”) would be fatal for the implementation of the military discipline model among rank-and-file police (Sālim 2005: 322). Senior police officers argued that the absence of a central body with the power to guarantee a homogenous national policy and similar standards of policing across regions and provinces would lead to chaos in police practice (Sālim 2005: 316–318).

The chain of command and the establishment of police headquarters were provided for in Republican Decree no. 475 and the Police General Regulations of 1979. The Decree established the post of Police Inspector-General in place of the Police Director-General required by the Police Acts of 1971 and 1977. The general regulations made the Police Inspector-General, who would report directly to the head of state, the senior officer in the police force. This was an obvious retreat from Ewart's ideas on the legal legitimacy of the police. The Police General Regulations of 1979 also stipulated that the police would be composed of several forces under the supervision of the regional governors, and would be under the effective control of the Police Regional Director-General, with the exception of the CID and the police college, which would continue to be under the direct control of the Police Inspector-General. The Decree went further, explaining in detail the powers of the Police Inspector-General versus the regional governors and local administrators over police forces at the regional and local level. It did the same with regard to the special central police forces that served in some departments, such as the railway police.

Eventually, it became obvious that these measures, particularly the Police Act of 1979, had stripped the police of any independent institutional character. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that in rural areas, administrative orders were deeply affected by political and clan issues. Control over police practice by local administrators seriously prejudiced the image of the police in the minds of the public. This situation again raised the question of the source of police legitimacy and cast a deep shadow over the police force's identity as an independent institution and over the legality and impartiality of its duties. Furthermore, professional satisfaction within the force itself was badly affected by this situation during the last years of the May Regime.

## **The April Uprising and the Restoration of the Ministry of the Interior (1985–1989)**

In April 1985, a popular uprising put an end to the May Regime. A transitional military council (TMC) and interim government were appointed to prepare for general elections in a year's time. One of the top priorities of the TMC and the interim cabinet was the re-establishment of the Ministry of the Interior. The vast majority of political actors who played an influential role during the interim period agreed that establishing a professional and united police force under an effective Ministry of the Interior would be an essential prerequisite for successful general elections. The dismissal of the previous regime's Sudan Security Organisation (SSO) and the

return of the SSO's tasks to the police was another factor in the interim government's decision to restore the Ministry of the Interior. The Ministry was established based on the same structure as prior to 1979, and the Police Inspector-General was appointed as Minister of the Interior on 8 April 1985. His deputy was appointed to be the Police Director-General. The task of the newly-born Ministry was to prepare the police forces for the general elections and carry out duties related to intelligence and national security (Sālim 2005: 337–340). After the general elections, the new parliamentary regime took up the policy of restoring the civil model of policing. It promoted the provisions of the police ordinance, removed the direct presidential powers over police and gave the Police Inspector-General – who had become the deputy of the Police Director-General – greater monitoring and supervisory powers over all Sudanese police forces (Berridge 2011a: 194).

## **Police under the *Inqādh* Regime (1989–2019): The Formation of the Unified Police Forces**

There was another military coup in June 1989. Its leaders established a Salvation Revolution Command Council (SRCC). For many years, all executive and legislative powers were concentrated in this council. It was obvious from a very early stage that the regime was motivated by a radical Islamist agenda in relation to both its domestic and foreign policies. As in the early phases of all military regimes in Sudan, the severe armed conflict in Southern Sudan and strong opposition from the Northern political parties were the major challenges the new regime needed to confront. On this occasion, it decided to address these challenges by mobilising an extensive political and military campaign against its opponents in both the Northern and Southern regions of the country, accompanied by a huge Islamic propaganda campaign that aimed to engage a wide sector of the community. As a result of this, large militias under the name of the Popular Defence Forces (PDF) and the Community Police Forces (CPF) were established simultaneously under the control of the military and the police. Islamic groups in the state political apparatus exercised extensive powers over these forces. The objective of the militias was to participate in the military efforts in the South and to protect the regime against any militant movements targeting the centre of the state that might be organised by the defunct Northern political parties.

In accordance with the new regime's policy, its leaders, inspired by their military backgrounds, showed an eagerness to adopt an openly militaristic policing model, especially with respect to organisation and duties. Police officers, who were still traumatised by the fragmentation of their institution during the May Regime,

viewed this strategy as a useful tool for increasing the institutional unity of the police and further pursuing a centralised structural and organisational model for the force. There was an implicit agreement between police leaders and the military officers in power to accept this model, in which the police would act as reserves in military operations in Southern Sudan in exchange for the regime's preserving the unity of the police force and strengthening the centralised structure. To this end, in May 1991, the Minister of the Interior established the Technical Committee for the Reorganisation of the Ministry of the Interior (Sālim 2005: 346–348).

The terms of reference of the committee revolved around reviewing the organisation and structure of the Ministry of the Interior, suggesting job descriptions for the senior positions in the Ministry that determined responsibilities and powers and deciding on the actual human resources requirements for senior officers and other rank-and-file members. The committee's final report recommended merging all the forces attached to the Ministry of the Interior, including the police, prison forces, fire-fighting forces and wildlife control, into a single unit to be called the Unified Police. In its report, the committee justified its recommendation by arguing that despite the fact that there was no significant difference in the salary levels of the various bodies and material benefits between the different forces, gathering all these forces together in one unified force would solve professional jealousy issues and lead to a better use of resources. In addition, the duties of the forces complemented each other, and therefore their unity would contribute positively to the efficiency of each of them. The report went on to argue that this unity would eliminate competition among them, and would lead to the uniformity of service conditions and privileges in all Sudanese police forces (Sālim 2005: 346–348).

Despite the formal policy of the state, which adopted the federal system by Constitutional Decree no. 4 on 4 February 1991, the SRCC issued Decree no. 61 of 1992 (Sālim 2005: 346–348). Decree no. 61 adopted the recommendations of the committee report and merged the aforementioned forces into a single body called the Unified Police. The Decree also merged the customs authority into the police. Shortly thereafter, the Police Forces Act of 1992, which superseded the previous Acts relating to these forces, was ratified. For the first time, the Police Act of 1992 included a section specifying the institutional police objectives, alongside the traditional section laying out the duties of members of the police. Previous Police Acts had usually described the duties of senior officers and rank-and-file police, but said nothing about the objectives of the police as an institution. In addition to specifying the ordinary duties of the police, however, the Police Forces Act of 1992 explained that these duties were necessary in order to protect the higher values of the community and to preserve public morals. Important elements of good policing such as civil, democratic, independent and impartial service were not expressed. The significance of this new section on police objectives was that it made Allah and the

Sharia the sole sources of police legitimacy, instead of the previous source, which had mainly been the law and executive orders from senior officials in the executive branch.<sup>24</sup> This was because according to the ideology of the regime, the higher values of the community derived directly from Sharia law. As a result, a considerable proportion of police personnel began to argue that they were not accountable to anyone but God, and when and how no one could know.

## The Police Act of 1999

The Police Act of 1999 has been considered to be the most militarising act in the history of the Sudanese police, but this is mainly because it was intended to be a response to the serious military situation in the South. The conflict eventually spread to encompass most of Southern Sudan and adjacent regions in the Western and Eastern states. The military and its supporting militia (the Popular Defence Forces) were unable to put an end to the rebellion, which was aided by a broad alliance among most of the Northern political parties. The situation fatally threatened the stability of the central government in Khartoum, which was under great pressure from both the state and community sectors to mobilise more personnel and resources to contribute to the military operations. The police were an obvious early candidate for that role. However, one complication the government faced in this regard was that the Police Force Act of 1992 barely allowed any use of police forces in an active role in armed conflict. According to Article 8 of the Act, the police could only play this role under the provisions of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) Act when they were attached to the military. Police forces practising their ordinary duties in areas of active military operations had neither a legal obligation nor the power to engage in combat operations. The need to modify the legal framework to enable police forces to take part in active operations was one of the major factors behind the adoption of the Police Act of 1999.

Interestingly, for the first time in the history of police legislation in Sudan, Article 4 of the Police Act of 1999 used the term “enemy” (*‘aduww*), which had previously been wholly alien to civil police functions. The term was defined as “armed groups and gangs, rebels, outlaws, and those who step outside the legal authority” (*al-jamā‘āt wa-l-iṣābāt al-musallaḥa wa-l-mutamarridūn wa-l-khārijūn ‘an al-qānūn*

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<sup>24</sup> See the Police Forces Act of 1992 here : “Bi-Sha’n Qānūn Quwwāt al-Shurṭa li-Sanat 1992”, 22 February 1992, *Shabakat Qawānin al-Sharq*. <http://site.eastlaws.com/GeneralSearch/Home/Articles-Details?MasterID=201751> (15 June 2022)

*wa-l-sulṭa al-sharʿiyya*).<sup>25</sup> A further step in the same direction was Article 61, which imposed the death penalty on senior officers and other rank-and-file police if they were convicted for certain actions related to combat operations, such as fleeing before the enemy or surrendering any site or equipment without justifiable reasons. Similarly, Article 62 imposed the death penalty for surrendering to the enemy in a manner that showed cowardice, and also for forcing commanders to surrender any site or police equipment to any unauthorised person during combat. In the light of Articles 60, 61 and 62, it is clear that combat operations had explicitly become police duties, and this development significantly affected their conduct in the ensuing years.

The most serious consequence of the Police Act of 1999 was the engagement of police forces in the large-scale military campaign against rebel groups in Darfur. At the beginning of the campaign, the government attempted to deny that the armed conflict in the region was political, and declared that the rebels were no more than outlaw gangs and bandits. A large section of the Police Central Reserves (PCR) – the combat arm of the police – was mobilised to lead the campaign against the rebels in Darfur, and many men were transferred to serve in the police in Darfur State. Training protocols at the time did not include training in International Humanitarian Law (IHL) or other legal obligations regarding engagement in internal armed conflicts. As a result, this lack of training in IHL aggravated the already poor professional skills of the police in combat. High numbers of casualties from both sides were therefore recorded between January 2003 and November 2004, and serious crimes against civilians were committed by police, other security forces and their supporting militias.<sup>26</sup> This situation led the UN Security Council to intervene and refer the situation in Darfur to the International Criminal Court in March 2005.<sup>27</sup>

The role the Sudanese police played in Darfur and other rebellious areas of the country was an extremely important milestone in contemporary police doctrine and practice in Sudan. One might argue that the Sudanese police had entered a new phase in their history by adopting a very militant model, which was aggressive, largely unchecked and authoritarian. Interestingly, a considerable majority of police personnel supported this new model of central and military-style policing, as became clear during the drafting of the Police Act of 2008 in the aftermath of the

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<sup>25</sup> “Qānūn Quwwāt al-Shurṭa li-Sanat 1999”, 29 June 1999, *Eastlaws*, <http://site.eastlaws.com/GeneralSearch/Home/ArticlesTDetails?MasterID=1289608> (15 June 2022).

<sup>26</sup> International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur, “Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the United Nations Secretary-General”, 25 January 2005, *United Nations and the Rule of Law*, [https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/com\\_inq\\_darfur.pdf](https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/com_inq_darfur.pdf) (15 June 2022).

<sup>27</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 1593, 31 March 2005, *United Nations Digital Library*, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/544817?ln=en> (15 June 2022).



2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA)<sup>28</sup> between the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM).

## The Police Act of 2008 and the Influence of the CPA

The 2005 CPA provided for the self-determination of the people of Southern Sudan at the end of a six-year transitional period. The CPA also established a regional government in Southern Sudan that had considerable autonomy from the central government, and recognised the armed forces of the SPLM as an autonomous part of the Sudan Armed Forces. It further required that for the purposes of holding national and regional elections at the end of the transitional period, the transitional government had to draft and ratify a transitional constitution and enact broad social and political reforms to promote democracy and general freedoms.

The position of the police under the CPA and the anticipated constitution was one of the more sensitive issues during the negotiations. To control the volatile situation in Darfur, the government of Sudan was eager to keep the organisation of police forces and their legal framework as they were. However, the SPLM was supported by Northern political parties, which wanted to introduce radical reforms to the legal framework and the structure of the police and other security forces in order to help build a decentralised civil model. The CPA ultimately adopted a model of police administration composed of three levels: the national level, the Southern Sudan government level and the state level. The subsequent Interim National Constitution (INC), which was ratified in July 2005, adopted these same three levels, but Article 148 of the INC provided that the powers and functions of each level should be “prescribed by law”.<sup>29</sup> A few years later, during the drafting and ratification processes of the Police Act of 2008, the police used this phrase to expand the powers of the national police and restrict the state's powers over them. The majority of officers did not welcome these provisions because they viewed them as a second attempt at fragmenting and undermining the police. Fearing a repetition of what they had experienced during the May Regime, officers at all levels reacted aggressively towards any provision that might be considered to be an imposition of effective powers over the police force at a state level. Therefore, although Article 5 (2) of

<sup>28</sup> “Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of Sudan and the SPLM/A”, 9 January 2005, *United Nations Peacemaker*, <https://peacemaker.un.org/node/1369> (15 June 2022).

<sup>29</sup> “The Interim National Constitution of The Republic of The Sudan, 2005”, *FAOLEX Database*, <https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC132848/> (15 June 2022).

the Police Act of 2008<sup>30</sup> provided a decentralised police structure with three levels of police administration, it mostly lacked the substantial state statutory powers over the police that were mentioned in the CPA. Instead, the new Police Act set out in detail the duties and powers of the Minister of the Interior and the Police Director-General relating to recruitment, promotion, movement, supervision, and legal and administrative powers over police staff. Although most of the military terms and combat duties laid out in the Police Act of 1999 were withdrawn, the Sudanese police continued to exercise these functions in practice.

## Conclusion

The police in Sudan have long faced problematic issues regarding their function, structure and source of legitimacy. In fact, during the colonial era – and indeed until today – the police have been seen by the public as a harmful body that serves the state’s interests as opposed to the interests of the public. Throughout the history of the police in Sudan, there have been frequent rapid expansions of their functions, which has led to a great deal of police–public interaction in many areas of Sudanese daily life. Historically, this expansion has not been accompanied by the required development in police performance, either in practice or in theory, and public satisfaction with the services provided by the Sudanese police has therefore remained low, and the image of the police in the eyes of the majority of Sudanese community members is not especially favourable. The police’s organisational structure and the distribution of human resources among different departments have not reflected the real needs of local communities in most rural and urban areas of the country. Instead, police deployment has always reflected the threats the state needs to face, and these threats have not necessarily corresponded to the community’s interests or what they need from the police.

For example, when the conflict in Darfur erupted two decades ago, the police focused on protecting government buildings in large cities, as well as protecting the flow of supplies, but local communities wanted protection for them and their farms from being abused or looted by the rebel groups outside the cities. The police nevertheless continued to act as a government tool that was continuously used against people, which prevented the police from building a positive and trusting relation-

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<sup>30</sup> Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān, al-Majlis al-Waṭānī, “Qānūn Shurṭat al-Sūdān li-Sanat 2008”, 17 July 2008, *Redress*, <https://redress.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2008-Police-Forces-Act-Arabic.pdf> (15 June 2022).

ship with the public. The police rarely questioned the legitimacy of any policy or practice the government asked them to enforce. They also considered that the orders and directives issued by the executive power prevailed over all directives from the other state powers. When directives from different powers clashed, the police tended to collude with and support the executive, as happened in the case of the Blue Nile Police Commandant during the Joda strike.

To improve the policing model in Sudan, the police must critically analyse their functions and their ability to carry out these functions in a way that serves the community professionally and is responsive to the community's needs. In order to achieve this, they must maintain a balance between what the government asks them to do and what is just and procedurally significant, taking the public's needs and interests and human rights rule into consideration. This is essential for resolving the tensions between the functions of the police and their tools.

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Part 4: **Urban Life, Queer History, and Leisure  
in Colonial Times**



Marina D’Errico

## Chapter 10

# The Urban Fabric between Tradition and Modernity (1885–1956): Omdurman, Khartoum, and the British Master Plan of 1910

## Introduction

The aim of this chapter, which covers the period between the foundation in 1885 of Omdurman, one of the “Three Towns” (Khartoum, Omdurman and Khartoum North) that make up the capital of present-day Sudan, and the early 1950s is to describe its original lay-out and how it was transformed after two major events: the application of the British Master Plan (1910) and the mass arrival of “detrified elements” during the early years of the Condominium into Khartoum’s *Deims* and into Omdurman’s traditional neighbourhoods, which at the time were still divided according to their affiliation to each *gabīla* (Home 1990). In the case of Khartoum, the Master Plan presented no particular problems: therefore only one section of the chapter will be dedicated to it. The former Turco-Egyptian capital had been largely demolished on the creation of the Mahdist state (1885–1898), and materials from its ruins were used to build Omdurman. Subsequently, in 1898, a colonial Works Battalion completed the job by clearing the entire site (Daly [1986] 2003: 26) and the Anglo-Egyptian capital was built from scratch. With regard to what William McLean defined as “the real native city of Omdurman” (McLean [1911] 2011: 577), which was densely populated, on the other hand, the Master Plan overlapped with the existing urban fabric, and in the neighbourhoods in which it was implemented, it led to demolitions and the relocation of the population. The city continued to be split into two sections for almost fifty years: the southern part rebuilt by the British and the traditional neighbourhoods north of *khōr* Abu Anga.

The Master Plan of Khartoum, Omdurman and Khartoum North, presented at the International Conference organised by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in London in 1910, met with widespread acclaim as the prototype of a modern city in the tropics. In Britain, the construction of the new colonial capital was a major event. For the government and much of public opinion, it meant redemption for the humiliation suffered during the loss of the city and the death of General Charles Gordon at the hands of the Mahdists thirteen years earlier. However, the Plan was later judged to be “one of the more extreme examples of an



alien urban form imposed by a colonial power” (Home 1990: 4), and questions were raised about the real intentions of its drafters.

This chapter focuses on the spatial incompatibilities between the compact urbanism of the traditional city (Omdurman), which prioritised the family’s privacy and the rights of neighbours, and the axial planning of the modern city (Khartoum), which in contrast gave priority to an orthogonal grid of its streets. I will also compare the history of some traditional neighbourhoods of Omdurman with that of the *Deims* (native working-class areas) of Khartoum because of the affinities of the socio-cultural phenomena that appeared in both settlements from the 1920s on. The methodological approach I have adopted is an analysis of the syntax of the spaces, in an attempt to identify the “space that commands”: that is, the space around which the city develops and to which the greatest number of routes leads. This space defines an orientation that is still distinguishable centuries later according to the “theory of persistence”, a principle of urban planning advanced by Marcel Poète, who cited the example of Paris between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, developed around the cloister of Notre Dame.<sup>1</sup> Recent satellite images (see Map 2 below) still reveal some traces of Omdurman’s historical layout.

In a traditional Islamic city like Omdurman, the original focal point was the square or large open space in front of the mosque with the main streets leading off it. All around this space, a compact fabric of dwellings gave the city an unmistakable characteristic that could be found in various traditions, including that of pre-colonial Sudanese cities. In this type of layout, the dwellings are the formative and permanent element. In the model of the courtyard house that is most widely used in Sudan, the function of the courtyard is particularly interesting, as it enables the serial multiplication of both the living cells within the courtyard house and the entire courtyard house towards the outside.

## 1 The Foundation and Distinctive Features of Omdurman

The capital of the Mahdiyya was founded in 1885 by the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi ibn Muḥammad al-Ta‘ā’ishī. It is almost certain that the Mahdī (Muḥammad Aḥmad

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1 “On le voit, sur le cloître (of Notre Dame) que s’oriente le développement urbain de ces parages”. [We see that it is on the cloister (of Notre Dame) that the development of these areas is oriented] (Poète 1908: 201). The theory of “persistence” in town planning is owed to Marcel Poète (1929: 27): “L’examen du plan suffit à révéler le mode de croissance ou plutôt les divers modes de croissance de Paris” [“An examination of the plan is sufficient to reveal the mode of growth, or rather the different modes of growth, of Paris”].

ibn ‘Abdallāh al-Mahdī) actually had no plans to found a city (Kramer 2010: 23), his intention being rather to concentrate on reforming Islam. Indeed, all he needed was a large open space where troops could be gathered for the forthcoming jihad. The Mahdī’s sudden death, only a few months after achieving his crowning success in the revolution against Turco-Egyptian, rule left his successor ‘Abdullāhi with the more prosaic task of building a state, and therefore a capital. The decision to abandon Khartoum had already been clearly expressed by the Mahdī during his last sermon in the Turco-Egyptian capital (Kramer 2010: 24). Previously, he had even refused to settle in El Obeid when the city fell into his hands (on 19 January 1883), as he considered Egyptians to be unbelievers, and as such both they and their domains were spiritually contaminated.

The locality of Omdurman, which the French naturalist Frédéric Cailliaud laconically defined as “un lieu nommé Omdurman” [a place named Omdurman] (Cailliaud 1826, vol. II: 198), had undeniable advantages: a better climate than Khartoum; easier drainage of stagnant water, a source of frequent illnesses; and a position close to the confluence of the White Nile and the Blue Nile, opposite the fertile fields of Tuti Island, in an area crossed by numerous wadis, of which the *khōr* Abu Anga is the most important. For the Khalīfa in particular, Omdurman was also the gateway to the West, the escape route to the regions from which ‘Abdullāhi’s family came. Maintaining ties of proximity with one’s land of origin is a recurring theme in the history of Sudan. Osbert G.S. Crawford (1952: 77) explained that its curiously decentralised location south of Sennar, the capital of the Funj sultanate, was due to its being less far from the dynasty’s supposed place of origin. The Turco-Egyptians themselves, after initially settling in Sennar, had then opted for a more northerly position and founded Khartoum, which was closer to the borders of their motherland.

The rapid increase of Omdurman’s population was due above all to the call for *hijra* (emigration), a central theme of the Mahdī’s preaching. While the Mahdī had linked this phenomenon closely with the waging of jihad, the Khalīfa used the concept of the *hijra* to mobilise and relocate many Sudanese (Kramer 2010: 36). This interpretation introduces two interrelated aspects to the fabric of Omdurman: the Mahdist capital’s value as a religious symbol and the density of its population. Omdurman’s role as a “holy place” was an effective means of populating the city. Many visitors undertook the long and arduous journey to partake of the *baraka* that emanated from the Mahdī’s tomb, from the main mosque and from the very presence of the families of the Mahdī and Khalīfa as if they were on a pilgrimage, or at least visiting the tomb of a saint. This is the tone of several letters requesting permission to travel from the provinces to Omdurman (Kramer 2010: 45). Although many of these people returned home, many others stayed on in the Mahdist capital, which within a few years had reached a length of six miles

and a width of three. Estimates of the number of inhabitants of the capital vary widely, however. The historian Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm (1979: 86) believes that the population had reached 400,000 in 1895, Robert Kramer (2010: 53) puts it at roughly 240,000, William McLean, one of the three drafters of the Khartoum and Omdurman Master Plan, put the figure at 150,000, “or more than double the present number” (McLean [1911] 2011: 582), while Paolo Rosignoli (1898: 147), a missionary and prisoner of the Mahdist state, stated that it was between 120,000 and 150,000. Even if we take the smallest of these figures at face value, Omdurman exceeded the demographic standard of historical Sudanese cities, which had a maximum of 10,000 inhabitants, and even those of Khartoum when it was the capital of the Turco-Egyptian state.

The symbol of a “successful Islamic revolt – the first in modern history – against a Muslim regime of foreign-backed ‘unbelievers’” (Kramer 2010: VII), the city was rarely referred to as Omdurman. It appears on certain Mahdist coins as *dār al-hijra* (Kramer 2010: 37), and was also designated as *al-buq’a al-musharrafa* [the noble place], *‘aṣīmat al-Islām* [the capital of Islam] and *al-madīna al-munawwara* [the shining city], a name traditionally reserved for the city of the Prophet (Searcy 2011: 109–110). *Buq’at al-Mahdī* [the Mahdī’s place] seems to have been the most popular name, however, and is the one used for the city in the French edition of the 1908 Baedeker guide to Sudan, which notes: “Le centre (où s’élevaient les sanctuaires et la ville retranchée habitée par la tribu des Bagaras, à laquelle appartenait Abdallah) est appelé par les indigènes el-Bouga, c.-a.-d. le lieu (saint)” [The centre (where the sanctuaries and the entrenched city inhabited by the Baggara tribe, to which Abdallah belonged, were located) is called el-Bouga, which means the (holy) place, by the indigenous people] (Baedeker 1908: 408). In what he terms the Omdurman experience, Kramer emphasises the emergence of a dominant ideology, that of the riverine populations (*awlād al-balad*), whose religion and culture were considered to be normative. As such they were projected in the spatial symbolisation of Omdurman as a “holy place” (Kramer 2010: IX–X).

On the basis of these expectations and this culture, the historian Kim Searcy identifies the Khalīfa’s main problem as maintaining the difficult balance between the need to build a state while retaining spiritual and political authority “in a region that had grown accustomed to instability and warfare” (Searcy 2011: 90). The set of symbols, rituals and ceremonies inherited from the Mahdī, which resonated like an echo in the social and religious consciousness of his subjects, was used by ‘Abdullāhi to legitimise his power in the absence of a charismatic leadership like his predecessor’s. For example, Rosignoli (1898: 176) recounted ‘Abdullāhi’s desire to be personally present at his subjects’ five daily prayers:

[The Khalifa] cancelled the Mahdi's order that the prayer should be done neighbourhood by neighbourhood under the supervision of the head: he commanded instead that it should be done in one place in his presence. The *giamàa* [sic] is at his residence and five times a day the inhabitants of Omdurman, even if they are from outlying neighbourhoods, must go there. . .

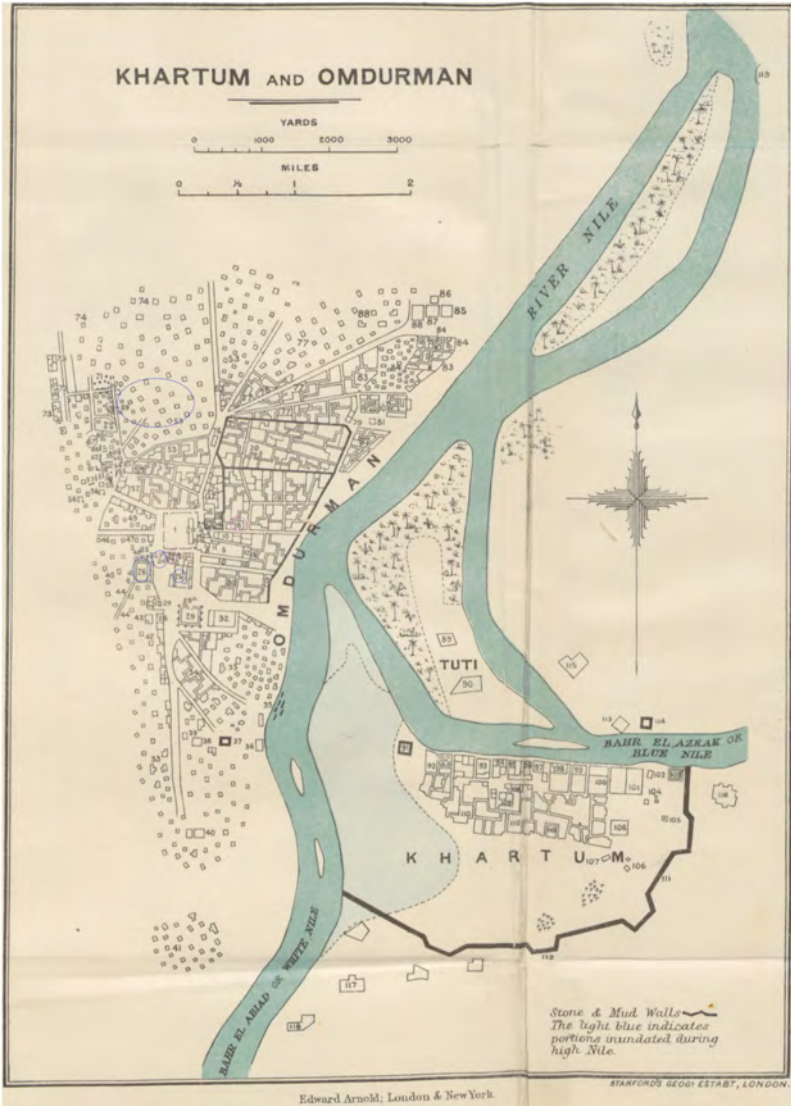
According to Rosignoli (1898: 188–189), the wealthier classes who did not need to work would spend much of the day at the mosque, praying and commenting on the Quran, while Karl Neufeld wrote that the daily life of the prisoners of the Khalifa was marked by the five daily prayers and reading the Mahdi's *rātib*: "When not working, we had to read the Mahdi's *ratib*, a description of prayer-book, containing extracts from the Quoran [sic] with interpolations of the Mahdi" (Neufeld 1899: 71).

## 2 The Original Layout

According to Kramer (2010: 165), the layout of Omdurman was inspired by that of Sennar in the Funj period, especially with regard to the enclosed "royal quarter" with its adjoining administrative district. This was the design of Sennar city centre at the time of Bādī II Abū Diqn (1644–1681) as it appears from the description in the *Funj Chronicle* (Holt 1999: 10–11). Omdurman was, however, dense with different cultural references, and complex and well-structured in its functions. It embodied the traditional division into two zones – the centre and the residential neighbourhoods – which some authors view as a key feature of early Arab-Islamic cities, as far as it has been possible to reconstruct it,<sup>2</sup> and of the Ottoman cities of North Africa and the Middle East from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Raymond 2008a: 59–61). In the latter, the sovereign's palace might be located in a decentralised position on the edge of the city, as in Cairo or Damascus. The layout of the centre was the responsibility of the authorities, but the larger area of residential neighbourhoods around it was the responsibility of the residents. In the centre there were the mosque, from which the main roads led off and to which the *sūq* was customarily attached, the seat of government, the administrative buildings and the homes of the aristocracy. This seems to have been the layout of Turco-Egyptian Khartoum, according to Roland Stevenson (1966), although in this case there were two markets.

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2 On the cities of Kufa, Basra, Fustat and others, see Denoix 2008.



Legend of von Slatin's map (extracted)

- 1 - The Mosque
- 3 - Mahdi's tomb
- 7 - Khalifa's Palace
- 10 - House of Khalifa's Mulazemin
- 15 - House of Mahdi's family

- 16 - Khalifa Ali Wad Helu's house
- 18 - House of Khalifa's son
- 20 - Mud wall of Omdurman
- 22-28 - Old and new house of von Slatin
- 23-24 - Houses of Kadis
- 25-26 - Yakub's old and new house

- 29 - Beit el Amana
- 31 - Prison
- 55 - Market courts of justice
- 69 - The Muslmania quarter
- 80 - Beit el Mal

**Map 1:** Khartoum and Omdurman in 1898.<sup>3</sup>

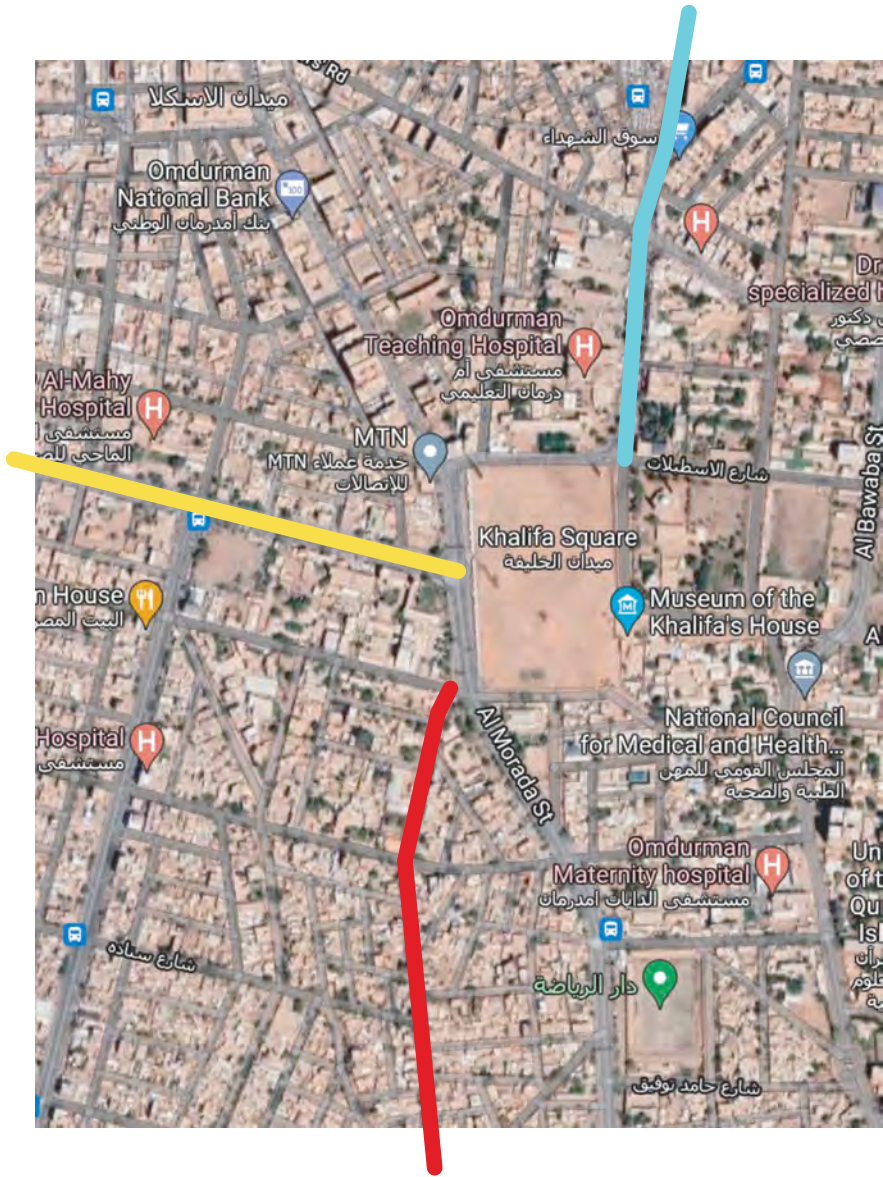
<sup>3</sup> Source: *Produced in the Intelligence Division, War Office, from a map compiled by COL. R. C. SLA-TIN. 1898.* Digitized copy by the British Library. HMNTS 9061.ee.34.

From the map of Omdurman produced in 1898 by the Intelligence Division of the War Office (Map 1)<sup>4</sup> from a map Rudolf von Slatin had drawn during his imprisonment, it is immediately evident that the square in front of the mosque was the space that dominated the city and oriented its lines of expansion. This was not only because of its central position and size (it could hold seventy thousand people) (Rosignoli 1898: 159) – the Mahdists considered it the fourth greatest mosque in the world after Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem (Searcy 2011: 110) – but also, and above all, because all the main roads led off it. It was along these roads that the town developed, as can be seen from Map 1 and modern satellite images today (Map 2). The roads were laid out according to the prevailing needs of military logistics; in fact, each of them eventually opened on to a large open space (*hujra*) where troops could gather: to the north, the *darb al-shuhadā'*, the Road of the Martyrs, was built with a possible expedition against Egypt in mind; the *darb al-'arḍa*, the Road of the Parade Ground to the west, ensured an escape route; and the third, to the south, passed close by the arsenal (*bayt al-amān*) and the old fort of Kara, where the *jihādīyya*, the professional army, was stationed. In the traditional layout, the main streets ensured that all inhabitants had access to the mosque and the market.

The house of the Khalifa and the *qubba* (“dome”, referring here to the tomb) of the Mahdī occupied areas close to the mosque, as was typical for government headquarters (*dār al-imāra*) in other traditional cities, where they were sometimes built against the *qibla*, the wall of the mosque facing Mecca (Bianca 2000: 52). The heart of the city contained the mosque, the tomb of the Mahdī and the house of the Khalifa: the religious symbol and the political power were gathered together and physically surrounded by a mud brick wall built in 1885–1886. The urban centre also contained the homes of the city’s elite, including those of the Mahdī’s family, ‘Abdullāhi’s brother Ya‘qūb and the other two *khulafā'* (Mahdist “caliphs” or generals), Muḥammad Sharif and ‘Alī wad Ḥilū, as well as the homes (both new and old) of von Slatin and certain qadis (judges). The administrative and legal powers were physically present in both the centre and more decentralised locations, with each state function having its own building. Also in the centre were the lithography press and the weapons and supply depot (*bayt al-amān*, “now a football stadium”). The *bayt al-māl* was decentralised towards the north: “The Beit al-Māl stood on the site now occupied by the Government Technical School and was the Khalifa’s Mint and Treasury” (Sarsfield-Hall n.d.: 6–7). The building that housed the court responsible for market affairs and a small prison had a permanent seat in the centre of the *sūq*

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<sup>4</sup> This is a digitised copy from the British Library. HMNTS 9061.ee.34, which is easier to read than other reproductions (see Kramer 2010 for example). The copy in the National Records Office of Khartoum (no catalogue number) is entitled *Khartoum and Omdurman. Produced in the Intelligence Division, War Office, from a map compiled by COL. R. C. SLATIN. 1898.*



- Road to North
- Road to West
- Road to South

Map 2: Satellite image of central Omdurman.

area, and the court responsible for the port of al-Mawrada probably had one there too.

One interesting variation in the layout of Omdurman is that the classic model of a market attached to the mosque, as in Aleppo, Kairouan, other Ottoman cities (Raymond 2008a: 59) and Turco-Egyptian Khartoum itself (Lejean 1865: 26), was not used: the Omdurman *sūq* was in a decentralised position in the western part of the city, separated from the mosque by the three parallel neighbourhoods of the Kanana, the White Nile Arabs and the Degheim Arabs (marked on Map 1 by numbers 49, 52 and 51), a distance of about five hundred metres. Why was this? Because most of the market goods came from the West, as Kramer has suggested? Or was it to provide space for the large neighbourhood of the Muslim converts (*muslimāniyya* or *masālma*), who mainly lived from trade? Or for both reasons? It is impossible to find a definitive answer in the data that are currently available to us.

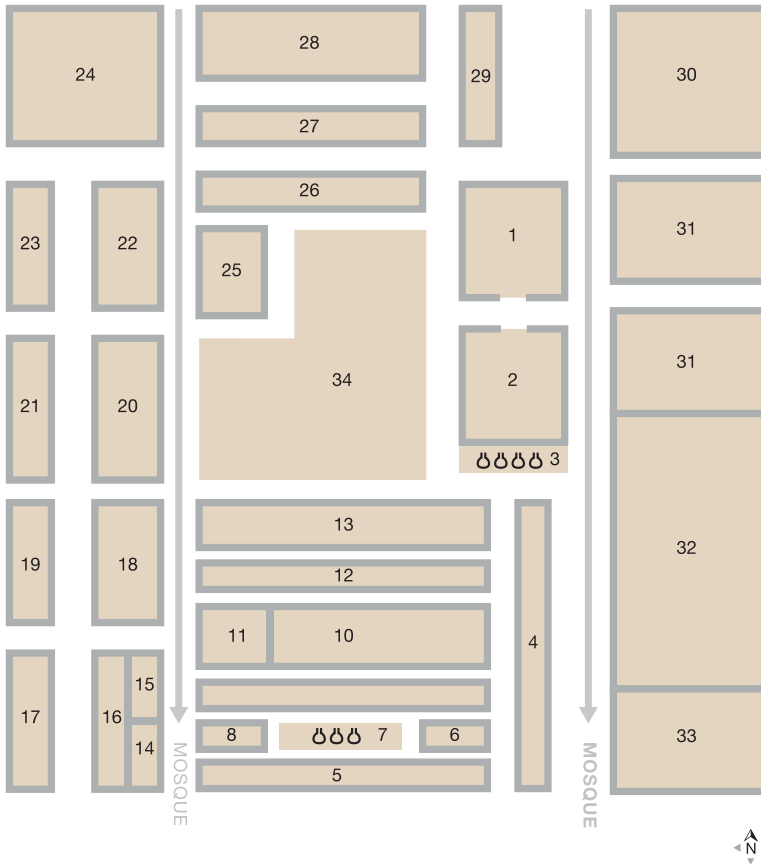
In any event, according to Kramer, the reorganisation of the *sūq*, which was completed in 1888, was one of the most complex operations of the Khalifa's administration, not least because of the establishment of a special police force and court.<sup>5</sup> The project applied the principle of a serial multiplication of linear modules, which in this case were not a fixed structure (Rosignoli 1898: 158), but generally allowed a large number of combinations both along a street (the linear *sūq*) and around a courtyard (*funduq*), giving rise to numerous models.<sup>6</sup> These modules are recognisable on Father Josef Ohrwalder's map (Figure 24, see further below), and even later on the Baedeker map of 1908. A precise description of the new *sūq* is provided by the autoptic drawing (Figure 11) by Rosignoli, who knew it well because he worked there. Early on in his imprisonment, in fact, the Khalifa summoned Rosignoli and informed him that he would have to support himself and look for a job. This the Catholic priest did without further ado by opening a stand in the *sūq* selling cooked broad beans.

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5 The Mahdī had already assigned a judge to the market, who was responsible for separating men and women in public spaces. The Khalifa expanded and strengthened the structure of the market with a twenty-five-man police force (*muṣliḥīn al-sūq*) whose task was to maintain order, and one state official who controlled prices, weights and measures of goods, the regular payment of wage earners and the proper disposal of waste, and who inspected meat, vegetables and other foodstuffs (Kramer 2010: 29, 31, 73–74).

6 The French orientalist Jean Sauvaget hypothesised that the linear model of the *sūq* in Aleppo was a consequence of the transfer of merchants from the Byzantine *agora* to the old colonnaded avenue, which had fallen into disuse after the Arab conquest and the formation of the Umayyad Caliphate in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century (Sauvaget 1941: Text: 78, 104, 180; Album: Plat. LXV). See also the maps of the *sūq* of al-Attarin (Fes) and of the *sūq* el-Belat (Tunis) in Petruccioli (2007: 151). One of the later examples is the Fondaco (*funduq*) dei Tedeschi near the Rialto Bridge in Venice (14<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries).





- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1 Zeriba of aw court   | 18 Saddles  |
| 2 Prison zeriba  | 19 <i>El suk el Kodar</i> : Vegetables                          |
| 3 Forks  | 20 Slaughterhouse & sale of mutton                              |
| 4 Oil and butter   | 21 Slaughterhouse & sale of camel & cow meat                    |
| 5 Carpets  | 22 <i>El suk el tabachin</i> : Trattorias & sale of cooked food |
| 6 Cotton   | 23 Fat  |
| 7 Square for sale of hens & pigeons                            | 24 Women's market   |
| 8 Sprayers   | 25 Tinsmiths  |
| 9 Salt & spices  | 26 Silversmiths   |
| 10 Gosoria (gallery) of jewelry, sugar & European products     | 27 Firewood   |
| 11 Square for donkey shearing                                  | 28 Construction wood  |
| 12 <i>El suk moseimin, barbes</i>                              | 29 Laundries  |
| 13 <i>El suk el dammur</i> : Cotonina                          | 30 Wood for construction  |
| 14 Tanned leather  | 31 Broad beans, lupins, honey & dates                           |
| 15 Repair & shoemakers red & black shoes                       | 32 Square for hay   |
| 16 <i>El suk el marakib</i> : Red & black shoes worked at home | 33 Carpenters   |
| 17 Scabbards for sabers, knives & money                        | 34 Big square for livestock trading                             |

Figure 11: The sūq of Omdurman.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Source: Rosignoli 1898: 156.

In the centre of a square open space stood the court established by the Khalifa for the market, *maḥkamat al-sūq*, a small prison and a platform with four gallows. Although it was quite a long way from the mosque, the grouping of goods in the Omdurman *sūq* by sector respected the spatial hierarchical scale of noxiousness (annoying noises and unpleasant smells) typical of many Ottoman cities, where the markets were more closely attached to the mosque and observed the spatial hierarchies in connection with the place of prayer and the purificatory rites required for access to it (Bianca 2000: 130–131). In Rosignoli's drawing (Figure 11), in fact, the area with the cooked food stalls, the slaughterhouse for mutton and goat's meat and the tinkers, blacksmiths and silversmiths were all located in the northernmost part of the *sūq*, furthest from the mosque. The carpet, perfume, jewellery and linen stalls, on the other hand, were close to it. This type of spatial location of goods seems to have been dictated by an intention to affirm the continuity of a tradition to which the merchant class, which included many *awlād al-balad* by its very historical origins (O'Fahey & Spaulding 1974: 81) and more recent past (Stevenson 1966: 26), was particularly sensitive.

Surrounding the centre were the residential neighbourhoods, a vast number of houses scattered over a large area that was destined to become more compact due to the increasing population density. The Khalifa divided the city into zones – one for each *gabīla* – that were distributed according to logistics that would guarantee his personal safety. For all the thirteen years of his reign, 'Abdullāhi had to face stubborn opposition from the *Ashrāf*, the extended family of the Mahdī, and the *awlād al-balad*, the riverine dwellers of the North, who contested his appointment as early as his investiture ceremony (Holt 1958: 120) and later attempted a coup d'état and an insurrection. The allocation of land grants in Omdurman was facilitated by the fact that while houses could be sold, bought, rented and mortgaged, ownership of the land remained in the hands of the state, in particular the *bayt al-māl* (Kramer 2010: 116). This was nothing new for the Sudanese: during the Funj sultanate, according to Jay Spaulding, “[the sultan] alone could make grants of land anywhere in the kingdom” (O'Fahey and Spaulding 1974: 54).

The allotment of individual plots (*dār*) to the aristocracy and collective plots (*khiṭṭāt*) to the various social groups was an ancient custom that some historians have traced back to the Prophet's policy with regard to the city of Medina (Denoix 2008: 119). According to Raymond (2008c: 784), it was an “old-established phenomenon, one that sometimes reflects the original concern to lodge the varied groups present at the city's foundation”. Turco-Egyptian Khartoum was also divided into neighbourhoods called *hilla* (group of houses or village). The traveller Guillaume Lejean hypothesised that the city had its origins in the fusion of several villages. He mentioned the Coptic quarter, the sailors' quarter (*el-Marakebiè*), the “arabe et marchand” [Arab and merchant] quarter (Lejean 1865: 25–26) and the quarter of

the Danagla, who numbered about 18,000 in Khartoum (Lejean 1865: 28). In the pre-colonial era, cities such as El Obeid, Berber and Shendi had also been divided into neighbourhoods according to ethnic backgrounds (see Burckhardt 1819: 212, 217 and Lejean 1865: 41).

The occupation of residential districts was not engineered from above. The authorities delegated their arrangement to the various clans and tribal and family groups, which organised and managed them autonomously, and which tended in general – but not always<sup>8</sup> – to settle in quarters defined by tribal affiliation.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Omdurman, as far as the division of responsibilities was concerned, it does not appear that the Khalifa went beyond the traditional prerogatives of his predecessors, the founders and/or promoters of the older Arab-Islamic cities, the more modern Ottoman ones or even Turco-Egyptian Khartoum itself.

As population density increased, decisions at the neighbourhood level ended up by having a major impact on the urban layout, giving it an aspect that is generally described as “organic”, since it can be compared to the growth of a plant. In fact, whole portions of the streets, which gave access to properties, could be swallowed up by the serial expansion of houses following agreement with the neighbours. Indeed, at the end of the process, the network of streets (except for the main thoroughfares) was reduced to a minimum structure of narrow winding alleys, cul-de-sacs, gates and steps, which filtered access from public spaces to the private intimacy of the house (Bianca 2000: 38). In short, first came the houses, and then came the streets in the spaces that remained. It would be wrong to infer some kind of anarchic use of the land, however; residents did not have unconditional freedom, and once boundaries had been established, all subsequent decisions were negotiated within a group or between different social groups by the respective sheikhs (Raymond 2008b: 784). In the type Arab-Islamic city, and later on in Ottoman cities, the religious and socio-cultural values of family privacy and the rights of neighbours were considered a priority that was reflected in the hierarchy of spaces. The relationships between the system of streets and buildings, and between public and private spaces, were completely inverted compared with the

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in Khandak, residents tended to refer to themselves simply as al-Khanadqa, inhabitants of Khandak (Soghayroun 2009: 132).

<sup>9</sup> As for Omdurman, despite the Khalifa's attempts to promote mixed marriages (Kramer 2010: 108–111), the division of neighbourhoods based on *gabila* is confirmed by Rosignoli (1898: 169): “Omdurman è un'agglomerazione di tutte le razze e di tutte le tribù del Sudan”, but “per lo più ciascuna tribù, ciascuna razza vive in un quartiere a sè e difficilmente i matrimoni si concludono fra abitanti di due quartieri diversi” [“Omdurman is an agglomeration of all the races and tribes of Sudan” but “each tribe mostly lives in its own neighbourhood, each race lives in its own neighbourhood, and marriages hardly ever take place between inhabitants of two different neighbourhoods”].

norms of western town planning, and a body of law that privileged private law over public law guaranteed the preservation of the system over time. In other words, it was a type of structure that exhibited the rationality of a coherent system despite not being based on a geometric design, (Raymond 2008a: 58).

This particular type of layout in Sudanese cities seems have been an element of continuity, at least in the three centuries preceding the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. It can be discerned from the accounts by Western visitors when they refer to “disorder”. Poncet (2016: 70), Burckhardt (1819: 218, 278) and Cailliaud (1826 Tome II: 100, 194, 258) all refer to a confused cluster of dwellings when they describe Sennar, Berber, Shendi, Halfaya or Turco-Egyptian Khartoum itself, which is described as “higgledy-piggledy without any special plan” (Stevenson 1966: 13). An American tourist who visited Khartoum in 1852 wrote: “There is no plan whatever in the disposition of the buildings” (Taylor [1854] 1862: 277), while Lejean (1865: 26) noted the similarity between the “old” part of Khartoum (the area dating back to 1830) and Cairo in their network of narrow streets and small neighbourhoods. The same phenomenon occurred in Omdurman: the map produced by McLean at the London Conference in 1910 (see Figure 22 below) shows a centre suffocated by the expansion of residential neighbourhoods that had swallowed up much of the secondary road network. Edwin Sarsfield-Hall, the Governor of Khartoum province between 1929 and 1936, wrote: “There was no attempt to plan or lay out Omdurman during the days of the Dervish Regime [ . . . ]. Houses were put up anywhere where there happened to be an empty space and, except for a few main thoroughfares, there were no streets at all” (Sarsfield-Hall n.d.: 8). In fact, the Khalifa intervened as little as possible, and then only when it was dictated by security concerns (Kramer 2010: 116).

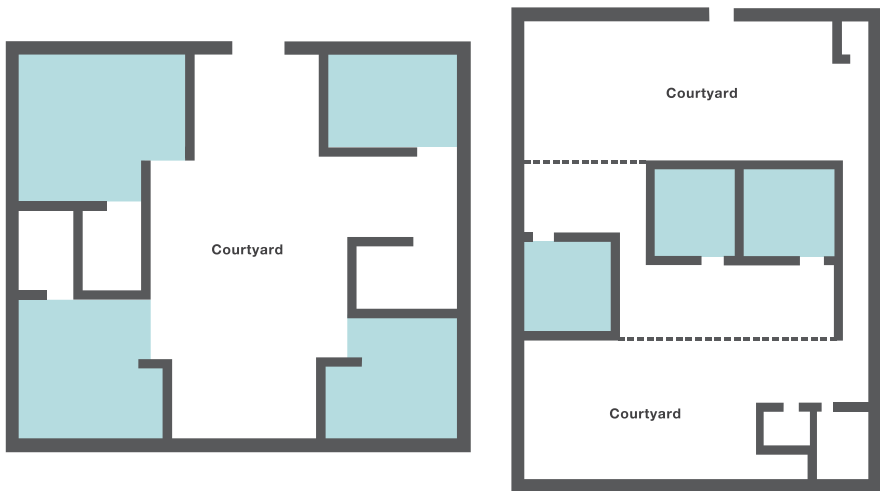
### 3 The Courtyard House

The origins of the courtyard house are lost in the mists of time, although its presence is attested to across an area stretching from China to the Atlantic and from the Sahel to Scotland (Edwards 2006). It is a type<sup>10</sup> of dwelling whose spatial distribution and permanence over time is due to its high level of climatic and socio-cultural adaptability, which has resulted in at least two different models and a large number of variants. It allows an optimal use of urban land in situations of high housing density without the need to resort to adding higher floors. Because of the

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<sup>10</sup> For the correct use of “model” and “type”, we refer here to the impeccable definition by Quatremère de Quincy (1832: 120–121, 629–630).

difference in temperature between indoors (the living quarters) and outdoors (the courtyard) at night and during the day and the materials used (sun-dried mud bricks), it is also the only possible housing solution in situations of extreme heat (Meir and Roaf 2006). This type of building is now the focus of international interest among architects (Weber and Yannas 2014), who see it as an element capable of ensuring sustainable urban development.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 12:** Interior and exterior courtyard house.<sup>12</sup>

The flexible structure of the courtyard house enables an articulated organisation of spaces, which vary according to its occupants' socio-cultural needs. Two models have been identified (Petherbridge 1995): the interior courtyard house, in which the courtyard is enclosed, and the exterior courtyard house (Figure 12), where the courtyard surrounds the house. However, their different origins (urban for the former, rural for the latter) are not certain. In any case, the former would not have been a good fit for Sudan, where the second model, which is the most widespread, appeared in cities. The dwellings described by Rosignoli were surrounded by a fence. In a kind of social egalitarianism, it was the materials used in the fence that distinguished the houses of the rich from those of the poor: "the most numer-

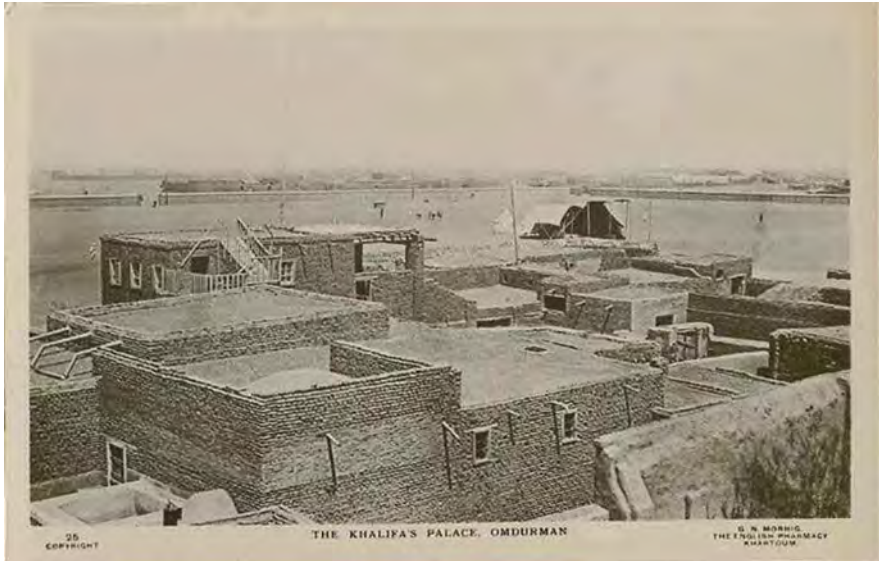
<sup>11</sup> For instance, this type of courtyard house has been used today for the Tuwaiq Palace in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, by architects such as Basem Shihabi and Nabil Fanous, and on the campus of the American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates by architect Serge Sautelli, to name just a couple of famous examples.

<sup>12</sup> Drawing by the author.

ous dwellings are made of earth and covered with *durah* thatch, surrounded by walls for the wealthy, and with *zeribe* [a thorny hedge enclosure] for the poor” (Rosignoli 1898: 147). Rosignoli (1898: 158) also wrote about “The *makkama* [sic] and the prison which are surrounded by *zeribe* and thus permanently delimited.”

The Khalifa’s home was a courtyard house built in 1887, a year after the failed coup d’état by the *Ashrāf*. Today, it is a museum with a plaque on its front door commemorating the architect Pedro, identified as the Italian Piero Agati, who was not an architect but a master builder, and one of the prisoners of the Khalifa. He won the Khalifa’s friendship and trust, married a Sudanese woman and ended his days in Omdurman after refusing an offer of repatriation (David 1988: 287). Sarsfield-Hall also names “one Hamid Abdul Nur” who worked “under the direction of an Italian captive named Pietro” (Sarsfield-Hall n.d.: 7). Of all the buildings in the city, this is the one that has made the greatest impression on the popular imagination. In his novella *The Empty House*, Conan Doyle even had his hero, Sherlock Holmes, pass through the Khalifa’s “court.” Von Slatin and McLean called it a “palace.” In reality, although vast and comfortable, with several courtyards and adjoining rooms, it was a rather simple dwelling, consonant with its owner’s frugal lifestyle, with modestly-sized rooms and ceilings that were not too high, as was probably the norm for the dwellings of Omdurman’s elite at the time. The only exception was the second floor, which the Khalifa added in 1891 after the failed uprising of the *ashrāf* and *awlād al-balad*. Sarsfield-Hall (n.d.: 7) reports the well-known popular story: “[. . .] The double-storied building was added in 1891 in order that the Khalifa might have a room from which he could look out over the adjacent Mosque Square without being under observation.” In reality, the entire west side of the house faces directly on to the Mosque Square. The second floor was not necessary for secretly spying on the crowds of worshippers, but was useful for being seen from afar. In fact, according to Rosignoli (1898: 215), the Khalifa, became more and more fearful for his safety, to the point where he was continuously accompanied by his guards (Figure 13).

The difference between the interior and exterior courtyard house is not just morphological; it is structural. In the interior version, the open space of the courtyard is in the centre and encircled by solid elements, the rooms, around its perimeter, and its only function is as a passage or connection between the various rooms of the house. In the exterior model, the courtyard, which is at a perimeter, performs at least four functions: as a passageway, a meeting area, a building lot and a mobile border of the property when it has to merge with that of the neighbours. The courtyard is the space on which other similar and self-sufficient modular dwellings can be built for children and grandchildren through a process of serial aggregation (Petruccioli 2007: 135). The relationship between the built and open spaces is destined to evolve and change according to need. In the beginning, there is only one



**Figure 13:** The Khalifa's Palace.<sup>13</sup>

dwelling unit, but within two or three generations, the courtyard can be reduced to a corridor (Figure 14), with the result that even if population density grows, the surface area of the plot remains constant. The central location of the dwelling unit divides the courtyard into at least two parts: one at the front, towards the entrance, and one at the back, or in any case in a decentralised position. This feature made the courtyard house particularly suited to the lifestyles of many *umarā'* (military commanders, sing. *amīr*) and merchants in Omdurman, who divided their living quarters into male and female areas during the Mahdiyya (Kramer 2010: 103).

In the absence of any documentation dating back to the Mahdiyya, the plans collected by Munīra Ḍayfallāh for a survey conducted for the Ministry of Housing in the 1990s offer the opportunity for a direct analysis.<sup>14</sup> The houses in question were built between 1910 and 1930, not long after the end of the Khalifa's reign. The information is anonymised for reasons of privacy, and all that is known is that they were located in one of the neighbourhoods of Omdurman that had not been impacted by the Khartoum Master Plan. An examination of the floor inspires a number of thoughts about the internal and external spatial dynamics of the courtyard house.

<sup>13</sup> National Records Office, Khartoum, Sudan (no catalogue number).

<sup>14</sup> The aim of the survey (Daifalla 1998) was to identify socio-cultural factors influencing the design of dwellings with a view to planning residential areas or resettlement schemes.

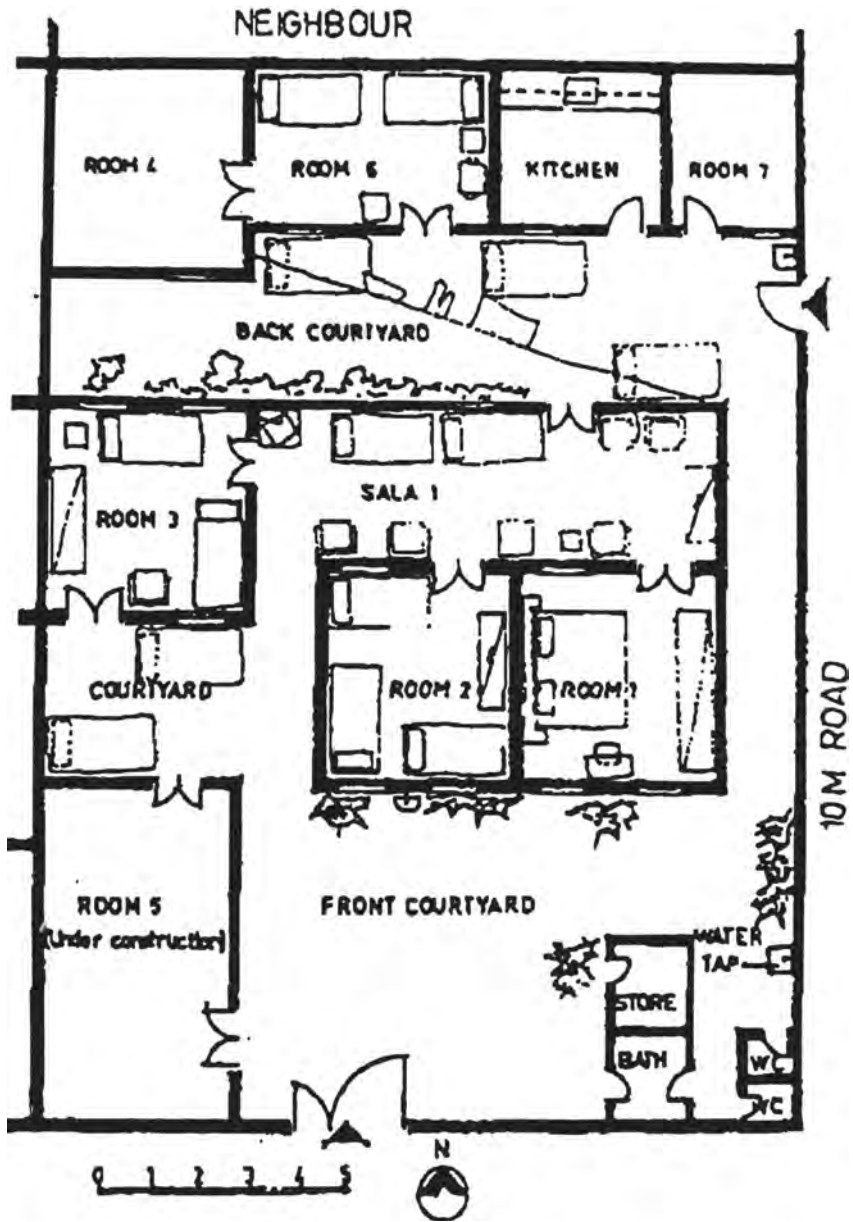


Figure 14: Dwelling unit.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Daifalla 1998: 59. Notice the expansion of the built space in relation to the open space of the courtyard.



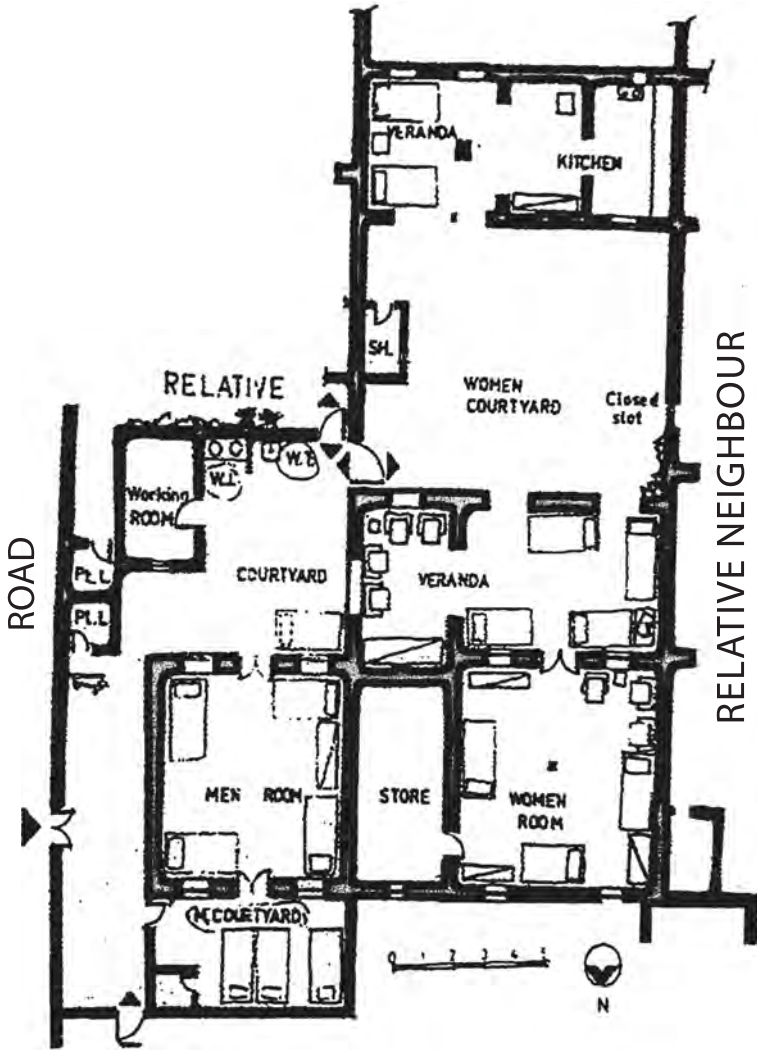


Figure 15: Courtyard house with *nafaj* built in 1930.<sup>16</sup>

As regards the distribution of the interior spaces, the floor plan of a house (Figure 15) shows the two courtyards and the two separate areas for males and females, the first of which, the reception room and men’s courtyard, is near the street door. Although small in size, it seems to be “the commanding space”: it is through

<sup>16</sup> Daifalla 1998: 67.

here that all the members of the family have to walk in order to leave the house. One might conclude that the spatial hierarchy respects a social hierarchy in which women are subordinate to the men of the family, but a closer examination reveals a different story: surprisingly, if we focus our attention on the *nafāj*, we see that the situation is reversed in favour of women. The *nafāj* is an opening in the fence in the women's area that connects the compound with that of the neighbours. In practice, it is a secondary exit that allows women to reach the street simply by crossing the neighbouring properties without having to pass through the men's area. In reality, in the intimacy of the home, it is the women's courtyard that is the "space that commands", and to which most of the paths lead: this is where the family gathers in the evenings, where they sleep on hot nights and where the comings and goings to and from either the kitchen or neighbours' properties all originate.

Other elements to note in Figures 14 and 15 (a house built in 1930) that are present in almost all of the floor plans are the position of the entrance to the house and the location of the kitchen and lavatory. The entrance door to the street, which is cut into the boundary wall of the house or courtyard, is never on an axis with the entrance to the living quarters. Respect for the family's privacy, which is reflected in a number of prohibitions and customs that continue to this day, is perhaps the best-integrated principle in the building of dwellings through sequences of openings and closures that filter access from the street. As can be seen in the streets of Omdurman today, the perimeter walls of the houses are impenetrable, and windows are either rare or absent altogether. These measures were so deeply embedded in building practices that they are still applied today in some public buildings. A bayonet entrance (*saqīfa* or *sqifa* in Sudanese Arabic) can be found at the National Records Office in Khartoum (entrance door to the south, exit door to the inner garden in the east at the end of the foyer), at the student entrance to Khartoum University and in the gatehouse to Comboni College. Conversely, respect for the privacy of others allowed those who wanted to open up a doorway on to the street to do so only on condition that it was not directly in front of their neighbour's entrance. In Omdurman, merchants who went into town on market days were required to dismount from their camels when entering residential quarters, otherwise they would have been able to see over the boundary walls of the houses (Daifalla 1998: 38).

In the domestic environment, as in the market, annoying noises and unpleasant smells were banished. In the plans, the kitchen, which is in the women's area, is an isolated room that opens on to the back courtyard so as to easily allow fumes and smells to escape, while the lavatory, which is separate from the rest of the house, is invariably located against the wall facing the street (where there is one) so as not to bother the neighbours, and is situated in the men's space so as to avoid the embarrassment of male guests having to go into the women's area.

## 4 Clustering Process: The *Nafāj* in the Construction of the City

As a result of serial multiplication, the courtyard house creates an increasingly compact urban fabric as the population grows. In the early years of Omdurman, the houses were still set at some distance from one another (Map 1). If a courtyard house was no longer sufficient to contain all the dwelling units, the simplest solution was to build another courtyard house immediately adjacent to it, so that at least one side of the external wall was shared, in accordance with the same process of serial aggregation that we have already seen for dwelling units, as schematised in Figure 16. The most interesting aspect of this is the key role played by the *nafāj* during the whole process, which as far as we know has not attracted the attention of scholars until now.

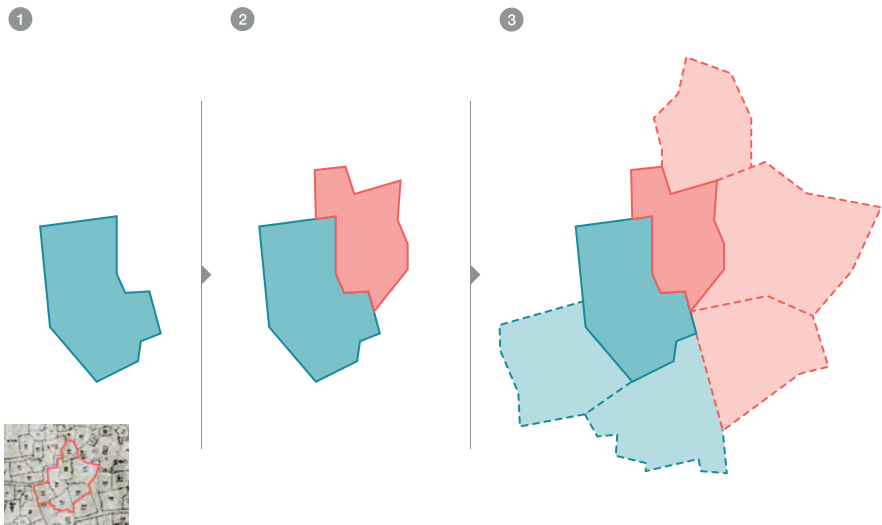


Figure 16: Clustered houses.<sup>17</sup>

Figure 17 shows one dwelling unit divided into two sections, which we have marked A and B. The former was built in 1920 and the latter in 1931. In 1989, section B was the male area (*diwān*) and A was the female area for the same family. As described in Ḍayfallāh's report, A was split in 1991 to make room for a new dwelling unit (which we have marked C) owned by the brother of A's owner (Figure 18 with A and C). In the meantime, B had become the home of one of the sons of the owner

<sup>17</sup> Drawing by the author.

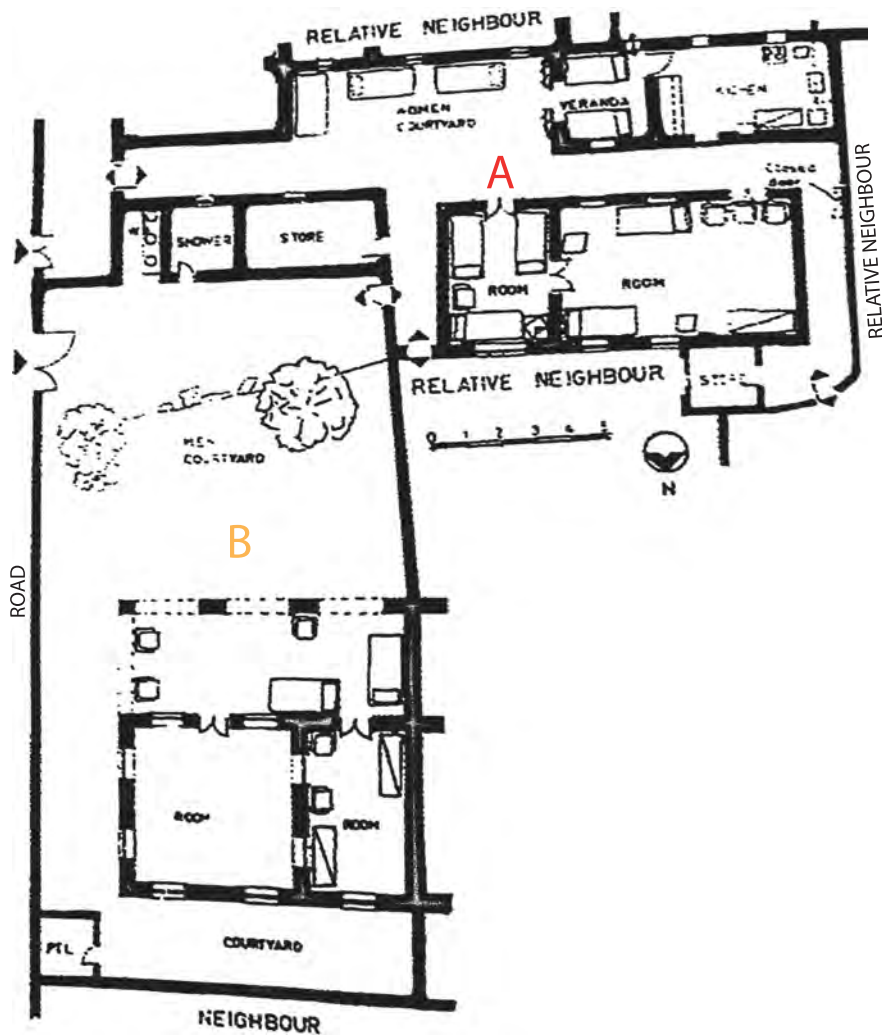


Figure 17: Sections A (built in 1920) and B (built in 1931) of the same unit.<sup>18</sup>

of A, who had married the neighbours' daughter and given part of the land to his uncle. The new couple in B (Figure 19) decided to close the *nafāj* with the maternal property, which still had three *nafājs*, through two of which access to the street was possible either through C or D (where the in-laws lived). The lower *nafāj* led

<sup>18</sup> Drawing by the Author after Daifalla 1998: 70.

to another relative's property (not shown on this plan) built in 1910, which had no exit. The properties had thus merged into a cluster (Figure 20).

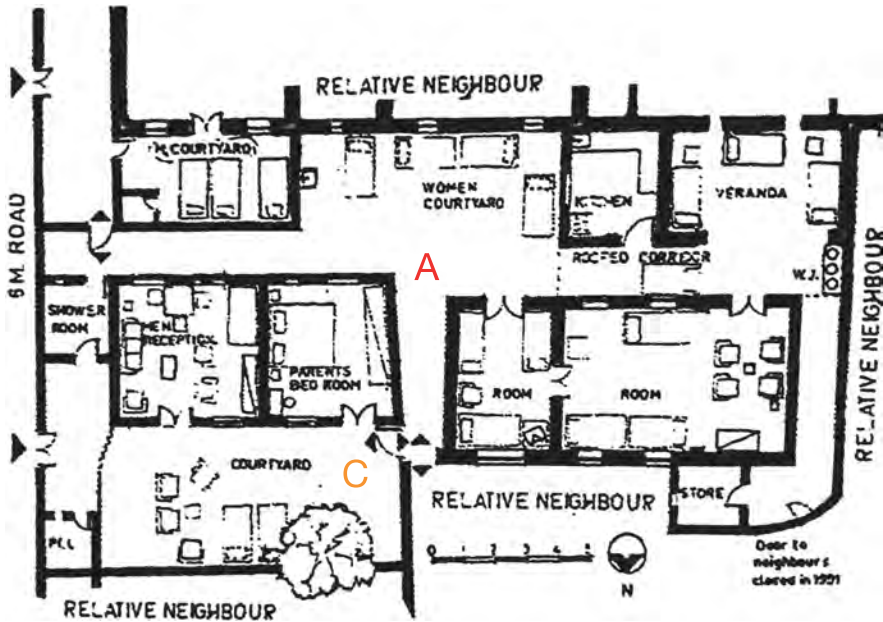


Figure 18: Splitting units.<sup>19</sup>

This example shows that thanks to the system of closing and opening *nafāj*, the cluster took the form that best responded to family relationships and the changes that might occur as a result of marriages, inheritances and so on, to include some properties or exclude others. In accordance with the principle of safeguarding the privacy of the extended family, the *nafāj* established a private system of circulation used by relatives as an alternative to the network of streets (and in many cases a quicker one). In areas with high population density, the role of the *nafāj* could be essential. Figure 21 shows the whole cluster comprising eight courtyard houses. Clearly, the clustering process must have swallowed up parts of the shared access to the street: in this whole block of eight houses, two (nos. 6 and 4) have no exit to the street, and the *nafāj* is the only way the plots that did not have direct access to the street could reach it. It was therefore possible to go from one courtyard to another, even across an entire neighbourhood, without ever stepping out on to the street.

<sup>19</sup> Two new dwelling units (marked A and C) formed out of one unit. Drawing by the author after Daifalla 1998: 71.

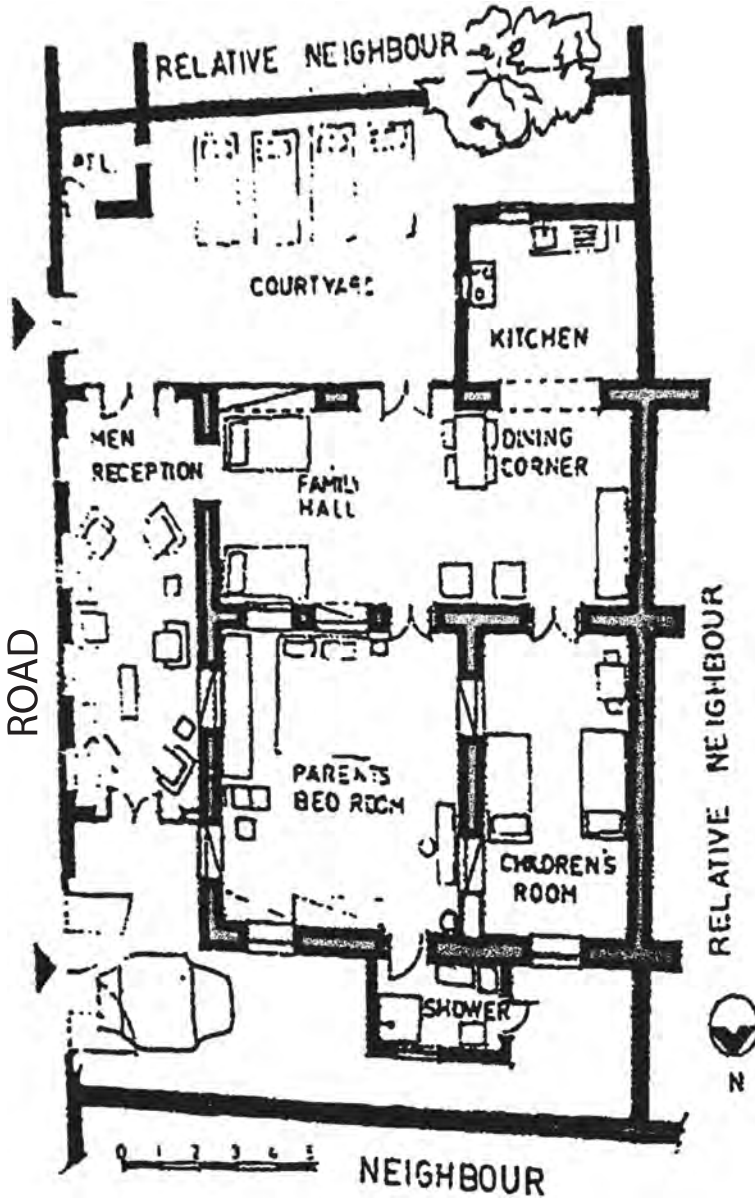


Figure 19: Conversion of section B into an autonomous dwelling unit.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> This happened because of a marriage. Daifalla 1998: 72.



Figure 20: Fusion: A, B, C, D have merged together through the passage of *nafaj*.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Drawing by the author after Daifalla's 1998 back cover.

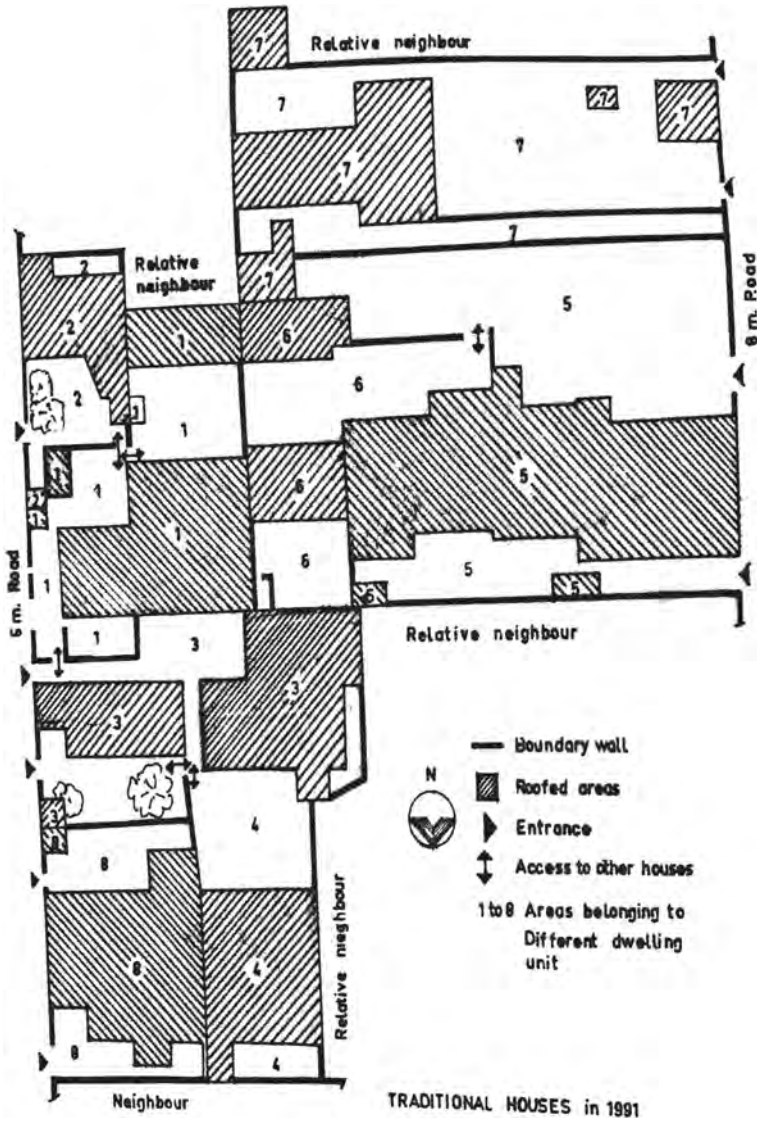


Figure 21: The whole cluster.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Daifalla 1998: 48.





Figure 22: Example of a cluster identified on a partial plan of Omdurman.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 23: Plots without access to the road.<sup>24</sup>

23 Original state. Drawing by the author after Whyte (2011: 593).

24 Drawing by the author.

The fact that there was a dramatic population increase can be seen by comparing von Slatin's map (Map 1) with McLean's (Figure 22), which shows the city as it was at the end of the Khalifa's reign. The courtyard houses are no longer scattered as they are in von Slatin's map, but are now attached to each other. The city had taken on the characteristic appearance of a beehive: apart from the three main arteries, the road network had been practically swallowed up by the twelve thousand compounds that had merged together into a sort of monolith besieging the city centre, which had remained the size it had been from the outset. What McLean's map does not show, however, is that the compact monolith of dwellings is in fact perforated on the inside by the openings in the external walls. In the process of interlocking the courtyard houses in clusters, some plots were left without direct access to the street, as was still reported in the early 1950s by the Sudan Political Service (SPS) survey in al-Mawrada: "[. . .] plots, many of which were internal plots having exit only through a neighbour or by a tiny cul-de-sac [. . .]" (Kenrick 1953: 281). In the figure-ground diagram (Figure 23) of McLean's map (the copy of the original is barely legible) some compounds and open spaces, which are highlighted in red, appear to have no exits.

Because the *ḥaqq al-irtifāq*, the neighbouring property rights and rights relating to access through a neighbour's property, is present in some texts of the Maliki school of law, the most widespread school in Sudan,<sup>25</sup> it is plausible that the topic might have been part of the professional background of the judges called upon to settle disputes on the clustering process. After the Mahdī's abrogation of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), as noted by Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban (1987: 33), the atmosphere was one of strict adherence to the Quran, the Sunna and the Mahdī's proclamations as sources of law. There could be some tolerance for the traditions of the Maliki school, however, "as long as they did not contradict the purifying measures of Mahdī teaching." Since these particular rules do not seem to contradict them, there is no serious reason to believe that the judges stopped applying Maliki law during the Mahdiyya.

In any case, it would appear that the neighbours' right of passage is a principle that has been deeply embedded in social behaviour, and still exists today. Among a list of complaints, the conclusion to the research carried out in the 1990s also records one regarding the rights of passage: "Another complaint is that the access is used by people who are not members of the family to pass through to other houses. That justifies the closing of some doors between some of the houses" (Daifalla 1998: 87). But, if some doors could be closed, others had to remain open for access to the

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25 See the analysis of the manuscripts of the Fodiawa trio (Hakim & Ahmed 2008: 663–667).

street or for some other use (childcare, or a car for older people who stayed at home during the day) where the presence of neighbours could be a necessity. Indeed, the researcher concluded: “Nevertheless, the inhabitants seem to have been able to deal with their problems.”

## 5 “Village Ideology” and Constructive Solidarity: A Place for “Lost” Newcomers

The case of a neighbourhood in which family and tribal ties had been loosened while the original layout, which had been conceived precisely on the basis of those ties, continued to exist without major changes, was nothing new. The process of detribalisation had already begun during the Turco-Egyptian occupation with the growth of new towns, and had only accelerated during the Mahdiyya. The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the start of a new and significant process of urbanisation characterised by the presence of former slaves who had reached the capital in search of work. Unlike other immigrants, who joined relatives or members of their clan who had already settled in the city, some former slaves no longer had any family (Sikainga 1996: 161–168). These new “detribalised” elements (Kurita 2003) settled in the *Deims* of Khartoum, where space was still available, and in some of the more popular neighbourhoods of Omdurman, such as al-Mawrada, ‘Abbasiyya and Abu Rof, about which the local sources appear to have more information.

In the records, ‘Abbasiyya is often assimilated with the neighbouring district of al-Mawrada, in terms of certain prominent figures from the worlds of music and football. Among the inhabitants of al-Mawrada for example, Ṭāriq al-Sharīf (2004: 42) remembers Lieutenant Aḥmad Morgan, who was the first person to spread military music, while it is also known that a settlement of discharged soldiers was established in ‘Abbasiyya (Sikainga 1996: 64) in 1901. Al-Mawrada, to the south, was Omdurman’s most important port, and controlled river traffic on the White Nile. An Intelligence map (1892) revised by Father Jospheh Ohrwalder (Figure 24), who was a prisoner of the Khalifa for ten years, shows the port of al-Mawrada at the time of the Mahdiyya with the boats and the many coffee shops typical of port areas.

Al-Mawrada appears several times in local sources, not only as the place for people of slave origins, but also, remarkably, as a neighbourhood where people who were famous in the world of music came from, such as the director of the radio orchestra, ‘Alā al-Dīn Ḥamza (al-Sharīf 2004: 42), as well as people associated with the nationalist movement. ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, the leader of the nationalist movement in the Revolution of 1924 is reported to have lived in al-Mawrada, and his family

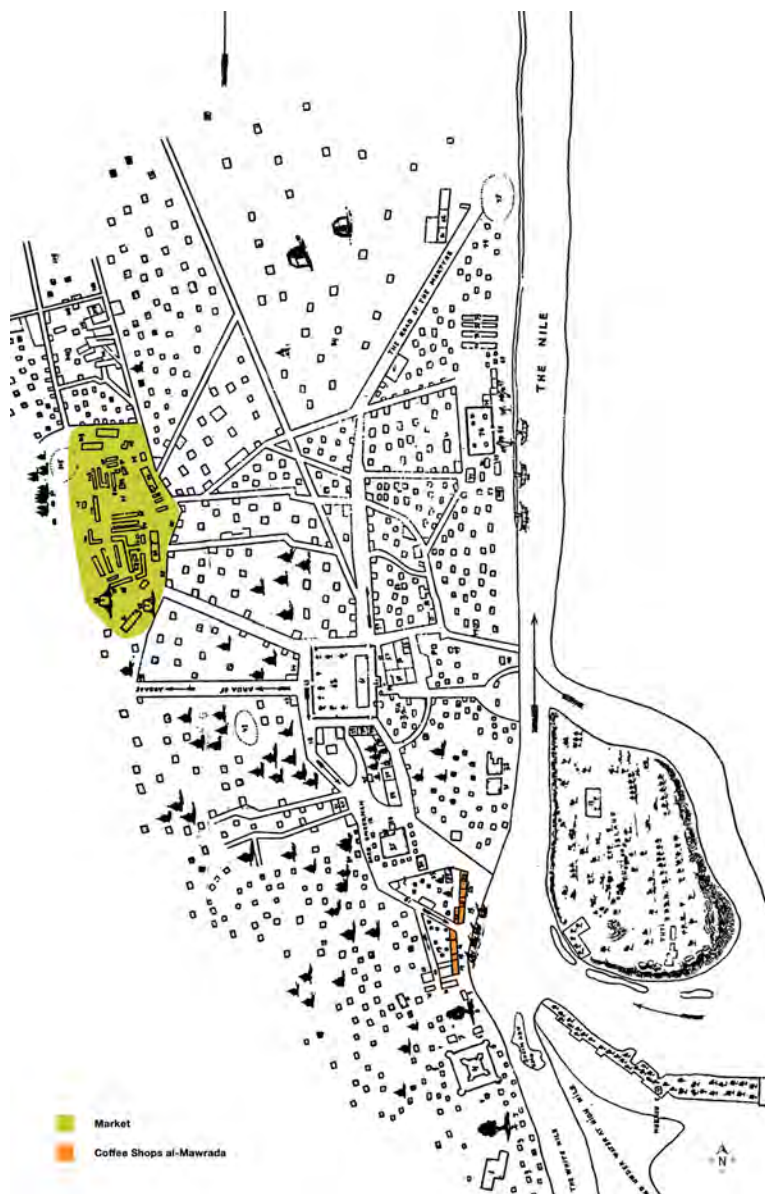


Figure 24: The market area and the area of the coffee shops near Mawrada harbor.

still has a house near the *khōr* Abu Anga.<sup>26</sup> The neighbourhood is also said to have made an important contribution to the Military School Cadets' demonstration in 1924 ('Alī n.d.: 4). 'Alī Nūr, "the poet of the Congress," is supposed ('Awṛū 2014: 76) to have lived in al-Mawrada, where there was also the seat of a graduates' club, which was inspired by the Indian National Congress ('Awṛū 2014: 65). Although much of this information deserves further historical investigation, it already testifies to the esteem in which the district is held in popular memory.

Abu Rof was the northern neighbourhood that sprang up around the second most important river port of Omdurman. According to Ṭāriq al-Sharīf (2004: 27), its residents were very mixed from the start: there were Danagla, Berti, Fellata, Imaraba, Mahas and Shaygiya from groups from Central, Northern and Western Sudan. The gradual construction of the bridges connecting Omdurman and Khartoum endangered the original boat-building activity, which was carried out mainly by the Danagla, and significantly reduced river transport. From 1918, new industries were established there, including pottery and shoe manufacturing and a leather tannery, and attracted labour from all over Sudan. In the recollections of Ṭāriq al-Sharīf, Abu Rof was also a lively artistic and cultural centre, and in the 1930s it was also home to the Abu Rof graduates' club.

The arrival of the new immigrants did not lead to any substantial changes in the layout of these neighbourhoods, whereas it led to definite transformations in the area's social composition. Even in the 1950s, a large part of Omdurman, including al-Mawrada and Abu Rof, was still basically much as it had been in the time of the Khalifa, as Kenrick (1953: 281) explained. It is worth noting that following the urbanisation of the detribalised areas, not all neighbours were related by family ties any longer, but the *naḥāj*, continued to exist, as some autoptic evidence (al-Sharīf 2004: 26) and the research from the 1990s mentioned above confirm.

What is certain is that in the 1920s and 1930s, in the *Deims* of Khartoum and in many traditional Omdurman neighbourhoods, including al-Mawrada and Abu Rof, the resident population developed into an extraordinary ethnic and socio-cultural melting pot. It was a well-integrated community that gave voice to a new urban and cosmopolitan popular culture from the 1920s. It was home to musicians and singers from a new musical genre, *ḥaqība*, which fused styles and melodies from different tribal traditions, setting the slogans of the White Flag League, the association that triggered the 1924 Revolution, to music; but it was also home to poets, playwrights and later football stars and the future heroes of the nationalist move-

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26 Interview by the author with Professor Widā'a Muḥammad Yūsif al-Tūm 'Awṛū, Al-Mawrada, Omdurman, 23 March 2017.

ment.<sup>27</sup> According to the historian Ahmad Sikainga, new social networks that were not based around ethnicity developed in these neighbourhoods of Omdurman, such as the “*ṣanduaq*, or rotating savings association. Because of their background and mobility and the nature of the urban environment, ex-slaves played a crucial role in the emergence of a vital, popular culture (Sikainga 1996: 163).

Far from hindering the integration of detribalised newcomers, the porosity of the spatial organisation of the traditional neighbourhoods of Omdurman actually seems to have facilitated it: contacts and mixed marriages were not uncommon, further confirming the reciprocity of the relationships between the organisation of space and social behaviour. In al-Mawrada, as Tāriq al-Sharīf (2004: 43) recounts:

Beside the tribe of Imarab, there were other tribes such as Jaaliyin, Danagla and Shawayga and all lived in peace in al-Mawrada. Imarab and Magharba had mutual relationships via marriages between the two tribes, and as a result of this melting pot, a great family was created: the family of al-Mughrabī.

Modern urban sociology has analysed a similar type of phenomenon, which Guy Tapie calls the *idéologie villageoise*, a feeling of belonging to a familiar group, which is also seen in certain residential neighbourhoods of our contemporary cities, where the links among residents are strengthened by encouraging *une co-veillance attentionnée* [caring co-vigilance] and the emergence of activities carried out collectively (Tapie 2014: 166). From a more strictly technical point of view, the courtyard house requires a kind of “constructive solidarity” (Petruccioli 2007:76): that is, a high level of participation and interaction with neighbours, which presupposes “social harmony or the existence of a group of relatives.” In the case of two adjacent rooms back-to-back belonging to different properties, for example, each of the two owners must accept the neighbour’s beams on the shared wall. The closing or opening of a *nafāj*, changed the routes, and could consequently lead to the closing or opening of other *nafāj* in neighbouring properties. It cannot be excluded that similar situations also occurred in the *Deims*.

## 6 Beautification: The British Master Plan of 1910

Among the town planning operations carried out by the British in the colonial territories, the Master Plan of Khartoum, Khartoum North and Omdurman (which, for the sake of brevity, we will simply call the Master Plan) occupied a prominent place,

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<sup>27</sup> See Sikainga 1996, Gadour 2001, Mustafa 2001 and the more recent work by Elena Vezzadini (2015), from which all the information about the nationalist movement in this study has been taken.

due to both its international recognition and its resonance among public opinion in the mother country.

## 6.1 The Master Plan

Two camps faced each other at the London Conference: supporters of axial planning and garden cities – in the words of *Architect* magazine, “the school of the wide street [ . . . ] and the advocates of the narrow road.” (Whyte 2011: introduction). Despite the fact that it had gardens, Khartoum was not a garden city. Along with Daniel Burnham’s Chicago and Rudolph Eberstadt’s Gross-Berlin, it was a case of axial planning based on a geometric design traced from a grid of streets that met at right angles: housing was built in the remaining spaces.

The first orthogonal grid plan is attributed to Hippodamus of Miletus (5<sup>th</sup> century BC), but it seems to have existed in earlier times in both Mesopotamia and the Egypt of the Pharaohs. L’Enfant’s design for Washington at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century definitively linked it to the Cartesian spirit of the Age of Enlightenment. Between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, axial planning had lost much of that light. In the post-liberal city of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the streets of Haussmann’s plan in Paris became endless corridors invaded by an anonymous crowd where Baudelaire (Benevolo [1975] 1983: 394) felt lonely, but which revalued the landed income of the bourgeoisie and satisfied the needs of a police state. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, axial planning was also the type that best met the needs of the transport revolution – the first Ford automobiles rolled out of the Detroit plants in 1903 – that was vital for an accelerated recovery of production. Supported by a technology as modern as it was alien, the orthogonal grid type was exported to most of the colonies, from Dakar to Saigon, and proved to be the road system that was most compatible with the objectives of a disciplinary society and a military anti-riot strategy.<sup>28</sup> The success of axial planning was unstoppable. It was a shock in the colonies of Africa (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1988: 49), but it was also a shock in Europe. Intellectuals and ordinary inhabitants alike felt the blow of an irreparable loss. The most disadvantaged strata of the population, whom a dizzying rise in rents had dislodged from the city centres, were

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<sup>28</sup> Some experiments with garden cities were introduced in Kenya, South Africa and Uganda, but Ebenezer Howard’s idea degenerated into districts polarised by racial segregation. Where it had not been imposed but freely imported from Europe – as in Egypt, for example – the so-called garden cities ended up being green zones for urban elites wishing to escape crowded Cairo, in which undulating streets were practically the only element of originality or, on the contrary, were framed in a rigid pattern as in Heliopolis (Volait 2003: 31–36.). On Kampala, see Gutschow (2009); on the neighbourhoods of Nairobi see Martin and Bezemer (2019); and on South Africa, see Muller (1995).

sent to live in sordid distant suburbs. Perhaps for the first time in urban history, there was a break between form and function (Petruccioli 2007: 19). Wherever axial planning overlapped with a pre-existing urban fabric, it tended to destroy it (Benevolo 1983: 387): Haussmann did not open 90 kilometres of new roads in Paris without obliterating 49 of the old ones (Sica 1977: 183–202) and without demolishing entire medieval quarters and relocating their population.

On 2 November 1898, only two months after the battle of Omdurman, Colonel Hon. Milo Talbot wrote to Wingate that work had begun on preparing the site on which the new Anglo-Egyptian Khartoum would be built: a Works Battalion of 1,000 men was set the task of clearing the site (Daly [1986] 2003: 25). In his final report, General Sir George F. Gorringe wrote that on 4 January 1899, “2000 men were brick-making, quarrying and burning lime [ . . . ]. By February 6th, all the roads had been laid out” (Daly [1986] 2003: 26) and the location of some iconic buildings (the Gordon Memorial College and the Governor-General’s palace) had been established.

Among the various issues and discussions raised by the plan, we will mention only two. Based on the number of days Kitchener was actually present in Khartoum, historian Martin Daly ([1986] 2003: 25) has questioned the authorship of the Master Plan, which he attributes instead to Kitchener’s subordinates, Talbot and Gorringe, who remained in Khartoum to work on the ground. However, considering Kitchener’s training as an engineer, his past experience as a cartographic officer, the plans he would shortly be drawing up in South Africa<sup>29</sup> and his personal obsession with security, he is, in fact, the most likely candidate. The second question concerns the usefulness of the diagonals, which McLean was planning to eliminate as early as 1912 (McLean 1912: 229). The numerous eight-road intersections were destined to be constantly jammed. Did they have a military objective, or did they just serve the symbolic purpose of representing the Union Jack? In reality, as shown elsewhere, these diagonals were nothing more than segments of a second *quadrillage*<sup>30</sup> of roads superimposed on the first, making the layout of Khartoum a full-scale surveillance cage, a Panopticon (D’Errico 2015).

Although not all planning or re-planning projects in colonial capitals were successful, as in the case of Zanzibar (Bissel 2011), it would be unwise to conclude that

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<sup>29</sup> In South Africa, the following year, Kitchener invented the drives: a dense network of barbed wire corridors connected to blockhouses placed at regular intervals that trapped the Boers, leading them straight into the arms of the British. Along with the first concentration camps in history and the use of armoured trains (another Kitchener obsession) in patrols, the drives handed victory over to the British (Arthur 1920, vol. 2: 5–10).

<sup>30</sup> A set of straight horizontal and vertical lines cut at right angles to form a chessboard, used, for example, in maps. In military or police operations, a *quadrillage* divides a territory into sections to ensure control.



the colonial bureaucracy was hapless and incapable. This was definitely not the case in Khartoum, and the Sudan Civil Service (SCS, later to become the SPS) was an elite taken from the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge (Kirk-Greene 1982) that was considered to be second only to that of the Indian Civil Service.

## 6.2 Application of the Master Plan in Khartoum and Omdurman

In essence, the new Khartoum was made up of three zones running parallel to the Nile, each of which corresponded to a class defined on a social and racial basis (Home 1990: 5). The First Class was reserved for British officers and administrators and looked out on to the Nile “owing to the proximity of the water supply and gardens, which are so necessary for the comfort of Europeans” (McLean 1912: 229). In the Second Class lived the Egyptians (officials, civil servants, businessmen, etc.). R.R. Baily (quoted by Daly [1986] 2003: 357), the Deputy Governor of Khartoum (1921–1925) recalls:

The British went home to their charming houses on the river with their well irrigated gardens and trees while their subordinates were relegated to dismal rows of houses in the dusty back parts.

The Sudanese lived in the Third Class, south of Abbas Avenue and furthest from the Nile, where cheaper mud houses were constructed. As early as 1912, McLean (1912: 229) envisaged moving the Third Class further south beyond the railway line, in the event of the hoped-for increase in population.

In 1907, the Sudanese continued to live in Omdurman (Jackson 1954: 22), which had a population of 60,000 in 1910, while Khartoum North had 25,000 residents and Khartoum itself 15,000 (McLean [1911] 2011: 576–577). Evidently, the Sudanese preferred to live in the mud houses of Omdurman and Khartoum North rather than the third-class mud houses of Khartoum. Further south, *Deims* occupied the Native Lodging Area, which was located in the desert, two kilometres south of the capital: “In this way an attempt was made to segregate the native population, a very desirable arrangement more especially from a sanitary standpoint” (McLean [1911] 2011: 585).

From the very beginning, it was clear that the conditions of the dwellings in the Native Lodging Area fell below the minimum living standards. They consisted of a single room with an average area of 25 square metres, with no proper latrines (people had to use the empty spaces around the houses) and no external wall. They were separated from each other by five-metre lanes and divided into blocks separated by forty-metre-wide roads (Fawzi 1954: 93). A few years later, the residents were able to obtain permission to build an external wall, which in practical terms transformed their single room cube into a smaller version of the traditional court-

yard house. They had to do the best they could with the narrow strip of land surrounding their homes, and as a consequence the surrounding perimeter wall had to be shared with the neighbours' dwellings, thus recreating at least a semblance of their original habitat.

London's investment in Khartoum in terms of men, means and skills must have been beyond the budget normally foreseen for this kind of operation. Indeed, it caused controversy, and left even the SCS inspectors baffled. Inspector Henry Jackson (1954: 22), who arrived in Khartoum in 1907 with the first contingent of the civil administration, wrote:

Many have wondered why Kitchener, who grudged every piastre that was not spent on absolute necessities, should have lavished so much money on Khartoum. [. . .] The explanation is that Kitchener was determined to show that the new government had to come to stay, and for this reason he erected large permanent buildings and excellent housing for the officials in Khartoum where they would impress the people.

If the colonial cities were vectors of modernisation (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1988: 61), they were also major communications operations. The frequent "guided tours" of sheikhs or local chiefs to Khartoum and the Governor's palace seem to have been part of the ordinary tasks of the SCS inspectors:

Machine-gun practice, aeroplanes, motor-cars or electricity apparently left them unmoved, but they were impressed by the gardens, the size of the buildings and the general magnificence of the city. For those who lived in the desert, where water was so scarce and often had to be carried long distances, the turning of a tap that produced water from apparently nowhere was naturally a source of wonder. (Jackson 1954: 23)

Behind the scenes, things were not exactly as they seemed. In 1907, there was only electricity in the governor's palace and water had to be fetched from the Nile (Jackson 1954: 23). In 1914, the only car to be seen on the endless avenues, which had cost an absurd amount of money, was the Governor-General's (Sarsfield-Hall 1975: 28).

Things went very differently in Omdurman. A technical survey of the city only began in 1906 under the direction of A.A.R. Boyce of the Survey Department, and A.M. Asquith of the SCS (McLean [1911] 2011: 595). Twelve thousand compounds were measured, numbered and registered under the name of the owner. After extensive demolitions, the southern part of the city, the old Khalifa's "stronghold", was quickly militarised. The quarter of the Mulazimin (the personal guards of the Khalifa) was completely demolished, rebuilt and turned into a First Class residential zone. The map drawn up by the Survey Department (Map 3) shows the situation as it was in 1910: Omdurman appears to be split in two, with the southern part of the city rigidly ordered in a chessboard pattern: axial planning had produced a *tabula rasa*. By contrast, most of the city to the north of *khōr* Abu Anga was left unchanged (except for the tramway route), and remained so until around 1950.



Map 3: Mawrada in Omdurman in 1910.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Area of Mawrada marked by the author on the *Plan of Omdurman, 1911*, compiled under the Direction of El Miralai Pearson Bey RE at the Khartoum Town Survey Office. Source: Bibliothèque Nationale de France. No.Cat. : GE C-4449.

That the colonial authorities in general were interested in maintaining a sort of dualism between the two capitals – and not only for administrative purposes – the old (in the sense of what was there previously) and the new (the colonial), especially when they were adjacent, is a hypothesis supported by numerous clues (Grinsell 2020: 203). For example, the Buganda Agreement (1900) kept the exclusively European city of Kampala strictly separate from the peripatetic capital of the *Kabaka* (the Bugandan king), which had been set up on the nearby Mengo Hill five years earlier. The contrast between Khartoum and Omdurman was particularly stark because of what the two cities represented: the former British revenge, and the latter the Mahdist revolution. There is no doubt that the language that emerges from the Proceedings of the London Conference emphasises rather than mitigates this juxtaposition. Khartoum was described by different speakers as “a splendid example of a well-planned city” (Stokes [1911] 2011: 603), “a beautiful city” (Bennet [1911] 2011: 602), planned “on sanitary lines”, while the previous capital was an “African pest-house” inhabited by a “naturally uneducated Moslem population [. . .] to whose conservative minds most necessary modern regulations are repugnant” (Kitchener [1911] 2011: 596), “a rabbit warren” and “a maze” (McLean [1911] 2011: 591, 593).

There were also some objective structural problems. Unlike Khartoum, Omdurman was densely populated in a spontaneously expanding system of courtyard houses that were tightly interconnected one with another. This was the real antagonistic force with which the orthogonal street pattern had to contend. If Haussmann had already shown in Paris that streets could be opened up by using bulldozers, this would be an even easier process in Omdurman, where the houses were built with mud. The documents do not mention any episodes of open opposition to demolitions and the relocation of residents, but some contradictions emerge in the official statements. At the London Conference, McLean ([1911] 2011: 595) displayed the most robust optimism:

The houses are built principally of mud, so that their reconstruction is not, of course, a serious matter; and, if a plot is required for roadway purposes the owner is given an equivalent plot on Government land. The scheme has the co-operation of the natives, who realise the value of the improvements, and, even before it becomes necessary, hasten to build on the new alignment as soon as it is set out.

The “co-operation of natives” who “hasten to build” had evaporated like a bubble of soap in the paper by Colonel John Plunkett ([1911] 2011: 601), a passionate defender of local architecture,<sup>32</sup> in which the word *order* was hammered out:

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<sup>32</sup> George T. Plunkett, a Colonel in the Royal Engineers, was Director of the Science and Art Institutions of Dublin and wrote a *Guide to the Collection of Irish Antiquities* (1907). He and his wife had

There is one other thing to remember, viz. the interior of the houses. That is a point with which [. . .] it is very difficult in the East to interfere in any way. The Government cannot, perhaps, influence the builders by direct means, but indirectly they can do much [. . .]. I was struck with all arrangements of the town [Khartoum], which have been so carefully thought out. Although, as I say, it is impossible for the Government to give orders about interiors, they can order what the outside should be, only the orders must be judiciously given. Orders can be given as to height of the walls of the courtyard, and as to the materials for building; but as regards the interior you can only work by example. I hope that those who have taken the place of Lord Kitchener and his immediate entourage will keep that in mind, and that by example and influence they will teach the traders and others who will certainly become rich in the near future in Khartoum that they can make the interiors of their houses beautiful and suitable to the country if they will take as a model the Egyptian houses of two, three, or more centuries ago in Cairo, for instance, instead of copying everything which they think is European, and making of the interiors of their houses an inferior copy of a third-rate modern Mediterranean town.

Plunkett's voice seemed to be an isolated one in the gallery of the London Conference. A completely different cultural and political approach emerges from his speech: it is the validity of the urban model itself and the coercive system with which it was imposed that is being questioned.

## 7 The Resumption of Town Planning: Slum Clearance and the *New Deims*

From the 1920s, the British administration began to confer increasing judicial and administrative powers on tribal sheikhs, but after the events of 1924 and the assassination of Governor-General Lee Stack (1916–1924) in Cairo, the atmosphere changed. Returning to Sudan in 1932 after many years of absence, Sir James Currie, the former Director of Education, wrote: “[. . .] The spectacle could be beheld of young administrators diligently searching for lost tribes and vanished chiefs” (quoted in Holt 1967: 136). In addition, the government had decided to implement a policy of economic austerity as a consequence of the global economic crisis of 1929.

In spite of this, there was a resurgence of urban development activities by the government that especially targeted the *Deims*, where the first episodes of open opposition to this urban policy (at least, those regarding which some information exists) also took place. According to Fawzi (1954: 93–94), the *Old Deims*<sup>33</sup> demon-

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volunteered to translate from Italian and French at the London Conference (Whyte 2011: Introduction and 14, 15).

33 So called in order to distinguish them from the *New Deims*.

strated a strong social cohesion that went beyond tribal or kinship ties. The first attempt to resettle the residents of the *Old Deims* in an area that had been earmarked for the *New Deims* located southwest of the *Old Deims* dates back to 1930. Two more followed in 1939 and 1946–1947, but they were unsuccessful because of opposition from residents, and the matter was only concluded with the destruction of the *Old Deims* in 1949. According to Fawzi (1954: 95), there were two reasons behind the resettlement of the *Old Deims*: firstly, the extremely poor housing conditions, and secondly, the expansion of the city towards the south. The first issue had been known to the authorities for a long time. As for the second, new residential areas had been approved below the railway ring line, right up to the *Old Deims*, due to demographic pressures. The problem of the open latrines therefore became urgent. However, it cannot be ruled out that reasons of political expediency also suggested the resettlement of the population of the *Old Deims* further south. With regard to the residents' resistance, Fawzi (1954: 94–95) recalls the opposition of “absentee landlords,” who started renting their houses in the *Old Deims*; however, this topic merits separate research.<sup>34</sup> In any case, the resettlement must have posed serious commuting and economic problems for the population of the *Deims*. Moved further south-west, the *New Deims* became even more distant from the city. As for state funding:

All the persons were left to build their new houses without financial assistance from the Government. [. . .] There must be a certain portion of the population who qualified for plots, but who could not build without substantial assistance, and who did not want to go into alms houses. Such persons were given ex-gratia payments of L.E.10 and were left to their own devices (Fawzi 1954: 95).

Having resolved the issue of the *Deims* in one way or another, the SPS began to re-examine the plan for Omdurman in the early 1950s. A preliminary survey was carried out before a slum clearance operation particularly focused on al-Mawrada was begun that among other things called for the delocalisation of half its residents. There is no demographic survey of al-Mawrada, with the exception of the one carried out by J.W. Kenrick, the SPS inspector in charge of the preliminary survey, in February 1951. This showed that the male population was divided into five categories: traders, general labourers, fishermen, servants of all kinds, and clerks and accountants. However, the data were not subdivided, so that in practice, it is not

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<sup>34</sup> For example, it would be interesting to trace the process of the different legal decrees governing regulating land ownership. Initially, the Native Lodging Area was on government land. It is not clear whether, how or when this was granted in freehold, as it would appear to be from Fawzi's article, which mentions landlords.

clear how many in each category were wage-earners or self-employed. They were, however, all poor, “a population consisting of low-income bread-winners supporting a considerable number of dependents” (Kenrick 1953: 283). Kenrick’s report, which was drawn up using the Survey Department’s aerial photographs taken during the winter of 1950–1951, described al-Mawrada thus:

Until recently when a visitor approached Omdurman by road from Khartoum he saw before him, on the left of the road and on the north side of khor Abu Anga, a picturesque quarter built of crumbling mud brick or puddled mud. [. . .] The area selected was easily identifiable. It is bounded on the east and west by wide roads, on the north by the Murada market, and on the south by Khor Abu Anga. It was cut up into blocks by narrow 5-metre lanes, but these blocks were each a honeycomb of small congested plots, many of which were internal plots having exit only through a neighbour or by a tiny cul-de-sac (Kenrick 1953: 282).

Curiously, Kenrick did not explain the reasons for the choice of al-Mawrada, while listing the same conditions of overcrowding, *cul de sacs* and interior plots without road frontages for the areas of Abu Rof and Bayt al-Mal and on both sides of the Abu Rof road. The plan for al-Mawrada, for which there were probably also political motives, as the neighbourhood was a hotbed of political opposition, was implemented over the next two years: half its residents were delocalised and a large part of al-Mawrada was redesigned according to an orthogonal grid. It was one of the very few places in Old Omdurman where the British managed to carry out such a relatively extensive replanning project.

## Conclusion

Before the Mahdiyya, Omdurman seems to have been no more than a village or group of villages with intermittent occupation. During the Khalifa’s reign, the city reached a size unprecedented in the urban history of Sudan. The original layout shows a dense cultural background in which tradition reworked and combined different contributions – the legacies of the first Arab Islamic founding cities, of the Funj sultanate, of the more recent Ottoman cities and of Turco-Egyptian Khartoum itself.

The city centre plan reveals the intention to make Omdurman a religious symbol, the tangible realisation of the ideals of the Mahdiyya, not only through the construction of the Mahdi’s tomb and the wall designed to protect it, but also, and above all, by means of the hierarchy of spaces, in which it was the mosque area that gave the whole city its orientation. This was echoed in the different names given to the city by its residents, and at a morphological level, in its residential neighbourhoods. The very uniformity of the dwellings, which differed only in the materials

used for the walls and fences – an earthen wall for the rich and a hedge of thorny bushes for the poor – reflected the egalitarian ideals of the Mahdiyya. The imprint of state power and legal regulation was strong, however, with every state institution having its own building.

In the development of the city, the extension and spatial organisation into a compact mass of residential neighbourhoods gave the whole urban layout its own specific character. The Khalifa intervened in this entire area as little as possible, and then only when obliged to do so by security concerns. Following an ancient custom, he delegated the organisation of the residential areas to the various tribal and family groups, and as Sarsfield-Hall (n.d: 8) later wrote: “Houses were put up anywhere where there happened to be an empty space.”

The role of the Sudanese model of courtyard house in the clustering process by serial multiplication, and therefore in the development of the entire city, emerges very clearly from this research. In fact, the passages (*nafāj*), through the hedges or walls connected the compounds, whose owners were related to each other, at least initially, thus ensuring internal circulation even for a whole neighbourhood without there ever being a need to go out into the street. This allowed the highest degree of adaptability of the whole cluster to changes in lifestyle over time both within and outside the family clan. Later, however, in a situation of high population density, the right of passage through the courtyard of a neighbour, who in many cases was no longer a relative, represented the only way to gain access to the street for those plots that had none. In this case, the *nafāj* became one of the most important elements of the constructive solidarity of which Antilio Petruccioli writes, which in turn presupposed “social harmony or the existence of a group of relatives”. Combined with a code of behaviour that held respect for neighbours in high esteem, it seems to have favoured rather than hindered the integration of the “detrified” newcomers who arrived in Omdurman or the *Deims* of Khartoum in the early years of the Condominium. Indeed, it was from precisely this new social composition that a metropolitan and cosmopolitan culture was born, and new intertribal social ties based on the neighbourhood came to exist.

Although a good part of Omdurman’s layout was spared, especially in the northern part of the city, for many inhabitants of the two cities on the opposite banks of the Nile the encounter with modernity was with the new city of the British rulers. Square, geometric, criss-crossed by long, wide, straight streets, it was inevitably in conflict with the spontaneous serial reproduction of the courtyard house and substantially alien to the inhabitants’ cultural background. The more alien the city was, the higher the price to be paid in terms of demolitions, relocations and the loss of the social spaces of daily life.



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Ahmad Alawad Sikainga

## Chapter 11

# Colonial Morality and Local Traditions: British Policies and Sudanese Attitudes Towards Alcohol, 1898–1956

The aim of this chapter<sup>1</sup> is to shed light on a topic that has received little attention in the scholarly literature on modern Sudanese history; namely interventions by the colonial state in the social arena and its efforts to control and shape the behaviour of its Sudanese subjects. In particular, the chapter looks at how British colonial officials tried to control the production and consumption of alcoholic drinks and the impact of these policies, and how the various segments of Sudanese society responded. The main argument is that the struggle around alcohol illuminates the interconnection between the issues of race, class, citizenship, and power, and provides important insights into the construction of Sudanese identity and engagement with colonial modernity. Like other colonies in Africa, Sudan was the site of an intense struggle over the manufacture, circulation, and consumption of alcohol. As we will see, the British efforts to regulate and restrict access to alcohol provoked a strong resistance from a broad section of the Sudanese population. However, this important dimension of the colonial experience and the daily struggles of the popular classes against the colonial authorities' efforts to control their behaviour has received little attention in the voluminous literature on Sudanese nationalism and anti-colonial resistance, which has tended to focus on the activities of the elite and the political parties and organisations. The discussion will also illustrate the paternalistic attitude adopted by the British and their stereotypical assumptions about Sudanese society and cultural traditions.

The chapter focuses on the capital city of Khartoum, which includes the towns of Khartoum North and Omdurman. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these three towns have been the political, economic, and cultural hub of Sudan and a microcosm of this diverse country. During the period of Anglo-Egyptian rule (1898–1956), the capital became home to a mixed population that included Sudanese from various social, ethnic, and regional backgrounds as well as Europeans, Egyptians, Middle Easterners, Ethiopians, and immigrants from the neighbouring regions. While many

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the Africa Institute in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, in May 2022. I am grateful to the faculty and fellows at the Institute and to Professor Carina Ray of Brandeis University for their valuable comments and suggestions.

foreigners were engaged in commercial activities, the majority of Sudanese were employed by the government as labourers, civil servants, soldiers, and policemen, while others worked as small traders, taxi drivers, sellers of food and local alcoholic drinks, prostitutes, and other non-wage workers. The study is based on a range of unpublished archives and published materials. The archival materials were gathered from the National Records Office in Khartoum (NRO), which is a rich source of information on all aspects of Sudanese history, including the official records of the British colonial administration. The published materials include books, magazines, newspapers, articles, and memoirs. Of particular importance for this study is the pioneering book on the *indāya* (drinking house) by the late Sudanese folklorist and ethnographer Al-Ṭayyib Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib (1934–2007). Another publication of special interest is Ḥasan Najīla's *Malāmiḥ min al-Mujtama' al-Sūdānī* ([1959] 2005), which offers a wealth of information on social life in Khartoum in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

This study is informed by the extensive literature on alcohol in Africa under European colonial rule. A number of scholars, such as Emmanuel Akyeampong, Charles Ambler, Chima Korieh, Justin Willis, Simon Heap, Ayodeji Olukoju, and Lynn Schler, have explored the connections between the use of alcohol and power in colonial Africa as well as its role in defining the frontiers of law, culture, identity, and consciousness. These scholars have shed significant light on the struggle around alcohol in different parts of Africa: for instance, the consumption of alcohol in settler colonies in Southern Africa has been examined in the context of race relations and nationalist politics.<sup>3</sup>

European concerns over the impact of alcohol on African people can be traced back to the era of the Atlantic slave trade and the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist movement. Humanitarian groups in Europe argued that the shipment of alcohol to Africa would become a health hazard, encourage drunkenness and laziness, and undermine the European “civilising mission” there. These forces began to lobby for prohibition on moral and political grounds. The Brussels General Act of 1889–1890 on the slave trade prohibited the sale and manufacture of spirituous liquors across a vast zone of Africa that extended from the 20<sup>th</sup> degree north latitude to the 22<sup>nd</sup> degree south latitude (Le Ghait 1892: 291). The question of liquor in Africa also figured prominently in the Saint-Germain-en-Laye Convention of September 1919, which was signed by the United States, Belgium, Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and

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<sup>2</sup> Ḥasan Najīla was a well-known Sudanese teacher and a prolific author and journalist whose writings date back to the 1920s. One of his most important books is *Malāmiḥ min al-Mujtama' al-Sūdānī*.

<sup>3</sup> The extensive literature on alcohol in Africa includes Crush and Ambler 1992; Akyeampong 1996; West 1997; Korieh 2003; Willis 2002 and 2005; and Mager 2010.

Portugal in the aftermath of the First World War. Article I of the agreement stated that the signing parties should restrict the trafficking of liquor in the “territories which are or may be subjected to their control throughout the whole of the continent of Africa with the exception of Algiers, Tunis, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, and the Union of South Africa.”<sup>4</sup> To implement the provisions of the agreement, colonial governments in various parts of the continent adopted draconian, restrictive, and racially discriminatory liquor laws that forbade Africans from consuming European spirits. These polices assumed that drunken Africans would behave in a disorderly fashion and defy the colonial authorities. In Southern Africa, for instance, the production and consumption of local drinks were criminalised, and thousands of women beer brewers were systematically arrested and prosecuted. This was especially the case in apartheid-era South Africa, where the consumption of alcohol was intricately linked to the emergence of a modern industrial system based on mining and the exploitation of migrant labour. Drinking was considered to be a source of dangerous disorder, indiscipline, social deterioration, and human degradation (Crush and Ambler 1992: 1–30).

The literature has also demonstrated that colonial policies on alcohol faced considerable resistance from local people, who found various ways to defy and circumvent them. In his study of alcohol in Ghana, Emmanuel Akyeampong makes the claim that the struggle over alcohol provides important insights into the culture of power under colonial rule, and argues that the resistance by the local population to colonial policies on alcohol cannot be separated from the broader popular protests against the local and colonial hierarchies of power. He points out that the link between popular resistance to alcohol policies and the nationalist movement in Ghana was manifested in the anti-colonial protests of the 1940s and 1950s (Akyeampong 1996: xv). Jonathan Crush and Charles Ambler have also argued that alcohol became a weapon of domination by the colonial powers as well as a potent form of resistance by local Africans. In their view, the failure of colonial governments to control the use of alcohol by their African subjects attested to African agency in shaping local processes during the colonial era. As they put it:

[The] ubiquitous daily struggles over alcohol production and consumption, and occasional violent conflicts between brewers and police, were surface manifestations of a deep rejection of state interference and control in the arena of drink. Illegal drinking places became sites for what James Scott describes as the “hidden transcript” of the dominated: a discourse of opposition that encompassed not only the web of alcohol legislation, but the shared experience of racial oppression and economic exploitation that bound drinkers together (Crush and Ambler 1992: 3–4, 27).

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4 “Convention Relating to the Liquor Traffic in Africa and Protocol.” *The American Journal of International Law* 15, no. 4, Supplement: Official Document, October 1921: 322–28.



Similarly, Lynn Schler (2002) has shown that the attempt to control the distribution and consumption of alcohol in Cameroon was clearly linked to the wider efforts by the German and French regimes to shape social, economic, and political processes in the colony. In her view, colonial alcohol policies and the local response can be understood through the prism of popular culture, because drinking houses and bars in certain quarters of Douala were the most significant places for public gatherings and cultural exchanges. In this way, popular culture might help scholars recover the experiences and cultures of non-elite groups and communities that were often excluded from political history (Schler 2002).

The scholarly works that deal with the struggle over alcohol in Muslim societies in Africa and the Middle East are of particular significance for this study. For instance, Ayodeji Olukoju (1996) and Simon Heap (1998) have examined the prohibition policies of the British colonial authorities in predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria, and have shown that both Muslim and non-Muslim groups defied the prohibition laws and consumed locally-made drinks. One of the most important recent works on the subject is the edited volume by Elife Biçer-Deveci and Philippe Bourmaud (2022), which explores the consumption of alcohol in North Africa and the Middle East since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Providing examples from different parts of the Middle East, the authors draw attention to the question of how and why alcohol became a catalyst for social and political divisions in the contemporary Middle East, and challenge the notion that these divisions are by-products of the overall influence of Islam on society and the assumption that Islam had a monolithic influence, regardless of context and socioeconomic transformation. They argue that the focus on Islamic norms and religious mobilisation tends to conceal the disputes about alcohol as a social struggle revealing all forms of domination in North Africa and the Middle East as much as everywhere else:

[W]e claim here that alcohol unveils the political content of religious norms. As such, disputes on alcohol are essential to grasp the relations of power that structure the societies of the Middle East and North Africa (Biçer-Deveci and Bourmaud 2022: 14).

In another chapter in the same volume, Philippe Chaudat examines the use of alcohol and religious practices in the town of Meknes in Morocco, and highlights how different understandings and attitudes towards alcohol consumption in Moroccan society co-exist. On the one hand, there are Moroccan Muslims who advocate strict adherence to the religious text and oppose any consumption, while on the other, there is segment of Moroccan Muslims who interpret Islamic rules less strictly and see no contradiction between the practice of their religious rites and the sale and consumption of alcohol. In other words, these people read the same religious text in a different way, and have reconciled their drinking and religious practices within their own world (Chaudat 2022).

Several scholars have highlighted the fact that alcohol has deep historical roots in several parts of the Muslim world, and have pointed out that Islamic rules regarding alcohol were never fully implemented until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Writing on Turkey, for instance, François Georgeon (2002) has pointed out that drinking in public spaces was a normal practice in Istanbul in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Omar Foda (2019) has shown that beer was consumed publicly in cafés in Egypt and that various brands were advertised in newspapers. In short, these and other studies have underscored the fact that drinking alcohol is a part of local tradition in many Muslim societies. In fact, this was also the case in Sudan, where the manufacture and consumption of alcoholic drinks has deep roots that date back to the ancient Nubian civilisation, as archaeological excavations have revealed. The brewing of alcoholic drinks continued even after the spread of Islam in Nubia from the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. According to the late Sudanese historian Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm (1982), despite vehement opposition from the religious establishment such as the *‘ulamā’*, the consumption of alcohol remained an integral part of life among the Nubians.

The use of alcohol by Sudanese Muslims was referred to by the Sudanese scholar Ḥaydar Ibrāhīm ‘Alī as “popular secularism,” which was a simpler and more tolerant form of Islam, as opposed to the orthodox and legalistic type advocated by the *‘ulamā’* and the religious establishment. According to ‘Alī (2011), the prevalence of this pattern can be attributed to the way Islam spread in Sudan and to the resilience of local cultural traditions.<sup>5</sup>

## The Production and Consumption of Alcohol in Sudan

It is important to point out that consumption of alcohol in Sudan had an important social, cultural, and political significance. People gathered to drink during social events such as weddings, the harvesting of crops, the building of houses, the construction of *sawāqī* (waterwheels), and on other occasions. These drinking sessions became a time for meeting friends, exchanging news, entertainment, reciting poetry, singing, and so forth. As will be shown later, drinking venues became sites of political activism, debates, mobilisation, and exchanges of news during the period of British colonial rule.

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5 Ḥaydar Ibrāhīm ‘Alī, “Al-Sūdāniyyūn: Bayn al-Tadayyun wa-l-‘Almāniyya al-Sha’biyya.” *Sudanile*, 26 May 2011, <https://sudanile.com/السودانيون-بين-التدين-والعلمانية-الش> (June 20, 2022).

There were several types of Nubian alcoholic drink. The most popular was called *al-dakkāy*, and was consumed during various seasons. It was made from dates, and was prepared in a clay jar known in Nubian as *kube* (Abū Salīm 1982: 48). The second type was called *al-nabeit*, which was also made from dates, but was stronger than *dakkāy* and took much longer to prepare. The third was *marīsa*, or *mersa* in Nubian, which was commonly drunk in many parts of Sudan. The fourth was *faqīriyya*, and was supposed to contain no alcohol, as it was given to *fuqarā'* (sing. *faqīr*) or religious individuals.

The recipes for *marīsa* varied from one part of Sudan to another. In the far north, it was made from dates, while in other parts of the country it was made from a wide variety of grains and fruits. In rural areas, brewing was primarily women's work, and both freeborn and enslaved women participated in the process. Women soaked the grain, ground it, cooked it, and mixed it with sprouted sorghum to make the mash, which often fermented into a thicker beer. It was an elaborate and time-consuming process that would take several days, and even weeks. When brewing for a large social occasion such as a wedding or circumcision, women from the neighbourhood gathered in the household of the host family to help them. Another common drink in many parts of Sudan was *'aragī*, a hard distilled liquor with a high alcoholic content that was made from dates or grain and was produced and sold by women, including former slaves and poor women, who depended on it for their livelihoods. European alcoholic drinks were introduced during the Ottoman-Egyptian rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the British administration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, as will be discussed later, with few exceptions Sudanese were not allowed to consume European drinks, which became a major source of contention with the colonial government.

## The Evolution of the *Anādī*

Alcoholic drinks in Sudan were sold in *anādī* (singular: *indāya*), or local bars. The history and operation of *anādī* have been best described in the pioneering study by al-Ṭayyib Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib ([1974] 2004). The origin of the name *indāya* is unclear, but it is believed to have come from the Arabic word *nādī* or *muntadā*, a gathering place for social occasions. *Anādī* seem to have existed in Sudan for many centuries, as there are several references to them during the period of the Funj Kingdom, which ruled the Northern and Eastern parts of Sudan from the early 15<sup>th</sup> century until the country was conquered by the Ottoman-Egyptian Mehmet Ali in 1821 (al-Ṭayyib [1974] 2004: 2–4). During the Ottoman-Egyptian rule (1821–1885), *anādī* proliferated in Sudan alongside the expansion of commerce and the rise

of urban centres such as Khartoum, El Obeid, Berber, Shendi, and other towns. However, they were despised by Ottoman-Egyptian officials, who confined them to certain parts of cities and called them *karakhāna*, or dirty place (al-Ṭayyib [1974] 2004: 5). During the Mahdiyya (1885–1898), the Khalifa adopted strict policies towards what he viewed as “evil” practices, particularly the consumption of alcohol and the use of tobacco. According to al-Ṭayyib, the Khalifa’s policies forced many people to drink clandestinely. In the Meroë region, for instance, *marīsa* drinkers had to hide on various islands in the Nile (al-Ṭayyib [1974] 2004: 38). Under British colonial rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, *anādī* were organised and their owners were required to obtain a licence in order to operate them. In urban centres, they were located in certain quarters outside residential areas and were subject to inspections and various rules (al-Ṭayyib [1974] 2004).

The *indāya* was not just a place for drinking: it was also an institution, with elaborate working structures, organisation, protocols, etiquettes, and rituals. The work in the *indāya* was performed by a team of women and men, which included the *shaykha*, the owner and supervisor of the place, who was responsible for obtaining a licence and paying taxes to the government. She was fully in charge of the entire operation, including producing the *marīsa*, providing cooking utensils and seats, supervising the bartenders, and collecting money from customers. The *shaykha* had an assistant, or agent, who ran the establishment when she was not there. Other workers included women bartenders and men who were responsible for carrying water and collecting wood. The employees were paid according to a special system: once a week, an employee would receive the profits generated from the sale of *marīsa* on that day, while the *shaykha* would receive a fixed amount. Payday was usually the day on which the *indāya* had the largest number of customers and the highest revenue. Sales of *marīsa* usually peaked on Fridays in cities and on market days in rural areas. (Al-Ṭayyib [1974] 2004: 11, 20–23).

*Anādī* owners also devised a particular advertising system. When the drinks had been made, the owner of the *indāya* would raise a flag or banner indicating that the premises were open and ready to receive customers. They usually opened at around 10 a.m. The raising of the flag would be accompanied by drumming, singing, and wailing. These songs were called *duhla*, and were songs of praise glorifying *marīsa* drinking and applauding those who consumed it (Al-Ṭayyib [1974] 2004: 5–6). The drumming and singing were marketing strategies employed to lure customers.

The customers of *anādī* were exclusively men, who sat in small groups called *tāyāt* (sing. *tāya*) and were usually friends, co-workers, or artisans such as leather workers, fishermen, or porters. Each *tāya* had a leader who was recognised by the owner of the *indāya*. This leader was responsible for distributing drinks to the members of his group, collecting money from them, and paying the *shaykha*. He enjoyed a number of privileges: for instance, while members of the *tāya* would sit on straw mats, he sat on

a stool. He was also usually accompanied by a young female bartender, who would sit with him and entertain him. If other men flirted with her or talked to her the leader would become angry, and fights would break out (Al-Ṭayyib [1974] 2004).

The drinks were served by young female bartenders who would go around the members of the *tāyāt*, provide them with drinks, and entice them to drink more by singing them songs of praise. Since the consumption of a large amount of *marīsa* was considered to be a mark of both prestige and masculinity, customers would continue to drink, and would sometimes become so intoxicated that they would order more drinks than they could afford, which often became a source of quarrels with the owner. If a customer did not have enough money to pay for his drinks, he would be asked to pawn some of his possessions, such as his knife, stick, or turban, which he could only retrieve after paying his debt. If he failed to pay, the *shaykha* would shame him by placing his pawned possessions in front of the *indāya* for everyone to see (Al-Ṭayyib [1974] 2004: 20–23).

Drinking in *indāya* followed certain protocols. If someone from outside the group came to join in, he would be offered three drinks as a courtesy. The first was called *ʿAmāra*, who was a famous ruler of the Funj Sultanate, the second was called *Dikayn*, who was another Funj leader, and the third was named after *Galbūs*, an army general who was known for his toughness and was considered to be a symbol of evil. After consuming the first and second drinks, the interloper had the option of asking the group to allow him to join them or leaving, but if he took the third drink without joining the group or refused to pay his share, he would be asked to leave or be thrown out (Al-Ṭayyib [1974] 2004: 4).

The protocols also included certain rules of behaviour that were taught to new and young customers by veterans. They included the following (Al-Ṭayyib [1974] 2004: 17):

- First, one should not fall asleep during the drinking session as this is considered the most degrading thing for a man
- Second, do not sit near the door: it is a source of evil
- Third, sit on your saddle: this is because another intoxicated customer may confuse it with his own and take it
- Fourth, always sit with your back against the wall, in case fighting breaks out
- Fifth, always keep your stick on your legs, as this is your only weapon
- Sixth, keep your eyes on your donkey
- Seventh, never take off your shoes: it is socially unacceptable
- Eighth, do not talk too much: talking makes you drunk quickly and can also be a source of misfortune
- Ninth, when the drinks are passed around, do not skip; this is a sign of weakness.

Consumption of the various types of alcoholic drinks reflected the social distinctions in Sudanese society. For instance, in addition to *anādī* there were also illegal

clandestine drinking houses called *karrī* (secret), where drinks were sold to wealthy and notable individuals who did not want to be seen publicly in the *anādī* (Al-Ṭayyib [1974] 2004: 136). In addition, while *marīsa* remained the most popular drink among the working-class and low-income population, the educated class, civil servants, professionals, and other elites frowned on it, preferring *ʿaragī* or imported European drinks. Instead of going to the *anādī*, some of these elites gathered in the so-called “salons” that became commonplace in urban centres like Khartoum in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These salons can be seen as an “upscale *anādī*”, and were run by women who served alcohol and provided entertainment in their homes. They became gathering places for members of the Sudanese intelligentsia, poets, writers, singers, and activists, who met to drink, recite poetry, sing, and discuss politics. They also provided a space for these Sudanese to consume either *ʿaragī* or prohibited imported European liquors and wines, a topic that will be examined later in the chapter. One of the most famous salons in Omdurman was owned by a woman named Shūl bint Ḥilwa, who became known as Fawz (see Osman chapter here). Her salon was described in some detail by Ḥasan Najīla ([1959] 2005: 148–161), and a biography of her was written by Ḥasan al-Jizūli (2013). Fawz was noted for her charm, elegance, and sophistication. She did not just serve drinks: she also sang and participated in the discussions and debates among her guests. It is not surprising that her salon attracted some of the most prominent intellectuals and anti-colonial activists, such as the legendary Sudanese poet and singer Khalīl Farah, ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, Muḥī al-Dīn Jamāl, Tawfīq Ṣāliḥ Jibrīl, and many others, who discussed politics, planned their activities, and produced leaflets (Najīla ([1959] 2005: 152). Although Fawz’s salon attained great notoriety, there were also several others in various parts of Khartoum, Omdurman, and Khartoum North.

## Struggles around Alcohol under British Colonial Rule

Following the Anglo-Egyptian conquest of Sudan in 1898, the colonial government began to introduce policies to control the consumption of imported European alcoholic beverages such as whisky, gin, brandy, and other spirits, as well as locally made alcoholic drinks. In May 1899, a Liquor Licence Ordinance was introduced that stated that no one may import, trade in, or sell wine, spirits, or other alcoholic liquors without a licence.<sup>6</sup> Later, the Native Liquor Ordinance of 1903 forbade the

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<sup>6</sup> National Records Office [NRO], Khartoum, Sudan, Civil Secretary [Civsec] 1/43/2/7, Civil Secretary to Governor General, 12 March 1923.

manufacture and sale of all drinks, including *marīsa*, without a licence. Additional prohibition laws were introduced in March 1908 that limited the consumption of imported European spirits to foreigners and the social clubs of government employees and colonial officials. Another law, the Native Liquors Act, which was introduced in 1919, prohibited the manufacture, sale, or possession of *'aragī* and *marīsa* without a licence. The punishment for a violation was imprisonment for up to one year, a fine, or both.

To implement the Saint-Germain-en-Laye Convention of 1919, the British authorities issued a Liquor Licence Ordinance in 1922. This Ordinance went beyond the requirements of the Saint-Germain Convention and prohibited the sale of any liquor to Sudanese citizens, including locally-made drinks such as *'aragī*. The Ordinance also established several categories of licence, including an A licence, which allowed the consumption of alcohol on and off the premises, and a B licence, which permitted consumption off the premises. The law empowered the Governor-General, the highest authority in the country,<sup>7</sup> to exempt certain categories of Sudanese from the prohibition. These included commissioned army officers and senior civil servants such as assistant District Commissioners.<sup>8</sup> Sudanese members of clubs that included Europeans were allowed to consume alcohol on these premises, with no distinction being made between them and their foreign counterparts. This was the case with the government employees club in Wad Medani, the only club with a majority Sudanese membership that sold European liquors.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these prohibitions, local Sudanese were able to find ways to circumvent the prohibition by obtaining European liquor from licenced individuals or people working in bars and hotels, a pattern that was confirmed in police reports from the 1930s. For instance, a Sudanese man named Faql 'Abd al-Wahhāb was found with a bottle of whisky that he claimed to have received from a bartender at the Sudan Club. Two Portuguese cooks, John Fernandis and John Nabat Damalo, were convicted of supplying beer to three Sudanese servants. A Greek contractor named Stavos Papadopoulos in Khartoum North was convicted of supplying beer to a Sudanese named Sharif Maḥjūb. Two prostitutes, Fāṭima b. Muḥammad Ḥabīb and Ḥabiba Abāba Jabrū, were found in possession of four bottles of whisky to be supplied to their clients; they claimed that the bottles had been left in their house by *khawājāt* (a Sudanese term for white Europeans).<sup>10</sup>

7 It should be pointed out that this office was exclusively occupied by Britons throughout the Anglo-Egyptian rule.

8 NRO, Civsec 1/43/2/7, Note on Liquor Legislation, Civil Secretary, 12 August 1941.

9 NRO, Civsec 1/43/1, The Official's Club, Wad Medani, by D.H. Hibbert, 28 November 1937.

10 NRO, 2 Kh.P.[Khartoum Province] 26/1/1, Civil Secretary to All Governors, 19 January 1933.

Another source of liquor for Sudanese was members of the Egyptian community, who were exempted from the prohibition laws. This community included Muslims as well as many Coptic Christians. There was also a large category known as “Muwaladin” (from the Arabic word *muwalladīn*, a term that referred to persons of Egyptian parentage who were born in Sudan or persons of mixed Egyptian and Sudanese parentage. Many Muwaladin tried to obtain European liquor by claiming they were Egyptian, an issue that provoked lengthy debates among colonial officials. The matter was finally referred to the Legal Secretary of the Sudan Government, who insisted that the Muwaladin could not be considered to be Egyptians and would not be exempt from the prohibition. He defined an Egyptian as follows:

a native of Egypt is one who, whether born in that country or not, can be identified with its indigenous inhabitants by reason of his descent, language, physical characteristics and customary mode of life.<sup>11</sup>

Although Egypt and other North African countries were exempted from the prohibition, the denial of this privilege to Sudanese and Muwaladin clearly showed how race and colour were used as tool of inclusion and exclusion.

There was also a considerable increase in the sale and consumption of Cypriot and Greek wines by Sudanese. In 1937, a British official asserted that at least 50 per cent of the educated class drank European alcohol regularly, and of these 10–15 per cent were addicts.<sup>12</sup> One of the cheapest and most popular wines that was consumed by low-income Sudanese was called “Abu Farrar”.<sup>13</sup> The following statistics from the government of Sudan’s Department of Economics and Trade showed the quantities of Greek wines imported into Sudan in two years in 1920s and five years in the 1930s<sup>14</sup> (Table 3).

According to official reports, the alcohol content of these Cypriot and Greek wines was 17 per cent.<sup>15</sup> However, British officials had concerns about the quality and health risks of cheap Greek wines. For example, in 1939, the Governor of Khartoum Province asked the Medical Officer at the Department of Health to examine these wines to see if they were harmful and should be prohibited.<sup>16</sup> This fear reflected the efforts of colonial officials in many parts of Africa to increase administrative control over the health and behaviour of their subjects. As Nancy Hunt (2016: 10–25) has noted in her work on the Belgian Congo, colonial officials tried to install what they

11 NRO, Civsec 1/43/2/7, Sudan Government Civil Secretary’s Office to All Governors, 19 January 1933.

12 NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/1, Educated Sudanese and European Alcohol, 18 December 1937.

13 NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/1, Legal Secretary to Civil Secretary, 1 July 1939.

14 NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/1, Legal Secretary to Civil Secretary, 1 July 1939.

15 NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/1, Acting Director of Customs to Civil Secretary, 1 July 1939.

16 NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/1, Acting Director of Customs to Civil Secretary, 1 July 1939.



**Table 3:** Wine imports, 1923–1938.

Year	Wine in Bulk	Wines in Bottles	Methylated Spirit
	Kilos	Kilos	Kilos
1923	20,737	44,334	no record
1928	30,393	39,463	34,202
1934	140,941	15,164	34,272
1935	267,319	24,997	50,062
1936	354,117	24,518	68,548
1937	455,396	28,464	42,723
1938	457,039	33,800	50,617

saw as efficient health control and security techniques. In March 1931, B.W. Whitfield, the Sudan Government Chemist, had already produced a report detailing the results of his examination of wine samples that had been provided to him by the Superintendent of Police. The results were as follows:

Alcohol by weight	12.8 per cent
Volume	15.8 per cent
Total extract	4 grammes per 100
Ash	0.36 per 100
Potassium Sulphate	1.78 per 100

Based on this analysis, he concluded that the wine was normal and that the high proportion of ash and the presence of potassium sulphate in such amounts indicated that the wine had been plastered. In his view, however, this amount was within the limits allowed in certain European countries such as France.<sup>17</sup>

## Challenging Colonial Liquor Policies

The refusal to grant Sudanese citizens access to European liquors generated vehement opposition from Sudanese, particularly in the capital. They expressed this opposition through petitions and letters addressed to British administrators such as the District Commissioners, provincial Governors, Civil Secretary, and even the Governor-General of Sudan. These petitions were submitted by ordinary people,

<sup>17</sup> NRO, 2 Kh.P. 1/7/167, B.W. Whitfield, Government Chemist, to Medical Officer of Health, 30 March 1931.

most of whom came from a working-class background, such as artisans, tailors, mechanics, and junior civil servants. For instance, a group of people who signed a petition in 1937 included the following names and their occupations<sup>18</sup>:

Mohammed Hassan Ali	Racquet stringer and assistant in a car repair shop
Abdel Karim Fatahalla	Barber
Zen Bur	Barber
Rashid Hamdnalla	Tailor
Ibrahim Mohmmed	Mechanic
Ibrahim Abdel Fadil	Barber
Suliman Abdel Wahab	Painter
Musa Mahmud	Murasla (messenger)
Bashir Gota	Washerman
Ramadan Hamid	Carpenter
Omer El Hag	Butcher

Following receipt of the first few petitions, British officials began to gather intelligence information about the people who wrote and signed them, including their backgrounds and activities. The government authorities focused on two figures who played a leading role in the petition-writing. The first was Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Alī, who was nicknamed *Abū Kaffa*.<sup>19</sup> A Nubian from Dongola, Muḥammad’s father served as a cleaner in the Governor’s palace for many years. Because of his knowledge of English, Muḥammad became a well-known petition-writer, advising anti-government activists and other protesters.<sup>20</sup> The other was ‘Abd al-Karīm Fathallāh, a barber, who was referred to in official reports as “Sudani,” a term used for a person of servile origin. He was also an active petition-writer.

The British authorities reacted to these petitions with a great deal of contempt. They loathed the petitioners and despised their social and working-class background. According to a police report:

None of the signatures is that of a person of standing. Most of them are those of butchers, hairdressers, tailors, bakers, cycle dealers and other like occupations. Some are known bad characters and others are all of doubtful reputation.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> NRO, Kh.P. 26/1/3, District Commissioner, Khartoum to Governor Khartoum Province, 28 December 1937.

<sup>19</sup> His nickname was *Abū Kaffa* (“father of hand palm”) because he was missing all the fingers on one hand.

<sup>20</sup> NRO, Kh.P. 26/1/3, Report by the Commandant of Police, Khartoum, 13 March 1937.

<sup>21</sup> NRO, Kh.P. 26/1/3, Confidential Report, Superintendent Police Headquarters, 23 December 1937.

The report described Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Alī and ‘Abd al-Karīm Faṭḥallāh as heavy drinkers and smokers of *kamanga* (local hashish) who befriended prostitutes. However, as will be explained later, the petitions and letters revealed a high level of political consciousness and an acute awareness of the concepts of citizenship, equality, and justice. It was also clear that the protesters were mobilising and organising people to oppose the liquor policies. An intelligence report stated that Abū Kaffa was always “roaming the city for abetting people for matters endangering the peace.”<sup>22</sup> He and Faṭḥallāh allegedly engaged in establishing organisations in Omdurman and Khartoum North to join their campaign. The group held its meetings in a house rented by ‘Abd al-Karīm near Comboni College in the centre of Khartoum, where people met to drink, hold meetings, and plan political activities. The report also alleged that these meetings were attended by certain activists who had participated in the 1924 uprising.<sup>23</sup> In 1937, these activists submitted at least five petitions, some of which were signed by more than two hundred people.

The questions and issues raised in these letters and petitions revolved around notions of citizenship, race, colour, and class distinctions. A petition sent to the Governor of Khartoum Province on 5 January 1937, which bore over two hundred signatures, stated that access to European liquor was a matter of freedom and equality, and pointed out that since foreigners “were allowed to do so and[,] we are forbidden we feel we are losing our equal rights of citizenship.”<sup>24</sup> The question of race was also raised repeatedly. For instance, in the petition submitted to the Legal Secretary of the Sudan Government, the writers pointed out:

In all Islamic countries like Egypt, liquors are politely resisted not like our existing law, which permits those white Moslems to drink and those black Moslems to be sent to the Criminal Court if they dare to taste it.<sup>25</sup>

The same point was elaborated on in another petition to the Governor-General of Sudan in December 1937:

We became in every day and every moment feel foreigners in our country, as far as our government is creating to us a world of progress and luxury in Khartoum, telling us that it is not existing for us; for example, when a native gentleman goes to the Cabaret, he pays an entrance fee of 10 piasters while no body of other communities is paying this fee, why? Because he is a Sudanese, and when he enters inside, he finds himself enclosed in an atmosphere which is

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22 NRO, Kh.P. 26/1/3, Translation of Report on Mohammed Hassan Ali and Abdel Karim Fathalla Submitted by No. 1, 13 March 1937.

23 NRO, Kh.P. 26/1/3, Translation of Report on Mohammed Hassan Ali and Abdel Karim Fathalla Submitted by No. 1, 13 March 1937.

24 NRO, 2 Kh.P., 26/1/3, Petitioners to Governor of Khartoum Province, 5 January 1937.

25 NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/3, Petitioners to the Legal Secretary, Sudan Government, 11 May 1937.

well saturated with alcoholic drinks, while he was forbidden by his government not to join others in any favourite of the drink, why? Because he is a black coloured man.<sup>26</sup>

By invoking race and Blackness, the protesters challenged the discriminatory nature of British liquor policies and showed how they conceptualised their Sudanese identity, which was often framed in the binary terms of “Africanism” versus “Arabism.”

The petitioners also questioned an important aspect of the colonial policy; namely the fact that it allowed Sudanese army and police officers and senior officials to access European liquor and deprived junior officials and ordinary people of it. As they put it:

A native of the Sudan who by sheer luck found his way through a military career – even from the ranks – is allowed liquor. A police officer who crept from sheer luck through a course of a few months at the police training school graduates and automatically becomes a right person to drink in elastic circles of the law.<sup>27</sup>

It is worth mentioning that this distinction was also a source of discontent for a wide range of people. For example, in May 1937, the Director of the Sudan Medical Service wrote to the Civil Secretary complaining that while Sudanese commissioned officers and assistant District Commissioners could obtain European liquor, medical doctors were not allowed to do so, pointing out that

[a] doctor can prescribe alcohol for his patients and can obtain drugs of addiction on his own signature, and it seems anomalous that he cannot be trusted to buy beer, wine, and spirits for himself.<sup>28</sup>

He went on to stress that Sudanese doctors “must be in a position of trust” and should be allowed to have the same privileges as those enjoyed by Sudanese senior officials.

The petitions also illustrated the role of class in shaping drinking patterns – a topic that has been discussed earlier – as well as the concerns of the protesters regarding the health issue. In a series of letters to the Governor of Khartoum Province, the protesters depicted *marīsa* as the drink of rural folk and the lower classes who were attracted to the entertainment provided in *anādī*, asserting that “it is impossible for those people who are living in town to go to the marrisa dens

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26 NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/3, Mohammed Hassan Ali (Abu Kaffa) and Others to Khartoum to the Governor-General of the Sudan, 15 December 1937.

27 NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/3, Mohammed Hassan Ali (Abu Kaffa) and Others to Khartoum to the Governor-General of the Sudan, 15 December 1937.

28 NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/3, Director of Sudan Medical Service to the Civil Secretary, 15 May 1937.

no matter what it looks like.”<sup>29</sup> They stressed the unhealthy methods of preparing and serving *marīsa* and the unsanitary environment inside and outside the *anādi*. They described the fatal impact of *marīsa* on the intestines and the digestive organs in some detail, citing the example of a man named Aḥmad Sa’īd Aḥmad, who had allegedly died in an *indāya* in the Khartoum Deims in March 1937.<sup>30</sup> They also complained about the contradictory nature of the colonial liquor policy, which prohibited locals from consuming *aragī* and at the same time deprived them of imported liquor: “Our government” the petition stated, “has deprived us of our native drink without allowing us a healthy substitute, and when we make a move towards a healthy drink such as beer or wine, we find ourselves confronting the Criminal Court.”<sup>31</sup>

The provincial authorities could no longer ignore these protests. In 1937, the District Commissioner (DC) of Khartoum met with representatives of the petitioners several times to discuss their grievances. Following one of these discussions, he wrote to the governor of Khartoum Province:

There appears to be a need in Khartoum for a good class of “Pub” to retail hygienically prepared Sudanese drinks in pleasant surroundings. At present the only drinking places are low class “andayat” in the slums to which no self-respecting middle- or upper-class citizen cares to go.<sup>32</sup>

In the late 1930s, the protests and the practical challenges of implementing liquor legislation prompted British officials to begin debating the efficacy of the existing liquor legislation and to admit that it was discriminatory and contradictory. They started to take steps to amend the 1922 law by new legislation known as the Liquor Licence (Amendment) Ordinance 1939. The stated purpose of the amendment was to address the flaws in the 1922 law and to allow Sudanese to consume beer and light Cypriot wines. This idea had already been discussed and unanimously supported by all the provincial Governors in Northern Sudan in meetings in February 1938. The justifications for the new legislation were outlined in a government press notice published in 1939 that stated that although the 1922 law had been introduced to enforce the Saint-Germain-en-Laye provisions, the Sudanese law went beyond that, imposing restrictions on the manufacture, sale, and consumption of non-spirituous liquors and local drinks, which were not covered by the Convention.<sup>33</sup> Moreo-

<sup>29</sup> NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/3, Petitioners to Governor of Khartoum Province, 2 March 1937.

<sup>30</sup> NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/3, Petitioners to Governor of Khartoum Province, 3 May 1937.

<sup>31</sup> NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/3, Petitioners to Governor of Khartoum Province, 11 May 1937.

<sup>32</sup> NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/3, District Commissioner Khartoum to Governor Khartoum Province, 18 March 1937.

<sup>33</sup> NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/3, The Liquor Licence (Amendment) Ordinance, 1941.

ver, in view of the fact that the Sudanese liquor laws followed the Convention guidelines, which excluded Egyptians and Levantines from the prohibition, and since these people lived side by side with the Sudanese, it would be extremely difficult to combat leaks of imported liquor from one community to another. The government also argued that even if the authorities succeeded in combating the illegal distribution of European liquors, it would lead to an immediate increase in the consumption of indigenous liquors of an “extremely harmful type.” The statement went on to say:

[W]e have the strange anomaly that, while certain sections of the community are exempted from the provisions of the present law and while the lower classes can obtain merrissa in the merrissa shops, there exists in the towns a large class of Sudanese who, by falling between these two extremes, cannot legally acquire any alcoholic liquor since their natural sense of dignity and self-respect debars them from attendance at merrissa shops.<sup>34</sup>

From the perspective of colonial officials, the 1939 amendment would improve the situation by allowing the sale of beer and light wines to Sudanese. To achieve this goal, certain “sophisticated towns” would be designated as “wet” areas where beer and light wines might be sold to natives. These included Khartoum, Wad Medani, Port Sudan, Atbara, El Obeid, Kosti, Shendi, Wadi Halfa, and other cities. Sudanese living in dry areas could obtain drinks from a wet area if they obtained a permit from the Governor of the province. However, this procedure proved to be inconvenient and impractical, and as a result, the 1939 legislation was amended in 1941, and came to be known as The Liquor Licence (Amendment) Ordinance 1941. The new version was deemed to be much simpler, as it empowered provincial governors to permit certain licence holders to sell beer and light wine to Sudanese regardless of where they lived. British officials contended that this legislation would “satisfy the legitimate needs of a large class whose *amour propre* is offended by their inability to drink alcohol unless they have recourse to merrissa shops.”<sup>35</sup> They claimed that the new legislation would allow the government to concentrate on combating the illicit consumption of imported and locally distilled liquors.

In the 1940s, the city of Khartoum had about forty-nine bars, with different types of licences that determined whether drinks could be consumed inside the premise or taken away by customers. Some of the most notable bars were the Victoria Hotel, the Gordon Bar, the Central Bar (Papadellis), the Albion Hotel, the Lord Byron Bar, the Coliseum Cinema, the Great Britain Bar, Sarsfield Hall, the Mogran Gardens, the St. James Hotel, and the Grand Hotel.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/3, The Liquor Licence (Amendment) Ordinance, 1941.

<sup>35</sup> NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/3, The Liquor Licence (Amendment) Ordinance, 1941.

<sup>36</sup> NRO, Kh.P. A 43/E/1, Commandant of Police, 11 October 1952.

During the years of the Second World War, imports of European liquor, particularly whisky, declined sharply. In 1942, a rationing system was introduced that assigned specific quotas to hotels and bars.<sup>37</sup> The severe shortage of whisky increased competition among its consumers. The Governor of Khartoum reported: “[A]lmost every day now I receive applications from Sudanese of standing for permits to purchase hard liquor,”<sup>38</sup> and he invariably granted them. The Sudanese specifically asked for whisky. The Governor rejected the prevailing notion among colonial officials that in the face of a whisky shortage, priority should be given to the Englishman, who “must have first call upon them, in order to satisfy his traditional right to consume 1, 2 or more whiskies in the evening.”<sup>39</sup> He wrote to the Controller of Supplies to ease the restrictions.

Suppliers of whisky such as the Distillers Company of London, which supplied 75 per cent of Scotch whisky to Sudan, could not produce enough in the 1940s and 1950s. According to the Director of the Department of Economics and Trade, Sudan would need to import 12,000 bottles a month in order to remove whisky rationing.<sup>40</sup>

The debate over European liquor continued in the 1950s. Five years before Sudan’s independence, J.W. Robertson, the Civil Secretary, wrote to all provincial governors telling them that “it is clear that the prohibition at present on Sudanese is becoming a point of national prestige and honour.”<sup>41</sup> He believed that if the matter were brought before the Legislative Assembly, it would be opposed. The Assembly was an elected body that had been set up by the British in 1948, and most of its members represented conservative and sectarian-based Northern Sudanese parties. It is not surprising that Robertson recommended that Governors should use their discretion. He considered that “at private houses and private entertainment there should be no differentiation made between Sudanese and British and if spirituous liquors are offered to British, they should equally be offered to Sudanese.”<sup>42</sup>

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37 NRO, Kh.P. A 43/E/1, Commandant of Police, 11 October 1952.

38 NRO, Kh.P. A 43/E/1, From H.R.P. Harrison, Governor of Khartoum, to Controller of Supplies, 14 August 1952.

39 NRO, Kh.P. A 43/E/1, From H.R.P. Harrison, Governor of Khartoum, to Controller of Supplies, 14 August 1952.

40 NRO, Kh.P. A 43/E/1, E.F. Aglen Director, Department of Economic and Trade, to The Distillers Company Ltd London, 1 October 1953.

41 NRO, Civsec 1/43/2/7, J. W. Robertson, Civil Secretary, to All Governors, 4 November 1951.

42 NRO, Civsec 1/43/2/7, J. W. Robertson, Civil Secretary, to All Governors, 4 November 1951.

## The Campaign Against 'Aragī

While some Sudanese were able to obtain European liquors, the vast majority turned to *marīsa* and 'aragī. As mentioned earlier, 'aragī was manufactured in many parts of Sudan from dates or grain. In Dongola and Halfa provinces, for instance, 'aragī was made from dates, while in the Southern and Central parts of Sudan it was distilled from grain. Despite its popularity, however, 'aragī was reviled by British officials, who viewed it as a highly intoxicating drink and a health hazard. It is not surprising that they made relentless efforts to prohibit it by criminalising its manufacturing and consumption. This attitude was best exemplified in a letter from the District Commissioner of Khartoum North to the Governor of Khartoum Province in which he wrote: "The araki [sic] distiller was more dangerous to the community than an ordinary thief as the direct evil effects were so much more widespread."<sup>43</sup> The DC's statement reflected the attitude of colonial officials in many parts of Africa, who considered drinking to be a source of dangerous disorder, indiscipline, social degradation, and defiance of authority.

In the early 1930s, the government authorities wrote alarming reports about a sharp increase in the consumption of 'aragī by local Sudanese, particularly in the large towns. For instance, in December 1930, the Civil Secretary of the Sudan Government sent letters to all provincial Governors and heads of department warning them that the manufacture and consumption of 'aragī was on the rise, especially among government employees, and that they must therefore take steps to prosecute not only those who manufactured it, but also those who marketed or consumed it.<sup>44</sup> A report by Samuel Bey 'Atīyya, the Director of the Intelligence Department, claimed that at least 30 per cent of government employees drank 'aragī.<sup>45</sup>

The anti-'aragī campaign embraced several strategies, including prosecution, propaganda, and the mobilisation of local leaders such as native administrators and religious figures. The government also made use of informants and other intelligence sources to gather information about the places where 'aragī was made and consumed. Despite these efforts, however, the extensive use of 'aragī persisted, prompting the Governor of Khartoum Province to question the efficacy of the government measures. He told the District Commissioners of Khartoum, Khartoum North, and Omdurman that the measures might even lead to increased drinking, arguing that "the law has the effect of adding a secret pleasure to drinking, and encourages heavy drinking on the principle that if a man is taking a risk he may

<sup>43</sup> NRO, Kh.P. 1/7/167, DC Khartoum North to Governor Khartoum Province, 8 February 1931.

<sup>44</sup> NRO, Kh.P. 1/7/167, Civil Secretary to All Governors and Heads of Departments, 11 December 1930.

<sup>45</sup> NRO, Kh.P. 1/7/167, Extract from a Note by Samuel Bey Attiyah, 20 December 1930.



as well get his risks' worth."<sup>46</sup> The Governor went on to express his willingness to consider a suggestion from some neighbourhood sheikhs that offering a limited number of licences to 'aragī makers might help control and decrease its consumption. In his view, licensing would provide a means of regulating and controlling the ingredients of 'aragī and gradually improve its quality.

In January 1 1931 the Governor of Khartoum Province held a meeting at the provincial headquarters attended by the District Commissioners of the three towns, as well as the Medical Officer of Health and the Superintendent of Police. He asked the DCs to meet leading notables and religious figures in their districts to explain the "evils" of 'aragī drinking to them, to draw their attention to the fact that its consumption was forbidden in the "Mohammedan" religion, and to ask them to launch a propaganda campaign against 'aragī and to cooperate with the government to suppress it.<sup>47</sup> Neighbourhood sheikhs should also be told that they would be held liable – and even dismissed – if the government discovered that 'aragī was being manufactured and consumed in their neighbourhoods. The Governor also asked the DCs to regularly inspect liquor licence holders and to solemnly warn them that they could lose their licences if they were caught selling liquor to unauthorised persons. He instructed the Superintendent of Police to warn members of the police force to be vigilant, to take action against 'aragī makers and drinkers, and to inform the police officers that if they failed to do so, they could be dismissed from the force.

The government campaign and its efforts to mobilise community leaders to stamp out 'aragī did not yield any meaningful results. Sudanese government employees opposed the anti-'aragī policies as a pretext by the government to discharge them from their jobs. To avoid being caught, these employees simply changed the venues where they drank regularly. According to government informants, neighbourhood sheikhs and native administrators were not keen on enforcing anti-'aragī measures because they also benefited from its sale, as they required unlicensed *marīsa* makers to pay them a regular fee in return for protection. For example, the sheikhs would give 'aragī makers advance notice of police raids and visits from the inspector. At the same time, members of the police force often ignored violators, and some even frequented *anādī* when they were off duty.<sup>48</sup> In short, local consumers, producers, and government agents all had a vested interest in protecting the enterprise.

The provincial authorities continued to push their efforts against 'aragī. In December 1930, the Governor of Khartoum wrote to the District Commissioners of

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<sup>46</sup> NRO, Kh.P. 1/7/167, District Commissioner Khartoum to Governor Khartoum Province, 12 January 1930.

<sup>47</sup> NRO, Kh.P. 1/7/167, Governor of Khartoum Province to DCs, 29 January 1931.

<sup>48</sup> NRO, Kh.P. 1/7/167, Informant Report, 20 December 1930.

the three towns urging them to mobilise what he called “enlightened” natives and religious leaders against *‘aragī* drinking. He also stated that he was planning for the publication of articles in leading newspapers and magazines such as *Ḥaḍārat al-Sūdān*. In his view, this public campaign would pave the way for the government to take drastic measures and impose severe penalties.<sup>49</sup>

The question of *‘aragī* drinking became the focus of a series of meetings between government officials and local sheikhs and community leaders. On 20 January 1931, a meeting was held at the provincial headquarters, attended by the District Commissioners of the three towns and the medical officer. The province governor and district officials proposed the idea of regulating *‘aragī* making by providing licences to certain individuals, but this was opposed by the medical officer.<sup>50</sup> However, officials agreed that the regulations must be tightened and that local sheikhs should be warned that they must report the consumption of *‘aragī* in their neighbourhoods. A few days later, the District Commissioner of Khartoum met religious leaders and native administrators and urged them to be vigilant and to report cases of *‘aragī* drinking in their neighbourhoods.<sup>51</sup> They all agreed to impose heavy penalties and long prison terms for violators. A similar meeting was held between the District Commissioner of Khartoum North and twenty notables and religious leaders, during which the DC explained the government regulations regarding *‘aragī*. The leaders promised to use their influence and to campaign against *‘aragī* drinking. Two proposals were put forward. First, it was agreed that the existing penalties of three months’ imprisonment and a fine for manufacturing *‘aragī* should be increased to at least one year in prison. Second, convicted persons should serve their sentence away from their homes in provincial prisons such as Port Sudan. The DC referred to verses from the Quran to support this idea.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, in March 1931, the DC of Khartoum held a meeting in his office attended by sheikhs and religious leaders, including the editor of *Ḥaḍārat al-Sūdān* and two representatives of Gordon College (which was the only secondary school in Sudan at the time). The DC pointed out the negative impact of *‘aragī* drinking on the health of consumers and on the morals of society, arguing that it was forbidden by the Muslim religion and civil law. He asked the attendees to assist in every feasible way and to act against the consumption of *‘aragī* as well as the illicit consumption

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49 NRO, Kh.P. 1/7/167, Governor Khartoum Province to DC Khartoum, Khartoum North, and Omdurman, 31 December 1930.

50 NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/1, Note of a Meeting Held at the Mudiria on 20/1/31, 20 January 1931.

51 NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/1, Governor of Khartoum Province to DCs Khartoum, Khartoum North, and Omdurman, 29 January 1931.

52 NRO, Kh.P.1/7/163, DC Khartoum North to Governor of Khartoum, 8 February 1931.

of European liquors by local Sudanese.<sup>53</sup> The meeting made several recommendations. First, since many *'aragī* makers obtained some of their ingredients from licensed *marīsa* makers, it was suggested that the number of *marīsa* licences should be reduced. Second, because the *anādī* were scattered throughout neighbourhoods, they should be concentrated in a single block. Third, the police should be instructed to be strict about drunkenness and should have the power to arrest drunkards without a warrant. Finally, drunk persons should be medically examined to ascertain whether they had been intoxicated by *marīsa*, *'aragī*, or European spirits.<sup>54</sup>

It is important to point out that the campaign against *'aragī* specifically targeted female producers. In addition to the fact that these women were dependent on the sale of alcohol for their livelihoods, they also sold drinks to low-income urban residents who could not afford imported liquors. In 1934, the stock sentences imposed on women who were found manufacturing or in possession of *'aragī* were two months' imprisonment and a fine of four pounds for manufacturing and one month's imprisonment and a fine of two pounds for possession.<sup>55</sup>

In the same year, the Governor of Khartoum Province sought the opinions of the DCs of the three towns to see whether they thought that the existing penalties were an adequate deterrent or if they should be more severe.<sup>56</sup> The DC of Khartoum North stated that since the public was not averse to drinking *'aragī*, it would be impossible to prevent it from being consumed, and that the only hope was to increase the price to make it unaffordable for as many people as possible.<sup>57</sup> In his view, the sentence for possession was too heavy. However, the assistant DC of Khartoum argued that the existing penalties for possession were not too severe because he did not see any difference between possessing and distilling.<sup>58</sup> His position was also supported by the DC of Omdurman.<sup>59</sup>

Anti-*'aragī* measures intensified in the 1940s and the number of prosecutions increased. Colonial officials found an ally in the Advisory Council of Northern Sudan, which was established in 1944 and consisted of tribal and religious leaders. In its third session in May 1945, the overwhelming majority of the Council's members voted against any policy that would allow Sudanese to consume alcoholic beverages.

53 NRO, Kh.P. 1/7/163, DC Khartoum to Governor of Khartoum Province, 4 March 1931.

54 NRO, Kh.P. 1/7/163, DC Khartoum to Governor of Khartoum Province, 4 March 1931.

55 NRO, Kh.P. 1/7/163, Governor, Khartoum Province to DC, Omdurman, Khartoum, and Khartoum North, 26 May 1934.

56 NRO, Kh. P.1/7/163, Governor of Khartoum Province to DCs and Commandant of Police, 26 May 1934.

57 NRO, Kh.P. 1/7/163, DC Khartoum North, 28 May 1934.

58 NRO, Kh.P. 1/7/163, A/DC Khartoum to Governor, 31 May 1934.

59 NRO, Kh.P.1/7/163, DC Omdurman to Governor, 7 June 1934.

ages, including imported European liquors and light wines as well as locally-made drinks such as *'aragī* and *marīsa*.<sup>60</sup> The Council's decision was met with a great deal of scepticism in certain segments of Sudanese society. On its editorial page, the *al-Sūdān al-Jadīd* newspaper acknowledged that the Council's decision was guided by religious tenets that were respected by many Sudanese Muslims, but expressed the opinion that the handling of the matter should be based on a proper understanding of local realities and the exigencies of modern life.<sup>61</sup> In this regard, the author pointed to the fact that drinking *marīsa* was part of the local traditions in the Western parts of Sudan and insisted that the government was just trying to use the support of the Council to implement the Saint-Germain Convention.<sup>62</sup>

The Omdurman Town Council appointed a special committee to consider the alcohol question. At its meeting in August 1945, the discussion focused on the sale of imported liquor, the prevention of *'aragī* manufacturing, and the possibility of improving *marīsa* houses in the city. The committee recommended stricter control over the sale of imported liquor in bars and the application of severe penalties for making *'aragī*. As far as *marīsa* was concerned, the committee recommended that conditions in *anādī* should be improved, but that they should be moved to the outskirts of cities because in the committee's view, they were attended by "bad characters."<sup>63</sup>

In 1945, the municipal authorities in Khartoum Province conducted extensive raids on *'aragī* distillers in various neighbourhoods, particularly in areas on the outskirts of the city such as Jabal Awlia, Halfayat al-Muluk, Kober, and Khartoum North, which resulted in numerous prosecutions and convictions (Table 4). Within a period of six months, at least eighty-nine people were prosecuted. The sharp increase in the number of prosecutions can be illustrated by the following figures:<sup>64</sup>

The colonial authorities also began to discuss controlling the production and consumption of *marīsa* at *anādī*. One of the proposals involved increasing the fee of *marīsa* licences to four pounds.

The efforts to control and regulate the manufacture and consumption of local alcohol continued under successive post-independence Sudanese governments. In

60 NRO, Kh.P. A 43/E/1, Extract from Minutes of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Session of the Advisory Council for Northern Sudan 23–28–5–1945 and *Al-Sūdān al-Jadīd*, 1 June 1945.

61 *Al-Sūdān al-Jadīd* was a weekly newspaper that was founded by Ahmad Yūsuf Hāshim in 1944. It covered a wide range of topics, including politics, literature, social affairs, and the arts.

62 NRO, *Al-Sūdān al-Jadīd*, 8 June 1945.

63 NRO, Kh.P.A 43/E/1, Report of a Special Committee Appointed by the Omdurman Town Council to Consider the Questions Concerning the Control of Drinks Submitted to the Governor of Khartoum on 28 August 1945.

64 NRO, 2 Kh.P. 26/1/1, Ahmed Gally, Assistant Commandant of Police, Khartoum Province to Governor of Khartoum, 14 January 1946.

**Table 4:** Prosecutions for illegal sale of alcohol, 1942–45.

Year	No. of Prosecutions
1942	190
1943	203
1944	231
1945	399

May 1957, for instance, the Municipal Council of the town of Atbara issued a local ordinance to prevent the manufacture and sale of *marīsa* outside *anādī* (al-Ṭayyib [1974] 2004). This order also required *anādī* owners to observe a series of rules. They were asked not to allow customers to become too drunk and to expel anyone who was intoxicated. Owners were also not to allow gambling on their premises. Finally, the order limited the daily working hours of *indāya* to between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. These regulations can be explained by the fact that Atbara was a working-class town, and much of its population was employed by the Railway Department, which had become concerned about the discipline and productivity of its workers. The campaign against alcohol in Sudan gained momentum in subsequent years through the growing influence of Islamist political parties and organisations. A series of local laws against *anādī* and local drinks was enacted in several towns, such as Kassala and Khartoum, in the 1970s. The final blow came in 1983, when the government of Jaʿfar al-Nimayrī introduced the so-called September Laws, which banned the manufacture, import, sale, and consumption of all alcoholic drinks. Hostility towards alcohol then escalated under the military regime of ʿUmar al-Bashīr (1989–2019), which was supported by the Islamist movement. It is no surprise that the regime enacted a series of punitive measures towards the sale and consumption of alcohol, including police raids and the arrest, detention, imprisonment, and flogging of producers and consumers.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, despite these measures, the consumption of *ʿaragī* and smuggled European liquors has continued to thrive to this day.

## Conclusion

The production and consumption of alcohol in Sudan under British colonial rule became an arena for contention, adaptation, and resistance. As in other parts of colonial Africa, British policies towards alcohol in Sudan were shaped by the ideal-

<sup>65</sup> For more details on these policies see ʿUlaysh 2012.

istic and paternalistic resolutions of the anti-slavery movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Saint-Germain Convention of 1919, and the particular British concept of Sudanese cultural and religious traditions. These officials waged a vigorous campaign against certain types of local drink such as *'aragī*, and at the same time adopted contradictory policies that allowed certain segments of the Sudanese elite to consume imported European liquors while ordinary people were denied access to the same products. Despite this, many Sudanese found different ways to thwart these prohibitions and obtain European liquors. The British liquor laws also provoked a strong reaction from a wide range of the Sudanese people, who mobilised and challenged the colonial authorities through petitions and letters that exposed the ideological basis and discriminatory nature of these policies. These protests prompted the British to rethink their liquor policies and to introduce major reforms.

Despite their relentless efforts to curtail or forbid the production, circulation, and consumption of alcoholic drinks in Sudan, the British colonial regime failed to eradicate this deeply-rooted tradition. Not even the draconian policies of the post-colonial authoritarian regimes of Ja'far al-Nimayrī and 'Umar al-Bashīr could stamp out the consumption of alcohol and its enduring social and cultural significance in Sudanese society. Alcohol is still made, smuggled, sold, and consumed in many parts of the country, either in the secrecy of closed premises or at private parties.

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Willow Berridge

## Chapter 12

# Colonial Homophobia: Externalising Queerness in Condominium Sudan

In their comprehensive survey of legislation criminalising homosexuality in the British Empire, Enze Han and Joseph O'Mahoney conclude that the British “managed to impose and institutionalise a set of laws in [their] colonies that criminalise homosexual conduct”, which produced a lasting legacy in the ongoing criminalisation of homosexuality by the subsequent nationalist regimes that replaced the empire (Han & O'Mahoney 2018: 105). Yet scholars of sexuality and empire have often overlooked the extent to which “historic geographies of regulation and resistance were differentiated” (Phillips 2006: 112). Han and O'Mahoney themselves note one significant outlier – the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of Sudan, which was established in 1899 after British and Egyptian forces had defeated the Mahdist state of the Khalifa 'Abdullāhi. Although the Condominium arrangement was unique within the British Empire, the British, having already informally colonised Egypt, were the de facto dominant partners and modelled the territory's laws on those of their most prized colonial possession, India. Unlike the Indian Penal Code, however, the Sudan Penal Code introduced by the Condominium did not criminalise consensual same-sex intercourse. Instead, it only criminalised “carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any person without his consent” (Han & O'Mahoney 2018: 14). Instead, it was the legal codes that were introduced during Sudan's nationalist, and then Islamist, periods that criminalised consensual intercourse with a partner of the same sex (Han & O'Mahoney 2018: 14–15).

Given the atypical leniency of the Condominium era legal codes, one post-colonial scholar contends that the non-criminalisation of homosexuality under the Condominium regime represented a “moral injury” inflicted by the British on the Muslim public in Sudan (Ibrahim 2008: 183–189). Meanwhile, in a sympathetic analysis of the 1991 Penal Code, Islamist Sudan's Director of Public Prosecutions 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Khalīfa lamented that its colonial predecessor “condoned consumption of alcoholic drinks, illicit intercourse, and even homosexuality provided there was consent. This was not the case in England even then; homosexuality was not yet legalised in England. . .” (Elkhalifa 1997). However, much of the literature on colonialism, post-colonialism and sexual and gender identity in Africa rightly recognises that nationalist – and in this case Islamist – narratives claiming that the colonisers imported homosexual practice erase much of the reality of pre-colonial sexual and gender diversity (Epprecht 2008; M'Baye 2013; Gaudio 2014). In practice, as



we will see in this text, the worldview of the majority of Sudan's British colonisers was deeply homophobic and transphobic, and their policing of the Condominium repeatedly marginalised and discriminated against sexual and gender minorities in Sudan. Meanwhile, although the rise of political Islam in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Sudan almost certainly contributed to the further marginalisation of these minorities, there is no particular evidence that the provisions of the Islamist penal codes criminalising *liwāṭ* (sodomy) were ever enforced (Tønnessen & el-Nagar: forthcoming). The question that logically ensues, therefore, is whether formal criminalisation of same-sex intercourse should be seen as the most important index by which to measure the degree of homophobia within a particular governing system or – especially in the context of an authoritarian system – society at large?

We might contend – and there is evidence for this in the following chapter – that unequal application of laws other than those specifically targeted at non-heterosexual activities might also represent an important index for measuring colonial homophobia and queerphobia. We also need to consider the extent of the colonisers' responsibility for the rise of racialised discourses about sexuality that maintained that same-sex relations were “un-African”. Epprecht, for instance, has categorised the manifold ways in which the period of European colonial hegemony gave rise to the notion of a “heterosexual Africa” (Epprecht 2008). Meanwhile, as Nandy has shown us, British colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was characterised by a form of “hypermasculinity” that posited a binary divide between the feminine and the masculine and abhorred any signs of “femininity in men” (Nandy 1988: 8). British colonial officers in Sudan did not operate outside those broader imperial discursive frameworks. In this chapter, I will attempt a synthesis of the approaches that focus on legislative and discursive homophobia respectively, both demonstrating that the legal system was mobilised against marginalised sexualities and genders even prior to the formal criminalisation of same-sex intercourse in the post-colonial era, and exploring the political and ideological contexts that informed the manner in which it was.

Given that colonial discourses about sexuality intersected with highly racialised and gendered power structures, one might question the utility of the term “homophobia” to describe the prejudices that resulted. The term first emerged in the 1970s in the period of sexual liberalisation that followed the decolonisation of the European empires, and denoted less a structural form of prejudice and more an individual pathology borne out of irrational fear or “phobia” towards homosexuals (Wickberg 2000). Instead, Thoreson (2014) proposes “anti-queer animus,” in recognition of both the broader ideological, religious and political structures that sustain anti-queer prejudice and the fact that these structures act upon individuals whose identities do not always fit within the Western sexual categories the term “homophobia” embraces.

While recognising the diverse character of sexual and gender identities within different cultures, “homophobia” might be valid for a colonial context insofar as it denotes a set of colonial mentalities informed by ideas about sexuality and gender that existed within the culture of the colonisers and went on to influence the nationalist elites (Rao 2020: 35). “Queerphobia” might also be employed to acknowledge the diversity of the forms of sexual and gender identity that triggered colonial anxieties. This piece will therefore make use of both “homophobia” and “queerphobia”, as well as “anti-queer animus”.<sup>1</sup> That said, my concern here is not to identify and categorise a specifically “Western”, “Islamic” or “African” form of queerphobia in Sudan as much as it is to identify multiple and situational forms of anti-queer animus shaped by an evolving colonial and anti-colonial context (Rao 2020: 52). While the core focus of the chapter will be on the policies and ideology of the colonial state, attention will also be given to Sudanese narratives. It will be seen throughout that homophobic discourses have been characterised by what Rao terms a “shape-shifting versatility” (Rao 2020: 52), serving both colonial and anti-colonial narratives. There was not a single inherently “Sudanese” queerphobia, but there are numerous different forms of anti-queer animus, each shaped by their own individual contexts (Thoreson 2014: 24). In the case of Sudan, the “political economy” (Thoreson 2014:25) of homophobia was shaped by the Egyptian and British contestation within the Condominium, the racialisation of “Arab” and “African” identities and the socio-political exigencies of the colonial state’s alliance with neo-traditional authorities and the riverain mercantile classes.

The existence of a ruling partnership between the British administrative cadres and the mercantile elites that had previously supported the Mahdist state (1885–1898) leads us to ask whether the presence of a revivalist Islamic regime in Sudan in the immediate pre-Condominium period explains the queerphobic outlook of the Condominium state. The question of whether classic Islamic scripture justifies queerphobia is contentious, with a generation of queer Muslim scholars now challenging the attitudes of both Islamist radicals and the orthodox Muslim establishment by maintaining that cis-heteronormative elites in the societies to which Islam spread have distorted elements of the original Islamic message regarding sexual and gender diversity (Kugle 2010; Zahed 2019). Historically, the position of Islamic jurisprudence on the criminalisation of same-sex intercourse has been far from univocal. The Hanafi *madhhab*, which was followed by the Ottoman legal authorities and thus also those of the Turco-Egyptian regime in Sudan (1820–1881), differed

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<sup>1</sup> As a rule, I have retained “homophobia” where I am discussing colonial concerns over specifically sexual behaviour rooted in contemporary understandings of what constituted a “homosexual”, and used “queerphobia” and “anti-queer animus” when discussing a broader outlook that incorporates hostility towards transgressions of gender norms.

from other schools in maintaining that “sodomy” (*liwāt*) should not be considered a *ḥadd* crime under Sharia law and thus should be penalised via “discretionary” (*taʿzīr*) legislation applied by temporal authorities (Ozsoy 2021). From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the discretionary penalty for consensual same-sex intimacy under Ottoman law was a fine. This penalty was removed in the 1840 Penal Code before the French-influenced 1858 Penal Code recriminalised homosexual acts, although only in public (Ozsoy 2021). Ottoman law codes exercised considerable influence on their Egyptian equivalents in this period (Brown 1997: 25), although their precise influence on legislation regulating non-normative sexuality is unclear.<sup>2</sup> What can be said is that the Mahdist regime that brought an end to the Turkiyya is regarded by scholars as “fundamentalist” in character insofar as it moved the country away from the “openness” and “diversity” of the Sufi form of Islam (Voll 1979), which was prevalent in Sudan and was understood in the Ottoman context to be more permissive towards *liwāt* (Ze’evi 2006: 78–88). The original revolt of the Mahdī is sometimes attributed in popular accounts to the marriage of two men in El Obeid (Ibrahim 2008: 167), and once established, the Mahdist state ruthlessly targeted communities of *mukhannathīn* (male-assigned feminine individuals) in Omdurman (Jacob 2005).

The queerphobic discourses that are prevalent within Muslim societies today have been to some extent shaped by narratives established during the period of European colonial hegemony. In particular, the emergence of a specific sexological discourse about “being homosexual” or “being a transsexual/transvestite” as both a specific identity and a medical pathology was very much tied to a set of intellectual developments in the West that in turn affected Muslim societies in Africa and Asia (El-Rouayheb 2005: 158–160). This has sometimes led academics working within the Foucauldian tradition to deny the existence of individuals with an exclusively homosexual – as opposed to bisexual – orientation in the pre-modern Islamic world, although this contention is now challenged by a variety of scholars working on queer Muslim identity and history.<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, the important point is that the prevailing cultural discourse focused on acts rather than identities (El-Rouayheb 2005: 153). The Arabic term *shudhūdh jinsī*, meaning “sexual deviancy”, only emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and before then, Arab-Muslim discourse tended to focus on specific “acts” that would only later be categorised as “homosexual”, such as *liwāt* (anal intercourse, or “sodomy”) (El-Rouayheb 2005: 159). To the extent that sexual identities were ascribed, they tended to focus on individuals as either passive or active more than categorising individuals on the basis

2 For “non-normative sexuality”, see Epprecht (2008: 82).

3 See in particular Habib 2010. For the claims about the non-existence of exclusively homosexual orientation, see Massad 2007.

of orientation. For the most part, historic Arab-Muslim discourses stigmatised the “passive” partner more than the “active” one (El-Rouayheb 2005: 153). There is an obvious parallel between this form of Islamic discourse and colonial European narratives that stigmatised “effeminate” homosexuality most violently (Nandy 1988: 7–8). Colonial discourses about Sudanese sexuality were not in and of themselves fully coherent, since the colonisers themselves were divided over whether to view African and Muslim societies through the prism of post-Enlightenment knowledge or render them fundamentally traditional, timeless and other (Moore-Gilbert 1997: 120); this is part of the reason why some colonisers would describe non-heterosexual Sudanese as “homosexuals”, whereas others would refer to “sodomy” and “unnatural vice” (see below).

Sources on the history of sexual and gender diversity are notoriously hard to find, particularly in colonial contexts, where those narratives that do exist are often vague and allusive (Aldrich 2003: 4–5). This chapter is intended as an analysis of both Sudanese and colonial attitudes as well as legal and discursive structures, and not as an attempt to relate a suppressed history of sexual and gender minorities in Sudan. Even so, sources documenting colonial attitudes are available only sporadically, in part due to the discomfort of colonial officials with discussing the subject. The narratives assessed here have been drawn from a diverse array of private and official correspondence, memoirs, and legal documents.

Some of our best evidence for the colonial state’s attitude towards non-normative forms of sexuality and gender expression in Sudan comes from a small collection of government documents available via the Civil Secretary collections in Sudan’s National Records Office, under a file entitled “Sodomy”.<sup>4</sup> Most of the files within date from 1925 and 1926, in the former of which years the government was redrafting the Sudan Penal Code and presumably reconsidering the criminalisation of homosexuality. The picture they reveal is not one of a permissive state with a *laissez-faire* attitude towards the spreading of “unnatural vices” among a morally outraged Muslim population, but rather of an ideologically queerphobic government apparatus determined to intervene to invent the tradition of an exclusively heterosexual Sudanese society.<sup>5</sup> These memoranda represent a private conversation between senior officials – at provincial governor level and above – rather than the official discourse of the state, but they nevertheless act as an important lens through which to study the treatment of non-normative forms of sexuality and gender expression by the state.

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4 CivSec (1) 41/1/2 “Sodomy”, National Records Office [hereafter NRO], Khartoum, Sudan.

5 For the notion of “invented traditions”, see Ranger 1983.

## Race, Politics and Pseudoscience in the Colonial Externalisation of Non-Heterosexual Identities

The homophobic agendas pursued by the official contributors to the “sodomy” file were shaped not just by colonial hypermasculinity but also by racial pseudoscience, in addition to colonial as well as anti-colonial politics. The most substantial reports in the “sodomy” file were prepared in the two years immediately after the British suppression of the White Flag movement, which sought union between Egypt and Sudan. The narratives produced in these files are profoundly shaped by colonial hostility to the White Flag movement and in particular to the Egyptian presence in Sudan.

The Egyptian role in the governance of Sudan dated back to 1820, when Egypt, as an autonomous province under Mehmet Ali, who was himself nominally a governor (*wāli*) representing the Ottoman Sultan, conquered the territory and established the regime that Sudanese came to remember as the Turkiyya. In 1885, shortly after Egypt had been occupied by Great Britain under the “Veiled Protectorate”, the Mahdist movement put an end to the Turkiyya. In 1899, the British, as Egypt’s veiled rulers, conquered her former province with the assistance of the Egyptian army, establishing a nominal arrangement of co-dominance that made the Egyptians, in Troutt-Powell’s words, “colonized colonizers” (Troutt-Powell 2003: 6). Although ultimate sovereignty formally rested with the Egyptian Khedivate (later monarchy), the senior echelons of the government in the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium were staffed exclusively by the British. Nevertheless, Egyptian army officers featured heavily in the middle rungs of the provincial administration, and Egyptians and individuals of shared Egyptian-Sudanese heritage played a substantial role in the economy at large.

Following the nationalist revolution in Egypt in 1919, British officials began to fear that the Egyptians in Sudan might become “decolonised colonisers”<sup>6</sup>. In turn, many within the Sudanese educated elite and the Sudanese battalions of the Egyptian Army saw in the Egyptian nationalist movement a model for anti-colonial struggle. In 1924, the White Flag League organised mass pro-Egyptian protests, which cumulated in a mutiny by the Sudanese battalions of the Egyptian Army. The British responded by violently crushing the mutiny, imprisoning the leaders of the White Flag League, expelling the Egyptian Army from Sudan and incorporating its former Sudanese units into the newly formed Sudan Defence Force.

It was the Governor of Berber Province, H.C. Jackson, who made the ideological link between the campaign to rid Sudan of corrupting Egyptian influences and the

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<sup>6</sup> This is a twist on Troutt-Powell’s “colonized colonizers”.

campaign to rid it of the scourge of homosexuality. Atbara in Berber province had witnessed some of the most serious protests during the White Flag movement, as members of the Egyptian Railway Battalion, which was headquartered there, went on strike and took to the streets. The Railway Battalion was a branch of the Egyptian Army that had been responsible for the expansion of Egypt's railway network towards Atbara and then the rest of Sudan during the Anglo-Egyptian reconquest of the 1890s. As nationalism grew in Egypt, the British-led administration had become increasingly hostile to its presence, and used its participation in the 1924 movement as a pretext to expel it from Sudan altogether, along with the rest of the Egyptian army.<sup>7</sup> Jackson, who after becoming governor of the province in August 1924<sup>8</sup> was instrumental in the suppression of the protests there, noted that "In 1924 in Atbara while searching houses of those suspected of political intrigue I found correspondence implicating several of the S.G.R. [Sudan Government Railways] officials and Inspector of schools in unnatural vice". Jackson followed this with the observation that "sodomy is a peculiarly Egyptian vice and should be stamped out in Sudan". He even linked "its spread in Atbara" to "the activities of Mohamed Pasha Fadil and his brother Bimbashi Zaki Bey", two senior members of the Egyptian Railway Battalion.<sup>9</sup>

Jackson's perspective indicated a tendency to treat perceived societal ills such as homosexuality as the colonial state treated perceived political ills – as "external" to Sudanese society. This paralleled the insistence of colonial intelligence agencies that unwanted political phenomena – radical anti-colonial nationalism akin to that seen in Egypt, or communism – were foreign imports that had no organic political base in Sudanese society (Berridge 2013: 851). His view was also almost certainly founded upon colonial tropes that maintained that same-sex sexuality was external to African society. The prevailing worldview was that homosexuality was a sin that had flourished in societies that had achieved a high degree of "civilisation", such as Ancient Greece, and that because Africa was "uncivilised" it was completely free of this vice (Epprecht 2008: 40). In this sense, the colonial state's homophobic agenda in Sudan, as elsewhere in Africa, was pursued in the context of attempting to construct the colonial subject as "tribal" and limit urbanisation (Mamdani 2010, 2018).

In the view of colonial officials, Arab, Ottoman and Egyptian civilisations were far more predisposed towards "deviant" sexuality than any African civilisation.

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7 For the history of the Railway Battalion in Atbara and its role in the White Flag Movement, see Vezzadini 2015: 77–79.

8 *Quarterly List Sudan Government Showing Appointments and Stations for the Quarter Beginning 1 July 1925*, p. 10, Sudan Archive [hereafter SAD], Durham, UK, <https://iiif.durham.ac.uk/index.html?manifest=https://iiif.durham.ac.uk/manifests/trifle/32150/t1/mb/85/t1mb8515n44z/manifest>

9 Note by Governor, Berber Province, 19 January 1925, CivSec (1) 41/1/2 "Sodomy", NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

Indeed, Jackson did not single out Egyptians for blame, but claimed that in Port Sudan and the old Ottoman era port of Sawakin, “many of the merchants, particularly those of Sawakinese or Arabian origin, keep boys instead of mistresses”.<sup>10</sup> This passage, which was part of an overall discussion on “sodomy”, itself bears witness to the colonisers’ reluctance to distinguish between pederasty and adult same-sex relations when discussing Arab culture. Narratives postulating that “sodomy” and “pederasty” were endemic to certain “Oriental” cultures had been popularised by the prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century explorer Richard Francis Burton, who had travelled extensively in Asia and Africa, and maintained the existence of a “Sotadic Zone” stretching from the East of the Mediterranean to Japan, incorporating much of Arab civilisation (Burton 1934: 17–18; Phillips 2006: 163–189). At times when colonial Europeans were forced to recognise the existence of same-sex sexuality in Africa, they tended to claim that it was the result of contact with Arab civilisation (Epprecht 2008: 42). The claim that Arabs had brought “sodomy” to Africa circulated widely among colonial officials in Buganda, who attributed same-sex liaisons at the Kabaka’s court to the arrival of Arab merchants (Rao 2015: 9).

Much has been written on the subject of the Condominium regime’s efforts to racialise the differences between “Arabs” and “blacks” in Sudan (Idris 2005; Mamdani 2010). Indeed, there are parallels between Jackson’s desire to exclude “Egyptian” sexual practises from Sudan and the colonial state’s efforts to exclude “Arab” influences from regions such as the South and the Nuba Mountains. Yet while the colonial state’s homophobic narratives did draw heavily on contemporary racial ideology, they did not always do so in a fully coherent fashion, and they did not always neatly align with the Condominium’s “Arab versus African” racial discourse, which was itself never fully coherent. Burton himself placed the Arabian Peninsula outside the “Sotadic Zone”, and maintained that it was only in its urban centres where “sodomy” was prevalent, whereas “badawi” (nomadic) Arabs were untouched (Burton 1934: 87). The image of the nomadic Arab as a hypermasculine and martially proficient “noble savage” shaped the British agenda of co-opting “traditional” Arab culture in a number of places (Cannadine 2002), including Sudan. The Egyptian Railways Battalion was itself escorted out of Sudan with the assistance of an “Arab” corps (Vezzadini 2015: 78), and the majority of the religious notables who supported *al-Ḥaḍāra*’s campaign against sexual non-conformity (see below) would likely have self-identified as “Arab”. Meanwhile, not all colonial Britons saw same-sex relations as external to “African” cultures – the anthropologist Siegfried Nadel, for instance, claimed that

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10 Note by Governor, Berber Province, 19 January 1925, CivSec (1) 41/1/2 “Sodomy”, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

homosexuality and transvestitism among the Nuba were products of Africa's matrilineal cultures, maintaining that living in "a society in which the fruits of procreation are not the man's" deterred them from heterosexual sex (Nadel 1947: 300). Another anthropologist, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, also argued in a piece published after the Condominium period that pederasty had once been common within Zande society and that "there is no reason to suppose that it was introduced by Arabs as some have thought" (Evans-Pritchard 1970: 1429).

Apart from muddled racial pseudoscience, the colonisers' efforts to rid Sudan of homosexuality were justified with reference to contemporary medical pseudoscience. Let us take the views of Reginald Davies, Assistant Director of the Intelligence Department and another contributor to the "sodomy" file:

Those who protest that it would be more worthy to screen such debasement for fear of scandal, are like them who find a man suffering from a deadly disease which is rotting the bones of the man's body and will sooner or late cause his death and withhold their treatment to him for the shame of letting people know that he is suffering from such a disease.<sup>11</sup>

Both the contemporary medicalisation of homosexuality and the perception that it was "external" to Sudan shaped fears about where and how it might spread. For colonial officials, homosexuality was in many ways analogous to many of the other "septic germs of modernity"<sup>12</sup> that they feared would have a negative impact upon Sudan, notably including modern education and modern forms of administration. One colonial official recalled that many in the SPS "felt, from an innate if twisted feeling that education saps a man's virility and virtue, these damned fellows who would wield a pen must at best be "pansy" and sea lawyers and at worst crooks."<sup>13</sup> The rumours of homosexuality that circulated in colonial society often targeted those with a prominent role in colonial schools (Deng and Daly 1989: 58–59).

Viewing homosexuality as one of the "septic germs of modernity", British colonial officials fixated on preventing its perceived spread as a matter of quasi-epidemiological importance. This is visible in their concern with the isolation of prisoners whom they perceived as sexually deviant. In a court ruling from 1942, through a typical instance of the colonial state's tendency to conflate perpetration of male-on-male sexual violence and homosexual orientation, C.J. Creed warned against committing two juveniles who had raped another boy to prison on the grounds that

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**11** Memorandum by Reginald Davies, 19 June 1926, CivSec (1) 41/1/2 "Sodomy", NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

**12** This phrase was first used by Geoffrey Archer's replacement as Governor-General, John Maffey, so as to rationalise the neo-traditional character of "Native Administration" legislation in Sudan. See Vaughan 2015.

**13** Owen Memoirs, SAD 769/11/43, Durham, UK, cited in Berridge (2011: 52).



they would be “likely to pervert the other inmates”.<sup>14</sup> In 1949, the senior prison official McInnes warned against sending prisoners under the age of 25 to one of the Central Prisons on the grounds that it “tends to increase the practise of sodomy which is disturbingly on the increase as Central Prisons are receiving more habitu-als, without sufficient cellular accommodation for segregation of perverts”.<sup>15</sup>

On account of the specific fixation on male homosexuality in the colonial psyche, accounts of female same-sex relationships are rarer. Those accounts that do acknowledge female same-sex sexuality usually describe it as “situational”, or else pathologise it. Jackson maintained that in Zandeland the Avungura chiefs’ practise of seizing and segregating women as their royal wives led the women affected into “unnatural vice” (Jackson 1954: 195). Evans-Pritchard (1970: 1429) also argued that “female homosexuality. . . was practised in polygamous homes.”

One ambiguous account is provided by Elliot Balfour, who served as an SPS administrator during the Condominium period:

I remember two cases of child abuse, neither capable of being proved, and one extraordinary case when a whole quarter of the town accused a woman of debauching their daughters. Once again there was not an atom of concrete proof but I discovered that she had some sort of husband and made him guarantee her to be of good behaviour. I also told the lady herself that she was a naughty girl and that if she did not give up her wicked ways she would no doubt be found floating in the waters of the Blue Nile, which would cause one great deal of trouble (Balfour 1999: 46)

The account is unclear on multiple levels, in that like many colonial accounts it mentions same-sex relations in the same vein as child abuse, does not clarify whether the daughters in question had reached adulthood, oscillates between describing the alleged debaucher as a “girl” and “woman”, and leaves what exactly the “debauching” constituted to the reader’s imagination. Like many colonial accounts, therefore, it tells us little about the nature of gender and sexual diversity in Sudanese society, but does remind us that colonial officials saw the realm of familial and patriarchal authority, and implicitly that of communal justice, as potential arenas in which threats to sexual and gender propriety might be addressed.

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<sup>14</sup> Hayes Files: Sudan Government vs. Abdel Gadir El Gazuli AC-CP-70-42, Hayes Papers, SAD, Durham, UK.

<sup>15</sup> 2.D.Fasher A 45/1/1 McInnes to All Governors Ktm, 1 December 1949, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

## The Ruling Partnership and Elite Sudanese Attitudes

The memoranda in the “sodomy” file are also noteworthy for the fact that they discuss several articles in an Arabic language Sudanese newspaper, *Ḥaḍārat al-Sūdān* [*The Civilisation of Sudan*, usually shortened to *al-Ḥaḍāra*], which apparently sought to construct sexual deviancy as a social problem in a manner similar to the British. When Jackson proposed outlawing consensual homosexuality in 1925, he justified his call on the basis that “This abhorrence is being constantly referred to in the *Hadara* and all the religious teachers and respectable natives would welcome legislation of the kind proposed.”<sup>16</sup> However, behind Jackson’s claims lay a much more ambiguous British-Sudanese discourse about “sodomy”, one which was at times mutually constitutive, and at times antagonistic.

The British-dominated Condominium regime had supported the establishment of *al-Ḥaḍāra* in the immediate post-war period. Heavily censored, and intended to act as an official government mouthpiece, it was this newspaper that provided vocal support for Britain’s continued hegemony in Sudan, and it was also this newspaper that, at least according to the references made to it in the “sodomy” file, acted as a prominent advocate for a campaign against sexual non-conformity in the mid-1920s. The paper was funded by a number of religious dignitaries who in the years after the war had committed themselves to launching Sudan on the path to nationhood under British, rather than Egyptian, tutelage. It was also financially supported by the Condominium regime, thereby helping to ensure its largely pliant tone. Its editor and many of its most prominent supporters came from families at the heart of the Mahdist movement that had brought an end to Egypt’s rule over Sudan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sharkey 1999: 535–536; Troutt-Powell 2003: 180; Vezzadini 2015: 40–41). Having worked with the Egyptian government to defeat the Mahdist state in 1899, the British were now forming an uneasy alliance with the “neo-Mahdist” movement to curtail Egyptian influence in Sudan in the wake of Egypt’s nationalist revolution (Warburg 2007: 677–678; Ibrahim 2004; Daly 2003: 285–287).

The establishment of *al-Ḥaḍāra* symbolised a new ruling partnership between the British administrative elite and the faction of the mercantile classes from riverain Sudan that had profited from the slave trade in the peripheries of the country in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which had backed the Mahdist movement as a reaction to the abolitionist policies of the British and Egyptians in Sudan, as well as anger at the excessive taxation imposed by the Turkiyya (Holt and Daly 2011: 63–65). The

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<sup>16</sup> Note by Governor, Berber Province, 19 January 1925, CivSec (1) 41/1/2 “Sodomy”, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

architects of the Condominium regime, such as Reginald Wingate, had used the anti-slavery cause to propagandise in favour of a campaign against the Mahdiyya, but once the Mahdiyya had been defeated, they sought to co-opt Sudan's slave-holding classes (Sikainga 1996: 37–38). In the 1920s the British and the mercantile elite shared two mutual interests; opposition to the Egyptian presence in Sudan, and a fear of the deleterious social consequences of rapid abolition, which in their view would unleash a Pandora's box of societal ills, including unemployment, prostitution, vagabondage – and sexual immorality.

In this sense, Jackson's claims about the views expressed in *al-Ḥaḍāra* might speak to the synthesis of Sudanese and British forms of anti-queer animus. However, the original *al-Ḥaḍāra* articles are untraceable,<sup>17</sup> and because we are therefore reliant on the paraphrased rehashing of their content in colonial files, we must proceed cautiously. To some extent, Jackson was co-opting *al-Ḥaḍāra* to pursue a set of specifically colonial concerns, and we must be prudent, given the lack of access to the original source, although views of the type inferred certainly did exist within elite circles in both Egypt and Sudan. The writers in *al-Ḥaḍāra* would probably have been conscious of Sudanese, and even Egyptian narratives, maintaining that the rule of the Turkiyya in Sudan had brought about cases of same-sex marriage in Sudan, and that the Mahdiyya had cleansed Sudan of these ills (Jacob 2005; Ibrahim 2008: 167).

The active homophobia of the colonial state cannot simply be rationalised as a pragmatic adjustment by the imperialists to the “fanaticism” of the ruling Muslim classes that they had co-opted. Senior Condominium officials believed that they were rescuing Sudanese society not from religious rigidity but also from moral decadence, including homosexuality. Let us take, for instance, the views of Reginald Wingate, Governor-General between 1899 and 1916, and Rudolf Slatin, Inspector General of Sudan between 1900 and 1914. In 1896 Slatin published the text *Fire and Sword in Sudan* based on his period as a captive of the Mahdī and his successor the Khalifa. The English translation of the German original was heavily edited by Reginald Wingate, in his role as Director of Intelligence of the Egyptian Army, who used it as propaganda for his campaign against the Mahdiyya (Daly 1997: 71–75). Having already maintained that the Khalifa had allowed adultery to flourish, Slatin and Wingate continue to observe that “A certain number of people also indulge in unnatural love: and at first the Khalifa made some attempt to check this by banishment to Reggaf”. Reggaf was a Mahdist outpost in Southern Sudan, perhaps seen as a fitting destination for sinners who were to be banished, given its location outside the Mahdī's Islamic community. Nevertheless, at this point Slatin and Wingate added,

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17 Correspondence with Dr Elena Vezzadini.

“latterly he has given up doing so. He has come to the conclusion that it is much easier to rule by despotism and tyranny a degraded nation than one which possesses a high standard of morality” (Slatin and Wingate 1999: 345). The Egyptian soldier Ibrāhīm Fawzī’s account of the same policy, which he describes as being targeted at *mukhannathīn*, interprets it as being far less lenient. He notes that the majority of those who were exiled to the South died, and that those who were not exiled were either imprisoned and tortured or constantly monitored in order to force them to abandon the feminine aspect of their identity (Jacob 2005: 163).

Attitudes similar to Slatin and Wingate’s are visible in Davies’ accounts of his campaign to clamp down on same-sex relations in Sudan. These remarks should be contextualised by noting that they appear to be a response to the implication by an author in *al-Ḥaḍāra* that the government should do more. Nevertheless, his comments indicate that even in the era of “moral surrender”,<sup>18</sup> when colonial governments were in theory at their least interventionist, senior officials were determined that it was they who must take the initiative in dragging a reluctant Sudanese population into their campaign to punish divergences from cis-heteronormativity. Davies maintained that

the Government authorities in Khartoum Province did their best and arrested all those who were suspected of this debased habit, and in short, the Police are fighting by all means at their disposal, in a praiseworthy manner. But what about the efforts of the public? Up to the present, the leaders of the nation, its Ulema and all the thinking men have not lifted a finger to assist in the matter as if their religion, the duties of morality and of patriotism do not make it incumbent on them to do so. . .<sup>19</sup>

The various classes appealed to here were among those that were central to bolstering British hegemony in Sudan. Since the inception of the Condominium, the British had been committed to supporting the orthodox religious establishment in Sudan as represented by the formal religious scholars, or *‘ulamā’* (Salomon 2016: 43–44). The appeal to “leaders of the nation” also reflects the post-World War I political dispensation in which the British were eager to acknowledge the idea of a separate Sudanese nation so as to provide a counterweight to Egyptian influence in the Condominium while also maintaining that this nascent national entity would require British stewardship for some time to come. This perhaps explains Davies’ didactic tone. For him, the ability to purge social vices such as “sodomy” can be understood

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<sup>18</sup> For an application of the notion of Mamdani (2018) in the Sudanese context, see Ibrahim (2008: 144–147).

<sup>19</sup> Memorandum by Reginald Davies, 19 June 1926, CivSec (1) 41/1/2 “Sodomy”, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

as one of the benchmarks of true nationhood – and he as the coloniser is the one who is to judge whether this benchmark has been reached.

Here, the aspiration for Sudan to be a nation free of homosexuality appears to be tied to the colonial politics of identity formation, rather than being a moral imperative emanating from the public at large. Remarks by Davies in 1926 are particularly revealing:

On the other hand, the simple minded and ignorant people are liable to listen to the fabricated stories by those addicted to this habit and are more liable to be sympathetic with relatives and friends thus debased. Besides a number of mean, anonymous letters have been addressed to the authorities. This has, unluckily, been the attitude of the public towards an honourable campaign carried out by the Government.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, no trace of these letters remains in the colonial archive, and it is hard to establish on what grounds the members of the Sudanese public referred to opposed the Condominium regime's queerphobic campaign. In different contexts, as we have seen, the colonisers maintained that the Sudanese public was alternately both deeply outraged by "sodomy" and utterly reluctant to do anything about it. Although it is impossible to generalise about the attitudes of the broader Sudanese public, the views of a number of elite Sudanese are accessible through their own writings.

For instance, although the original edition of *al-Ḥaḍāra* is untraceable, we can find similar views to those attributed to the editor of *al-Ḥaḍāra* in the memoirs of Bābikr Badrī, a former Mahdist warrior who went on to play a prominent role as an educationalist in Condominium Sudan. In his memoirs, Badrī recalls an encounter with a *mukhannath* (pl. *mukhannathīn*) who visited him in Omdurman market during the Mahdist period and his reasons for refusing his request to "make clove water to drink with his girls". Badrī explained to a friend "you know these *mukhannathīn*, how they long to get in touch with women in their homes, and what they say about them afterwards."<sup>21</sup> Badrī was afraid that the *mukhannath* would visit him in his home and become familiar with the female members of his household, and that if subsequently rejected they would "say of his women what [their] foul life and foul tongue prompted [them] to say" (Bedri 1969: 219–220).

Badrī's perception of the *mukhannath* as a threat to the domestic seclusion of women should be understood in the context of a broader elite moral panic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century about urban prostitution as a threat to the gendered power structures.

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<sup>20</sup> Memorandum by Reginald Davies, 19 June 1926, CivSec (1) 41/1/2 "Sodomy", NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

<sup>21</sup> I have used Yūsuf Badrī and George Scott's translation here, with the exception of the translation of *mukhannathīn* as "pansy-pimps", which is discussed below.

Yūsuf Badrī and George Scott's translation of Badrī's memoirs renders *mukhannath* as "a male prostitute and pimp", then later as "pansy-pimp" (Bedri 1969: 219–220).<sup>22</sup> This translation has much to say about the association of gender variance with prostitution in the minds of British colonial and Sudanese nationalist elites, since in classical and modern Arabic the term has had no such meaning.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the social politics of prostitution in 19<sup>th</sup> century Sudan certainly informed Badrī's outlook. 19<sup>th</sup> century urbanisation had provided opportunities to a class of women who used prostitution as a means of living independently of their families, and both the Turkiyya and the Mahdist states had responded by attempting to enforce a policy of compulsory marriage (Spaulding and Beswick 1995: 525–526). For Badrī, the *mukhannath* is threatening not just because their gender ambiguity threatens to blur the distinction between the male and female spheres, but because, surrounded as they are by dissolute women, they might undermine the norms of sexual propriety he has established for the women of his own household. Badrī's hostility towards this figure is not principally expressed in cultural or religious terms, but in terms of the threat they pose to the gender order.

Just like Badrī, the colonisers saw male-assigned prostitutes as a threat to their particular vision of social order. The Condominium regime's treatment of these individuals differed markedly from its treatment of female-assigned prostitutes, who were in different contexts scorned and cherished by contemporary elites. At the peak of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the possession of concubines came to signal social prestige, and following the nominal abolition of the slave trade by the Condominium regime, master-concubine relationships often evolved into client-prostitute relationships (Spaulding and Beswick 1995: 521–522, 528). As a result, the British Condominium government, the policy of which was shaped by its alliance with the former slaveholding classes, was willing to overlook the presence of brothels in which natal women offered sexual services. British troops in Sudan also frequented the same brothels, which encouraged the colonial regime to license a number of prostitutes so as to enable medical checks and prevent the spread of venereal disease to the soldiers (Spaulding and Beswick 1995: 527–528). Although the 1905 Vagabondage Ordinance officially criminalised runaway enslaved people and prostitutes, it was apparently used most frequently to target individuals who did not conform to the colonisers' binary gender model, often on the basis of a separate clause criminalising cross-dressing. For instance, in Khartoum North between 1923 and 1925, 2,159

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<sup>22</sup> For the use of *mukhannath/mukhannathīn* in the original, see Badrī ([1959–1961]: 169–170).

<sup>23</sup> Rowson (1991), in an article on the *mukhannathūn* of the first Islamic century, translates the term as "effeminates"; Hans Wehr (1994), in his *Dictionary of Modern Standard Arabic*, also gives "effeminate". Neither makes any reference to prostitution, nor does Almarri (2018) in his discussion of the term's etymology. I have also followed Almarri in using the "they" pronoun.

of the 2,714 individuals arrested for prostitution under the Vagabondage Ordinance were identified by the state records as male (Spaulding and Beswick 1995: 531). The fact that the colonial state criminalised cross-dressing is in itself evidence that it was far from being fully legally tolerant of gender and sexual diversity, and indeed that it was particularly fixated upon penalising the more “feminine” partners in any non-heterosexual relations.

Davies outlines the rationale behind the state’s targeting of these individuals by once more referencing an article from *al-Ḥaḍāra*:

The Editor begs to draw the attention of the authorities to the fact that [a] number of these low human beings do actually live in brothels with public women, where they practise their low trade, and as the ignorant public know that these public women are licensed by the government, they are under the impression that these low men are also licensed - so it would be to everybody’s interests to try and expel all such persons.<sup>24</sup>

It should be reiterated that the original copy of *al-Ḥaḍāra* is untraceable, and as such it is impossible to ascertain to what extent Davies is distorting or exaggerating the editor’s views so as to frame his own narrative and agenda. Nevertheless, his approach was very much tied to the colonial state’s efforts to co-opt the class the editor of *al-Ḥaḍāra* represented, for whose benefit cis-female prostitution had been licensed. The Vagabondage Ordinance was in part a product of the colonial state’s lukewarm attitude towards abolition, which was itself shaped by its desire to limit the costs of early state expansion, its preoccupation with social order, and its reliance on a ruling partnership with the former slaveholding classes (Sikainga 1996: 47–48). The Vagabondage Ordinance was principally used against recently emancipated Sudanese whom the colonial labour market had failed to integrate, and in practise served the purpose of deterring enslaved people from leaving their masters (Sikainga 1996: 47, 50). Condominium officials often maintained that the migration of emancipated Sudanese and their children towards urban areas was responsible for a proliferation of crime and general social disorder (Berridge 2012: 448). The colonial perception, influenced by contemporary racial narratives, was that both emancipation and urban migration had removed the natural order that restrained the childlike and amoral tendencies of Africans (Vezadini 2010: 84). The moral panic surrounding emancipation and the perceived rise in vagabondage thus formed an important background to the queerphobic campaign of the colonial state. Davies observed of the targets of his queerphobic campaign: “We are told

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<sup>24</sup> Note by Reginald Davies, Intelligence Department, Khartoum, 7 June 1926, CivSec (1) 41/1/2 “Sodomy”, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

that the majority of those arrested are persons notorious as vagabonds and most of them have been previously tried as such”.<sup>25</sup>

The British and Sudanese elite narratives coincided in their understanding of male-assigned prostitutes as a threat to the social order. Elsewhere, however, elite Sudanese employed queerphobic rhetoric to express their hostility to the colonial presence, and in particular the colonial education system. A number of the available accounts reflect the views of the class of qadis [religious scholars and judges], who were hostile to both the British teachers and the effendis of Gordon College, and contrasted the lifestyle there with their own more austere experience at *al-Maḥad al-ʿIlmī*, which had been founded by the colonisers in 1912 to separate Islamic learning from the mainstream elite education system (Ibrahim 2008: 83–86). Mudaththir al-Būshī, a famous qadi who had studied engineering for a year at Gordon Memorial College (GMC) but left to join *al-Maḥad al-ʿIlmī*, described the director of the GMC, N.R. Udal, as “not normally of good morality”, and “a bad man in his policy, in his behaviours” who had “done a lot of disgraces to the college” (*Al-Riwāyāt al-Shafawiyya li-Thuwwār 1924 1974*: 65).<sup>26</sup> Al-Būshī’s language was allusive, but his account coincides with a more widespread Sudanese perception that “homosexuality was prevalent among the British” (Deng and Daly 1989: 56–57). Others were more explicit. One teacher at the *Maḥad* described the students at GMC as the “progeny of N.R. Udal”, ‘sprouted and watered by “men’s semen”, who “lay face down wiggling all night like a bride at her wedding ceremony” (Ibrahim 2008: 86).<sup>27</sup> The same author also attacked the students for wearing European dress and speaking the coloniser’s language (Ibrahim 2008: 86). In this context, therefore, the rumours of passive and receptive same-sex relations at the college act as a metaphor for the passive reception of European culture by the effendis.

Al-Būshī was a prominent participant in the White Flag League who looked favourably upon Egyptian nationalism, and while adopting a similar emphasis on the “externality” of sexual immorality to Jackson, identifies the British as the culprits in its importation. The synthesis of British colonial anti-queer animus and Sudanese elite narratives, therefore, was far from complete. We can only speculate as to whether the authors of the now untraceable articles in *al-Ḥaḍāra* saw the British, the Egyptians or Sudanese society itself as being most responsible for the rise in sexual immorality they sought to decry. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of Sudanese elite narratives might explain why at times Jackson and Davies appear to be using the authors in *al-Ḥaḍāra* to justify their queerphobic crusades, and at others

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<sup>25</sup> Memorandum by Reginald Davies, 19 June 1926, CivSec (1) 41/1/2 “Sodomy”, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

<sup>26</sup> My thanks to Elena Vezzadini for providing this reference. The translation is hers.

<sup>27</sup> Here I am relying on Ibrahim’s paraphrasing of the author’s words.



seem to be concerned to shift the blame for the perceived prevalence of “sodomy” in the Condominium away from themselves and on to the Sudanese. At the same time, there is a parallel between the accounts of al-Būshī and the *Ma’had* teacher and those colonial officials who, as discussed above, saw both modern education and homosexuality as among the “septic germs of modernity”. The British themselves attempted to rein in the influence of the generation of effendis trained at the GMC in the wake of the White Flag movement, viewing them as responsible for the rise of secular nationalism, and to foster “traditional” forms of authority instead. In this sense there is an overlap between the colonial and conservative Islamic criticisms of the supposedly effeminising effects of modern education.<sup>28</sup>

## British Colonial Hypermasculinity and Queerness Denied

Aside from anti-Egyptianism, contemporary medical ideology and concerns about abolition and Sudanese labour, there is another potential factor that might explain why members of the Sudan Political Service (SPS) pursued such a virulent queerphobic campaign at this time: it was a means of undermining the new Governor-General of Sudan, Geoffrey Archer (1925–1926), whom they believed to be a homosexual. Hassan Ibrahim claims “that Archer was a homosexual, and that this was widely known by members of the service who could not understand his appointment to such a position as Governor-General of Sudan” (Ibrahim 1980: 222). He bases this claim on his own correspondence with the historian Robert O. Collins, who had personal contacts with many of those who served in the late Condominium period. Whether these claims about Archer’s sexual orientation were true or just rumours circulated to undermine his unpopular governor-generalship, the coincidence between Archer’s arrival and the demands by SPS officials for a campaign against homosexuality is uncanny. Archer arrived in Khartoum on 5 January 1925, at which point, Daly (1977) notes, “he was instantly disliked.” It was on 19 January 1925 that Jackson circulated his memorandum calling for “sodomy” to be made illegal in Sudan.<sup>29</sup> The Condominium Regime’s public campaign against sexual and gender minorities in Sudan, as documented in the “Sodomy” file, appears to have been at its most vehement in the period during and shortly after Archer’s governor-general-

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<sup>28</sup> For the synthesis of British colonial and Islamist narratives about modern education, see Berridge 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Note by Governor, Berber Province, 19 January 1925, CivSec (1) 41/1/2 “Sodomy”, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

alship, from which he was forced to resign due to the personal hostility of his fellow SPS members. After this point, the correspondence dries up, with the exception of a note in 1934 by Douglas Newbold advocating leniency.<sup>30</sup>

One important question remains: given that the attitude of British colonial officialdom in Sudan was so overtly queerphobic, and that the state often used the available legislation to penalise sexual and gender transgression, why did the Condominium regime make such a notable break with its counterparts elsewhere in the Empire such as India or the other African colonial territories, and twice refrain from introducing a law criminalising same-sex intercourse – in 1899, when Sudan’s criminal codes were first established, and in 1925, when they were being reviewed?<sup>31</sup> It is impossible to answer this question without a degree of supposition. It might be argued that there was an unspoken concern that formal legislation criminalising same-sex intercourse might expose “scandalous” behaviour within the British administrative elite itself, thus threatening to undermine the fragile vision of white hypermasculinity upon which the colonial racial hierarchy was built.

It is well established that in spite of the visceral homophobia of official colonial discourse, many colonial Europeans saw the colonies as places where they could escape the sexual restrictiveness of the metropole, where the government had criminalised acts of “gross indecency” between one man and another (Aldrich 2003: 1–4; Cook 2006: 65). This did not prevent the formal criminalisation of same-sex intercourse in other British territories, however, so why was Sudan an exception? Degrees of celibacy within the SPS were high even in contrast with other colonial administrations. Recruits were required to be single men, and permission was not usually granted for them to marry until four or five years into their period of service. In 1930, only 64 of the service’s 158 members were married. Even married officials were often forbidden from bringing their wives to Sudan on the basis that they would supposedly not cope well with the climate. This contributed to the Sudanese perception that in the absence of female companions, many British officials were practising homosexuals (Boddy 2007; Deng and Daly 1989: 56–57).

Colonial officialdom would no doubt have been concerned by the perception in Sudan that homosexuality was widespread within the British administrative elite. All the colonial officials interviewed on the subject by Martin Daly and Francis Deng in the post-Condominium era strenuously denied that this was the case, maintaining that strict selection procedures focused on “robust” masculinity, and rigid taboos

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**30** Memorandum by Douglas Newbold, 31 December 1934, CivSec (1) 41/1/2 “Sodomy”, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

**31** For the 1925 revision of the Sudan Criminal Code and Code of Criminal Procedure, see Massoud (2013: 60).

against same-sex relations prevented any such liaisons from occurring. When seeming evidence of such relations did emerge, it led to conspiracies of silence. One notable murder trial in the 1940s, in which Ramsay, the District Commissioner in Kapoeta, was believed to have been murdered by one of his Sudanese servants, forced British officials to confront the apparent existence of homosexuality among members of the SPS. Rowton Simpson, the SPS official who acted as President of the Major Court that tried the case, argued that the court “was left in no doubt” that the official in question “was on abnormally familiar terms” with one of his Sudanese manservants. The Court was satisfied that “sodomy” had taken place, and further believed that the jealousy this provoked in another manservant was what led to the murder.<sup>32</sup> It is notable that all three presiding members on the Major Court were British, which was unusual for such cases in the late colonial period, and that Simpson denied Ramsay’s relations with his manservant in conversation with other officials. Another District Commissioner, A.J.V. Arthur, wrote to his parents that the story of Ramsay’s intimate relationship with his manservant had been spread by a police official, but that “Simpson himself does not believe this was true – and I find it impossible to believe”, noting that Ramsay “was one of the nicest and straightest fellows you could hope to meet anywhere”.<sup>33</sup> The secrecy surrounding the trial would almost certainly have been a product of the fear that official recognition that homosexual relations had occurred across the colonial divide would undermine the gendered and racial hierarchies that were critical to the Condominium regime.<sup>34</sup>

A series of allegations made in private correspondence by Sudan’s Director of Public Works, MacDougall Ralston Kennedy, illustrates the significance of the unspoken fear that cases of same-sex intimacy coming to light might destabilise the colonial racial order. Kennedy had long been at odds with the Governor-General, Reginald Wingate, over major public works decisions, and in 1918 the Condominium Government had put him on trial on charges of “insubordination”.<sup>35</sup> Kennedy was furious, and wrote to Wingate, who was now High Commissioner in Egypt, threatening to discredit the trial by exposing the role of the new Governor-General, Lee Stack, in “countenancing a career of sodomy on the part of one of his senior British officers” with Wingate’s backing. Kennedy declared that after he reported “charges of sodomy brought by certain of my native clerks against this official” to Stack, Stack’s response was that “as British official prestige would suffer it would be well not to take up the matter officially – better to let it “slide”, as the official would

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<sup>32</sup> See Rowton Simpson Memoirs, SAD 720/4, Durham, UK, p. 170–179.

<sup>33</sup> A.J.V. Arthur, Letter to Parents, 18 April 1952, SAD 726/6/73, Durham, UK.

<sup>34</sup> For a similar case provoking similar anxieties and handled in a similar manner, see Schmidt 2008.

<sup>35</sup> C.W. Gwynn to Mr Barrington, 22 April 1956, SAD 400/3/32, Durham, UK.

fairly shortly be out of the country”.<sup>36</sup> Kennedy noted that “I did let it “slide” merely out of respect for the reputation of our race”, but now facing his own disciplinary trial, he effectively attempted to blackmail Wingate by threatening to send letters to officials in Egypt revealing the details of the case.<sup>37</sup> Kennedy was ultimately dismissed, and was charged with criminal libel alongside another British official in 1921.<sup>38</sup> It is obviously impossible to discern the factual accuracy of Kennedy’s claims; whether or not the incidents referred to occurred, however, it is clear that the threat legal charges of “sodomy” posed to “the reputation of our race” was at the forefront of colonial officials’ minds. The scandal provoked by Kennedy’s letter would presumably have still been at the forefront of their minds when Sudan’s criminal codes were reviewed in 1925.

Some of the officials who spoke to Daly and Deng were willing to concede that various of their colleagues may have had a sublimated homosexual orientation. Two of Deng and Daly’s interlocutors suggested that Douglas Newbold, a long-serving member of the SPS, who was at one point civil secretary, enjoyed the company of men, while denying that he would ever have been a practising homosexual. Robin A. Hodgkin categorised Newbold as being one of those he considered “homosexuals in a nonactive way”, noting that he was criticised by many for having young district commissioners round to stay at his house, although Hodgkin himself maintained that these relationships were purely platonic (Deng and Daly 1989: 58–59). Colonial cultures were often defined by a highly ambivalent attitude towards male homosexuality insofar as they exploited the relative absence of white women to valorise white homosocial bonding, while denigrating visible manifestations of non-heterosexual orientation as unmasculine and degenerate (Bronski 2012: 44–46).

As noted above, it was Newbold who in 1934 attempted to bring the SPS internal discussion on the criminalisation of homosexuality to a close by advocating leniency. As Governor of Kordofan, he noted that

I have no doubt that some of the Sudanese officials of this province are homosexuals. I state this as a pathetic fact rather than as a criticism and I would only urge that until medical science, by psycho-analysis or surgical means, can devise a cure for these unhappy addicts, we should err on the side of leniency.<sup>39</sup>

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**36** M. Ralston Kennedy to F.R. Wingate, 10 February 1918, Wingate Papers, SAD 167/2/211, Durham, UK.

**37** M. Ralston Kennedy to F.R. Wingate, 10 February 1918, Wingate Papers, SAD 167/2/211, Durham, UK.

**38** Michael Barrington to Richard Hill, 13 June 1961, SAD 400/9/9, Durham, UK. Barrington does not mention what allegations the libel trial concerned, and may have been unaware of Kennedy’s allegations against the unnamed official, or wary of discussing them.

**39** Memorandum by Douglas Newbold, 31 December 1934, CivSec (1) 41/1/2 “Sodomy”, NRO, Khartoum, Sudan.

The fact that Newbold referred to “homosexuals” rather than “sodomy” suggests he was more open to contemporary sexological discourse than Jackson and saw it as relevant in Sudan. We might surmise that the SPS resolved a number of its own unspoken inner conflicts by projecting them onto the Sudanese public. Debates over how to respond to Egyptian and Sudanese homosexuality could be understood as a way of articulating sentiments about homosexuality in the SPS that could not be expressed openly – what Stoler (1995: 129, fn 96) calls a “deflected discourse”. This might explain why Newbold responded to the perception that he was himself homosexual – assuming he was aware of it, of course – by advocating leniency towards a “Sudanese” problem, or why SPS members who feared the Sudanese perception that homosexuality was a British “import” (Deng and Daly 1989: 57) targeted Egyptians officials for doing the same, or why officials who wanted to target Archer on the basis of his purported homosexuality instead attempted to purge Sudanese society of those who failed to conform to colonial heteronormative ideals.

## Conclusion

Both the ideological outlook and the practice of the Condominium government were profoundly queerphobic, but it did not exercise its prejudices through legislation designed specifically to target those who deviated from colonial cisheteronormativity. The Condominium state’s reluctance to formally introduce a law penalising same-sex intimacy may have stemmed from its own fear of the emergence of scandals involving colonial officials that would undermine the colonial racial hierarchy, which was built on an image of the British administrator as hypermasculine and heteronormative.

In seeking the roots of state anti-queer violence, therefore, it is important to emphasise not just legislation but also the broader discursive frameworks that have constructed non-normative sexual and gender identities as “external” to Sudan. When marginalised communities are deprived of the capacity to narrate their own history, it becomes possible for more empowered actors to exploit their identities for their own political, cultural and ideological ends. This was the case throughout the Condominium period, as both colonial and Sudanese actors mobilised rumours of same-sex sexuality as a means of justifying their particular worldviews and delegitimising a variety of opponents. For many of the British colonisers, the narrative that same-sex sexuality was an Egyptian import was a natural means by which to undermine their unwanted co-dominal partners. The understanding of same-sex sexuality as a foreign import was also tied to the British sense that they were stewards of a timelessly “tribal” Africa that had to be protected from urban vices. In

many regards, British and Sudanese queerphobic discourses were mutually constitutive, as the homosexual/pansy/*mukhannath/lūṭī* was constructed as the “other” of a social order produced by the ruling partnership of the SPS and “traditional” elites, while at other times, homophobic tropes were employed by Sudanese nationalists to undermine the colonisers.

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Brendan Tuttle and Joseph Chol Duot

## Chapter 13

# Cinema, Southern Sudan and the End of Empire, 1943–1965

My heart palpitates as if something is coming.  
I've known this feeling before, waiting outside a cinema.  
– Taban lo Liyong

This chapter is an examination of cinemagoing during Sudan's decolonisation era (1943–1965).<sup>1</sup> It looks at the expansion of cinemagoing and efforts to use the cinema as a means of control, the Juba Picture House and some of the debates prompted by popular entertainment and the creation of mass cinema audiences after the Second World War. We draw on a combination of archival sources, oral history interviews and guided conversations with residents of Juba, as well as memoirs and travelogues written by residents of Juba and visitors to the town during the period under study.

Sudan's decolonisation period was an era when the country's place in the world and the relations between its centres and hinterlands were very much on people's minds. In 1946, Egypt had sought to assert its sovereignty over Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Britain responded by affirming Sudan's right to both self-determination and self-government, while at the same time British officials sought to encourage the Sudanese to see themselves as backward and in need of European tutelage. Having already decided to hand over power to Sudan's Northern elite, the British administration held the Juba Conference to discuss the future of Sudan as a "self-governing and self-dependent" country and to gauge Southern opinion about the inclusion of South Sudanese in the legislative assembly (Fuli Ga'le 2002: 416). Meanwhile, Northern leaders opposed "any concession to South Sudanese demands," barring discussion of anything that might suggest federalism or the secession of Southern Sudan, and even going so far as to ban the use of the capitalised word "South" in official documents (Johnson 2016: 124).

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<sup>1</sup> We are particularly grateful to Douglas Johnson, who provided archival material on the cinema and meeting of 1954, Reilly Bergin Wilson for helpful advice on earlier drafts of this essay and several anonymous reviewers for their comments. We also wish to thank Francis Gotto and the staff of the Sudan Archive at Durham, Opoka Musa Obalim, Majok Beny, Rebecca Glade, Youssef Onyalla, Hayley Umayam, Holly Moses, Anna Rowett, Iris Seri-Hersch and Florence Miettaux, who have all contributed to this project in one way or another.

This chapter examines a time that is widely considered to be a moment of “political awakening” marked by the emergence of South Sudanese nationalism (Loiria 1969). This was a period when Southerners began to organise professional unions, formal committees and political parties, like the Southern Sudan Welfare Committee, which became the Liberal Party. At the same time, British officials, who were worried about Egyptian designs on Sudan, advocated self-government while encouraging the perception that “the South was neither economically nor administratively ready to participate on an equal basis with the North in an independent Sudan” (Johnson 2016: 124). Development discourse provided a framework for encouraging this self-perception among Sudanese, whom British officials hoped would welcome their expert advice and continued involvement in the country.

The Sudan Film Unit was a self-contained travelling production group established in 1949 to provide material shot in Sudan for mobile cinema screenings. It produced films that urged audiences to imagine an independent developmental state united by agricultural exports and money.<sup>2</sup> *Sudan Currency*, for example, an 18-minute 16 mm film produced in 1958–1959, provided audiences with information on Sudan’s banknotes and encouraged them to imagine a unified national “Sudanese economy” through the various images that were depicted on banknotes and linked by money within Sudan: the Palace, Sudanese battalions, cotton production and machinery at the Managil Extension project, sawmills, sugar cane, cattle, mining and the workshops where products were made (cf. Young 2013). The film followed Sudanese banknotes from their production by Waterlow & Sons in London through their transportation by air to Khartoum and delivery to Barclays Bank to their circulation in Sudan.<sup>3</sup> But while governments sought to use the cinema as a means of state- and nation-building, officials were never able to master the ways audiences interpreted films. Commercial westerns, historical dramas, love stories and science fiction films from Italy, Egypt, India, England and the United States appealed to imaginations in unpredictable ways, and presented alternative means of imagining the world and Sudan’s place in it. Cinemagoers thought of themselves as members of communities that were both larger and smaller than the Sudanese

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2 The unit was formed in 1949 and became operational in 1950. “Making of 16 mm. Silent Films about the Sudan,” H. B. Arber, Public Relations Officer, Civil Secretary’s Office, Public Relations Branch, Khartoum to All Governors & Heads of Depts, 5th January 1950, JUB EP 108/B/3-9, vol. 1, 1951–1960 (South Sudan National Archive in Juba, hereafter JUB).

3 Sudan Archive in Durham (hereafter SAD) 894/1, 16 mm Government Publicity Films, J. Carmichael Collection. For a discussion of the “Sudanese currency dispute”, the process by which Egyptian currency was replaced with an independent currency, see Young (2013: 94–97).

state. Children sold peanuts to cinemagoers and played games inspired by the cowboy films they had seen, while other young people reflected on Indian films and the possibilities they showed for alternative relationships with rural traditions, colonial legacies, parental authority and romantic love.

This chapter falls into four major parts. The first focuses on the period immediately after the Second World War, when many people had their first experience of cinemagoing. Mobile cinema vans crisscrossed Southern Sudan, creating a mass audience familiar with Charlie Chaplin, American cowboys and wartime propaganda. The cinema was seen by its boosters as a “modern” technology and a means of linking communities within Sudan, not only with each other, but also with new spheres of experience and networks of communication and influence that spanned the globe. A central theme of the second section concerns anxieties about how audiences interpreted cinemagoing experiences as the expansion of cinema and mass audiences followed the paths of the mobile cinema vans. By 1962, there were twenty-five of these vans operating in the country and more than thirty-two commercial cinemas (Republic of the Sudan 1962: 265–267). Where cinemas would be built, what would be shown there and who could attend were all matters for official regulation and popular debate. The chapter’s third part examines the debates prompted by the opening of purpose-built commercial cinemas in the Southern provinces. Officials discussed the regulation of a public sphere by prohibiting the “exhibition of a film in the interest of public order or morality,” efforts to “creat[e] a Sudan united in taste, manners and thought”, and relations between central power and provincial autonomy.<sup>4</sup> Censors in Sudan sought to limit any films or scenes that were likely to prompt questions or doubts concerning the justice of the emerging post-colonial social order. Local governments in Northern and Southern Sudan sought to take on some powers of censorship in order to be able to play a role in shaping post-colonial society. The chapter’s final part shifts the focus of the discussion, zooming in to examine one of these commercial cinemas, the Juba Picture House, and how it is remembered by cinemagoers who attended films there in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Juba Picture House, which was Southern Sudan’s first permanent cinema, usually earns two mentions in historical works on South Sudan, each of them dramatic: first, as the location of the Liberal Party meeting of 1954;<sup>5</sup> and second, during

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<sup>4</sup> JUB EP/108/B/1-24, p. 1 (1946–1954).

<sup>5</sup> The separate prominence of the cinema and the 1947 Juba Conference probably account for the common misidentification of the Picture House as the venue for the 1947 Conference. The Picture House had not been built in 1947.

the Juba Massacre of 1965, when on 8 July, soldiers carried their rifles into the cinema and calmly watched a screening before beginning their rampage through residential areas of Juba where Southerners lived, burning homes and shooting in all directions.<sup>6</sup> The conflicts and actions of armed men have conventionally supplied the units by which Sudan's past is measured. The region that today comprises Sudan and South Sudan is often portrayed as the story of a succession of failed states interwoven by primordial hatreds, a predatory centre and collapse. But a number of scholars, applying studies on economic planning and policymaking (Young 2018), education and decolonisation (Seri-Hersch 2017, 2020) and the onset of Sudan's first civil war (Rolandsen 2011), have shown how a critical examination of periodisation can help us recover a sense of historical contingency – a sense of the past as it was experienced by those who lived it, their hearts palpating, without any sure foreknowledge of what was to come. This chapter seeks to further nuance studies of decolonisation through an examination of cinemagoing during a period running roughly from 1943 to 1964, when mobile cinema shows created mass audiences, and cinemagoers developed new leisure habits and took great pleasure in encountering the lives of others.

## Mobile Cinemas: Historical Background

The first cinema screening in Sudan was organised in January 1912 under the direction of Herbert Kitchener to mark the opening of a new section of the railway in El Obeid, not long after the King's visit to Sudan.<sup>7</sup> Notables “from all parts of the country” had attended the arrival of the *H.M.S. Medina* in Port Sudan and the reception for King George V and Queen Mary of England (Fortescue 1912: 19). A film was made of the event and shown a few days later to thousands of people gathered on a parade ground in El Obeid. Steward Symes, Assistant-Director of Intelligence at Khartoum, described how a “silence fell on the crowd as a dark object moved across the patch of light” and how the silence built into “loud gusts of applause and laughter” with the recognition of familiar individuals shown in the film (Symes 1946: 20).

A decade later, in the 1920s, merchants began setting up commercial cinemas in Sudan. The first were small “makeshift open-air” travelling outfits consisting of little

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<sup>6</sup> See “Report from the Sudan African Liberation Front Office: The Black Massacre in Juba as told by Eye-Witnesses—8<sup>th</sup> July, 1965,” *Voice of Southern Sudan* 3, no. 2, October 1965, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Lord Kitchener, Consul-General in Egypt at the time, had come to Sudan to greet the King and Queen.

more than a few chairs arranged in front of a bedsheet or a blank wall, on which Charlie Chaplin silent comedies were projected (Ibrahim 1999: 38). Larger open-air commercial establishments were set up in the 1930s. Who could show films, and where they could be exhibited, was tightly regulated.<sup>8</sup>

During the 1940s, the use of mobile cinemas was greatly expanded to manage Sudanese perceptions of the Second World War. The concerns were the result of both local anxieties and processes that were circling the globe. British officials worried about how the Sudanese, like other colonial subjects in similar situations elsewhere, would interpret events in Europe (Sikainga 2015). Weekly Arabic language press conferences were held with newspaper editors and Arabic-language radio broadcasting was expanded with programmes for the Sudan Defence Force in the field, supplemented by *Hunā Omdurmān* (“Here is Omdurman”), an Arabic-language magazine. Communal listening sets were installed to reach more listeners, and special broadcasts in Shilluk were also begun (Cookson *et al.* 1960: 347). English language programming was introduced for the British forces and a new English-language newspaper, *The Sudan Star*, was licensed. “The information office directed a steady and ever-increasing flow of handouts, maps, photographs, blocks, articles and other material through suitable channels,” the Governor-General wrote of the war years, and “maintained a system of directives on war news, produced a number of pamphlets in the “Sudan at War” series, and distributed numerous publications, calendars and reviews of the war.”<sup>9</sup>

A travelling cinema was also organised to project propaganda films around the country. *Desert Victory* (1943), a film about the “rout of Rommel,” and *Partners in Victory*, a specially commissioned film about the Sudan Defence Force in North Africa, were shown in provincial capitals (Swanzy 1947: 71). These films, which displayed airplanes and tanks, were made to exhibit the power and organisation of the Allied forces and were offered as evidence of the security of Britain’s hold on the country. British officials hoped that viewers would remember these films and recount the spectacle to others.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Foreign Office (FO) 371/23358, “Cinemas and Films: Request to Show Films in Sudan: Desire to Open Cinema in Sudan,” UK National Archives. “Censorship of Films for Public Exhibition,” A.D. Tennyson, Secretary Cinematograph Board, National Guidance Office, Ministry Social Affairs, to Governor Equatoria. 18 July 1954. JUB UNP/9/E/2-16.

9 Governor-General of the Sudan, “Report on the Administration of the Sudan for the Years 1942–44 (inclusive),” p. 126.

10 See, for instance, the description given by three men who had seen the film in the district capital as related by Richard Owen, a District Commissioner in Kordofan (Owen 2016: 33).

## Sudan Railway's "Public-Enlightenment" Car

Several years ago the Sudan Railway in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan equipped a railway car with a magic lantern, a silent movie projector, and a small portable generator. This car toured the system, giving performances at wayside stations, especially for employees of the railway.

Since the outbreak of the war, the "movie-car," now equipped with a sound projector, has been even more widely used. Latest war films, with Arabic commentaries, Government-information shorts, and educationals are shown. Regular itineraries are announced, and from 400 to 600 persons frequently gather at stations to see the shows.

In order that people living considerable distances from the railway may benefit from the movies, the railway company sometimes transports the projection equipment by truck to isolated villages and presents special performances.

Figure 25: The Sudan Railways "public enlightenment" car, 1944.<sup>11</sup>

11 U.S. Department of Commerce, 1944. "Sudan Railway's "Public Enlightenment" Car." *Foreign Commerce Weekly* 14, no. 1, 1 January, p. 24. For a discussion of the enlightenment discourse in colonial Sudan, see Seri-Hersch (2011: 23).

Funds for the establishment of a permanent mobile cinema were approved in 1945.<sup>12</sup> By 1947, three Government mobile cinema vans were on the road. Their audiences were rural, but by no means small or isolated: 5,000 people attended mobile cinema screenings in the Khartoum area in 1947 and more than 230,000 men, women, and children attended shows in rural areas.<sup>13</sup> In the years that followed, mobile cinema vans created mass rural audiences. There was even a cinema train, the Sudan Railways' "Public Enlightenment" Car (Figure 25), which was equipped with a silent movie projector and portable generator to help reach railroad workers and residents of villages and towns near railways with war films, government information shorts and educational pictures.

Together with mass literacy campaigns and other public relations efforts, the expansion of mobile cinemas was part of a broader programme undertaken in anticipation of a post-imperial era. Cinema audiences were much larger than the reading public created by the circulation of magazines and newspapers, and films were more accessible than written material in Southern provinces, where literary rates were low.<sup>14</sup> Screenings were immensely popular, but British officials worried about their inability to regulate how audiences would understand the images they saw.

## Colonial Intentions and the Social Reception of Films

Concerns about the unpredictable reception of films were rooted in broader post-war anxieties about the loss of British control and prestige. "[T]he trials and upheavals and the stimulus of war have not failed to have their effect upon the minds of the Sudanese," the Governor-General wrote in 1945. "It has broadened their outlook and brought them to some extent out of the comparative isolation of their domestic and tribal existence."<sup>15</sup> This perception was reflected in officials' concerns about how

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<sup>12</sup> Governor-General of the Sudan, "Report on the Administration, Finances and Conditions of the Sudan in 1945," p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> Governor-General of the Sudan, "Report on the Administration, Finances and Conditions of the Sudan in 1947," p. 144. For a comparison of the numbers reached by mass literacy campaigns, see Seri-Hersch (2011).

<sup>14</sup> By 1956, only 4.5% of the adult population of Equatoria and less than 2% of the population of Bahr El-Ghazal and Upper Nile had attended any elementary school (Seri-Hersch 2011: 24).

<sup>15</sup> Governor-General of the Sudan, "Report on the Administration, Finances and Conditions of the Sudan in 1945," p. 10.



films were understood by rural audiences. From racist and primitivising worries about “detrribalisation” and the idea that young people would turn to crime, emulating the images they saw in cowboy films, to the apprehension that the rapid changes brought about by colonial rule would produce an epidemic of mental illness by suspending Africans “between two centuries,” the same fears were repeated again and again. Officials worried that “colonial progress” would disrupt and dislocate as much as it would improve “traditional society.”<sup>16</sup> In April 1952, for example, the Public Relations Office (PRO) convened a three-day conference in Khartoum on the use of visual aids for varied audiences. The conference agenda covered mobile cinema vans, the central film library and the suitability of different types of films and techniques of presentation for “schools, primitive peoples, technical and other training and sophisticated audiences.”<sup>17</sup> G. E. Janson-Smith, the Assistant Director of Education for the Southern Provinces, emphasised the need for more research around “exactly what an unsophisticated audience really notices in a picture.”<sup>18</sup> This question stemmed partly from a desire that people would benefit from instructional films and see themselves as needing instruction, and partly from anxieties about the inability of British officials to master their colonial subjects’ interpretations of visual representations (Burke 2002; Larkin 2008).

The screening of mobile films can be seen as a kind of political ritual akin to the institutions of “the tribal gathering” (Willis 2011) and “the meeting” (Leonardi 2015), during which local level government was enacted and the relations of “communities” and the state negotiated. The primitivising myth of the isolation of Southern Sudan, in particular, provided the British and Sudanese organisers of cinema screenings with a framework for these encounters. Mobile cinema had its roots in government spectacles: the opening of a stadium or railway, the occasion of the first cinema show in Sudan, tribal gatherings, the trek and showing the flag, hygiene promotion and the travelling hospital. These political rituals made the colonial authority a presence. The travelling cinema was meant for rural audiences, and was expected to go beyond contributing “to the general education of the people” by linking the political centre to the hinterlands in order to pull weakly-governed

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<sup>16</sup> See Seri-Hersch (2011), which describes colonial concerns related to literacy and “detrribalization.”

<sup>17</sup> “Conference on the Use of Films and Film-Strips in the Sudan, 8-10 April 1952,” JUB EP/108/B/3 (1951–1960), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> G. E. Janson-Smith, “Some Notes on the Use of Film-Strips and Films for Unsophisticated Audiences (1952),” 1. JUB EP/108/B/3 (1951–1960), p. 14. Here, Janson-Smith is drawing on a large body of literature on spectatorship in colonial Africa (on which, see Burns 2000) most associated with William Sellers, the first Director of the Colonial Film Unit (see Larkin 2008).

parts of the country into the state project.<sup>19</sup> “I should be grateful if you could consider an extended tour by the mobile cinema for this province next winter,” J. C. N. Donald, Assistant Governor of the Upper Nile Province wrote to the Public Relations Office in Khartoum. “The people here see and hear little of the outside world and it would give them greater pleasure than many who have access to cinemas in the larger towns.”<sup>20</sup> “[F]ilms were exhibited by the mobile vans throughout the length and breadth of the country,” Kamāl Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, the scriptwriter on the first mobile film unit later wrote, describing how in those days mobile cinema was “penetrating at regular intervals into the remotest villages through inaccessible and unbeaten desert tracks, hazardous and sometimes precipitous mountain roads, [to] bring information and entertainment to multitudes of Sudanese of different make-ups, cultural backgrounds and ethnic origins” (Ibrahim 1999: 38). For Ibrāhīm, the cinema offered a way of tying the large country together more closely.

In 1951, James Robertson, the Civil Secretary, urged governors to lend greater support to mobile cinema units in their provinces. “[S]ince the mobile cinema can be a great asset to a Province, providing a first-class means of enlightenment on economics, politics, Government both local and national, and world events, as well as entertainment,” he wrote, “I am sure that you will be very willing to assume some responsibility for its proper functioning in your Province.”<sup>21</sup> By the end of 1951, there were thirteen mobile cinema vans travelling all over South Sudan. During a single month in the winter of 1959, for example, Robin Doro (Effendi), a cinema operator and commentator, together with Lucidio Kenyi, a driver, travelled roughly 2,000 miles in a Bedford van. Their Mobile Cinema Van (No. 573) departed from Juba for the compound of “Chief Jambo” on 14 December 1959, and showed films on successive nights in Luri, Amadi, Mundri, Maridi, Ngumundi, Ibba, Yambio, Nzara, Li-Rangu, Naandi, Ezo, Source Yubu, Tumbura, the Mupoi Catholic Mission, Sakure, the villages of several chiefs, an army camp and three Forestry Department Camps (see Map 4). Their return to Juba was delayed by the Governor’s visit to Morobo, where the mobile cinema unit was instructed to report by the 16<sup>th</sup> in order “to give film shows on the occasion of the president’s visit.”<sup>22</sup> Travelling film units usually consisted of a driver-mechanic and a projectionist-commentator, together with a 16

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19 Governor-General of the Sudan, “Report on the Administration, Finances and Conditions of the Sudan in 1945,” p. 128.

20 J. C. N. Donald, Telegram to Public Relations Office, 25 May 1951. JUB UNP/92/B/1-28.

21 Civil Secretary to Governors, “Mobile Cinema,” 17 July 1951, JUB UNP/92/B/1-46-7.

22 “Provisional Programme for Mobile Cinema Van S.G. No. 573, in Moru and Zande Districts between 14th December 1959 and 14 January 1960,” JUB 64/T/1 51. Discom Yambio to ADISCOM Tembura (telegram instructing the Mobil Cinema van to delay its return to Juba and to proceed to Morobo), JUB 64/T/1-53.

mm sound projector, a record player, a radio, a projection screen and stand and a set of portable generators and 26-volt batteries.<sup>23</sup> A cinema commentator's role went far beyond translating dialogue or reading off subtitles. Commentators like Ambrose Majwok Akwoc (1929–1979) or Robin Doro needed a microphone plugged into a powerful loudspeaker – along with broad learning, verbosity and a quick wit rather than meticulously memorised scripts – to compete with the high volume of running commentary produced by audiences of between two and four hundred people.<sup>24</sup>

Film exhibitions were held in the open, often following a lecture or speech, beginning at sunset and lasting for one to two hours. The arrival of the mobile cinema attracted crowds of spectators, who gathered in front of a white sheet, on which the film was projected. The programme consisted of a mixed series of short films ranging in length from five minutes to thirty or more, including newsreels, American comedies or westerns and short documentaries made by the mobile Sudanese film-making unit for a Sudanese public, films made in India or Kenya and films made in Britain, which featured scenes of “Sudanese in England” or depictions of “middle-class lives.” Educational documentaries and filmstrips were shown alongside news and entertainment. “Educationally the film-strip is probably more useful than the film,” J. F. Grover, the Zande District Commissioner, wrote in 1952, “but it would not be so popular with the Azande whose interest would fade when they learnt some lecture was being given.” Officials used “films as bait to attract audiences,” Grover said, so that they would be there to receive “the pill or the propaganda either before or after the show.”<sup>25</sup> Films about farming and health alternated with cowboy films, Charlie Chaplin features, and “other funny films.”<sup>26</sup> On 27 November 1959, at the Tufegia Forest Post near Malakal, for example, one hundred and three people turned out to see a three-hour programme that opened with “New Era in the Sudan,” followed by a newsreel showing Tito's Visit to Sudan, then “Sudan Independence,” “The Land is Green,” “Freedom (Part 3)” and “How Disease Travels,” and finishing with “American Cowboy.”<sup>27</sup>

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23 For standard equipment and budgets from mobile film units, see L. N. M Newell to Governor, UNP, “Mobile Cinema,” 25 November 1951, JUB UNP/92/B/1-43. During the first years of the travelling cinema, commentary was provided by inspectors or senior teachers “knowing the local language who hear the English commentary through once or twice first.” In later years, officials sometimes accompanied mobile cinemas “so that the operator and driver will not be tempted to use the van for their own ends.” P. Le Fleming, “Southern Provinces – Mobile Cinema,” 20 June 1952, JUB EP/108/B/2-76-7.

24 J. F. Cumming, DC Bor, to Governor UNP, “Mobile Cinema,” 17 April 1953, JUB BD/36/F/1-99.

25 J.F. Grover, D.C. Zande District, “Subject: – Cinema Van,” Yambio, 25 March 1952, JUB ZD/64/T/1.

26 Governor UNP, “Urgent: Press office Khartoum,” 2 January 1953, JUB UNP/92/B/1-90.

27 Ambrose S. Mojwok, Cinema Commentator (UNP) Report on the Month of November 1959, JUB UNP/92/B/1-71a (2 December 1959).



**Map 4:** Map of Mobile Cinema Van No. 573 exhibitions in Southern Sudan during a 30-day period in 1959.<sup>28</sup>

Films were often shown in government spaces: at court centres, chiefs' compounds, schools and prisons. Mobile cinema itineraries were circulated in advance to ensure that preparations were made and the roads permitted travel, and to allow for modifications, so that film exhibitions could be made to correspond with court meetings and other gatherings.<sup>29</sup> The mobile cinema constituted audiences as colonial subjects and a kind of public. Films displayed the power of the colonial government by showing the great farms of Gezira, the country's roads and bridges, infrastructure and much military pageantry. These screenings were also very popular. "The visit of the Mobile Cinema unit to Renk District was a great success," N. Hamad wrote on behalf of the District Commissioner at Renk to the Governor of Upper Nile in 1953; "and this showed itself in the thousands who flocked for entertainment and knowledge, and in the way by which people urged the supervisors to go on each night. . . . Besides being a change to the monotonous life, the people were particularly impressed by King Cotton, the season being that of picking."<sup>30</sup> For many South Sudanese, mobile cinema units showing educational films, newsreels and comedies were their first experience of film.

Mobile cinema was also explicitly pedagogical at all levels. Films like *Local Government* (a PRO film about local government in the Three Towns), *Sudan Currency* or *The New Sudan* were part of a national pedagogy policy that officials hoped

<sup>28</sup> December to January. Map by authors.

<sup>29</sup> B.H. Dening, Eastern Nuer District, Nasir, to Governor UNP, 3 January 1953, JUB UNP/92/B/1-93.

<sup>30</sup> N. Hamad to Governor UNP, 12 March 1953, JUB UNP/B/92/1-97.

would shape mass rural audiences into a kind of national public.<sup>31</sup> Instructional, public health, and developmental films about the production of dry salt fish, for instance, or methods of protection against mosquitos were meant to provide a useful education while also drawing onlookers into a national project, albeit within a public sphere in which people were mainly invited to participate as spectators in need of “uplift.”<sup>32</sup>

Mobile cinema was designed to provide a link between the centre of the state and the periphery, the country’s “remotest villages.” For British and Sudanese officials, it seemed that mobile cinema might make the country governable by linking its subjects together more closely. The technology was also quintessentially “modern,” prompting British and Sudanese officials to present its arrival as a kind of “first contact” between “the modern” and “the traditional,” or a new technology and “unsophisticated audiences,” particularly in the Southern provinces.<sup>33</sup> Jādallāh Jubāra, a cinematographer who worked alongside Kamāl Ibrāhīm on Sudan’s first mobile film-making unit, evoked this myth of first contact in his memoir *My Life and Cinema* (2008) with an episode that recalls the “train effect” – named after the myth that audiences panicked in 1895 during the first showing of Lumière’s motion picture, *Arrival of the Train*. During the screening of a film in some remote part of Sudan, Jubāra says, a man was startled by the moving image of a lion and tore the screen to ribbons with his spear. The story is probably untrue, but tales like this were told and retold because they captured the feeling among those who showed films that they were pioneers who were bringing a wholly new experience to people remote from metropolitan society. By presenting the early responses to film as a failure to understand the relationship between reality and representation, myths like the one recounted by Jubāra also turned audiences’ various forms of engagements with films and their critical and intelligent reactions to them (booing, sarcastic comments, or even boredom) into something less threatening to the authorities.<sup>34</sup> For both Jādallāh Jubāra and Kamāl Ibrāhīm, mobile cinema offered a way of going about bringing “unsophisticated” audiences into a modern, national project.

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31 Seri-Hersch (2020) provides a useful comparison in her discussion of the policy of educational “unification” carried out by Khartoum’s Ministry of Education after 1948.

32 Officials frequently requested that cinema operators bring specific films to support particular development objectives: “please . . . bring dry salt fish film for showing at places in Renk District.” Governor UNP to Discom Bor, telegram, 1 January 1953, JUB UNP/92/B/1-89.

33 G.E. Janson-Smith (Assistant Director of Education in the Southern Provinces), “Some Notes on the Use of Film-Strips and Films for Unsophisticated Audiences (1952),” 1-2. JUB EP/108/B/3 (1951–1960), p. 14–15.

34 Stephanie Newell (2017: 347) has examined how, by “attributing African laughter to unrefined ‘native’ cruelty, colonial officials precluded the possibility of a politics of ridicule among audiences.”

Apart from being largely mythological, however, “first contact” accounts like these not only disregard audiences’ critical responses to films; they also overlook the role of cinema itself in the very constitution of ideas around “modernity” and “tradition.” Mobile cinema brought images of the lives of people elsewhere into the conversations of people they had never met, prompting discussion and reflections on different traditions and modes of life. “The tribes will be described by name and their way of life will be mentioned,” Charles Tookey, a producer attached to the Sudan Film Unit, wrote in the synopsis for *The Modern Sudan*. “Other tribes will be described from the point of view of their way of life, forms of pleasure, i.e. village dances etc.”<sup>35</sup> For many people in South Sudan, mobile cinema provided a first view of places they had heard about (Khartoum, South Africa, Nigeria, India, Cyprus, or England) but had never visited themselves. Images of dances in distant villages in Sudan and in India (*Kathakali*), developments around Khartoum (*Abu Akar*; *Three Towns*), and public transport and tourist sites in England (*Sudanese in London*), for instance, prompted reflections on the circumstances of Southern Sudan, the region’s place in the British Empire and the lives of other colonised people.<sup>36</sup>

Mobile cinema exhibitions were expressly meant to produce an image of Sudan as a kind of patchwork of “tribes,” each with its own “way of life” and “forms of pleasure”, to use Tookey’s term. In this way, officials aimed to use cinema to entrench the political-administrative system of “tribes,” with their chief’s courts and police, which had been established by the colonial regime, by supplying a kind of cultural overlay. In rural Sudan, cinemagoers travelled to chiefs’ courts and other centres of government to view films brought in from Khartoum (by way of the provincial headquarters) that represented the lives of other Sudanese people. In other words, there was an effort to produce a differentiated audience, a collection of spectators who imagined their unity to be partly embodied in their residence within a “patchwork” of localities linked by the institutions of indirect rule within a single country (Leonardi 2020). By limiting what was deemed to be political content, officials also sought to control how Southern audiences interpreted these films, hoping to encourage viewers to locate themselves at the margins of a broader project of uplift rather than seeing themselves as oppressed.

In the first two parts of this chapter, we have discussed government-run mobile cinema screenings. In the next section, we will turn to the debates around local censorship prompted by the opening of purpose-built commercial cinemas in the Southern provinces. These debates reveal geographical tensions, and illustrate some of

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35 C.E. Tookey, “The Modern Sudan, Story Synopsis” (Sudan Film Unit, December 1957), 2. JUB EP/108/B/3 Vol. I, 1951–1960, p. 97.

36 Public Relations Office, Catalogue of 16 mm. Films, February 1952.

the frictions that emerged within colonial discourse and policy. The chapter's final section examines some of these issues on a smaller scale by means of a discussion of the Juba Picture House, the first purpose-built cinema opened in what is now South Sudan.

## Control, Censorship, and an Excess of Detail

Government-run mobile cinema was first used as a form of political display, and was then expanded to manage Sudanese perceptions of the Second World War. By the early 1950s, mobile cinema was part of a broader effort to prepare Sudan for self-government, and shared a number of its aims with mass literacy campaigns (see Seri-Hersch 2011). At the same time, it was designed to encourage audiences to see themselves and their surroundings as backward, and needing the instruction, uplift and improvement offered by Europeans. While colonial governments sought to use cinema to maintain colonial hierarchies, they were never able to control how audiences interpreted what they saw. Much as they tried, the films that were shown always included too much detail, which worried officials and offered material for forming alternative meanings. "It has been found that an audience will sometimes pay all its attention to a detail entirely irrelevant to the main subject of the picture because it happens to interest them or be familiar," Janson-Smith explained at the Conference on the Use of Film and Film-Strips in the Sudan held over three days in Khartoum in April 1952. He cited "the classic example" of "a picture containing two hundred figures in the foreground which when shown to cattle [keeping] people was always greeted with cheers since it had in the background in very small scale the rump of a urinating cow."<sup>37</sup> Despite the careful "verbal preparation of the audience," much repetition and "commentary with stops and sectional reshowing of important points," discussions and questions, audiences would draw their own conclusions.<sup>38</sup> Some laughed or provided critical commentary, while others were visibly bored. Even appreciative "gusts of applause and laughter" worried officials, who were unable to control how audiences would react to what was shown.

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<sup>37</sup> G.E. Janson-Smith (Assistant Director of Education in the Southern Provinces), "Some Notes on the Use of Film-Strips and Films for Unsophisticated Audiences (1952)," 1-2. JUB EP/108/B/3 (1951–1960), p. 14–15.

<sup>38</sup> G.E. Janson-Smith (Assistant Director of Education in the Southern Provinces), "Some Notes on the Use of Film-Strips and Films for Unsophisticated Audiences (1952)," 1-2. JUB EP/108/B/3 (1951–1960), p. 14–15.

It was not only British officials who were concerned about the changes film might bring. The introduction of cinemas also initiated a series of debates among Sudanese. For example, the al-Nuhud Town Council (Kordofan) met in August 1945 to discuss whether or not to grant a licence to a Syrian merchant who had applied to open a cinema in the town. The council was composed of prominent Sudanese residents of al-Nuhud Town. T. R. H. Owen, a District Commissioner in Kordofan at the time, was surprised when the council rejected the proposal by a vote of 15 to 4, having believed that the council would have felt that a cinema was necessary to “keep up with the times.” Instead, he wrote, the council members worried that a cinema “would only lead the children to squander their own & their parents’ pennies and introduce an unsophisticated audience to a cheap & immoralising mode of life.”<sup>39</sup>

In September 1946, the Public Relations Office circulated a draft of the Cinematographic Ordinance among governors and commissioners for comment. T. R. H. Owen (who had since become the Deputy Governor of Bahr El-Ghazal Province) replied to the Civil Secretary, noting that the Ordinance seemed to imply that decisions on film censorship would be made in Khartoum rather than by a District Commissioner or a town council. “[If] the plan will be for these censors in Khartoum to decide whether a film should be shown [for example in] Juba or Roseires,” Owen wrote, “the proposal seems to me of doubtful advisability.” This was partly, he said, drawing on a common stereotype, because audiences were so much more varied in the South than they were in Khartoum. “[I]n the South, the same audience would comprise highly civilised intellectuals and naked Dinka.” More importantly, he insisted, it was because “the real suitability of a film for a place can only be truly judged by one or two of the most sensible and decent citizens of the town itself.”<sup>40</sup>

Owen’s language in his objection to the Cinematographic Ordinance follows a broader shift in the political language of the late colonial period. As independence approached, officials began to promote ideas and practices of national citizenship (Seri-Hersch 2011). For “the most sensible and decent citizens,” Owen wrote, perhaps reflecting on his earlier experience in al-Nuhud, “[c]ensoring is also a highly educative responsibility for local leaders to undertake, and much better than accepting a standardised product “off the peg.”” A centralised censorship board might work well as a “filter,” he said, but not for a final decision. “I must put in a strong plea for powers of local censorship.”<sup>41</sup> For Owen, “powers of local censorship” not

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<sup>39</sup> T. R. H. Owen, Letter to his Father, 17 August 1945, SAD 414/15/97-98.

<sup>40</sup> T. R. H. Owen to Civil Secretary, Wau Town, 10 October 1946, JUB 108/B/1, p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> T. R. H. Owen to Civil Secretary, Wau Town, 10 October 1946, JUB 108/B/1, p. 11–12.



only reflected a relationship between Khartoum and provincial authorities that was felt to be more appropriate to self-government; they provided an opportunity to train members of town councils to embrace new occupational roles. Yet within this vision of local self-determination lay some disturbing ironies. By reproducing the differences between council members and the “unsophisticated audience” they were charged with protecting from the dangerous and “immoralising” influences of film, local authorities were put in a position to protect colonial forms of unequal membership and hierarchy.

In the view of many local officials, while the regulatory authority of local government might have been broadly constrained by the Cinematograph Ordinance of 1949 and the licensing decisions made by the Cinematograph Board in Khartoum, local authorities had enough room for manoeuvre within these constraints for the showing of any particular film to owe more to the judgment of local leaders than to decisions made in Khartoum. Local governments already regulated where films were exhibited under their powers to provide for “the orderly conduct and cleanliness of places of public resort” and to regulate public order.<sup>42</sup> The Cinematograph Ordinance was “not concerned with the licensing of the premises or places at which films are shown,” but rather that “only films licensed by the Cinematograph Board” were shown by non-government mobile cinemas and commercial theatres.<sup>43</sup> But did the responsibility for maintaining public order not also extend to regulating what was shown? Judging from the volume of guidance issued by the Public Relations Office and telegrams from officials requesting clarification and modification, this question was not resolved for several years.

The Cinematograph Ordinance of 1949 established a Cinematograph Board, which agreed at its first meeting in April 1950 to a series of principles to be applied by censors.<sup>44</sup> The Board developed these principles against the background of an international debate on the merits of films that showed “immoral behavior.”<sup>45</sup> In addition to the American Motion Picture Production Code, the Board also drew on previous practice for the regulation of films shown in Sudan. An official circular,

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42 For a discussion on the establishment of town and local councils, see Leonardi and Vaughan (2016) and Badal (1977: 244–248).

43 D. M. H. Evans to Director, Local Government Branch (with copies to D.C.s and Councils), “Licensing of Mobile Cinemas (Other than Government Mobile Cinemas),” 27 May 1951, JUB 108/B/1-31. Public Relations Office, Khartoum, to All Governors, Draft Cinematographic Ordinance, 24 September 1946, JUB 108/B/1-1.

44 “Censorship of films for public exhibition,” A.D. Tennyson, Secretary Cinematograph Board, National Guidance Office, Ministry Social Affairs, to Governor Equatoria. 18 July 1954, JUB UNP/9/E/2-16

45 The Board explicitly modelled its guidelines on the American Code.

which provided a list of six descriptions of proscribed material and the effect it might have on viewers, illustrated colonial anxieties during this period:

- (a) *Matter which might offend the religious susceptibilities of any section of the audience.*
- (b) *Matter which might arouse undesirable racial or political feeling.*
- (c) *Matter which is violently anti-social (e.g. film presenting drug-trafficking as a laudable adventure).*
- (d) *Matter which is indecently amorous (or presents women in familiar association with male natives, and vice versa).*
- (e) *Matter which might tend to bring into disrepute or ridicule the forces and uniforms of constituted authority.*
- (f) *Matter which presents undesirably exaggerated travesties of Western civilisation and behavior.*<sup>46</sup>

By 1954, the censors had developed a list of specific items that caused them concern and were generally forbidden: “(i) drunkenness, (ii) horror pictures, (iii) poisoning scenes, (iv) murders by women, (v) scenes of penitentiaries, flogging or insanity, (vi) strike and mob scenes (when strikes or demonstrations are prevalent), (vii) scenes of indecency in dress or dancing.”<sup>47</sup>

During the summer of 1954, shortly before the Juba Picture House began operating, D. A. Laṭif, the Assistant Governor of Equatoria, wrote that the “question of censorship” was raised by the opening of the Juba cinema.<sup>48</sup> Making a “strong plea for powers of local censorship in Equatoria,” Laṭif noted that Section 9(1) of the Ordinance provided powers to the Governor “to prohibit exhibition of a film in the interest of public order or morality,” which might perhaps supply a mechanism for local censorship. “Films that have been passed for showing in Khartoum may not all be suitable for Juba,” he wrote.<sup>49</sup> New practices of representative government and citizenship had been first introduced in the 1940s through town councils and local government (Leonardi and Vaughan 2016). Questions about how these citizens and their representatives would relate to “higher levels” of government,

<sup>46</sup> Public Relations Office, Khartoum, 1954, “Censorship of Films for Public Exhibition,” JUB UNP/9/E/2-16, p. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Public Relations Office, Khartoum, 1954, “Censorship of Films for Public Exhibition,” JUB UNP/9/E/2-16, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Hag Omer Abbashar, “a merchant in Malakal,” submitted an application to open a cinema during the same year. A/Governor, Upper Nile Province, to Governor, Equatoria Province, 30 July 1954, JUB UNP/9/E/2 – 22. (Filed in EP 108.B.1).

<sup>49</sup> D. A. Laṭif to Secretary Cinematographic Board, National Guidance Office, Khartoum, 27 July 1954, EP108/B/1. J. W. Grover [on behalf of A/Governor, Equatoria], Juba, to Information Officer, National Guidance Officer, Khartoum, 27 July 1954, JUB EP/108/B/1-14.

governors and the government in Khartoum became more urgent as independence approached. Relations between the regions and the central government were worked out slowly.

The decolonisation of Sudan was not the result of a two-sided struggle between Sudanese nationalists and British officials. As colonial withdrawal became an accepted principle and British and Sudanese civil servants discussed the details of bringing about self-rule, more differences in interests, visions and strategies emerged – not just between nationalists and British officials but among competing visions of self-rule, between national and provincial information officers, between Khartoum and local authorities, among Southern Sudanese and even among British civil servants. The Assistant Governor of Equatoria’s petition for local censorship authority was rejected by the Minister of Social Affairs, whose instructions were relayed by D. H. Evans: “I am directed by the Minister of Social Affairs to say that he intends to do all he can to forward the policy of creating a Sudan united in taste, manners and thought, and that he cannot therefore agree with your statement that ‘what is suitable for Khartoum may not be suitable for Juba.’”<sup>50</sup> Iris Seri-Hersch (2011: 355) has shown how the decolonisation of the education sector in Sudan involved “a complex process jointly conducted by British and Sudanese civil servants over a decade”. Disagreements about censorship and how best to create “a Sudan united in taste, manners and thought” reveal territorial tensions between the country’s political centre and its multiple peripheries, as well as debates about what kinds of membership would characterise this unity.

## Juba Picture House

During the early summer of 2017, Joseph Chol Duot circulated a questionnaire survey among some of the men who spent their time off work around the tea stalls of Hai Cinema. This resulted in “A Research Report on Leisure Activities, Films, Fashions, and Popular Culture in Hai Cinema, now Emmanuel Diocese, Juba (1962–2017),” which provided a summary of some of the films people had seen at the Juba Picture House, their recollections of the cost of admission, what people had worn when they went there, where they had sat and other details. Over the next few months, we spoke with several dozen of the people whom Chol had identified as cinemagoers in the 1960s and 1970s.

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50 D. M. H. Evans to Governor Equatoria, 14 August 1954, JUB EP/108/B/1 (1946–1954), p. 24.

Most were men, well-educated civil servants who had done most of their growing up in Juba.<sup>51</sup> Many of them were in their late fifties. A few were older. Some had been born in Juba; others had come to Juba with a parent from other parts of South Sudan. The period of their recollections of the cinema ran from the 1960s to the early 1980s: roughly from *In Love and War* (1958) and *Qalb Min Dhahab* (“Heart of Gold”, 1959), which were both shown at the Juba Cinema in June 1960, to *I Am in His Eyes* (1981) and *Jawaani* (1984).<sup>52</sup> Many of their accounts were threaded through with nostalgia for a kind of “vanished world” in which people of all ages went to the cinema together rather than sitting alone and watching television or listening to the radio in their homes, as people in Juba do these days. This nostalgic theme was reflected in complaints about the loss of solidarity and mutual aid, which people assured us had been the universal rule in the days before greedy politicians conspired to spoil it.

That the Juba Picture House had a history worthy of being told was taken for granted by everyone we talked to. After all, it was the place where the Liberal Party meeting of 1954 was held, when (by Alexis Mbali Yangu’s 1966 account) “20,000 persons from every walk of life and from all parts of the South – chiefs, notables, officials and all other classes of the Southern populace” (23) – came together in Juba to come to an agreement on “the political future of the Sudan” (Lwoki & Morgan 1954: 118). “The House,” as participants called it, held 400 people. Attendees shuttled back and forth between discussions in the House and discussions among all those “from every walk of life” who had come to Juba for the event. The meeting not only produced a statement on federalism; it also provided a concrete experience of the principles and organisation of a pan-Southern political association. Liberal Party members, Southern National Unionist Party members, chiefs from the Upper Nile, Equatoria and Bahr El-Ghazal, representatives of South Sudanese in Khartoum and “Northern Sudanese who claim African descent” all came together for a slow and thoughtful multilingual debate carried out “well and in Good Spirit” (Lwoki & Morgan 1954: 121), with their words “translated into various languages in the South”: Bari, Zande, Latuka, Dinka and Arabic.

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<sup>51</sup> Both men and women attended cinema performances. The preponderance of men among the cinemagoers we interviewed is partly explained by the larger numbers of boys who attended, and partly by the places where we carried out our research.

<sup>52</sup> This paragraph is drawn from notices published in the *Equatoria Daily News Bulletin*. JUB EP/36/F 1950 contains an incomplete set of the *Equatoria Daily News Bulletin* running from No. 480, 14 March 1960 to No. 570, 12 July 1960.

The Juba Picture House – or Kirrissasa Cinema, as many people called it, after the cinema’s proprietor Anthony Crassas, or just The House – was a large cinema. At 7 p.m., when the dim headlights of a small light green Volkswagen – belonging to Anthony – swung into view in the distance, the ticket cage would open, a detail fixed into popular memory by the anticipation of waiting. “And when we saw the car is coming [we’d cry], “Oh, Anton. Anton. Anton.” And clap. And people will just rush to the line and be ready to get their tickets.”<sup>53</sup> Tickets cost three and a half, seven or fourteen piasters, depending on the seat. For their money, customers saw trailers and a feature film. On Fridays there were Arabic-language films. For a few days during the Christmas period Anton put on two shows, with a first at 7 p.m. and another at 10. Many cinemagoers also bought a handful of roast peanuts or a fava bean sandwich, which could be had for one piaster. A tall building with a roof supported by wide trusses, the Picture House was situated in the borderland between the hospital and Juba’s Native Lodging Area. The cinema attracted families, lovers, loafers, intellectuals, onlookers, children, racketeers and hawkers of every kind. Hai Cinema exists today because the Picture House gathered a neighbourhood around itself.

Inside the theatre, the town’s social divisions and hierarchies could be seen in miniature. Visitors who paid fourteen piasters to sit in the first class balcony overlooked families, small traders and schoolchildren with their mothers – who had paid seven piasters for second class seats in the middle of the hall – and the “youth” who had paid five piasters to sit in the third class area, with their noses practically pressed against the screen. “Those in first class were more civilised,” one cinemagoer recalled, laughing. The third class section could be rowdy. If any tickets were left over, children could pay three and a half piasters to gain entrance, which secured them a place in the already crowded third class section. The town’s teachers, civil servants and businesspeople, Greeks, Turks, Indians and Egyptians, tended to sit in the first class seats. Some used the call box to book their tickets in advance.

The cinema also crystallised broader anxieties about urbanisation and change in Southern Sudan. During the Second World War, Southern Sudan had seen considerable urban migration in Juba, Torit and Yei, with the arrival of Northern troops, labourers and artisans for building programmes, and the return of the Equatorial Corps and East African units (many of whom had seen service in Burma).<sup>54</sup> The

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<sup>53</sup> One person we spoke to said the car was a Peugeot. Interview by authors: Arok Gak, 4 August 2017, Hai Gabat, Juba.

<sup>54</sup> Juba’s population doubled (from 4,135 to 8,265) during the four years following the end of the Second World War (Mills 1981). The town’s importance as a port of transit, commercial centre and

Governor-General's Report for 1942–1944 noted a worrying increase in petty theft in Juba, which it attributed to the large number of labourers employed there, alongside increasing numbers of traffic offences and fatal accidents attributable to military vehicles and the “drunkenness of the drivers.”<sup>55</sup> All this growth and excitement had also “encouraged the drift of undesirable hangers-on to these centres with a resultant increase in cases of drunkenness and theft,” the Governor-General wrote, attributing the situation to returning soldiers’ pay together with the lack of consumer goods for them to spend it on.<sup>56</sup> This extra cash helped encourage the growth of beer parlours, dance halls, gambling places and other inexpensive pastimes such as fighting and lodging appeals against court cases.<sup>57</sup> All this was deeply troubling for the authorities in Juba, who worried that population growth and labour migration would lead to the loosening of the customary bonds of authority and breed vice, idleness and the organising of labour. Officials in Malakal worried so much about “detrimentalisation” and the “demoralising influence” of beer parlours and the town’s “mixed population” that they built a little “tribal village” on the outskirts of the town to accommodate “visiting Nuer and Dinka” inside a cordon where they could be protected from the town’s undesirable influence.<sup>58</sup> Nicki Kindersley has written about how these concerns regarding migrants were “a continuation of older fears over slaves, ex-slaves and other migrants in the Condominium period” (Kindersley 2016: 63). Officials worried that new residents, finding themselves in a place governed by a money economy, where a “man’s worth is judged by the extent of his wealth,” and “forced to act independently of patriarchal or tribal authority” without the safety net of mutual aid characteristic of rural areas, would fall into crime and delinquency. Cinemas were commonly singled out for their “demoralising influence”<sup>59</sup>:

The audio visual media has great influence upon in-migrants as something new to them. The young are more susceptible to the effect of the Cinema, where they are stimulated to violence

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focus for administration made it an essential link in the Allied chain of communications and transportation (Beaton 1951:27).

55 Governor-General of the Sudan, “Report on the Administration of the Sudan for the Years 1942–44 (inclusive),” p. 187.

56 Owing to rationing and shortages. Governor-General of the Sudan, “Report on the Administration, Finances and Conditions of the Sudan in 1945.”

57 Governor-General of the Sudan, “Report on the Administration, Finances and Conditions of the Sudan in 1945,” p. 197.

58 Governor-General of the Sudan, “Reports on the Finances, Administration and Condition of the Sudan in 1935,” p. 124.

59 Lord Milverton, *The Colonial Territories*, HL Deb 06 July 1955 vol 193 cc 497–500. Commons and Lords, Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates (available online, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/>)

and crime by the highly coloured episodes which they see on the screen. Some of these children develop a strong desire to become regular visitors and are therefore likely to obtain the cost of the tickets by devious means, when they fail to get them through normal channels (Hadi 1972: 188, quoted in Kindersley 2016: 68).

It is not hard to see how fears about children's susceptibility to "highly coloured episodes" might ultimately be based on anxieties about the loss of colonial and patriarchal domination. More widespread anxieties about Sudan's future and the changes brought about by rapid post-war urban growth coalesced around the influence of films on children. But debates on the susceptibility of young and "unsophisticated audiences" to film were not taking place in isolation in Sudan; these discussions were part of an international debate about children and cinemagoing (Smith 2005).

Children also drew cinemagoing into their reflections on age and authority. We asked cinemagoers how they had arrived at the cinema and what they had done afterwards. They described in-between places, open areas where you could play football or fly the brightly-coloured kites you had made; the scrubland around Khor Gissis between the Native Lodging Area and the Dressers lines, where children played cowboys ("no one wanted to be an Indian") in the tall grass; and the marshy places where children went to catch birds or to fish by the riverside. These routes often cut across the social boundaries created by adults: the mirrored doors of the Greek Club, where children could examine their own reflections, grimacing – "you could see your teeth"; the market after dark, where a child could collect mangoes "for free." Even the town's system of bucket latrines offered possibilities. The Picture House's latrine was a wooden seat over a large bucket, which was collected by night-soil men. By lifting the iron flap at the back of the box, pushing the heavy bucket aside and climbing up, small boys were able to enter the cinema compound without paying the entrance fee.

Many of the men we spoke to carefully described the places of their early youth, often highlighting those where negotiations with adult structures of authority took place. Their descriptions were tied to certain key sites where they could grasp for themselves some of the control typically exercised by parents, teachers, and other adult figures of authority. These sites were typically the cinema, the market at night, the unsupervised riverside ("I almost drowned—three times!"), the scrubland around Khor Gissis and the road between the Lodging Area and the town centre). Older children – often older brothers – figured prominently in these narratives.

In October 2017, for example, we talked to a man about cinemagoing during the mid-1960s, when, he said, he was about nine years old. We would typically ask a question and let the audio recorder run.

- Interviewer: When was the first time you went [to the cinema]?
- Sebit: The first time I went to the cinema, it was in 1964. 1964. 65. Well by then, when we were still young boys, we liked cowboy films. Cowboy films they came first – if the film is a cowboy, then we all rushed to it. Because we wanted to see the star man shooting with the revolver. We were very impressed by how he used the revolver.
- Interviewer: Do you remember that time. . . the first time you went?
- Sebit: Yes, I can remember [I was taken there by my] elder brother. He decided to make himself as a [ticket tout] – you know he had money. He would send me to the cinema: “You go and stand in the line.”
- I would be the first person in the line. When the tickets are being bought, he would come and replace me, and he would take all the tickets. And then, after that, he’d come and sell [the tickets] in the black market.
- So – my reward. He’d take me in for one ticket and give me safa – a sandwich. That was my reward. You see? So when he asked me, “Will you go and be in the line,” I would never refuse; because he will take me in [to see the film], and then he will serve me with a sandwich. So that became part of my duty.<sup>60</sup>

Stories like this describe experiences and attitudes that are not typically found in the literature produced by journalists and other observers during the 1960s (see Ziegler 1966a-b). This is no doubt partly because journalistic literature during the 1960s focused mostly on periods of violence. These narratives overlook other periods and experiences, and also indicate something about the context in which they were told. The recollections of cinemagoing reported to us were usually short, humorous anecdotes of the kind conventionally told in small group settings, often to catch others up or simply to pass the time. The stories men told us about going to the cinema as children often touched on challenging generational authority and the subversion of adult roles and responsibilities (“that became my duty”), relying more heavily on images of empowerment and fun than victimisation (Figure 26). Theirs were stories about pleasure.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Interview by authors: Sebit, 10 October 2017, Hai Cinema, Juba.

<sup>61</sup> These memories also provide a useful lesson about “fieldwork” in South Sudan and the idea that knowledge is produced about the country through months of sweat and toil in the most inaccessible place on the map. This project was carried out in a city where ordinary people spend their afternoons chatting, drinking tea, playing football, trading recipes, attending lectures, watching films, writing memoirs, practicing an instrument or doing another hobby, like an oral history project with a friend.



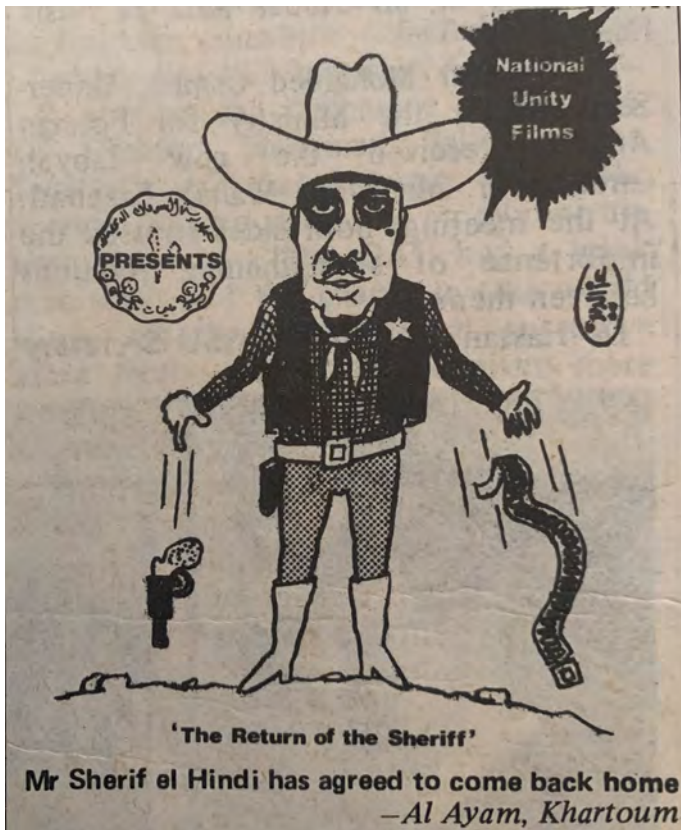


Figure 26: Cartoon.<sup>62</sup>

## What Was Playing?

Between March and July 1960, the Juba Picture House exhibited more than forty different films in four languages. Any given film generally ran for several days. Most were in Technicolor; some were black and white. Only a few had been released more than three years prior to being shown in Juba. There were westerns, adventures, legal and crime dramas, spy thrillers, science fiction films, war films, romances and wildlife pictures from the United States, England, India, Egypt and Russia. On Sunday 3 April, audiences were offered a costume drama set in ancient Egypt. On

<sup>62</sup> Reproduced in *Sudanow*, May 1978, p. 26.

the following Monday, Rock Hudson thrilled the staff of the Information Office in Juba with his performance in *Farewell to Arms* (1957), a “marvellous picture in Cinemascope & colour.” In May, audiences watched a flying saucer settle on a field in Washington DC in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), the *Beat Generation* (1959), *Up Periscope* (1959), a Second World War picture set on a submarine, and *Chori Chori* (1956), which began on a yacht.<sup>63</sup>

The expansion of mass audiences followed the paths worn by mobile cinemas. This expansion of commercial cinema audiences coincided with the ascent of westerns as a popular genre, which helps account for their prominence among the films mentioned by the cinemagoers we interviewed. These films were also inexpensive for commercial cinema proprietors to obtain. The prominence of westerns and “Tarzan films” in memories of the Juba Picture House also has to do with the age of the men we spoke to, many of whom had been born in the mid-1950s and first went to the cinema in Juba as boys (Duot 2017).

These personal narratives about cinemagoing were also stories about growing up. Several men measured their own maturity, and the immaturity of their friends, with a yardstick provided by their changing tastes in film. For instance, one elderly man told us that he was introduced to the cinema by a friend of his who liked cowboy films and later joined the army. He described how as he grew older (and his interests turned to women), he would find some excuse to refuse his friend’s invitation to see a cowboy film. “Those cowboy films were all the same: a guy walks into a bar and starts fighting,” he said, implying that such things were all right for the sort of person who runs off to enlist at the first opportunity, but not for a young man with ideas. As he matured, he said, he came to prefer Indian films, particularly the musical numbers, the part where “a young man sings to a young lady who [feigns indifference] for a while then sings to the man.”<sup>64</sup> Many of the cinemagoers we interviewed mentioned “Indian films” as the ones that they liked to watch best (Duot 2017).

Brian Larkin (2003) has written about how for Hausa filmgoers in Nigeria, Indian films provided a kind of “parallel modernity”: that is, a look at the lives of people living in another newly-independent country, where people were still reckoning with the influence of colonial powers. These films probed questions about “tradition,” a domain customarily marked by marriage celebrations, food, village life and song, and centred around people’s concerns about whether to speak English or Hindi, or to marry a person chosen by their parents or someone they loved.

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<sup>63</sup> This paragraph is drawn from notices published in the *Equatoria Daily News Bulletin* (JUB EP/36/F 1950).

<sup>64</sup> Interview by authors: Arok, 15 October 2017, Hai Jallaba, Juba.

Films about how people redefined their relations with each another in the midst of profound change would have resonated in Juba during the years after the Second World War. In May 1960, for example, audiences at the Juba Picture House saw *Chori Chori* (1956), a Hindi language remake of *It Happened One Night* (1934), which ran at the cinema for several nights. The film opens with Mr Girdharilal – who is outraged by his daughter Kammo’s refusal to eat some food he has sent to her cabin on his yacht, where she had been imprisoned to prevent her marriage to a man whom her father believes to be a gold-digging scoundrel – arguing with a porter who has just fled the cabin: “Sir, I survived the German war. . . but I had to run from there.” Kammo soon makes her escape by jumping overboard and hitching a ride on a passing boat. Though the film begins on a luxury yacht anchored in British Ceylon, it mostly takes place in modest places: on a crowded bus, along the roadside, where women roast maize on braziers, beside a river and among hay-stacks in farm fields.

A handful of Juba’s Hindi-speaking residents may have been able to follow the film’s dialogue. Some of Juba’s ex-soldiers may have visited the places represented in the film, having served in British Ceylon and India during the Second World War. Most audience members were able to enjoy the film and follow the plot (without the help of Arabic subtitles<sup>65</sup>): an argument between a father and a daughter provokes a long journey, shown with buses and roads and sleeping in fields, punctuated by song-and-dance numbers, and concluding with a marriage. Many would have also recognised the hierarchies involving loudmouthed wealthy men and “native” hotel porters who had fought in foreign wars. People we spoke to about cinemagoing in Juba often remarked that Indian films were easy to follow because India was really very similar to South Sudan; people there placed great value on traditions of song and dance and of food and family, filmgoers told us.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have discussed the use of cinema as part of state- and nation-building projects and the expansion of cinema and creation of mass audiences in Sudan, the establishment of the Southern provinces’ first purpose-built cinema, the Juba Picture House, and some of the debates prompted by the opening of cinemas. Mobile cinema campaigns in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan were part of a wider effort, at

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<sup>65</sup> These films may also have resonated – and travelled well – because the films originated in a multilingual region, in India, where many audiences may have included many people who were not native Hindi-speakers (Ganti 2013, 2016).

first to manage Sudanese perceptions of the Second World War, and later to draw rural parts of the country into the empire.

By all accounts, archival and oral, people took great pleasure in spending an evening at the cinema, whether government or commercial and seeing the “way of life, forms of pleasure” and dilemmas of other people elsewhere. Yet films made for wider audiences *about* Sudan have often been preoccupied with violent encounters between Sudanese and outsiders (Elsanhoury 2017). This chapter has focused more on how film prompted people in Southern Sudan to reimagine their relations with each other and their place in the world. Mobile cinema and commercial films showed images of other parts of Sudan (and other places farther afield), food, songs and dance, and provoked discussions about the value of different practices *within* Southern Sudan and South Sudanese national life. In our conversations with cinemagoers, films that showed different ways of doing things (marrying, dancing or making a spear or drum) were cited in discussions about distinctions between values and practices held out as “Dinka” or “Bari” or “Malakiyya” and those said to be “South Sudanese” or Egyptian, Indian or ancient Roman.

The cinema’s ability to do all of this has led it to be enrolled in nation-building projects, but this effort has not always had expected results. Reflecting on the multiplicity of voices in her film, *Our Beloved Sudan* (2011), which traces Sudan’s history from 1956 to the referendum on South Sudanese independence in 2011, Taghreed Elsanhoury makes an argument that recalls the unexpected directions taken by earlier mobile cinema efforts to knit the country together. The “Make Unity Attractive Campaign” during the Comprehensive Peace Agreement period (2005–2011) “backfired,” she argues, because it revealed the limits of the regime’s ability to imagine full South Sudanese participation within a Sudanese nation: the campaign “did not entail rethinking the nation, rethinking what it meant to be Sudanese, and engaging South Sudanese and other marginalised people’s narratives of belonging and anomie” (Elsanhoury 2017).

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Part 5: **Labour Identities, Practices and Institutions**





Enrico Ille

# Chapter 14

## The Borgeig Pump Scheme in Wartime Colonial Sudan (1942–1945): Social Hierarchies, Labour and Native Administration

### 1 Introduction

In *Living with Colonialism*, the historian Heather Sharkey argued that the study of colonial bureaucracy is an essential field of historiography because many early nationalist leaders and officials were educated for and “grew up” – professionally, economically, and politically – through it; they “shaped and were shaped by its system” (Sharkey 2003: 119). By examining how state-citizen relations are learned by those who later come to positions of power, studies such as these can capture historical continuities in governance: coloniality is not merely a question of inherited structures, but also of incorporated values of leadership and hierarchies in the distribution of power and resources (Quijano 2007). Bureaucracy as a practice for governing thus belongs to those historically grown institutions an analysis of which not only addresses the shortcomings of conventional periodisation (colonial/post-colonial) but also traces the long-term dynamics of relations among humans in changing areas of co-existence and rule (Sharkey, Vezzadini and Seri-Hersch 2015).

If we expand this idea to human-environment relations under colonialism, this area of study also touches on the broader problem of state-resource relations (Beinart and Hughes 2007). In Sudanese historiography, these relations have been associated with several wide areas of political contestation and research, such as water resource management and agricultural development. A number of major issues, including Nile water politics, have attracted a sizable body of scholarship, including historical works in which the notion of hydropolitics has linked them to political ecology (see, for instance, Tvedt 2004). This literature also addresses irrigated agriculture as a historically contested production site “at the junction between state, nature, and capital” (Bertoncin *et al.* 2019).

These are the general concerns this chapter ties in with. As a case study of an irrigation scheme in late colonial Sudan, it applies a general research interest in bureaucracies during that period to a specific project of agricultural food production. It approaches this production as a form of labour used to transform environments and manipulate plant growing processes so as to be aligned with human

nutritional needs. The question to be investigated here is how the priorities of this food production and the subsequent organisation of labour have been determined in the specific historical context the chapter studies, and by whom. This issue is also embedded in more general questions about the continuities between colonial and post-colonial rule. The chapter looks at how the aims and priorities of non-resident power elites were related to the aims and priorities of the resident population.

The specific case examined here is the Borgeig Scheme, a long-term residential government pump scheme in Sudan's Northern Province, in the northern part of the Sileim Basin.<sup>1</sup> The scheme was started by the (British) Sudan Government as part of the British Empire's so-called war effort during the Second World War, with the declared aim of producing grain for the armed forces and increasing the Sudanese population's self-sufficiency in food. It was born out of (previously abandoned) plans for the so-called Kerma Basin (today's Sileim Basin) that go back to before the First World War, when the area was one of the first to be considered for both private and public investment in irrigated agriculture under British rule (Allan and Smith 1948: 626–627; Ahmed 1970: 275–276). These plans were themselves a part of attempts to remedy the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium's heavy reliance on subsidies from Egypt by promoting commercial agriculture, while also fulfilling a growing need for cotton and self-sufficiency in grain (Kapteijns and Spaulding 1991: 95; Serels 2007: 65; Mollan 2008: 95–96).

The development of the Borgeig Scheme during and after the Second World War was also designed to implement a transition from a Native Administration board dominated by the local aristocracy to a tenant-elected Farm Board as part of a broader move towards “modern” self-administration that accompanied the transition to a Sudan ruled and administered by Sudanese (“Sudanisation”). But the transition was hindered by an aggressive rejection on the part of both the British and Sudanese authorities of the political demands of a growing labour and nationalist movement in the 1950s. The local aristocracy, in league with a growing merchant class, sought to co-opt this transition in order to maintain its grasp on senior administrative positions. These later developments will be alluded to briefly below.

The real focus of this chapter is on the transformation works carried out during the early years of the scheme (1942–1945), when forests and pastures were turned into irrigation canals and agricultural fields. The observations to be drawn from the documentary materials are guided by a study of the organisation of labour, specifically who was intended to provide it and who actually provided it, and under

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<sup>1</sup> The Sileim Basin is a stretch of low-lying land east of the Nile that reaches as far as Timinar to the south, about 10 kilometers south of Dongola, and Abu Fatima, the northern edge of Kerma, to the north. It is 73 kilometers in length and between 3 and 8 kilometres wide, an area of about 70,000 feddan (El-Dishouni 1989: 11). See <https://www.google.com/maps/@19.3767659,30.4240926,81256m/data=!3m1!1e3>.

what conditions, with a focus on the relationship between coercion and persuasion in the recruitment of labour, tracing the tensions of the negotiations on goal-attainment between the requirements of the War Supply Department and the requirements of local food security.

The core argument looks at how two sets of boundaries – the line between “external” (others’) and “internal” (own) interests, and between the “proper” and “wrong” pursuit of these interests – shifted constantly between the actors involved. The successful manipulation of plants such as grains, legumes and fruit-bearing trees towards “good” yields may have emerged as a shared concern, but for whose benefit and based on whose directions it was to be achieved was a matter for negotiation that entangled both aspects – not always for the benefit and success of one set of actors. The case study emphasises this negotiation by describing how a large-scale geopolitical contestation, the British Empire’s war effort as an ostensibly unified supraregional project, was simultaneously interrelated with, dependent on, and in conflict with local food production, which was also intended to serve the nutritional and other economic requirements of the population of the areas of production.

The specifics of this negotiation are observed here through one of its nodal points – mid-level colonial administrators, who had to translate between different circumstances and levels of interest, be they the Empire’s war machine, the Sudan Government’s leadership, the local aristocracy, grain traders, landowners, technical personnel, or farmers. This multipolar – albeit hierarchised – negotiation to organise food production is made visible by a corpus of communications represented by letters and reports held at the Sudan Archive in Durham as part of the official and private papers of Laurence Medlicott Buchanan (1906–1991), who was the District Commissioner in charge of the Meroë-Dongola district, which included the Borgeig Scheme, from 1942 to 1945.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.1 Nile Flood Control

Control of the Nile from source to delta was one of the founding elements of British imperial interest in North-East Africa (Tvedt 2011). While imperial counter-projects, whether Ethiopian or French, were successfully held in check during the first

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<sup>2</sup> See catalogue under [https://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ark/32150\\_s147429914p.xml](https://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ark/32150_s147429914p.xml). An extended visit to the Sudan Archive in Durham and fieldwork in Borgeig was made possible by the Urgent Anthropology Fellowship granted to me 2016/2017; I thank the Anthropologists’ Fund for Urgent Anthropological Research, the Royal Anthropological Institute and my colleagues at the British Museum for this opportunity. I also thank my hosts in Kerma and Borgeig, as well as local historiographer Abū Bakr al-Khayrī for their hospitality and generous sharing of information.

half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, securing full control of the waters themselves remained an unfinished task. The Nile flood levels fluctuated significantly every year, and the consequences of this annual uncertainty were a constant subject of discussion, including among engineers, who mostly looked at the issue from an Egypt-oriented and/or irrigation volume perspective, and administrators and agriculturalists, whose ability to obtain good harvests depended on good water levels, meaning that they were neither too low nor too high. The extent to which both, control and output, could be achieved was a potential source of imperial pride as much as it was of “imperial anxiety” (Grinsell 2020).

The importance of the ultimate subordination of water uses to irrigation concerns in Egypt never diminished under British rule (see for instance Newhouse 1939) or even in early independent Sudan, as confirmed – contrary to the opinion of Sudanese experts (Abdalla 1971: 329) – by the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement. Projects in other riparian countries had already been considered and partly implemented in the decades preceding their independence, not only for local irrigation schemes but also for hydropower installations; however, their initiators rarely diverged from the instrumentalising colonial gaze on landscapes and people alike (see Shamir 2018 on Uganda’s Owen Falls Dam). After the Second World War, this gaze shifted, albeit not without serious disagreements, towards establishing national economies out of the imperial construct of a united Nile Valley economy, a shift that as historian Alden Young has argued can be traced through the minutiae of financial planning (Young 2018: chapter 2).

It is also relevant to observe these shifts from imperial to domestic concerns in the late colonial period through the individuals who held positions at the points where administrative and professional responsibility was to be handed over to independent states such as Sudan. This might entail a detailed understanding of both the goals of and the ways of imagining and pursuing Sudan’s hydrological and agricultural future, and by whom and for whom it would be secured.<sup>3</sup> It is at this stage that a closer look at the inner workings of local bureaucracies seems to be warranted, in order to examine, for example, to what end and in what way control over landscapes and people’s labour force was sought to be established.

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<sup>3</sup> This has been attempted, for instance, by observing the professional training taking place at central academic institutions (e.g. Zetterstrom-Sharp 2020 on agricultural scientists at Khartoum University).

## 1.2 Governmental Pump Schemes and Sudan Studies

The foundation of large-scale irrigation schemes in Sudan, especially those devoted to cotton production, has received a great deal of attention in Sudan Studies: like few other enterprises, they represented the “direct involvement of the colonial administration in the capital accumulation process” (Shaaeldin 1984: 27). Through the British Cotton Growers Association and the Sudan Plantations Syndicate, these schemes also incorporated agricultural development in Sudan into the competitive dynamics of global trade and subordinated it to imperial interests in their products.

The historiography of irrigated agriculture in Sudan is dominated by the gravity-irrigated Gezira Scheme because of its size and economic, political, and social importance. In fact, the whole area around and immediately upstream of the confluence of the Niles has monopolised developmental imagination since the First World War and still forms the core of the so-called Hamdi triangle in which the centripetal political economy in the country has been entangled (Verhoeven 2015: 136).<sup>4</sup> The Gezira Scheme has therefore invited a wide range of scholarship; the study of administration-tenant relations, for instance, has been covered, from classical debates in agricultural development (see, for example, Bernal 1988 on coercion versus incentives) and emerging forms of governance (Clarkson 2005 on tenant elitism) to irrigation systems as actor-networks (Ertsen 2016 on human and non-human agency).

However, there are several reasons to look more closely at “smaller” – but still sizable – schemes as well. Large-scale irrigation in Sudan made use of a number of techniques that required different conditions in terms of design, finance, and tenancy, from those that depended on the annual Nile flood – basins flooded completely or with canal structures that used a water flow caused by gravity – to those that used the reservoirs that formed behind dams to provide constant irrigation through suction pumps. Depending to their position, size, and function, subsequent irrigation schemes had a different, though mostly significant, impact on the areas where they were implemented, be it their importance to local socio-economic history (on the Gash Delta, see Salih 1985), their origin in instances of large-scale displacement (on New Halfa see Sørbo 1985), or even their non-completion, reflecting the fate of political priorities over the course of decades (for example, plans for the Jonglei Canal, Collins 1990). Each scheme was to a different extent also relevant to local agricultural development, for instance as a pioneer – or invasive spearhead – of mechanised farming or new irrigation technologies (such as the

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<sup>4</sup> A map entitled “The Sudan main grain production belt” (Jefferson 1950: 9) illustrates how the colonial gaze had already established this perception of “core areas” rather than diversification and complementarity as principles of economic development.

pilot projects outside Gezira discussed in Jefferson 1950). Looking at various water schemes also makes it possible to underline the diverse reasons why such schemes were established in colonial and post-colonial times, thereby shedding light on the fine print between the broad lines of agro-political history.

The Northern Province rarely features prominently in historical works on irrigated schemes, and when it does, it is mostly with a focus on cotton-growing schemes (compare Simpson 1991: 103–105 and 105–111). However, the government pump schemes for food production that developed in this region count among the most consistent government commitments to agriculture, and as residential schemes, they offer insights into one of the most sustainable reorganisations of labour and everyday social life by government agents, who often promoted them as a way to gain privileged access to land and steady incomes. This is also significant because at the same time the region was experiencing some of the earliest instances of extensive private investment in agriculture in Sudan in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which the close interweaving of political favouritism and investment and trade opportunities prepared and foreshadowed the political economy of post-independence Sudan. During the 1920s, the slow introduction of mechanical irrigation pumps – because it was heavily regulated – brought some previously unavailable areas under cultivation, first in the form of pump schemes managed by the government or selected individual investors, and then through village-based cooperatives, which were supported by the authorities for a brief period in the mid-1930s (Serels 2013: 166–168).

During the Second World War, agricultural production fell heavily under the influence of the War Supply Department, which regulated the domestic circulation of grains, including a ban on exporting sorghum (Serels 2013: 173).<sup>5</sup> The scarcity of commodities in the context of a war economy allowed successful independent cultivators and traders to charge high prices, which in turn enabled them to accumulate capital. When restrictions on pump licences were lifted after the war, investment in new private schemes soared, mostly benefitting the land-owning elites and well-connected traders through arrangements with tenants that were heavily skewed to the formers' advantage while shifting the economic risks to the latter (Sikainga 1996: 97). Recurring food crises therefore still favoured a limited number of scheme-owners and merchants among the political elite, who benefitted from the subsequently high prices (Serels 2013: 176).

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<sup>5</sup> This was based on the Defence of the Sudan (War Supply) Regulations Act 1941 and the War Supply Movement of Good Restriction Order 1942.

### 1.3 Food Security in the Northern Province

According to the historian Steven Serels, by the 1920s and 1930s colonial officials were convinced that the Northern regions around the Nile were not able to feed themselves and were thus best served by “encourag[ing] outmigration to fertile rainlands in the Jazira, Qadarif and Qallabat” (Serels 2013: 164). Instead of improving local production, they pursued “government-owned large-scale commercial agriculture schemes and [. . .] the economic interests of a small group of indigenous elites” (Serels 2013: 164). Again in the 1950s, the geographer K.M. Barbour argued that the northern Nile areas were overpopulated relative to the amount of arable land and therefore generated a good deal of outmigration, with only a few sizable areas south of the Borgeig pump scheme still available for agricultural development (Barbour 1959: 254–255). This “scarcity” was due partly to the land ownership structures and inheritance mechanisms and the consequent fragmentation of land in the region, and partly to the long-term effects of land registration (Ille 2018). The sociologist Hassan Abdel-Ati has also highlighted the circumstance that the motivation to establish governmental pump schemes in the Northern Province was related as much to demands made by the higher authorities to the local administration to produce a certain output of crops as it was to the needs of the resident population during the frequent food shortages and famines (Abdel-Ati 1983: 112).

The Second World War crystallised this concomitance of external (non-resident) production demands and internal (resident) consumption needs. The external demands were clearly shaped by the so-called war effort, which included the contributions that were expected from the different regions of the British Empire. In Sudan, apart from soldiers, they entailed contributions to the Middle East Supply Centre, which distributed grain to the region’s garrisons (Serels 2013: 171). An additional wheat production drive originated with a request to the Sudan Government to make the country itself self-sufficient in wheat (Sudan Government 1950a: 63). Accordingly, limits on exports as well as “a complex system of price controls, rationing and subsidies” were introduced, but this did not prevent inflation, especially as regards food prices, from reaching 71% in 1945 (Cross 1997: 238). When food production remained insufficient after 1939 due to low Nile floods and additional troop movements, cotton-growing was halted on all governmental schemes in the Northern Province and additional schemes such as the Borgeig Scheme, with 10-feddan holdings of government land in return for payment of an annual rent, were developed (Hewison 1948: 749; Serels 2013: 172).

Interestingly, these schemes were presented by colonial administrators primarily as a tool to combat local food insecurity. Walter Ferguson Crawford, the Governor of the Northern Province (until 1944), claimed that Borgeig and similar



schemes were “the best insurance against famine and distress in years of low Nile” (quoted in Hewison 1948: 752). This description of the scheme as an oasis in an area of scarcity was echoed in the 1948 Annual Report of the Sudan Government: “A good example of the ordered prosperity which can be secured for local cultivators by a well organised undertaking” with “conditions [. . .] probably unequalled anywhere in the country” (Sudan Government 1950b: 163). However, different assessments circulated in the Empire’s administrative circuits, in which this kind of “overselling” of what the government would provide was problematised. During the later stages of the Second World War, the War Supply Department official R. J. Hillard, referring to soldiers returning home from the front in North Africa, remarked in a letter to Buchanan that “the locals are getting an exaggerated idea of ‘standard of living’ through their friends and relatives coming on leave from the armed forces for whom much too much luxury has been provided.”<sup>6</sup>

Both positions reflect differing external projections of what an acceptable livelihood would have been for the “local population”. Apart from appropriating the definition of what was sufficient for this population in terms of quality and quantity, the term “local” conflated a wide range of socio-economic situations in societies in which hierarchies were both reflected and challenged by the way in which schemes such as the Borgeig Scheme were organised.

## 1.4 Native Administration, Farms Boards, and Labour Recruitment

A closer look at administration-tenant relations in the northern government pump schemes reveals a tension between administrative conservatism and innovation, as they reflect in their own way the ongoing transition from Native Administration (“tribal” representation) to local government (municipal representation). In 1948, J.W. Hewison, who was Inspector of Agriculture for the Northern Province at the time, noted that the government schemes were undergoing – or it was intended that they should undergo – a gradual shift of responsibility from departmental staff to local farm boards, with [colonial] officials acting as technical advisers. He quoted John Douglas Tothill, Director of the Sudan Department of Agriculture and Forests (1939–1944) and editor of an influential handbook (Tothill 1948), who in 1942 outlined a general pathway for development towards agricultural societies formed

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from Hillard to Buchanan, 25 September 1944, Sudan Archive, University of Durham, UK, 797/6/153 (hereby SAD). He related this to the existence of flourishing black markets in the war areas, not to high salaries.

and led by tenants. The first step, Tothill asserted, could only be taken through advisory committees initially appointed by the governor and later elected by the tenants, which would be mostly “dominated by the Omdas and Sheikhs” (Hewison 1948: 751), the middle and lower levels of the Native Administration respectively. They would be “hopelessly inefficient” at first, and would have to be taught to be useful by a resident Agricultural Officer, as well as the Inspector of Agriculture of the province, or so the claim went. The Inspector of Agriculture would not have to stay on site once the committee was capable of managing the agricultural society alone and, as Tothill put it, “[t]he Government will remain as friendly landlord and as the provider and distributor of water” (Hewison 1948: 751).

The actual official line differed from Tothill’s 1942 proposals with regard to the name, composition, and function of these societies, as it opted for so-called farm boards that were to be kept separate from local government. The tenants were to choose their members from among their own number, but their functions would be dedicated solely to executive management and finance (Hewison 1948: 752). As we will see in a later section (“The Enduring Power of the Local Aristocracy”), however, these institutional innovations did not mean immediate, or even medium-term, emancipation from Native Administration structures or, in the area under review here, from the dominant local aristocracy.<sup>7</sup> A conceptual change from Native Administration to local government, not to mention to self-administration, was not at all a straightforward path, especially in the view of long-serving administrators like Buchanan. In contrast, this change, as described in the 1937 Local Government Act, was seen by contemporary Sudanese politician Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Maḥjūb as a timely evolution from the direct central – military – rule established by the early Anglo-Egyptian administration to the indirect rule policies (Native Administration) carried out in the 1920s and early 1930s. He welcomed a new division of labour between central and local government on the path to independence (al-Maḥjūb 1945: 78–86).

These ambiguous views of Native Administration and local government are relevant here, as the recruitment of labour, especially for public works, was one of the central functions the British authorities allocated to the Native Administration leaders. In the words of the then Civil Secretary Douglas Newbold (1939–1945, quoted in Henderson 1953: 495), based on his self-identification as an agent of a developmental state: “Economic development of any community depends on the energy and derives from the consent of the individuals of that community. This consent and energy can only satisfactorily be engendered through the Native Administration authorities.” Indeed, Article 10 of the Local Government (Rural

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<sup>7</sup> On “neo-traditional authority”, see Vaughan 2010.

Areas) Ordinance of 1937 maintained the local authorities' right to enlist "able-bodied natives" to carry out public works for up to ten days a year (see the ordinance in Abushouk and Bjørkelo 2004: 251).

However, the development of the workforce in Sudan was not at all confined to closed communities and their authorities, whatever the basis for their leadership position may have been. In addition to the areas that were being urbanised, the large irrigation schemes attracted a significant number of labourers from several regions within and outside Sudan, including escaped slaves and landless indentured workers from other agricultural areas. This created, well into the 1930s, a contradiction between the official anti-slavery rhetoric and actual discouragement from freeing slaves and the maintenance of landless individuals as a reserve of cheap labour to serve the economic hierarchies established by the land-owning "agrarian elite" (Kapteijns and Spaulding 1991: 97; see also Daly 1987: 439–446; Vezzadini 2010). But shortage of labour occurred even in large government schemes, such as in the Gezira scheme from 1942 onwards, in part due to the different wage levels in different labour markets, which gave bargaining power to labourers who were able to circulate freely. It was the Local Government Ordinance that then made it possible to coerce workers into such schemes, at least for ten days a year (Sikainga 1996: 133), which hints at one of the ways in which "Sudanisation", the gradual transfer of administrative power to Sudanese officials, did not mean emancipation for everyone.

The Northern Province was not only one of the main instances in which modernised capitalist forms of production were intertwined with, or even based on, precolonial patterns of workforce exploitation; it was also one of the regions in which measures against forced labour, which were finally endorsed and increasingly implemented during the 1930s, had begun – alongside general economic changes – to "deprive" the land-owning classes of their main source of labour. In Dongola province, where the Borgeig Scheme would be commenced in the 1940s, officials were still trying to stop the flow of slaves outside the area in the 1920s. Nevertheless, landowning farmers had to rely more and more on family labour or sharecropping arrangements with the landless (Sikainga 1996: 104–105), which became the main form of contract farming in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

There was also another dynamic that will only be touched on briefly in this chapter. In the mid-1940s, the hitherto mostly unrelated worker strikes began to converge into organisational structures that finally gave way to a nascent labour movement (Fawzi 1957; Cross 1997). Another driving force developed with the closer connection between labour issues and anti-colonial nationalism, which strengthened after the Second World War and became radicalised as a result of a backlash from the Sudan Government. The government's response was partly at odds with evolving labour policies in Britain itself (Taha 1970: chapter 3; Vezzadini

2017) and was far from being unchallenged, even within the colonial administration (Curless 2013). In general, these dynamics of “unwilling” labour, where government intentions diverged from what were legitimate demands in the eyes of those who were expected to carry them out, are revealing instances of the prevailing principles of governance. The killing of over 300 tenant farmers on the private Joda Scheme near Kosti on 19 February 1956 by the police forces of the young independent government is a case in point (Ali 1983; Madanī 2008), indicating how violent suppression of protest remained a legitimate tool for governing in the eyes of the ruling elites.

These strands of development form the context of this case study. While several of the dynamics outlined here also appear in the source materials, the primary value of these archival documents lies in the opportunities they offer to analyse how various kinds of “resistance” – including by forces of nature – were micro-managed at the mid-level of the colonial administration, where top-tier requests were translated into the locally achievable.

## 2 Colonial Officials and the Launch of the Borgeig Scheme

In January 1942, the Governor of the Northern Province communicated privately and confidentially to Buchanan that self-sufficiency in wheat was the order of the day, since Japan’s entry into the war had escalated it and increased the Empire’s demands for war contributions from its provinces.<sup>8</sup> In the years that followed, administrators in the Northern Province debated the issue of how to increase crop production, specifically wheat. They also prepared a more extensive campaign to expand cultivation and requisition agricultural produce from public and private schemes. At that point, British presence in the Northern Province had been strongly reduced, the District Commissioner and some agricultural inspectors being the only British staff between Wadi Halfa and al-Damir.<sup>9</sup>

The local administration of Meroë-Dongola district was composed of District Commissioner Buchanan<sup>10</sup> – who answered directly to the Governor of North-

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<sup>8</sup> Letter from Crawford to Buchanan, 7 January 1942, SAD 797/4/2.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Buchanan, 17 January 1944, SAD 797/6/11.

<sup>10</sup> The following details are based on the catalogues and Sudan staff lists held at the Sudan Archive, University of Durham.

ern Province at al-Damir<sup>11</sup> – and Assistant District Commissioner (until January 1944 Sub-Inspector) Muṣṭafā Nadā Bey, an Egyptian, both of whom were based in Meroë. Below the District Commissioner came the position of “Mamur” (from the Arabic *ma'mūr*), which was held by Muḥammad 'Abd al-Rāziq in 1943 and by Sharaf al-Dīn Muḥammad from 1944 on. Based in Dongola, the Mamur was supported by sub-Mamurs.<sup>12</sup> The sub-Mamur in Dongola, Nūr 'Uthmān, was directly involved with everyday business *vis-à-vis* the local government.<sup>13</sup> The Department of Agriculture and Forestry was represented by Inspectors of Agriculture, and a young Bachelor of Science, Robert F. Laing, was appointed in Kerma, and later in Borgeig in July 1943.<sup>14</sup> The Inspectors had Sudanese Agricultural Officers below them, and in Borgeig it was Muḥammad 'Awām Nimr from Barkal until 1946.<sup>15</sup>

By means of a study of letters and reports from the Buchanan papers, the following sections reveal the preparatory works for new agricultural land that was intended to balance the required volume of crop contributions with local food security.

## 2.1 “Unused” Land

When the Borgeig Scheme was instituted in 1942, officials took care to create it without incorporating any private land, thereby preventing both compensation claims and subsequent fragmentation as the result of sales. This limited legal transactions to individual contracts signed with individual tenants, and land issues remained between the government agents as scheme managers and tenants (Hewison 1948: 749; Niblock 1987: 28–29). Accordingly, only those parts of the Kerma Basin that had

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11 Sir Walter Ferguson Crawford (1941–1944) and then Christopher B. Tracey (1944–1948), while E.G. Evans and E.A.V. de Candole were their respective deputies.

12 In 1945, the position of Mamur was replaced by a second Assistant District Commissioner.

13 Nūr 'Uthmān had a background in Gadarif (letter from Buchanan to Crawford, 20 August 1944, SAD 797/6/110) and reached the position of Deputy Assistant Civil Secretary in March 1948. 'Uthmān had previously worked in Buchanan's office. When he was transferred to Dongola permanently, it was Da'ūd 'Abd al-Laṭīf who took over his tasks in Meroë, including the “Borgeig problems” (letter from Buchanan to Nūr, 5 June 1943, SAD 797/5/91). Da'ūd 'Abd al-Laṭīf, the founder of the Sudanese Tractor Company (SUTRAC) which later became one of Sudan's largest conglomerates under the name DAL, had been trained as sub-Mamur by Buchanan and worked with him in Wadi Halfa (letter from Buchanan to Crawford, 1 May 1943, SAD 797/5/74).

14 Robert G. Laing was later the resident Inspector of Agriculture, based in Argo; he became Senior Inspector of Agriculture for Blue Nile Province in September 1951.

15 He was then appointed Inspector of Agriculture in Kadugli, and in 1951 Gezira Tenants Adviser.

been classified as government land were included,<sup>16</sup> leaving out most, but not all, of the land that had previously been used for cultivation or pasture.<sup>17</sup> Administrators treated this as especially important in the Northern Province, which was one of the few areas of Sudan where the narrow category of individual freehold land, meaning land registered before the First World War, was applied (Adam 1965: 87–101).

This principle to include only “unowned” and “unused” land is not only significant as regards the otherwise prevailing pattern of agricultural colonial and post-colonial development through schemes that transferred peasants’ land to state and private investors, leading to the centralised management of previously self-directed, albeit not necessarily economically independent, labour (Bernal 1988: 93). The approach taken in Borgeig was also an example of the colonial “attempt to restructure the perceived empty African physical landscape into a radically different, modern rational environment” (Ertsen 2006: 148), based on its own categories of proper land ownership and use.

Here, the “emptiness” of the targeted land referred solely to formal land registration and the observation that the older irrigation technology, *sāqiya*,<sup>18</sup> could not bring water further into these areas than land that was adjacent to rivers, suggesting a level of accessibility that was limited to the riverain population and their agricultural development.<sup>19</sup> However, these eastern extensions of the riverain settlements had already been used as pasture by the resident population,<sup>20</sup> and the basin was partly covered by a stretch of forest at the edge of the desert, a conservation issue that will be revisited below. In fact, a part of Kerma’s eastern lands had had a recent history of cultivation with water from wells that had been documented when *sāqiyya* land was charted in 1912<sup>21</sup> and was still mentioned in a handbook entry on the Northern Province in 1948. It was the associated depend-

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16 This classification followed the stipulation of the 1925 Land Settlement and Registration Ordinance that “waste, forest, and unoccupied land shall be deemed to be the property of the government, until the contrary is proved” (Art. 16c). This was taken almost verbatim from the 1840 Crown Land (Encroachments) Ordinance No. 12.

17 Letter from Buchanan, 17 November 1942, SAD 797/4/83.

18 These wooden installations lifted water from the Nile using waterwheels (*sawāqī*, sing. *sāqiya*) driven by livestock walking in circles. The term also denotes a category of land tenure that dominated the customary agricultural law in the Northern Province (detailed, for instance, in Ḥabīb 1997).

19 Sharif El-Dishouni (1989: 12), among others, has noted that the physical disappearance of this irrigation technology, which had been dominant for centuries, did not obliterate its presence “in the social relations and tenure arrangements under diesel-pump irrigation of the day”.

20 Interview with Muḥammad Ḥusayn, Borgeig Scheme, Sudan, 30 November 2016.

21 This *sāqiya* map was seen by the author in the Land Office of Argo on 15 November 2016.

ence on fluctuating water levels that was problematised in that case, with a call for an intervention to establish “better” water control and thus “better” land use (Allan and Smith 1948: 624–625).<sup>22</sup>

In any event, the occupation of this space by a new settlement irrigation scheme meant a more profound transformation than simply from “wilderness” to cultivated fields, as it established new human-environment relations and redrew the boundaries between insider and outsider in the area. A long-lasting change in the landscape was brought about by the labourers who were recruited to clear the land, and a new long-term settlement was established by the scheme’s tenants. These two groups were not congruent either with each other or with the resident population on the banks adjacent to the Nile.

## 2.2 Tasks and Technologies

The first task for the new scheme was clearing the land, as it was covered with trees and bushes, followed by levelling fields and digging irrigation canals. The aim was a clearly and uniformly organised agricultural space: the Kerma Basin had already been divided administratively into departments or branches (*qism*, pl. *aqsām*) during the 1910s, subdivided into irrigation units (*hawḍ*) of 640 feddan each and then into 64 plots (*tarbiyya*) of 10 feddan.<sup>23</sup> In the Borgeig Scheme, the plots were called *hawāsha* (from *hōsh*, courtyard), 250 of which were distributed during the first year of operation, divided into 4 quarters (*hāra*, pl. *hārāt*).<sup>24</sup> The 10-feddan plot was again to be uniformly divided into four parts: 1 feddan for residence purposes, 4.5 feddan for wheat, 2.25 feddan for sorghum, and 2.25 feddan for cowpeas (*lūbiyā*, *Vigna unguiculata*) and sorghum (Hewison 1948: 750). The spatial reorganisation was thus intended to induce a major shift in vegetation: three kinds of crops were to replace the dominant *talḥ* tree (*Vachellia seyal*), a drought-resistant species used for incense and gum Arabic.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Other aspects, which cannot be discussed here for reasons of space, are Kerma’s historical significance as the location of one of the world’s oldest state formations and as an important archaeological site (Bonnet 2019), with a long recent settlement history, as well as the association of these eastern areas with morbidity and death among populations residing around Kerma (the author’s own observation from fieldwork in November 2016).

<sup>23</sup> “Kerma Basin: Criticism of Irrigation Works Executed and Proposals for New Works.” Report by T. Yenidunia, 6 May 1913, p. 3, SAD 112/1/221. 1 feddan is an area of 70x60 metres, that is, 4,200 m<sup>2</sup> or 0.42 hectares.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Buchanan to Crawford, 7 October 1943, SAD 797/5/111.

<sup>25</sup> This transformation was not without unintended consequences. One of the lasting environmental effects of administrative measures during this period was planting of a grass called *al-nāla* by

A first cutting campaign was already planned for February 1942,<sup>26</sup> and it was conducted over the following years under the supervision of an overseer, Omer Eff.,<sup>27</sup> and a resident forest administrator (*nāzir al-ghābāt*) Ali Eff.,<sup>28</sup> in the presence of an Assistant Conservator of Forests and a Forest Ranger from the Forestry Section, the latter being in charge of processing and storing trunks. The wood itself was initially also needed to fuel the steam engine that pumped water into the canals,<sup>29</sup> and requests for new private schemes with wood-fuelled pumps were denied after January 1942 in the expectation that wood-burning pumps and boilers from the Sudan Plantations Syndicate would be used in the new government scheme and require all available wood resources.<sup>30</sup> The subsequent logging, although it was combined with immediate reforestation, depleted the forests around the village of Kodroka, as witnessed by an early tenant.<sup>31</sup>

The engine used for the Borgeig Scheme itself at the time of the launch constituted regression to the already technologically obsolete steam pumps, which had been discarded elsewhere. This reflected the wartime economy and the utilitarian rather than developmental origin of the project.<sup>32</sup> Given the limits on the supply of wood and the environmental effects in a region with sparse tree cover, the Nile Pumps Control Board required the swift replacement of all steam-driven pumps with oil-burning ones after the war (Hewison 1948: 758).<sup>33</sup> A similar technological backwards step was experienced when the canal was being dug using manual labour throughout. While this also reflected wartime economies, the colonial concepts of what kind of labour could and should be available were also at play here.

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the tenants. It was intended to stabilise the canals, which regularly broke up in many places due to erosion, and remains an ineradicable weed today (interview with Muḥammad Ḥusayn, Borgeig Scheme, 30 November 2016).

26 “Notes on Conservations Evans-Buchanan 13th.-16th. Feb.” 13-16 February 1942, SAD 797/4/19.

27 Letter from Buchanan to Crawford, 1 May 1943, SAD 797/5/73.

28 Letter from Buchanan to Nūr, 17 January 1944, SAD 767/6/13.

29 Letter from Buchanan to Laing, 21 February 1943, SAD 797/5/35.

30 Letter from Crawford to Buchanan, 16 January 1942, SAD 797/4/7; letter from Crawford to Buchanan, 30 January 1942, SAD 797/4/8: 10.

31 Interview with Jaʿfar Suleymān, Borgeig Scheme, 30 November 2016. The village still hosts the Kodroka Forest Reserve, which had been established to hold back desertification in the area but consisted, as of 2016, almost completely of agricultural land.

32 The introduction of a wood-fuelled engine was wildly anachronistic, as it had already been rejected in 1922 for the Wad Al-Nau pumping station, the fourth station of the Gezira Scheme, in exchange for diesel oil engines, due to the “difficulty of obtaining coal or wood” (Allen 1924: 399).

33 This had happened by 1948, when the steam engines of Borgeig Scheme were replaced with two 350 brake horsepower (bhp) diesel engines to work two 36-inch pumps (Sudan Government 1950b: 163).



## 2.3 Sources of Labour

The initial administrative discourse around the Borgeig Scheme was mainly on the subject of the recruitment of labour. While there was no doubt about whether or not the works would take place once the administrative decision had been made, the material shows ongoing negotiations on who exactly would carry them out. Bearing the background of an authoritarian colonial state in mind, we see that this debate was an interesting balancing act between persuasion (“incentives”) and coercion (“conscripted”), and between internal (“local”) and external (“imported”).

The presumptions underlying the attempts at persuasion sometimes focused on the “evident” benefit of the scheme for the population to be recruited, and sometimes on the “adequate” payments and incentives offered: advertising for labour in Borgeig was, for instance, made part of the training of sub-Mamur candidates when they were sent across the whole district in May 1943,<sup>34</sup> as it was among the usual duties of the sub-Mamur in Dongola to organise labour and supplies for the Borgeig Scheme.<sup>35</sup> Additional sugar rations were also apparently earmarked for the Meroë-Dongola district “to attract labour”.<sup>36</sup>

A radical shortage of labour soon shifted the focus to coercion, however, although this new policy especially targeted people who were already in prison. In January 1944, 150 prisoners were requested from Khartoum and sent to work for several months on wood-cutting and canal cleaning:<sup>37</sup> tellingly, a meeting on organising labour in late February 1944 was held inside the temporary prisoners’ camp.<sup>38</sup> The presence of prisoners became much more permanent, however, and the Kerma prison camp was established under a Senior Prison Officer,<sup>39</sup> and in November of the same year, even more prisoners were requested by Buchanan from the Sudan Police HQ in Khartoum.<sup>40</sup>

In practice, persuasion could turn swiftly and fluidly into coercion, and vice versa: another group working on wood cutting at the same time as the prisoners were “conscripted Arabs”, who also numbered about 150. They were to receive sugar through a retailer at the lower price of Pt. 20 per 1/40 of a sack (*ra’s*) after

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34 Letter from Nür to Buchanan, 20 May 1943, SAD 797/5/86.

35 Letter from Buchanan to Crawford, 1 May 1943, SAD 797/5/73.

36 Letter from Crawford to Buchanan, 28 September 1943, SAD 797/5/102.

37 Letter from Crawford to Buchanan, 13 January 1944, SAD 797/6/6; letter from Nür to Buchanan, 16 January 1944, SAD 797/6/8-9.

38 Letter from Laing to Buchanan, 9 March 1944, SAD 797/6/68.

39 Letter from Buchanan to Arthur Leonard William Vicars-Miles, Commandant of Police, Civil Secretary’s Office, 23 August 1944, SAD 797/6/117.

40 Letter from Vicars-Miles to Buchanan, 26 September 1944, SAD 797/6/156.

15 days of work<sup>41</sup> and a relative high payment of Pt. 2 per cubic metre of cut wood,<sup>42</sup> but a year previously, Buchanan had already ordered that “if any imported workman refuses to work [. . .] [h]e will get a day or two in gaol”.<sup>43</sup>

Variations in the harshness of the measures taken had partly to do with “higher forces” that either caused hindrances or encouraged moving forward: early 1944 saw Buchanan eager not to repeat the experience of the previous year, when by May 1943, six weeks into the works, only a quarter of the annual wood supply had been cut at Borgeig, when the work needed to be finished before the August floods.<sup>44</sup> By November, the workforce had to be increased due to an announced visit by the Governor-General in the same month, for whom Buchanan wanted to put on “a decent show”.<sup>45</sup>

Buchanan’s correspondence, especially with Governor Crawford, also shows broad divergences of opinion on how to find enough labour for the initial phase. The debate was mostly around whether to conscript labour from among the resident population or whether – to use colonial language – to “import” it. Crawford was critical of suggestions that labour should be enlisted, and asked what sort of work would be done by “unwilling conscripted labour”.<sup>46</sup> Buchanan, on the other hand, challenged the Governor’s reluctance to use compulsory local labour and called imported labour “a great nuisance”.<sup>47</sup> In fact, he later claimed not to like having to use prisoners, and that he had felt forced to do so because of the lack of alternatives.<sup>48</sup> Nūr ‘Uthmān, the Sudanese sub-Mamur in Dongola, was even clearer on the subject, claiming that the “scheme is for the welfare of the local people who are not appreciating this. It is to their benefit to let them work compulsorily”.<sup>49</sup> He combined this with a report on 100 imported labourers who had recently arrived in Dongola and who were “Westerners”.<sup>50</sup> Being “Westerners”, he added, they were

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41 Letter from Buchanan to Nūr, 17 January 1944, SAD 797/6/13. Meanwhile, resident cultivators had to sell barley or wheat to the government in order to be allowed to buy sugar at the same price, 1/20 of a sack for each sack of cereals they sold (Letter from Buchanan to Nūr, 17 January 1944, SAD 797/6/13).

42 Letter from Nūr to Buchanan, 2 December 1943, SAD 797/5/145.

43 Letter from Buchanan to Laing, 21 February 1943, SAD 797/5/35.

44 Letter from Buchanan to Crawford, 1 May 1943, SAD 797/5/73.

45 Letter from Buchanan to Vicars-Miles, 23 August 1944, SAD 797/6/117.

46 Letter from Crawford to Buchanan, 14 May 1943, SAD 797/5/84.

47 Letter from Buchanan to Nūr, 5 June 1943, SAD 797/5/91.

48 Letter from Crawford to Buchanan, 13 January 1944, SAD 797/6/6.

49 Letter from Nūr to Buchanan, 20 May 1943, SAD 797/5/86-87; also, letter from Nūr to Buchanan, 14 June 1943, SAD 797/5/93.

50 This is a term used by Central and Northern Sudanese for people from West of the Nile, especially from Darfur and Kordofan.

“always [a] men[a]nce to public security so [he] arranged a permanent Police Post (2 men) at Borgeig”.<sup>51</sup>

Buchanan reacted with a political gamble while Governor Crawford was on leave, speculating on the fact that Deputy Governor Evans might reconsider. He asked Zubayr al-Malik, the head of the local government in Dongola, to prepare to take workers from among “[t]hose who have no other work” and “[o]ne able-bodied man from every Sagia in nearby communities” to work for the scheme for an entire month, subject to Zubayr’s approval.<sup>52</sup> After some hesitation,<sup>53</sup> Evans offered to go against Crawford and gave assurances that the conscription of labour was considered by the Civil Secretary to be possible for ten days a year under section 10 (1) (j) of the Local Government (Rural Areas) Ordinance. He argued that the work was “for the benefit of the community”, given that the function of the Borgeig Scheme was to be a safeguard during low flood years.<sup>54</sup> This illustrates how the definition of the scheme’s purpose to provide local food security was linked with the option of coercing labour.

At the same time, the colonial apparatus had its own legal and hierarchical logic, which had to be adhered to by the officials. For instance, Buchanan referred to prosecutions according to the 1939 Defence of the Sudan Ordinance<sup>55</sup> when he threatened private pump scheme owners who had entered into contracts to provide wood but who “relaxed or refused to work or ask[ed] for a higher price than that fixed by the Government”.<sup>56</sup> What sounded like a matter of a standing order had to be reviewed by the Labour Board, however, as his Acting Governor E.G. Evans had pointed out in the discussion on conscripted labour.<sup>57</sup>

It is important to note that the actual work – and the subsequent cultivation – was mostly carried out by people who lived nowhere near Kerma. Indeed, the completion report by F.H.R. Finlay, Assistant Divisional Engineer in the Projects Division of the Sudan Irrigation Department, who was in charge of designing and implementing the canal structure, listed four “sources” of labour for digging the canals in Table VIII: “Saidis” (*ṣa’ādī*, free workers from Upper Egypt, mostly from

51 Letter from Nūr to Buchanan, 20 May 1943, SAD 797/5/86-87.

52 Letter from Buchanan to Zubayr, 19 May 1943, SAD 797/5/85.

53 Letter from Evans to Buchanan, 11 June 1943, SAD 797/5/92.

54 Letter from Evans to Buchanan, 18 June 1943, SAD 797/5/95.

55 This law allowed the country’s executive to enact emergency measures in case of threats to national security. It was upheld and amended – rather than abolished – not only after the war but also after independence in 1956.

56 Letter from Nūr to Buchanan, 2 December 1943, SAD 797/5/145.

57 Letter from Evans to Buchanan, 11 June 1943, SAD 797/5/92. It must be noted that the Labour Board’s influence strongly fluctuated under colonial rule and was fully empowered only after 1945 (Cross 1997: 232–233).

the neighbouring Aliab scheme), “Departmental Labour” (workers recruited by the Irrigation Department from other regions), “Labour from A.&F.” (workers recruited by the Agriculture and Forestry Department from other schemes) and “Conscript Labour” (local and non-local).<sup>58</sup> The extent to which these workers belonged to “the community” can only be interpreted if community is meant in a much wider sense: the district, the province, the nation, or the empire. Although what constituted a common benefit at any of these levels is debatable, an individual’s decision not to take up a specific kind of work was treated as being due to ignorance and/or laziness. The paternalistic tone of the debate betrays a sense of entitlement to labour that ignored the possibility that contractual shortcomings, unattractive conditions, or simply a lack of interest in or doubts about this specific project may have been behind “unwilling labour”, not to speak of the possible environmental concerns that were, as we have seen, not unfounded.<sup>59</sup>

## 2.4 Harvest Beneficiaries

This trend towards coercion continued when cultivation began. While the Buchanan papers say little about day-to-day interactions regarding the Borgeig Scheme, a disregard for the farmers’ subsistence or even profit, combined with the presumption of deciding what was good for people, clearly emerges from remarks Crawford made when planning it: wheat would be part of the “great war effort”,<sup>60</sup> and by the 1942/43 season all wheat was expected to be acquired by the government and compensated for by imports of sorghum (*durrah*),<sup>61</sup> as sorghum was “good enough” for the population.<sup>62</sup> In fact, he made his priorities clear when saying that “[w]hen I have got the wheat seed out of them [the people of Meroë-Dongola district] they can go to hell and make their own arrangements”.<sup>63</sup>

It was now Buchanan who took the side of exchanges rather than extraction; he had already expressed the opinion that purchases would be preferable, as the

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<sup>58</sup> The report is held at the National Records Office (NRO) in Khartoum, File 11-1-22. I thank Abū Bakr al-Khayrī for sharing a copy. On Finlay see also [https://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ark/32150\\_s1k3569437r.xml](https://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ark/32150_s1k3569437r.xml).

<sup>59</sup> The colonial discourse blasted resistance to “orders” in this regard as “ignorance of the natives, their rooted objection to the introduction of any innovation and their confidence to their own superior wisdom” (“Kerma Basin” from 1912 Annual Report, SAD 112/1/35).

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Crawford to Buchanan, 17 February 1942, SAD 797/4/22.

<sup>61</sup> Letter from Crawford to Buchanan, 25 February 1942, SAD 797/4/28.

<sup>62</sup> Letter from Crawford to Buchanan, 17 February 1942, SAD 797/4/22.

<sup>63</sup> Letter from Crawford to Buchanan, 21 May 1942, SAD 797/4/34.

use of coercive measures was already at a high level.<sup>64</sup> In response to Crawford's second remark, he wrote back in protest that it amounted to "pure fascism" because from his point of view, cultivators had to be compensated for the crops that were taken from them so that they would not starve or be left "entirely in the hands of parasitic and lazy merchants".<sup>65</sup>

This correspondence illustrates once again how administrative argumentation, styles, and priorities could differ significantly between colonial officials, but apart from being another variation of the shifting boundaries between the purpose and benefit of production, and between local ("cultivators") and global ("war") interests, it also raises the wider question of the extent to which specific people and the food they produced were merely instrumental to lives other than their own. It is worth taking another brief look at the context of the scheme at this point in order to highlight the fact that the dynamics that potentially led to coercive pressure – by limiting the available options – were related not only to direct administration-tenant relations under war conditions, but also to the political economic framework within which crops were produced thereafter.

## 2.5 The Enduring Power of the Local Aristocracy

The Annual Report of the Sudan Government noted for 1948 that "[a] locally appointed farm board consisting of leading cultivators under[took] the day-to-day management of the scheme" (Sudan Government 1950b: 164). I will argue here that both "appointed" and "leading" are loaded terms that implicitly refer to government-subject relations marked by politically bolstered Native Administration structures.

When the Borgeig Scheme was first mentioned in the Sudan Government's Annual Report for 1942–1944, a farm board of this kind was already part of its administration, and was still intended at the time "to be assimilated gradually into local government administration" (Sudan Government 1950a: 62, 131). However, the status quo was the other way round, as the local government, the former Native Administration, already dominated both the administration and agricultural production of the scheme and of trade in the region.

When C.B. Tracey took over as Governor of the Northern Province in 1944, he planned an inaugural tour in October with a stop at Borgeig on 15 October.<sup>66</sup> His visit

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<sup>64</sup> Letter from Buchanan to Crawford, 1 February 1942, SAD 797/4/13.

<sup>65</sup> Letter from Buchanan to Crawford, 25 May 1942, SAD 797/4/35.

<sup>66</sup> Tour Plan, 9 September 1944, SAD 797/6/136.

included a tour of the Kerma prison camp and the scheme, which began at Laing's house at the landing site. The scheme's Omda and the Farm Board he headed were intended to be present.<sup>67</sup> The Borgeig Scheme's Omda was 'Abbās Muḥammad. He had been proposed as Omda in November 1942,<sup>68</sup> and the decision was finalised in late December. He was the brother of Urṣud al-Malik and "half-brother of the present old Omda (Sh. Mohd. Mohd. Bey)" who had been in charge of the northern part of the Kerma [Sileim] Basin up to then.<sup>69</sup> This choice created a minor conflict, as the older Omda, who had a feud with his half-brothers, considered that the position should be his.<sup>70</sup> Accordingly, as suggested by Buchanan, Governor Crawford communicated in a letter to the head of the local government in Dongola, Zubayr al-Malik, that the appointed candidate was age-appropriate, while the old Omda was to remain in his position, which would be made more "important" because of the need for forest control.<sup>71</sup>

This brief outline of the most important positions in the area's local government illustrates a situation in which the local aristocracy, the al-Malik family, continued to hold "all political positions of the Native Administration in the Northern part [. . .] which coincides with the boundaries of their grandfathers' kingdom [. . .] until that administration was abolished in 1969/70" (Omer 1985: 17). Indeed, they did not just dominate general administrative functions: the status of these local government representatives was also reinforced by the favourable treatment they received in trade policies, especially through their participation in the Dongola Traders Board, intertwining local government with trade structures.<sup>72</sup> The trade board worked both as a profit-oriented venture and as a tool to implement the government's rationing policies during the war. Both positions – as government agents and as traders – also reinforced each other, for instance through the District Commissioner's insistence that the provision of retail licences to sell rationed goods should be made in consultation with the Omdas.<sup>73</sup>

This was embedded in the more general strategy of the colonial government to co-opt specific Sudanese leaders, or those whom it wished to be promoted as such, a process that also entailed personal likes and dislikes: Buchanan, for instance,

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67 Tour Plan, 9 September 1944, SAD 797/6/136.

68 Letter from Buchanan, 17 November 1942, SAD 797/4/83.

69 The rest of the basin was organized into branches, which were headed by branch presidents. The Argo Branch was led from December 1943 by Muḥammad Ḥamad al-Malik, the brother of Zubayr al-Malik.

70 Letter from Buchanan to Crawford, n.d., SAD 797/4/97.

71 Letter from Crawford to Zubayr, n.d., SAD 797/4/98.

72 Until 1943, the board was under the sub-Mamur Nūr 'Uthmān. Da'ūd 'Abd al-Laṭīf took over from him in June 1943 (letter from Buchanan to Nūr, 5 June 1943, SAD 797/5/91).

73 Letter from Buchanan to Zubayr, 27 January 1944, SAD 797/6/26.

saw the need to fill Omda positions with the better-educated in order to exchange the “prehistoric type” with one that was “at one with the ‘intelligentsia class’”.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, he came to distrust the established merchants of Dongola and elsewhere, who were “very much inclined to intrigue and to misinterpret even your best motives”.<sup>75</sup>

The involvement of the local aristocracy in governmental pump scheme boards was an expansion of not only their previous role as Native Administration leaders in land registration procedures, but also their favoured access to capital, which they invested in private pump schemes, such as the farms of the al-Malik family around Dongola (Niblock 1987: 54). This privilege went back to positive discrimination by Anglo-Egyptian officials, who had exempted them from the prohibition against private investment in pump irrigation during the 1920s and 1930s (Serels 2013: 168). Subsequently, “the differential access to new irrigation technologies was turning some impoverished cultivators into the tenants of a small group of indigenous elites” (Serels 2013: 169). As a result, the public administration, private production, and trading of grain was dominated by the same local aristocracy, who defined the political economic context in which the tenants of the Borgeig Scheme found themselves.

After the war, an increasing internal and external drive towards Sudanisation was taken up by these same elites, who demanded preferential access to resources the colonial state had seized in the name of the war effort (Serels 2013: 171). In fact, it was again Zubayr al-Malik who became one of three representatives for the Northern Province on the Advisory Council for Northern Sudan, which was formed as early as 1943, marking the colonial government’s attempt to organise “previous forms of collaboration” with “tribal leaders, merchants and moderate educated groups” (Abushouk 2010: 215–216) against the more radical pro-independence movement.

### 3 Conclusion

This chapter recounts some of the early developments of the Borgeig Scheme, a government pump scheme that was founded in 1942 and still exists today. It has used insights gained from private and public colonial documents to discuss some

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74 Letter from Buchanan to Charles Stanley-Baker, Civil Secretary Office, 21 November 1942, SAD 797/4/88.

75 Letter from Buchanan to Ramadan Eff., incoming Mamur in Dongola, 20 January 1945, SAD 797/7/18.

of the aspects of labour organisation and governance that started to develop in the scheme. Heeding calls to engage more deeply with the inner workings of colonial bureaucracies, the chapter is based on an analysis of a specific archival collection, the Buchanan papers at the Sudan Archive in Durham, which represents the correspondence between mid- and high-level officials in the district in which the scheme was located.

The Borgeig Scheme was a radical socio-environmental transformation that was initiated to cover multiple kinds of “benefit” during the Second World War, mostly as a contribution to both the war effort and local food security. As a result, distribution measures related two staple crops, wheat and sorghum, in new ways to different populations, at the same time activating older structures for regulating production and trade and also creating new ones. Building on a colonial hierarchy enhanced by wartime legislation, the recruitment of labour for this purpose was anything but the clear-cut implementation of official orders, as with few exceptions the “local population”, who were ostensibly the main beneficiaries of the scheme, failed to engage with it during these early years. At the same time, the initial structure of the scheme’s administration confirmed rather than challenged the collusion of colonial administrators with politically favoured agrarian elites through land and trade policies.

Food production has been considered here as the reorganisation of labour to produce organic materials pertaining to the needs of human nutrition. This means not only transforming environments – in this case, for instance, deforestation, levelling fields, and irrigation – but also defining the specific benefits and how they are to be attained. Both imply a combination of decision-making and enforcement, which has been observed here as the variable application of persuasion and coercion to engage in specific kinds of transformative and productive labour.

If persuasion is understood as a non-violent influence on choice in the face of several options – with coercion as its violent counterpart – political measures will necessarily be a combination of both, and the source material reveals not only differing opinions among officials as to what combination would be preferable in interaction with whom, but also a situation in which limitations on both the persuasion and coercion of the resident population “forced” the inclusion of others, such as prisoners, whose choices were already limited because of their confinement. In fact, additional organisational efforts had to be made even then in the form of a previously unplanned camp to “contain” their agency.

This hints at the underlying uncertainty on whose benefit this work was to be done for. Its presumptuous pre-definition by officials as being “for their own benefit” was employed both as a justification for the persuasive element of recruiting the “local population”, for instance by making preferential payments, and as a good reason for increased coercion. However, the choice was complicated by the



question of who was better able to achieve the desired outcome, and what level of persuasion and/or coercion would lead to it.

My analysis reveals another shift in the boundaries here, between internal and external. The war effort itself might already be perceived as the application of a maximum degree of “internal” – a purportedly shared interest in the Empire’s endurance – but whether such an interest was shared or not was not instrumental to the debate between administrators. Rather, it was the status and extent of the local population’s food security that was of variable importance, and the district’s main decision-makers – the District Commissioner and the Governor – differed markedly in their assessment of what relationship between internal and external needs in this sense was acceptable.

The correspondence reflects a limited understanding of the variable composition and socio-economic structure of the population, with its focus on interactions with its ostensible representatives, namely the local aristocracy, first dubbed the Native Administration, and then local government. The official discourse fluctuated between a presumed patchwork of local communities whose energy could be harnessed through their “leaders”, and the “free” labour and trade market colonial officials both worried about and exploited. However, the scheme also changed the composition of the resident population and formed new social categories and groupings, such as “tenant of an agricultural scheme”. As a result, the emerging productive and residential community differed significantly from that defined in the colonial design, and shifted the meaning of “local” food security – or “benefit for the community” – in the process.

While the case study illustrates an emerging relationship between political economy and environmental transformations in late colonial Sudan, its place in Sudan’s social history can only be hinted at based on the material presented. The Second World War imposed exceptional conditions, but the associated “war effort” stood in for the existence of externally defined priorities and needs to which food production – or labour in general – was subjected. The principle of subjecting demands for labour to externally defined priorities seems to be confirmed by the close relationship between the scheme’s initial administration and the prevailing political elites, namely the Sudanese local aristocracy that dominated both Native Administration and representative positions in the increasingly “Sudanised” state apparatus, as exemplified by the al-Malik family.

However, the Borgeig Scheme evolved partly during and also after the Second World War from an ad hoc economic measure into a development instrument: with waning demands for the war effort, transforming modes of production to comply with “better” agricultural practices came to the foreground. The developing self-administration, through a tenant-elected Farm Board, also promised increasing autonomy when deciding what to produce and how. Indeed, the character of the

scheme changed in the decades that followed from centralised production planning of cooperative structures to individual enterprises, with fluctuating directions from and effects of government intervention.<sup>76</sup> If one looks at the broader context of agricultural development, therefore, the scheme can be considered either as an antipode, marginal note, or waning bulwark vis-à-vis the private – but often politically bolstered – large-scale investments that have taken over more and more tracts of land in independent Sudan.

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<sup>76</sup> This transformation is the topic of an ongoing research project on the Borgeig Scheme led in cooperation with a resident historian whose family has included tenants since the inaugural years.

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Harry Cross

# Chapter 15

## Industrial Relations in a British Bank in 1960s Sudan

### Introduction

This chapter examines labour relations in the British bank Barclays Dominion, Colonial & Overseas (DCO) in Sudan.<sup>1</sup> Although Barclays DCO had been in Sudan since 1925, the first union among its staff was only formed in 1964. I attempt to understand why bank staff did not participate in the first wave of unionisation in Sudan between 1946 and 1958, only for there to be a marked upswing in labour militancy among these same workers in the late 1960s. Barclays DCO was nationalised in Sudan in 1970, so this chapter covers events over a short period of only six years.

As its name suggests, Barclays DCO was a supremely imperial institution, and it had entered Sudan when the territory was under British administration. After 1956, however, it no longer operated in Sudan under the aegis of an imperial political authority that would ensure economic, political and regulatory conditions that favoured its model of multinational finance. To secure the continuing success and expansion of its local operations, the bank had to forge and maintain close working relationships with Sudanese public authorities, local businesses – and its own staff. Although the British managers of Barclays DCO frequently regretted labour organising by their staff, they also embraced the formalisation and bureaucratisation of labour relations as a means of effectively managing discontent and preventing industrial action.

Existing historical literature on white-collar labour in Africa emphasises how the categories of locally-recruited salaried office workers that were created by colonial economies, although small demographically, “functioned as intermediaries between the (post)colonial state and the population” (van den Bersselaar 2019: 380;

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to express my thanks to my supervisors Justin Willis and Cherry Leonardi and to the editors of this book for their invaluable feedback on successive drafts of this chapter. I also wish to thank the *Centre d'études et de documentation économiques, juridiques et sociales* (CEDEJ) in Khartoum, which hosted me when I was in Sudan and which supports a lively community of scholars and researchers. Finally, my thanks go to the archivists at Barclays Bank, Manchester; the London Metropolitan Archives, London; and the National Records Office, Khartoum.

also, Lawrance, Osborn and Roberts 2006). Messenger and clerical staff in Barclays DCO were frequent points of contact between a British multinational corporation and its local clients – not to mention the local agents of the other multinationals that made up a major part of the bank's business. In the 1960s, bank employees began to organise around an awareness that their interface with bank users constituted a bottleneck that could be exploited by industrial action, or the threat thereof. The contribution of this chapter to the wider historiography on labour in Sudan and Africa is its focus on labour relations in an “imperial” firm after independence, as both employers and employees navigated changing economic, political and regulatory environments. Significantly, I reveal how formal labour relations blended with a particular form of elite politics within postcolonial societies, as certain categories of employees sought to protect the purchasing power of their salaries from the threat of domestic inflation on the one hand, and to become a new economic elite by replacing expatriates in senior managerial positions on the other. I explore the nationalistic aspects of staff demands, as Muslim Sudanese used their union to seek promotions at the expense of Greeks and Copts, notwithstanding the fact that many of the staff from each of these communities were members of the same union. The gendered composition of the bank's workforce was also crucial. Barclays DCO increased its dependence on female labour in the 1960s to cut its salary bill, but female staff subsequently unionised and secured paid maternity leave, a novel concession by the bank in Sudan.

I begin this chapter by placing industrial relations in Barclays DCO in the context of the bank's evolving local business strategy and the history of labour relations in Sudan. I analyse them in order to demonstrate how they shaped the timing of unionisation in the bank, the nature of the demands and the strategies adopted by the bank's staff. I then explore successive episodes of labour organisation and agitation in the bank. In addition to focusing on actions taken by the bank's unions, these sections also examine the employer's response.

A comment is required on sources. This chapter relies on the archives of Barclays International (formerly Barclays DCO), which are kept in Manchester, UK by its parent company, Barclays Bank. These sources provide valuable insights into the strategies and tensions within the bank's hierarchy with regard to local labour relations. However, they were generated by the bank's British management, primarily in correspondence between the local head office in Khartoum and the general managers in London. There are evident biases within these sources: British managers were largely disdainful of union organising and believed that their employees were being manipulated by political radicals; however, they were also willing to concede arguments concerning the rising costs of living. A further disadvantage of these sources is that they exclude the voices of the unionised workers themselves: evidence of their strategic ingenuity is clear in the archival record, but, sadly, their own words with which to describe their struggles with their employers are almost entirely absent.

## Barclays DCO: The Ultimate Imperial Bank in Sudan

Barclays DCO was founded in 1925 when the British domestic bank Barclays acquired three British banks specialising in overseas activities, namely, the Colonial Bank, the National Bank of South Africa, and the Anglo-Egyptian Bank. Barclays combined these three institutions to create a single overseas subsidiary, Barclays Dominion, Colonial & Overseas (DCO), which inherited offices in the Caribbean, West Africa, South Africa, the British Mediterranean and the Nile Valley (Crossley & Blandford 1975: 1–19). The inequitable and imperial distribution of global capital is highlighted by the fact that a British domestic bank was the parent company to a subsidiary whose operations covered so vast an area. British multinational banking in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had been characterised by small geographically specialised institutions operating branches in a particular region with a head office in the City of London (Jones 1993: 13–62). However, the creation of Barclays DCO was part of a new trend towards consolidation, as the collapse of international trade and finance during the First World War had undermined the viability of small, specialised institutions. Barclays DCO was the largest multinational bank to emerge from this period of consolidation in British finance, and its parent company, Barclays, had the largest overseas investment of any domestic British bank. This made Barclays DCO the ultimate imperial bank, servicing the financial rhythms of industry, trade and finance across Britain's formal and informal empires, and extracting a share of surpluses in return.

The Anglo-Egyptian Bank, one of the banks acquired by Barclays, had been present in Sudan since 1902, shortly after the country had been conquered and placed under British rule as the “Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of Sudan” in 1899. Barclays DCO inherited a commercial banking monopoly in the Condominium from the Anglo-Egyptian Bank, and Barclays DCO would remain Sudan's largest bank throughout its presence in that country (Cross 2021: 45). In 1925, political independence for Sudan would have appeared both to the local managers of Barclays DCO and the bank's metropolitan investors at best as a distant prospect. The bank pursued an “imperial” business model that relied on public institutional deposits as liquid counterparts to lending to fellow multinational corporations, primarily for import and export financing. In Sudan, these corporations included British-owned trading firms such as Gellatly Hankey, Mitchell Cotts and Sudan Mercantile and, after the Second World War, the Anglo-Dutch Shell Oil Company and the West German engineering firm Philipp Holzmann (Cross 2021: 45–47, 168).

For its staff, the bank relied on a cadre of loyal British employees who circulated between its different territorial divisions, fulfilling core banking and mana-



gerial responsibilities. These staff received their training in-house and would typically remain with the bank throughout their careers, and, if fortunate, they would gradually rise through its ranks. With time, the bank also filled an increasing proportion of junior and intermediary positions with local hires (Jones 1993: 169–172, 218–219).

Barclays DCO's commercial banking monopoly was broken in 1949 when the British- and French-owned Ottoman Bank opened in Khartoum. Further new entrants arrived in the 1950s as British executive and legislative powers were progressively devolved to self-governing Sudanese entities (see Johnson 1998 for a detailed account of this process). Although this devolution was viewed as an unfavourable development by metropolitan investors in Great Britain, many non-British investors saw an opportunity to enter a market that had once been a jealously guarded imperial preserve. The French bank *Credit Lyonnais* and the Egyptian *Banque Misr* both entered Sudan in 1953. They were joined by the Palestinian-Jordanian *Arab Bank* in 1956, and by the *State Bank of Ethiopia* in 1958 (Cross 2021: 59–92).

Barclays DCO responded to this increased competition with a programme of branch expansion in a bid to remain the foremost domestic bank in Sudan. In 1949, the bank had not added to the four branches it had inherited from the *Anglo-Egyptian Bank* in 1925, but, by 1956, it operated 15 out of the 31 bank branches in Sudan, increasing to 23 out of 57 in 1970. The *Ottoman Bank* and *Banque Misr* followed Barclays DCO with strategies for provincial branch expansion, but they lacked the local resources and first mover advantage to expand to the same extent, and their progress was slower. Meanwhile, *Credit Lyonnais*, the *Arab Bank* and the *State Bank of Ethiopia* eschewed branch expansion and focused on corporate accounts held at their principal offices in Khartoum (Cross 2021, which analyses the geographic distribution of branches and banking business in detail).

After 1956, political independence transformed the financial and regulatory environment for Barclays DCO in Sudan. First, new banks were founded and incorporated in the country, which was a novel development. These included three state investment banks for agriculture, industry and real estate, established between 1959 and 1967; the *Sudan Commercial Bank*, founded in 1959, which was owned by a consortium of Sudanese businessmen; and *Al-Nilein Bank*, which was established in 1964 as a joint subsidiary between *Credit Lyonnais* and the Sudanese central bank. The creation of the central *Bank of Sudan* in 1960 prompted a gradual withdrawal of large-scale public deposits from commercial banks to the new central bank, requiring the former to seek new sources of funds. In 1961, Barclays DCO launched a savings campaign that pursued the small- and medium-scale deposits of private Sudanese. The *Ottoman Bank* and *Al-Nilein* launched savings campaigns in 1962 and 1966 respectively, but Barclays DCO's was the most successful, and it was

the only bank in Sudan to maintain a surplus of deposits over lending throughout the 1960s (Cross 2021: 157–169).

Barclays DCO's share of commercial banking deposits declined from nearly 100 per cent in 1949 to 71 per cent at the time of Sudan's independence, and to 44 per cent in 1970 (Cross 2021: 246). This indicates not only that competitors were successful in securing a share of the local market, but also that Barclays DCO maintained its leading position with almost as many deposits at the end of this period as the rest of the commercial banking sector combined. Credit Lyonnais briefly overtook Barclays DCO shortly after independence, but otherwise the British bank remained Sudan's largest provider of finance. In short, Barclays DCO remained the leading bank in a competitive sector during the first fourteen years after Sudanese independence. It did so by expanding its provincial branch network from the 1950s and turning towards small- and medium-sized depositors in the 1960s. Through its branch network, depositor base and staffing Barclays DCO had more contact with individual Sudanese than any of its rivals.<sup>2</sup> The changing composition of the bank's local staff, as it expanded in line with its growth in branches and clients, is analysed in the next section.

## Labour Relations in Colonial Sudan

When the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of Sudan was established in 1899, there was almost no local working class that survived by purchasing consumption goods with wages received from the sale of labour power (the army was the important exception). Furthermore, British officials had no desire to create such a class, which they believed would erode “traditional” modes of existence and prove to be socially destabilising (Cross 1997: 218–219). When manual labour was required for infrastructure projects in transport, irrigation and urban development, therefore, officials turned to labour imported from elsewhere in Africa and the British Empire (Cross 1997: 225–226). Simultaneously, “labour pools” emerged in neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Khartoum and Omdurman, where recent, and often seasonal, arrivals in these cities lived in the hope of finding employment in the waged and salaried economy created by the Condominium. Ahmad Sikainga (1996) highlights the importance of recently freed or escaped enslaved people in the population of these neighbourhoods. In the absence of an historical process of proletarianisation that compelled workers to accept the contractual terms dictated by employers, public and private employers in Sudan sought alternative mechanisms to ensure

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<sup>2</sup> With the exception of the Agricultural Bank.

the discipline of their workers. Accordingly, Sikainga (1996) identifies the frequent toleration of – or active recourse to – coercive measures, making the passage from enslaved to free labour under the Condominium an often murky and gradual process rather than a decisive break.

The creation of the Condominium also produced a need for local clerical staff in the Sudan Government and the local offices of multinational corporations. These positions, which required specific technical competencies, were filled primarily by members of the resident non-Sudanese or non-Muslim communities in Sudan. These included Greeks, Syrians, Armenians and Egyptian Copts, who migrated to Sudan in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to run small businesses and fill positions such as these (Chaldeos 2017). In contrast to the coercive measures frequently used to enforce compliance among manual workers, employers ensured the cooperation of these workers with generous salaries, and they enjoyed a high status. Initially, Barclays DCO recruited overwhelmingly from these communities for junior and intermediate positions in the bank.

Peter Cross describes the period before the Second World as the “pre-history” of the Sudanese labour movement (1997: 223). To be sure, there was labour resistance during this period, for example in the form of wildcat strikes and other short-term actions – including among clerical workers (Cross 1997: 236) – or the “passive” withdrawal of labour as migrant workers turned to other livelihoods (Cross 1997: 236–237; Sikainga 1996; Vezzadini 2015: 234–254). In contrast, the decade or so after 1945 witnessed a surge in “active” labour organising in the workplace and the creation and development of trade unions as lasting organisational structures seeking to represent and mobilise their members (Fawzi 1957; Cross 1997: 237). I account for this turning point by arguing that a critical number of Sudanese lived permanently within waged and salaried economies, particularly in urban areas, without recourse to other forms of sustenance. This contrasted with the situation before the 1940s, when the local demand for manual labour had been met to a great extent by seasonal and migrant workers (Galal-al-Din 1980: 428). Evidence of this can be found by examining the population of the greater Khartoum conurbation (Khartoum, Omdurman, and Khartoum North/Bahri), which both fluctuated and decreased significantly during the depressed 1930s. This suggests a mobile population capable of (re)turning to non-waged and agricultural forms of livelihood when waged work dried up. Conversely, after 1945 and the full economic mobilisation of the Second World War, greater Khartoum entered a period of uninterrupted demographic expansion, with natural growth now ensuring the continuous increase of the city’s population (El-Sayed 1976). As individuals were born, raised and supported families in the monied urban economy, they were almost wholly dependent on the purchasing power of their wages over consumer goods for their sustenance. This permanent vested

stake in pay and conditions in this economy prompted an upswing in labour organising in Sudan.

Although employers in the Condominium resented militancy among their workers, they were also able to accept that trade unions were useful structures for managing potential grievances and negotiating compromises, thereby ensuring the uninterrupted flow of the labour process (Fawzi 1957; Curless 2013). Legislation allowing the formation and registration of trade unions was passed in 1946, and by 1952 ninety-nine were in existence (Vezzadini 2017: 81). To be sure, waged and salaried workers remained a small proportion of the Sudanese population, although they were of great importance in the urban centres and cotton-growing regions. One contemporary estimate calculated that there were between 150,000 and 200,000 waged and salaried workers in Sudan in 1951, out of a population of more than 8.5 million. Astonishingly, as many as half of these workers, or possibly more, may have been unionised (Vezzadini 2017: 91). By exploiting bottlenecks in production, transport and the supply of trained labour, Sudanese workers secured favourable pay settlements in this period (Curless 2013: fn3). Sudan's union movement was further strengthened by its relationship with the powerful Sudanese Communist Party (SCP), whose politics promoted pride in the historical role of the manual working class (Taha 1976: 81–82). Although workers with access to waged and salaried economies enjoyed a relatively privileged material existence in Sudan, this always had to be defended from capital recouping wage concessions through price increases, or deteriorating working conditions.

Despite the gradual normalisation of formal industrial relations, governments still made ready recourse to coercive measures to overcome labour militancy. These included both British officials in the Condominium, who maintained a ban on the SCP and used covert surveillance measures against it, and the Sudanese parliamentary regime after independence, which used the police to break a strike by tenant farmers on the White Nile in 1956. This resulted in over five hundred arrests and the death by suffocation of 194 unionised workers in a crowded gaol in Jouda (Ali 1983). While elected Sudanese politicians did not refrain from using coercive measures to assault union organising by manual workers, they nevertheless pursued policies to support Sudanese in salaried clerical positions. This took the form of a policy of “Sudanisation”, which sought to replace Britons, Egyptians and other nationalities in the public administration with Sudanese hires. In fact, the Condominium government had practiced an undeclared Sudanisation over many decades.

In Sudan, as in other imperial territories, the public administration was growing in size, and this created a need for more staff in junior and intermediate positions (van den Bersselaar 2019: 389). As formal education institutions were producing Sudanese with the requisite skills and training for these roles, the proportion of

Sudanese employed in the expanding Condominium government increased from 37 per cent in 1920 to 86 per cent in 1948 (Sudan Government 1950: 4). Such a transformation had a clear economic logic, as Sudanese were remunerated at lower levels than Britons, Greeks or Copts in comparable positions. Sudanese governments after independence also advocated Sudanisation in the private sector by asking multinational corporations to appoint Sudanese to increasingly senior positions. Although governments could not control private appointments directly, the granting of visas gave them a powerful lever of influence.

## Labour in Barclays DCO

A previous section described the growth in branches and depositors of Barclays DCO in the 1950s and 1960s. This drove a corresponding increase in staff numbers. Barclays DCO employed 316 staff in Sudan in 1953, 474 in 1956, 538 in 1964, 650 in 1968 and 710 when it filed its final half-yearly return in 1969.<sup>3</sup> As with the public administration, this was accompanied by an undeclared Sudanisation, as junior and intermediate positions filled by local hires expanded faster than the number of senior posts filled by Britons.

For a number of reasons, bank employees were typically paid higher salaries than workers in other sectors, and Barclays DCO in Sudan was no different. Banking requires detailed knowledge and significant training, much of which is done in-house (this also applied to local staff in Sudan). This makes the recruitment and training of new staff a costly affair. Nevertheless, banking requires low labour inputs relative to turnover, meaning that bank revenues are only modestly compromised by rising salary costs. As a result, banks typically offer generous employment terms to attract and retain competent staff. Barclays DCO was no exception to this rule, and it was mindful to maintain competitive pay scales relative to other employers in Sudan. This meant that its staff were a local labour aristocracy, being among the best paid of any workers in the country.

Nevertheless, as staff numbers in Barclays DCO expanded in relation to revenue (despite branch expansion, the vast majority of revenue continued to arise from a small number of corporate accounts in Khartoum), the bank sought measures to lower average staff costs. Sudanisation was one such measure, due to the distinct pay scales for “local” and “covenanted” (external) hires, a bureaucratic distinction that sustains racialised pay structures in multinational companies,

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<sup>3</sup> Barclays DCO, Half-Yearly Reports: Sudan (multiple dates), Barclays Bank Archives, Manchester, UK (hereafter BB), 0029.

embassies and non-governmental organisations in Sudan to this day. From at least 1958, the inspection reports produced when the bank's general managers visited Sudan were critical if they believed a branch had too many British staff with respect to its operations.<sup>4</sup> As Sudanese employees in the bank gained experience comparable to that of their non-Sudanese colleagues, they were also appointed to increasingly senior positions, for example as provincial branch managers. The bank's local directors responded both to official pressures for Sudanisation and their own managers' attentiveness to their overall salary bill to reduce their local dependence on external British appointments. The bank employed 23 British staff out of 479 in 1958, but only 14 out of some 700 in 1970.<sup>5</sup> The bank also appointed two local Sudanese directors in 1964 – Naṣr al-Ḥājj 'Alī, the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Khartoum, and 'Abd al-Majīd Aḥmad, a former Minister of Finance (Cross 2021: 221–222).

In 1961, Barclays DCO also began a drive to recruit female staff on the basis that it could pay female labour less than male labour for the same positions. Unlike the racialised pay scales I have described above, which were expressed through the categories of local and covenanted hires, these gendered pay structures were explicitly stated. The number of female staff was reported to the bank's general managers as an entry in its pre-printed half-yearly reports, suggesting that the policy was general, rather than specific to Sudan. The number of female staff employed by Barclays DCO in Sudan rose from 67 out of 492 in 1960 (13.6 per cent, when this figure was first reported), to 93 out of 538 in 1964 (17.3 per cent) and 134 out of 660 in 1968 (20.3 per cent; after this date, the figure was no longer reported).<sup>6</sup> It is not possible from the available archives to identify the religion or names of these women workers, and it may be that they were recruited to a significant extent, and perhaps overwhelmingly, from the Greek and Coptic communities rather than the Muslim Sudanese population, in line with local gendered mores.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Barclays DCO, Mr Law's Visit to the Sudan: Wad Medani Branch, February/March 1958, BB0080/4563.

5 Barclays DCO, Mr Law's Visit to the Sudan: Wad Medani Branch, February/March 1958, BB0080/4563 and *Khartoum News Service*, 29 May 1970. UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, The National Archives, Kew, UK, FCO 39/702. Data on British staff numbers are not available continuously.

6 Barclays DCO, Half-Yearly Reports, BB0029.

7 In 2018, I attended several meetings of the Barclays Retirees' Staff club in Khartoum. I did not meet any Muslim Sudanese women who had worked in banking in this period. I met one female Coptic retiree.

I argue that bank staff did not participate in the first wave of unionisation in Sudan between 1946 and 1958 because they formed a labour aristocracy that enjoyed elite terms of employment. Greek, Coptic and other minority communities were well represented among bank staff in this period, and they may have identified closely with their British expatriate managers in often intimate office environments rather than with an increasingly militant class of Sudanese manual labourers (notably in the railways and agriculture).

In 1958, Sudan's first period of parliamentary rule ended with a coup by senior army officers. Sudan's military regime suspended all trade unions and political organising, and used military and police violence to break the power of organised labour (Kilner 1959: 436). Any legal union organising among bank staff was precluded while these measures remained in place. However, the military period saw the beginning of sizeable public deficits in Sudan to finance a civil war in the South of the country. This drove domestic inflation, which threatened the purchasing power of salary scales in the bank, shaping the contours of labour disputes later in the decade.

## The Messenger Staff Union (1964)

Having examined Barclays DCO and its labour force in the wider context of labour relations in Sudan, I now turn to consider unionisation, negotiations and industrial conflict in the bank from 1964 onwards.

In 1964, Sudan's military government began attempts at gradual liberalisation. These included allowing trade unions to register and dialogue with employers and the government in a corporatist vision of economic development. However, restrictions on unions' rights to industrial action remained in place. Early in 1964, the messenger staff of Barclays DCO in Khartoum and Omdurman registered a union that the local director noted indignantly "now purports to represent the Messenger Staff of the whole territory".<sup>8</sup> Messenger staff were a since-defunct category of banking staff who were responsible for cashing commercial paper by visiting payers and presenting bills handled by banks for their clients. Out of 538 staff employed by Barclays DCO in 1964, 126 were messenger staff.<sup>9</sup> Due to the mobile and social nature of messenger work outside bank premises, Barclays DCO's messenger staff were entirely male, in line with British and Sudanese mores. The messenger union and the local British managers conducted negotiations that the latter

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<sup>8</sup> Barclays DCO, Half-Yearly Report: Sudan, 31 March 1964, BB0029/0079.

<sup>9</sup> Barclays DCO, Half-Yearly Report: Sudan, 31 March 1964, BB0029/0079.

described as “proceeding amicably”, before concluding a three-year agreement in February 1965 with improved pay and conditions.<sup>10</sup>

There are several factors that can explain why messenger staff were the first to unionise in Barclays DCO. First, they required less specialist training for their roles. With their work being categorised as “unskilled”, they received lower pay than clerical staff. Accordingly, messenger staff could identify more readily with the working lives and organising practices of waged and manual workers. Second, they were entirely Sudanese, so they did not have access to the social distinctions practiced by Greek, Coptic and other non-Sudanese and non-Muslim communities. Third, the nature of messenger work outside bank premises reduced this workforce’s interactions with British managers in often close-knit office environments, meaning that there was less occasion for a shared identity between workers and managers to emerge. Similarly, Curless (2013: 813) identifies a lack of socialisation between Sudanese railway staff and their British managers as a factor that precluded a sense of shared interest, thereby driving unionisation in the 1940s. Moreover, unobserved communication and organisation among messenger staff was easier than it was for office-bound clerical workers. The paucity of detail on this first act of unionisation in Barclays DCO reflects the paucity of information in the archival records compared with subsequent disputes.

## The Clerical Staff Union (1966)

This section examines the downfall of Ibrāhīm ‘Abbūd’s military regime (1958–1964) from the perspective of Barclays DCO and its staff. This episode prompted the first participation in organised strike action by staff of the bank. As the legal and political regime in Sudan liberalised and democratised, subsequent years saw a union form among clerical staff of Barclays DCO.

Late in 1964, the military government’s attempts at liberalisation were extended to organising a series of debates at the University of Khartoum seeking solutions to Sudan’s “Southern Question”, namely, the ongoing civil war in Southern Sudan. Opposition politicians rapidly co-opted this platform to denounce political repression in Sudan as a whole, causing the government to suspend the debates and use armed police to break up student meetings that continued in defiance of this ban. On 19 October, a student, Aḥmad al-Qurashī, was killed by a police bullet. His funeral sparked a series of protests in Khartoum against the government, which were joined

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<sup>10</sup> Barclays DCO, Half-Yearly Report: Sudan, 31 March 1965, BB0029/0175.



by protests across the country and a call by professional associations and trade unions for a general strike opposing military rule (Berridge 2015: 18–22).

Barclays DCO initially continued to operate in defiance of the general strike order. As it gained in momentum, the strike forced the closure of the central bank and other commercial banks, not to mention public and private bodies across Sudan. The local director of Barclays DCO, Ian Anderson, reported to London that on Monday 26 October “We had apparently been the only government or commercial concern operating at full strength.”<sup>11</sup> Shortly after this, the bank’s Sudanese staff informed their British managers that they no longer wished to break the strike and come to work, citing fears for their personal safety and that of their families, following threats from revolutionary and strike committees. The local managers acquiesced.<sup>12</sup> Although concerns for personal safety were the only motivation cited by the local director in his letters to London, it is also possible that Sudanese staff sympathised with the aims of the strike in opposing military rule, and British local managers may even have recognised this as exceptional grounds for tolerating strike action by staff. However, an appreciation of this nature was not reported in written communications with the general managers in London, who opposed all grounds for strike action as a matter of policy.<sup>13</sup> This first instance of strike action by bank employees in Sudan emerged from a national political revolution, rather than from discontent regarding terms and conditions in the bank itself.

Under mounting pressure – in which Berridge argues the general strike, rather than protests, were decisive – President ‘Abbūd dissolved the Supreme Council of Armed Forces on 30 October. ‘Abbūd himself resigned on 15 November, and a Transitional National Council oversaw the organisation of parliamentary elections in 1965 (Berridge 2015: 22–23). The return of parliamentary rule prompted a liberalisation of trade union laws and restored the right to strike, albeit under conditions that remained regulated by the law (see below). After 1964, organised labour was held in high regard in Sudan due to its role in ending military rule. Unlike in the 1940s and 1950s, union organising now extended to bank staff in Sudan.

In January 1965, the Union of Male and Female Employees and Workers was formed among the staff of the Ottoman Bank, and registered with the Ministry of

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<sup>11</sup> Ian Anderson, Local Director, Barclays DCO, Khartoum. Summary of Events, 29 October 1964, BB0011/2592.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Anderson, Local Director, Barclays DCO, Khartoum. Summary of Events, 29 October 1964, BB0011/2592.

<sup>13</sup> Ian Anderson, Local Director, Barclays DCO, Khartoum. Summary of Events, 29 October 1964, BB0011/2592.

Labour.<sup>14</sup> It is probable that the Ottoman Bank, like Barclays DCO, had sought to increase its proportion of female employees to lower staff costs, and it is noteworthy that both female and male workers were explicitly recognised in the union's formal appellation. Similarly, the organisation of both workers and employees within a single body contrasted with Barclays DCO, where messenger and clerical staff formed separate unions. The local British managers of the Ottoman Bank were unsuccessful in preventing managers, sub-managers and controllers from joining the union, which subsequently presented demands calling for increased salaries and the Sudanisation of multiple managerial roles, demonstrating a grassroots adoption of a policy that had been advocated by Sudanese governments for over a decade.<sup>15</sup> In May, as negotiations stalled, the union called for strike action. This threat proved effective and an agreement was concluded granting increased pay, and the strike was called off.<sup>16</sup> The case of the Ottoman Bank, demonstrated an alternative model to the separate messenger and clerical unions in Barclays DCO, and the fact that the interests of female workers were pursued through unionisation elsewhere in the banking sector. The scant archival records preclude a more detailed comparison between labour relations in Barclays DCO and the Ottoman Bank, let alone other banks in Sudan, and so the remainder of the chapter will return to focusing on Barclays DCO.

Clerical workers in the Khartoum and Omdurman branches of Barclays DCO first attempted to register a union with the Ministry of Labour in early 1965.<sup>17</sup> However, registration was frustrated by disputes between staff in these cities and the bank's provincial branches, with the latter arguing that they were insufficiently represented in the union's structures.<sup>18</sup> The fact that Barclays DCO operated by far the largest branch network in Sudan appears to have significantly delayed effective union organising and coordination, as it began in the capital city conurbation. The Barclays Bank Staff Trade Union was finally registered in August 1966.

Clerical workers composed the three-quarters of Barclays DCO's staff who were not messengers. Due to the costs of training and replacing these staff and their centrality to the bank's core operations, they wielded a much greater power to disrupt the bank's business and impact its standing with its customers. The union issued a wide-ranging list of demands that included: a forty per cent salary increase; larger bonuses; new calculations of overtime; increased personal loans for staff on

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**14** Ottoman Bank, Minutes of the London Sub-Committee, 17 February 1965. London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA), MS23970/12.

**15** Ottoman Bank, Minutes of the London Sub-Committee, 24 February 1965, LMA/MS23970/12.

**16** Ottoman Bank, Minutes of the London Sub-Committee, 17 May 1965, LMA/MS23970/12.

**17** Barclays DCO, Half-Yearly Report: Sudan, 31 March 1965, BB0029/0175.

**18** Barclays DCO, Half-Yearly Report: Sudan, 31 March 1965, BB0029/0175.

improved terms; increased leave; expanded medical coverage to include dental and optical treatment, as well as coverage for wives and children; paid maternity leave; and the Sudanisation of sub-managers, provincial branch managers, accountants and sub-accountants.<sup>19</sup> As with the staff union of the Ottoman Bank, the government's policy of Sudanisation was adopted by its potential beneficiaries. Furthermore, specific demands highlighted the conditions of female staff, and the fact that male and female employees sought to raise local families with their salaries, which would not have been the case when the bank relied on unattached British males early in their careers to a much greater extent.

In the eyes of the general managers, the local managers' efforts to negotiate with the new union led to several strategic blunders. First, the new local director, Frank Dolling, wrote to all branch managers asking how many of their staff had joined the union and whether the managers themselves intended to do so. The general managers were highly critical of this intelligence-gathering initiative, as they believed it served as an advertisement for the union. Indeed, although no branch manager admitted to being a member of the clerical workers' union, some responded to express interest in a separate managers' union, to the horror of officials in London.<sup>20</sup> A second error in remote coordination occurred when the general managers instructed Dolling to issue the union with details of the bank's clerical pay scales. These had previously been confidential in Sudan, but the management was trying to help the union to articulate demands for the purposes of negotiations, thereby indicating the employer's willingness to encourage formal industrial relations as means of managing labour discontent. However, London then sent a further specification to Khartoum that the top rate of pay for clerical staff should be redacted. The published pay scales would therefore end with the phrase "awarded according to merit", suggesting no upwards salary ceiling. The second communication was unfortunately received too late, and inequities in the maximum salaries available for local and external hires were revealed.<sup>21</sup>

The general managers looked on with alarm as the clerical staff of their Sudanese division unionised rapidly, while a prospective managers' union loomed. The bank dispatched its Assistant Staff Manager, Colin Mellor, from London to Khartoum in September 1966. Mellor's pedigree included experience of labour negotiations for the bank in Ghana.<sup>22</sup> Vezzadini (2017: 85) points to a similar deployment

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<sup>19</sup> Union Demands, August 1966, BB1214/0066.

<sup>20</sup> Unsigned Draft, London, Letter to Collin Mellor, 26 September 1966, BB1214/0066.

<sup>21</sup> General Managers, Barclays DCO, London, Telegram to LHO, Khartoum, 26 September 1966, BB1214/0066.

<sup>22</sup> Julian Wathen, General Manager, Barclays DCO, London, Telegram to LHO, Khartoum, 13 September 1966, BB1214/0067.

of external labour “experts” to Sudan by the British Foreign Office in the 1940s, which was a strategy used both for dispute resolution and the remote control of the officials who were leading negotiations for the Condominium government.

Mellor’s arrival was followed by a succession of practical difficulties. To keep the purpose of his visit secret from the Sudanese authorities, he told border officials at Khartoum Airport that he was visiting for leisure purposes. Accordingly, his visa was stamped with the specification that he could not undertake paid or unpaid employment during his time in the country. Owing to the government’s policy of Sudanisation in the private sector, the bank routinely encountered difficulties in obtaining visas for new external appointments. The local managers of the bank feared that if Mellor violated the terms of his visa, it would make future attempts to secure work visas more difficult still. As a result, the local managers initially excluded Mellor from meetings with the union and insisted that their own meetings with him had to be held outside the bank’s premises. When a manager in London learned of this from Mellor, he commented disdainfully “this seems unnecessary”.<sup>23</sup>

Mellor was finally allowed to access union negotiations, possibly after an intervention from London. Many of these negotiations were conducted on the employer’s side by ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Mūsā, a former civil servant in the Ministry of Labour, who was now contracted by the bank as their Head of Industrial Relations. A new problem presented itself to Mellor: Mūsā and the union conducted most of their negotiations in Arabic, which Mellor did not speak.<sup>24</sup> Once again, there were precedents for this, as Curless (2013: 809) points to British officials’ ignorance of Arabic as a factor that had frustrated dispute resolution with railway workers in the 1940s. Mellor’s ineptitude in the Sudanese context suggests that for London, the purpose of his visit was in fact the remote control of local managers, rather than involvement in the negotiations themselves.

The union was run by a sixteen-member executive, within which the employers identified the union secretary as a probable ringleader. Mellor reported that “He has obviously been well briefed by somebody with Trade Union experience.”<sup>25</sup> The local managers suspected that this person was a partner in a local law firm used by the bank. A British official from Shell Oil informed Barclays DCO that lawyers who were Communist Party members were lending support to the unions. Although this may have reflected the paranoid suspicions of expatriate business

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<sup>23</sup> Annotation on Colin Mellor, Khartoum, Letter to Mr Reynolds, Barclays DCO, London, 22 September 1966, BB1214/0067.

<sup>24</sup> Colin Mellor, Khartoum, Letter to Mr Reynolds, Barclays DCO, London, 30 September 1966, BB1214/0067.

<sup>25</sup> Colin Mellor, Khartoum, Letter to Mr Reynolds, Barclays DCO, London, 30 September 1966, BB1214/0067.

leaders in Sudan, it could also indicate the supporting and coordinating role of one of the most powerful communist parties in Africa and the Middle East within Sudan's labour movement (Ismael 2012).

One of the most delicate issues at stake was the Sudanisation of managerial roles. As an outsider, it quickly dawned on Mellor that senior British staff were not the primary targets of Sudanisation: rather, it was Greeks, Copts and other non-Sudanese and non-Muslims in intermediate and managerial roles.<sup>26</sup> The case of the Copts is significant, as many of them held Sudanese nationality. However, their religion, and often their use of Egyptian dialect, meant they were frequently cast as foreign by Muslim Sudanese, thereby making them targets for Sudanisation.<sup>27</sup> Anti-Coptic discrimination in attitudes and government policy had driven a gradual outflow of the bank's Coptic staff since independence, with many drawing pensions early and emigrating, either to Egypt or countries of European settlement – notably, Australia – where their Christian religion meant that they were favoured by racist immigration policies. Despite the potential for a split in the union, Mellor advised the general managers not to actively seek to encourage antagonism on this question. The managers agreed.<sup>28</sup>

Negotiations were most protracted on the issue of pay. Dolling was willing to offer a 10 per cent rise, but he was instructed by the general managers to offer 3.5 per cent and to move only to 5 per cent.<sup>29</sup> Conversely, upward pressure on the employers' offers came from the agreement signed between the Ottoman Bank and its union in 1965. Barclays DCO did not know the content of this agreement, but wanted to offer the best employment conditions of any bank in Sudan. Accordingly, the general managers instructed Dolling either to match the annual leave offered to staff by the Ottoman Bank, or to exceed it by half a week.<sup>30</sup> Barclays DCO was clearly willing and able to finance generous terms of employment for its staff, provided that it was for reasons of inter-bank competition and not the material concerns of its employees.

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<sup>26</sup> This was known to the local directors, who had reported the point to the general managers earlier in the decade. Barclays DCO, Mr Rodway's visit to Sudan, 20 February/10 March 1961, 31. BB0080/4350.

<sup>27</sup> Colin Mellor, Khartoum, Letter to Mr Reynolds, Barclays DCO, London, 30 September 1966, BB1214/0067.

<sup>28</sup> Colin Mellor, Khartoum, Letter to Mr Reynolds, Barclays DCO, London, 30 September 1966, BB1214/0067.

<sup>29</sup> General Managers, Barclays DCO, London, Letter to Frank Dolling, Local Director, Khartoum, 3 October 1966, BB1214/0067.

<sup>30</sup> General Managers, Barclays DCO, London, Letter to Frank Dolling, Local Director, Khartoum, 3 October 1966, BB1214/0067.

Discussions continued to stall as managers and employees exchanged distant offers and evidence of movements in the cost of living. Negotiations continued into late October, when a strike was threatened that Dolling feared would be widely supported. As a delaying tactic, he now referred the dispute to the Ministry of Labour for mediation. Strike action was illegal while this mediation was ongoing, indicating the legalistic constraints on organised labour that remained under a liberal parliamentary regime.<sup>31</sup> In November, with the mediation still ongoing, the union lowered its initial salary demand from 40 per cent to 20 per cent, while increasing its requested annual bonus from one month's to two months' salary in exchange.<sup>32</sup>

In December 1966, the bank and the union finally concluded negotiations, agreeing on a range of revised terms and conditions. The negotiated terms were enshrined in a Recognition Agreement, and a strike was narrowly avoided. The Agreement recognised the Barclays Bank Staff Trade Union as the representative of clerical workers in the bank, excluding senior staff in positions from sub-accountant upwards, along with personal secretaries and typists working for the local directors and assistant local directors. There was no managers' union. On pay, the bank and the union agreed to a 7.5 per cent rise. Forty days' maternity leave on half pay for married female staff was approved, thereby recognising some material rights of female employees, albeit with a marital stipulation in line with local and British mores. Terms for a Joint Negotiation Council between the union and the bank were formalised, including standing orders and defined areas for discussion. The latter included most terms and conditions but explicitly excluded Sudanisation, pensions and provident funds. There was a three-year freeze on further demands, except for an agreed review of emoluments for cost-of-living increases after eighteen months, in June 1968.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the bank increased salaries for its senior local staff, who had refrained from unionising and who were excluded by the terms of the Recognition Agreement. Early in negotiations, the bank had promised these staff that they would always enjoy better terms of employment if they remained un-unionised. They were given a salary increase of 8 per cent, and the bank's board in London was reassured that "the additional ½% [above the union-secured increase] was approved to show that it was not directly tied to the Union figure and to illustrate that members of the

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<sup>31</sup> Barclays DCO, Khartoum, Telex to General Managers, London, 30 October 1966, BB1214/0067.

<sup>32</sup> Barclays DCO, LHO, Khartoum, Telex to General Managers, London, 15 November 1966, BB1214/0067.

<sup>33</sup> Memorandum of Agreement Between Barclays Bank D.C.O., Khartoum, Sudan and Barclays Bank D.C.O., Clerical Staff Trade Union, 27 December 1967, BB1214/0067.

Management can do better without being Union members.”<sup>34</sup> Needless to say, this formulation actually highlighted how the managerial pay rise *was* directly linked to the increase secured by the Staff Trade Union, in such a way that these senior employees benefited from the organising efforts of their more junior colleagues.

## Renewed Disputes (1968)

This section explores a renewed confrontation between Barclays DCO and its unions in Sudan in 1968. It reveals how domestic inflation caused employees to protest against the rising cost of living, which the bank rapidly acknowledged was grounds for exiting the negotiating framework that had been agreed to in 1966. I also demonstrate how these negotiations were of a different nature from those held in 1966, which were largely internal within the bank, as labour agitation in 1968 was coordinated across the banking sector and employees’ unions more widely. In turn, Barclays DCO coordinated with fellow private employers, most of whom were also its principal customers.

In July 1968, a Workers’ Cadre Committee was formed among government employees. Citing increases in the cost of living, it submitted a demand for a 15 per cent increase in public sector salaries, which was granted. This revision of public pay scales prompted a wave of demands for comparable increases among clerical workers in the private sector, who had historically enjoyed higher salaries than their public-sector counterparts.<sup>35</sup> In October, both the Barclays Bank Staff (clerical) Trade Union and the Messenger Workers’ Union submitted demands for 15 per cent pay increases in line with the public sector. In addition, the clerical union held a full-day strike on 15 October as a show of strength and submitted notice for a further five days of strike action to begin on 28 October. The bank’s local managers described the one-day strike as “generally effective”, albeit with partial service being maintained at a handful of branches.<sup>36</sup>

The bank’s new local director, Mr Longmire, secured an agreement with the general managers “exceptionally” not to deduct strike pay for 15 October.<sup>37</sup> It is not

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<sup>34</sup> Julian Wathen, Barclays DCO, Gracechurch Street, London, Note for Board, January 1967, BB1214/0067.

<sup>35</sup> General Managers, Barclays DCO, Memorandum: Trade Union – Sudan, 16 October 1968, 1. BB1214/0066.

<sup>36</sup> General Managers, Barclays DCO, Memorandum: Trade Union – Sudan, 16 October 1968, 1. BB1214/0066: Addendum, 20 October 1968.

<sup>37</sup> General Managers, Barclays DCO, Memorandum: Trade Union – Sudan, 16 October 1968, 1. BB1214/0066: Addendum, 21 October 1968. Underlining in original.

clear from the archival records whether this demonstration of goodwill was motivated by a desire to maintain a good relationship with staff and thereby expedite a settlement, or an additional element of fear of the impact of a further strike, following the effectiveness of the initial action. Both the local and general managers began to prepare an offer to the union that would address cost-of-living concerns and preclude the need for a strike. Longmire informed the union that he would only negotiate based on proven cost-of-living increases, and not with reference to settlements concluded by the Workers' Cadre Committee.

The employees' unions submitted comparable salary demands in other foreign-owned corporations, and Longmire consequently coordinated the offers he had made with the Sudan Employers' Association, which included a large contingent of expatriate European managers representing multinational corporations among its members. The Association was especially keen for the government to make a public or private statement establishing what it considered to be an acceptable level of wage concessions across the private sector. This imported expectations of public coordination of wages and price policies that existed in Britain and other European economies in this period.<sup>38</sup> Such a policy would prevent spiralling concessions by successive employers. During Barclays DCO's negotiations in 1966, the Minister of Finance, Ḥamza Mīrghanī Ḥamza, had fulfilled this role by privately requesting wage restraint as his government prioritised reductions in domestic demand to protect Sudan's external reserves.<sup>39</sup> However, Ḥamza's government was ousted in 1967, and was replaced by a government that was significantly more pro-labour, not to mention nationalistic and critical of the role of foreign capital in Sudan (Cross 2021: 213–220). In a speech in October 1968 marking the anniversary of the 1964 revolution, which took place during the negotiations between private employers and clerical workers, Sudan's president Ismā'īl al-Azharī stated that private employers should do something for workers on an individual employer basis. This signalled support for high demands by labour, and distanced the government from any coordinated response with employers.<sup>40</sup>

In other contexts, a single employer in a sector convulsed by union demands might push for early settlement with its workers to preclude an upward surge in demands that each incorporated the settlements reached with other employers. However, Barclays DCO as a bank faced a tactical difficulty, in that its fellow corporate employers were not merely colleagues, but also its most important clients.

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**38** General Managers, Barclays DCO, Memorandum: Trade Union – Sudan, 16 October 1968, 1. BB1214/0066, p. 1.

**39** Colin to Mr Reynolds, Barclays DCO, London, 22 September 1966, BB1214/0067.

**40** Local Head Office (LHO), Barclays DCO, Khartoum Telegram to General Managers, 24 October 1968, BB1214/0066.



For this reason, Longmire observed that a generous early settlement by the bank would “cause marked disappointment among other employers including [our] most important customers”.<sup>41</sup>

On 24 October, Longmire communicated an “unsubstantiated report” to London that strike action was planned across the foreign-owned banking sector from 29 October and that Shell Oil in Sudan would also receive a strike notice in the near future. This was clear evidence of coordination among workers across companies and across sectors, which might point to a coordinating role by the Sudanese Communist Party. This further complicated Barclays DCO’s negotiations with its own staff, in case they were “unwilling or unable [to] withdraw threat notwithstanding commencement of negotiations lest this be seen as [a] betrayal of joint pressure [by the] concerted union federation.”<sup>42</sup> The bank believed that the strike it had experienced on 15 October had been a calculated test case for unions in the banking sector.

Longmire informed the clerical union that he would only begin to negotiate terms if the strike notice were withdrawn, and this occurred on 25 October. Longmire then made the opening offer that had been agreed with the general managers, namely a 5 per cent increase in cost-of-living allowances. This was promptly rejected. The union submitted evidence of substantial increases in the cost of living, which Longmire requested time to review until 31 October. On 28 October, the day when strike action had originally been scheduled, notice was given of a five-day strike beginning the next day. By this time, a notice had been issued for a seven-day strike in Shell Oil beginning 2 November.<sup>43</sup> The bank again informed the union that it would only continue negotiations if strike action were withdrawn.

The union withdrew its strike notice the following morning, within hours of its being due to come into effect. This was at the instigation of the Ministry of Labour, which now urged both sides to negotiate towards a settlement. On the same day, a strike notice was issued in the four other foreign-owned banks (the Ottoman Bank, Banque Misr, the Arab Bank and the State Bank of Ethiopia). Conversely, no strike action was called in Sudan’s three state-owned investment banks, or in the Sudan Commercial Bank, which was locally and privately owned. Strikingly, no notice was issued at Al-Nilein, which was 40 per cent foreign-owned by Credit Lyonnais, but was otherwise owned by the Sudanese central bank. This points to a highly nationalist orientation of Sudan’s banking unions, which sought concessions from foreign capital while failing to mobilise Sudanese employees working for Sudanese

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<sup>41</sup> Local Head Office (LHO), Barclays DCO, Khartoum Telegram to General Managers, 24 October 1968, BB1214/0066.

<sup>42</sup> Local Head Office (LHO), Barclays DCO, Khartoum Telegram to General Managers, 24 October 1968, BB1214/0066.

<sup>43</sup> Barclays DCO, Khartoum Telegram to General Managers, 28 October 1968, BB1214/0066.

employers.<sup>44</sup> It has already been demonstrated that Barclays DCO sought to have the best terms of employment of any bank in Sudan, so this strategy by the unions cannot be explained by inferior terms of employment in foreign-owned banks.

As Barclays DCO continued to coordinate with the Employers' Association, the Association concluded that it had significantly underestimated the recent cost-of-living increases. It had initially referred to indices from the International Labour Organization, which even suggested a modest cost-of-living decline in Sudan. However, the employers concluded that these indices reflected the circumstances in 1967, when fiscal austerity by Ḥamza Mirghani Ḥamza had temporarily restrained price inflation. In contrast, a renewed commitment to social expenditure after 1967 had caused inflation to return. The Association believed that employee unions across multiple companies were offering credible evidence that the cost of living had risen by approximately 30 per cent in twelve months, and that "any [employer] would be very lucky to get away with as little as [a] 10% increase in pay."<sup>45</sup>

On 16 November, Barclays DCO concluded a 12.5 per cent increase in the cost-of-living allowance with the Barclays Bank Staff Trade Union. Privately, the managers had been willing to go up to 20 per cent. Concerned not to establish a precedent, the bank insisted before the union and the Employers' Association that this was the result of the emoluments review scheduled for June 1968 in the 1966 Recognition Agreement, and was not prompted by public sector pay rises or cost-of-living increases. Notwithstanding this, the bank then prepared a comparable settlement with the Messenger Workers' Union, even though the union had no pay review clause before February 1969.<sup>46</sup>

The fact that Barclays DCO had been used as a "test case" by employee unions gave it a head start in negotiations, and the bank escaped from the five-day strikes that eventually took place in three foreign-owned banks (I have not been able to identify which) and the entire petroleum sector.<sup>47</sup> At the insistence of the general managers, the new agreements reiterated time periods before which specific terms and conditions could be reviewed ("re-opener clauses"), even though these had broken down in the negotiations that had just been concluded.<sup>48</sup>

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44 Barclays DCO, Khartoum Telegram to General Managers, 29 October 1968, BB1214/0066.

45 Barclays DCO, Khartoum, Telegram to General Managers, 6 November 1968, BB1214/0066.

46 Barclays DCO, Khartoum, Telegram to General Managers, 16 November 1968, BB1214/0066.

47 Barclays DCO, Half-Yearly Report: Sudan, 30 September 1968, BB0029/0143. These reports were written several weeks after the end of the half-year.

48 Barclays DCO, Half-Yearly Report: Sudan, 30 September 1968, BB0029/0143.

## Nationalisation (1970)

In May 1969, a coup by junior army officers replaced Sudan's parliamentary regime with a military government that included an eclectic alliance of socialists, communists and Arab nationalists. Exactly one year later, the "May regime" nationalised private banks and foreign companies in Sudan, and Barclays DCO was replaced overnight by the State Bank for Foreign Trade (Niblock 1987: 243–244). The Barclays Bank Staff Trade Union took this opportunity to press their long-standing demands for Sudanisation by producing a list of proposed nominees from among its members to replace the bank's outgoing British management. This list was presented to the Bank of Sudan, which was overseeing the bank nationalisation programme.<sup>49</sup>

One contemporary and subsequent interpretation of Sudan's 1969 coup was that it briefly brought Sudan's radical left and pro-labour political forces to power (Niblock 1987: 233). However, the pro-labour credentials of the government failed to manifest. Nationalisations of industrial enterprises were followed by the state's explicit rejection of union demands that this had to be accompanied by changed working conditions and reformed managerial structures (Cross 2021: 269). Similarly, with regard to the banking sector, the Bank of Sudan stated that:

Some trade union leaders genuinely believed that the capitalists who exploited them have now gone and it is time for them to enjoy the fruits of their labour now that a socialist government is in power. [ . . . ] But the Government made it clear that its policy will be the right man for the right job and that pay increases have to be linked to higher productivity.<sup>50</sup>

This suggests that considerations of economic nationalism drove the policies of the May regime, rather than a progressive project to challenge the power of capital over labour. This confirms a phenomenon that has been revealed in this chapter whereby the strategies and rhetoric of labour organising were co-opted by social and labour elites, whose demands frequently received state endorsement, while the demands of manual workers were suppressed. Not only does this account for the reactionary turn of the May regime (which ejected communists from the government and liquidated the party's cadres in 1971, while simultaneously embarking on several denationalisations and an "open door" policy to new foreign direct investment), but it also presents these policies as elements of continuity (Cross 2021: 252–258).

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<sup>49</sup> Bank of Sudan, *The Nationalisation of Banks in the Sudan*. Khartoum, 1970/1?, 18. Middle East Documentation Unit, Durham University, Durham, UK. 17/4/BAN/3.

<sup>50</sup> Bank of Sudan, *The Nationalisation of Banks in the Sudan*. Khartoum, 1970/1?, 18. Middle East Documentation Unit, Durham University, Durham, UK. 17/4/BAN/3.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined labour relations in the British bank Barclays DCO in Sudan after decolonisation. The international and local structures of the bank had been shaped by the company's history as a commercial branch bank operating across the British imperial space. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, the bank had to contend with the decline of formal imperial rule and the new political, legal and social contexts that came into being under the postcolonial state.

There is no evidence that bank staff in Sudan had organised in trade unions before 1964. Bank staff could be considered to be a "labour aristocracy" in Sudan in this period, as they enjoyed privileged salaries and comfortable working conditions compared with other workers elsewhere in the public and private sectors. When Barclays DCO became involved in labour disputes with its staff in the 1960s, the bank nevertheless sought to maintain privileged working conditions for its staff compared with those offered by rival employers. In addition, the staff in commercial banks in Sudan before independence consisted to a great extent of appointed expatriates or members of local minority communities, such as Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians and Sudanese Copts. This introduced a dimension of racial distinction shown by many of these staff towards other members of the local labour force. As such, many bank staff no doubt identified more spontaneously with their senior managers than they did with workers in Sudan's organised labour movement, which underwent a surge in militancy in the 1940s and 1950s.

Nonetheless, the position of a labour aristocracy is always precarious, with the balance of power between labour and capital always being susceptible to being reorganised in the interests of the latter. In Sudan, this occurred as salary scales rose much more slowly than price inflation in the 1960s. Furthermore, the sociological profile of bank staff was changing, as the bank expanded in size and increased its proportion of junior and intermediate staff relative to senior managers. In addition, both the official and unofficial policies of Sudanisation (which simultaneously appealed nationalist politicians and lowered average staff costs within racialised pay scales) increased the proportion of Muslim Sudanese among the bank staff: that is, members of the majority population in Sudan. This meant that staff were now becoming more likely to identify and socialise with other members of the local waged and salaried populations, who were engaged in militant union organising. It is telling that unionisation in the bank began with messenger staff, whose mobile work was done outside bank premises, away from close working relationships with their senior managers, and who received the lowest levels of pay in the organisation. In addition to lowering staff costs through the grim logic of racialised pay scales, the bank operated gendered pay scales as it increased its proportion of female employees in a conscious effort to lower staff costs. This shaped the nature

of labour demands in the 1960s, as bank unions called for paid maternity leave. As such, this chapter has explored how changing sociological dynamics within Sudan's white-collar workforce shaped industrial relations.

Union disputes in the 1960s were variously triggered by questions of narrow economics and purchasing power, as well as wider political considerations. In 1964, bank employees participated in the general strike against military rule, making this a clear form of political mobilisation (or mobilisation due to societal pressure in a highly politicised context), as a result of factors that were clearly distinct from the bank and its relations with its workforce. In 1966, after political liberalisation, a labour dispute between clerical workers and the bank resulted in a recognition agreement, increased pay and a schedule of additional benefits. Labour unrest re-emerged in 1968, once again highlighting cost-of-living concerns. However, this dispute was part of a coordinated action across the multinational corporate sector, with the not implausible spectre of involvement and coordination by Sudan's powerful communist party.

Although the bank resented labour agitation by its staff, it also embraced formalised labour relations as a means of managing labour unrest. Bank staff did indeed secure improved terms in 1964, 1966, and 1968; however, many of these concessions were less than what managers had privately been prepared to concede. In each instance, the bank prevented major strike action, and, in 1968, the bank was able to disassociate action by its own employees from wider actions in the sector. In the senior managers' search for a formalised labour process, they turned to the Sudanese government and national labour legislation. They found a supportive government in 1966 that advocated wage restraint and industrial harmony, and a markedly less supportive government in 1968 that was willing to lend rhetorical support to agitation by Sudanese staff against non-Sudanese employers.

Finally, this chapter has shed light on a particular form of post-colonial nationalism. White-collar workers repeatedly turned to organising methods that had traditionally been associated with manual workers, in order to secure their position as a labour aristocracy. This project by bank staff exceeded mere salary demands, and included calls for Sudanisation that were co-opted from the rhetoric of successive Sudanese governments. This created a nationalist vision of who should hold senior positions in Sudanese economy and society after independence. After nationalisation in 1970, the bank's clerical union therefore presented a list of nominees for senior managerial promotions to the central bank, which was now the sole shareholder of the nationalised company. Sudan's banking sector was transformed in the 1970s, including by having expatriate managers entirely replaced with Sudanese appointments from the commercial banking sector and the civil service. However, this was also associated with a foreclosing on many labour demands, as the new

government confirmed that nationalisation was a project born of elite nationalism, rather than a vision of pro-labour social transformation.

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Barbara Casciarri

# Chapter 16

## Being Dayāma: Social Formation and Political Mobilisation in a Working Class Neighbourhood of Khartoum

### 1 Introduction

#### 1.1 The Genesis of the Fieldwork

This chapter is based on longitudinal fieldwork carried out in Deim (al-Duyum al-Shargiyya), Khartoum, between 2008 and 2019. I lived in Deim between 2006 and 2009, and continued to collect data there after 2010, returning to the same neighbourhood almost twice a year during my research trips.<sup>1</sup> When I first worked in Deim in 2008, my background was in social anthropology, and I had done research in rural Sudan on political and economic issues among nomadic groups in the Butana region since 1989 and during the 1990s. When I returned in 2006, I continued my study, and extended it to settled peri-urban pastoralists in Greater Khartoum and Southern Kordofan cattle herders, focusing on resource grabbing and its impacts on disrupted pastoral territories. Despite my continuing involvement in pastoral issues, the chance event that led me to plan fieldwork in Deim was my decision to live there when I took up residence in Sudan at the end of 2006 as coordinator of the CEDEJ (Centre d'études et de documentation économiques, juridiques et sociales), a French centre for social sciences research in Khartoum. Initially, my hybrid situation between insider and outsider made me hesitate to engage in a study of a place I felt in some ways to be my own. Discussions with my neighbours (there had been rumours since 2007 of a forthcoming new forced displacement) and my discovery of Ahmad Sikainga's wonderful book *From Slaves into Workers* (1996), together with

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1 Although the chapter is mainly based on data collected between 2008 and 2019 and then during two short fieldworks in 2019 and 2020 (after the revolution), my residence in Sudan in 2021–2022 thanks to a CNRS *délégation* was crucial for the writing process. I thus thank the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and the ANR Project THAWRA SuR that I have coordinated in Sudan since 2021. My warmest thanks also go to the many Dayāma who shared their memories and experiences with me, with my deep respect and admiration for their persistent capacity of resistance and struggle for social justice in Sudan.



a dearth of existing studies,<sup>2</sup> reinforced my desire to begin fieldwork in Deim. My initial sense of disorientation due to the fact that this was an unusual kind of work for a rural anthropologist was alleviated by the earlier training I had received at my Italian university in the oral and social history of local urban working classes before becoming an anthropologist. My data consist of 156 interviews – mostly life stories<sup>3</sup> – with variations in actor profiles (age, gender, profession, education, ethno-tribal origin and places of residence), coupled with notes on participation and observations on social life in the neighbourhood.

My project turned into a reconstruction of the social history of Deim with the objective of carrying out an ethnography of a neighbourhood rather than a tribal group, as I had done previously among pastoralists. Based on data collection methods I had used elsewhere, this new fieldwork was supported by three simple guidelines: matching the biographies of Deim's inhabitants (the *Dayāma*, to use their own definition) to that of their neighbourhood, viewed as a “living entity” with its own life story (Portelli 1985), to understand how places make people – as social and cultural individuals or communities – and how people make a place while making the city; focusing on “memories”, in the sense of a “matrix of meanings” (Portelli 1988) rather than as representations of the past or a “store of events”, both for the present and for imagining a desirable future; and unfolding the meaning of “being *Dayāma*”, an identity that was especially singled out by both insiders and outsiders.

A further question emerged, as behind the plurality and diversity of the individual life stories and profiles of the people I met, a shared definition of the district stressed its identity as a “working class” and “popular” place – with two terms, *ummāl* (workers), and *sha'bī*, (popular) being used repeatedly. Although the term *ummāl* (sing. *āmīl*) may refer to workers in general, in Deim as in other Sudanese contexts – see Sikainga for Atbara (2002: 5) – it is conventionally used as the equiva-

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2 As far as I know, only one master's thesis in Sociology at the University of Khartoum has focused on issues of social order in Deim (Hamza 2000). Shortly after my arrival, I suggested to one of my students that she should choose Deim for fieldwork for her master's thesis, which was funded by an urban water management project I was coordinating (Arango 2009). Apart from these two cases and some secondary information in other works – for example on Ethiopian refugees (Le Houérou 2004) – I do not know of any other anthropological works that use Deim as a central location for their fieldwork.

3 Most of my interviews had a common structure: I asked respondents to talk to me about the story of their life (and those of parents and extended families) and the history of the neighbourhood. Multiple informal discussions and participation in exceptional or ordinary events in the neighbourhood provided further sources of information and contextualisation for the main corpus of interviews and biographies.

lent of “working class”.<sup>4</sup> Its common association with the adjective *shābī* also made it clear that people in Deim did not use *shāb* with an interclass connotation. Nonetheless, this shared label contrasted to some degree with the true situation at the time of my research: in fact, a fair number of Dayāma were no longer working class in the strict sense (some were unemployed or did precarious work during a deep economic crisis, others were working as employees of the lower middle class or even as managers), and the quarter itself was changing rapidly following a process of gentrification that made it difficult to define it unequivocally as a “popular place”. I finally found a possible explanation of this gap between the neighbourhood’s current configuration or social composition and its persisting identity as a working-class popular place, when I looked at the interplay of class formation, ethnicity and locality, as shaped during Deim’s history and embedded in the parallel development of Sudanese urbanisation and the colonial – and later post-colonial – division of labour. This attempt to reconstruct the meaning of being Dayāma, in which interviews and observations of ordinary people’s daily lives highlight a political value, makes more sense after the events of the recent Sudanese revolution.

Limitations of space prevent me from going into any detail on the potential contradictions and plurality in the discourses and practices of my respondents. I will restrict myself to reporting the most common and most shared visions and positions among the people I met in Deim. In this context, expressions such as “the Dayāma say. . .think. . .do. . .” do not imply a high degree of generalisation or a wish to reduce the neighbourhood to the homogeneity of a harmonious “community”; rather, I consider this huge corpus to be an “ethnographic sample” (Werner & Russell 1994) aimed at *representation* rather than *representativeness* (Olivier de Sardan 1995), which despite its limitations may offer interesting discussion elements for the general objectives of this book.

## 1.2 The Foundation of Deim and its Evolution

The foundation of Deim<sup>5</sup> is associated with the urban planning designed by the British in late colonial times. Scholars who have focused on the formation of the

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4 Besides the common semantic value of the term, the composition of this “working class” is different in Atbara, where it denotes a homogenous group of workers in the railways sector (Sikainga 2002), and in Deim, where it covers a wider range of subordinated, skilled and unskilled wage-jobs. For the purpose of this chapter, I am more interested in tackling the reasons behind this conception in local discourses than I am in discussing the details of their socio-economical parameters and evolutions.

5 The etymology of *daym* cannot be definitively traced. It is linked to the history of slavery in Sudan, and described the slave traders’ settlements in the frontier areas of Southern and Western

first Sudanese working class under colonial rule (Sikainga 1996) have talked about slums (called “Deims”) where people from various regions and other African countries gathered between the Turkiyya (1821–1884) and the Maḥdiyya (1885–1898). This precolonial genesis explains Deim’s social composition, notably the presence of former (mainly military) slaves who, after being emancipated during British rule and living far from their original homes, became a wage-earning source of manpower for the new colonial division of labour. With the urban development of the capital, these places – “Old Deims” in colonial documents – continued to attract precarious populations of various ethnic and regional origins until the British decided to demolish them and displace their populations to a new peripheral district. They wanted both to “clean” the central areas of Khartoum for a growing middle class and to solve the problems of social order linked to these precarious, scattered slums (Curless 2016). Although the aim of concentrating these populations within a planned quarter (New Deims) was declared to be to improve living conditions for the native poor, another objective was the more effective control of the “dangerous classes” and their relegation outside a city space that was reserved for the elites. The displacement took place between 1949 and 1952 (Fawzi 1954). As far as the site of my fieldwork is concerned, al-Duyum al-Shargiyya<sup>6</sup> (Eastern Deims), which is today known as “Deim” *par excellence*, mostly took in inhabitants of today’s Khartoum 2 and Khartoum 3 districts. As we will see, the merging of dynamics of concentration and stigmatisation – which has been observed in other contemporary “regimes of urban marginality” (Wacquant 1999) – had a profound effect on the shaping of the neighbourhood and its identity.

The expansion of a capitalist mode of production enforced by colonisation and its division of labour turned the people of Deim into the bulk of the first colonial working class. Remaining at the bottom of the social ladder (compared to a very small native elite selected by the colonial power), the people of Deim were integrated into the main labour tasks of infrastructure building and agriculture and

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Sudan (Johnson 1992: 170–71): the toponym Deim Zibeir (a town in Southern Sudan) still bears witness to this history, and Deim Zibeiriya is also a sub-district of modern-day Deim in Khartoum. Since colonial times, governmental actors have used the term to describe poor native areas that are socially and spatially marginal. Most local actors explain the term by using the verb *dayam*, which they associate with the idea of a camp, a temporary place to live. In one Sudanese Arabic dictionary, the word is translated as an “inhabited territory at the margins of a town. Originally a military camp” (Gāsīm 1985: 423).

<sup>6</sup> For the colonial administration, al-Duyum al-Shargiyya (Eastern Deims) was similar to al-Duyum al-Gharbiyya (Western Deims). Nevertheless, the analogy between the two neighbourhoods (in terms of their history and social composition) is not a perfect one because only the former was fully a product of forced displacement from slum areas.

into lower-level jobs as unclassified civil servants in the British administration.<sup>7</sup> Although the process of colonial class formation should be seen as developing in different phases (Cross 1997), in Deim we see that the progressive shaping of this “urban proletariat” also involved more or less temporary wage-earning jobs for the development of rural projects (dams and agricultural schemes) or the building of infrastructures (railways, bridges), for which the Three Towns constituted a “labour reservoir” (Cross 1997: 219, 223). Two main features of this native working class emerged: first, gradual, albeit limited, access to education (and to services that were considered to be signs of a “modern” urban way of life) and second, a growing degree of politicisation that affected the configuration of the neighbourhood, which would become a stronghold of the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) in the following years. This allowed Dayāma to claim – as they still do today – an identity as a popular (*shaʿbī*) place inhabited by workers (*ʿummāl*), and pride in being ready to stand up for their rights and rise up against various authoritarian regimes, including in the postcolonial phase.<sup>8</sup> In the early decades of its development, alongside the urbanisation of the capital city, Deim continued to attract newcomers as part of a rural exodus not only from several regions in Sudan but also from African countries, mainly in the shape of refugees from Ethiopia and Eritrea (Le Houérou 2004). The multiethnicity of the place coupled with its working class structure favoured the integration of newcomers while also increasing the stigmatisation of the neighbourhood as a major block of precarious, ethnically mixed and potentially dangerous lower class people within the city. The multiplicity of cultural backgrounds (as regards not only ethnic and tribal groups<sup>9</sup> but also religions) was an important

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7 Because of this early urbanisation and integration in the division of labour of a colonial economy, supported by a strong focus on schooling and access to education, a fair portion of the younger generations in Deim, although they share a “working class” identification, might be better defined as “middle-class poor” (Bayat 2015) compared to the profound precariousness of contemporary city dwellers in other peripheral areas of Khartoum.

8 As I will show, this is, in fact, a reality: Deim activists (with strong support from their families) have often been involved in the insurrections and political movements that have shaken the powers-that-be since the colonial period. Although people in Deim paid a high price during the repressive period of the Islamic regime in the 1990s, they have continued to be active in urban protests, as proved by the recent riots against the increase in food prices (2012 and 2013), the mobilisation against cuts in the water supply (2015–2016), the recent uprising in 2018–2019 and the ongoing struggles since the October 2021 coup.

9 Tribal affiliation is still a significant parameter for a huge part of rural and urban Sudan, although scholars have noted the non-essentialist nature of tribes and their historical political manipulation (Casciarri & Ahmed 2009). While the word “tribe” (*gabila*, pl. *gabāʿil*) evokes a patrilineal group with a common ancestor often related to a territorial and political dimension, the term “ethnic group” refers to broader categories (such as Arabs or Nuba) that imply cultural or status dimensions, and may be seen as including different *gabāʿil* (Casciarri 2016).

factor in shaping the district as a place of “free habits” (Hamza 2000)<sup>10</sup> that increasingly conflicted with the Islamic morals enforced by the country’s Arab-Muslim elites beginning in the 1980s.

The progressive expansion of the capital quickened after the 1980s, due on one hand to the mass arrival of environmental and economic migrants and IDPs from areas affected by the civil war such as Southern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains and Darfur (de Geoffroy 2009), and on the other to the development of new districts for the growing local middle and upper classes. This spatial reconfiguration of the capital meant that Deim shifted from its former margins to a new centre shaped by the city’s expansion (Map 5). In the 1990s and 2000s, the reconfiguration of the neoliberal city, strengthening dynamics of socio-spatial injustice and relegation (Morange & Fol 2014) brought about new transformations in Deim. The liberalisation pursued by the Islamic regime since the mid-1990s, the opening up to new foreign and national investors, the boom in oil exploitation after the end of the war and the strengthening of a Sudanese bourgeoisie were all processes that accompanied an attempt by the political powers to restructure Khartoum and its centre according to new principles of exclusion. In recent times, therefore, Deim has become an attractive location for a new local and international bourgeoisie, and its inhabitants are facing (and sometimes trying to oppose) dynamics of gentrification that resemble those taking place in other cities in the North and South at a time when global capitalism is reshaping socio-spatial urban borders.<sup>11</sup> While the expansion of the city limits as a result of recent urbanisation<sup>12</sup> gave Deim a new spatial centrality, the context does not favour the Dayāma’s opportunity to benefit from this, first because of a general economic crisis fostered by neoliberal policies that affects the popular classes more deeply, second, because the impact of gentrification is driving their gradual eviction from the district and finally, due to the persisting label of marginality the dominant actors ambiguously continue to associate with the “original core” of Dayāma. As we will see, ethnographical data may help

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**10** Scholars would often explain such kind of labelling through the legacy of slavery. Although this may make sense, I prefer not to rely on this reading, first because ex-slaves were just one component of a very heterogeneous social composition in Deim, and second to avoid an exaggerated stress on “slavery heritage” as portrayed by both colonial and post-colonial ideologies in Sudan.

**11** The figures on Khartoum’s demographic development show an accelerated process of urbanisation (one of the highest rates in modern Africa): the population of the capital, which was just 260,000 at the time of independence (1956), reached 1,342,000 in 1983, and 4,482,000 in 2008 (Blanchon & Graefe 2012: 43).

**12** According to the last national census, in 2008, Deim had 25,634 inhabitants (distributed among twelve administrative units). In the same period, Khartoum Centre (including Deim) had 72,235 inhabitants, the Khartoum agglomeration (Khartoum, Omdurman and Khartoum North) 4,482,000, and Khartoum State 5,274,321 (CBS 2008).

reveal a more complex vision of strategies rooted in Deim’s social background for countering marginalisation at both a material and an ideological level.



Map 5: Location of Deim in Khartoum.<sup>13</sup>

## 2 Making Deim’s Social History through Ethnography

In this section, I will attempt to show how an ethnographic study tracing the meaning of the neighbourhood for its people helps us reconstruct a social history of the place. Local narratives on the beginnings of Deim stress its nature as an area of forced displacement: when people talk about the relocation of 1949–1952 (the birth of Deim in its present form), they use expressions that might be generally translated as “they brought us here” (*jābūnā*, *shālūnā*, *khattūnā*, *nagalūnā*, *raḥḥalūnā*).

<sup>13</sup> Casciarri 2014.

The British had put my parents there, in Old Deims, but then they changed their mind, they took this place back, which is now Khartoum 2, and sold it at a higher price. They destroyed our houses (my children were young when they destroyed everything), then they brought us (*jābūnā*) here, they displaced us (*raḥḥalūnā*) here. [A.B.I., b. 1925, 2009]<sup>14</sup>

There was no discussion or negotiation with the British: they used to come into Old Deims to put down marks, to give anyone an exact deadline to leave, and even if you had a problem, you were forced to leave, with no discussion (*mā fi kalām*). [A.M., b. 1945, 2009]

There can be no doubt about the early injustices, and the refrain of forced displacement stands as a political leitmotif, inasmuch as the Dayāma do not chose to position themselves as victims, but stress their capacity to transform this original injustice into a strength in several ways: rejecting a marginality label, actively producing locality and reversing the values associated with ethnicity.

## 2.1 Counter-Narratives of Centrality and Marginality

The particular genesis of Deim explains how it has had connotations of a “dual marginality” since it was founded: one spatial because of its location at the margins of the colonial city, a historical frontier between an urbanised (civilised) space and the rural desert (uncivilised) space, and the other social, due to its being inhabited by the lowest native class, one that was considered by the colonial élites to be “detrified”, and of mixed or slave origin (Kurita 2003). In the local discourse I often found an express desire to challenge this early label of marginalisation and stigmatisation, as well as its persistence.<sup>15</sup> The leitmotif of the founding stories of the neighbourhood seeks to claim a shared history of domination, reminding us that the first Dayāma were taken there by the colonial authorities against their will,<sup>16</sup> but the discourse soon also embraces rejection of the longstanding label of Deim as a marginal place. This is frequently expressed by saying that Dayāma are “the centre [heart] of Khartoum” (*galb al-Khartūm*). The expansion of Khartoum’s urban boundaries in

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14 All personal names have been anonymised. They are followed by the respondent’s birthdate and the date of the interview.

15 I have noticed that outsiders, politicians and sometimes even scholars (Pantuliano et al. 2015) still tend to assimilate Deim with these images of poverty and marginality. This may be linked to both a lack of knowledge of the neighbourhood and the heritage of colonial discourses.

16 This is the main difference from other displaced groups like the Nubians, who can associate this origin from “elsewhere” with a common ancestry and cultural homogeneity (Fogel 1997). For the Dayāma, whose origins were scattered across Sudan, on the other hand, their forced displacement associated with their classification as subaltern workers is their prior commonality, which partly explains the construction of a shared popular class identity.

recent decades makes it easy for an observer to agree with this claimed “new” centrality, and Deim’s position compared to the current vast outskirts of the capital confirms that the ancient margins had definitely turned into a centre. However, local narratives go beyond this purely spatial notion of centrality, and mix the present and the past in their dismissal of any alleged marginality of the district.

Three elements are worth mentioning in the construction of this central role, which have been taken as a given since the earliest years of Deim’s development. The first attributes a kind of mission to the ancient Dayāma in the urbanisation of the wild space. As the elders remind us, when the British relocated the inhabitants of Old Deims to their present place, they pushed them into a remote area south of the colonial town that is still remembered as *khalā*, desert,<sup>17</sup> a connotation expressed by memories of wild animals and natural vegetation, the opposite of an urban space.

The borders of New Deims started in the area of the Faruk Cemetery, and you know what was beyond? Just desert land (*khalā*). It was a forest (*ghāba*) with wild animals. There was nothing else before we started to build the houses you see today in Deim. [A.M., b. 1945, 2009]

For people who have already been “urbanites” for decades, this eviction to the ecological borders of the city has been reshaped in their memories, and the Dayāma seem to stress their role as unwitting, yet objective, pioneers of the civilisation of the desert, the people who made it possible to bring “culture” to the former realm of “nature”, and even wilderness. This is also underlined by the contrast with the nearby middle class neighbourhood of Amarat:

Today you see Amarat as a place with big houses and big roads, with lights, but when we arrived, it was simply desert land (*khalā*). It was created long after Deim, in the period of ‘Abbūd [1960s]. Actually, the first three areas (*manāṭig*) in Khartoum were Deim, Tuti and Burri; all the rest was only desert land! [O.H., b. 1936, 2010]

The second element that is commonly found in discussions on the founding years is the rapid availability of modern infrastructures and services – first water and then electricity are invariably mentioned as a sort of privilege the Dayāma benefited from. Their emphasis on this material aspect of daily life is also linked to a desire to recall that Deim never fit the image of a marginal place, even at an earlier stage. As some recall, “. . . in Old Deims we were using oil-lamps (*fānūs*) – there was no electricity – and we got water from wells or water vendors” [H.A.H, b. 1948, 2008],

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<sup>17</sup> This wilderness is more rarely described using the word *ghāba* – literally “forest”, but more broadly defining a place with dense spontaneous vegetation – another image that conflicts with the urban landscape.



but later, “. . . in New Deims, we were the first people in Khartoum to get water and electricity in our houses, long before other places in the capital and in Sudan” [O.H., b. 1936, 2008]. Through these two powerful markers of an early modern “urban way of life” (water and electricity), the Dayāma stress further evidence of the centrality that had been denied to them. To offer further proof of the illogicality of the stigma of marginality, they mention squatter or unplanned areas of Greater Khartoum that still had no access to such facilities in the 2000s (de Geoffroy 2009).

The third recurring element stresses the unsuitability of the marginality label, and asserts that Deim has always been a central place – sometimes even more so than certain new middle class districts – far from the images of precariousness and remoteness that have been forged since colonial displacement. This relates to the presence of professionals, and examples are given of the modern jobs the Dayāma were coopted into by the opportunities opened up by the new economic system. Thanks to the singularity of individual or family lives, we thus discover that behind the common label of “wage-workers” (*ummāl*) lies a varied universe of craftsmen, electricians, mechanics, carpenters, tailors, cooks, builders, printers, guardians, drivers and low-level civil servants, mixed with more occasional employment in agricultural or infrastructure projects and a (less varied) female labour force employed as domestic servants in the homes of Europeans. Although the common expression “to work *with* the British” seems to obscure the nature of subordinated colonial work, the stress is placed on another aspect: by claiming to have been the first natives to include job profiles such as these,<sup>18</sup> the Dayāma prove their early ties to “modernity” and “urbanity” brought about by the British division of labour. They can therefore claim their social centrality as a working class within a modern wage-labour economy with a certain amount of pride.

People in Deim were the first inhabitants of Khartoum, since the British time, when there was nothing here. They were really close to the British (*garibīn*), they learnt about their nature (*ṭabīʿa*), traditions and customs (*ādāt wa-tagālid*). They were the first to be open to this new situation, and more than other Sudanese, the first to work with the British: they got from this an experience (*khibra*) that they later transferred as a heritage (*warrathū*) to their children. [H.U., b. 1970, 2008]

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<sup>18</sup> Some informants mention the fact that other Sudanese, like “people of Omdurman” (*nās Omdurmān*), refused to work with the English, preferring their traditional (agricultural, pastoral or commercial) economic activities.

## 2.2 The Production of Locality

Anthropologists have observed how the social appropriation of a *space* turns it into a *place* that is historical and relational (Augé 1992). This is known as the “production of locality” (Appadurai 1996), the dialectical process by which the place makes people and people “make the place” (Agier 2015). As they do so, they also draw borders and meanings of “we” and “others”, of “sameness” and “otherness” rooted in a specific place, filled with constructed shared meanings. This is what happened when people first lived in Deim and built their houses (*sakannā, baneinā*), shaping the patterns of their shared lives, which continue to be characterised by certain distinctive common elements. They are mentioned in discourses, but also revealed in daily practices, as evidence of inclusion in the category of Dayāma. As scholars have underlined, certain problems are raised by the “. . . assumed isomorphism of space, place and culture”, as cultural differences within a locality may be underestimated by the “implicit mapping of cultures into places” (Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 7). Being aware of this nuance, I must report what seems to be a widespread association between place and culture that Dayāma propose as part of their claimed identity.

Naming and defining the borders of one’s own place is a prior requirement of this production of locality: an intimate socio-spatial knowledge of the district makes people talk differently from the official administrative divisions of the neighbourhood (either the colonial names “al-Duyum al-Shargiyya” and “al-Gharbiyya” or more recent ones corresponding to *lijān sha’biyya*, the “popular committees” until 2019). The previous names of Old Deims are still in use, their meanings often linked to ethno-tribal groups, famous figures or job occupations to signify mastery of a local history that ignores the sterile denomination of colonial or later planning.<sup>19</sup> The same idea of mastery is conveyed when local people reject the administrative or geographic inclusion of areas of the neighbourhood whose social and historical settings do not correspond to the shared background of the Dayāma. For example, although the sub-district of Hay al-Zihur lies spatially in the middle of Deim, most Dayāma do not consider it to be a proper part of Deim as it was built following the eviction of precarious Fellata inhabitants and the plots (which are larger than the average Deim houses) were assigned to a middle class of employees with ties to the government in the 1970s.

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<sup>19</sup> The modern names used geographical references (Deim Wasit, “Central Deim”; Deim Janub, “Southern Deim”, etc.) and numbers for the blocks; the ancient ones referred to ethnic groups or regions (Deim Taqali, Deim Taaisha, Deim Banda, Deim Kara, Deim Gawamaa, etc.), to historical local figures (Deim Ibrish, Deim Zibeiriya, Deim Saad) or to occupations (Deim Attala, Deim Gasha-sha) (Casciarri forthcoming).

Hay al-Zihur is not really Deim. It is not as mixed (*khalit*) as Deim: there you have descendants from Greeks, Turks, Yemenis, Copts, people with light skin (*humur*), like the *mawāhid* in Omdurman. [S.H., b. 1968, 2009]

The Fellata, who at the beginning were in Mogran then with us in Old Deims, had a huge family in Hay al-Zihur, then the government took them (*jābūhum*) faraway, in a neighbourhood now called al-Inghaz. [H.R., b. 1945, 2014]

After the early steps of being able to name the “real” Deims and identifying their borders, the second expression of the production of locality is the sharing of public spaces and the production of new common areas. This starts with the connotation of a domestic space which is used in a different way from the idea of a private space. Communications between households and the image of “open doors” are frequently evoked, as in the words of a girl who returned to live in her father’s house in Deim from Yugoslavia, where she was born:

When I was a child, I came back to live in Deim [1996], I did not really understand “*who* was living *where*”, because the children spent their time in their friends’ or neighbours’ houses, and I was surprised to see that everyone knew each other, over three generations, from grandparents to grandchildren, and the neighbour’s house was in some way like your own house. For example, I did not have to knock on the door of my neighbours to enter – they would say: “Why are you knocking? You can enter as you want, that is your house!” [A.S.I., b. 1990, 2009]

Observations of daily life reveal that the extra-domestic spaces (streets or squares between blocks) are also commonly appropriated for working activities, the consumption of food or tea, the leisure time of children, adults and women (sports or playing cards) or sleeping, with intense social interaction during the day and even part of the night. Some of the features of neighbourhood morphology encourage this trend to jointly appropriate external spaces:

The empty spaces between each block created by British planning have been left without buildings: children play there, if we have a marriage or a funeral we gather there, and some are used to play football. This land belongs to nobody, or rather I would say it belongs to us all, to do what we need. [H.S., b. 1950, 2012]

The sense of creating and maintaining these shared spaces is underlined as a sort of “commonality”, in contrast with the individualisation and closing of spaces in middle class areas. Here, Amarat is often cited in discourses as a sort of “anti-Deim”, a district where everyone is locked inside an individual domestic space, as a metaphor for urban solitude and individualism.

Following this appropriation of common and public spaces, great importance is attached to what we might call a claim to control social order autonomously: value is placed on the fact that people in Deim prefer not to use the formal public order institutions (the police or others). They tend to manage and solve their prob-

lems within the community, and also have a sort of local patrol (called *dawriyya*) made up of young people, who patrol and control the district at night. Some also recalled the presence of institutions for conflict resolution similar to the *judiyya*, a well-known presence in rural Sudan, which thanks to the reciprocal knowledge and mutual respect produced by the common history of the quarter, can make it possible to manage minor disputes without going to the police or courts.

The blending of this particular way of living a common space to make it look like a single, cohesive place also means that the Dayāma label is not automatically granted to everyone who physically settles within the borders of the district. “Being Dayāma” means more than just living in Deim: this social appropriation by a community of its own place makes more sense when people explain that it is not enough to be “a resident” to be a Dayāma. Intimate knowledge of the place, its history and what makes up the particular social composition of its people are the parameters that make it possible to be considered a part of this imagined community, which expresses present and past behaviours and values to single out its special identity, which is deeply rooted in a specific location. For this reason, newcomers who do not share these common values and practices of living together are not considered to be Dayāma, and are sometimes labelled with connotations that underline this difference: they may simply be defined as *judād*, “the new ones”, *mushtarīn* or *mujarīn*, “the ones who buy” or “the ones who rent”, in order to stress their different status compared to the children of people who received plots during British planning, or even more directly as *nās al-fulūs*, “people with money”, when identified as the actors of present-day gentrification in the quarter.

This people, the new inhabitants, they were not born in Deim. They simply had money and bought houses here, but they were neither people of Old Deims nor their children, even if today they want to grab everything here! They are people coming from outside. It is just because they had money and wished to make profit that they succeeded in becoming owners (*nās milik*). [K.M., b. 1946, 2009]

Several narratives insist on this “cultural gap” between the Dayāma who are considered to be “original” (*aşliyyīn*) or legitimate inhabitants (*siyād al-ḥagg*) and these newcomers whose economic wealth is the only privilege that allows them to settle in Deim. However exaggerated the local discourses may be, forgetting that in some cases the regretted transformation of a local setting and way of life comes from wealthier factions within the neighbourhood, this dichotomisation goes alongside the classification of “real Dayāma” as working class people who share a popular district.

## 2.3 Reversing Mainstream Meanings of Multi-Ethnicity

The common historical markers of class and locality are interlocked with issues of ethnicity and tribal affiliation, which complete the picture of a self-definition of the Dayāma, according to one of the most persistent “identity complexes” (Casciarri *et al.* 2020) through which Sudanese social dynamics are read. Although they recall the fact that Deim was created out of a heterogeneous cluster of people from different ethnic and tribal groups, witnesses constantly conclude with a positive evaluation of this “multiethnicity”. In a country where the hegemonic view that is enforced by the state and its elites, but also widely accepted by majority groups, historically prizes the idea of ethnic purity and conservation, privileging shared ancestry and considering multiethnicity and mixing to be inferior, this position stands as a political statement. As one of my first and oldest respondents summed it up when he explained to me what the place of tribal affiliation in Deim was: “*Al-Duyūm kānū gabā’il, lakin kullenā bigīnā wāḥid*”, “The Deims were [formed of different] tribes, but we all became the same”. [A.M., b. 1945, 2009]. This sort of inversion of the mainstream concept is expressed by various historical and contemporary practices in the neighbourhood.

A review of the narratives of the oldest inhabitants, who are often the ones who lived through the passage from Old to New Deims, although they may have been young at the time, paints a picture in which origins (of fathers and mothers, and of grandfathers and grandmothers) are far from being forgotten or censored by memory selection. A certain stigma that was enforced by colonial discourses and never abandoned in post-colonial times (Vezzadini 2015) places an emphasis on the slave origin of most of the first inhabitants of Deim, supporting the dominant vision of “blood mixture”, leading one to imagine that people might hide their ethnic origins or understate the importance of ethnicity because of this feeling of inferiority. In my ethnography, however, most people had no hesitation in eliciting their regional and ethno-tribal origins prior to their arrival in Deim in detail. On the contrary, they emphasise and comment on this huge variety, constructing and explaining what they claim to be a kind of model of “inclusive citizenship” as almost the only way to overcome the impasses of Sudanese nation-building (Casciarri 2016). While in dominant discourses autochthony is associated with the legitimising concept that everyone is from a single ethno-tribal origin,<sup>20</sup> the Dayāma expressly claim that they come from a group, but have been “born again” in a

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<sup>20</sup> This is the case with dominant groups considered to be Arab and Muslim, among which narratives aimed at proving their status and the legitimate occupation of a territory are usually associated with claims of a common origin (*aṣl*) and a unique ancestry (*jidd wāḥid*), and thus being members of the same “tribe” (*gabīla*).

place: people remember how their fathers and mothers or grandparents arrived from elsewhere and from different tribal groups (see Casciarri 2016: 71), but they believe that other shared elements of their history have allowed them to reshape this diversity as a new unity. Although this may be linked in some cases to a desire to forget ancient slave origins, the same narrative can be found among individuals from Arab groups:

I cannot say that because I am from Misseriya tribe I am an Arab. I define myself as Sudanese. To define oneself as Arab, Dinka or Shaygiya is something that has only brought us huge problems (*mushkila kebīra*). For me, the best thing is to say that we are all Sudanese. You know? In all Sudan, there are no Arabs, because in the past the mothers may have been Dinka or Nuba, and even if your father or grandfather was an Arab, after all this time, the Arab blood is finished, that's all! [A.D., b. 1948, 2009]<sup>21</sup>

This brings us to a second observation on the complex relationship between “tribal affiliation” and what is normally labelled as “tribalism”. Without going in the details of a vast social sciences debate and its influence on post-colonial African state-building, we can say that a “tribal paradigm” (covered by the term *gabīla*) functions as a relevant multilevel form of social organisation and symbolic representation of Sudanese groups (Casciarri & Ahmed 2009), with well-known manipulations during the colonial Native Administration system, that does not correspond to a “pure invention” of tribes (Grandin 1982). After the independence of Sudan, and alongside a general renewal of decolonised thought, African states and intellectuals began to stigmatise “traditional” loyalties to one’s tribe: the term tribalism (*gabaliyya* in the local use) became a metaphor for a backward attitude and a hindrance to democracy and modernisation. Although affiliation to hegemonic Arab-Muslim *gabīla* continued to be a *de facto* basis for accessing political and economic power at least until the *inqādh* regime (1989–2019), there is a widespread perception that often associates the relevance of tribal affiliations to rural contexts, as distinguished from (and as inferior to) urban ones. This would lead us to expect that Dayāma, who first of all claim an early urbanity and also mainly do not belong to dominant Arab-Muslim groups, would tend to minimise or conceal their affiliation to their *gabīla*. On the contrary, however, their position is that remembering one’s *gabīla* is linked to a political statement against the rejection of *gabaliyya*, an implicit anti-tribalism that seems much more convincing than the one that can

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<sup>21</sup> One might argue that Western Sudanese tribes like the Misseriya Baggara have a lower status among Arab groups in the country, but I also found similar narratives among people in Deim from higher status groups, like the Jaaliyin – one of whom even defined himself as a *janūbī* (Southerner) because he had lived in Juba for many years and married a woman from the Bari, a group from Southern Sudan.

be heard among the upper classes as a simple denial of the tribal issue.<sup>22</sup> Thus, even though most Dayāma continue to say that “tribes are still present in Deim” (*al-gabā’il mawjūda*), and while they underline the fact that the policies of the most recent regime also strengthened tribal divides within their own community, they insist on the Dayāma’s capacity to go beyond such hierarchical separations:

Before, in Deim, it was not a matter of differentiating people by asking “Which ethnic group (*jinis*) or which tribe (*gabīla*) are you from?”. People were all supporting each other like one family (*ahl*), the ones coming from the West as well as the ones from the North. The division between tribes in Sudan is recent, it has been fostered by politics (*siyāsīyyāt*), by the government. Before, people wanted to build Sudan, they were saying “Sudan is our country, for us all”, without putting forward difficulties or problems. And here they consider themselves as “*awlād al-Daym*” [children of Deim]. [A.D., b. 1943, 2009]

A corollary of the value placed on multiethnicity can be found in discourses and practices around marriage choices. From a sample of marriages stretching from the present generations back to the first inhabitants of Old Deims (Casciarri 2021), I noticed the importance of matching a huge gamut of ethno-tribal origins of the partners, crossing not only the borders between Arab and non-Arab groups, but also other divides (religious, or even national).<sup>23</sup> Again, these intermarriages are in striking contrast to the trends of agnatic endogamy found both in rural Sudan and among urban elites (Delmet 1994, Miller 2021). Close kin marriage is a persistent feature of Sudanese society and an indicator of status linked to ethno-tribal hierarchies. Dayāma discourses on this topic are another counter-narrative, in which the term *khalṭa*, which we might translate as “*métissage*” or “blending”, has positive connotations compared with a widespread perception that stresses the risk of mixing “different people” through marriage, thus confusing the lines between positions and degrees of “purity”. This anti-conformist treatment of the sensitive issues of kinship and marriage, and of relations between tribesmen and neighbours, has the effect of building a sort of quasi-kinship for the Dayāma. Enhancing this multilevel merging of ethnic and tribal origins as a particular meaning of “being Dayāma” leads to an assimilation of the strong solidarity links of kinship,

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<sup>22</sup> Apart from my personal experience, this trend of denying the existence of the *gabīla* has also been noticed by other researchers among opposition activists with a profile merging a middle and upper class background and their belonging to higher status Arab-Muslim tribes (Deshayes 2019). This is why I believe that the anti-tribal discourse has other powerful political meanings and is in line with the parallel claim of ethno-tribal affiliation among the popular classes, as found in Deim.

<sup>23</sup> As far as religion is concerned, it is made up of a majority of Sunni Muslims mixed with Christians, Catholics and Copts. In terms of nationality, as far as my personal (and not statistical) data are concerned, we can include Ethiopian, Eritrean, Nigerian, Chadian, Egyptian, Syrian and Yemenite.

and is suggested as a sort of alternative path to becoming Sudanese (an overarching inclusive meaning of citizenship and nation-building). The current use of collective terms such as *awlād al-Daym*, “the sons of Deim”, or *banāt al-Daym*, “the daughters of Deim”, shows that a shared place may replace a single ancestor in creating this shared identity, and the assimilation of the term Dayāma<sup>24</sup> to collective tribal names in use in Sudan expresses a capacity to go beyond biological determinants without denying one’s own origin, albeit with an awareness that it might gradually be superseded.

### 3 “Being Dayāma”: A Counter-Power Narrative

As it seems from my ethnography of the neighbourhood, this local identity summarised by the claim of “being Dayāma” is a “counter-power” narrative that has the aim of talking critically about the present and imagining alternative futures rather than remembering the past. When talking about the history and present of their place, people in Deim explicitly or implicitly express their views on politics, power relations and the possibility of challenging them. In this section I will focus on two aspects: the definition of the Dayāma as non-subordinate subjects and the politicisation of places and moments in everyday life.

#### 3.1 A Long and Persistent Tradition of Revolt

Insiders and outsiders seem to agree on the characterisation of Deim as a neighbourhood where people have historically been ready to stand up for their rights and to rise up against unjust powers, from the foundation of the neighbourhood in colonial times until the present day. This is often summarised by describing the Dayāma as *nās ṣaʿbīn*, which means “unruly, tough people”. Although this characterisation can be found in other neighbourhoods of Khartoum, in Deim it is associated with a form of reappropriation of a historical label that stresses the positive (and political) value of this “harshness”. There is also a locally and nationally widespread proverb that goes: “*al-Dayāma ḥaṭab al-giyāma*”, literally “The Dayāma are the firewood of Judgment Day”, which, aside from the fact that it has diverg-

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<sup>24</sup> In one of my first discussions in Deim, when I questioned a man I met at a *sittat al-shāy* (tea lady) place about his origin (in terms of his tribal group), he quietly answered: “I am from the *gabīla* Dayāma”.



ing interpretations,<sup>25</sup> emphasises and spreads a particular political vision of the neighbourhood. It is interesting to note, in fact, that after the 2019 Revolution, the same motto was echoed on the flag used in demonstrations by Deim's Resistance Committees: "*Dayāma giyāma*".<sup>26</sup>

The idea of a "rebel Deim" is not just a matter of imagination or external stigmatisation, however: evidence of participation in social and political mobilisations at a local and national level is widespread, and is well documented in biographies and narratives of the neighbourhood. Personalities who took part in historical protest movements<sup>27</sup> are frequently mentioned in discourses, which came as a considerable surprise to me because during the *inqādh*, people tended towards self-censorship on such topics, especially when talking to a foreigner. Trade Unions (*nagābāt*) were the first of these actors, and in Deim I was able to meet several elders who proudly recounted their experience in their job sector as workers' representatives as early as the late colonial times. This discourse could then easily move on to one about the repression of workers' associations in post-colonial times.

People who were really born in Deim have a good level of education, but more than this they know and follow exactly what is going on, and in the field of politics, nobody can cheat them. These are the Dayāma. Some of the elders were active in the first trade unions since the British period, and their children followed, being active in unions or parties, mainly the SCP, and opposing this regime even at risk of their life. [S.I., b. 1956, 2016]

The affiliation to political parties is also stressed, with particular reference to the Sudanese Communist Party, which was well established in Deim, although its members paid the cost of government repression, first during the Nimayrī regime but even more dramatically in the 1990s after the *inqādh* came to power. The special ties between Dayāma and the SCP is sometimes presented as being "natural" due to the area's working class make-up, fostered by a shared lifestyle, which even the recent gentrification of the neighbourhood cannot erase:

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25 The difference can be summarised as follows: on one hand, people who proudly claim the idea that they are genuine rebels and believe that the saying comes from the Dayāma themselves, and, on the other, people who reject this connotation and believe that it was invented by others (the Islamists) to stigmatise the Dayāma as impious.

26 In this case, the term *giyāma* means "insurrection or revolt", from a widespread use of the verb *gām/yagūm* in the sense of "to rise up, to protest".

27 Recurring examples of this are the organisers of the White Flag League revolution in 1924, the officers who led the 1971 coup d'état against al-Nimayrī, and Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭāhā, who was killed for apostasy in 1985, together with less renowned – but locally meaningful – names such as 'Alī Faḍul, a communist doctor and trade unionist who was killed in 1990.

Deim, since its origin, is a workers' area (*manṭega 'ummāliyya*). There was no other class (*tabagāt*) beside these workers, which is why they were united, they had the same level of life, they formed their trade unions, and in their essence (*tabī'athum*) most of them were close to the Communists. Today you may see some changes, for example in the buildings (*'amarāt*), but it is neither the workers nor their families who built them. This is a new class, coming from outside, and still we can say that Deim is a working class town (*medina 'ummāliyya*), and a popular one (*sha'biyya*), like Atbara. [B.B., b. 1960, 2020]

Although this interview dates from after the December revolution, my attention was caught by the insouciance displayed by the speakers – men as well as women, and young as well as older people – even during my previous investigations, when they mentioned their link with this party. For me, this offered a clue that Dayāma claim this specific aspect of their political identity as an essential part of the wider one.

Memories of past and recent uprisings are also a central element of these counter-narratives. In this case, the speaker may include an episode linked to such movements either as it relates his or her own life or as it involves someone from their family or the neighbourhood, but with a constant intent to illustrate the common threads intertwining the national and the local, collective and personal histories, and to prove that the neighbourhood was not accurately described without evoking its political engagement, adding another shared meaning to the fact of being Dayāma. The age of the respondents influenced the references to precise uprisings, and it is more the older generations, those who lived in both Old and New Deims, who remember local participation in the 1924 Revolution (Vezzadini 2015), “the one of ‘Abd al-Latīf” as they call it, or a revolt in the 1940s that was also supported by local sheikhs against an attempt by the government to close places (*anādī*) where alcoholic drinks were produced and sold.<sup>28</sup> It looks as though people care less about stressing the political and ideological values of a precise revolt than this sort of common attitude towards rejecting injustices and standing up and organising collectively to oppose them. Local participation in protests against the dominant powers were cited in the narratives, or were simply mentioned as a background to a discourse on non-political issues.

Although the two significant moments of the 1964 and 1985 revolutions (“October” and “April”) are the most frequently cited, more ephemeral and more recent movements have also marked local memories and entered this common narrative, as was evident for some that occurred during my fieldwork in 2012 and 2013,

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<sup>28</sup> Even though I did not find detailed evidence of this revolt, Sikainga (1996) confirms that both Old and New Deims were places where local alcohol was sold, and they remained so until Nimayri decided to close them after the application of Islamic law in 1983.

and between 2015 and 2016. The 2012 mobilisation is particularly relevant in this narrative as it had more local roots in the district. It started out as general demonstrations against the increasing prices of daily items (gas and fuel), and then turned into local riots after the killing of a young woman from Deim, 'Awāḍiyya 'Ajabnā, by a member of the Public Order Police in her own home.<sup>29</sup> The movement, which was known as “September 2013”, is also remembered with a sense of oppression, as the repression that followed it was very rapid and violent. The movements between 2015 and 2016 were more closely to problems with cuts in the water supply (Casciarri and Deshayes 2019). Whatever the nature, duration and final outcomes of these mobilisations, the spread of these events through oral testimonies proves that for the Dayāma, given their history and social particularity, rebelling against unfair power is a logical, unavoidable, and persistent practice.

### 3.2 Everyday Politics in Times of Oppression

Apart from the explicitly political events, which I have mentioned in order to stress the counter-power position of Dayāma, attention needs to be paid to other dimensions of more silently, yet constantly, “making (counter)politics”. I will now discuss some everyday practices in Deim that might be interpreted in the terms categorised by James Scott as “infra-politics” (1990), and as what Asef Bayat considers to be a “quiet encroachment of ordinary people” (2010). These practices help unravel the underlying political values in non-spectacular actions that bring a genuine sense of protest and yet avoid more risky explicit political acts. This connotation made them especially apt in the authoritarian period of *inqādh*. Nonetheless, it would be too simple to conceive them as expressions of a sort of opportunistic removal from “real” politics: on the contrary, what I call the everyday politicisation of the neighbourhood implies an effort to create political spaces and moments that are capable of overcoming serious repression by cultivating this important political impregnation of the Dayāma identity not just as a heritage but also as a potential tool to be reactivated in the future. This second-level political reading of local practices could be extended to a number of different aspects, but I intend to focus here on a few significant examples of the “implicit counter-politics” of everyday life and ordinary people, merging places and situations.

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<sup>29</sup> *Sudan Tribune*, an online independent newspaper, reported the killing of 'Awāḍiyya on 6 March 2012 and the demonstration held in Deim the day after her death, which ended in an attack on the neighbourhood police station: <https://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article41834> (retrieved on 1/8/2021).

Sūq al-Deim, the Deim market, which has existed since the colonial foundation of the neighbourhood, is one example of how hubs of everyday politicisation can be located in a place that is also a target of repressive power. Anthropologists have stressed that socialisation networks and extra-economic aims sometimes overwhelm economic transactions in African markets (Geertz 1978; Agier 1984; Sindzingre 1988), but I would also add that in Sūq al-Deim, infra-political or openly political links construct a web within the day-to-day operations of the market. Some places act as “political corners” in different spots inside the market. At the kiosk (*kushuk*) owned by Faḍul Muḥammad, a retired Post and Telegraph trade unionist (and the first trade unionist from Deim), and the father of ‘Alī Faḍul, one of the first *inqādh* martyrs,<sup>30</sup> people known to be critical of the power of the regime would gather in the mornings and sit reading newspapers and talking freely about politics. In the evening, the same role was played by the shop owned by John David, a tailor, who is said to have been the first South Sudanese to have a permanent shop in Deim Market. He was also close to the SCP, and embraced the progressive and secular vision of the late John Garang’s “New Sudan”.<sup>31</sup> Even where political connotations are not displayed so openly, other places are symbols of this “uncivil society” (Bayat 1997), like the two cafés at the north and west corners, which are now *gahwa*, but were *bār* until the sale of alcohol was prohibited, where people can sit until night time to talk and play cards (another activity forbidden by Islamic law). More generally, this political stance within the market can be seen in the solidarity displayed by established legal traders and shopkeepers when they “protect” the tea-seller women (*sittāt shāy*), ambulant vendors or rickshaw drivers, who are mainly *ḥabash* (Ethiopian and Eritrean) refugees and *janūbiyyīn* (Southerners) who suddenly became “illegal” after 2011, from *kasha* (police raids).

Another interesting area of implicitly political collective behaviour is found in the context of mourning, which makes it possible to talk of a “power of death”. People from Deim are usually buried in the Faruk Cemetery, which symbolically marked the border between Khartoum 2 (the ancient site of Old Deims) and Deim after colonial displacement. Being a community also means giving a collective social meaning to death, and, as elsewhere, being buried in this cemetery is evidence that

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Alī Faḍul was kidnapped by the security services on 21 April 1990 and tortured to death. His father Faḍul Muḥammad kept a kiosk for selling eggs at the market almost up to the time of his death in 2020.

<sup>31</sup> John David refused to return to South Sudan after the 2011 separation, and continued to be appreciated as a man who claimed his Southern origins and yet defended the unity of Sudan regardless of ethnicity. On his death in 2015, a celebration was held (despite attempts by the authorities to forbid it) that was attended by the whole district and political personalities from the opposition parties.

one belonged to the group, and participation in the mourning ceremony is a must for the neighbours. Here, however, death is also a space to be permeated by a greater political meaning that goes beyond the nature of this crucial moment as a rite of passage. In fact, in the early years of the *inqādh* regime, an association was formed in Deim to jointly organise the funerals of Dayāma (washing the body, preparing the shroud, transporting the deceased and digging the grave) and to overcome night time curfews. This made it possible to strengthen the already powerful value of “sharing death” and to stress the importance of gathering together and honouring the deaths of Dayāma without the risk of repression: whether they were martyrs or simply engaged citizens, they were symbolically essential for reasserting the identity of the neighbourhood as a place of counter-power, and once again to insist on the singularity of Deim compared to other neighbourhoods.

When this government came, they imposed a curfew: you cannot move during the night, not even close to your place, unless you have special permission from the police. So we decided to form an association (*jam'yya*) to make it possible, when someone dies during the night, to do all the operations and go with the body to the cemetery without being arrested by the police. [O.H., b. 1936, 2010]

Sudanese consider that bodies have to be buried soon after death. When you die in Deim, you will be buried in two hours! There is a group taking care of it. If you have someone who has died, you just call them, they prepare everything, they organise everything that's needed, for everyone from Deim. And I think there is nothing like this in other neighbourhoods. [M.F., b. 1957, 2018]

Finally, this counter-power narrative is also embodied in the lives of ordinary Dayāma in their daily occupation of public spaces. Although they often risked falling under the control of the authorities, local clubs (*nādī*) and associations (*jam'yya*) linked to sports, music and regional or ethnic groups remained, even during the *inqādh* regime; those were spaces where sociability was enhanced as a way of maintaining community ties, enjoying opportunities to gather and talk about how things are going or should go, and possibly organizing together at particular moments where solidarity, and even protest, was needed.

Often simply occupying a public space outside the home, even just outside one's door, can be read as an infra-political act. This intense sociability displayed in outdoor spaces affirms other ordinary ways of conceiving an alternative social order other than the one imposed by “public order laws” and Islamic morals: in Deim, this can be seen by the presence of women selling tea and food in the neighbourhood streets or the frequency of less regular events that continue to be celebrated in the open air (for example, marriages, with music and dancing often going on after the legal 11 p.m. limit). One example of this occupation of common open spaces as both a political act and a way of strengthening the solidarity of this moral

community was provided by one of my neighbours in October 2018. She invited me to a street party (with food and music), explaining that it was actually the third birthday of her child, but as it is forbidden by the government to celebrate birthdays – with the exception of the Prophet’s *mawlid* – they were pretending that it was a party to celebrate the *tahūr*, or circumcision.

These examples of situations and spaces may seem different from one another, but what I wanted to stress is that first of all, in Deim, the political counter-narratives of the Dayāma are an expression of their wish to root their daily lives in past and present revolts, and, second, aside from the more explicitly political events, an infra-political dimension is spread in a variety of shared places and situations that ordinary people create and feed on in the flow of their everyday lives in the neighbourhood.

## 4 Some Lessons from the “December” Revolution

My fieldwork in Deim was supposed to be “concluded” when I left Sudan in October 2018, and I finally began the book I had been wanting to write for years (Casciarri, forthcoming). When I returned to Sudan in August 2019 after a long absence caused by the political events of the period, I shared in the euphoria of the people in Deim. Listening to their stories about how they had lived through the last revolution, I was able to find some answers to questions that had emerged during my decade of fieldwork in the neighbourhood. The following observations try to make sense not only of the persisting Dayāma identity, but also of some new elements brought about by the particular conjuncture of the “December” Revolution.

### 4.1 Making Sense of a Persisting Working-Class Popular Identity

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, the Dayāma as I knew them from my fieldwork and partly as an “insider” during the 2000s resembled a sort of “working class without workers”, to paraphrase Bayat (2017), when he talks about “revolutions without revolutionaries”. In fact, at the time of my research, most of them were either casual precarious workers in times of economic crisis or lower middle-class employees and professionals with a symbolic capital that was often higher than their economic capital. In both cases, they were quite far removed from the idealised image of a central, stable and homogenous working class that had lasted from colonial times until about the 1980s–1990s. At the same time, listening to their narratives and looking at their values as embodied in their daily practices, they seemed in

some way to be “revolutionaries without a revolution”, because of the gap between their memories of past struggles, revolts and revolutions and their limited political opportunities during the thirty years of the *inqādh* regime.

As I discovered from the discussions I had with them in 2019, their involvement in the recent events of the “December” revolution helped me imagine a reason for this persistence of the claimed identity of the Dayāma as “a working class” and of Deim as “a popular place”. After my return in late 2019 and at the time I wrote this chapter, it appeared to me that the efforts to maintain and pass this identity down through the generations may have been a tool for survival in difficult times by using collective memory and shared values to leave the door open to the possibility of imagining a different, fairer future. This looks similar to other Western contexts in which after the deindustrialisation of the 1970s and 1980s, the former working classes had to deploy new strategies, first to guarantee their livelihoods on the margins of wage labour, and second to reassert their centrality through the production of a new popular territorial anchorage (Collective Rosa Bonheur 2019).<sup>32</sup> This is also what has happened in Deim, where for the Dayāma, shared memories (coupled with the production of common places) have played the role of an intangible place where common values of justice and freedom can be grounded, in which to root an identity capable of supporting the struggle for a better present to be built at more opportune moments such as the ones the last revolution brought about in 2018–2019.

## 4.2 Reshaping Visions of Deim and Dayāma Within the December Revolution

Nonetheless, while the more politicised Dayāma tended to stress that for them this revolution was a “natural” and logical event rather than an unexpected one, several remarked on its novelty, and declared that they had been surprised by some aspects of it that were not simply a repetition of what they, their fathers and their grandfathers had lived through. I will focus on two main elements of this perception as they were related to me in discussions in Deim during my fieldwork in the autumn of 2019. Both show that dynamic contexts – especially radical multilevel moments of change like revolutions<sup>33</sup> – may contradict images and categorisations that in ordi-

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<sup>32</sup> It also echoes the reflections of a Marxist geographer who, following Henri Lefebvre, considers that the agent of revolutionary change is not simply the “working class” but more particularly the “urban” class, with its constant claims of a “right to the city” (Harvey 2019: xiii).

<sup>33</sup> While I am not going to join in the debate on how to categorise protests to subvert order, I have noticed that the Sudanese used the term *thawra*, “revolution” since the beginning of the uprising, and continued to do so after the formation of the transitional government, while Western media

nary times tend to follow a rigid dualism and binary opposition, and make them highly nuanced and very complex.

The first remark suggests the existence of a particular “interclass” alliance developed during the uprising between two neighbourhoods, Deim and Amarat, which had formerly been presented as socially and historically opposed. In previous Dayāma narratives, Amarat was in fact the stereotype of an “anti-Deim”, inhabited by rich people locked up in their large, luxurious houses, individualistically dedicated to their businesses, and all belonging to dominant Muslim Arab groups. In post-revolution discourses, although most Dayāma agreed that the spark that ignited the revolution was increasing pauperisation due to the economic crises, they did admit to some extent that the urban disadvantaged class (and workers like them) had not been the first to rise up. They were thus ready to reconsider their former stigmatisation of “middle and upper class” neighbourhoods, and to welcome the fact that “*awlād ‘amarāt*” (who had previously been seen as a conservative bourgeoisie far from people’s worries and needs) have been on the front line together with “*awlād al-daym*”, sometimes even before and more than them.

The second novel aspect is a rethinking of the “right way” to fight in order to defeat the forces of oppression. My previous discussions with Dayāma about protest movements or political action tended to paint an archetypal view of an oppressed and exploited people whose anger had to be framed by left-wing parties and trade unions. Consequently, more spontaneous movements begun by younger and less formally politicised actors, such as the riots of September 2013, were said to have failed because of their distance from the best practices for leading a successful revolution. After 2019, a new interpretation of this spread, and people became open to accepting and legitimising new actors and new patterns for political change. The events of “September 2013” turned from a painful memory of a political mistake paid for with brutal repression to the status of marking the very beginning of the victorious movement of the 2018–2019 revolution (Casciarri & Saeed 2020).

In my discussions after 2019, the older generation, who had closer ties to a traditional vision of revolutionary events led by a carefully organised and centralised “working class party” seeking to take power even with the use of weapons, also acknowledged the crucial role of “less organised”, widespread peaceful movements. This has created a sort of deep political respect for the young men (and also the young women) to whom the victory in this revolution is said to belong. The older respondents had no hesitation in expressing their astonishment when they realised they had a great deal to learn from young men and women, and from the peaceful

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and observers – and sometimes scholars – imposed and spread different labels that underscored the movement’s radical dimension (Casciarri & Manfredi 2020, Abdelhay et al. 2021).



and more horizontal movement they led until the final victory. But thanks to the revolutionary experience, the same feeling of “learning something new”, something that was quite unknown in usual practices, was found in the narratives of younger people. Many told me how they “rediscovered” the importance of sharing that they had thought was simply a nostalgic ideal of their fathers and mothers when they compared the past with the present. Most examples of this sharing are in the form of memories of the moments experienced during the sit-in,<sup>34</sup> starting from the most emblematic of them, the sharing of food, and moving up to the intangibles (solidarity, culture and feelings). Labelled with a new term borrowed from internet English (*shīr*) (Casciarri & Manfredi 2020), “sharing” took on a deep political sense, as the ultimate value of the December revolution seen as a process anchored within a long-term history of the Sudanese people. The fruitful convergence of old and new practices and values is also welcomed in other attitudes such as bravery and courage (*shujāʿ*) when it comes to facing repression, torture and death, which is said to be a tribute offered by the young to “traditional” Sudanese values.

## Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to summarise a long period of fieldwork work that started out as a study of “identity building” in a popular quarter in Greater Khartoum, and then attempted to search for hints for its interpretation in a more recent political event, namely the December revolution. My final observations were mainly based on interviews and informal discussions with Dayāma during my fieldwork after the revolution, in the autumn of 2019. This means that they need to be compared with an evolving situation in which the pandemic and economic crisis since 2020 have threatened the revolutionary momentum (Casciarri 2022), even more so after the October 2021 coup d'état, which began a new phase of political repression. In any event, at the stage my reflections had reached at the end of 2019, it made sense to match the results of ten years of counter-power narratives gathered among the Dayāma with the renewed meaning their involvement in a successful revolution brought. The connotations of what until 2018 might have been read as a nostalgic, idealised image of Deim as a “rebel neighbourhood” broadly conveyed by Dayāma, or, from the outside as a persisting stigmatisation of a historically marginal place and its people, changed: after “December”, it can be interpreted as a powerful tool of socio-political resilience

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<sup>34</sup> A huge sit-in was held in front of the army headquarters in central Khartoum from 6 April 2019 (leading to the fall of 'Umar al-Bashir on 11 April) until it was brutally dispersed, and followed by the massacre by military and militias on 3 June 2019 (Bahreldin 2020).

for groups striving to hold on to their “capacity to aspire” as a weapon of the weak (Appadurai 2013), reinforcing their ability to oppose the political and economic violence of neoliberalism. The Dayāma seem to show that this can be achieved by bridging the past, present and future whenever a sense of community is maintained with care and handed down through the years and generations. This is also possible because this sense has been constructed through the appropriation of a common space, and is connoted by values of socio-spatial justice, anchored since colonial times in a history of contested domination. In this framework, wider revolutionary processes may be successfully rooted in a specific local, social and political history like that of Deim. Nothing can illustrate this better than the wall painting near Deim Market (Figure 27). Against a general trend to paint portraits of *shuhadā*, or “martyrs”, killed by the regime during the last revolution (Khier 2020), the “Dayāma” – the collective authors signing this work – have chosen to paint two martyrs from their neighbourhood, ‘Alī Faḍul (d. 1990) and ‘Awaḍiyya ‘Ajabnā (d. 2012), who were killed *before* this revolution by the same oppressive power. It is a way of reminding people that uprisings have deep roots rather than being ephemeral events, as the media and powers often suggest, and that although they are part of a united larger movement, they are nourished by local contexts and the thickness of their relations.



**Figure 27:** Wall painting in memory of ‘Alī Faḍul and ‘Awaḍiyya ‘Ajabnā, Deim.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Photo B. Casciarri, 2019. The text reads (from the left): “Martyr ‘Alī Faḍul, martyr ‘Awaḍiyya ‘Ajabnā. Freedom, Peace and Justice. Civil Government (*madaniyya*).” It is signed by the Association of Sudanese Painters, Shabāb Ṣafrajat and Dayāma.

Another tentative reflection emerges from this study: the idea of how anthropology and history can profitably merge when attempts are made to construct the social history of “ordinary people” in popular quarters. My personal trajectory is just one of these possible pathways. Before becoming an anthropologist, I received my initial training in social history, and discovered fieldwork through an oral history of the working class in Italy. This experience gave me an interest in studying how people (especially subaltern, dominated or marginalised groups) tell stories about their lives and places, considering memory not as a receptacle of “facts” but as a “matrix of meanings” (Portelli 1985), in which we can look at how people invest their present and future through their practices and desires. Focusing on pastoral contexts during the early years of my research, and later caught up in the misleading debates that attempted to discern and label “urban” and “rural” anthropologists, I finally accepted that I had the qualifications to propose a social history of Deim through an ethnography of the district. Although I passed from the desert to the town, I still very much remained an anthropologist, relying on qualitative ethnography for my fieldwork in Deim, based mainly on stories people told me about their lives and their involvement in the life of the district, enriched by frequent in-depth observations and helped by my status as a resident, which together with my empathy certainly also represented a bias. I also overcame the malaise anthropologists still sometimes express with regard to history as a persisting legacy of colonial anthropology (and structural or functionalist approaches). Discovering my identity neither as a “rural” nor an “urban” anthropologist, but claiming a political and dynamic critical anthropology (inspired by Marxist tradition and its multiples approaches), I found myself unable to ignore the historical dimension proved to be unavoidable for me as I dealt with all my fieldwork, and in my search to understand collective social processes and their meanings. This modest contribution can be seen first as a tribute to the Dayāma, as one of the many peoples who fight injustice and oppression and sacrifice themselves for it, and second as a starting point for a development of a dialogue between historians and anthropologists to promote the construction of a new social history in Sudan.

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## Chapter 17

# Midwifery in the Nuba Mountains/South Kordofan as Vocation, Education, and Practice (1970s–2011)

## Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the links between vocation, education, and practice as experienced by midwives in the Nuba Mountains (South Kordofan, Sudan) between the 1970s and 2011. I study the ways in which midwifery was practiced under conditions of structural deprivation, as this experience reveals a great deal about midwives' lived agency. At its core, this study is an investigation into how and when individual midwives decide to take up the profession, how they prepare for their professional life, and how they conduct their work later on, for instance in terms of access to clients, actual practice, and payment. In order to trace these phases in their professional lives, I consider the relationship between their agency and structural conditions.

I look at this relationship within the framework of general health governance. Any analysis of general health governance must, however, be situated within the region's dynamic fluctuations between periods of war, post-war, and peace. I use the term structural conditions to refer to official health policies, the professional definition of midwifery and its position in the hierarchy of medical professions, the selection criteria applied to decisions of who will be sent for training, the training content and methods, the regulations that determine the division of labour, the social position of midwives, and social expectations regarding the provision of services. I also include recognition in the health administration system (or lack thereof), the territorial boundaries of the service coverage of specific midwives, the availability of tools and supplies, and the general infrastructural conditions under which they work. By the term agency, I mean the ability to take or choose an action, for example to work in specific way or to decide certain policies. Agency is shaped by gender, political affiliation, economic status and class, age, vocational work history, on-the-job performance, and the midwife's social character in her interaction with society.

Intensive historical and social studies of biomedical midwifery in Sudan already exist. "Biomedical" refers here to the kind of medical knowledge the profession and its educational institutions rely on, in this case the medical knowledge that



applies the principles and findings of biology and biochemistry. In Sudan, the introduction of biomedical midwifery grew out of concerns about reproductive health in relation to labour supply as well as the “embarrassment” of widespread female excision and infibulation vis-à-vis the British civilisation project (Bell 1998: 4–5). Although there are indications of earlier forms of midwifery instruction (Anderson 1908: 310; Nadel 1947: 224, 487, 515–516; Boddy 2003: 67; Al-Safi 2006: 238, 423, 881; Brown 2017: 45), the foundational history of biomedical midwifery in Sudan was marked by the opening of the Midwifery Training School (MTS) in Omdurman, which was administered under the Medical Department of Sudan, in 1920 during the colonial period under the leadership of Mabel Wolff. The school was a part of a slow transition from medical services based on the needs of specific groups, institutions, and situations (such as administrators, the army, irrigation schemes, and epidemics) to public health-based national policies (Boddy 2007: 180).

The school’s curriculum and the health professionals who were trained there had a lasting impact on midwifery in Sudan. Furthermore, the preference for MTS midwives and their teachers among Sudan’s political elite during the 1920s helped raise not only the school’s status but also the status of the profession itself (Bell 1998: 15). The early history of the MTS and the subsequent changes in midwifery as a profession have been relatively well documented. The existing studies and sources span from those closer to the institutional history itself (Kendall 1952; Elhadd 2020) to those that place the school in its wider political and societal context (Bell 1998; Boddy 2003, 2007; Brown 2017), and to those that follow the biographies of specific midwives (Kenyon 1991; Sharkey 1998; al-Amīn 2012) and their role in social change and societal controversies such as female excision (Gruenbaum 2001).

However, while the subsequent expansion of biomedical midwifery was a part of these studies, not all the regions of Sudan have received the same level of attention, not least due to the uneven availability of historical sources. Midwives in the Nuba Mountains, for example, have mostly been referred to at the margins of other studies and reports (see references in the case study), including one of the region’s most renowned female personalities, Mandī bint Sulṭān ‘Ajabnā,<sup>1</sup> whose career as a midwife remains unmentioned in most accounts of her life.<sup>2</sup>

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1 See, for instance, her mention during the 2020 centenary celebration of Sulṭān ‘Ajabnā and his daughter Mandī (for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71nOQFC3F6g>). Whenever fighting women have been mentioned in Sudan, Mandī appears as one who used a certain rhythm to call her ‘Nemanj’ tribe to fight British troops when they entered the Nemanj area. After the independence of Sudan this same rhythm was used in military music marches (as recorded, for instance, in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipPJAqTRU2k>).

2 She is mentioned, for example, in Mabel Wolff’s inspection tour sheets of 1934 (Sudan Archive [hereafter SAD], Durham, UK, SAD 580/7/16).

My study contributes to this understudied historiography of midwifery in the Nuba Mountains. It is based on open narrative and biographical interviews I conducted with traditional birth attendants (TBAs), nurse midwives, and auxiliary nurse midwives in the Nuba Mountains in 2010 and 2011.<sup>3</sup> During the same period, I conducted participatory observations at the reproductive health section at the Hayban Clinic, a rural centre in the central Nuba Mountains. The interviews and observations focused on the midwives' perceptions of training, the social position of the midwifery profession, health polices, and midwifery practices.<sup>4</sup>

I will begin with a general introduction to the study area (see Map 6), with a focus on its administrative status and the history of the armed conflict during the study period. I will then present a general overview of the development of medical services in the Nuba Mountains. In the case study that follows, I will relate this to the development of health governance in the region and to the biographical accounts of midwives covering the period between the 1970s and 2011.

## General Introduction to the Area

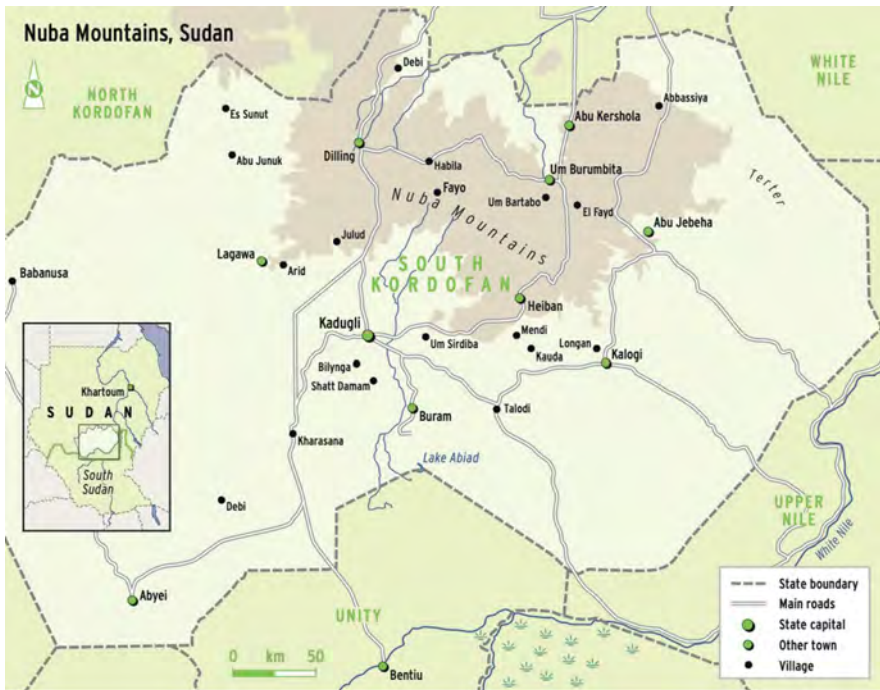
Under British rule, the Nuba Mountains were initially classified as a separate province. They were then integrated into Kordofan province in 1929 when the capital moved to El Obeid (Kāfi 1999: 73).

Kordofan has been divided and redistricted several times since independence in 1956, for instance into North Kordofan, with El Obeid as its capital, and South Kordofan, which had Kadugli as its capital. In addition to this administrative restructuring, the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005), which spread to the region in 1985, introduced a division of South Kordofan into the areas held by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and those held by the Government of Sudan (GoS). The areas under the control of the GoS consisted of three states in 1994, but included five provinces with 30 localities by 1998. The size of the SPLM/A-controlled areas was unstable, as it depended on the changing military situation; in these areas, the highest administrative level was the county, followed by two lower tiers: *payam* and *boma* (Abdel A'al 2010: 104; El-Battahani 1998).

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<sup>3</sup> All the interviews were conducted in Arabic, transcribed, and translated by the author. All the names of the interviewees have been changed.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank all my interlocutors for their patience in sharing their experiences with me. I wish to extend my thanks to Enrico Ille for our discussions and sharing the literature, and to Hannah Sapunor for reading and editing my chapter.



**Map 6:** Map of the Nuba Mountains.<sup>5</sup>

In 2002, a ceasefire agreement finally put the war officially on hold, and a Joint Military Commission monitored the agreement. The GoS and the SPLM/A signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 in which the Nuba Mountains were defined as one of the “Three Areas”, together with Blue Nile and Abyei. They were later renamed the “Chosen Areas”. The Nuba Mountains area was supposed to hold popular consultations about their future status in 2011. A slow process of integration between SPLM/A- and government-held areas had been taking place since 2005, with the establishment of Joint Integrated Units and a plan for integrating the administrations and civil services of both areas into one. This process did not reach the desired result, however, as will be discussed below with regard to healthcare services. The Nuba Mountains have continued to be divided along military lines ever since, which has had a crucial impact on social life.

The history of the midwifery profession and its development cannot be isolated from the situation of medical services in Sudan in general and in the Nuba

<sup>5</sup> Flint 2008: 2.

Mountains specifically. The development of medical services in Sudan reflected the general economic policies of the colonial administration (1899–1956): those areas that were identified as being “more important” in economic terms were also favoured when it came to the development of services. For example, Blue Nile Province, which contained a large segment of the Gezira Scheme, was served by 27% of all rural dispensaries and had more hospitals beds than any other area in the country (Gruenbaum 1981: 57), including the Nuba Mountains.

## Training and Work Experience in the 1970s and 1980s

### 1.1 The 1970s Plan to Strengthen the Health Service in the Nuba Mountains

In the early 1930s, the Nuba Mountains only had three hospitals, in Kadugli, Dilling, and Talodi (Corkill 1939: 519). There were also a few dispensaries at a lower level.<sup>6</sup> The number of medically-trained personnel also remained low: in 1940, for instance, Kadugli Hospital only had one medical officer, twelve female nurses, and three male nurses, and no medical inspector.<sup>7</sup> The following 40 years saw a slow increase in the numbers of health facilities and medical personnel. In 1980, there were eight hospitals in what was then South Kordofan Province. The main hospital (and only one in the district) was in Kadugli, and there were others in Abu Gebeiha, Talodi, Lagawa, and Dilling. During this period, certified midwife (*qābila qānūniyya* in Arabic) had become a fixed component of the Ministry of Health’s official personnel structure, as had the so-called “health visitor” (*zā’ira šiḥḥiyya*), who were specialised community public health nurses who also supervised midwives in the localities and provinces, and “community health workers”, who had also received training in obstetrics.

In 1975, during the period of Ja’far al-Nimayrī’s authoritarian rule (1969–1985), the Ministry of Health formulated a plan with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) for the development of primary health care within a timeframe beginning in 1976 and

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<sup>6</sup> Assistant District Commissioner G.W. Bell, Eastern Jebels, Monthly Diary, October 1934, SAD 695/8/6-8, Durham, UK.

<sup>7</sup> Sudan Government (SG), Completed Questionnaires on Dilling and Kadugli Containing Information on Housing, Communications, Population, Labour, Buildings, Transport, Animals, Water and Electrical Supplies and Health and Sanitation, 6–9 July 1940, SAD 100/26/31–37, Durham, UK.

ending in 1984. The basis of the plan was a low-cost health system founded on community self-help, with the aim of integrating the treatment of simple illnesses and injuries, maternal and child healthcare, nutrition, immunisation, and the control of communicable diseases. According to the plan, two categories of health workers were targeted to implement the public healthcare programme: community health workers, who provided general health services, and village midwives, who attended to the care of mothers and children. Both categories would be selected by their communities for a nine-month training course. Graduates from the training course were licensed to provide services for up to 1,000 people. Within this framework, the community and the government shared responsibilities for the health system. For example, the community could build a clinic hut, and the district council paid the salaries. The rural council was responsible for paying one midwife a salary of LS 15–35 a month. A health visitor provided support to the midwife. The community health worker received technical support and supervision from a medical assistant in a dispensary that served approximately 2,000 people (Michael 1987: 83).

The plan was a response to the population's urgent need for an increase in the quantity and quality of midwifery healthcare. There were therefore many considerations the planners of the programme put first, and the plan did not cover all the population's needs, aiming rather at providing at least one trained midwife for each province. The planners also decided that implementation should run at a low cost and begin within a short period of time. In 1980, therefore, the Ministry of Health and UNICEF strengthened the traditional health services to supplement the village midwife programme. So-called "traditional birth attendants" (TBAs, midwives with no formal training, *qābila taqlīdiyya*) took a short training course. The project began in the Kordofan Region in 1980. By April 1982, 40 TBAs had completed the first course, and a second group was trained in 1984 (Sakal 1984: Annex III, cited after Michael 1987: 88).

According to health officials interviewed by the anthropologist Barbara Michael, the project had a positive impact on reproductive health. Deliveries by trained midwives continued to remain below the targeted average, however, because the numbers of trained midwives graduating did not go beyond the initially planned number of one midwife per province, far from the ambitious programme to have a midwife in each village. A 1984 UNICEF study by Viviane Sakal claimed that "in South Kordofan it is estimated that 83% of children born are delivered by a traditional birth attendant or a relative" (Sakal 1984: 2, cited after Michael 1987: 87–88).

In the next section, I will look more closely at the training practices at a village training centre in Kweik, based on observations by Barbara Michael in the early 1980s. I will then recount the memories of one of the midwives I interviewed in 2011. She was trained at the midwifery school in Dilling in the 1960s and has

worked in Kadugli since the 1970s. In her interview, she reflects on the changes in training and working practices during this period.

## 1.2 The Training Method

When the primary health care programme was formulated, the selection criteria for the midwives who would receive training did not take their ages into consideration, but an age difference between village midwives and TBAs appeared nevertheless. Communities chose candidates to be trained as village midwives or TBAs themselves. The training programme for village midwives was mostly taken up by unmarried women between 18 and 25 years of age (Sakal 1984: Annex III, cited after Michael 1987: 87). The women who were sent to be trained as TBAs by communities were usually older, as community trust and practical experience guided their selection (Michael 1987: 88).

The training curriculum for the village midwife programme followed the path of the early midwife training in colonial Sudan, which sought to introduce basic biomedical and obstetric practices using sensory experiences rather than writing and medical theory, to match the fact that most of the midwives did not know how to read or write. From the beginning of certified midwifery in Sudan, midwives were trained to recognize the ingredients of medical preparations from their colour, taste, and smell. In the 1970s, however, the primary health care programme was also designed and implemented in conjunction with local knowledge, practices, and materials, which would be cultivated alongside basic biomedical knowledge. In this specific curriculum, for instance, the UNICEF teaching aids were anatomical pregnancy charts, models of an open abdomen, and an infant with the umbilical cord still attached. Local community knowledge was also adopted, for instance in the form of herbal nutritional supplements such as juice made from *tebeldi* (*Adansonia digitata*) fruit pods. This adoption of local knowledge combined with biomedical training was not limited to TBA training alone: it had already been part of the Wolff sisters' communications with their midwifery trainees at the Omdurman Midwifery Training School. This method corresponded to other experiences around the world, as discussed in the WHO Expert Committee on Midwifery Training and documented in its first report, which was published in Geneva in 1954 (WHO 2017: 8).

The training in Kadugli and other schools in Sudan also aimed to fill the gaps in knowledge of hygiene and delivery techniques in connection with the requirements of the formal health system, and to reduce illiteracy among village midwives (Michael 1987: 87–88). The training method considered both the students' literacy level and their extensive midwifery experience. The teaching methods used repetitive questions and answers, as well as the identification of medicinal products

using taste and smell. The courses also used learning-by-doing, with no fewer than 20 supervised deliveries. Classroom training period lasted for seven months, and the practical component was usually eleven months. Other learning activities for village midwife schools included sewing lessons and handicrafts (Michael 1987: 87).

This integration of existing experience with the introduction of new practices was also implemented in the traditional birth attendant (TBA) training centres, such as the one in the village of Kweik, north of Kadugli, which was observed by Barbara Michael in 1984 (Michael 1987: 88–93). At the time, the centre's architecture was a very simple design of huts made from local materials such as mud and dried grass. The trainees lived in the compound. The course initially covered three months, but the training Michael observed in 1984 only lasted for three weeks. The targeted group was women of between 40 and 55 years of age, whom Michael described as “27 Arab women, 6 of whom were nomads, and 13 Nuba women” (Michael 1987: 89). This indicates that the community criterion of selection based on previous experience was applied here, in contrast to the other components of the village midwife training programme (see above).

The training program for TBAs included subjects such as hygiene, prenatal care, delivery techniques, postnatal care, registration of births, childcare, child spacing, new techniques, nutrition for mother and child, and consideration of the health issues caused by female excision. Local herbal remedies were also considered here, and the training encouraged the continuation of boiling the *habil* plant (*Combretum hartmannianum Schweinf.* or *Combretum cordofanum*) as an antiseptic, using locally available foods for weaning, and controlling diarrhoea with a drink made from *tebeldi* (*Adansonia digitata*) and by eating peanut paste.

Some of the training methods were common to all the centres. After learning about scrubbing, boiling water, and sterilising scissors and razor blades, etc., the students carried out birth simulations as they followed instructions. The main idea was that each one would take their turn. One played the role of instructor while the other carried out the delivery. The others watched on and listened to comments from the instructor and the teacher. Other practices related to the contents of the midwife's kit after the students had learned about the materials through sight, smell, or taste. They repeated the role play, while their classmates listened and observed how to prepare cotton balls and gauze bandages. The women were shown how to sterilise them after the cotton had been rolled into balls and stuffed into cloth bags. The instructor then reviewed the identification and use of the various medications in the midwife's kit (which was similar to the one the TBAs would receive). At the time, the contents included bottles of salt, soda, and vitamins.

Michael described a session such as this in detail, including the use of a model womb and birth canal, and a life-sized doll the trainees had to “deliver” using sterilised tools, followed by an examination of the placenta and after-birth care (Michael

1987: 91–92). The end of training was marked by a graduation ceremony. This was a very important event, as it marked the beginning of a (new) professional life and the distribution of the UNICEF kits, a covered pot for sterilising and a tea kettle each trained TBA received. It was attended not only by representatives of UNICEF and the government but also by community dignitaries and the students' own families and friends, revealing an attempt to integrate higher-level administrative and local socio-cultural recognition.

### 1.3 The Impact of Training on Work Experiences

According to an evaluation in the region quoted in Michael's study, the training had a remarkable impact on TBAs' working lives. The standard of midwives' work improved during and after the primary health care programme (1976–1984), as Michael showed through interviews with town councils and a report by the programme's evaluation team. This team reviewed Kadugli hospital and its records before and after the 1981 training course, as well as during the time the midwives were working in their communities between 1982 and 1983. Infants' death numbers were reduced after training, the main reasons for infant mortality being diarrhoea and neonatal tetanus. Another impact of the training related to the development of TBAs, who acquired knowledge by combining existing accepted practices with biomedicine, which reinforced their status: from an administrative standpoint, trained TBAs were considered to be the equivalent of village midwives. They were supervised by midwife officers or health visitors, and were allowed and requested to refer difficult cases to the nurse midwives in the hospitals. According to this evaluation, their training also enabled them to supplement their incomes with payments from their communities (see the discussion of incomes below).<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, this impact cannot easily be traced except by general evaluation, as individual work experiences were rarely documented. The sections below offer instances of these work trajectories from biographical interviews I conducted in 2011, which reveal a number of additional aspects of the development of the profession and the regulations that were established in order to organise the division of labour between the TBA, village midwives (who have been known as auxiliary nurse midwives since 2008),<sup>9</sup> and nurse midwives, based on the WHO definitions

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<sup>8</sup> In the 1980s, midwives received LS 5.00 for delivering a male infant and LS 3.00 for a female. They also received one litre of cooking oil, half a kilogram of sugar, tea, or coffee (or a combination of the three), and one or two bars of soap (Michael 1987: 89–90).

<sup>9</sup> An auxiliary nurse midwife is a registered midwife who receives a salary from the government and is supervised by a midwife officer. She is equivalent to the village midwife but must have a



introduced into the health system over the years. They also trace the contradictions between professional development as envisaged during training and the actual social and professional position a midwife achieved after being trained.

### 'Awaḍiyya

'Awaḍiyya<sup>10</sup> was trained as a midwife in the 1960s. In her opinion, there have been clear developments in midwifery training and regulations in Sudan since she began her professional career; however, the national health policies and the international programmes, she felt, did not reflect the experience and position of the older generation she belonged to.

'Awaḍiyya was born in the 1930s and graduated from the El Obeid midwifery school in October 1959. She did not know how to read and write at the time, but this was not a requirement for schooling. She worked in al-Burgal, a suburb of Dilling city, about 120 kilometres north of Kadugli. She recalled:

One of the important lessons was on obstructed childbirth. We learned to first ask a pregnant woman her age and if she had had a baby or had been pregnant before, or whether this was her first attempt, to detect pregnancy, how to know whether a baby is in the first or second stage, and whether a baby is in the transverse or breech position.

After graduation, she earned a salary of 20 Sudanese pounds a month from the Ministry of Health. When her husband had to move to Kadugli for work, she asked her supervisor in the Ministry of Health in Dilling to relocate her there. When she worked in the Kalimo health unit in Kadugli in the 1970s, she received a salary from the Ministry of Health of 60 Sudanese pounds. By the 1980s, however, midwives were earning an additional 20 Sudanese pounds, as general inflation had devalued the currency. She reported that

up to then we had earned the same amount, but we stopped taking it because it had no value. Time was moving on but their [the government's] money was not" (*al-zaman māshī lakin gurawshah mā māshī*). The lack of a reliable income from the government meant that she "works for the people, [and] they can decide to give or not give at least [enough money to cover] the price of soap.

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secondary school certificate. She can work in a health unit, clinic, or rural hospital, and – unlike the village midwife – may be promoted to health visitor after another exam and two years' work experience (interview with 'Afaf Zayd, head of the Kadugli school since 2001, Kadugli, 8 December 2010). The Kadugli school opened in 1971.

<sup>10</sup> This portrait is based on a biographical interview by the author with 'Awaḍiyya, Kadugli, 8 December 2010.

During the more than 30 years she worked at the police health centre and Kalimo health centre in Kadugli, her main financial resource was her clients, who never paid a specific rate but decided for themselves what was fair. Another was the money she received to help pay her transport costs to attend pedagogical workshops (between 100 and 200 Sudanese pounds). This was the equivalent of between 5 and 10 monthly salaries, and so it represented a significant additional income, but this ended when the war spread to the area in the mid-1980s. These workshops only started up again after the CPA in 2005, once again at Kadugli's midwifery school, which coordinated workshops activities with the Ministry of Health and international donors. The workshops now covered sexually transmitted diseases and how to prevent midwives and babies from contracting them. Other topics included the importance of natural breast-feeding, eradicating diarrhoea among children, family planning, and obstructed childbirth. 'Awaḍiyya felt that these workshops were good but were focused on what they should not do and what cases they had to refer to nurse midwives or doctors.

She traced this diminishing importance of village midwives through a changing description of the contents of the midwife's bag since she started in 1959:

We had in the bag one pair of scissors, one pair of obstetrical forceps (*jefitt*), and *gumatrin* [Ergometrine<sup>11</sup>], a kind of injection to stop bleeding until the case reaches the hospital, food salt in case of low blood pressure, English salt to dry milk in the breasts of women who lost their babies during delivery or after birth, glycerine in case of a navel infection, carbonate for pregnant women who suffered from heartburn [calcium-carbonate antacid], and Dettol, cotton, and soap.

'Awaḍiyya felt that the bag was crucial for facilitating her work. The first change came with the war. During the war that began in South Kordofan in 1985, supplies for midwives' bags were not stable, so they only used boiled water and clean cloths. After 2005, a new bag was distributed that contained only tools, but no medicine, and supplies remained unreliable.<sup>12</sup> She expressed her dissatisfaction with the change in the contents of the bags and her status, both of which seemed to have shrunk despite her decades of practical experience, together with a loss of financial support and social status: "We worked all these years and covered much work but they did not give us or tell us the things of the new midwives (*al-dayāt al-judād*)."

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<sup>11</sup> This injection is now included in the bags of nurse midwives with three years' training, but not those with only one year of midwifery training. The same applies to a substance called Syntocinon, which is sometimes mixed with Syntometrine.

<sup>12</sup> The bags contained 2 obstetric forceps, 2 scissors, a bowl, pregnancy tests, thread, and cotton. The inventory of equipment in the reproductive health unit included 1 blood pressure monitor, 1 stethoscope, and examination couches with curtains (Sharif 2019: 51).

For her, the bag represented a tool of professional power that was now underequipped and neglected, although she was still expected to cover a large population across a service coverage area that had not been reduced in size.

Another aspect of the midwives' experiences she described was that midwives had faced major challenges during the war relating to both their financial and physical security: "There were kidnappings of midwives by *al-khawārij*" (a pejorative term for SPLA soldiers based on the Arabic word for "dissidents"). The GoS Ministry of Health had also introduced new regulations that forbade midwives from only being accompanied by the husband or a male relative of a pregnant woman. Instead, they were required to have a female relative of the pregnant woman present and to clearly describe where they lived to the relative. The regulations also required the midwife to return before nightfall, as there was no public service to protect them while they were coming and going, revealing the limited efforts on the part of the security and police forces to provide these services. The only affordable means of protection were the midwives' or the pregnant women's families.

When I asked 'Awaḍiyya why she continued to provide midwifery services, she explained that the changes were made very slowly, and that she always nurtured the hope that things would be different. For example, she thought the situation would improve after the war, or after training or a workshop. She also made the point that this was the work she had learned and provided over the course of many years. Her professional identity was how people saw her and how she saw herself, so what other work would she do? Her vocation was not only a practice but also something that gave her a purpose and identity:

Now I have grown old, people come and ask for my help. I cannot refuse, that is what I have learned through years and God may give me a price [for it] in later life. I am not responsible for my children any more: they have all graduated and work, they have their own families.

'Awaḍiyya reported how time went "slowly", and her religious expectations added another dimension to the various structural conditions she had faced throughout her working life, including the need to take care of her children. However, a degree of independent agency is also apparent in her decision to continue working as a widow and elderly woman. She had substantial work experience, and was a hard worker who was trying to improve her skills, which defined her societal image and her own self-image as a midwife, as well as the sense of belonging to her work that motivated her to continue.

The next section will further consider midwives who persisted with the profession in spite of difficult conditions. I also discuss midwives' experiences in SPLM/A-controlled areas and the development of midwifery in the health services and nursing education in these areas.

## Health Governance, Education and Work from the Late 1980s to 2011

### 2.1 The Health Services from the Late 1980s

According to the 1983 census, the Nuba Mountains had a population of 914,453 (Komey 2004: 184) out of an overall population of 20.564 million (Davies 1983: 33), which represented 4.4% of the total. The whole of Sudan had 12,871 nurses, 3,858 midwives, and 366 health visitors at that point, while South Kordofan had 546 nurses (4.2%), 143 midwives (3.7%), and 13 health visitors (3.5%). The Kadugli District had registered 60 community health workers and 40 Traditional Birth Attendants (Michael 1987: 85–86). At the end of the 1990s, a government assessment of mother and child care personnel in South Kordofan (Ri'āsāt al-Jumhūriyya 1999: 114) reported 36 health visitors. It also counted 182 certified midwives, 20 obstetric nurses (*mumarrīdat qābilat*), and 110 TBAs.

However, the spread of the war into the region from the mid-1980s exacerbated the unequal provision of service in the region. This was clearly illustrated in the first combined assessment of SPLM/A- and GoS-held areas since the beginning of the war, although it was conducted by two different field teams (United Nations Coordinator of Emergency Relief Operations [UNCERO] 1999). The team in the SPLM/A-held areas pointed clearly to the damage caused by the targeting of health institutions by the government military forces (UNCERO 1999: 33). The relative availability of health practitioners was as follows (see Table 5):

**Table 5:** Doctors to patient ratio in the late 1990s.<sup>13</sup>

SPLM/A-held areas	GoS-held areas
1 doctor per 300,000 people	1 doctor per 75,000 people
1 medical assistant per 50,000 people	1 medical assistant per 9,000 people
1 nurse per 50,000 people	1 nurse per 8,500 people
1 community health worker per 5,500 people	1 health visitor per 21,500 people 1 assistant health visitor per 50,000 people
1 midwife per 50,000 people	1 certified midwife per 2,500 people 1 traditional birth attendant per 7,000 people

Both distribution and quantity were clearly at different levels. People also had to rely completely on community health workers in the SPLM/A-held areas in

<sup>13</sup> Source: UNCERO 1999: 34, 45.

the absence of regularly paid health professionals. While the community health workers and health visitors in both areas were paid from community contributions and midwives and TBAs were paid by their clients, the work situation in the SPLM/A-held areas was much more precarious, since they still depended on their own agricultural production to survive, which also limited the time they could spend on health services to about 4 to 8 hours a week (UNCERO 1999: 34, 45). On the other hand, the voluntary nature of the work and the community contributions gave the provision of healthcare a more socially embedded character than a service based solely on the payment of salaries (UNCERO 1999: 36).

The period between the wars (2005–2011) also did not see a significant reduction in regional and national inequalities in healthcare provision (Sharif 2019). An assessment in the eastern Hayban Locality, a central SPLM/A-held area, for instance, found only 264 health personnel for a population of 211,474, including just 11 midwives, which left each midwife to serve 20,000 people (Komey and Ille 2010: 19–23).

## 2.2 Health Governance and Facilities

Like all civilian health providers, midwives and TBAs came under the military authority of the SPLM/A-held territory in the second half of the 1980s. Health units were subject to direct supervision and administration by army medical brigades, and the availability of health services was related to the military presence and mobility. These units were the only institutions that provided health services for both the civilian population and soldiers between 1985 and 1990. Midwives and TBAs, like all civilian health services in the area, were generally very few in number, and they included soldiers who were interested in providing health services or who had received medical training in Southern Sudan or Ethiopia. There were also civilian health workers who became members of the SPLM/A, or health workers who had not fled when the SPLM/A entered their villages, as well as other health professionals who joined the SPLM/A voluntarily from numerous places inside and outside Sudan. In any case, civilian health personnel had no alternative but to accept the army's domination of their services during this period.

The years between 1990 and 1993 were a turning point for the development of health administration in the SPLM/A areas. A population census was completed under the supervision of teachers from Ḥakīma Ya'qūb School, a medical school that had been founded in 1989 (see the section below), with participation from the school's students and native administration leaders. An election was also held to form an advisory council, which in turn appointed a health committee made up of teachers from the school. Their main function was to provide services for both military personnel and the civilian population, but other efforts to stabilise health

services were also made, such as mobilising funds. The consequence of all these steps was the stability of health services in general, and midwifery in particular, which did not have to depend as much as it previously had on the movements of army brigades (Sharif 2019: 27–28). The population census also helped the planning of midwives' training for areas in need and to redistribute them in these areas.

Between 1993 and 1997, further steps to stabilise the provision of services were taken in the health administration sector. The health committee became the Secretariat of Health, which included a number of posts in a hierarchy of functions, from the secretary's deputy and the secretary of finance to the supervisor of midwives, as well as the supervisors of geographical sectors established in previous years (1990–1993). These sectors, which were created on the basis on geographical factors and population size, included health centres with subordinate health units. The health workers in these units – including midwives – made up the lowest level of the health administration. All were graduates of Ḥakīma Ya'qūb School (with the first batch graduating in 1990–1991), and while some came from army units and returned there after graduation, most were deployed as civilian nurses. It was from among this group that midwifery services were established, as basic obstetrics had been made part of the regular curriculum for all nurses. One nurse from each health centre group of 6–10 was required to focus on practising midwifery, regardless of their gender (Sharif 2019: 29).

In 2002, a ceasefire agreement was reached. The structure of the health administration was extended, with sections added to the secretariat, such as environmental health, a supervisor of primary health services and an organisational coordinator, who managed the work of the non-government organisations that were already active or became active in the region (Sharif 2019: 30). The administrative objective during the subsequent period was to enhance the structure of the Secretariat of Health and the stability of the provision of health care, and to produce more health workers and improve health-related communications with communities (Sharif 2019: 30). After the CPA was signed in 2005, the Secretariat expanded its offices and sections with a permanent building and rebuilt health units and health centres. The new sections included vaccination, water and sanitation, and epidemic diseases, as well as a section for reproductive health that replaced the previous midwifery office. A section for medical supplies was given a new building, which marked a departure from the logistical responsibilities that had previously been held by Ḥakīma Ya'qūb School, whose students had played – and continue to play – a major role in the distribution of medical supplies (Sharif 2019: 45).

From this development of health governance, it is possible to observe that the emergence of the midwifery office and later the reproductive health section was linked to the stability in the provision of healthcare based on geographical sectors, whereas midwifery services had been virtually absent when health services had

been connected to the mobile army brigades. Nevertheless, these offices focused on maternal health as the only service for women's health during the war and the post-war eras.

Given Ḥakīma Ya'qūb School's central importance to the provision of health-related services in the SPLM/A-held areas, the next section will look more closely at its training and staffing, and the process for selecting students. It should be noted that at all students at Ḥakīma Ya'qūb were trained in midwifery as part of their curriculum and prospective employment, and there was no division of nursing work. I will also relate these issues to working practices as they were recounted to me in the biographical interviews.

## 2.3 Ḥakīma Ya'qūb School

Ḥakīma Ya'qūb School was the only health education institution in the SPLM/A-dominated areas. It was founded in 1989 by the SPLM/A, and was named after a nurse and SPLM/A member who had been killed in battle. Responsibility for the school rested solely with SPLM/A's health administration throughout the war, until Save The Children USA took over in 2003. At the time, the location of the school, which had changed several times during the war, was in Kadero. A new school built by Save The Children USA in Kummo opened in 2006 with the same name, Ḥakīma School. In the same year, the Ḥakīma Ya'qūb School in Kadero was closed.

### Objectives and Selecting Students

When Ḥakīma Ya'qūb School was established, the administration set itself three main aims: to build trust between the SPLM/A and communities through health-related communication; to develop a type of health education with a curriculum that would take the immediate needs for physical and cultural survival into account; and to produce healthcare personnel who would be able to react to all kinds of emergency situations and trained to provide all types of health services without any form of specialisation. With the development of the new school, a fourth objective emerged in 2004 and 2005 related to the formal certification of Ḥakīma School graduates. It was here that the ambiguous administrative status of the Nuba Mountains – split between the SPLM/A and GoS – became apparent: what were the standards to be applied here? Were they those of Northern Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, or Kenya? What was to be done with the methods that had been developed during the war and the post-CPA transitional period? How would health workers – including midwives – who had practiced throughout the war be evaluated?

These seemingly technical issues were widely discussed as a background to the general integration of the public administration that had been agreed on in the CPA with the ostensible goal of treating the systems of both parties to the conflict equally. In practical terms, the integration process moved towards assimilating human resources in the health sector controlled by the SPLM/A side into the GoS Federal Ministry of Health's existing system, with their own evaluation standards. Apart from the political tensions this created, there were implications for the organisation, certification, and practice of midwifery in the SPLM/A area.

This becomes clear if we consider the question of how the school was staffed. When it was founded, four civilian nurses and two medical assistants were transferred from the military medical units to become teachers. Selection of the civilian staff was based on their motivation to stay and their capacity to adapt to conditions of war and the military administration. All the teachers employed at the school from 1989 to 1992 held the Sudanese certificate issued by the GoS Ministry of Health. Most had studied and graduated in the 1970s, and some had a nursing certificate from Sudan's unified exam, while two had medical assistant certificates. They were similar in terms of their education and age, but they had had different experiences in terms of areas and practices, which was reflected in the distribution of the topics they taught at the school (Sharif 2019: 62, 71). In subsequent years, there were a number of changes in the staff, but a major shift in the numbers and variety of staff came after the CPA with the establishment of the new Ḥakīma School in Kummo in 2006, when pupils were recruited from many neighbouring countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia, and from Southern Sudanese and Nuba who had been educated in East Africa. In addition, there were other employees besides the teaching staff, including a librarian, cleaners, and kitchen workers (Sharif 2019: 65–66).

Four criteria were used to select students in the SPLM/A areas. First, they had to have been health workers who had stayed in the area despite the war; second, they had to be delegates from churches; and third, they needed to be community members who were interested in health work. These first three recruitment criteria were applied regardless of age and gender, with a preference for people who were able to read and write, although this was not a main condition, especially during the war. Priority was given to students who showed a political commitment to the SPLM/A, or at least a tendency towards such a commitment; this politicisation of professionalising midwifery was a distinctive feature of the midwifery landscape. The fourth category of students was SPLM/A soldiers serving in army medical units, including those who had trained outside the Nuba Mountains, with a view to having them learn about available resources in an emergency and share their experiences with the other students (Sharif 2019: 63).

The selection criteria remained unchanged after 'Umar al-Bashīr came to power in 1989, although they did change somewhat in 1993, when the school began



to train nurses for one year and medical assistants for two. However, the conditions for admission remained substantially the same, with reading and writing becoming a preferred skill, especially for the longer training courses. All these criteria and the content of the training are an indication of the importance of a sense of belonging not just to the profession but also to the village, geographical area, and Nuba region the health workers were intended to represent. In other words, a deeper form of commitment than merely taking up a job was ingrained in the training.

These criteria changed completely in 2009, when the Sudanese secondary school certificate became an entry requirement and one of the conditions for graduation for undergraduate students. As a consequence, admission to the school was no longer exclusively for students from the SPLM/A areas or those affiliated to the party: it was now available to all students from South Kordofan (Sharif 2019: 66). In fact, the new conditions became a disadvantage for prospective health workers from the SPLM/A areas, whose education and professional lives during and after the war were not conducive to satisfying the required formalities. This dynamic was also experienced in the work environment, as we will see below.

### **Educational Content and Methods**

Health education at Ḥakīma Ya'qūb School gradually developed to cover different levels, from health auxiliaries to nurses to medical assistants. Health auxiliaries, the lowest level, only graduated between 1989 and 1992, with a total of 565 graduates. Nursing certificates were first issued in 1993, initially to 65 graduates, with the idea of covering all health services with no specialisation and no distinctions between male and female nurses in the provision of care. The medical assistant programme was started up in the same year. This was a two-year course, and a total of 214 men and women graduated between 1993 and 1999. This broad capacity-building of health workers continued until 2005. In 2006 the new Ḥakīma School was prepared to accommodate 85 students, but in fact it only admitted 32 a year, allowing the school to focus on building a solid ground for nursing – including midwifery – through the development and teaching of new courses that had not been possible during the damaging war years.

Different teaching methods were used to work around the limited access to biomedical drugs and pharmacological training. For example, teachers tried to keep samples of medicines to study. They also drew medicines from memory and repeated information orally for the students to memorise when exercise books were not available. Teachers sometimes had to describe some or all of the ingredients of medicines in this way (Sharif 2019: 67).

As mentioned, interaction with communities was one of the school's aims, in order to build trust between communities and the SPLM/A.. This was one of the main issues at a time of armed struggle and cultural emancipation, as was confirmed by a former director of the school (1989–2006), who said in an interview that “We are fighting to let our culture survive, so we have to know it and respect our communities’ health knowledge” (Sharif 2019: 68–69). Consequently, multiple learning references were sourced from communities alongside the knowledge and treatment and prevention practices brought in by agencies. With limited resources but a rich environment, the former director of the school explained how these interactions took place: “Theoretically, we taught [bio]medicine but practically we trained them in rural communal treatments (*al-ilājāt al-baladiyya*).” This is a reference to the herbal treatments that are well-known practices in these communities. As he said, “We just organised these practices or we facilitated knowledge exchange between areas.”

The main points of reference for students’ health education were their teachers’ educational and professional backgrounds; this was even more the case where no library was available. Members of staff who were themselves graduates of the health auxiliary and the auxiliary midwifery school in Kadugli before the war, for instance, applied its training model, which included obstetrics and gynaecology, among other topics (Sharif 2019: 62, 71). As I have mentioned above, midwifery was also part of the general curriculum at Ḥakīma Ya’qūb School, but some auxiliaries and nurses were chosen to specialise in it. A focus on a portrait of a teacher on the midwifery course at the Ḥakīma Ya’qūb school (1992–2005) will give an idea of the content, methods, and structural conditions of the training and how they were all reference points in the interaction between teachers, their students, and medical soldiers.

## Teresa

Teresa<sup>14</sup> studied at the Hayban Primary School up to the sixth grade, and continued her education at the intermediate school in Kadugli, where she also studied midwifery. She stopped attending school and returned home in 1986 when the war broke out. When Ḥakīma Ya’qūb School was established in Jangaro, she was selected by one of churches in the area to attend it. She graduated from Ḥakīma Ya’qūb in 1992 and stepped into a teaching role the same year. When the school

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<sup>14</sup> This portrait is based on a biographical interview by the author with Teresa, Debbi, 21 November 2010.

moved from Jangaro to Debbi for security reasons, she followed it there. Teresa said, “we tried to graduate students with many specialisations so when they return to their community, they will be able to help, even in midwifery, so all students, males and female, learned midwifery.”

To teach the subject, she used her notebook from her studies in Kadugli and at Ḥakīma Ya‘qūb School. She also shared one of the few available books at the school, a textbook in Arabic entitled *Musā‘id al-Ṣaḥḥa* (“Health Auxiliary”), with all the teachers. The book is known in Sudan as the basic text for all health workers. When the school began to provide medical assistant certificates, it became necessary to import reference texts for medical assistants from Khartoum and Kadugli (Sharif 2019: 65–67). After 1995, they worked with a book called *Where There Is No Doctor*, which was brought in by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) during a remarkable intensive training course for students and teachers held in Nairobi in 2000. This course gave Teresa a push in her midwifery teaching content for auxiliary nurses, nurses, and medical assistants (Sharif 2019: 71–72). Teresa and all the other teachers relied on each other’s previous experiences as well as current practices in emergency situations. They also interacted with the students who joined the school after having previous training in South Sudan, Ethiopia, and other countries, and exchanged knowledge with the army medics, who brought books or texts that were in short supply and more training, especially from South Sudan.

Teachers like Teresa and their students learned from their communities, where teachers and students came from different parts of the region. Another means of expanding their knowledge developed when the school moved from one location to another for security reasons, as was the case when it moved from Jangaro (Lumon) to Debbi in 1993 and then to Kadero in 1997, along with the army medical units. Training was affected not only by the limited resources, but also by the conditions of war and the agency of students and teachers. This was the case with Teresa, who made the most of every interaction to acquire knowledge and forge her own path in education and midwifery while also practicing with very limited resources in a dangerous situation. For example, she taught students in her midwifery lessons how to clean a women’s body by using soapberry bark (*Balanites*).

However, this also meant that not all health problems could be addressed: students, and later midwives, were confronted with numerous cases of rape and genital mutilations by Sudanese government troops, and severe wounds required types of urgent surgical intervention and psychological and social support that neither they nor the teachers could provide. Referral to the MSF hospital in Lumon was the only solution. Regardless of these emergency situations and the subsequent limitations in their resources, the teachers made innovative adaptations to the educational content to suit the particular context, to the extent that they even created their own educational tools. As an expression of their individual and collective

agency, teachers and students such as Teresa transformed the school's curriculum and methods by creating an interaction between their local/biomedical knowledge and practices.

Unfortunately, none of the practices and knowledge created by teachers such as Teresa have been certified or even recognised by the Ministry of Health, which evaluated the school and students during the integration process after the CPA agreement. The Ministry of Health's technocratic assessment only considered educational certificates and medical examination reports that were based on its own medical board or equivalent certification. The inspectors also demanded certificates of work experience, and only accepted work carried out in the medical institutions that had been integrated during this process (Sharif 2019: 54–55). These kinds of requirement relied on authenticating documents more than examining experiences, knowledge, and practices on a case-by-case basis, and failed to acknowledge the fact that the lack of stability – in healthcare and education, for instance – were both a factor and a consequence of the war. There was no consideration of the war conditions, when there was no safe space to keep papers in the struggle to stay alive. However, this very instability resulted in situations in which a different kind of agency and experience appeared, such as Teresa's struggle to emancipate herself and midwifery education under these conditions. An unadjusted focus on written documentation and a limited application of work experience criteria meant that a nurse midwife like Teresa was ultimately not officially integrated as a midwife or teacher into the Ministry of Health's human resources registration system.

## 2.4 Work Experiences

I consider work to be a space and practice. Work as a space and its infrastructure are part of the conditions that affect a midwife's decision-making. Work as a practice is the expression of a midwife's agency that is both shaped by and shapes their vocational work history and on-the-job performance, as well as their social character in their interactions with society. The portraits of midwives and their practices I present here offer a perspective on the capacity and own decision-making in the profession. I mainly discuss practices in situations of shortages of medical supplies and how midwives dealt with them, and also cover their reporting practices vis-à-vis national and international conventions for documenting healthcare.

One of the main determinants of the performance of health facilities is the level of medical supplies for medicine and tools in general, and for midwives' bags specifically. Health workers always had to learn and practice how to report their needs or gaps in supply, as well as population health. The supply context changed over time, however, and so did the required skills. At the beginning of the war, for

instance, there was a famine in the SPLM/A-controlled areas, where there were no supplies of drugs or medical equipment, and reading and writing were far less essential skills during that time than how to deal with cases without biomedical drugs and equipment (Sharif 2019: 36).

One example of this is Mūsā, a 39-year-old nurse who graduated from Ḥakīma Ya'qūb School and whom I interviewed in 2010.<sup>15</sup> He had been selected from his village of Saraf al-Nila to study at the school in the early 1990s. Although he was nominated to become a teacher at the school, he decided to return home to serve his community in the health unit. He remembered how the community welcomed him, and noted that they expected a high standard of work, as he was one of the outstanding graduates. But his actual work confronted him with decisions that even his wartime training had not covered. In the interview, he offered details of one of the many critical cases he had to deal with, a pregnant woman with a broken pelvis lying on the ground in her house, and about to die. He had been trained in midwifery, but like many nurses during that time, he had no medical equipment. He used blacksmithing tools such as nippers and pliers, and even asked a blacksmith to help him. After they had ordered everybody out of the room, he sterilised the tools with fire, examined the woman's belly and the position of the foetus, and found that there was no way to deliver the foetus alive and that the mother's life was also in danger. He decided to at least save the mother by breaking the head of the foetus and dragging the dead body out of her. He took care of the woman after the operation with herbal treatments. He concluded by saying "She is still alive, and later delivered another baby" (Sharif 2019: 88).

Midwives who graduated from Ḥakīma Ya'qūb during the war found themselves facing a fundamental difference between what they had been trained for and what they had to do as necessary interventions if their patients were to survive, such as using herbal treatment. What they faced went beyond this, however: they also had to learn to deal with moral questions of who should survive in such critical moments, like the issue the pregnant woman and Mūsā had experienced.

Another challenge was reporting skills under conditions of medical shortages. Before 1995, when MSF Holland began to contribute medical supplies, there had been no focus on maternal health, medicine, or reproductive facilities or tools for midwives. In later years, however, midwives were able to receive equipment from many organisations as a component of medical kits. Between 1993 and 2002, therefore the reporting and information requirements among health workers changed, including for midwives, who were now trained by international organisations such

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15 Interview with Mūsā by the author, Hayban, 25 November 2010.

as MSF and UN agencies to follow their procedures. However, these reports still contained limited written information about the need for medicine or medical tools, and no further information, for instance, about birth rates or epidemics. This also served to keep the literacy requirements low.

In peacetime, after the CPA in 2005 up to the time I conducted my fieldwork in the reproductive health units at the Hayban health centre in 2010 and 2011, the unit had mainly received supplies from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (Sharif 2019: 51).<sup>16</sup> The reporting system now followed the format laid down by the Federal Ministry of Health and General Directorate of Primary Health Care. There were three types of report: the first was a monthly report with details about maternal health, based on the so-called “daily registration for outpatient clinics”; the second was the collection of antenatal cards, which recorded the details of pregnancies; and the third was from the decentralised health system project, according to which midwives were supposed to write down information about maternal care, the number of births and deaths, the number of pregnant women and infants, vaccinations, and postnatal growth follow-up information (Sharif 2019: 86). The channel of communication started when the midwife submitted the reports to the clinic’s medical assistant, who then submitted reports to the coordinator of reproductive health in Hayban Locality, who delivered them to the locality’s director of health services.

Midwives’ writing practices in these formal reports varied. During my fieldwork at the health centre in 2011, there were different levels of education and reading and writing skills among the midwives. In an interview with Āmina, who was the youngest midwife, with 16 months of training in the Kadugli Midwifery School and 18 months of work experience in the unit, she expressed her frustration and the challenges associated with working with four older village midwives, two of whom had not been integrated into the health service despite the need for their services.<sup>17</sup> There was a lack of commitment to attend when the workload was high: the village midwives would often leave the health centre to work in their villages, but they still brought critical cases to the medical assistant at the centre or hospitals when needed. In addition to the differences in educational levels and irregular attendance, I observed unclear work schedules that affected the quality and quantity of the reports.

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<sup>16</sup> The following paragraphs are based on chapters 2 and 3 of Sharif 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Interview by the author with Āmina, Hayban, 19 November 2010.

One of the common reporting errors I documented was that for the most part, the midwives at the Hayban health centre did not record the date of the women's registration, the name of the midwife who registered the information, or the date of issue of the report (Sharif 2019: 82). In addition, pregnancy-related cases were not followed up, and there was no written coordination of reporting and referring between nurses in the vaccination office, the nutrition unit, and the midwives in the reproductive health unit. Referring between these units was mostly done orally.

These shifts in the supply, reporting, and administration systems led to an intergenerational conflict between the health workers who had practiced throughout the war and the new workers who joined with a Federal Ministry of Health education background. A closer look at the reporting practices during my fieldwork not only reveals this conflict but also illustrates how the reproductive health coordinator in charge dealt with it by using a solution of her own design.

When I interviewed the reproductive health coordinator for Hayban Locality, she confirmed these observations when I asked her about the challenges facing the work of midwives: "There were some mistakes extending to the point of not registering the death of pregnant women or infants."<sup>18</sup> She mentioned one specific case of a report that was not only incomplete in comparison to reports prepared by the nurses from the same health centre, but had also been submitted through informal communication channels either in order to avoid her involvement or because they did not know how to report correctly. As a result, she attempted to build up the capacity of the midwives, especially those who were not good at writing and reading, as these were important skills for their performance at work. She organised the first workshop with the UNFPA for all midwives in the locality in May 2009. The policy allocated the midwives to centres and units in a way that achieved a balance of performance and skills among the various teams. This allowed the midwives to work together so that those with low reading and writing skills but excellent experience levels could collaborate with newer midwives who had less experience but were able to read and write well. In the case of the Hayban health centre, however, this allocation method created a tendency for irregular reports, especially in times of integration-related challenges.

The biographies show an even more radical notion of agency in individual practices and decision-making that points far beyond formal role definitions, administrative arrangements, and training content: midwives had to address not only the logistical but also the moral consequences of shortages, and they had to both follow and invent ways of organising their work and that of their peers.

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<sup>18</sup> Interview by the author with Esther, Hayban, 26 April 2011.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed autobiographical interviews of midwives in the Nuba Mountains to examine how they perceived the relationship between their profession as a vocation, their educational aims, and their practice. I have looked at the quality of this relationship in terms of midwives' expectations and experience, and I have highlighted their agency vis-à-vis the structural conditions of emergencies that required them to take action, not just shaped by but also reshaping the conditions under which they worked.

My study of individual biographies has highlighted the midwives' own perspectives on the quality of their work as they discussed the relationship between what they expected from the profession and themselves, what their training brought them in terms of knowledge and skills, and their practical experiences over the years. Criteria other than quantitative assessments, such as the value of remaining flexible under changing conditions and retaining a capability for own decision-making and problem-solving, came to light. This agency appeared at several different levels, from issues of administrative recognition to uncertainty and threats to physical and cultural survival in times of war and displacement.

This capacity to adjust has been depicted as a constant condition at Ḥakīma Ya'qūb School, the central training institution in the SPLM/A.-held areas in the Nuba Mountains. I have shown that its teachers brought their multi-faceted backgrounds into their educational practices while changing locations, and that the administration of the school mirrored the structural conditions of the war and post-war areas in general. This could also be traced to the shift from community-based knowledge production during the war to a formalised curriculum based solely on biomedicine under the administration of international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

Another aspect is the contradiction between (self-)perceived professional status and expertise and decreasing levels of administrative recognition and support for a specific kind of health worker, in this case the so-called traditional birth attendant (TBA). This has been discussed through a TBA's own analysis of the changing content of midwifery bags, with a perceived decline from being provided with tools and medicine to the sporadic provision of certain types of equipment, which for her represented a shift from being regarded as a healer to being able and expected to refer difficult cases to the "real" medical institutions. Meanwhile, she was still covering the same area with her midwifery services, and she viewed this continuation as a part of confirming her professional self-identification as a midwife.

I have also described the changing reporting systems in health units, and shown how different skills were required based on shifting conditions of medical supplies and levels of involvement of different administrations and organisations.



Through the example of literacy, I have studied the contradiction between a generation of health workers who served during the war but often lacked higher skill levels when preparing systematic written documentation, and a new generation of health workers who had had a more formal education. At a state health governance level, these different sets of skills and experiences failed to be integrated, while the reproductive health coordinator I interviewed solved any tensions that arose by forming mixed teams from both generations on her own initiative,

Here, I see an interesting case of individual agency interacting with structural conditions, with neither being independent from, or simply determined by, the other. Since the 1960s, midwifery health governance in Sudan had focused on expanding the coverage of midwifery services, especially in rural areas, and increasing the quality control of midwives by changing the supervision and referral systems; however, these health governance regimes failed to take the conflicts that emerged within the development of the profession into consideration. These conflicts arose between individuals over the division of work, resources, social positions, administration recognition, and hierarchies in decision-making, but they also activated individuals' agency towards these structural conditions: they developed among actors who were trying to come to terms with these conditions by relating to each other rather than merely being a function of them.

The quality of being a "good" midwife can therefore be identified as the ability to gain benefits from the profession, including in terms of both *etic* and *emic* notions of professional identity and "good performance". The self- and/or social expectations towards midwives were often broader than what the administrations and patients themselves provided, and they had to deal with problems that were not part of their training, which made improvisation a fundamental requirement for their success. As far as their tools were concerned, they often did not have what they had been trained with, so they had to find innovations or stopgaps to meet situational needs while also complying with their professional and human conscience, as in the case of Mūsā's triage. Another aspect is the continuation of work in spite of low or lack of income, whether from government salaries, community contributions, or patients' fees. Between their own professional identity as a service provider and economic and other vulnerabilities, an effective benefit may or may not emerge based on an individual valuation of this kind of work. I would argue that close biographical observation is needed in order to give visibility to these evaluations.

I have also introduced the political implications of these dynamics under conditions of war and beyond. The development of training methods and content, for instance, was not just determined by the immediacy of the need to provide emergency health care. Teachers and students alike were involved in a fight for both physical and cultural survival. Teachers were inspired by the historical develop-

ment of training methods that were close to surrounding communities, both linguistically and practically, for instance in the use of herbal treatments. This attempt to integrate communal knowledge was institutionalised during wartime, but ceased after the main form of instruction became the workshops provided by international NGOs, after which time training had to adhere more closely to biomedical concepts, and moved far from communal knowledge or the issue of cultural survival.

The policies of the humanitarian organisations remained in effect in the post-war situation. They touched – often unintentionally – on basic questions about the future of peace as the post-war government, communities, and professionals struggled with arguments about what kind of health education and healthcare system would be established in the SPLM/A.-held areas: assimilation into the Northern government system, a separate system based on what had developed during the war under the Secretary of Health, or a mixture or integration of the two. The development of health governance was thus directly related to the historical issues of hierarchies and power that underlie questions of war and peace in the region. Individual decisions by health workers, such as confirming the NGOs' shift to purely biomedical training, have therefore represented not only an enforced adherence to structural developments, but also an exercise of these individuals' agency that supported – or rather enabled – the emergence of such developments.

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**Part 6: The Ordinary Doing and Undoing  
of the Establishment**



Anaël Poussier

## Chapter 18

# Governing Men and their Souls: The Making of a Mahdist Society in Eastern Sudan (1883–1891)

When Muḥammad Aḥmad b. ‘Abdallāh, a leading member of the Sammāniyya *ṭarīqa*<sup>1</sup>, openly proclaimed on 29 June 1881 that he was the Expected Mahdi (*al-Mahdī al-muntazar*), he initiated a collective religious and political movement that was to profoundly transform Sudanese society. Over the four years that followed, he successfully wrested control over most of Nilotic Sudan from Egyptian colonial domination (1820–1885) and founded a centralised state structure, which was headed by the Khalifa ‘Abdullāhi after Muḥammad Aḥmad’s death on 22 June 1885. Until its demise in September 1898 in the wake of the Anglo-Egyptian conquest (1896–1899), the Mahdist regime exerted tremendous influence on the social fabric of the diverse local communities, which it attempted to radically alter to conform to the Islamic ideals it promoted, notably through its mobilisation of the population for jihad.<sup>2</sup>

However, the historiography of the Mahdiyya (1881–1898) has remained focused on the political and military dimensions of the period, at the expense of an analysis of its socio-economic dynamics. The main reason for this gap is the lasting influence of British colonial literature, which was initially developed by Francis R. Wingate, the senior British intelligence officer in Egypt between 1889 and 1899. Indeed, Wingate’s first publication, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan* (Wingate 1891), and his famous editorial work on the personal accounts published by Joseph Ohrwalder (1892) and Rudolf C. von Slatin (1896), have played a crucial role in shaping contemporary understandings of the Mahdist movement. His efforts were famously described by Peter M. Holt as “war propaganda” or “the public relations literature of the Egyptian Military Intelligence” (Holt 1958: 112), and aimed, through the construction of the “legend of the Mahdiyya” (Daniel 1966: 424–428), to convince British public opinion and political leaders of the necessity and legitimacy of a military intervention in Sudan (Warburg 2005: 373).

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1 All translations from Arabic to English are by the author.

2 I wish to express my thanks to Iris Seri-Hersch and Elena Vezzadini for their insightful comments on the early drafts of this chapter, as well as to the two anonymous reviewers whose remarks were decisive in refining my argument. All translations from Arabic to English are by the author.

“Wingate-Slatinism”, as Martin Daly dubbed this production, was based on two central arguments. The first was that the Mahdist uprising was a reaction to the many abuses committed by the oppressive Egyptian rule, especially in the area of tax collection, which had antagonised the local populations. As a result, some parliamentarians, radicals and Gladstonian liberals viewed the Mahdist movement as one of national liberation and were reluctant to support yet another imperial adventure in the region (Nicoll 2013: 12–16). So as to persuade them of the necessity of an intervention in Sudan to carry out the “civilising mission” (Warburg 2005: 374–375), Wingate had to discredit the legitimacy of the new regime. Thus, his second argument portrayed the Mahdists as fanatics, superstitious men who had been easily swayed by the Mahdī’s charisma. As for the Mahdī, whatever the validity of his early calling might have been, “he was ruined by unbridled sensuality,” and became an “effeminate and debauched prophet” (Wingate 1891: 12, 228), succumbing to the delights of Omdurman. The reformist values he had defended were further corrupted under the rule of his successor, who was responsible for the “horrors and cruelties” that resulted in “at least seventy-five per cent of the total population [perishing due] to war, famine and disease” (Slatin 1896: 623). In this respect, British colonial literature insisted heavily on the alienation by the Mahdist regime of its own population. This propaganda allowed the conquest of the Sudanese Nile Valley by Anglo-Egyptian troops in 1896–1898 to be framed as the liberation of an oppressed people. This somewhat self-contradictory narrative negated both the potency of the Mahdī’s *da’wa*<sup>3</sup> and his appeal to Sudanese populations, as well as the agency of the men and women who had voluntarily joined the movement, by considering their commitment as the imperative result of tribal affiliation or the effect of the Mahdī’s manipulative rhetoric.

This perception prevailed until the 1950s, when more nuanced accounts were offered in works by Peter M. Holt (1958) and Makkī Shibayka (1964). This historiographical reappraisal, which coincided with the opening of the Mahdist archives, led to a reconsideration of the despotic nature of the Mahdiyya and the role of “Wingate-Slatinism” in this characterisation. However, it remained somewhat locked answering questions that had first been asked by British propagandist literature, whether on the causes of the Mahdist uprising, which was still held to be primarily dependent on factors external to Sudanese society (Egyptian fiscal oppression and the abolition of the slave trade), or on the nature of Mahdist authority (considered almost uniquely from the point of view of the political centre, namely Omdurman). A second historiographical shift was initiated at a conference on the history of the

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<sup>3</sup> The polysemy of the term *da’wa*, which means “invitation”, “summoning” and “preaching”, makes it hard to translate. These terms fail to encapsulate the nuance that it also denotes the ideological paradigm expressed through it.

Mahdiyya in Khartoum in 1981, which helped broaden historical research beyond political and military matters to include topics such as the Mahdiyya's economic policies (al-Gaddāl 1987), and, crucially for this chapter, the attempted formation of a “Mahdist society” (Kāb al-Rafīq 1987). Later works pursued the avenues opened by this conference by studying the role of women during the Mahdiyya (Mahgoub 1992; Decker 1998) or the “Omdurman experience” and the formation of an original urban society in the Mahdist context (Kramer 2010).

As Mahdist studies subsequently faded from academic debate, the impetus provided by these analyses in the direction of a structured social history of the Mahdiyya was short-lived, even as the body of edited sources expanded greatly thanks to the work of Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm.<sup>4</sup> Despite all the efforts made towards a revisionist history, the initial framing of the Mahdiyya has proved astonishingly resilient, and little attention has been devoted to understanding the ways in which the Mahdī's *da'wa* resonated with the Sudanese populations and led a large numbers of men and women to commit to his movement. Most assessments of the effects of the Mahdist regime outside Omdurman remain locked in a dichotomy that places adhesion and resistance against each other,<sup>5</sup> one that is almost systematically considered at the level of tribal groups, and overlooks the complexity of individual interactions with the state and its representatives, and the social model they promoted.

Nonetheless, as early as 1898, direct contemporaries such as Paolo Rosignoli, an Italian Catholic priest captured by the Mahdists after the fall of El Obeid in 1883, offered a more nuanced description of the dynamics behind Mahdist mobilisation, writing that “the promise of equality and equal distribution of wealth had intoxicated the masses and they gave themselves heart and soul to the Mahdī”. He added that “the Bayt al-Mal [treasury], repository of wealth and distributor of the same, reflected the socialist aspect of the Mahdi state. It centralised wealth and redistributed it” (Rosignoli and Rehfish 1967: 59–60), thereby linking the principles laid down by the Mahdī to their administrative implementation. This chapter follows Rosignoli's intuition, arguing that the egalitarian doctrine proclaimed by the Mahdī not only drove the mobilisation of the *anṣār*,<sup>6</sup> but was also instrumental

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4 Among the most important editorial works undertaken by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, we must mention his magisterial editions of the Mahdī's and 'Uthmān Digna's correspondence, as well as the unfinished edition of the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhī's immense correspondence.

5 This is particularly clear in the regional literature, which tends to present opposition to Mahdist rule as an unwavering homogeneous local movement against an outside power. See for example al-Ḥasan (1970).

6 Literally “helpers”, this term was preferred to “*darwish*” (a member of the Sufi *ṭarīqa*), which had been used in the early days of the Mahdiyya. It is a direct reference to the supporters of Prophet Muḥammad in Medina.



in structuring the Mahdist administration. Furthermore, the latter, far from being solely an *ad hoc* set of institutions developed to respond to the needs of the nascent movement, was central to realising the Mahdist vision of a reformed Sudanese society. Finally, I intend to demonstrate that the Mahdist tenets proved resilient, both in time and space, after the death of the Mahdī in June 1885 and outside Omdurman.

This text undertakes a critical review of the potency of the Mahdī's ideology in shaping a Mahdist community through the works of the administration in Eastern Sudan between 1888 and 1891. With regard to the decisive influence of the model of Sufi *ṭuruq* (singular *ṭarīqa*) on the development of the Mahdist institutions, it heeds Knut S. Vikør's call for "a unified approach [that] must assume the primacy of the pious ideals, seeing the social and political consequences as results, side-effects, of the realisation of these pious ideals" (Vikør 2002: 79–80). Instead of dismissing the Mahdist ideology as pure religious rhetoric or postulating its irrelevance to the state's ordinary operations, I seek to question the enduring effects of the call for social justice it championed through an approach "from below", and to reveal its impact on daily interactions.

An investigation such as this requires a substantial, consistent corpus that allows for an in-depth analysis of the dynamics at work in the structuring of a local Mahdist community. In this regard, the set of documents produced by the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan between 1888 and 1891, particularly by the treasury of Tokar, is exceptional in several aspects, and represents by far the richest collection of texts emanating from provincial authorities. Because of the circumstances under which they were gathered,<sup>7</sup> these documents offer a detailed snapshot of a society under Mahdist rule, enabling a granular description of the administrative operations that are considered here as the locus of the expression of Mahdist ideology through the norms they attempted to impose, through their materiality – namely the scriptural practices that embodied the action of the administration – and finally through their daily negotiation and contestation by members of the community.

The first section of this chapter discusses the core principles of the ideology promoted by Muḥammad Aḥmad, how they were made to resonate with the Sudanese population and the means by which they were expressed in the building of the early Mahdist administration. The ways in which these ideals were still performative at the turn of the 1890s and critical for defining the generative interactions between the administration and an emerging Mahdist society in Eastern Sudan are the subject of the second section.

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<sup>7</sup> See below.

## Origins of the Mahdist Social Pact: Equality and Justice

The Mahdist *da'wa* as communicated to believers relied upon two central imperatives. The first was abandonment of the material world (*dunyā*) to dedicate oneself to the afterworld (*akhīra*). This meant renouncing possessions and riches to allow a total commitment to God. The second duty of new Mahdist adherents was to perform the *hijra*,<sup>8</sup> a first step toward the jihad, in the sense of the struggle to annihilate the rule of the “Turks”, the term used in the Mahdī’s correspondence to describe the Egyptian colonial administration in Sudan. It was also conceived as a replication of Prophet Muḥammad’s path and an escape from oppression, in this case repression by the Egyptian forces (Voll 1987). Both invocations were profoundly intertwined and reflected the structures of 19<sup>th</sup> century Sudanese society. The ideal of asceticism and relinquishing all worldly possessions promoted by the Mahdī often translated into his adherents’ leaving their land and cutting themselves off from their sources of livelihood. Muḥammad Aḥmad expressed this vividly in a letter to Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Baṣīr, the Mahdī’s father-in-law and main agent in the Gezira, which served as a template for later versions of the *da'wa*, when he wrote that “the beloved (*muḥibbīn*) shall renounce their homeland (*waṭān*) and their possessions (*amwāl*), since the material world is [only] delusion (*ghurūra*)” (Abū Salīm 1990: letter 15). Aside from agricultural exploitation, land was also critical to defining social relations and the inscription of individuals in kinship groups, both for sedentary populations and, as will be shown later, for pastoralists like the Beja in Eastern Sudan. The term “homeland” used by the Mahdī insists on the necessity of a break from the community of origin. The first *da'wa* stated:

You are not unaware of the change of time and the abandonment of the sanctioned usages (*sunan*). And one with faith (*imān*) and discernment (*fāṭin*) is not satisfied with this, but would rather abandon [his] people (*ahl*), desires (*awṭār*) and homeland to uphold the religion (*iqāmat al-dīn*) and the sanctioned usages. (Abū Salīm 1990: letter 22)

The Mahdist *da'wa* thus had a properly revolutionary dimension that aimed at a radical transformation of Sudanese society by uprooting individuals from their

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<sup>8</sup> The destination of the *hijra* evolved through time. From 1881 to 1885, the *muhājirīn* (literally those who perform the *hijra*) were enjoined to come to the Mahdī, wherever he had settled. After his death, Omdurman became the main *locus* of the *hijra*, but the term could also be used for journeys within a province to reach the site where the *ansār* were concentrated.

socio-economic environment to constitute a reformed Muslim community, in preparation for the day of judgment.

Once the earliest supporters of the Mahdist uprising had been brought together, the community needed to be organised and sustained, as the gathering of large numbers of men and women raised practical and logistical issues. Despite repeated assurances by the Mahdī that God would provide for them, internal tensions seem to have been rife. The treasury, the *de facto* central administration, is mentioned in Mahdist correspondence as early as November 1881, immediately after the Mahdī had settled in Qadir, in the Nuba Mountains (Abū Salīm 1990: letter 25). It was financed by the proceeds of looting (*ghanīma*) and the *zakāt*, the central pillar of Islamic fiscality. Considering later evidence on revenues generated by direct taxation (as no documents from the treasury between 1881 and 1885 seem to have survived), looting appears to have been by far the main source of income. The treasury was also responsible for sharing the resources that were collected. The primary group of combatants, who were organised around a banner (*rāya*),<sup>9</sup> could offer support to any of its members, if “[the] could not find anything to spend on himself, neither big nor small”. But “[the one] who did not have a brother to spend on him and was not integrated in the banners, he should come to the *tabaldīyya*,<sup>10</sup> or any place where we are [and] if we find anything, [. . .] we will give them what is needed [literally we will remove his needs].” (Abū Salīm 1990: letter 139). The first system of redistribution was limited, and relied on informal procedures to meet the needs of the men and women who had undertaken the *hijra* individually, a fairly frequent occurrence. But after this initial phase, the treasury found itself with more resources in its hands due to the expansion of the movement and the growing amount of booty it received, but also responsible for an even greater number of combatants and families, thus submitting the Mahdist administration to major inner tensions. The strain was so great that in June 1884, Aḥmad Sulaymān, the first secretary (*amīn*) of the treasury, wrote to the Mahdī that:

When the [people] saw the accumulation of goods brought from everywhere to the [treasury] [. . .] their selves recoiled and they lost their mind, since the poor (*masākīn*) have no other recourse but the treasury, and so, the clerks (*kuttāb*) who are in charge of the interests of the

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<sup>9</sup> The banner (*rāya* plural *rāyāt*) did not imply a specific number of fighters but tended to gather individuals of similar geographical origin. It was divided into *muqaddamiyyāt*, headed by a *muqaddam* (plural *maqāḍīm*), and, as for the banner, could comprise varying numbers of men, from a dozen to more than a hundred.

<sup>10</sup> The *tabaldī* (the African baobab in Sudanese Arabic), which is mentioned in this letter of October 1883, is native to Kordofan, particularly in the wadis around El Obeid, a city captured by the Mahdists in January 1883.

religion found themselves cornered and assaulted by the wrongdoers (*zullām*). (Abū Salīm 1992: letter 348)

The mobilisation of men and women and the disruption it caused in the socio-economic fabric of Sudanese society were unprecedented in the modern history of this region, and put immense pressure on state resources and the administration. Rosignoli argued that this development was the reason for the eventual downfall of the Mahdist state, as it became unable to satisfy the needs of an “inert population” once the resources acquired through looting had been depleted (Rosignoli and Reh-fisch 1967: 60).

However, the Italian father failed to see that the dependency of the Mahdist supporters on the treasury’s distributions was not accidental, but may rather have lain at the core of the Mahdist project: that is, the establishment of a reformed community removed from material concerns and entirely dedicated to its religious duties, in immediate proximity to the holy figure of Muḥammad Aḥmad. In this regard, the Mahdist society in Qadir bore a striking resemblance to the Sufi *ṭuruq* of the Greater Nile Valley. Indeed, the Mahdist vocabulary was infused with terms related to Sufi organisations, such as *muḥibbīn*, *khalīfa*, *muqaddam* and *bayt māl*. Still, several aspects of the early structuring of the Mahdist movement signalled important differences from the classical model of the *ṭarīqa* as a semi-autonomous local community centred around the sheikh. As the Mahdī exhorted his supporters to join him, he also set up a network of delegates who initially bore the title of *nā’ib* or *khalīfa*, and who were primarily responsible for mobilising combatants and collecting taxes in specific territories.<sup>11</sup> This mirrored the practices of Sufi *ṭuruq*, which had emerged in Sudan in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as the Khatmiyya, and to a lesser extent the Sammāniyya, to which Muḥammad Aḥmad belonged until 1881. Their centralised hierarchical organisation was in stark contrast to the fragmentation that had characterised previous Sufi institutions. This evolution, which is often ascribed to the broader trend of Sufi revivalism that began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, had a profound influence on the Mahdist movement. The numerous debates on the ideological dimensions of what some have described as “neo-Sufism” may have partially obscured the importance of these organisational changes (Voll 2008: 320–321). This was reflected in at least two core issues for the nascent Mahdist regime. Firstly, the changes allowed the movement led by the Mahdī to quickly assume state functions, particularly in his effort to establish consistent territorial control. There were, however, limits to this mutation of a Sufi leadership

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<sup>11</sup> For examples of early appointment letters, see letters 33, 46 and 66, all dated 1299 *hijrī* (1881–1882) (Abū Salīm 1990).

into a state power, most notably because the Mahdist movement was not able to rely on its own bureaucratic apparatus, and had to resort to recruiting elements from the Egyptian colonial administration by force to fill a number of positions, resulting in a hybrid organisation. Secondly – returning to Vikør’s injunction to consider the social practices of Sufi institutions as consubstantial with the realisation of their pious ideals – we should view the social organisation established by the Mahdist administration as a performative way of inducing the transformation of individual behaviours, a direct echo of the emphasis on personal religious realisation common to these revivalist Sufi movements (Wright 2020: 100–141). This produced a particular governmentality that inextricably associated a totalising reform of Sudanese society based on religious imperatives with the individualisation of the forms of political control (Savoia 2012).

The broader objective of the Mahdist project was to remedy the perceived corruption brought in by the “Turks” along two lines: equality and justice. As regards the former, Muḥammad Aḥmad repeatedly condemned overt manifestations of wealth and power in his correspondence. In, 1883, he communicated his alarm to the Khalifa ‘Abdullāhi about the interest shown by his following in worldly possessions, and advised him to set an example by banning all forms of luxury in his own clothing, food and drink (Abū Salīm 1990: letter 132). It also affected rank and status, and Muḥammad Aḥmad instructed his father-in-law, Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Baṣīr, “not to elevate [himself] secretly above the lowest of the poor, but to consider [himself] as their equal” (Abū Salīm 1991: letter 225). The depth of this drive for social reform based on an equalitarian ideal was probably best expressed through the regulations affecting matrimonial issues. There is no clearer testimony to the perceived imbalance of Sudanese society than the early, and repeated, edicts promulgated by Muḥammad Aḥmad to limit dowries, in an attempt to both restrict conspicuous spending and enable greater mobility within the newly-founded Mahdist society of equals (Layish 2016: 107). On the other hand, the Mahdī was also keenly aware that however dedicated to the Mahdist revolution his followers might be, the lures of personal enrichment were powerful. Calls to prevent the seizure of unlawfully looted property abound in early Mahdist correspondence, showing how complex these regulations were to enforce, but also how crucial they were nonetheless considered to be for the establishment of a reformed social order. A just society could only be established if these individual failings could be reported and condemned, meaning that its representatives should be held accountable for any misdeeds. Those who felt they had been wronged were therefore exhorted to contact a member of the Mahdist hierarchy and expose their case. On this subject, the Mahdī’s correspondence is rife with reparatory measures

of various kinds, in an attempt to limit illegal appropriations by commanders or military elements.<sup>12</sup>

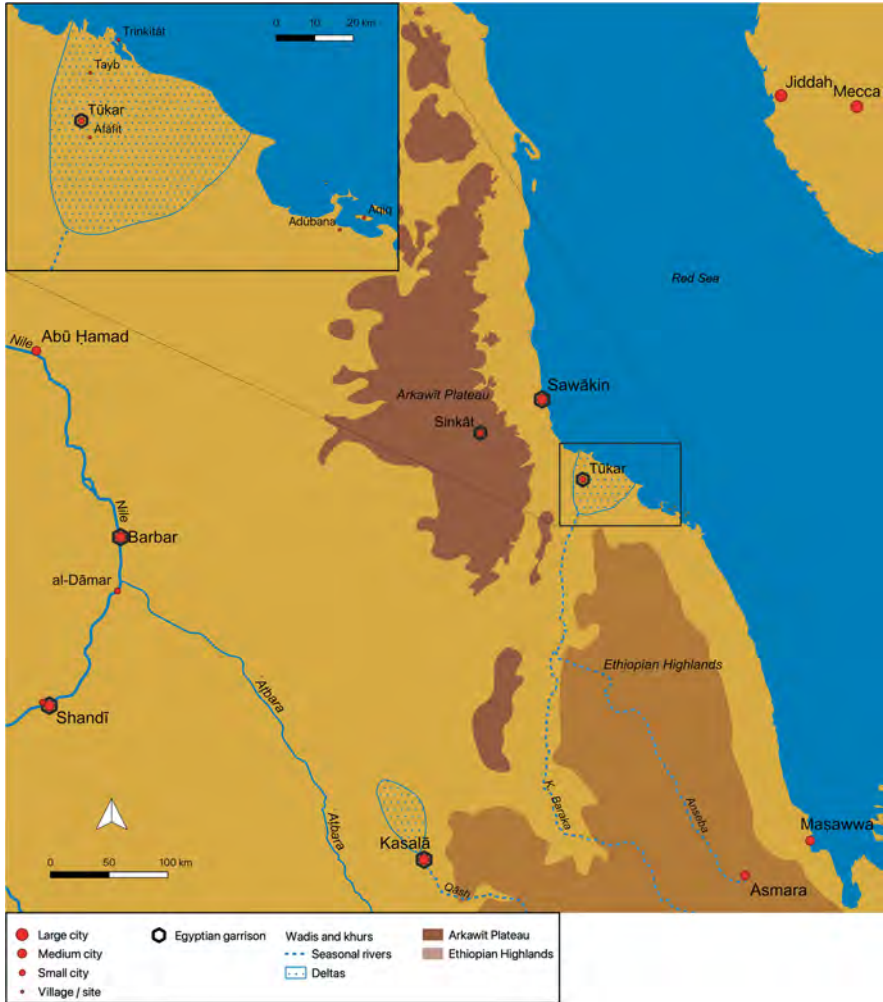
There was a transformative shift after the capture of El Obeid in January 1883. With the settlement of Mahdist authorities in an urban centre, the role of the nascent state was redefined. The Mahdī took the radical decision to request that all looted assets be handed over to the treasury, under the direction of its secretary Aḥmad Sulaymān (Abū Salīm 1990: letter 97). This break from previous instructions on the sharing of booty, as well as from Quranic prescriptions,<sup>13</sup> represented an important change of direction, as it placed the Mahdist administration in the situation of being the sole provider for the communities waging jihad. In principle, this organisational structure was to be applied to all Sudanese populations, but the Mahdī's policies were also defined by a marked pragmatism. Indeed, the disruptive potential of the Mahdist movement in economic matters was curtailed by early decisions such as the introduction of a limitation period of just seven years for land disputes (Layish 2016: 79). The same was true of his dealings with specific groups. For example, merchants were asked to “take up the victory of religion as [their] most important trade” (Abū Salīm 1990: letter 83) but were still allowed to pursue their activities.

Despite several changes following Muḥammad Aḥmad's death and his succession by the Khalifa ‘Abdullāhi, and particularly with the progressive abandonment of the jihad expansionist policy, the principles under which the first Mahdist communities were organised remained a fixture of the regime and constituted the most important legacy of these early years. Although an all-encompassing comparison between provinces is limited by the lack of sources, an analysis of the situation in Eastern Sudan reveals the perennial dimension of the organisation. Unlike classical accounts of the gradual corruption of Mahdist principles under the autocratic influence of the Khalifa ‘Abdullāhi, an examination of the life of a provincial Mahdist community reveals their vitality and resilience.

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, letters 73, 76, 79, 83 and 103 (Abū Salīm 1990) for the first months of 1300 *hijrī* (late 1882–early 1883), as Mahdist rule in Kordofan began to structure itself.

<sup>13</sup> Despite numerous and divergent interpretations, Muslim jurists mostly agreed that the booty taken after a display of force (*ghanīma*) was to be divided into five equal parts, four distributed to the combatants and the remaining fifth (*khums*) to be kept by the leading authority. A different set of complex rules was applied to booty seized without the use of force (*fa'y*) and to immoveable property.



Map 7: Eastern Sudan in the late 19th century (drawn by the author).

## Ideology in Practice: Administrative Operations and the Making of a Mahdist Society in Eastern Sudan

Opportunities for an investigation into the daily activities of provincial Mahdist societies are limited due to the fragmentary nature of the sources. Many documents were

lost during the turmoil of the Anglo-Egyptian conquest of 1896–1898 or intentionally destroyed before the advance of the enemy, although Eastern Sudan stands out as an exception in this regard. The swiftness of the raid launched by British troops in February 1891 against Afafit, the Mahdist administrative centre in the immediate vicinity of Tokar (see Map 7), took their adversaries by surprise and prevented them from moving or destroying the archive. This allowed the Department of Military Intelligence of the Egyptian army to seize the entirety of the documents kept by the treasury, as well as a variety of letters and notebooks. In addition, contrary to most of his counterparts, ‘Uthmān Digna, the *amīr*<sup>14</sup> of Eastern Sudan, had remained in his position since his appointment in 1883, and would continue to be the main representative of the Mahdiyya in this region after he had retreated to Adarama on the banks on the Atbara River following his defeat in Tokar. As a result, his correspondence with the central authorities is much easier to track down than is the case with other provinces. Finally, along with the official documentation and correspondence from the Mahdist administration, a set of petitions and requests was also found in the provincial centre. Despite their limited number, which was a consequence of the low level of Arabic literacy in this region, where the Beja language was predominant, they offer precious glimpses into the life of a Mahdist society from the point of view of the men who made it up. Paradoxically, the sheer volume of documents captured by Military Intelligence in the Mahdist camp, amounting to several thousand pages, may have led some scholars, like Abū Salīm,<sup>15</sup> who considered it to be the second most important “cultural centre” of the Mahdiyya after Omdurman, to overstate the importance of Afafit (Mahdi Rāḍī 1985: 6).

But Afafit was far from occupying a minor position. When the Anglo-Egyptians took possession of the place, they were surprised to find more than 6,000 *tukuls*,<sup>16</sup> larger compounds enclosed in a *zarība*<sup>17</sup> and around thirty more permanent clay buildings occupied by the treasury or serving as merchants’ houses (Wingate 1891: 505). At its apex, the population probably numbered more than 10,000, making Afafit one of the largest urban settlements in Sudan (albeit dwarfed by Omdurman). The location was originally occupied by the Ḥasanāb, a small community of scholars

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14 For the sake of clarity, *amīr* will be employed only to designate ‘Uthmān Digna, and *‘āmil* (pl. *‘ummāl*) the head of a banner. This only partially reflects their usage in the sources, which tend to refer to most Mahdist officials, military or administrative, as *‘āmil*.

15 Among the most important editorial works undertaken by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, we must mention his magisterial editions of the Mahdī’s and ‘Uthmān Digna’s correspondence, as well as the unfinished edition of the Khalifa ‘Abdullāhī’s immense correspondence.

16 Small huts made of straw.

17 A fence made of thorny bushes.



from Sawakin. It started to grow as a Mahdist camp<sup>18</sup> after the capture and destruction of Tokar, the headquarters of the *ma'mūriyya*<sup>19</sup>, in February 1884, when the *'āmil* Khidīr b. 'Alī al-Ḥasanābī gathered his men there (Ḍirār 1981: 216–219). Until 1888, it was only of secondary importance compared with Handub, the Mahdist base during the siege of Sawakin. Defeated by the Anglo-Egyptian garrison of the Red Sea port on 22 December, the Mahdists retreated to the delta of Tokar in early 1889. As a result, Afafit quickly grew to be an important settlement because of the constant migrations of troops, in most cases accompanied by their families.

The vast majority of the administrative documents at our disposal dates from this “Tokar period” of Mahdist rule in Eastern Sudan. While the meticulous bureaucratic recording undertaken by the treasury in Afafit was brought to an end by the Anglo-Egyptian raid of February 1891, the reasons behind the absence of administrative records prior to December 1888 are still unclear. The collection we have access to, which spans more than two years from late 1888 to early 1891, nonetheless gives us one of the most precise overviews of the social life of a Mahdist camp in a situation of relative stability, despite being marked by the effects of the famine of the “*sana sitta*”.<sup>20</sup>

## Counting the Combatants

Combatants were subjected to the disciplinarian gaze of the Mahdist administration. They were entangled in a dense network of paper trails that conditioned their access to state resources and through which their movements were closely monitored. Censuses lay at the heart of this power apparatus in Eastern Sudan. They were conducted every year and following military movements. The first attested census was conducted in February 1888 (1305 *h.*) following a direct request from the Khalifa 'Abdullāhi to notify him, “individual by individual”, of the names and banners of the men leaving Kassala to participate in the siege of Sawakin (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 26). After the Mahdist defeat on 22 December 1888 before the walls of the Red Sea port, another census was taken in January 1889 on the troops in Handub (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 125), and one month later, in February 1889 (1306 *h.*), there was another on all the troops in the Tokar region. An exhaustive account

<sup>18</sup> Mahdist sources use *daym* and *ribāt* to designate military encampments regardless of their size. They could be established within the city boundaries, as it was the case in Kassala, or in the open country, like in Afafit.

<sup>19</sup> The *ma'mūr* was the local representative of the Egyptian colonial administration.

<sup>20</sup> Meaning the famine of “Year Six”, in reference to the year 1306 *hijrī* (1888–1889).

of the number of men present was carried out and five reports, one for each banner, were sent to the Khalifa (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 153). As the Mahdist authorities settled in Tokar, censuses seem to have been taken on a more regular basis, at least once a year, as in 1890 (1307 *h.*) and again in 1891 (1308 *h.*).<sup>21</sup> The method used to take these censuses is not known, but it may have been based on a monthly record of transfers of combatants and their families. It distinguished between those who were enlisted (*qar'a*), those whose service was extended (*amadd*) and those who were dismissed (*raft*), so as to be able to calculate the number of remaining combatants (*bāqīn*) as well as the number of family members.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly enough, requests for detailed information on the number of mobilised men appear less in the correspondence of 1889–1890 than previously, which indicates a greater degree of autonomy of the provincial administration when military matters were not immediately affected; this is confirmed by the fact that in all likelihood, the detailed censuses of 1890 and 1891 were not communicated to the central authorities in Omdurman. The next detailed report on the troops in Eastern Sudan was sent by 'Uthmān Digna to the Khalifa 'Abdullāhi after the loss of Tokar in February 1891 and the withdrawal of the Mahdist administration (Abū Salīm 2004: letters 216 and 217).

Why were such precise records not only kept, but also regularly updated, surely at great cost to a thinly spread-out administration?<sup>23</sup> Most evidently, the new state was invested in keeping track of the whereabouts of its population, primarily the men who had been mobilised for the jihad. The correspondence between the Khalifa and 'Uthmān Digna shows that no movement between provinces or to the capital was possible unless it had been previously sanctioned, often after a direct enquiry to the Khalifa himself. For example, Mūsā Aḥmad al-Bashīr, the *āmīl* of Dār Muhārib, on the White Nile, had come to Kassala with many men, but a great number had died during the famine of 1306 *h.*, some had fled to Omdurman (as reported by various witnesses there) and only forty remained. He wrote to 'Uthmān Digna asking for authorisation to travel to the capital to reunite his group, but the *amīr* reminded him that they could not leave without the Khalifa's assent and exhorted him to be patient while they waited for an answer (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 189). This

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<sup>21</sup> These two last censuses were the only ones that could be found in the National Records Office (NRO), Khartoum, Sudan. See Mahdiyya 5/07/34 (1307 / 1889–1890) and Mahdiyya 5/08/38 (1308 / 1890–1891) respectively.

<sup>22</sup> A single example of such a record has survived: NRO, Mahdiyya 5/05/23 (c. Dhū al-Ḥijja 1306 / c. August 1889).

<sup>23</sup> The Mahdist state did not clearly distinguish between administrative and military functions. Although the former were restricted to acts of recording (for example excluding tax collection, which was often undertaken by military parties), no more than a few dozen clerks covered the entire *imāla* of Eastern Sudan, which spread over an area of around 200,000 km<sup>2</sup>.

close supervision of movements was not only limited to combatants. Requests were made for family reunifications, as was the case with Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Baṣīr, who in April 1888 asked for his wife and niece, Fāṭima bint al-Salīm, to be sent to him from Omdurman (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 45). It also applied to the few foreigners who arrived in Sudan, especially from the East. In September 1890, ‘Uthmān Digna requested authorisation from the Khalīfa for a traveller named Muḥammad bin al-Walī Ḥammada to travel to Omdurman. Originally from Chinguetti (Mauritania), after having visited Jerusalem, Bagdad, Damascus, Medina and Mecca, he wanted to go to Berber and then on to the capital to meet the successor of the Mahdī.

Censuses were crucial tools for controlling space and movements. They allowed the Mahdist provincial authorities to incorporate combatants and their families into a network of paper trails. Conversely, non-sanctioned movements were viewed with great suspicion, and individuals who failed to request the necessary documentation were considered to be deserters, and as such faced immediate punishment. Forty-four individuals, including two women and a slave, who left the camp at Handub on 25 September 1888 without notifying the administration, were pursued by a party of *anṣār*. When they were finally caught, four were killed (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 88). Such a level of violence may not have been the norm, however. A month after this event had taken place, when the Khalīfa was informed that deserters had managed to reach Kassala, he simply ordered ‘Uthmān Digna to transfer details about these individuals to Ḥāmid ‘Alī, the governor of the town, and to instruct him to send them back to Handub (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 105). In any case, mobilisation always proved to be immensely challenging for the Mahdist administration, despite the numerous records kept to demarcate the men’s movements. In one banner alone originating from the region of Rufa’a on the Blue Nile, only 50 of the 300 combatants who were inscribed in the banner’s register were still in Kassala in late 1888, little more than 15% of the total, the others having either returned home, or most likely having never actually left in the first place (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 109).

The Mahdist state’s attempts at administrative control were informed first and foremost by spatial dynamics, a result of practical reasons such as the lack of men to control moving populations dispersed across vast areas, as well as of the unreliable nature of communications between the central authorities and their representatives in the provinces. The most efficient way for Mahdist leaders to ensure that they would be able to exert their authority was almost solely to keep these individuals close. The predominance of this position, which was relentlessly echoed in the correspondence between ‘Uthmān Digna and the Khalīfa, lies at the core of the main tension of Mahdist authority: the impossibility of ruling from afar and the inadvisability of leaving the centre of political power lest disgruntled factions seize the opportunity to depose their ruler. Spatial dynamics were imbued with political

and religious meaning, a perpetuation of the initial calls for *hijra* that were prevalent in Muḥammad Aḥmad's early correspondence. Mobilisation was necessarily expressed by displacement from a politically anomic space to one that was entirely framed by the Mahdist authorities. Participation to the Mahdiyya was essentially situational. In this regard, a significant amount of the production of the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan was aimed at locating the men and their families, keeping track of their whereabouts and circumscribing their movements through an elaborate paper trail that found its clearest expression in the establishment of meticulous censuses.

## Caring for the Men and their Families

These records were not used solely for control purposes by a state with limited governance tools, however; they were also the main vector for the redistribution of resources, a pillar of Mahdist welfare. Indeed, as shown previously, the initial mobilisation of men for the jihad beginning in 1881 led to the creation of a small community of *anṣār* who were almost entirely dependent on the state. Several years later, in early 1889, the situation had not considerably evolved, and the authorities encountered the same issues brought about by the need to support a large number of men, women and children who had moved from all over Eastern Sudan and beyond and settled in the Tokar region.

The first objective of the Mahdist authorities was to feed the men, a chronic problem that reached tragic dimensions with the advent of the famine in 1306 *h*. In order to do so, the combatants had to be added to the registers, in their relevant formations, which was most often the banner or the *muqaddamiyya*. Unsurprisingly, resettlement appears to have been the primary factor when it came to creating or updating state records. In April 1888, the *Ashrāf*<sup>24</sup> in Taka (Kassala) wanted to join 'Uthmān Digna near Sawakin after the death of their *'āmil* and the appointment of the new one, who was already there. The *amīr* therefore wrote to his subordinate in this town "to send (*tarhīl*) all of the *Ashrāf* and those who have joined them to [him], with their families, after the combatants and their families have been entered in the necessary records". As mentioned above, the first census at our disposal for Eastern Sudan was also linked to the arrival of troops from Kassala in Sawakin. This intricate relationship between space and administrative regulation makes even more sense because most of these men derived their livelihoods directly from the

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<sup>24</sup> Whereas in the Islamic world *ashrāf* designates descendants of the family of the Prophet, in Eastern Sudan they were a small tribal group.

lands they had occupied. The Mahdist state had to compensate for this loss (*izālat al-darar*) and so provide for both the men and their families. This question is central to the topics broached in the correspondence between the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi and ‘Uthmān Digna. As the siege of Sawakīn grew more intense in June 1888, the head of the Mahdist state instructed his *amīr* that “since the number [of men] in the camp (*ribāt*) has increased with the arrival of the army, [he] should work for a way to achieve the welfare (*rāḥa*) of the army and bring to them subsistence (*ma‘āyish*), so that they suffer no harm (*ḍarar*)” (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 60).

The main staple in the distribution of food was sorghum (*dhura*), which was kept at the granary (*shūna*) under the authority of the provincial treasury. It was mostly produced locally, in the Baraka Delta surrounding Tokar. Easy access to arable land and water was probably one of the most important factors in the Mahdist decision to move their camp to Afafit in early 1889. The economic – and particularly agricultural – activities of the *anṣār* are rarely mentioned in the sources, and it is unlikely that they made a direct contribution to cultivation. Grain was to be distributed at the beginning of every month, at least in theory. Because the granary sometimes had insufficient stock, the arrival of a party in a new location, often after a difficult journey, might bring new tensions, as those who were there on a more permanent basis would have already depleted the meagre reserves. A few weeks after the Khalīfa had written to ‘Uthmān Digna asking him to be diligent when dealing with the welfare of the troops, he wrote again, this time prompted by complaints from a few *maqādīm*, who claimed that owing to the lack of food they had had to sell their pack animals (*zawāmil*), their servant slaves (*khaddām*), their weapons and their captives. Indeed, they had had to buy their grain themselves, as they had only received a quarter<sup>25</sup> (*rub*) of grain (*‘aysh*), approximately 6 kg, in the previous 75 days. The *amīr* admitted that grain had been scarce, but challenged the claim that some of the combatants might have had to sell their weapons. More importantly, he asserted that upon their arrival, this detachment had received grain brought over from the treasury of Tokar, which had been distributed to all of them, their families and their horses (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 63).

The provision of fixed stipends in grain and cash that had been introduced under the Mahdī continued after 1885, and was the accepted practice. In late 1888, salaries in money for those working in the Mahdist administration in Tokar ranged from 2 *riyāl* for the gatekeepers of the treasury or 3 *riyāl* for those who measured the grain (*kayyāl*), to 10 *riyāl* for the head of one of the administrative

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25 A quarter corresponded to four *qadaḥs* (literally a bowl) or one *qirāt*, that is one twenty-fourth of an *ardabb*, the main unit for grain, weighing around 144 kg.

departments.<sup>26</sup> The mobilised men also received a monthly allowance of sorghum in a quantity that varied from time to time depending on its availability. Additional grain might also be given instead of money based on somewhat obscure calculations in which the status of the claimant certainly played a role. In general, the rule was that every month men would receive four *qirāt* of grain (24 kg) and two additional *qirāt* (12 kg) for each family member registered with him.<sup>27</sup> There were, however, significant fluctuations, and the *ummāl* were sometimes granted much larger quantities, which they could redistribute as they saw fit. Notwithstanding the numerous exceptions, the provision of an allowance was directly linked to the scriptural record of the banner to which a combatant was attached. This was not forgotten by those involved, as was the case with a certain Muḥammad Bāsūma, who asked ʿUthmān Digna in November 1891 to be reintegrated into the banner of his cousin Ibrāhīm Saʿīd, along with a few other family members, and for their wages (*irzāq*) to be transferred with them (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 235). To assert their rights, combatants would also declare births and ask the treasury to add their new-borns to the relevant registers,<sup>28</sup> thus contributing to the development of this administrative knowledge. Money and grain were not the only items to be distributed in an organised fashion: clothing, namely *jubba* and trousers, was also handed out from the store of items manufactured in the camp's tailoring workshop.

However, this system was under constant tension due to the lack of sufficient resources. Paradoxically, the records that were so painstakingly kept by the treasury clerks describe the situation with great precision, while also concealing the realities of the Mahdist community in Eastern Sudan. Whereas most of these documents were produced between 1889 and 1891 when the famine of 1306 *h.* struck Sudan and most of North-East Africa, ʿUthmān Digna's correspondence with the Khalifa is astonishingly silent on the matter, seldom mentioning the situation of distress referred to by British eye-witnesses in Sawakin (Poussier 2012: 142–145, 163–168; Serels 2012). Personal letters sent to the *amīr* or the secretary of the treasury in Tokar, al-Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf, were sometimes more straightforward when it came to offering unvarnished testimony of the population's plight, and the disruptive effects of the famine on this provincial Mahdist society can be observed, if only by reading between the lines, in some of the requests. This is the case with al-Bakrī Muṣṭafā, who wrote in September 1889 to ask for an extension (*imḍād*) of grain for the children, as “their hands [were] bereft of food”. On this occasion, he reminded the head of the treasury that his own children had died in Handub,

<sup>26</sup> NRO, Mahdiyya 5/03/11 (c. Dhū al-Ḥijja 1306 / c. August 1889).

<sup>27</sup> For example: NRO, Mahdiyya 5/04/17 (c. Dhū al-Ḥijja 1306 / c. August 1889).

<sup>28</sup> For example: NRO, Mahdiyya 5/10/41, doc. 20 (7 Ramaḍān 1307 / 27 April 1890).

before most of the Mahdist society had moved to Afafit in February 1889, but that he had adopted orphans, indicating the toll taken on the Mahdist community by the famine.<sup>29</sup> In this context of a chronic lack of supplies of food, the treasury resorted to distributing goods collected from merchants by tithing (*ushr*), confiscations or loans with a view to supplementing the irregular distribution of grain. On some occasions, cash appears to have been more readily available than grain, and it was also sometimes given as a replacement in the absence of food. Individuals would then attempt to find and buy their own sustenance.

These transfers were carefully registered every day in the treasury's books, and each item was accounted for, but because no yearly overview was produced by the Mahdist administration, it was possible for a slow-paced crisis of the magnitude of the 1306 famine to leave almost no trace. Indeed, the records were not economic tools *per se*; rather, they essentially served to certify the legality of each handout. Mahdist governmentality was not so much interested in the overall balance of revenues and expenses as it was in the attainment of its equalitarian ideals based on a fair distribution of its resources, with the objective of ensuring the welfare of the community at large.

## Regulating the Mahdist Social Body

In addition to the essential task of providing for the men mobilised for the jihad, the Mahdist provincial authority in Eastern Sudan also regulated core social practices by assuming functions that would normally be carried out by the extended family or the community by instrumentalising the combatants' dependency on the treasury's resources.

Control over marriages offers us an unequivocal example of how the Mahdist leadership penetrated important aspects of social life in the Afafit camp. It is unclear whether the men were obliged to ask for authorisation from their *'amil* to marry, but the practice was common. In any case, despite the numerous restrictions on dowries imposed by the Mahdī (Layish 2016; Mahgoub 1992; Decker 1990), marriages still entailed expenses that could not be met by men who were isolated from their family networks, and so they were compelled to request assistance (*musā'ada*) from the treasury, thus giving the Mahdist administration effective supervision of their unions. According to the available evidence, it seems that this contribution was provided almost systematically if the treasury's reserves so permitted. There were no

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29 NRO, Mahdiyya 1/30/04, doc. 41 (17 Şafar 1307 / 13 October 1889).

formal ways to file a request. Usually, an *anṣārī* would write to the *ʿāmil* of his banner, who in turn would transfer the request to the secretary of the treasury.

The same al-Bakrī Muṣṭafā we mentioned above, who asked for additional grain for the orphans under his guardianship, strengthened his case by reminding the head of the treasury that he had made another request for assistance for his marriage a few days earlier (one would imagine to the mother of the orphans) and that he had received neither pieces of fabric nor money for his expenses “since the treasury is empty right now”.<sup>30</sup> Muḥammad al-Amīn ʿAmmār had been luckier a few months earlier, in July 1889. After receiving authorisation from Muḥammad ʿUthmān Abū Qarja to marry, he wrote to the treasury asking for the necessary items to be provided to him for the dowry. He therefore received two bundles (*tāqa*) of *marmar*, two quarters of *zīrāq* and two units of *mushtarak*<sup>31</sup>, two units of various items of clothing and seven and a half units of *marbūʿ* and *majmūʿ* perfumes.<sup>32</sup> Textiles and scents were the main components of state donations and, significantly, the main imports, together with foodstuffs, from which taxes could be collected in kind.<sup>33</sup> The importance of fabrics in Sudanese social life cannot be underestimated, and explains why a variety of cloths would still be imported in a context in which severe restrictions on trade were imposed both by the Mahdist state’s hostility towards maintaining commercial relationships with “unbelievers” and by the numerous retaliatory embargoes enforced by the Anglo-Egyptian administration in Sawakin (Poussier 2012: 112–142). Indeed, fabrics were a crucial component of dowries, after land and cash. Their importance also grew dramatically in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the increased pressure on free women to cover their upper bodies,<sup>34</sup> a phenomenon directly linked to distribution of the *thōb*, a long covering and constraining garment that restricted physical activities and thereby contributed to women’s gradual exclusion from the economic sphere (Spaulding 1995: 130). From this perspective, the repeated appeals from the Mahdī to reinforce the segregation of women and the covering of their bodies show that the process had not been completed by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Grants of fabrics were possible in Eastern Sudan because of the strategic location of the Mahdist authorities in Tokar, which allowed them to control – albeit only partially – the irregular trade between the Red Sea and

<sup>30</sup> NRO, Mahdiyya 1/30/04, doc. 41 (17 Ṣafar 1307 / 13 October 1889).

<sup>31</sup> Respectively white, blue and silk fabrics.

<sup>32</sup> NRO, Mahdiyya 1/30/04, doc. 10b (5 Dhū al-Qaʿda 1306 / 4 July 1889).

<sup>33</sup> See the tithe records in NRO, Mahdiyya 5/01/04 (Rabīʿ II–Jumādā I 1306 / December 1889–January 1890), 5/02/07-08 (c. Dhū al-Ḥijja 1306 / August 1889 and Rajab 1306 / March 1889), 5/05/20 (Dhū al-Ḥijja 1307 / July–August 1890) and 5/08/36 (Jumādā I 1308 / December 1890–January 1891).

<sup>34</sup> This was a complete reversal of the practices that had predominated during the Funj Sultanate (1504–1821), when only women of elite status were allowed to cover their torsos.



the Nile Valley. It conformed to both Mahdist regulations on limited dowries and the requirements of moveable wealth for an uprooted society.

This matrimonial economy had ramifications beyond the confines of the Mahdist camp, and formed an important part of the administration's regional policy in Eastern Sudan. The condition of women captives in particular was addressed on several occasions in official correspondence in 1887 and 1888. Alliances were considered to be so important that in a proclamation dated 7 November 1887, the Khalīfa forbade women who had been taken captive by the Mahdists to be married to *anṣār* without his express approval.<sup>35</sup> The status of women who had been captured during the raid on the Salahat Mahdist camp was also contentious: a ruling by the Mahdī stated that women who had been seized were to be considered as slaves, which resulted in the dissolution of their matrimonial bond (*īṣma*) (Layish 2016: 234), but whether this also applied to women who had been captured by the enemy was not clear. Eventually, the Khalīfa qualified the initial ruling by instructing 'Uthmān Digna that women released from Sawakin where they had been kept prisoner could be reunited with their husbands without renewal of their matrimonial bond, but only after three menstrual cycles.<sup>36</sup> In the case of captive women from communities hostile to Mahdist rule in Eastern Sudan, his consent was still required, but he delegated the authority to judge whether these unions were in the "interest of the religion" (*maṣlahat al-dīn*) to the *amīr* of Eastern Sudan (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 48). This policy reflected the Khalīfa's political investment in matrimony through the proxy of 'Uthmān Digna's appreciation of a volatile regional context. Captive women were instrumental in shaping relationships with the Beja nomads, the objective being to bend their will to resist by threatening to keep their wives in bondage or marry them to Mahdist combatants, or by rewarding their submission by returning them.

The Mahdist regime in the Eastern province carried out other functions as a social safety net through acts of charity (*iḥsān*). Money could be requested when someone was stricken by illness. In November 1889, a man named Ismā'īl al-Shā'ib could therefore write to Khāṭir Ḥamīdān, the head of his banner:

For a period of more than fifty days, I have been bedridden due to a pain in the eyes and other [ailments]. [I am] still without health, and my hands are empty of everything and of compensations [. . .]. My family is in an extreme state of duress. As this is our condition, [. . .] it was necessary to write to you [. . .] particularly to approve an expense to me from the treasury.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Sudan Archive (SAD), Durham University, UK, SAD 14/12/2M, *Daftar 'Uthmān Digna*, p. 114 (20 Ṣafar 1305 / 7 November 1887)

<sup>36</sup> This is an evolution of the Mahdī's jurisprudence that considered that a woman who was separated from her husband for a period exceeding her menstrual cycle could not be reunited with him without a renewal of the matrimonial bond (Layish 2016: 148).

<sup>37</sup> NRO, Mahdiyya 1/30/04, doc. 28 (12 Rabī' I 1307 / 6 November 1889).

This complaint was transmitted to the treasury with the support of the *‘āmil*. Other traces of the policy appear in various accounting documents. According to the daily reports for cash debits and credits, one *riyāl* was spent on 9 July 1890 for “women sick from an illness of the throat” at the “anchorage” (*marsā*), most likely in Adubana near Tokar.<sup>38</sup> These expenses, as well as others for water, for the services of *jihādiyya* (slave-soldiers) and *awlād ‘arab* (from Western Sudan) at the port or for guests hosted by the administration were all included under the title “*ihsānāt*”: namely, acts of beneficence or charity.

Sickness, undernourishment and war took their toll on the population in Eastern Sudan, and the Mahdist administration was also responsible for regulating deaths. British observers noticed that military encounters rarely led to battlefields strewn with corpses; on the contrary, the Mahdists seemed to go to great lengths to ensure a proper burial for these men. Death rituals were important enough that an entire section of the accounting notebooks was dedicated to the shrouds (*kafan*) provided for burials. The widows of martyrs (*shuhadā’* singular *shahīd*) were not forgotten by the administration either. In an attempt to implement the gender segregation prescribed by the Mahdī, Uthmān Digna had forbidden women to go out, but the Khalifa wrote to him that “in this region [Eastern Sudan] there were wives of martyrs, as well as women from the *jihādiyya*, working in the service of the religion whose livelihood depends on the markets”. The *amīr* therefore rescinded his order and compromised by establishing two markets, one for men and the other for women (al-Gaddāl 1986: 79), following the model adopted in Omdurman (Kramer 2010: 103). This allowed women to supplement the assistance they obtained from the Mahdist administration with income from small trading activities, thereby alleviating the burden on a treasury that was chronically in deficit (Mahgoub 1992: 48–49).

When taken together, these letters paint a picture of a fractured society. Families were broken up by displacements, couples were separated and children were lost. The attention the central authorities paid to regulating marriages is testament to the extent of the social disruption brought about by years of conflict in Eastern Sudan. Beja societies were profoundly affected by the emergence of Mahdist rule. While tribal dynamics were predominant in shaping the relationship with the new provincial authorities, they fail to adequately represent the wide spectrum of positions and the divisions that broke up tribes, clans and families. In contrast, the Mahdist authorities were actively engaged in a process of social engineering aimed at a radical transformation of communities to integrate them in a unified and reformed society that would uphold the Mahdī’s ideals: namely, a society wholly committed to carrying out its religious duties.

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38 NRO, Mahdiyya 5/06/29B (Dhū al-Ḥijja 1307 / July–August 1890).

## Disciplining a Provincial Mahdist Society

The Mahdist leadership was fully aware that its project of broad social transformation would be hindered by the fragmented and heterogeneous nature of the societies in the Greater Nile Valley, hence the strong emphasis placed on the geographical concentration of populations. This Sisyphean effort to stabilise these communities also involved the introduction of a new power apparatus to reinforce their unity by limiting internal dissension. Only then would it be possible for the reformist policies meant to strengthen adhesion to Mahdist ideals to be implemented.

Individual or collective engagement, especially for the jihad, which was the prominent form of mobilisation, required physical movement to enter the political and religious space formed by the Mahdiyya. The *hijra* to Omdurman – the “holy spot” (*al-buq‘a al-sharīfa*) – to the Khalīfa and the Mahdī’s tomb were important endeavours that were often requested by the combatants themselves. In the provinces, the displacement of communities responded to both strategic and religious considerations. The concentration of men in specific locations was aimed at thwarting external threats: from the Anglo-Egyptians between 1885 and 1891, and after 1890 from the Italians closing in on Kassala, a city they eventually seized in 1894. However, the correspondence of the *amīr* of Eastern Sudan clearly shows the conflation of both dynamics. A refusal to take part in the jihad was deemed to be an act of apostasy by the Mahdī, and so the reluctance of sections of the Beja tribes to join ‘Uthmān Digna was not only a sign of disobedience and contestation of Mahdist authority, but also a manifestation of their opposition to “religion” (*dīn*). Conversely, true adhesion to the Mahdiyya almost inevitably meant joining the *amīr*’s troops in Tokar. When in early 1888 the *Ashrāf* communicated their desire to “come from the regions of Taka [Kassala] to be among [the Mahdists] for the jihad for the cause of God (*fi sabīl Allāh*)”, ‘Uthmān Digna ordered the Governor of Kassala to organise their transfer (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 41). On the other hand, the Mahdist leader often criticised the Beja tribes for their lack of commitment to the Mahdiyya. His recriminations were focused on their constant desire to return to their homelands, so avoiding the hardships involved in the jihad (Poussier 2020: 861). This led to numerous attempts to stabilise their presence in the region of Tokar by threats and coercion. In this regard, ‘Uthmān Digna noticed that one of the main reasons for desertions was the separation of the combatants from their families (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 92), and so on several occasions he arranged for these families to be moved. While most of these relocations were forced, they were also sometimes prompted by the combatants them-

selves. In a letter written by the “*maqādīm* of the Samrīdawāb”<sup>39</sup> in May 1889, they explained:

When we were informed and assured that the jihad could only be performed by leaving our homelands and abandoning our personal customs (*ma'lūfāt al-nafs*), some of us left our people in the Gash to come to this place with the intention of [undertaking] the *hijra* and participating in the victory of the religion (*nusrat al-dīn*).

Now they were settled in Tokar; however, they asked 'Uthmān Digna to organise the transfer of the rest of their people, who were near Kassala at that time, and to authorise their “brother” Bilāl al-Amīn, who had been living in Omdurman for some time, to join them in Eastern Sudan (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 165). Some large population movements, which were often referred to in Mahdist correspondence as *tahjīr*<sup>40</sup>, therefore responded to more complex dynamics than simple coercion. A leading group of Mahdist volunteers could lead the way before being joined by the rest of their family, clan or tribal group, which probably caused significant frictions with the more reluctant members. This process of concentration contributed to the greater stability of the Mahdist community by restoring organic social relationships, but it could also constitute a threat to the establishment of a new social order by reintroducing tribal allegiances and putting groups together that had rarely, if ever, been in such close proximity.

Central to the efforts of the authorities to discipline individual behaviour was the pacification of internal relations within the Tokar community, which apparently enjoyed some measure of success. Indeed, surprisingly for such a society composed of men who were often separated from their original communities without personal resources – and, it seems, idle for most of the time – incidents are seldom mentioned in the sources. A murder was reported in July 1888 (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 65), and a general fight broke out in March 1889 (Ḥammūdī 1967: 135–37), but not much more was declared by the *amīr*. He may have been reluctant to provide details of issues related to life in the camp that might justify criticism of his leadership by the Khalifa, but it is more likely that discipline was maintained and that most of the intense violence that characterised this period happened outside the confines of Mahdist society. The process implied the establishment of a power apparatus that was able to regulate disputes, which were often related to ethno-tribal rivalries between and inside groups of mobilised combatants, by ensuring that conflicts could be expressed, heard and resolved. In this regard, the Mahdist adminis-

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<sup>39</sup> Most likely the Hadendowa Samrandawāb, established on the Gash Delta near Kassala.

<sup>40</sup> Based on the same root as *hijra*, the notion of *tahjīr* implies the role of an external actor; in this case the Mahdist state, and some amount of coercion in the realisation of a population's displacement.

tration played a role not dissimilar to the one played by Sufi *ṭuruq* as promoters of peace in certain regions of Muslim Africa (Vikør 2002: 85), although it was limited in scope to the society formed by proponents of the Mahdist movement. With this in mind, the provincial authorities followed the tenets that structured the organisation of the early Mahdist regime: namely the imposition of a strict hierarchy, the use of outside arbitration and an insistence on the accountability of its leaders.

The prevalence of hierarchical relations is clear in all 'Uthmān Digna's correspondence with the Khalifa. The fact that the former had to ask the opinion of the latter on what might be considered to be minute details of life in the Mahdist camp of Afafit, such as transfers from one banner to the other, indicates not only the high degree of centralisation of the Mahdist state, but also the importance attributed to upholding a clear hierarchical structure. In the course of a dispute that erupted between the leaders of two different banners in April 1889, with one accusing the other of having interfered with his orders after he had left for Omdurman, the plaintiff addressed the matter directly to the Khalifa, but once the issue had been resolved, the delegates (*umanā'*) who had dealt with the case reproached him, writing:

You should not raise a problem with the Khalifa unless you have consulted those with you among the *'ummāl* of the army, the *umarā'* of the detachment, or others from your brothers the *anṣār*. If a dispute between you cannot be solved, then the *'ummāl* of the army will authorise raising the matter with the Khalifa.<sup>41</sup>

Since there were a number of disputes between different hierarchical echelons, outside arbitration was deemed necessary in order to reinforce the trust of all the parties in the final decision. This concern mainly materialised through delegates (such as the ones mentioned above) being sent out by the central authority. In Eastern Sudan, the available sources indicate that this happened on at least two occasions, the first time in February 1889<sup>42</sup> and the second in April 1891 (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 222). In both cases, delegations of four and two representatives respectively were sent during episodes of tension: in December 1888, when the siege of Sawakin appeared to be nearing its end, and in February 1891, after the capture of Tokar by Anglo-Egyptian troops and the withdrawal to the Atbara. They were prompted by multiple motives, but essentially to assess the state of the army and report on internal tensions. The first group of delegates seems to have stayed until April 1890, and through the authority conferred on them by the Khalifa they played a crucial role as neutral intercessors. They represented the first recourse for conflicts arising between the *anṣār* for more than a year.

<sup>41</sup> NRO, Mahdiyya 1/30/04, doc. 62 (undated).

<sup>42</sup> SAD 14/12/2M, *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna*, p. 205 (6 Jumādā II 1306 / 8 February 1889).

These steps were taken to ensure that leaders would be accountable, clearly echoing the drive for social justice that had underlain the Mahdist movement since its inception. It was already present in 1883, when the Mahdī issued a proclamation forbidding the *anṣār* to intervene in the affairs of the administration but enjoining them to inform their *ʿāmil* of any wrongdoing they may have witnessed. Perhaps in order to drive his point home, the next letter requested that “anyone who has been wronged by me [the Mahdī], [. . .] the *khulafā*<sup>43</sup>, the *umarā*, [or] the *ashrāf*, should come forward” (Abū Salīm 1990: letters 147 and 148). While the extent to which this principle was applied is difficult to gauge, the evidence reveals that petitions addressed to the Mahdist administration were frequent and, as far as the cases available to us are concerned, led to actual investigations. One of the rare documents detailing the entire process, relating to a dispute in February 1889 between several *maqādīm* and the leader of their banner, Shāʿib Aḥmad, comprised 27 letters and involved the four delegates who had recently arrived in Afafit acting as representatives of the *shariʿa*, the twelve chiefs of the banner, the two *umarā*, ʿUthmān Digna and Abū Qarja, and the Khalifa, to whom the initial petition had been duly communicated. Accused of appropriation of funds and victuals by his men, the secretary of the treasury was eventually asked to produce the accounting records and check the legality of each transfer<sup>44</sup>, an operation that was the mainspring of this fastidious bookkeeping.

Despite these measures aimed at upholding the equalitarian principles of the Mahdiyya, the fact that the Khalifa’s proclamations repeatedly enjoined the combatants to strive for unity (*taḥazzub*<sup>45</sup>) shows that peaceful relations in the Mahdist camp of Afafit were constantly under threat. The degree of penetration of Mahdist ideology is difficult to assess, but some of the missives and petitions sent by the *anṣār* to the provincial administration offer us hints about the dissemination of the Mahdist discourse. When Faḍlallāh Karrār, the deputy of one particular banner, asked ʿUthmān Digna to be removed from his position due to a conflict with the *maqādīm*, he was careful to add that his only intention was to “concentrate [his] effort (*tafarrugh*) on the matter of the religion and reform [him]self (*iṣlāḥ nafsi*), far from what brings envy and anger among companions, but for the love of God and brotherhood in the hereafter (*ajila*)” (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 151). Karrār’s comments do not say much about his actual commitment to Mahdist ideals, but they do reveal the importance attributed by the authorities in Eastern Sudan to a commitment that went further than just military mobilisation, and valued adhesion to the

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43 Singular *khalīfa*.

44 NRO, Mahdiyya 1/30/03, doc. 1 (Jumādā II–Ramaḍān 1306 / February–May 1889).

45 *Taḥazzub* is most often translated as “factionalism”, from *ḥizb*, a party or faction. In the context of the Mahdiyya, it meant uniting as a faction without taking tribal affiliations into consideration.

religious reformist principles of the Mahdiyya. This was expressed in the numerous exhortations of the Mahdī, which were repeated by his successor, to observe the essential religious rituals (*sha'ā'ir al-dīn*): namely, attending the Friday prayer, performing ablutions and preserving one's purity (*ṭahāra*).<sup>46</sup> These relatively limited requirements were probably a pragmatic response to the various levels of religious engagement encountered among the men mobilised for the jihad.

Still, the Mahdist authorities had higher ambitions, and they understood that the welfare of combatants encompassed both their material wellbeing and their spiritual development. They therefore attempted to implement more transformative policies that went beyond following core Islamic ritual practices. In late 1888, the Khalifa enjoined his *amīr* to treat the *anṣār* with kindness, “to treat their elder as a father, their young people as sons, their equals [in age] as brothers” and also “to bring them to God with wisdom, good preaching (*al-maw'īza al-ḥasana*) and charity to their family (*ishra*)” (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 120). The effects of this policy were limited. Asked by the Khalifa about the condition of the army in Tokar in October 1890, ʿUthmān Digna replied that he would talk to them in the morning and in the evening, probably after prayers. In accordance with Mahdist ideals, he exhorted them to abandon their material desires, read the *rātīb* and perform their prayers, but complained that his command was not heeded. Many did not pray, particularly the *ʿummāl* (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 215). The main tool for the imposition of a Mahdist religious discipline was lectures, the favoured medium for a predominantly illiterate society. Receipts show that some individuals received a salary as “readers of the *rātīb*”. This was no trivial matter, as in May 1889, there were 23 of them in Afafit, including eight in the banner of ʿUthmān Digna alone.<sup>47</sup> The Khalifa's proclamations (*manshūrāt*) appear to have been systematically read aloud to the *anṣār*, and their content was explained by using “their tongue” (*lisān-hum*): that is, in Beja. More informal letters could also be shared with the troops, such as copies of correspondence sent by *umarā'* from other provinces announcing military successes.<sup>48</sup> On at least one occasion, in December 1888, a copy of an article from the *Egyptian Gazette* describing the dire situation of the population in Sawakin, which was under siege by the Mahdists at the time, was “read to the *anṣār*, and it rejoiced their hearts, when they learned of the fear that reigned [there]” (Abū Salīm 2004: letter 117).

<sup>46</sup> See for example letter 238 (Abū Salīm 1991).

<sup>47</sup> NRO, Mahdiyya 5/14/50, doc. 151 (Ramaḍān 1306 / May 1889).

<sup>48</sup> See for example letters 243 and 132 (Abū Salīm 2004).

## Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to shed light on the coherence and potency of the Mahdist social project. As an ideology, Mahdism was meant to radically transform Sudanese communities. This was the properly revolutionary nature of this movement, which sought to discipline individual behaviours, weaken tribal bonds and create a reformed society that was perpetually mobilised for the victory of Islam. Albeit marked by frequent shortcomings and pragmatic concessions resulting from the limitations of the political authority exercised from Omdurman, the social project developed during the Mahdiyya was never abandoned, and remained the driving influence behind the structure and operations of its administrative apparatus throughout this period. The Mahdist call for equality and justice was heeded by many, men and women alike, and the society formed under its auspices was organised to ensure that these principles were upheld. Arguably, this political and social construct might be interpreted as a new form of governmentality that extended the disciplinary practices of Sufi institutions to the level of a state.

The norms issued by the Mahdī were performative in the peripheral territories of the Mahdist provinces. Contrary to the colonial depiction of an arbitrary power grounded on violence, the documents from the provincial administration in Eastern Sudan show how these principles were constantly being reactivated. Measures that might appear to be instrumental or to respond primarily to strategic considerations arising from the many military operations conducted by the Mahdists on the Red Sea coast and in the Abyssinian borderlands were ensconced within an ideological framework that did not suddenly disappear in 1885, after the death of Muḥammad Aḥmad. In this regard, the communities of combatants can be considered to be examples of a model Mahdist society. Entirely devoted to the jihad, their needs were guaranteed by an administration that sought to regulate almost all aspects of their lives and allowed them to abandon all other activities. Still, the responsibility for keeping up with the Mahdi's edicts did not lie solely with the local leadership. The correspondence exchanged with the *umarā'* and the administrators of the treasury in Afafit reveals how members of this Mahdist community engaged with these equalitarian ideals by challenging the administration to conform to them. The rich details they provide when describing their cases has briefly lifted the veil from the inner workings of a provincial Mahdist society in the making.



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## Chapter 19

# Liberation from Fear: Regional Mobilisation in Sudan after the 1964 Revolution

## Introduction

Following the 1964 Revolution in Sudan, which reintroduced democracy into the country after six years of military rule, several regional movements from Northern Sudan gained representation in parliament. This chapter uses these regional movements as a lens through which to understand the late colonial and post-colonial transformation of subjects into citizens.

In her book *Seeing like a Citizen*, Kara Moskowitz (2019) argues against Frederick Cooper's concept (2002: 97) of a gatekeeper state that substantially controls financial streams in and out of the post-colonial state, and thus the developmental agenda. Instead, Moskowitz suggested that citizens played a central role in shaping these agendas through various forms of cooperation, petitioning and resistance. This was not a linear process, however; it was shaped by a multitude of local bureaucrats and technical officials and their abilities or lack thereof. As a result, "the rural sense of state unreliability" (Moskowitz 2019: 6) became a key feature. Moskowitz describes the encounter between the state and rural citizens in Kenya at a type of local meeting called a *baraza*, at which citizens could register complaints, even though they remained "unsure of the exact process for resolution" (Moskowitz 2019: 7).

While Moskowitz's critique of the understanding of post-colonial states as "monolithic states, with symmetric, ordered aesthetic visions, [which] enacted massive social engineering plans", mostly without feedback from the bottom up (Moskowitz 2019: 9), is well noted, it is important to point out that the form of interaction between rural citizens and the state in this example did not vary very much from the colonial to the post-colonial period, in that it remained centred around a variety of forms of cooperation, petitioning and resistance. While it is true that the post-colonial state might have been more receptive to the wishes of local "citizens," or at least pretended to be, given the undemocratic nature of the post-colonial Kenyan state, post-colonial state–citizen relations were noteworthy for their continuity.

Indeed, Cherry Leonardi and Chris Vaughan (2016) have shown that in the case of Sudan, (certain) colonial subjects did not simply put up with colonial oppression; they challenged decisions taken by the local authorities and local British administrators through petitions and complaints. These people are often referred to in

colonial records as *al-maẓlūmīn* – the oppressed – but the term “did not connote the passive status of subjection to oppression so much as the active contestation of this oppression” (85). Leonardi and Vaughan thus distinguish the *maẓlūmīn* from *nās* (people), in that the latter reflected Mamdani’s notion of subjecthood “in the full sense” (85). As the Condominium government shifted towards a more developmental discourse from the late 1930s, complaints and petitions were increasingly framed in a language of rights, and appealed to a notion of colonial or state law.

The Sudanese example, however, is an outlier in the early African post-colonial experience, thanks to the country’s recurring periods of democracy (1956–1958, 1964–1969 and 1985–1989). While decolonisation in Kenya turned subjects into citizens from a formal perspective, Sudan’s second democratic period between 1964 and 1969 created the potential for a more substantive meaning of citizenship. In a democratically-organised state, citizens are theoretically not obliged to engage with the state as a separate entity through cooperation, petitioning and resistance; rather, because they form a legal category, they can engage with the state as co-sovereigns, in line with Gianfranco Poggi’s notion (2003: 42) of “citizens as sovereigns.” This does not mean, however, that all citizens (as individuals) are actually able to fill this role. Indeed, Justin Willis (2007) has suggested that during the elections in the 1950s, “the local meaning of the election may have been as a way of choosing intermediaries with government, rather than selecting the government itself” (497). The transformation of subjects into citizens was therefore not automatic. This chapter explores the role played by three movements – the General Union of the Nuba Mountains (GUN), the Darfur Development Front (DDF) and the Beja Congress – in driving this transformation forward.

The principal thrust of this chapter is that these three regional organisations should not be viewed exclusively, or even predominantly, as political parties, but as movements created to carry the decolonisation process into the regions. By gaining an understanding of them as a part of an emancipatory project, it becomes possible to foreground a gradual process of change in political engagement in Sudan’s peripheries. In concrete terms, the chapter argues that the three regional movements increased the ability of individual citizens to exercise their legal rights as citizens in a democratic and independent state in different ways. The term “democratic” is used in a technical rather than a holistic sense, referring to a state with overall free and fair elections that build the foundations of a more meaningful category of citizenship rather than one with a fully-formed civil society and public sphere; in the latter case, the transformation driven by the three regional movements would have needed to have been completed, and not have just begun.

In order to make this argument, some historical background will first be provided for readers who are not fully familiar with Sudan in the 1960s. This will

be followed by an account of the historical emergence of the three movements and a discussion of the aims and logics behind it. Owing to the relative lack of written source material and secondary sources, in the case of the GUN and the DDF, the chapter is mostly based on interviews with early members of the movements. ‘Abd al-Fātiḥ Tiya Kāfī, Phillip Kalo Ramaḍān Kardela, and Yūsif Jibrīl were all founding members of the GUN, with Phillip Kalo being elected to parliament in 1965. Nūr Tāwir Kāfī Abū Ra’s has been a women’s and Nuba rights activist for her whole life. In 1962, when she was at high school, she co-founded the Nuba Women Association. She was the first woman from the Nuba Mountains to study at the University of Khartoum, where she enrolled in 1965. All the interviews were conducted in Kadugli at the home of Yūsif Jibrīl, who also acted as a facilitator. ‘Alī al-Ḥājj and Aḥmād Dirāj were both founding members of the DDF, and Dirāj was elected to parliament as an independent in 1965. Both were living in exile when they were interviewed, Dirāj in London and al-Ḥājj in Bonn. In the case of the Beja Congress, the research is primarily based on three (semi-autobiographical) accounts by members of the Beja intelligentsia. Muḥammad Adrūb Ūhāj, a professor of Arabic, who is also one of the foremost writers on Beja language, poetry and literature, graduated from the University of Khartoum in 1966 (Ūhāj 2006). Aḥmād ‘Uthmān Tūlanāb Ūdīn, a Beja activist who participated in the Beja Club conferences in the 1950s, was born in Sinkat in 1937 and had a career in football as a player for al-Hilāl and later as a club manager (Tūlanāb 2007). Abū Fāṭima Aḥmad Onūr Maḥmūd, who is considerably younger, was born in Kassala in 1966. He has worked as a teacher and for various civil society organisations and has written about Beja issues (Maḥmūd 2009).

## Historical Background

In terms of the historical background, three observations will help contextualise the regional movements of the 1960s. This section will first briefly discuss the unique nature of colonisation in Sudan, and will then move on to the resulting conditions of independence and the 1964 Revolution. Because Southern regional politics formed an important framework for the regional movements in Northern Sudan, this section will also briefly mention the Southern context for each of the three topics in the historical background.

After the Ottoman-Egyptian occupation of Sudan had been ended by a millenarian uprising under the leadership of the Mahdī in 1885, the British decided to lead a campaign against the Mahdist movement, which they viewed as a source of instability. Lord Kitchener re-established control over Sudan in the name of

Egypt, creating the so-called Condominium in 1899 under the sovereignty of two colonial powers, Britain and Egypt. The unique construction of the Condominium meant that Sudan was *de jure* governed by a semi-independent governor-general. The administrative personnel who worked in Sudan were not part of the colonial service, but a “*sui generis*” Sudan Political Service (Kirk-Greene 2000: 164). In 1922, the British established an administration along the lines of indirect rule, which was known in Sudan as the “native administration” (Abdul-Jalil, Mohammed, and Yusuf 2007; Bakheit 1965: 131–183). Most Sudanese therefore experienced the colonial state in a decentralised form; it was with good reason that Mamdani described the structure of indirect rule as “decentralized despotism” (1996: 62–108). Besides the native administration, the colonial state was characterised by the all-powerful district commissioners: “the Sudan government was popularly known to Northern Sudanese as ‘the government of Inspectors’ (hukumat al-mufettishin)” (Hamad 1995: 244). Only in the late colonial period was the native administration replaced by a notion of local government, which was increasingly integrated into the colonial state as a whole rather than being principally linked to the district commissioners as a decentralised interface and a replacement for the central state (Leonardi and Vaughan 2016: 87–89). In addition, administration in the Condominium was characterised by what might be described as extensive compartmentalisation. While a certain level of disaggregation – or *divide et impera* – is a normal effect of indirect rule, in the case of Sudan different groups were separated in additional ways, most importantly through the Southern Policy, which disconnected the Southern from the Northern provinces (Abdel Rahim 1966; Mayo 1994), and in the North, albeit to a lesser degree, through the Nuba Policy (Abdelhay 2010; Salih 1990).

Since Britain’s principal motivation in Sudan was to secure Egypt and the Suez Canal, the condominium government focused on maintaining peace at the lowest possible cost. While the areas on the Nile bordered the strategic transportation axis – the first section of the Sudanese railway from Wadi Halfa to Atbara had been built to enable Kitchener’s occupation – and were of some economic interest, particularly with the expansion of Sudanese cotton production, the rest of Sudan, including Kordofan, Darfur and the Southern provinces, was at best of secondary relevance to the British. Indeed, the “pacification” of the Nuba Mountains and the Southern provinces continued long after the condominium administration had been established in the riverain heartland (El Zailaie 2003: 52–71), and Darfur even remained independent until it was reintegrated during World War I. This imbalance in the level of attention was powerfully reflected in investments, and most importantly in the number of schools built in the different regions: for example, there were only two intermediate schools in the Nuba Mountains in 1947 (Sanderson 1963: 243). The small number of inter-

mediate schools resulted in an even smaller number of students who continued on to secondary education at Gordon Memorial College in Khartoum. Between 1934 and 1944, 4,696 pupils joined GMC; 75% were from Khartoum or Northern Province and only 4% from Kordofan and 3% from Kassala Province, with just four students from Darfur (Beshir 1969: 200). Essentially, the centre–periphery differences in Sudan, with the centre being the areas close to the Nile in Northern Sudan and the periphery being everywhere else, were the result of a socio-economic imbalance that if not actually created during the Condominium, was very much intensified by it.

When Sudan became independent in 1956, the decolonisation process was heavily conditioned by the structure of the Condominium. The British had integrated the Sudanese into the administration of the territory over the years, including through the Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan in 1944 and the more powerful Legislative Council in 1948. This took place fairly late in comparison to other British colonies in Africa, however. For example, in the Gold Coast colony, nine of the fewer than thirty members of the Legislative Council had been Africans since 1925, and this Council was comparatively more powerful than the Advisory Council in Sudan (Sederberg 1971: 181). It is difficult to interpret these steps as a transition to Sudanese independence in 1956. In fact, in 1950, condominium officials concluded that it was too early to think about a ten-year transition period towards independence (Beshir 1974: 174–175). Sudan's independence less than six years later must therefore be understood in the light of the Free Officers Revolution in Cairo on 23 July 1952. The new Egyptian government and the British agreed to conduct elections in Sudan, which were held in November 1953. The elections were won by the National Unionist Party (NUP) under the leadership of Ismā'īl al-Azharī, with the Umma Party under 'Abdallāh Khalīl coming second. In late 1955, this parliament voted unanimously for independence, which was concluded on 1 January 1956. It is clear from this that local Sudanese pressure notwithstanding, it was primarily the dynamics between the two co-domini that secured independence. Thus, unlike in other British colonies in Africa, the nationalist movement was never forced to institutionalise systematically throughout the country.

With the creation of the Legislative Council, the Southern Policy and its separation of the Southern provinces from the rest of Sudan came to an end. The condominium government held a conference in Juba in June 1947 at which selected Southern representatives discussed their position on the matter. The conference decided in favour of including the South, which according to Howell (1978: 106) also marked the beginning of organised Southern politics. During the negotiations between the British and the Egyptians after the Free Officers Revolution, Major



Şalāḥ Sālim<sup>1</sup> secured Southern support through a remarkable visit, still believing that Sudan would eventually choose unity with Egypt (Sabri 1982: 109–111). After a relatively long separation, the Southern provinces were not reintegrated into Sudan gradually, but were suddenly reattached. Shortly before independence, in 1955, a lack of trust led to a mutiny by Southern soldiers of the Sudanese army in Torit. For the new government in Khartoum, conflict in the South underlined the relationship of internal division and sovereignty, making the idea of autonomy or federalism a no-go from the start.

During the transition from the elections in 1953 to independence in 1956, British and Egyptian administrators were systematically replaced by Sudanese under a process known as Sudanisation (Sconyers 1988; Al-Teraifi 1977). The Sudanese were selected based on their qualifications and seniority of service. However, due to the extreme imbalance of the country's schools, the vast majority of qualified staff came from the Nile Valley. Sconyers (1988: 72) quotes a British administrator who reported that “in the South there was absolutely no one available”. As a result, out of the slightly more senior positions, only two assistant district commissioners and two Mamurs<sup>2</sup> were Southern Sudanese, leading one Southerner to exclaim “it appears [ . . . ] that our fellow Northerners want to colonize us for another hundred years” (quoted in Al-Teraifi 1977: 131). However, this inequality in the Sudanisation process affected regions in Northern Sudan such as Darfur and Kordofan similarly, and since the administrative service was national, newly-appointed administrators from Kordofan or Darfur were not necessarily appointed to serve in their respective regions.

Moreover, for the riverain Arabic elites, the division of Sudan into North and South, the presence of missionaries and the use of English as the language of instruction in some schools were all seen as colonial legacies, and so Arabisation and Islamisation campaigns were a central aspect of decolonisation for them (Seri-Hersch 2020). This attitude created an idea of being Sudanese in which a true Sudanese was supposed to be Muslim and Arabic-speaking. Not only did this stratify the country into a centre in which “real” Sudanese lived, and a periphery for the rest, but from the perspective of the periphery, it was also easy to see Arabisation and Islamisation as an imposition from outside that replaced one form of colonial control with another.

After independence, Sudan experienced a brief period of democratic rule characterised by a variety of economic, financial and regional crises. Eventually, in reac-

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1 Şalāḥ Sālim was one of the Free Officers who came to power in Cairo in 1952. He was responsible for the Sudan portfolio in the Free Officers cabinet.

2 An administrative rank below district commissioner.

tion to the instability of the parliament, Prime Minister ‘Abdallāh Khalil handed power over to the military less than three years after independence (Mihatsch 2021). Although the army was temporarily able to stabilise the economic situation, it also escalated the conflict in the Southern provinces. Discussions on the conflict at the University of Khartoum led to large-scale protests planned by a variety of professional organisations unified under the umbrella of the Professional Front. Days later, Ibrāhīm ‘Abbūd agreed to resign in order for a transitional government to be formed (Berridge 2016: 20–23). As a result of the non-inclusive nature of the decolonisation process and the rapid military takeover by an army that was largely of colonial making, the 1964 Revolution was perceived by many people as a “real decolonisation”. As Willow Berridge has argued in her seminal volume on civilian uprisings in Sudan:

Participants often saw the 1964 Revolution as a kind of continuation of the independence struggle. [. . .] the public saw in their military rulers ‘another image of the colonizer’, observing that the generals wore exactly the same uniforms and even the same caps as their colonial predecessors! (Berridge 2016: 31)

Although, as Berridge pointed out, the October 1964 Revolution was mostly driven by the urban middle classes and elites in Khartoum (Berridge 2016: 34–37), the revolutionary moment also created an opening in which new imaginaries could emerge.

If one considers that the revolution was triggered by a discussion on the conflict in the Southern provinces, although it would be an overstatement to argue that it was the situation in the South that caused the revolution, the two aspects were still intertwined. This created a public sphere that was, at least at first, more willing to engage with the Southern question and the other peripheral regions more generally (Willis 2015: 294). At the same time, it marked a shift in terms of the organisation of Southern political leadership; after the revolution, Southerners in Khartoum, who had begun to organise underground, formed the Southern Front as a reaction to the Professional Front, which had run the protests. The Southern Front pushed the newly-selected Prime Minister to accept their candidates for the cabinet instead of hand-picking his own candidates. As Abel Alier remembers it: “One of the things people in the Southern Front did not like was Northern Sudanese political leaders selecting Southern representatives without consultation. [. . .] We said, this is to be stopped.”<sup>3</sup> As a result, a number of Southerners joined the cabinet and the five-man Supreme Council that replaced ‘Abbūd as President.

The Revolution thus provided an excellent catalyst for other regional movements and concerns about the nature of the Sudanese nation as well as local development.

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<sup>3</sup> Abel Alier, personal interview, Khartoum, 26 February 2011.

That is not to say that it caused the emergence of these regional movements, however; rather, it was a moment of crystallisation. While the GUN and the DDF both emerged after the Revolution, the Beja Congress had existed since the 1950s. The three movements were not the only regional organisations to emerge during this period. Others include the Union of the Southern and the Northern Funj in Blue Nile, which failed to enter parliament, or the Union of the Sons of Halfa in Northern Province and a similar organisation in the Abyei area, both of which were purely social associations.<sup>4</sup> There were also the Kordofan Front<sup>5</sup> and the Union of the Sons of Dongola, which were principally opposed to the local form of Native Administration,<sup>6</sup> and the Sons of the Misseriya, which was concerned with employment possibilities along the new railway line in the West.<sup>7</sup> Had Sudan remained democratic in 1958, it is likely that there might have been similar, but asynchronous, trajectories at an earlier stage in the various regions and at different moments in time. Rather than being the cause, 1964 gave clear visibility to a development that might otherwise have been more blurred.

## The General Union of the Nuba Mountains

The Nuba Mountains form a hilly region in Central Sudan approximately as large as Austria. Kadugli, the administrative centre, is 590 kilometres south-west of Khartoum. The Nuba Mountains are comparatively densely populated, and are very green and fertile during the rainy season. They are mostly populated by Nuba and Baggara Arabs. According to Sudan's first census in 1956, there were over half a million Nuba in Sudan. They speak various languages and are partly Muslim and partly Christian. The term Nuba does not describe a single tribe or ethnicity, but a geographical grouping of various non-Arabic-speaking people (Stevenson 1984: 4).

The British only engaged in the Nuba Mountains quite late on, and when they did, they faced a relatively fortified community that was suspicious of outsiders. As a result, it was well into the 1920s before local resistance in the Nuba Mountains against colonial occupation was suppressed (El Zailaee 2003: 52–71). The administration implemented a “Nuba Policy” along the lines of the Southern Policy as a result of which Nuba and Arabs living in the Nuba Mountains were governed by two separate local administrations (El Zailaee 2003: 115–135). Nuba were only allowed to enrol in mission schools, and military recruitment of Nuba was more or less halted

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<sup>4</sup> These organisations were mentioned to me in various interviews.

<sup>5</sup> *Al-Ayyām*, 15 March 1965, 6–7, and 25 May 1965, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Al-Ayyām*, 4 April 1965, 5, and 9 April 1965, p. 1, and 31 May 1965, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Al-Sūdān al-Jadīd*, 18 May 1965, p. 5.

(El Zailaee 2003: 136–188). Nevertheless, they were not disconnected from the rest of the country, firstly because there were Arabs living in the Nuba Mountains and secondly because there was a large number of Nuba migrant labourers. The Second World War ended the Nuba Policy when the British recruited 6,000 Nuba and dispatched them to North Africa to fight against the Germans (Salih 1982: 337–392).

The GUN was not the first attempt at politically organising the Nuba. The cotton farmers of the Nuba Mountains had attempted to form a farmers' union similar to the union of the tenants of the Gezira as early as May 1952. The Nuba Mountains Farmers' Union (it called itself a union, but neither the colonial state nor later governments ever agreed to register it as such officially) was a broad coalition of Nuba farmers, Nuba notables and Arab traders. The Farmers' Union supported the NUP in the 1954 elections after the NUP leader and later Prime Minister Ismā'īl al-Azharī promised to register them as a union and to address their key grievances. Additionally, the Umma was perceived as “pro-British,” which hurt its electoral position in the Nuba Mountains. Once the NUP came to power, its leaders failed to keep their promises, leading to the radicalisation of the Farmers' Union, in part under the leadership of the communist movement<sup>8</sup> (El-Battahani 1986: 269–321).

In 1957, the Nuba Mountains General Union, which despite its similar name is not to be confused with the GUN in the 1960s, was founded in Khartoum and the Nuba Youth Club was formed in Dilling. The leaders of these organisations supported the Umma Party in the 1958 elections, but “failing to gain any concessions in return for their support for the Umma, the Nuba intelligentsia became increasingly disillusioned with the Northern political parties” (El-Battahani 1986: 356). Support for these different parties can be understood in terms of negotiating and engaging with the state, rather than engaging in it. The *ḥukūma* was now represented by the national political parties, but remained the “other”.

In 1959, an organisation called the Nuba Sons emerged in Khartoum and replaced the Nuba Mountains General Union. The Nuba Sons focused on organising a tax protest against the poll tax (*dīqniyya*), which the Nuba still had to pay at the time.<sup>9</sup> This tax had been abolished in most places in Sudan where it still existed after 1956, including for Arabs in Southern Kordofan, but not for Nuba (El-Battahani 1986: 362–371). El-Battahani (1986: 360–361) observed that because the poll

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8 *Al-Ḥaraka al-Sūdāniyya li-l-Taḥarrur al-Waṭani* (HASUTU) was founded in 1945 in Cairo and moved to Khartoum in 1946. It participated in the 1953 elections under the umbrella of the Anti-Imperialist Front, winning one seat. The movement was closely interlinked with the worker's movement and various unions. After the 1964 Revolution, the communist movement officially founded the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) (El-Amin 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Fawzi 1957; Warburg 1978).

9 A poll tax is a fixed sum that must be paid by each individual. It was a common colonial form of tax.

tax was “retained in the Nuba region, and not in most other regions of Sudan, [it] came to be interpreted as an indication of the continuing ‘colonial’ or subordinate status of the Nuba.” Their protest was ultimately unsuccessful, however. All these organisations were interest or pressure groups that sought to influence politics, but not to participate directly. It was only after 1964 that this position changed.

In the days following the civilian uprising against Ibrāhīm ‘Abbūd, a new organisation with the provocative acronym GUN was founded.<sup>10</sup> It was created as a result of three different formative processes that took place simultaneously and within a conducive political environment. The first group who were central to the establishment of the Union were students. In 1964, nine students from the Nuba Mountains entered Khartoum University. They were not the first students from the Nuba Mountains to attend, but in previous years they had always been only one or two in number. Yūsif Jibrīl, who was one of the nine, recalled:

There were some students before us. Two, one, two, every year. But our group was nine. The Nuba people became very happy. They made a big celebration for us in Khartoum. Oh look at our people, our students, our boys, they entered university. Yes, they were very happy because of that.<sup>11</sup>

One can easily imagine that being among the first to be able to go to university, the students must have felt an enormous responsibility towards their people. The fact that they entered the university in a “larger” group and enjoyed the support of other Nuba in Khartoum was very likely to have given them additional motivations and a greater sense of responsibility. They also entered Khartoum University at a time when the students there were highly politicised, and with the overthrow of ‘Abbūd in late 1964, politics dominated the public debate. All of these factors made their decision to form some sort of Nuba organisation seem inevitable. Nūr Tāwir, who entered the university one year after Yūsif Jibrīl as the first woman from the Nuba Mountains,<sup>12</sup> noted: “You grow up as a politician if you like it or not, because it is forced on you.”<sup>13</sup>

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**10** The Union was founded in Khartoum in late 1964 and merged with other Nuba organisations in early 1965.

**11** Yūsif Jibrīl, personal interview, Kadugli, 5 March 2010.

**12** Women were allowed to study at the University of Khartoum from its establishment in 1956 and in the Khartoum branch of Cairo University since its creation in 1955. Nevertheless, the number of female students was low, and by 1964 only 50 women had graduated from the University. In the four years that followed, 93 women graduated. The number of female students from the peripheries was even lower. In 1968–1969 only one female student from the Southern provinces was enrolled, with one from the Beja communities and one from the Nuba communities (Saad 1972: 175–76).

**13** Nūr Tāwir Kāfī Abū Ra’s, personal interview, Kadugli, 5 March 2010.

At the same time, there were a large number of Nuba living and working in Khartoum. Nūr Tāwir remembered: “In Khartoum we were thousands, because there were many Nuba in the army and also many who had left the place because the Nuba Mountains were very poor and had no services.”<sup>14</sup> The Nuba in Khartoum had already started to organise, not politically, but in social groups such as lending societies. ‘Aṭrūn ‘Aṭīyya, who was an employee in the Ministry of Finance and later became the first leader of the GUN, had been involved in these social groups, which he organised to help the Nuba people in Khartoum. Yūsif Jibrīl remembers the beginning of the Union:

We, the nine students and some leaders of the social societies founded in Khartoum, they were working in the government as employees, and the students who entered University of Khartoum ahead of us, we sat together and discussed. We met in the house of ‘Aṭrūn ‘Aṭīyya in the beginning, and then we moved the meetings from there to the University of Khartoum Students Union Club.<sup>15</sup>

In Khartoum, they discussed their objectives and elected ‘Aṭrūn ‘Aṭīyya as the first head of the Union. Among these objectives, the General Union of the Nuba Mountains called for Sudan to be organised as a federal state and for the separate province of the Nuba Mountains, which had been integrated into Kordofan by the British in 1928 (El-Battahani 1986: 122), to be re-established. It also asked for the abolition of two taxes that were collected in the Nuba Mountains – the previously-mentioned poll tax (*diqniyya*) and a so-called air tax (*māl al-hawā*).<sup>16</sup> Finally, it asked for all kinds of services and development, including streets, dams, schools and hospitals.

At the same time as the Union was being formed in Khartoum, the Nuba organised themselves in the Nuba Mountains in an association called the League of the Sons of the Nuba Mountains. ‘Abd al-Fāṭiḥ Tiya recalled how they organised the first committee in Kadugli with members from the neighbouring towns, and when they learned about the Union that had formed in Khartoum, they merged the League with it.<sup>17</sup>

During this period of the interim government in Khartoum, the GUN petitioned the government to abolish the poll tax and the air tax. The government agreed to do so, and according to Phillip Kalo, who was a parliamentarian for the GUN between

14 Nūr Tāwir Kāfi Abū Ra’s, personal interview, Kadugli, 5 March 2010.

15 Yūsif Jibrīl, personal interview, Kadugli, 5 March 2010.

16 The air tax was a cattle tax. If you had twenty-five cows you would be taxed for thirty, allegedly because the number of cattle was only established every couple of years. The tax on the five non-existent cows was called the air tax.

17 El-Battahani mentions an additional group in El Obeid called the Nuba Mountains Sons Union, which “was an all-Nuba organisation, and its leadership came from amongst the Christian educated Nuba, and included traders, teachers and Catholic priests.” (El-Battahani 1986: 372)

1965 and 1968, it was announced on the radio that the Union had submitted this petition and that the taxes were going to be abolished.<sup>18</sup> Naturally, this victory proved very useful when the GUN began campaigning in elections. As Yūsif Jibrīl remembered, “This was one of the reasons that gave us a strong ground when we came to the area and addressed the people.”<sup>19</sup>

When the election in April 1965 came around, the students, who were too young to run themselves, campaigned for the Union candidates. Reliance on these students, who were back home for the vacation, reduced the resources that were needed to a minimum. The shortage of resources was demonstrated by the fact that other parties would offer voters lorries to drive them from their village to their designated polling station, which was often in a different village. The GUN did not have the means to do this and therefore resorted to a trick:

The most expensive is to carry voters from their villages to the voting centre. [. . .] I told my [prospective voters] you go and tell these people [that you are] going to vote for [their candidate], whether Umma or NUP, and this is the symbol for voting. And they will say yes, you are my voter, then let's go. They get in the car and take them to the centre and when they vote they vote for me anyway. [. . .] So they [Umma and NUP] paid for us.<sup>20</sup>

These strategies proved highly successful. The Nuba Mountains had twelve electoral districts at the time, and the Union won in eight of them. The youngest of the new parliamentarians was Phillip Kalo, who managed to arrange to be cleared to run although he was only 23. Five of the new parliamentarians were primary school teachers, two worked for the church, including Philip ‘Abbās Ghabūsh, one worked for the agricultural cooperation of the Nuba Mountains and ‘Aṭrūn ‘Aṭīyya worked in the Ministry of Finance.<sup>21</sup>

## The Darfur Development Front

Darfur is the most western region of Sudan. It stretches along the western border from Libya in the north along Chad to the Central African Republic in the south, and

<sup>18</sup> Phillip Kalo Ramaḍān Kardela, personal interview, Kadugli, 6 March 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Yūsif Jibrīl, personal interview, Kadugli, 5 March 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Phillip Kalo Ramaḍān Kardela, personal interview, Kadugli, 6 March 2010.

<sup>21</sup> The parliamentarians for the GUN were: Zakariyyā Ismā‘īl (Kadugli Town), Kabbāshī ‘Uthmān (Kadugli South), al-Bahār Kirya (Om Dorein), Phillip Kalo (Hayban at-Tira), Ibrāhīm Kuku Angelo (Aturu), ‘Aṭrūn ‘Aṭīyya (Kadugli West and Miri), Qamar Ḥusayn Raḥma (Talodi South) and Philip ‘Abbās Ghabūsh (Dilling West). One candidate for the NUP from Laḳawa, Sayyid Fajrallāh, also worked with the GUN on an unofficial basis.

is approximately as large as Spain. El Fasher, Darfur's old administrative centre, is 800 kilometres west of Khartoum. It is very dry in the North, while the Western and Southern regions are more fertile. Extensive agriculture is carried out in the Jabal Marra region. According to the 1956 census, 1.3 million people lived in Darfur at the time of independence, approximately 13% of the total population of Sudan. During this period, Darfur was inhabited by mostly nomadic, Arabic-speaking groups such as the Bani Husayn and Rizaygat and by mostly sedentary and semi-nomadic non-Arabic speaking groups such as the Fur and the Zaghawa. The vast majority of its population is Muslim. Darfur was an independent sultanate until 1874, when it fell to Turco-Egyptian Sudan. During the Mahdiyya (1885–1898), Darfur became one of the most important support bases for the Mahdī's religious movement, the *anṣār*, and when the Mahdī died, he was succeeded by Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi, a Darfuri from the Taaisha tribe. After the defeat of Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi by Anglo-Egyptian forces in 1898, Darfur once again became an autonomous sultanate. It was only in 1916, when the new regime had consolidated its reign and the British began to be concerned about Ottoman influence in the sultanate, that Darfur was incorporated into Sudan once again.

The role of the Condominium in Darfur was even more minimalist than it was in the East, the Nuba Mountains and the south. As Julie Flint and Alex de Waal (2008: 11) have pointed out, "Britain's only interest in Darfur was keeping order. It administered the province with absolute economy". A "native administration" along the lines of indirect rule was set up, tribal structures were adapted to fit the needs and expectations of the Condominium and Arabs were placed in a superior position to non-Arabs. "The doyen of these reactionary orientalist was Harold MacMichael" (Flint and de Waal 2008), who wrote an account of the Arab tribes of Sudan – part history, part colonial-style ethnography – which for many years formed the basis of British understanding of Sudanese society (MacMichael 1912, 1922). Development of the economy and services was largely ignored: economic development options were not even considered until 1945. In terms of schools and the numbers of primary and secondary school graduates, hospitals and doctors, Darfur was one of the least developed provinces of Sudan (Flint and De Waal 2008: 12; Daly 2007: 179–181).

After independence, thanks to widespread support for the *anṣār* and the Mahdī, Darfur became a power base for the Umma Party, which was founded by the Mahdī's son Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Mahdī (1885–1959). It is necessary to add two qualifications, however: first, the support of traders in urban centres allowed the NUP to win various seats from the Umma; and second, people voted for the Umma who



did not consider themselves to be *anṣār*.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, voting patterns could be quite complex, as demonstrated by Vaughan with regard to the election in 1953, when the situation was additionally complicated by the Socialist Republican Party, which had been created by the British (Vaughan 2015: 191–196). Darfur was also a breaking point between the family of the Mahdī and the family of Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi. As early as in 1957, some members of the Khalīfa’s family (‘Izz al-Dīn al-Mahdī, Muḥammad Dāwūd and ‘Umar) felt that the Umma was exploiting its position in Darfur without giving anything back to the region, and they tried to form a breakaway party. Their attempt was successfully prohibited by Sayyid ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, however (Abdel Salam 1979: 229–233).

According to ‘Alī al-Ḥājj, the first time the issue of marginalisation of Darfur in newly-independent Sudan was discussed in a public forum was at a conference in El Fasher in the summer of 1956, which was organised by Ma’mūn Muḥammadī and the Darfur Students Union. After the conference, they supposedly went to Nyala, where they organised a rally and discussed the issue of the underdevelopment of Darfur. As ‘Alī al-Ḥājj says, this was when “people were starting to get aware.”<sup>23</sup> As mentioned previously, ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Mahdī attempted to organise an Umma break-away in 1957, but failed. In 1962 or 1963, he tried to organise the Darfuris a second time, this time in support of Ibrāhīm ‘Abbūd. ‘Alī al-Ḥājj, who attended the meetings in Khartoum as one of the students from Darfur at the University of Khartoum, says that this attempt eventually failed when no specific development commitments for Darfur were made.<sup>24</sup>

In November 1964, just after the popular uprising against ‘Abbūd, the first meetings that eventually led to the formation of the Darfur Development Front (DDF) took place. As had been the case with the General Union of the Nuba Mountains, similar social groups also contributed to this development, including Darfuri students at the university, Darfuris in the unions and the civil service and a handful – fewer than ten, according to ‘Alī al-Ḥājj<sup>25</sup> – of university graduates.<sup>26</sup> In the case of the Darfur Development Front, it was Aḥmād Dirāj who operated as a catalyst, bringing the right people together and creating an initial momentum.

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22 This is based on conversations Sean O’Fahey had while travelling in Darfur in the 1960s. Sean Rex O’Fahey, private conversation, Bergen, February 2009. The observation is also in line with those made by traders in other parts of Sudan, such as Arab traders in the Nuba Mountains, who according to El-Battahani were also closely associated with the NUP.

23 ‘Alī al-Ḥājj, personal interview, Bonn, 4 September 2010.

24 ‘Alī al-Ḥājj, personal interview, Bonn, 4 September 2010.

25 ‘Alī al-Ḥājj, personal interview, Bonn, 4 September 2010.

26 Aḥmād Ibrāhīm Dirāj, personal interview, London, 19 June 2010.

The early meetings were held at the Khartoum University Students Union Club. Around fifty people attended them: some were civil servants, graduates and union leaders, but the majority were students. The DDF published its first statements the same November, and went on to organise a large rally at the Horse Racing Club in the south of the city, to which all Darfuris in the capital were invited. According to ‘Alī al-Ḥājj, more than thousand people attended this meeting, during which the DDF elected a committee and its leadership: Aḥmād Dirāj was elected as president and ‘Alī al-Ḥājj as his deputy.<sup>27</sup>

The DDF then sent out delegates, including Aḥmād Dirāj, to tour Darfur, organise rallies and speak to the electorate, local leaders and party chapters to raise awareness of the problem of underdevelopment in Darfur and to pressure political parties to put up local candidates in elections, and not candidates who had been “exported” from Khartoum. In the 1950s, the Umma in particular would field candidates from elsewhere in electoral districts in Darfur whom they wanted to select as ministers, because the constituencies in Darfur were viewed as safe Umma strongholds. A candidate like this had no relationship with Darfur, and so after the election, he would go “back and become a minister, but knew nothing about the area he is elected from and he would not serve the people.”<sup>28</sup> However, as Vaughan has shown, the difference between the 1950s, with the exported candidates and the 1960s, with candidates who actually represented Darfur, has been overstated. The question had already come up in the 1950s, when certain candidates were attacked for their perceived “Easternness” and as early as 1953, the Umma leadership in Khartoum was often unable to impose its choice of candidate (Vaughan 2015: 191–196).

In the 1965 election, the DDF did not propose its own candidates, but supported any candidate from any party who was from Darfur and had the necessary education to be a voice for his community. After the elections, the DDF organised a conference in El Fasher and invited all the elected parliamentarians from Darfur to discuss the specific regional issues and grievances of Darfur.<sup>29</sup> ‘Alī al-Ḥājj explained the purpose of the conference:

We told everybody to be in his party, but we have issues for Darfur, we want you as a block to support these issues. We are not interested if you are Umma or Communist. We are only interested in our issues and for you to support them. That is why we were able to make a conference in El Fasher, that is a conference for the parliamentarians, the parliamentary group who was actually elected in 1965. There were 24 of them. That conference was chaired by

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<sup>27</sup> According to interviews with Aḥmād Dirāj and ‘Alī al-Ḥājj. Aḥmād Ibrāhīm Dirāj, personal interview, London, 19 June 2010. ‘Alī al-Ḥājj, personal interview, Bonn, 4 September 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Aḥmād Ibrāhīm Dirāj, personal interview, London, 19 June 2010.

<sup>29</sup> *Al-Ayyām*, May 23 1965, 6 and May 26 1965, 1.

me. It began on 25 May 1965, and after three days, we made a charter and in that charter we talked about decentralisation of the government and other things, but decentralisation was very very high on the profile.<sup>30</sup>

With this conference, the DDF attempted to commit the parliamentarians from Darfur to occupying themselves with any question that touched on development of the region. Their aims were very similar to the ideas of the Beja Congress and the General Union of the Nuba Mountains, but the strategy was different. While the Beja Congress was actually a party and the members of the GUN ran as independent candidates, the DDF was working with parliamentarians from various parties.

Nevertheless, two candidates did actually run as independents in the name of the DDF. One was Aḥmād Dirāj, who won the election in Zalingei North. In the spirit of the DDF's cooperation with the established parties, Dirāj later found a political home in the more progressive "Şādiq wing"<sup>31</sup> of the Umma Party. As an independent, he would have been in a more neutral position and may have had more leverage over other parliamentarians from Darfur, while at the same time, as a member of Umma he was able to join the government as a minister. 'Alī al-Ḥājj says that Dirāj's decision to join the Umma was "controversial,"<sup>32</sup> and even Aḥmād Dirāj himself said that joining Umma was a mistake in the sense that afterwards he was "too lenient with the political parties." At the same time, he argued that it was also the right decision in that he was able to influence politics and help the modernisation process within the Umma Party along. By this he mainly meant the ideological reorientation of the Şādiq wing of the Umma Party, which in 1967 formed an alliance with a strong regional outlook called the New Forces Congress, which included the Sudan African National Union representing Southern Sudan and the Islamist Islamic Charter Front (ICF), with some support from the Beja Congress.<sup>33</sup>

## The Beja Congress

Eastern Sudan had been unified as Kassala Province during the colonial period. Kassala Province began just east of Khartoum and was slightly smaller than Germany

<sup>30</sup> 'Alī al-Ḥājj, personal interview, Bonn, 4 September 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Shortly after the death of Sayyid 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, his son Şiddīq al-Mahdī also died. This led to a power struggle over control of the Umma Party between Şiddīq's brother Imām al-Hādī, who took over as leader of the *anṣār*, and Şiddīq's son Şādiq al-Mahdī. This eventually led to a split in the Umma into two wings, which continued until the Nimayrī coup in 1969.

<sup>32</sup> 'Alī al-Ḥājj, personal interview, Bonn, 4 September 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Aḥmād Ibrāhīm Dirāj, personal interview, London, 19 June 2010.

in area. It included Sudan's entire shoreline along the Red Sea. Its capital was Kassala town, which lies 420 kilometres east of Khartoum. Over half the inhabitants of the province were Beja, while another quarter belonged to various Arab groups. The Beja people lived mostly in Sudan, but also in Egypt and Eritrea (Paul 1954). They were divided into clans, which included the Hadendowa, the Bani Amer, the Amara, and the Bishariyin, among others. A total of 650,000 Beja lived in Sudan in 1956. With 260,000 members, the Hadendowa were the largest group. Most Beja speak a dialect of Beja, with the exception of the Bani Amer, who speak a dialect of the Eritrean Tigre language. Nearly 80% of the Beja lived in Kassala province in 1956. The Beja were predominantly devout Muslims, mostly adhering to the Khatmiyya Sufi *ṭarīqa*, but many Hadendowa were part of the *anṣār*. Most Beja lived a pastoral, semi-nomadic lifestyle, with some being permanent or temporary wage and migrant labourers (Morton 1989: 66).

Sawakin had been the most important port city on the Red Sea coast for centuries. It dates back to the times of Ptolemy, and for many centuries it was a magnificent and important harbour town that also served as a harbour for Muslim pilgrims travelling to Mecca from as far away as Nigeria. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the town's commercial importance had already faded. The Swiss traveller and orientalist Johann Ludwig Burckhardt visited it in 1814 and found two-thirds of the houses uninhabited. The Egyptians tried to revive the harbour in 1865, but although it managed to weather the attacks from the Mahdī's forces, the British decided to develop a new harbour fifty kilometres further north, one that was larger and more suitable for the naval trade they expected to develop, which they called Port Sudan (Berg 1993). The British administrators brought in Arab families from the Nile to run the new city and business was mostly taken over by immigrants from the Middle East. The Beja had to compete for low-paid jobs in the port (Morton 1989: 66–67). The primary focus of the British in the East was on Port Sudan and the cotton plantations in Gash and Tokar. The semi-nomadic Beja were of little relevance except as regards their "pacification," as a result of which the British restructured the local leadership (Young 2007: 18). Worse, the British economic and development focus further deprived the Beja tribes (Pantuliano 2006: 710).

The Beja began to organise themselves systematically for the first time in 1952 with the establishment of the Beja Club, as a reaction to the modern colonial state. The Club had all the customary social functions of a club at the time, but it also established three committees: the first focused on education with a literacy campaign; the second on relations with the government, demanding minor jobs in the administration; and the third, most importantly, on worker issues, forming the first union of dockworkers to demand additional rights from foreign companies. The Club was a direct reaction by the Beja leaders to their community's low status, poor education level and restricted access to government resources such as health ser-

vices. Shortly before independence, a preliminary political committee was formed within the Club and soon thereafter a memorandum in support of federalism that explicitly demanded a division of power and resources was sent to the new national government (Tūlanāb 2007: 74–79). The Club did not become directly involved in national politics at this point, however, and in the 1953 elections, it supported the NUP candidates.

Shortly after independence, in May 1956, members of the government party who were affiliated with the Khatmiyya Sufi *ṭarīqa* broke away and formed the People's Democratic Party (PDP). The PDP then joined a new government, in a coalition with the Umma. After the division of the NUP, the Club sided with the PDP due to religious allegiances; as previously mentioned, many Beja were also members of the Khatmiyya. At the same time, the leaders of the Beja Club continued their struggle on local issues by organising a conference to discuss Beja issues. This first Popular Conference of the Beja Tribes demanded more jobs, more education, and access to schools for adults. These demands were not met by the government, and a larger conference was organised on 7 June 1957 with the aim of securing a mandate from the people to work for Beja rights. The conference looked explicitly at the economic and social problems and lack of rights of the Beja, and concluded that independence had not made any difference for them (Tūlanāb 2007: 80–102).

In the run-up to the 1958 elections, Dr Ṭāhā 'Uthmān Belya attempted to be nominated in one constituency as the PDP candidate. Although he was able to obtain local support, the leadership of the party in Khartoum disagreed. Muḥammad Sirr al-Khatim al-Mirghani, the patron of the PDP, preferred a non-Beja candidate. After a protracted struggle between the two sides and a broken promise by Khartoum to give up their candidate, both ran for the PDP, and because they split the vote, they lost the election to the NUP candidate (Tūlanāb 2007: 103–108). This experience demonstrated to the Beja leaders that further cooperation with the PDP and the Khatmiyya sect was not in their interest, and they therefore decided to form their own political organisation (Ūhāj 2006: 79–91), and on 11 October 1958, they founded the Beja Congress at a large meeting in Port Sudan. It is interesting to note that this meeting was so much on the national radar that even Prime Minister Khalīl attended in person (Maḥmūd 2009: 131–133). However, only 36 days later, Khalīl handed over power to Ibrāhīm 'Abbūd, ending Sudan's first period of democracy.

After the 1964 revolution, the Beja Congress regrouped, this time with the express aim of running as a political party in the elections. The Umma Party decided to support the Beja in their attempt to select candidates, and to rally and mobilise voters. This move by the Umma must be interpreted as an attempt to weaken the PDP and NUP, which were stronger in Kassala Province than the Umma. The Umma in turn were allowed to nominate a small number of their own people as part of

the Beja Congress. The party won eleven seats,<sup>34</sup> a victory that was at least partially due to the fact that the PDP, its main competitor, boycotted the election (Ūhāj 2006: 137–147). Compared to the GUN, the Congress had longer experience and a higher level of institutionalisation. It was formally registered as a political party, but it would be a mistake to overstate the extent to which the Congress was formalised at this stage.

## Decolonising the Peripheries

The main demands of the three movements were very similar. First, they all wanted some form of devolution of power to the provinces. Second, they all opposed what they perceived to be “exported candidates.” Umma and NUP would send candidates from Khartoum whom they wished to nominate as ministers in the next government to places they viewed as safe seats; certain electoral districts in Darfur were seen as safe by Umma, and districts in Eastern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains were seen as safe for the NUP and PDP. Both demands were fed by a broader grievance that decolonisation was perceived as the replacement of one foreign power by another.

The independence movement never needed to expand beyond the riverain centre. The Northern Sudanese peripheries – the Nuba Mountains and the east, even more than Darfur – were objects rather than subjects of independence. If 1964 was a “continuation of the independence struggle” (Berridge 2016: 31) for the riverain elites in Khartoum, this was even more true for the students and young graduates from the peripheries. As previously mentioned, during the decolonisation process, administrative positions that had previously been held by British, Egyptians and a few other foreigners were now given to Sudanese. This process, which was dubbed “Sudanisation” at the time, was often described by interviewees as “Northernisation”: that is, a process by which jobs were given to the elite from the riverain centre, who were on average better-educated. As Iris Seri-Hersch has pointed out in reference to Southern Sudan, this Northernisation process extended beyond the replacement of administrators into fields such as education (Seri-Hersch 2020: 783). Arguably, this was equally true for the Nuba Mountains. Interestingly, even an interviewee in Port Sudan associated with the Beja Congress used the term

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<sup>34</sup> Ten candidates won on the Congress ticket. Muḥammad Aḥmad 'Awaḍ was nominated in Kassa-la by the PDP, and when the party decided on a boycott, he ran anyway and switched his allegiance to the Beja Congress after the election.

“Northernisation.”<sup>35</sup> In Darfur, the complaint was more about domination by “Easterners,” but this essentially reflected the same concern. As has been explored in the historical background, the October Revolution created a space in which various regional movements were able to drive discussion of this relationship between the centre and the peripheries forward. Various associations in the regions had already posed questions about their underdevelopment in various ways and had tried to tackle these problems, either through social initiatives or by petitioning political parties or the military government. After 1964 they began to engage more directly in the state and as part of the state.

Berridge argues that “October 1964 did represent a truly national revolution” (Berridge 2016: 37). However, soon after that year, this opening up of an opportunity for a different national narrative was shut down by politicians from the centre who were too afraid that demands for regionalisation or federalism might lead to a loss of power for the riverain elites. Importantly, the idea of a federal Sudan was not rejected by everyone in the central Sudanese elite, but by its politicians. Bashīr Muḥammad Saʿīd, a close associate of Ismāʿīl al-Azharī and the editor of *al-Ayyām*, wrote a number of op-eds in support of federalism. He believed that it would be good for the development of Sudan, but warned that Sudan might otherwise face “dismantlement, division and destruction.”<sup>36</sup> He called on the Umma and the NUP to give the issue of regional governance their attention and study the possibility of decentralisation,<sup>37</sup> but he realised that although the parties were worried about the emergence of regional competition, they made no effort to understand the underlying problems in the periphery.<sup>38</sup> The most significant reaction was a law banning any groups calling for secession,<sup>39</sup> and some time later the Prime Minister called on the media not to report any further about regional political movements.<sup>40</sup>

If one evaluates the impact of the three movements from a perspective of party politics, one sees that their role is often downplayed, in part because the GUN and the Beja Congress were much less successful in the 1968 elections and the DDF ceased to play a relevant role. Nevertheless, they did play a role in driving the process of turning subjects into citizens forward. Although the parties did not win as many seats in the subsequent elections, the practice of “exported” candidates ended. As regards the Nuba Mountains, ‘Abd al-Fātiḥ Tiya stated: “After 1965 the big

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35 Conversations over coffee in the market of Deim al-Arab with various current and former Beja Congress leaders.

36 Bashīr Muḥammad Saʿīd, Op-ed, *al-Ayyām*, 10 March 1965, p. 3.

37 *Al-Ayyām*, 20 May 1965, p. 3.

38 *Al-Ayyām*, July 26 1965, p. 3.

39 *Al-Sūdān al-Jadīd*, 24 May 1965, p. 1.

40 *Al-Ayyām*, 20 June 1965, pp. 1, 8.

parties selected candidates from the Nuba Mountains and did not bring them from outside anymore.”<sup>41</sup>

This indicates more than a “technical” modification in the nomination processes for parliamentary candidates: it points to a changed relationship with parliament and the national political system. The Beja Club and the Nuba Mountains Farmers Union tried to make deals with the national parties in the 1950s, meaning that they perceived politics in Khartoum as something separate, as something to negotiate with, similar to the colonial state. The Beja Congress, the GUN and in a different way the DDF pushed for their own representation in Khartoum. Like the Southern parties, which have struggled with the expectation of representing the South, a label that artificially homogenises a highly diverse region (Willis 2015), the Beja Congress and the GUN were ultimately unable to represent the full diversity of their regions, and they were never able to reproduce their early success in later elections. Nevertheless, regional representation was later carried forward through the local candidates elected for the national parties. Thus, the regional parties of the 1960s allowed the Nuba, Beja and Darfuri to view Sudan increasingly “as a citizen,” in the sense of being co-sovereign in the political process.

While it is important not to overstate the impact of the mid-1960s, as the decolonisation of Sudan’s peripheries has been a long and complicated process that has arguably continued until today, the movements contributed centrally to a transition that, as Leonardi and Vaughan have shown, began in the late colonial period. By making this transition, the inhabitants of these regions claimed a space in the state, essentially expanding it to the peripheries, a form of bottom-up state-building, a continuation of what Leonardi and Vaughan described in relation to the late colonial period: “We might understand these local processes, including the politics of citizenship, as central to the very processes of state formation” (Leonardi and Vaughan 2016: 96). This political transformation is also reflected in a statement by Nūr Tāwir:

[With] the policy of the closed districts, we were literally shut out from life in Northern Sudan. And you can say that 99.9% of the people were illiterate. They did not know about life except where they lived. So we did not have many people to go into parliament and we did not have a lot of people to go into government. Even for elections they would come from the North. [ . . . ] Even the elders – we had our own judiciary system, we had the Makk with the king, we had the ‘Umda and we had the Sheikhs to organise life here – did not think it was important what was coming from the North. Because this was their life, they were not educated, they were living like outside history. So you cannot expect that these people suddenly, when Sudan became independent, would have political awareness and would begin to ask for their rights or fight for their rights with the Northerners. No, this was a really long process.<sup>42</sup>

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41 ‘Abd al-Fātiḥ Tiya Kāfi, personal interview, Kadugli, 6 March 2010.

42 Nūr Tāwir Kāfi Abū Ra’s, personal interview, Kadugli, 5 March 2010.



This is where the Beja Congress, the GUN and the DDF came in during the 1960s. Building on to the social clubs, the first graduates to return home with a university education and a few individuals who had experience with working for the government, they functioned, as 'Abd al-Fātiḥ Tiya put it, as an emancipatory project.<sup>43</sup> This did not end with the 1968 elections or the 1969 Nimayrī coup, but has continued to the present day, with the regional question possibly being the central challenge for the post-Bashīr transition. One *al-Sūdān al-Jadīd* journalist described the emergence of these movements succinctly in 1965: "It is not ethnicism or regionalism, but the beginning of a liberation from fear."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> 'Abd al-Fātiḥ Tiya Kāfi, personal interview, Kadugli, 6 March 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Tijānī, Op-ed, *al-Sūdān al-Jadīd*, 16 May 1965, 3.

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Iris Seri-Hersch

## Chapter 20

# Education, Violence, and Transitional Uncertainties: Teaching “Military Sciences” in Sudan, 2005–2011

This chapter started life as an incidental discovery made while I was doing research for my PhD on history teaching in colonial and early postcolonial Sudan. As I was looking for old history and geography schoolbooks in Khartoum’s libraries, bookshops and streets in 2009, the covers of three recent textbooks entitled “The Military Sciences” (*al-‘ulūm al-‘askariyya*) drew my attention. I bought them out of curiosity, without realising that they would become objects of history, belonging to a present that a revolution that would unfold ten years later (2019) would seek to turn into a past. From the vantage point of a volatile post-revolutionary moment, this study<sup>1</sup> seeks to understand the relationship between education and violence in another context of political uncertainty, namely the years stretching from the formal end of the North-South civil war in 2005 to Sudan’s partition into two states in 2011. As it explores connections between an *emic* category – violence as used by social actors; a concept – violence as an analytical tool; and a source – textbooks, this research intersects with two main fields.

The first is the academic literature on the self-named Sudanese *inqādh* regime (“salvation” in Arabic, 1989–2019), especially its ideological, educational and coercive dimensions (Guta 2009; Fluehr-Lobban 2012; Breidlid 2013; Berridge 2013; Gallab 2014; Tenret 2016; Salomon 2016; El-Battahani 2016). These works have analysed how the Islamist ruling elites attempted – with partial success – to transform cultural representations, legal norms, moral values, social conduct, political practices and even aesthetic models over the course of more than two decades. Noah Salomon’s ethnographic study (2016) has examined the social life of the state, focusing on the daily experience of ordinary Sudanese (both supporters and critics of the regime), and bringing to light local debates over the nature of “true” Islam

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1 My thanks go to Candice Raymond and Mohamed Bakhouch, who organised a seminar on “Patterns, Dynamics and Representations of Violence in the Islamic World” (Aix-Marseille Université, 2016–2017). My initial ideas were developed in this framework. I would also like to thank Elena Vezzadini, Lucie Revilla, Anaël Poussier and two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. All translations from Arabic and French are mine; the names of all the informants have been anonymised.

and its relationship with the political form of the nation-state. Although they were a central actor in the inception and maintenance of the *inqādh* regime, the Sudanese armed forces have attracted very limited scholarly attention (Kalpakian 2019: 47). The two main works (Sa'īd 2001; Ṭāhā 2002) were written by ex-military officers who had been excluded from the army following the 1989 coup as part of the large-scale purges carried out by 'Umar Ḥasan al-Bashīr's regime. They therefore provide vital background information from an insider's perspective, while also assuming an engaged, anti-regime position.

The second field of interest here is the social sciences scholarship on violence. In Latin languages, "violence" comes from the Latin term *vis*, which basically means "force" and relates to various forms of physical and immaterial violence (Faggion and Régina 2010: §18). The Arabic term *'unf* conveys not only notions of violence, aggressiveness and harshness, but also ideas of excess and severity (al-Ma'ānī 2021). The multifaceted nature of violence – which may be physical, verbal or symbolic; spontaneous or organised; individual or collective; private or public; and social, religious or political – makes it a complex subject of inquiry that has attracted the attention of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and philosophers since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Faggion and Régina 2010: §1–3). When they discuss research methods for investigating violence in African contexts,<sup>2</sup> historian Élodie Apard and political scientist Cyrielle Maingraud-Martinaud (2021: 3) remind us that violence as a social phenomenon is always relative. Still, physical violence can be broadly defined as a destructive process that hurts – deliberately or not – the physical integrity of people involved in it (Maingraud-Martinaud 2021: 5). As for symbolic violence, several concepts have been developed by social scientists. Pierre Bourdieu conceives it as the interiorisation of domination mechanisms to a point where dominated people stop perceiving them as such. It is by applying this reading that Sümbül Kaya (2013: 520) has interpreted the attitude of Turkish officers and conscripts who both endure and perpetuate an institutional form of violence in army barracks. In contrast with Bourdieu, political sociologist Philippe Braud (2003) defines symbolic violence as a *consciously lived* experience that generates subjective suffering.

Bourdieu's and Braud's conceptualisations of symbolic violence would prove useful for an ethnography of real teaching situations in schools or for testing Kaya's

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<sup>2</sup> In France, the current dynamism of what might be termed "violence studies" applied to Middle Eastern and African contexts may be seen in European research projects such as "Social Dynamics of Civil Wars" (2016–2021): <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/669690> (20 May 2021) and a recent special issue of *Sources. Materials & Fieldworks in African Studies* (Apard and Maingraud-Martinaud 2021).

central hypothesis in the Sudanese context: do recruits undergo and exert physical and moral violence during military training along a vertical (hierarchical) axis and/or a horizontal one (between peers)? If so, does this violence lead to the internalisation of power relations based on social hierarchies such as class, ethnicity or religion? What part does it play in the symbolic killing of young conscripts who are later ready to endure the violence of war (Kaya 2013: 515, 520)? The concept proposed by historian and political scientist Hamit Bozarslan is more directly relevant to this study. According to Bozarslan (2008: 11), symbolic violence pertains to “the discursive construction of enmity that precedes, accompanies and *a posteriori* legitimises physical violence”. In addition to violence as discourse, this chapter will also argue that one subtle, but nonetheless powerful, form of symbolic violence is silence, especially in the educational field. Indeed, school education plays a central role in the socialisation process, which “induct[s] actors into the norms and rules of a given community” (Checkel 2017: 594). We shall see how the notion of a complex process involving the agency of both socialisation agents and targets (Checkel 2017: 595–597) materialises in the Sudanese case.

This chapter investigates the meanings of violence in a context characterised by both military appeasement and political uncertainty: Sudan in the “transitional” era (2005–2011) following the conclusion of the peace treaty between the North and the South that officially brought an end to one of the longest civil wars in postcolonial Africa (1955–1972 and 1983–2005). On 9 January 2005, the Sudan Government of the National Congress Party (NCP) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Naivasha, Kenya, under the auspices of US diplomacy. While committed to making the preservation of a united Sudan “attractive”, the agreement called for a referendum on Southern independence after a six-year transitional period. The Southern Sudanese voted massively in favour of independence (98.8%), leading to the partition of the country and the effective secession of South Sudan on 9 July 2011 (Aalen 2013; Johnson 2013). In the mid-2000s, therefore, it seemed that Sudan was “getting out” of two episodes of civil war that had opposed the central government in Khartoum and the Southern Sudanese rebel movements (Anyanya, then SPLM) for decades.

Over the past twenty years, scholars have nuanced the simplistic interpretation of these clashes as a purely ethnic or religious conflict between a predominantly Arab-Muslim North and an African Christian South. These civil wars should in fact be understood as the outcome of a multi-layered historical domination of Southern Sudanese people by Northern groups (Idris 2001; Collins 2005; Poggo 2009; Johnson 2016; Seri-Hersch 2020). Among the major phenomena worth recalling here are the experience of slavery and the slave trade, which expanded greatly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the separate administration of the two

regions by the British colonial authorities (1899–1956), which concentrated their meagre investments on infrastructure, education and health in the North; the marginalisation of educated Southern Sudanese in the negotiations with Britain and Egypt on Sudanese independence in the 1950s; and the aggressive Arabisation and Islamisation policies implemented by successive Khartoum governments from 1948 on.

With regard to the nature of the North-South civil war, it has been argued that the status of the forces involved in the fighting evolved significantly between the 1960s and the 1980s. According to Jack Kalpakian (2019: 56), from 1955 to 1972 the fighting was done by regular Sudanese troops on both sides (the Southern rebels being mutineers from the Sudan Defence Force<sup>3</sup>), whereas a variety of militias took part in the second civil war as allies or adversaries of the national army. The 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s therefore witnessed the fragmentation of armed violence, which was deployed by various state and non-state actors in Southern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains and Darfur (Kalpakian 2019: 54–6). However, this argument should be nuanced by the fact that the first civil war also involved pro-governmental militias who had been recruited from among poor Southerners (they were known as *al-ḥaras al-waṭani*, the “national guard”) (Ruay 1994: 132), as well as Southern rebel fighters drawn not only from ex-soldiers, policemen and prison guards, but also from students and civilians in general (Poggo 2009: 60–71, 131–144).

The signing of an agreement to end a war that had proved especially long and deadly<sup>4</sup> aroused hopes at the local and international levels. These hopes materialised into a growing use of the expression “post-conflict Sudan” to refer to the post-2005 era. Implying the existence of a *before* and *after* clearly delimited by the CPA, this expression came to be used regularly by political actors and international agencies (World Bank 2012: 54, 85, 98, 119, 179), as well as by Sudan scholars (Ahmed 2009; Guta 2009; Leturcq 2009; Leu 2011). However, the transitional era witnessed a large-scale conflict in Darfur (Western Sudan), which attracted international attention from 2003 and was categorised by part of the academic community as a genocide (Prunier 2005; Daly 2007; Totten 2011). In addition, the Sudan government continued to increase its spending on defence, security and the police: in 2012, more than half the state annual budget was devoted to this sector (El-Battahani 2016: 4). Moreover, although the 2005 agreement was supposed to usher in a new era of

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<sup>3</sup> The Sudan Defence Force, which was established by the British in 1925, was renamed the “Sudan Armed Forces” after independence in 1956.

<sup>4</sup> Whereas the first civil war left 170,000 people dead and 1,200,000 displaced (Vezzadini 2014: 181), the 1983–2005 war left 2 million dead and 4 million displaced, of whom 600,000 moved out of Sudan (UNMIS n.d. [2005]).

peace, a subject called “Military Sciences” (*‘ulūm ‘askariyya*) was taught in Sudanese public secondary schools, as indicated by the three textbooks I discovered in Khartoum (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2005, 2006, n.d.).

The notion of a “post-conflict” Sudan was therefore more akin to a performative discourse than it was to dynamics on the ground. The reality of the transition was characterised by multiple forms of armed, political and social violence, a great deal of which was directly linked to the authoritarian *inqādh* regime born out of an alliance between General ‘Umar Ḥasan al-Bashīr’s military faction and the National Islamic Front (NIF) of the Islamist ideologue Ḥasan al-Turābī.<sup>5</sup> If one nuances the Weberian interpretation of the state as monopolising legitimate forms of violence (Colliot-Thélène 2003), one might say of the Sudanese army, police, security services and state militia that the violence they used before and after 2005 was neither legitimate nor exclusive because of the regime’s authoritarian character (El-Affendi 2013; Deshayes and Mahé 2020), the maintenance of irregular policing bodies as a tool of social control and a means of bypassing the judicial system (Berridge 2013) and the ongoing conflict in Darfur (Suliman 2011; Hastrup 2013; Mahé 2016).<sup>6</sup>

Did the CPA include precise provisions on the Sudanese educational system after the North-South civil war? What were the objectives of military teaching in this transitional context, and who were the target audiences? To what extent did military sciences dialogue with the various Sudanese internal conflicts? Lastly, how are militarism, the legitimisation of violence and being accustomed to violence interrelated? This chapter seeks to answer these questions by drawing on various primary sources, including Sudanese laws, the CPA, UN, UNESCO and World Bank reports, Danish and British state reports, Sudanese military instruction schoolbooks, official and informal Sudanese websites dedicated to education, local and foreign media, and personal correspondence with seven Northern Sudanese – four women and three men – born between 1958 and 1981, most of whom are university educated.<sup>7</sup> The analysis of this primary source material is informed by recent

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5 On the relations between state and society under the Islamist regime, especially in the 2000s and 2010s, see the works by Abdullahi A. Gallab (2014) and Noah Salomon (2016). On the links between the civil war in Darfur and authoritarian resilience, see Mahé 2016. William Berridge (2013) has analysed the role played by public order policing units in extending the political apparatus of the ruling party (the NCP from 1999) and enforcing the regime’s strict interpretation of Islamic morality.

6 The prerogatives of the army and security services were defined in the People’s Armed Forces Act (2007) and the National Security Forces Act (1999) respectively (Redress n.d.). On the history of the Sudanese police, see the chapter by Ammar Mohamed Elbagir Ibrahim in this book.

7 Rather than being representative of any specific social group, these informants provided insightful comments on educational realities in the 1990s and 2000s based on their own experiences or those of relatives, friends and acquaintances.



studies on contemporary Sudan, violence, and the link between military institutions and socialisation to violence in the Middle East. Most examples will be taken from the first-grade textbook because it was prepared during or after the signing of the CPA (first edition: 2006). Moreover, its impact might have been especially powerful due to the relatively young age of first-grade pupils (14–15). Indeed, political scientist Jeffrey T. Checkel (2017: 594, 597) and others have suggested that age is a key factor in socialisation, as children – as well as adults who lack primary socialising agencies – are more easily influenced. Particular attention will be paid to the words used in military instruction, and to violence as expressed through both discourse and silence.

This chapter does not rely on ethnographic observations of real-time textbook use, teaching methods or students' reactions; still, it offers important insights into our understanding of the *inqādh* regime and the ways in which it sought to produce and reproduce itself through the education of its prospective citizens. It therefore sheds some light on an authoritarian system that was increasingly called into question in the 2010s (Deshayes and Vezzadini 2019: 160–164), and was ultimately overthrown by the 2018–2019 revolution, during which people chanted slogans such as “*hurriyya, salām wa-’adāla al-thawra khiyār al-sha’b*” (“freedom, peace and justice; the revolution is the choice of the people”) or “*suḷṭa madaniyya aw thawra abadiyya*” (“civil rule or everlasting revolution”) (Casciarri and Manfredi 2020a: 17, 36). More broadly, this chapter adds empirical evidence to theoretical studies on education in times of political transition (Smith 2005). Based on a Sudanese case study, it reflects on various conceptualizations of symbolic violence as useful tools for historians and sociologists of education.

## Education, a Blind Spot in the CPA

In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, armed conflicts have had a deep impact on the type, quality and degree of education offered to young people – or withdrawn from them. Conversely, the transmission of certain kinds of knowledge, world view and value to future citizens may fuel conflict within a given society or conversely contribute to an easing of tensions (Davies 2004). In the words of education scholar Anders Breidlid (2019: 132): “The classroom was in one sense an extension of the battlefield” in Sudan. The education system was instrumentalised by the Khartoum regime in the 1990s and 2000s to cultivate an Islamist, Arab-centred ideology that largely overlooked the country’s real religious and ethnolin-

guistic diversity<sup>8</sup> (Guta 2009; Breidlid 2013: 37–40; *id.* 2019: 126–128; al-Bashīr 2017: 265–317). In the SPLM-controlled Southern areas and the Nuba Mountains, the schools that continued to operate during the war often used Ugandan, Kenyan or Ethiopian textbooks. In the early 2000s, the SPLM developed its own school materials with a view to fostering an inclusive Southern Sudanese identity, one that would transcend ethnic cleavages (Sommers 2005; Leu 2011: 13–14; Breidlid 2013: 40–42).

One might expect that the CPA would have dealt with education matters in 2005 in such a way that teaching and learning would contribute to the Sudanese process of peace-building, and yet the opposite was true. The CPA focused on political and judicial institutions, the sharing of land, oil and fiscal resources, monetary policy, the status of border areas such as Abyei and security arrangements (The Comprehensive Peace Agreement n.d. [2005]). The “multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual” character of Sudan had certainly been officially recognised in the first round of negotiations three years earlier (“Chapter I: The Machakos Protocol, Signed at Machakos, Kenya on 20th July, 2002.” *The Comprehensive Peace Agreement* [2005]: 5), and the CPA’s final text did mention the “right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” among a number of fundamental rights (“Chapter II: Power Sharing, Signed at Naivasha, Kenya on 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2004.” *The Comprehensive Peace Agreement* [2005]: 5). It also stated that “all the indigenous languages are national languages which shall be respected, developed and promoted”, while reaffirming the prominence of Arabic as the “widely spoken national language in the Sudan” and English as the second administrative language (*The Comprehensive Peace Agreement* [2005]: 26–27). But it did not include any provision regarding the education of Sudanese children and teenagers.

The public education system was maintained along the lines drawn by the *inqādh* regime in the early 1990s (al-Amīn [2005] 2007: 220–233). Formal instruction theoretically lasted for thirteen years and was divided into three stages: a two-year pre-school cycle (kindergarten or Quranic school for children aged 4 to 6), an eight-year primary cycle (*al-ta’līm al-asāsī* for children aged between 6 and 14, which was to be free and compulsory according to the 2005 interim Constitution<sup>9</sup>) and a

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<sup>8</sup> In 2010, the Sudanese population was made up of approximately 70% Sunni Muslims (mostly in the North), 25% members of “local” religions, and 5% Christians (Kramer, Lobban and Fluehr-Lobban 2013: 367). Among dozens, or even hundreds, of languages and varieties used in the country, the major languages are Arabic, Nubian, Fur, Masalit, Zaghawa and Beja in the North, and Dinka, Nuer, Bari, Zande, Juba Arabic and English in the South.

<sup>9</sup> The 1973 Constitution had already mentioned education as “a right of every citizen” and the role of the state as “endeavour[ing] to spread and provide it free in all stages” (Article 53) (The Democratic Republic of the Sudan 1973: 10). The 1998 [Islamist] Constitution referred to the responsibility

three-year secondary cycle (*al-taʿlīm al-thānawī*, 14–17 years of age). Things were different in practice, as the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in 2008–2009 reached 72% for primary schooling and only 28% for secondary schooling, with significant territorial variations. Whereas the capital Khartoum and the riverine regions had much higher GERs than Darfur, Blue Nile or Kassala states (World Bank 2012: 51, 53, 81–82), the proportion of Southern Sudanese pupils who completed primary school was extremely low (Sommers 2005: 70–71; Vuni 2008), and reproduced inequalities that had already existed in the colonial era (Seri-Hersch 2018: 363, 367).

As for secondary schooling, there were 753,988 students in 2009–2010 (al-Bashīr 2017: 184), half of whom were girls. The secondary stage was organised into a two-year core course followed by a year of specialisation. The mandatory core subjects included Arabic, English, religious sciences and the Quran, mathematics, sciences (physics, chemistry and biology), geography and the environment, history and social studies. Military sciences had been introduced into public secondary schools as a separate subject in 1998–1999 (al-Amīn [2005] 2007: 233; Nafisa 2021), perhaps as a result of intensified fighting in the South from 1996.<sup>10</sup> It was offered as an optional subject alongside engineering, agriculture and cattle-rearing, commercial sciences, physical education, family sciences, arts and computer science (al-Bashīr 2017: 205–206). Usually taught by history teachers, it was also offered to third-year students. The weekly amount of teaching of the subject was one period (45 minutes) in the first and second years, rising to four periods in the third year (Maḥmūd 2021; Shirāz 2021). Although military instruction was optional,<sup>11</sup> it could be chosen as an exam subject for the Sudan School Certificate (SSC), as indicated on the online portal “The Sudanese Electronic School” (*al-madrasa al-īliktrūniyya al-sūdāniyya*),<sup>12</sup> which provides videos prepared by teachers on various classes and exam subjects, including sequences of military sciences posted on the Eschoolsudan YouTube channel (Eschoolsudan 2014).

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of the state for “implement[ing] educational policies, moral care (*riʿāya khuluqīyya*), national education (*tarbiya waṭaniyya*) and religious purification (*tazkiya dīniyya*) to produce a good generation (*jil ṣālih*)”. (Article 14) (al-Majlis al-Waṭānī 1998: 2).

**10** I do not know whether there were any specific military science textbooks between 1998 and 2005, or if so whether their content was different from those published in 2005–2006.

**11** One informant (Maḥmūd 2021), who worked as an Arabic teacher at a public secondary school in Omdurman before moving to an administrative job in the town’s education office, stated that military sciences was a compulsory subject in the first and second years, but was only optional in the third year. There may have been significant variations between different schools and different tracks.

**12** Its current website is <http://www.eschoolsudan.com/> (28 April 2021).

## The Social Impact of Military Sciences Under the *Inqādh* Regime

One might first consider a number of parameters that rather limited the social reach of military instruction. Given the relatively low GER in secondary schools and the fact that military sciences was an optional subject, only a minority of Sudanese teenagers would have studied it. While it is quite clear that boys and girls followed the same curriculum (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2016; al-Bashīr 2017) – albeit at separate schools – the possible division of options based on gender is less well-established. According to Shīrāz (2021), a Sudanese university teacher born in 1981, girls rarely chose military sciences as an optional subject, and if they did it was merely to improve their overall grades because the subject was considered to be an easy one. In her view, family sciences (*‘ulūm usriyya*), on the other hand, specifically targeted female students. In addition, it is difficult to assess the extent to which Khartoum’s curricula were used in the South in the aftermath of the civil war. The Northern curricula may have been studied by some of the 6% of Southern Sudanese teenagers who were enrolled in secondary schools in 2009, especially in the regions close to the North (Leu 2011: 14, 18). We should also note that at least a part of the Southern population in exile in Khartoum – sometimes for decades – who amounted to 41% of the capital’s 4.4 million inhabitants in about 2001, must have been enrolled in public secondary schools (Sommers 2005: 207–250; Vezzadini 2014: 178; Casciarri 2016: 72). Finally, schools were only one among numerous sources of information and socialisation sites – including families, neighbourhoods, youth movements, religious organisations, cultural associations, political parties, and medias, among others<sup>13</sup> – that obviously interlap, but are difficult to untangle from each other.

However, there are other factors that reveal the importance of military sciences. The subject needs to be understood as part of a broader process, namely the militarisation of education that had been under way since the beginning of the 1990s (al-Bashīr 2017: 194). This dynamic can be seen not only from the introduction of a new subject explicitly dedicated to the military field at the secondary school level, but also from the prominence of a martial vocabulary in the pedagogical materials used for other subjects such as Arabic, the Muslim religion, history, geography and literature from the earliest primary school grades up to secondary education (Guta 2009: 82–85; al-Bashīr 2017: 305–308). The militarisation of the school universe

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<sup>13</sup> The 2005–2011 transitional era was characterised by the opening of the political space to opposition parties and independent media (Deshayes and Vezzadini 2019: 159).

under the *inqādh* regime is perceptible in both schoolbooks and pupils' clothing. Throughout their education, students attending public schools were required to wear uniforms that mimicked military camouflage (see figures 28 and 29).<sup>14</sup> This meant that two central institutions of the modern state – the army and the school system – were ideologically and visually connected in the Sudanese public space, no matter how much the pupils themselves actually identified with the military. A university teacher born in 1974 told the author that in the 1990s war songs were not only sung in class, but were also a constant presence on children's radio and television programmes (Mahā 2021). Until 2005, the regime used to broadcast a weekly thirty-minute programme entitled *Fī sāḥāt al-fidā'* ("In the Fields of Sacrifice"), which used footage of battles between government armed forces and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) to promote jihad against Southern "infidels" and celebrate fallen "martyrs" (Fluehr-Lobban 2012: 83). Although the programme was taken off the air when the CPA was signed, Sudan Television briefly resumed broadcasting it in 2011, as conflict erupted in the Blue Nile and South Kordofan areas (El Gizouli 2011).



**Figure 28:** Sudanese girls in school uniform in 2007.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> There was also a strong military component in private school networks such as the (Islamist) *al-majlis al-ifriqī li-l-ta'lim al-khāṣṣ*/African Council for Private Education, where most teachers were serving in the army. In the 1990s, a weekly "jihad course" was taught, albeit with no textbook (personal communication to author by historian Anaël Poussier, 12 June 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Di Lauro 2007.



**Figure 29:** Sudanese boys in school uniform in 2015.<sup>16</sup>

The military science textbooks themselves were vehicles for an educational discourse that was both authoritative and long-lasting. The books were authored by senior officers (Major-Generals Muḥammad Bashīr Sulaymān and Muḥammad Maḥmūd Jāmi' and Brigadier-General Majdhūb Raḥma al-Badawī), and the first-grade textbook was even reviewed by the Director of the Military College (*kulliyat al-ḥarb al-'ulyā*), Ḥaydar 'Abd al-Karīm Jawda. The authoritative quality of these school texts stems from at least three attributes: they were written by high-ranking officers; they had high scientific pretensions – consider the use of the term “sciences” (*'ulūm*), which echoed the regime’s long-term endeavour to “fundamentalise” or “Islamise” knowledge (*ta'ṣīl* or *aslamat al-ma'rifa*) since the 1990s (Salomon 2016: 97–107) – and they were published under the aegis of the Ministry of Education. It seems that they were in continuous use from the time they were published around 2005–2006 at least until 2020,<sup>17</sup> even though 'Umar al-Bashīr's regime had been overthrown in the meantime and replaced by a transitional government under the leadership of Prime Minister 'Abdallāh Ḥamdök in September 2019.

Finally, military instruction cannot just be reduced to a bundle of theoretical knowledge disconnected from reality. Several sources have suggested that in the so-called “post-conflict” or transitional era, Sudanese secondary school students and graduates were still required to undergo sessions of military training organised by the

<sup>16</sup> Habbānī 2015. This uniform, which aroused some debate inside and outside Sudan (see for instance al-'Arabī al-Jadīd 2015), has been widely dropped since the fall of the *inqādh* regime in April 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Evidence of its continuing use is provided in the official National Centre for Curriculum and Educational Research (NCCER) website in 2016 (<http://www.manahg.edu.sd/index.php/manahg-books/studentbooks/secondary>), which is no longer available, and informal sites dedicated to uploading and downloading schoolbooks (Zarkachat 2020; 'Abdallāh n.d.).

*quwwāt al-difā' al-sha'bī*/Popular Defence Forces (PDF) – a regime militia<sup>18</sup> – before they were eligible to be admitted to university or to secure a job in the government administration or large companies (Salmon 2007: 17–18; Home Office 2012: 114; al-'Arabī al-Jadīd 2015). Lasting from forty-five days to three months and held at PDF camps in Khartoum and elsewhere in the country, this training had been imposed on students who had been admitted to universities and higher education institutes as early as December 1990 (Lobban 2001: 119), and by 1992, it had become mandatory for all university students, both male and female (Danish Immigration Service 2001: 37). In 1994, the government also announced compulsory PDF training for secondary school students (Lobban 2001: 123), reflecting both the regime's attempt to control the minds and bodies of young, educated people and its growing need for recruits in its war against the SPLA. According to scholars J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins (2003: 17), PDF recruits were introduced to weaponry by army instructors, but “their indoctrination was more religious than military, including interminable lectures on Islam delivered by known members of NIF and Muslim Brothers”. Besides their PDF training, which may have been implemented less systematically after 2005,<sup>19</sup> men aged between 18 and 33 – and women to a lesser extent – had to complete a period of national service that had been compulsory at least since 1992 (see “The National Service Act for 1992” in Danish Immigration Service 2001: 67–74). According to the law, national service could be carried out in the armed forces, police or other regular forces, in government and public sector units or in public projects in development, economic or social services (Danish Immigration Service 2001: 68). It lasted for twelve months for university graduates, eighteen months for secondary school graduates, and twenty-four months for all other young adults (Danish Immigration Service 2001: 36–37, 69; Home Office 2012: 114).

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**18** The precise history of the PDF is still somewhat obscure. It seems that it was established under Sudanese law as early as 1981, under the Nimayrī regime (see “The People's Defence Forces Bill, 1981” in Redress n.d.). The PDF prominently included Arab Baggara militias (*murāhīlīn*) recruited in South Kordofan by the Nimayrī regime and later by the Umma Party government (1985–1989) to fight the SPLA (the SPLM's armed wing). A new law was passed after al-Bashīr's coup in 1989, which continued to stress the PDF's aim as “instil[ling] in them [PDF members] a military spirit and military traditions and discipline so that they will be able to assist the People's Armed Forces and other regular forces wherever needed”, but broadened its function to encompass “any other task entrusted to them by the Commander-in-Chief himself or pursuant to a recommendation of the [PDF] Council”. The other major shift between 1981 and 1989 was the lowering of the minimum age of recruits from 18 to 16 (“The People's Defence Forces Bill, 1981” in Redress n.d.: 5; “Popular Defence Forces Act of 1989 (Translated from Arabic)” in Redress n.d.: 2, 4; Burr and Collins 2003: 16–17; Kalpakian 2019: 52–53).

**19** As suggested by one of the anonymous reviewers of this chapter.

## Military Instruction, Islam and the Sudanese Homeland

What were the declared goals of the educational discourse of military instruction? The first-year course was meant to teach military history and the arts of war to prepare the students to “protect this homeland’s faith, land and achievements” (*ḥimāyat al-‘aqīda wa-turāb wa-muktasabāt hādihā al-waṭan*) (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 1). On the assumption that human conduct and activities were primarily shaped by conflict and war rather than peace (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 6), the officer-educators sought to instil the centrality of “Sudanese national security” (*al-amn al-qawmī al-sūdānī*), reinforce patriotic inspiration to face “all the dangers that may threaten [Sudan’s] national interests” (*kull al-makhāṭir allatī qad tuhad-didu maṣāliḥahā al-waṭaniyya*) and above all foster “the spirit of jihad and sacrifice” (*rūḥ al-jihād wa-l-tadhīyya*) among all strata of society for the sake of the faith and the homeland (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 1–2).

In an echo of the totalising visions typical of modern Islamist movements,<sup>20</sup> the text characterises the Muslim religion as a “comprehensive system” (*manhaj mutakāmil*) governing all aspects of human life. From this perspective, military instruction was inseparable from the “right Islamic education” (*al-tarbiya al-islāmiyya al-ṣaḥīḥa*) (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 6). The three textbooks quote numerous Quranic verses, *ḥadīths* and chronicles from the early Islamic centuries in order to assert the existence of close connections between the Muslim religion, moral conduct and military strategies, thereby legitimising contemporary Sudanese security concerns through an Islamic framework (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 14–17, 55, 67–73; Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2005: 1–7, 20–27, 40–48, 73–76, 80–81; Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān n.d.: 33–36, 47, 58, 70–75, 88–104, 130–139). This pervasive Islamic referential (Seri-Hersch 2015: 316) perfectly fit the regime’s political ideology and “civilisational project” (*al-mashrū‘ al-ḥadārī*): since most Sudanese were Muslims, the application of Islam was seen as a democratic principle that derived from the will of the people. Thus, all Sudanese institutions and individual behaviours were expected to conform to the form of Islam conceived by the ruling elite (Salomon 2016; Deshayes and Vezzadini 2019: 156).

We should also note that the military sciences curriculum developed in the early and mid-2000s built on previous educational practices in Sudanese schools. In

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<sup>20</sup> The thought of the Sudanese leading Islamist figure Ḥasan al-Turābī (1932–2016) has been debated. Some scholars see it as a direct incorporation of the “radical” ideas that had been developed earlier by the Pakistani Abū al-‘Alā al-Mawdūdī and the Egyptian Sayyid Quṭb, whereas others speak of a partial tactical appropriation (Berridge 2017: 144–176).



the 1990s, pupils at all school levels were required to sing what several informants termed “jihadi songs” (*anāshīd jihādiyya*) at the daily morning assembly (Murād 2021; Rashīd 2021; Sāra 2021; Shīrāz 2021). One of the most famous was “In Your Protection, Our Lord” (*fi ḥimāka rabbanā*), composed by ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm ‘Ābidīn (1914–1976), a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the organisation’s secretary general in the 1940s. This song, which celebrated Islamic unity and dying for God, was thus transposed from British-dominated Egypt to the NIF’s late 20<sup>th</sup> century Sudan.<sup>21</sup> Pupils also recited a war poem attributed to ‘Abdallāh ibn Rawāḥa, an early companion of Prophet Muḥammad who died at the Battle of Mu’ta between the Muslims and the Byzantines in 629. According to a Sudanese inspector of finance born in 1960 (Rashīd 2021), this poem was “distorted” (*taḥrīfuhā*) to fit the regime’s ideological agenda against the “American tyrant” and to foster a culture of violence, hate and martyrdom among Sudanese youth.

To this we should add two illuminating points. First, there were significant variations depending on the teachers and the geographic locations. When recalling her own experience as a pupil at an intermediate school in Khartoum Bahri from 1992 to 1994, Shīrāz (2021) stressed that headmasters and teachers affiliated with the Islamist movement were far more intransigent than other educators. In her case, the headmaster had a black whip, and would beat any pupil who did not sing the “jihadi” songs at the morning assembly. After the signing of the CPA in 2005, martial songs continued to be imposed at secondary schools outside the capital, notably in Kassala, Nile, Gezira and Sennar states (Shīrāz 2021), whereas the practice was generally abandoned in Khartoum state (Shīrāz 2021; Rashīd 2021; Sāra 2021). The second point relates to the agency of the pupils, who were not passive recipients of “jihadi” songs. For instance, in one of Bahri’s government secondary schools for girls, pupils developed various strategies for resisting singing jihadi songs in 1995–1997: when the (male) headmaster played a religious song on the tape recorder, the girls would reply with a “science” song; they also unplugged the tape recorder from the microphone, which led to a reorganisation of the morning activities. The embarrassed headmaster lost “control” (*sulṭa*) over them and was replaced with the (female) physical education teacher, who had been officially responsible for morning activities but had been unable to direct them before the microphone incident (Shīrāz 2021). These examples demonstrate the agency of socialisation targets, who may resist or be unreceptive to a socialiser’s message (Checkel 2017: 597) and expectations.

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21 The words of the song can be found on the web (“Fi ḥimāka rabbanā – kitāb anāshīd Abi Māzin” n.d.).

In the 2000s, the secondary course of military instruction sought to appeal to 14–15 year-old students by connecting them with slightly older schoolmates who were engaged in military training, as shown on the textbook cover (figure 30). At the end of the book, additional black and white pictures concretise this link between youth, military enrolment and patriotic commitment. An explicit legend<sup>22</sup> shapes the meaning of the photographs.



**Figure 30:** Cover of the military sciences textbook used in high school, 1<sup>st</sup> grade (2006).<sup>23</sup>

The three textbooks were not organised along any clear thematic or chronological lines. In the first year (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006), students would learn a specific vocabulary (ranks, units and warfare), encounter examples of wars from various times and places (Greek and Roman antiquity, 7<sup>th</sup> century Islamic conquests, the Second World War and the Arab-Israeli wars) and become acquainted with the main

<sup>22</sup> “Examples of secondary students as they join the ranks of the national service and train with unprecedented enthusiasm and an elevated patriotic spirit (*bi-ḥimāsa munqaṭiʿat al-naẓir wa-rūḥ waṭaniyya ʿaliyya*). [They are] ready to extend the faith and the homeland” (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 75).

<sup>23</sup> Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006.

bodies responsible for Sudan's internal and external security (the army, the police, the security services and the PDF). The second year was devoted to the qualities and moral spirit of a soldier; the techniques and rules of warfare, the art of leadership (mentioning Sa'd bin Abī Waqqās – one of the first Muslim converts, a companion of the Prophet and the victorious commander at the Battle of al-Qādisiyya between the Muslims and Sassanids in 636 – and the French General and Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte as examples), national security and psychological warfare (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2005). The presence of an entire chapter on Napoleon's biography and military campaigns and an assessment of his strengths and weaknesses (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2005: 28–39) is surprising, given the *inqādh* regime's emphasis on cultural authenticity. It might have been a legacy of Napoleon's major influence on the modernisation of Ottoman Egypt's army under Mehmet Ali (1805–1848) and his successors, a process that has been coined “defensive developmentalism” by scholars such as James L. Gelvin (2016: 72–89). In the last year, the course developed around further military strategies and doctrines, different kinds of warfare (including space war), Islamic teachings about the qualities required of a commander; the country's preparation for war and three examples of battles from Islamic, Sudanese and world history (the Muslim-Quraysh Battle of Badr in 624, the Anglo-Mahdist Battle of Shaykān in 1883, and the British-German Battle of El Alamein in 1942) (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān n.d.). The choice of these three battles allowed the textbook authors to highlight Islamic, Sudanese Mahdist and Allied military victories. In the last case, the respective strategies of German General Erwin Rommel and British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery dominated the text, but astoundingly, the involvement of the Sudan Defence Force in the Libyan desert in 1941–1942 was omitted (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān n.d.: 156–166).

The next section analyses how violence was expressed in and through the textbook narrative. It will allow us to reflect on the meanings of war and the ways in which state-sanctioned educational discourses sought to accustom teenagers to violence at the very time when Sudanese citizens were grappling with existential questions about their society's past and its political future (Deng 2010).

## **Non-Violent Wars, Absent Conflicts and the Army as a Vector of Democracy**

A close reading of the first-grade textbook raises three important observations. The school narrative produces an interesting dissociation between war and violence; it praises the role of the army in Sudanese history, but remains silent on Sudan's

civil wars. We will now develop these three dimensions through the use of concrete examples.

The 1948 Arab-Israeli war, which was termed “the Palestinian war against the Jews” (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 22), was presented as an archetype of modern 20<sup>th</sup> century warfare. Why was this so? Sudan’s military and political involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict might provide a part of the answer. Not only did Sudanese volunteers take part in the 1948 war (Hazkani 2021) and Khartoum host the Arab League summit in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War, which endorsed the “Three Nos” Resolution (no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel and no negotiation with Israel), but ‘Umar al-Bashīr himself fought in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war as a member of the Sudanese units that sided with the Egyptian army against Israel (Abd al-Ḥamīd 2016). After 1989, the *inqādh* regime provided Palestinian Islamist movements such as Hamas and the Islamic Jihad with steady ideological and logistical support (Sharfi 2015: 527–529). In depicting the 1948 war, the authors of the textbook focus on its different stages, the movement of Zionist forces and Arab armies and the balance of power between Jews and Arabs, which favoured the former (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 23–24). Several important aspects of this pivotal event in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are omitted, such as the civil war between Jews and Arabs in Mandatory Palestine (December 1947–May 1948), the massive Palestinian exodus, the number of casualties and the war’s territorial, demographic and political consequences.<sup>24</sup> Paradoxically, violence is absent from the description of the war, whereas it runs through a paragraph devoted to “the situation before the war” (*al-aḥwāl qabl al-ḥarb*):

Zionist terrorism (*al-irhāb al-ṣahyūnī*) stood out in Palestine before the war. From 1936 to 1939, Jewish gangs (*al-‘iṣābāt al-yahūdiyya*) committed numerous violent and deadly acts (*al-‘adīd min a’māl al-‘unf wa-l-qatl*) in Palestinian towns. The gangs’ operations lessened during the Second World War and then resumed in 1943. The goal of these terrorist acts (*hādhihi al-a’māl al-irhābiyya*) was to inflict a psychological debacle (*hazīma nafsiyya*) on the Palestinian citizen (*al-muwāṭin al-filasṭīnī*) (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 22).<sup>25</sup>

Violence also showed through a question posed at the end of the chapter in the context of a summarising “discussion” (*niqāsh*) the teacher was supposed to have with his/her students: “How were the Jews able to despoil the land of Palestine (*istilāb arḍ Filasṭīn*)?” (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 27). The Arabic root سلب expresses the

<sup>24</sup> Among the wealth of scholarship on the 1948 Palestine war, see for instance the works by Benny Morris (2009), Ilan Pappé (2015), Walid Khalidi (2012, 2013), and Shay Hazkani (2021).

<sup>25</sup> The use of the word *muwāṭin* in the sense of a citizen would be anachronical here. In the 1930s, Palestinian citizenship was held by both Arabs and Jews living in British Mandatory Palestine. The Sudanese authors probably wanted to identify the country’s Arab Palestinian inhabitants.

idea of lifting, taking by force, looting, raiding and alienating, thus referring to the semantic field of violence. The Sudanese school narrative stresses the physical and psychological violence stirred up by armed Zionist operations against the Palestinians, yet this violence remains vague and has no concrete effects. Nothing is said about the Palestinian Arab revolt against Zionism and British policies in 1936–1939, nor is any reference made to the Palestinian national movement. Also, the Jewish appropriation of Palestinian land seems to be depicted as having unfolded *before* the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.<sup>26</sup> The educational discourse therefore produces a cognitive disassociation between war, which is technicised through an emphasis on military strategies, and violence, which is tangible at a moment that was not categorised as a war.

The second observation is perhaps less surprising. It relates to the representation of the Sudanese army as a vector of patriotism, peace and democracy. The textbook goes back in time as far as the Kushite kingdoms (2500 BCE–350 CE) and the Christian kingdoms of medieval Nubia, whose military organisation is briefly described as being based on irregular “voluntary” (*mutatawi’in*) troops. Interestingly, these non-Islamic polities are not framed as some “time of ignorance” (*jāhiliyya*) that preceded the advent of Islamic kingdoms in Sudan; on the contrary, a clear connection is established with the Sultanate of Sennar (1504–1821), whose rulers had “greatly benefitted from the previous experience of the extinct [Nubian] kingdoms in the organisation and constitution of their army, alongside the benefit they drew from the experience and legacy of Muslim armies” (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 29–30). After a few sentences on the Sudanese soldiers recruited into Mehmet Ali’s army (the *jihādiyya*), who are praised for their “exceptional heroism” (*buṭūla nādīra*), the narrative deals with the private army set up by the powerful slave trader al-Zubayr Pasha Raḥma (1830–1913), which is seen as the direct precursor of the armed forces of the Mahdist state (1885–1898): indeed, several Mahdist commanders, including al-Zāki Ṭamal, Ḥamdan Abū ‘Anja and Al-Nūr ‘Anqara, are said to have been trained at al-Zubayr’s “military school” (*madrassa ḥarbiyya*) (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 31). The textbook attributes a significant development to the Mahdist army, stressing the growth of a coherent military organisation that replaced the “haphazard tribal fighting” (*qitāl al-qabā’il al-‘ashwā’ī*) that had apparently predominated beforehand (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> It is a well-established fact that the 1948 war constituted the turning point in the control of land. Jewish land amounted to only 7% of Mandatory Palestine in 1947, whereas after the 1949 Armistice Agreements, the State of Israel controlled 78% of the territory. The Sudanese textbook mentions the 1956 and 1967 wars briefly, but without providing any detail.

<sup>27</sup> On the Ottoman-Egyptian army in the late 1870s, see Moore-Harell 1999. Ronald M. Lamothe (2013) has studied Sudanese slave soldiers serving in the Anglo-Egyptian army in the 1890s.

Although the authors recognise the role of the British colonisers in the creation of the modern Sudanese army in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they mostly emphasise the participation of Sudanese military officers in the anticolonial struggle. Sudanese officers and soldiers took part in the foundation of the Sudanese Union Society (*jam'iyat al-ittihād al-sūdānī*) in 1919, the nationalist mobilisations led by the White Flag League (*jam'iyat al-liwā' al-abyaḍ*) in 1923–1924 – including the mutiny among Military School cadets and the street demonstrations following the British decision to evacuate the Egyptian army from Sudan – and the creation of the Graduates' Congress (*mu'tamar al-kharījīn*) in 1938 (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 34, 38–39). The school narrative has much less to say about the army's role after Sudanese independence in 1956, although it deals with the army's stance during the popular uprisings that led to the demise of the respective regimes of General Ibrāhīm 'Abbūd in 1964 and Colonel Ja'far al-Nimayrī in 1985. In both cases, the Sudanese armed forces are represented as “taking sides with the people in their revolution against the ruling regime” (*inḥāzat [ . . . ] ilā jānīb al-sha'b fī thawratihī ḍidd al-nizām al-ḥākīm*) (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 39). The army emerges as a patriotic actor that prevented potential bloodshed resulting from the collision between the regime and the demonstrators. Furthermore, it is depicted as the central force that allowed the return to a democratic political order in 1965 and 1986 (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 40). Three comments should be made here.

Ex-military officers and historians have started to unravel the scope of political and ideological divisions within the Sudanese army in the 1960s and 1980s (Sa'īd 2001; Ṭāhā 2002; Berridge 2015). The army cannot therefore be seen as a monolithic bloc that is unambiguously engaged “for” or “against” anti-regime mobilisations. It is also quite astonishing that in 2006 the officer-authors valued the army's potentially subversive role *vis-à-vis* the regime, while they themselves were part of the armed wing of a state apparatus that might well have been called into question after seventeen years of authoritarian rule. Should we interpret this as unintended clumsiness or as a discrete form of criticism of the ruling political elites? In the case of the 1985 uprising, is this representation related to the fact that the Commander-in-Chief of the army, 'Abd al-Raḥmān Siwār al-Dhabab, had decided to “side with the people” (that is, by removing Nimayrī from power) but later came sufficiently close to the *inqādh* regime to be appointed as head of the Khartoum-based international “Organisation for Islamic Predication” (*munazzamat al-da'wa al-islāmiyya*) (Berridge 2015: 53, 199)? Lastly, the textbook is silent about the three military coups that overthrew parliamentary systems and re-established authoritarian rule in 1958 ('Abbūd), 1969 (Nimayrī) and 1989

(Bashīr).<sup>28</sup> The aim of this omission was undoubtedly to opacify the striking contrast between the length of the authoritarian episodes (thirty-nine years) and that of the parliamentary interludes (eleven years) in Sudanese political life between 1956 and 2006.

However, the most deafening silence is around the Sudanese civil wars. A few fleeting hints are certainly scattered through the textbook, but they do not explicitly convey civil conflict. For instance, the authors evoke a “rebellion/mutiny in the Equatorial Corps” (*tamarrud bi-firqat khaṭṭ al-istiwā*) in 1955, and interpret it as the motive for “creating an army able to protect the nascent independence” (*khalq jaysh qādir ‘alā ḥimāyat al-istiqlāl al-walīd*) (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 37), as if the mutiny had called into question the very principle of Sudanese independence rather than the establishment of a state dominated by Arab-Muslim elites from Khartoum. Elsewhere, the text vaguely indicates “the deterioration of the security situation in the South” (*tadahwūr al-mawqif al-amnī bi-l-janūb*) in 1984 (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 63). In brief, it was a devastating rebellion that only the creation of the PDF could remedy:

The forces of rebellion (*quwwāt al-tamarrud*) assaulted the citizens’ villages and homes (*dāhamat qurā al-muwāṭinīn wa-masākinihim*) in Southern and Western Kordofan and in the Upper Nile. They seized their property and arrested the women (*nahabat mumtalakātihim wa-asarat al-nisā*). The citizens gathered their capacities and formed special groups to defend themselves and their property. (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 68)

These “local motives” (*dawā’ī maḥaliyya*) explain the creation of the PDF on the advent of the *inqādh* regime in 1989.<sup>29</sup> PDF camps – which according to scholars were set up after 1991 with Iranian support (Salmon 2007: 17–19; Kapakian 2020: 53–54) – were meant to “train all the sons of the community/nation, empowering them to respect God’s order” (*tadrīb li-kāfat abnā’ al-umma, tamkīnan li-amr allāhī*) (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 67).<sup>30</sup> Playing on the double meaning of the Arabic term *umma* (Muslim community or nation in the political sense), this rhetoric incorporates all citizens into a single national and religious body – Muslim Sudan. The first-grade textbook therefore passes over thirty-nine years of conflict between Northern and

<sup>28</sup> Altogether, Ṭāhā al-Dīn (2002: 549–555) mentions seventeen (failed or successful) coups between 1956 and 1991.

<sup>29</sup> Previous developments, such as the 1981 “People’s Defence Forces Bill” or the *murāḥilīn* policy of Nimayrī’s regime and Ṣādiq al-Mahdī’s government, are not mentioned, as if the *inqādh* had created the PDF from nothing.

<sup>30</sup> On the ways in which the *inqādh* regime elaborated its own notions of *tamkīn* (empowerment) and *tanwīr* (enlightenment) to develop multiple relays within society (such as the Sudanese General Women’s Union or community police units at a neighborhood level), see the chapters by Abir Nur and Lucie Revilla in this book. The PDF were integrated into the regular army in 2020.

Southern Sudan, as do the books for second and third grade students. The national army's role in these extremely long and deadly wars is hushed up. The Darfur conflict is never mentioned. The same silence characterises the history textbooks in use during the transitional era, as the historical narrative never goes beyond Sudan's independence in 1956.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion: Violence as Discourse, Product and Silence

This study makes it possible to suggest a heuristic distinction between violence as described *in* the school narrative and violence as produced *by* this same narrative. On the one hand, the textbooks as a source contain a bundle of representations that need to be decrypted. For instance, the terminology used by the authors was aimed at delegitimising specific actors by associating them with violent behaviours, as was the case with Zionists and Southern Sudanese rebels. On the other hand, those textbooks sociologically acted as a vector of violence, preparing Sudanese secondary students for the discourses and practices they would encounter within the framework of official or unofficial military training. Thus, the school narrative *tells* of a certain violence but also *did* violence. This violence was both physical and symbolic.

This case exemplifies Bozarslan's concept of discursive violence. The analysis of Sudanese textbooks for military sciences brings to light a process of lexical technicisation, which certainly acted as a means of producing consent to instituted forms of violence. The officer-authors chose a strategical and technical vocabulary to euphemise the violence inherent in military activities. At the same time, the school narrative drew on a political nationalist discourse and a religious Islamic register to legitimise armed action. Mobilising ancient and modern history, Muslim sacred texts, and the prophetic model served to promote notions of national security and jihad – the latter being understood in the sense of an ultimate commitment in the path of God and a necessary armed struggle (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 70–73).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> On the representations of colonialism in these history textbooks and how they resonate with Northern Sudanese contemporary educational discourses on globalisation, see Seri-Hersch 2015.

<sup>32</sup> The enemies targeted by this jihad were not clearly identified. They were akin to “external threats” or “subversive activities” attributable to foreign organisations, individuals and states or to “Sudanese groups” (Jumhūriyyat al-Sūdān 2006: 57). Clément Deshayes and Anne-Laure Mahé (2020: 91) have noticed the semantic violence of an internal state jihad directed at populations in or from Southern Sudan, Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains, who were called “slaves” or “cockroaches” by certain



Besides symbolic violence as a discursive tool, I suggest an additional concept that sheds light on the Sudanese case – but which would well apply to other national contexts, especially authoritarian regimes in their various guises: silencing certain facts, processes and actors allows one to deny the physical violence that is being carried out against obscured groups. The almost total silence about intra-Sudanese conflicts, despite – or rather because of – their length and disastrous human consequences is also a form of symbolic violence. It must be added to the types of physical and psychological violence that are consubstantial with civil war and repression of not only anti-regime activists, but also ordinary citizens from “ethnic” groups that have been structurally discriminated against (for example: Southern Sudanese, Darfuris and Nubas) and/or the lower social classes (Deshayes and Mahé 2020). In the uncertain transitional context of 2005–2011, this institutional denial impeded the dissemination of officially-sanctioned knowledge about the various conflicts, and hindered any potential recognition of Southern Sudanese or Darfuris as historical actors and full members of society.<sup>33</sup> At a theoretical level, this form of silent violence might be compared to what anthropologist Michael Taussig has termed a “public secret”: namely “that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated” (Taussig 1999: 5). This perspective nuances the Foucauldian theory linking knowledge and power by arguing that active not-knowing (“knowing what not to know”) is at the very core of power (Taussig 1999: 6–7). The absence of certain social groups, political events and armed conflicts from Sudanese school narratives and practices also brings to mind the phenomenon of enforced disappearances, which sociologist Didier Bigo (1994) has studied as a tool for invisibilising political opponents in authoritarian contexts around the world.

Behind the recurring expression of “national security”, one should see an attempt to reproduce the *inqādh* regime and avoid the partitioning of the country through the use of ideological indoctrination, the disciplinary control of bodies and the enrolment of young Sudanese in the paramilitary and armed forces. This political imperative explains why it became necessary to convey the image not only of a powerful state, but also of Sudanese society as cemented together by a shared history and religion, as well as by common interests – above all the defence of its territory and state structures against foreign and local threats. In fact, this fictional – and largely fictive – unity did not stand up to centrifugal socio-political realities, which clearly manifested themselves in the divorce between Sudan and South Sudan in 2011 and the popular revolu-

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agents of the *inqādh* regime. ‘Umar al-Bashīr himself is reported to have called the Southern Sudanese “insects” before and after the secession of South Sudan in 2011 (Chirico 2018: chapter 10).

<sup>33</sup> Merethe Skårås and Anders Breidlid (2016) have shown that the silencing of the Southern civil conflict was also prevalent among South Sudanese teachers after the outbreak of the civil war in newly-independent South Sudan in 2013.

tion that led to the fall of the Khartoum regime in 2019 (Deshayes and Vezzadini 2019; Latif 2020; Bach, Chevrillon-Guibert and Franck 2020). In the street demonstrations and digital mobilisations that culminated in the removal of President al-Bashīr in April 2019, Sudanese activists called for inclusive citizenship by the widespread slogan “You [ʿUmar al-Bashīr or Ṣalāḥ Gosh<sup>34</sup>] racist and arrogant, the whole country is Darfur” (*yā al-ʿunṣurī al-maḡhrūr kull al-balad Dār Fūr*). A variation of this slogan, “you [ʿUmar al-Bashīr] racist and coward, the whole country is women” (*yā al-ʿunṣurī yā jabbān kull al-balad niswān*), served to denounce a patriarchal order that had distant roots in the past but which the *inqādh* regime had strengthened through the imposition of strict dress codes and the repression of “shameful” conduct in the public space (Berridge 2013: 531, 535–538; Casciari and Manfredi 2020b: 982, 984).

The military sciences course was implemented at a time of political transition, when the major issue at stake in Sudan was relations between the North and the South. Ironically, the textbooks continued to be used in (Northern) Sudan after the 2011 split, illustrating a frequent gap between political and educative temporalities. This kind of inertia also reminds us of the multiple conditions – political will, specialised knowledge, social acceptability and human and financial resources – required to transform school curricula and educational practices, even within a classic top-down reform approach (Karami Akkary 2014). At the time of writing, the post-revolutionary era (2019–2023) is also one of political transition from the *inqādh* regime to a potentially new democratic order that might emerge from the parliamentary elections planned for 2023. As the nature of the Sudanese political regime and the relations between state and citizens are the issues currently at stake, a heated debate was stirred up by a reform of the history curriculum launched by the NCCER in 2020. The inclusion of a reproduction of Michelangelo’s 16<sup>th</sup> century “Creation of Adam” fresco in a sixth-grade textbook sparked a controversy among Muslim authorities, educationists and intellectuals. Sudan’s Islamic Fiqh Academy banished the book, describing it as an “ugly offence” and denouncing its supposedly pro-Western bias. After a preacher accused the textbook of promoting “apostasy” and “heresy” in a widely-circulated video and another called for it to be burned, Prime Minister Ḥamdōk froze curriculum changes and appointed a commission to investigate the matter in January 2021 (ʿAwaḍ 2021; AFP 2021). This decision, and the subsequent resignation of the head of the NCCER, ʿUmar Aḥmad al-Garrāy, show that educational changes – even those that seem to be very limited or symbolic –

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<sup>34</sup> Ṣalāḥ Gosh headed Sudan’s National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) from 2004 to 2019. This slogan may have been directed at him rather than at ʿUmar al-Bashīr as a response to claims by Gosh that the 2018–2019 uprising was stirred up by the ʿAbd al-Wāḥid faction of the Darfuri Sudan Liberation Movement.

are at once possible and highly sensitive in the uncertain times of political transition, as competing social groups and ideological trends struggle over the cultural orientation of Sudanese society and its political translation into state institutions.

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Lucie Revilla

## Chapter 21

# The “Civilisational Project” from Below: Everyday Politics, Social Mobility and Neighbourhood Morality under the Late *Inqādh* Regime

Before April 2019 and the fall of Sudan’s National Salvation regime, from which the term *inqādh* derives, analyses of the Islamist movement were mainly undertaken through its internal development and progressive integration into the state (Sidahmed 1996; Gallab 2008; Musso 2016).<sup>1</sup> Through this dominant lens of analysis, the Islamist movement seems to be a political movement designed by the elites to expand their domination over society by various coercive means. Numerous works have paid attention to power relations within the movement and its penetration into different sectors of Sudanese society, especially the economy (Marchal 1995; Ahmed 2004; Verhoeven 2015). The approaches that have focused on intellectuals and well-known politicians (Ahmed 2004; Abdelwahid 2008; Berridge 2017) are essential in many ways because they reveal the heterogeneity of the Islamist elites and the internal contradictions within the movement.<sup>2</sup> One could then come to the conclusion that the *inqādh* regime (1989–2019) was first and foremost an elite construction imposed on a passive society through top-down strategies, but this perspective marginalises any analysis of the multiple forms the movement has taken in people’s everyday lives.

On the other hand, with regard to the regime’s brutality, it might seem provocative to analyse the “civilisational project” (*al-mashrū’ al-ḥaḍārī*) imposed by the Islamists from the 1990s through the lens of the everyday, since many authors have pointed out its exceptional violence. Nonetheless, it can offer new ways of understanding the naturalisation of a political order in everyday life and its sway over society. Although the imposition of the regime’s policies was unquestionably brutal

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1 I dedicate this chapter to Mahadiyya, Asahweer and Bidur. I am immensely grateful to Najwa Abulbasher and Musa Adam Abduljalil for their kindness, help and hospitality.

By the term “Islamist movement”, I am referring to the broad galaxy of political groups gathered around the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan under the Islamic Charter Front in 1964. For a detailed history of the structure of the Islamist Movement and the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan, see El-Affendi 1991 and Abdelwahid 2008.

2 I use the term “Islamist” as my informants or actors used it to describe themselves.

and it used coercive means to establish its domination over society, the effects are less well-known in the long term, and are generally reduced to open conflicts or dichotomic understandings of resistance or obedience. Sudanese society under the *inqādh* has mostly been represented *through the dichotomic opposition of adhesion versus resistance to the regime*. As other scholars have underlined in different contexts, however, should we consider anything that goes beyond adhesion or resistance as their opposite (Pilotto 2016: 12)?<sup>3</sup> Are people adhering to the *inqādh* project if they do not openly resist? Does non-adhesion mean resistance?

This dominant approach fails to grasp the variety of reactions to the Islamist political project, considering the heterogeneity of the social groups in a regime that lasted for thirty years, especially the wide range of attitudes that the boundaries of adhesion or resistance cannot embrace. However, certain perspectives informed the hegemonic strategies used by the Islamist movement to consolidate its domination, and underlined the mutual appropriations and co-production of hegemony between the state and specific social groups (Chevrillon-Guibert 2013a; Musso 2015; Salomon 2016; Mahé 2017), including the most marginalised ones (Abdel Aziz Ahmed 2018; Abdul-Jalil 2018). These perspectives have gone even further, focusing on the multiple forms of subjectivation provoked by the *inqādh* regime's "civilisational project" to radically transform society and everyday life in accordance with the ideology spread by the National Islamic Front (*al-jabha al islāmiyya al-qawmiyya*, NIF) and later by the National Congress Party (*ḥizb al-mu'tamar al-waṭani*, NCP), which was formed after 1999.<sup>4</sup>

I draw from the influence of these later works to contradict the elitist structure that is customarily used to analyse the *inqādh* regime, and look at the specific forms of socialities and local hierarchies shaped by the "civilisational project" and its integration into the everyday lives of "ordinary people".<sup>5</sup> I use this conceptual framework to understand how people living in the popular areas of Khartoum "actually clung" (Lüdtke: 4) to the Islamist regime on a daily basis.<sup>6</sup> The notion of "ordinary" here is a twofold one: first, it balances the sometimes extensive and dichotomic use of "subaltern" or "elite" as analytical categories, leaving the social classes open to

<sup>3</sup> I was inspired by Pilotto's comment on the difficulty of analysing the agency of Palestinian workers outside the context of resistance shaped by the dominant nationalistic narrative.

<sup>4</sup> The NIF was dissolved after the 1989 coup led by 'Umar al-Bashir and Ḥasan al-Turābī to be integrated into every level of state administration. It re-emerged under the banner of the NCP for the return of a so-called multipartyism promoted by the Constitution of 1999.

<sup>5</sup> On the notion of ordinary people, see Lüdtke 1995: 4.

<sup>6</sup> Initially this historiographical approach was anchored in the study of societies under totalitarian regimes. However, it has been increasingly used as a key in other contexts to go beyond a dichotomic understanding of the routinisation of domination and between consent and resistance: Geoffray 2015.

a more complex analysis.<sup>7</sup> Through a study of social practices and everyday socialities among low-ranking NCP members active at a neighbourhood level and their interactions with the inhabitants, I argue that the *inqādh* regime had profound effects on people’s everyday lives, and caused considerable disruptions to social stratification by introducing new social groups whose status was ambiguous. I then illustrate how a political project translated into everyday experiences of power, and how it affected the meaning the inhabitants of popular neighbourhoods attributed to their existence.

This perspective draws attention to the many forms of expression and positions that affiliation with the NCP entailed in popular neighbourhoods in Greater Khartoum by focusing on two suburban areas where I carried out ethnographic research from October 2016 to September 2019. When I was in the first phase of my fieldwork, exploring the city to find the neighbourhood I could come regularly to for ethnographical purposes, I went to al-Fath on my colleague Hind Mahmoud’s advice; she was already conducting fieldwork in this area on issues of education and youth vulnerability. I talked with one of her main interlocutors and I visited him three times in the beginning of 2017. But due to the breadth of al-Fath area and the few social bonds I had at that time,<sup>8</sup> I lacked a real anchorage and it seemed to me too hard to conduct an ethnography of everyday life in that context. It was finally by coincidence that I discovered two months later that my host mother in al-Fitihab, had a cousin living in a block of al-Fath 2.<sup>9</sup> This relation allowed me first to come to visit and then to be able to come at least twice a week to conduct ethnography during eleven non-consecutive months in two blocks (*murabba*) of al-Fath 2.

Located on the extreme edge of North Omdurman, al-Fath 2 is attached to a sub-division of the Karari local government, one of the seven local governments in Khartoum State. The inhabitants have been designated as marginalised by the state, both because it provides them with very limited public services and as a result of the treatment afforded to them at the time the neighbourhood was planned (Mahmoud 2021). This state of marginalisation is explained by the term *muham-mashīn* (“marginalised”) used by the inhabitants of al-Fath 2 to define themselves. My second research area is al-Fitihab, which is located in the local government of

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7 As Elena Vezzadini (2012) has shown, a social group can be defined as an elite while still occupying a subaltern position. By contrast, the social group I am studying here is neither a subaltern nor an elite group.

8 Al-Fath is composed of four main zones: al-Fath 1, al-Fath 2, al-Fath 3 and al Fath 4. Planning projects for al-Fath 5, al-Fath 6 and so on had already begun.

9 For the sake of anonymisation, I do not name this person, who welcomed me each time I went to al-Fath 2 as well as to the two blocks taken as case studies.

Omdurman. Its relationship to the state is more ambiguous, as it occupies a complex position within urban and social stratification that is not as marginalised as it is in al-Fath 2.<sup>10</sup> I lived in al-Fitihab from October 2016 to May 2017 after PhD student Ester Serra Mingot suggested me to live in the room she had rented from a family living in this neighborhood.<sup>11</sup>

I conducted regular observations and interviews both before and after the fall of the regime with forty NCP members involved in popular committees (*lijān sha'biyya*), volunteers in the Popular and Community Police (*al-shurṭa al-sha'biyya wa-l-mujtama'iyya*) (Berridge 2013; Revilla 2021) and representatives of the native administration, a system of local administration inspired by colonial rule and revitalised by the Islamist regime at the beginning of the 1990s (Casciarri 2009; Abdul-Jalil 2015). In order to move beyond the dichotomic analysis of the *inqādh* and its elitist bias, I first show the extent to which the claim of societal transformation has given rise to an intermediary “moral class” that embodies new lifestyles and has the task of implementing the Islamist project at a local level. This perspective makes it possible to more accurately understand the many contradictions the Islamist regime created. I then highlight the specific rationalities and government practices introduced by the civilisational project and endorsed by NCP members, which led to contradictory forms of appropriation.

## The Formation of an Intermediary “Moral Class” Under the *Inqādh* Regime

The expansion of the organisational apparatus developed by the Islamist movement after the 1989 coup reshaped social stratification in popular areas, and gave a new status to local representatives of the regime, providing them with access to resources and new registers of distinction (Revilla 2020). I argue that the *inqādh* regime structured a specific moral class that “can be said to be created when the prescriptive elements of its ways of life stabilise: that is to say, when the members of the class adopt a codified life aesthetic in the form of behavioural obligations and prohibitions” (Bertrand 2005: 104).<sup>12</sup> The term “intermediary” does not refer here to the middle-class but rather to a specific kind of “control class” (*classe d'en-*

<sup>10</sup> The complexity of social and urban stratification has been underlined in previous research. See, among many others: Franck 2016; Bakht 2020; Casciarri in this volume.

<sup>11</sup> See Mingot 2018.

<sup>12</sup> My translation. Romain Bertrand borrows the notion from E. P. Thompson, 1963. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Gollancz.

*cadrement* in French, see Bihir 1989; Chevallier 2020) in charge of controlling and administrating the popular classes in the interests of the regime.

## Islamist Revolution and Social Change

The respondents to my research cannot be classified as an elite or a local elite, since they do not hold significant political power in their hands. Although they cannot be categorised as subaltern either, they are the product of the contradictions of the Islamist regime, which shaped a new kind of popular class through its social policies. There are many different factors that drove this reshaping of social structure from below.

First, the notion of *tamkīn* was central to Islamist penetration into state structures after the military coup of 1989 and the disruption of social stratification. Coming from the Arabic word *makana*, and frequently translated in English as “empowerment”, which implies an emancipatory horizon, it actually signifies an authoritarian force that strengthens or takes root in something until it becomes totally embedded. The tree, which became the official symbol of the NCP in 1998, is meant to be a metaphor that suggests that the more the Islamist movement grows roots in the Sudanese society, the more it is able to regenerate it. From this perspective, the followers and supporters of the Islamist movement were considered to be the only people who would be able to implement the civilisational project. The main purpose of the *tamkīn* policy was therefore to integrate these people into government jobs in order to bring about a radical transformation of society. Its primary consequence was mass dismissals of civil servants from the administration at all levels, and their replacement by Islamist followers and supporters.<sup>13</sup>

Second, the urbanisation of Khartoum led to a more extensive state hold on the newly-arrived population living in the peripheries of the capital. Of my forty respondents, five had fled the conflict in Darfur that had broken out in 2003. Eleven were from the Nuba Mountains and South Sudan and had arrived in Khartoum in the early 1980s after the outbreak of the war between the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (*al-ḥaraka al-shaʿbiyya li-taḥrīr al-Sūdān*, SPLM) and the Sudanese army. Thirteen were “northern poor”<sup>14</sup> from nomadic or *jallāba*<sup>15</sup> backgrounds who had become impoverished as a result of state incentives to settle, which led to their

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<sup>13</sup> See Anne-Laure Mahé’s ongoing research on purges.

<sup>14</sup> I would like to thank Anaël Poussier, who suggested me the use of this expression.

<sup>15</sup> Northerners who migrated to Southern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains or Darfur since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were involved in commercial businesses and slavery, staying for several generations.

becoming invisibilised in the urban margins (Salih 1990; Casciarri 2014). Interestingly enough, seven of them, all of whom were men, had arrived in the peripheries of the capital from Darfur and the Nuba Mountains in the early 1970s, and had joined the police, army or security services, which demonstrates that integration into coercive institutions is also a factor in migration to the city. Finally, two had migrated to Khartoum looking for better healthcare for a close relative at the very beginning of the 2000s.<sup>16</sup>

Third, the urban policies implemented by the Islamist regime fluctuated between violent repression and expulsions, with measures being taken to provide newcomers to the city, whose arrival in Khartoum intensified in the early 1980s, with access to property, and to legalise former squatters' areas after they had been demolished (Denis 2005). The popular committee members interviewed in al-Fath 2 received plots of land in 2003 after the violent expulsions from al-Djikhis, close to the Şābrīn bus station, in the Karari local government area. Al-Djikhis was an “*ashwāʾ*” constructed with very precarious materials and declared to be illegal by Khartoum state. Following their extremely violent eviction by the state, the inhabitants of al-Djikhis were forcibly displaced to the desert area in the Karari local district, on the extreme fringes of north Omdurman. As one of the former inhabitants of al-Djikhis, who is now settled in al-Fath 2, put it:

The government left us in the desert of al-Fath for a year and three months with nothing. We were settled in the market square [*sūq 9*] without water, without electricity. We were supplied by truck. There were a few [humanitarian] organisations. It was very hard. They poured us there like dust, as if we were nothing!

Subsequently, the urban authorities of Khartoum organised the distribution of plots of land, and the former inhabitants of al-Djikhis finally had access to land, with a parcel of 200 square metres for each family to build a home. Although the location of the plots was extremely unfavourable because of the total absence of public services and al-Fath 2's remoteness (Mahmoud 2021), anthropologist Musa A. Abdul-Jalil (2018: 175) reminds us that “acquiring a plot of land is a dream for most newcomers to the Greater Khartoum conurbation, where rents are relatively high and there is no security of tenure, since all available houses are owned by individuals who can evict tenants at any time.” Al-Fitihab has a more complex position in the social and

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<sup>16</sup> The two remaining respondents are one woman NCP member and one tribal representative from the Zanakha tribe, also an NCP member, both of whom were from Abu Said and ambiguously positioned on the social ladder. They had inherited land and benefited from deep social roots, but had become impoverished because their families had ceased their agricultural activities (see Franck 2007), and because of broader economic issues of the kind that affected those I have classified as “Northern poor”.

urban landscape. Although it shares many similarities with al-Fath 2 in terms of planning and the legalisation of squatters’ areas in the 1990s, reproducing the same *modus operandi* by the demolition of settlement areas that had been declared illegal (Franck 2016), it became more heterogenous because it attracted middle classes and intellectuals after a bridge was built in 2000 that created a direct link between the southern part of Omdurman and Khartoum.

Another factor that explains the reconfiguration of social stratification under the *inqādh* regime can be found in the relative democratisation of the university system as part of the civilisational project launched by the Islamist movement. With student numbers growing from 6,080 to 132,042 between 1989 and 2008, an increase that far exceeded the contribution from population growth, Laura Mann (2012: 97) classifies this phenomenon as an “education revolution”. Many young people were given access to higher education as a result of the numerous universities created under the *inqādh* regime in the context of the Islamisation of knowledge (Medani and Nur 2020). A wide-scale affirmative action policy aimed at including students from remote areas and conflict regions was launched, albeit with very limited results (Tenret 2016). Far from being a merely clientelist strategy to provide services and co-opt large sectors of society, however, it must also be read as part of a social transformation designed by the civilisational project.

As Noah Salomon (2016: chapters 3 & 4) notes, the creation of a large number of universities reflects the break the Islamic movement intended to bring about from previous epistemological registers and modes of knowledge. The state’s ambition was to propose a new model of higher education that integrated religious principles of knowledge into a university system that secular institutions were not seen to encompass. At the same time, the Islamic movement tried to break with previous Sufi modes of knowledge and education based on the *khalwa*<sup>17</sup> system, which embraces a specific ideal of political authority characterised by a vertical power relationship linking religious leaders to their followers, revelation and knowledge being embodied by the sheikhs. Conversely, the Islamist movement imposed a different means of accessing knowledge by creating an enormous university system of which the University of the Holy Coran was a representative. This investment in higher education was intertwined with religious registers and specific modes of legitimising Islam as the source of a specific kind of “modernity” (Berridge 2017). Its aim was to realise a project of “fundamentalisation of knowledge” (*ta’šīl al-ma’rifā*) that encouraged dialectical methods of reasoning and learning as “new modes of knowledge production (. . .) that rethought such modern scientific inquiries” (Salomon 2016: 64) by

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17 A place dedicated to religious devotion and contemplation, and for reading the Quran and training oneself to memorise. In Sudan the word *khalwa* came to designate a Quranic school.



integrating Islamic references. As a consequence, the Islamist movement reformulated the elitist registers of distinction that had been based on higher education and technocratic values by creating a new education system to legitimise the references at the core of its project, including modernity and knowledge power. While not all my respondents had had the benefit of higher education, all of them were able to offer it to their children.

The final major aspect that explains the fabric of a new segment of the popular classes created by the *inqādh* regime is their relationship with the public administration. The integration of subaltern groups through enrolment into the army and coercive institutions has been analysed previously, and is still relevant to understanding my respondents' social mobility (Vezzadini 2015; Revilla 2021). Eleven of the respondents are or were civil servants. Six had a direct involvement in coercive institutions, working as policemen or security personnel or having been soldiers. Four of the respondents were native administration representatives, sometimes after serving as policemen or soldiers or in the Popular Defence Forces (*quwwāt al-difā' al-sha'bi*, PDF).<sup>18</sup> Others were teachers or civil servants in the Ministry of Health, or worked in local administrations (*maḥaliyya*). Even though their incomes remained low in most cases – from 1,200 to 1,500 SDG in 2019 – they accumulated skills and cultural capital and a broader knowledge of the state that transformed their social position into a situation of in-betweenness. These trends are meaningful for my respondents' trajectories, and I will now describe some of them in order to illustrate my argument more effectively and to clarify the biographies of my main interlocutors.

## **Al-Ḥasan: NCP, Popular Committee Member and Community Police Volunteer in al-Fath 2**

Al-Ḥasan was born in El Fasher in 1977. He grew up in the main city of North Darfur and identified with the Tunjur ethnic group. He pursued a classic school career until he graduated from secondary school (*thānawī*), unlike his parents. He was therefore the first member of his family to have access to this level of education. After the 1960s, which were a crucial turning point for the spread of the Islamic movement in Darfur, the 1970s and 1980s were shaped by its growing influence in Western Sudan (Chevrillon-Guibert 2013b). The movement established bases in secondary schools,

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<sup>18</sup> The PDF was created by Ja'far al-Nimayrī's regime in the early 1980s to strengthen the Sudanese army in its war against the SPLA, the armed wing of the SPLM. See the chapter by Iris Seri-Hersch in this volume.

giving birth to the second generation of Islamist followers, to which al-Ḥasan belongs. At the beginning of the 1990s, he left El Fasher for Libya, where a significant Darfuri diaspora had developed commercial networks (Chevrillon-Guibert 2013a: 363–371). The Libyan market was an important one for Darfuri traders, who obtained supplies there and sent them to the Sudanese markets that were flourishing in Khartoum and Omdurman at the time (Chevrillon-Guibert 2013a: 432–521). These commercial networks enabled a large sector of the Western society to earn large amounts of capital, creating a business elite that later took part in the Islamic movement (Chevrillon-Guibert 2013a: 369).

Al-Ḥasan returned to El Fasher at the end of the 1990s to marry. His wife had difficult pregnancies, and the couple lost several babies. They decided to leave for Khartoum to look for better treatment and care. When the couple arrived in Khartoum state, they found accommodation in Umbadda, the most western peripheral suburb of Omdurman. Owing to intensive land pressures and rent increases, al-Ḥasan decided to settle in al-Djikhis. When he arrived in Khartoum in 2000, he decided to pursue his education, and started looking for a university education, many years after he had left school. Migration to Khartoum offered a powerful incentive because of the large number of university courses on offer in the capital. Al-Ḥasan registered at the University of the Holy Quran and Islamic Sciences in Omdurman. He chose to study Religious Sciences and Islamic law (*al-ʿulūm al-dīniyya wa-l-sharīʿa*) and to become a teacher of “religious sciences”,<sup>19</sup> with the idea of playing a role of moral guidance, driven by educationalist aspirations. His university education helped shape a scholastic disposition in him to teach and to obtain a senior position at a local level, despite the pitifully small income he received from it: “I wanted to improve my general knowledge, to become an intellectual (*muthaqqaf*) and to contribute to education. Education is very important for development (*tanmiya*), and to achieve this, you have to participate in enlightening people (*tanwīr al-nās*)”.<sup>20</sup>

## Khadija: NCP Member and Police Volunteer in al-Fath 2

Khadija was born in 1967 near Marawi in the Northern Province (*al-wilāya al-shamālīyya*). She identifies with the riverine Shaygiya tribal group. She comes from a family of ten children, but lost her father when she was very young. She went to elementary school, and then her older brother took over as her guardian, and settled the family

<sup>19</sup> This subject is compulsory from primary school to university. See also Seri-Hersch in this volume.

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview with al-Ḥasan, al-Fath 2, September 2018.

on the outskirts of Omdurman at the very beginning of the 1980s. The area was in full urban development at the time under pressure from migration to the capital. Khadija had a religious education in a *khalwa* for women. She was also socialised in the May Brigades (*katā'ib māyo*) and the Friends of the Police (*aṣḍiqā' al-shurṭa*), which were major youth organisations during Nimayrī's May regime (1969–1985). She finished her education after high school (*thānawī*) and married in 1990, when she was 23. Her husband was called up to join the PDF in Southern Sudan against the SPLA, the Southern armed force that was fighting the Sudanese army, but he died shortly after arriving in South Sudan. She remarried a few years after his death, but her second husband “already had three wives, and it was only problems. I decided to leave and have my own house”.<sup>21</sup> Khadija freed herself from this situation and settled with close relatives in al-Djikhis in 1999. She met al-Ḥasan during the evictions from al-Djikhis by the Khartoum authorities in 2003. At the time of my fieldwork, she was in charge of the *khalwa* for women in her neighbourhood in al-Fath 2.

## Sulṭān Ibrāhīm: Native Representative and NCP Member in al-Fath 2

Ibrāhīm was born in a village near Kadugli in the second half of the 1950s. He had no more than a primary education, and he certainly had a disrupted one, since he cannot read or write easily in Arabic. Ibrāhīm arrived in Khartoum in 1975. Like the vast majority of the Morro, mostly present in the Nuba Mountains and with which he identifies, he is a Christian.

When he arrived in the capital, he went from job to job, cleaning markets or working on construction sites. Like many racialised young working-class men in the early 1990s, he was enrolled in the PDF. This paramilitary force mainly enlisted young men from working class and ethnically marginalised backgrounds. After his service in the PDF, Ibrāhīm was recruited by the internal intelligence services (*istikhbārāt*) and held various surveillance positions, always at a low level of responsibility, working as a guard. Although Ibrāhīm had a similar trajectory to that of another interviewee whom we introduce below (James), he did not succeed in converting his membership of the security apparatus into social capital. During the 1990s, he moved with his family to various neighbourhoods in Umbadda, moving from one informal area to another after being evicted by the state. He finally settled in al-Djikhis, and met Khadija and al-Ḥasan before being given land in al-Fath 2.

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<sup>21</sup> Personal interview with Khadija, al-Fath 2, August 2019.

In 2007, Ibrāhīm became *ʿumda*, which corresponds to the intermediate leadership position recognised by the policies of indirect rule inherited from British colonialism and reinstitutionalised by the *inqādh* regime. This delegation of authority involved appointment by a council of representatives of the Morro ethnic group validated by the High Council of the Customary Order of the State of Khartoum (*al-majlis al-ʿālī li-l-nizām al-ahlī bi-wilāyat al-khartūm*), which was in charge of so-called customary affairs and the co-optation of local chiefs appointed on a tribal basis. Ibrāhīm received training from Khartoum State and the Karari local government. He received a monthly salary of 1,200 SDG for his local court services, and considers that he “works for free!”<sup>22</sup>

### James: Security Services, Popular Committee Member and NCP Relations in al-Fitihab

James was chairman of the popular committee (*lajna shaʿbiyya*) of his block from 2006 to 2011, the year of South Sudan’s independence and his departure from Khartoum.<sup>23</sup> Like many South Sudanese, he returned to the neighbourhood in 2013 when civil war broke out in South Sudan (Franck 2016). A Christian from Malakal, which is now in South Sudan, and where the Shilluk ethnic group with which James identifies is widely represented, he arrived in Khartoum in the early 1980s.<sup>24</sup> He settled in an informal housing area in a block that is now part of al-Fitihab. In 1983, he was recruited by the national security apparatus (*jihāz al-amn*) and was assigned to protection of the German Embassy until 1987. He was then transferred to the British Embassy, where he worked for ten years as a security guard. During district planning work performed by Khartoum State in the mid-1990s (Franck 2016), plots of land were distributed to civil servants like James. He gradually acquired official authority as a result of his initiatives in the first popular committee, in which he was in charge of the services section. He organised night patrols, mobilising the

<sup>22</sup> Personal interview with Ibrāhīm, al-Fath 2, April 2017. 1,200 SDG amounted to a little more than 40 dollars at the time of the interview.

<sup>23</sup> South Sudan acquired independence in 2011 following the referendum required by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in 2005, which put an end to the conflict between the Sudanese army and the Southern rebels of the SPLM/A. Personal interview with Ibrāhīm, al-Fath 2, April 2017.

<sup>24</sup> On relations between Christians and Muslims in the marginalised districts, see Abdalla 2014. For an analysis of the co-optation of the inhabitants of Mayo by local institutions and the motivations for conversion to Islam, see Abdel Aziz Ahmed 2018.

young men of the block, and became an important local intermediary for the police. He also helped mobilise the local government of Omdurman to provide the block with basic services. With other members of the popular committee, James began to frequent the local cadres of the NCP at official ceremonies and to take part in meetings at a local government level in response to invitations to do so.<sup>25</sup>

In 1997, he left the national security services to work for a Turkish-Sudanese company, remaining there for just a year before going to work for the British humanitarian organisation Save The Children until 2002. He then found a job as local intermediary for United Nations Development Programme projects, where he remained until 2006. The skills he acquired in the state security apparatus, his knowledge of administrative procedures and the relationships he fostered enabled him to convert to the humanitarian sector. His trajectory is a good example of the mobility that could be achieved by low- and medium-ranking state security officers, and of the skills that could be put to use.<sup>26</sup> James became involved in numerous disputes when he was representing the Omdurman South administrative unit within the Southern Section of the NCP (Berridge 2021) and left the party. The reasons behind his departure and return can be explained by the authority relationships at a local level. The party organisations would create competition for access to administrative positions. Competition for recognition by an authority played a fundamental role in the NCP's internal cohesion. In the early 2000s, James and his supporters considered that they were not sufficiently integrated into the local government of Omdurman and that their "work" was not recognised enough. James returned to the NCP by obtaining the position of "peace coordinator" (*munāsiq al-salām*), and he became the national unity government's representative for Omdurman following the CPA in 2005. He became chairman of the popular committee of his block in 2006, a position he would leave in 2011 due to the loss of his Sudanese nationality (Vezzadini 2014) and his departure for Malakal. This story of relative independence should not suggest that the party was merely a receptacle for personal strategies: on the contrary, it defined its framework of action.

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<sup>25</sup> During the two interviews carried out with James in August 2017 and July 2018, he constantly stressed "these Muslim sheikhs" that he knew and that he "liked" to rub shoulders with at events organised jointly for the NCP.

<sup>26</sup> This is by no means surprising in the light of the recruitment practices of the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), a Sudanese state agency for which numerous state security workers supervise the activities of humanitarian organisations.

## Grassroots Organisations and the Creation of Local Hierarchies

To implement the Islamist project in Sudanese society, the *tamkīn* strategy took shape through the multiplication of grassroots organisations under the control of the regime, especially at a local level. The “state of the masses” (*jamāhūriyya*) model developed in Libya inspired the *inqādh* after the coup of 1989, and the political order introduced by the Islamists shared many similarities with the “direct democracy” and conference system imposed by Mu‘ammar al-Qadhafī (Lavergne 1997; Musso 2015). The popular committees and so-called “volunteer” structures were part of the mass and grassroots organisations implemented by the Islamist regime.

I will focus here on the neighbourhood level, since many institutions attached to the NCP framed the everyday socialities in popular areas. According to the “conference model” promoted by Ḥasan al-Turābī, popular committees represented the federal state at a neighbourhood level, and answered to the local government, which had an elected body whose members were appointed through members of the popular committees, but remained under the *mu‘tamad’s* full control. The *mu‘tamad* was appointed by the governor of Khartoum State and represented the highest authority at the local level, and was generally an NCP follower. Members of the popular committees were viewed as an outpost of the NCP. Based on a pyramidal structure and a logic of “participative democracy” (Lavergne 1997), these committees raised citizens’ demands for services such as water supply or waste management, representing the lowest level of social welfare. The committee was composed of 10 to 20 members who were theoretically appointed by inhabitants of the same block (*muraba*), but in reality were often pre-selected by the NCP, taking into account their ideological and political affiliations (Revilla 2020).

The committee was divided into different sections, some of which were dedicated to young people and women. These sections integrated volunteers who were involved in the Sudanese General Women’s Union (*al-ittihād al-‘amm li-l-mar’a al-sūdāniyya*, SGWU) and the National Union of Sudanese Youth (*al-ittihād al-waṭani li-l-shabāb al-sūdānī*, NUSY), which were themselves under the direct control of the NCP.<sup>27</sup> While it was theoretically necessary to have a membership card to be an NCP member, the volunteer organisations were open to everyone, and no one needed to be formally affiliated with the NCP to be included in them. Membership of a popular committee was not subject to membership of the NCP, even though the appointment processes were largely controlled by the party, as I have shown elsewhere (Revilla 2020). More than diluting partisan affiliations, the volunteer organisations

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27 On the social policies implemented by the SGWU, institutional feminism and women’s involvement in the Union, see Nur in this book. On the NUSY, see Abdalla 2017.

duplicated the administration bodies by orientating certain social policies toward targeted categories that they had to promote. The social anchoring of the NCP was ensured by superimposing “mass” organisations and party sections that were characterized as *amāna*, and which were supposed to represent the various interests of Sudanese society based around specific categories (women, youth, etc). At the same time, the NCP members’ positions overlapped many mass organisations in order to achieve a monopoly of local representation.

The multiplication of mass and volunteer organisations affiliated with the Islamist movement made social stratification in popular areas more complex by giving official and administrative positions to “ordinary” citizens. Indeed, popular committees represented the first way of becoming involved in politics and later being co-opted by the NCP. Through the *tamkīn* policy, the lowest representatives of the state and NCP could then access higher administrative and political positions, especially in local government, by being appointed as local legislative conference members. Contrary to the argument proposed in many analyses of the link between neoliberalism and the *inqādh* regime that would induce the retreat of the state (Mann 2012), the political framework shaped by the Islamist movement actually intensified state control over society, with the NCP playing the role of a centralising force to control policies and co-opt the population. Members of the popular committees and mass organisations could receive special training, which provided them with feelings of competence and a disposition to do administrative work by obtaining certificates and validation. For example, members of popular committees in al-Fath 2 received special training to become judicial auxiliaries at the juvenile court of Omdurman, dealing with family and domestic cases.<sup>28</sup>

By means of administrative attestations and assistance, the popular committees and mass organisations facilitated access to the acquisition of technocratic and bureaucratic skills, which assisted recruitment into public administrations. Volunteers working with the Community Police received training that integrated them into the police authority; they also had a *de facto* authority to make arrests (Berridge 2013). Volunteer policewomen were permitted to attend workshops on family violence and childcare organised by the SGWU. Members of the popular committees also had the ability to provide certification to obtain social assistance, to be included in the microcredit system launched by the SGWU or to follow recruitment sessions organised by the NUSY. Members of the mass organisations formed a net woven by the *inqādh* regime, and supported the social ascent of individuals from marginalised areas such as al-Fath; as we have seen above, these neighbourhoods

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28 *Barnāmij al-Ma’āwīn al-Qānūniyyīn: Maḥkamat al-Ṭīfl Umdurmān*, 2011 (programme brochure consulted on 7 February 2017).

were the result of the forced displacement of people who had settled in illegal areas and camps, most of whom remained outside the realm of the provision of public services, and yet it is through this incorporation into the state that the Islamist movement framed a powerful system of political control, spreading its ideology and new lifestyles through the appropriation of *emic* representations of morality and authority.

## Being “*Multazim*”: The Islamist Appropriation of an *Emic* Notion of Legitimation

Whereas the Sudanese Arabic term *kōz* describes a corrupted version of the Islamist follower flawed by state appointments, being “*multazim*” categorises those who seek to perform a moral duty by taking on political responsibilities at a local level (Revilla 2020). The adjective *multazim* (*multazima* for women), means “to be engaged” or “under obligation”, and being “disciplined”. The same term can also be interpreted as a commitment to a superior, transcendental cause that requires being disciplined, or exerting a strong constraint on oneself in the service of a cause. *Multazim* also refers to asceticism and self-discipline: being able to serve the community and deserving to represent a group of individuals. It embodies an ideal of moral behaviour that has evolved through historical periods and political regimes. The term is directly connected to the word *iltizām*, meaning commitment.<sup>29</sup> In Medieval Islamic thought, it described a person who conformed to the law (*al-multazim bi-l-aḥkām*) (Fadel 2006: 328), and later an administrative figure in the Ottoman Empire in charge of collecting taxes. After the Second World War, it referred to the political commitment of a section of Arabic-speaking intellectuals and writers, giving rise to a specific form of Arabic political poetry (Martin 2016: 83).

It was not originally a religious notion, but in the Sudanese context it became associated with “being devoted to God”, with asceticism and with a repertoire of self-representation. Although it progressively acquired ties to conduct that was viewed as religious, and to the adoption of a specific dress code, such as the *ḥijāb* for women and a beard and/or ankle-length trousers for men, in accordance with the Salafist clothing norms, it was actually far from being the only way of demonstrating *iltizām*. Some members of popular committees and local NCP affiliates adopted this manner of self-presentation without being labelled as *multazim*, and were recognised as legitimate representatives. In one of the blocks in al-Fitihab on the south-

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<sup>29</sup> See the entries for *iltizām* and *multazim* in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2> (16 June 2022).



ern periphery of Omdurman, where there is a strong political influence of South Sudanese from Malakal (Franck 2016; Revilla 2021), the president of the popular committee appointed after the departure of the previous one, who left after he had lost his Sudanese nationality following the independence of South Sudan in 2012, was clearly showing off a stereotyped version of the Salafist model of self-presentation (wearing a beard and ankle-length trousers, not greeting people by shaking hands, keeping his distance from women, etc.). However, he was not recognised as legitimate as the former president had been, and was condemned because of his low standards of morality. A female inhabitant of al-Fitihab criticised him for not carrying out his administrative tasks and for not being easily accessible:

James [the former president of the popular committee] was very active and his conduct was good with people. He mixed with them and had a superior morality. But Yāsīn [the new president] does not mix with people. With James, his morality with people [was] like that [she raises her thumb]. Which means that he was engaged with the people (*huwa multazim ma'a al-nās*), he lived well with the people. But Yāsīn puts himself in the top of a tower. His function should push him to be with the people (. . .) but he is busy with his own business, he is not even available to watch alcohol. He has a business here, a business there, he has an event here, he has his own "business". He is seeing himself with money, he does not need people.<sup>30</sup>

Another inhabitant backed this position up: "You can never reach him [Yāsīn] – he disappears (*huwa mukhtafti*). James used to enter houses directly, giving you the *zakāt*<sup>31</sup> directly and giving everybody their right, everybody, even the Christians before the independence of the South." Despite the fact that James was not an "Islamist" in the ideological sense of the word, the authority he embodied was typical of that of the popular elite shaped by the *inqādh* regime,<sup>32</sup> and underlined the moral foundation of political legitimation at a local level. It shows that the concept of *multazim* could apply to non-Muslims (James is Christian), and also demonstrates the symbolic meanings of being *multazim*, which is also linked here to the idea of treating people as equals and presenting oneself with modesty. The practice of equality is embodied by specific behaviour, demonstrating self-discipline and proximity to the people for whom one is responsible.

By using a concrete example of the progressive politicisation of *iltizām*, I show how under the *inqādh* regime it was also an element in the production of political representation and a primary source of local anchorage for the NCP. With the forced displacement from al-Djikhis in 2003 and the resettlement of its inhabit-

<sup>30</sup> Personal interview with Najla, al-Mussalass, August 2018.

<sup>31</sup> *Zakāt* can be defined as the institutionalisation of a charitable system of compulsory contributions as a form of tax. See Abdalla 2017.

<sup>32</sup> James's trajectory has been documented in detail in Revilla 2020.

ants in al-Fath 2,<sup>33</sup> the main families in this informal area established a “solidarity fund” (*ṣundūq tadāmun*) to form a collective body and collect money. The objective of raising this money was to make their time in the place where they had been forced to settle, which was not provided with public services like water or general electricity, secure. The group also had a representative function vis-à-vis the local government and the urban authorities of Khartoum State. It needed to appear to be an established interest group in order to have an influence in local politics and to be taken seriously by the ruling party.

Al-Ḥasan, who was a young married man at the time, took the lead in the representation of the group with other men, mostly fathers of families. Al-Ḥasan was ideologically close to the Islamist movement, but he did not formally enrol in the NCP until 2004, when all the members of the solidarity fund finally joined the party, thinking that they would be able to maximise their chances to obtaining land rights and public services in their area. The main objective of the solidarity fund was to ensure that the inhabitants of al-Djikhis would not be dispersed and mixed with Internally Displaced People (IDPs) through the procedure for distributing plots of land. The allocation of plots involved a draw (*qurā*) that distributed people randomly and scattered former neighbourhood communities. The urban authorities of Khartoum organised the allocation of land through a lottery system that was supposed to distribute plots transparently and to prevent ethnic segregation and clientelism (see Franck 2016). In fact, however, this system increased negotiation levels and the opportunities to bypass the regular land allocation process.

Through his involvement in the solidarity fund and the interactions he established with the local government, al-Ḥasan acquired “influence” (*nufūdh*). This influence was staged and co-produced by the local authorities, the NCP and the inhabitants. Al-Ḥasan had power over the local community and his authority was recognised by the state, since he was viewed as representing the inhabitants, and was seen by them as being able to defend their cause. The more influence al-Ḥasan acquired at a grassroots level by adopting representation positions, the more he appeared to the state authorities and the party that strove to co-opt him to be essential, and the more his position was reinforced among the inhabitants, as he seemed to be the only intermediary (*wasīf*) with the state, and his image was associated with public resources. He became a party member and popular committee representative, as the NCP and state institutions tended to co-opt individuals they perceived as already being recognised by their local communities. The repertoire of *multazim* was the central element of a “presentation of self” (Goffman 1959) that served to anchor the regime’s appropriation of an *emic* concept of authority, and at

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33 Two blocks in al-Fath 2 have been used as one of my main case studies: see Revilla 2021.

the same time its legitimation. This self-presentation as a disciplined and “engaged” individual gave birth to a belief – which was a factor of al-Ḥasan’s symbolic capital from both sides<sup>34</sup> – in an intrinsic quality that legitimised his authority to represent the community and to be recognised by the party and the local authorities. Al-Ḥasan fitted in well with the NCP’s standards of self-presentation and responded to the inhabitants’ social demands for intermediation. He displayed the Salafist version of self-presentation, but unlike Yāsīn, he acquired consensus by engaging in grassroots politics.

Being *multazim* did not just refer to an individual and personal mode of self-expression: by extension it also implied devotion to the community. It suggested a certain self-imposed technique that people interpreted as a commitment to the community. It was sometimes assimilated with an external appearance that required a specific dress code, the *ḥijāb* for women and the intentional distancing between men and women, in accordance with a Salafist interpretation of Islamic norms. The classification went far beyond mere appearances, however: it established the moral qualities that legitimised authority. This notion could be embodied as much by a man as by a woman: in al-Fath 2, the two main representatives of the community committee responsible for gathering police volunteers were al-Ḥasan and a woman who had been appointed as *multazima*.<sup>35</sup> The notion of self-discipline was closely related to that of self-help efforts (*juhūd al-dhāt*), which was used by the regime as a category for public action to mobilise people at a grassroots level through popular committees and voluntary organisations under the direct control of the NCP (Baillard and Haenni 1997; Mahé 2017). It can help us understand this repertoire of legitimation, which linked a form of “government of the self” to the “government of others” (Foucault 2008).

## The Shaping of the Everyday Under the *Inqādh* Regime

In this second section, I will illustrate the production by the Islamist regime of a “common sense” as specific localised rationalities through which everyday government practices and the understanding of power were interpreted. To put it in

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34 Pierre Bourdieu (1991: 192) has defined symbolic capital as a form of “credit founded on *credence* or belief and *recognition* or, more precisely, on the innumerable operations of credit by which agents confer on a person (or on an object) the very powers that they recognize in him (or it).”

35 For a more detailed analysis of women’s trajectories of authority in popular neighbourhoods, see Revilla 2021.

another way, I look at the interpretation and translation of the Islamist ideological project in everyday life, as it produced a specific form of knowledge and unpredictable representations that far exceeded its initial elitist framework (Gramsci 2011: 173, 186). The Islamist project gave rise to multiple appropriations, generating ambivalent relations to power that ranged constantly between attachment and attempts to self-distance.

### “Our Duty is to Enlighten the Masses”: The Popularisation of an Elitist Disposition

The Islamist movement has been carrying out its reformist political project of “enlightenment” (*tanwīr*),<sup>36</sup> which encompasses profound reforms in society and ways of life, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After 1989, the year of the coup organised by the military and Islamist followers, the project took the form of a promotion of a “civilisational project”. All kinds of social activities were impacted, including architecture, institutions, the arts and culture (Salomon 2016). The *inqādh* regime embraced a coercive version of social control and integrated a legalist interpretation of Sharia into public spaces. Dress codes for men and women and the criminalisation of many social practices were institutionalised by the Public Order Laws at the beginning of 1990s,<sup>37</sup> including, among many other things, the manufacture and consumption of alcohol and sex work (Berridge 2013). This set of rules and legal regulations embodied the policing measures adopted by the Islamist regime after 1989 to reshape social relations to comply with what was considered to be “legal” conduct. Its reformist ideas were interpreted by the regime through a coercive and legalist lens, in line with the transformations imposed by the state during and after colonial rule (Ibrahim 2008). Rather than a strict and limited representation of reformist ideas that would reproduce the regime’s propaganda, it is necessary to understand what people actually did, not only from the abstract ideals of conduct inspired by the regime’s ideology as spread through grassroots organisations but also from local concepts of morality. Investigating how reformist ideas actually materialised in everyday life enables us to analyse the sense people gave to the coercive version of Sharia imposed by the regime, and the social hierarchies with which the project connects. It makes it possible to focus on *emic* categories that are echoed by the idea of reforming conduct.

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<sup>36</sup> Al-Ḥasan: “*wājibna tanwīr al-jamāhīr*”, personal interview, al-Fath 2, September 2018.

<sup>37</sup> The Public Order Laws are a range of legal regulations that prohibited and criminalised many social practices. Their precedent was the September Laws imposed under al-Nimayrī’s rule in 1983. See Ibrahim 2008.

In order to enforce what was presented as a “reformist” project and a condition for development and national modernisation,<sup>38</sup> the regime created a dense network of grassroots institutions to be responsible for implementing the coercive version of Islam promoted by the Islamist movement, which had been unleashed long before it came to power (Ibrahim 2008). Along with the creation of special police units like the Public Order Police (*shurṭat al-niẓām al-‘āmm*), Popular and Community Police volunteers operated at a local level to “cleanse society of negative behaviour” (*tazkiat al-mujtama‘ min al-sulūk al-salbiyya*).<sup>39</sup> The popular police volunteers had to report any offence committed against the Public Order Laws to the police and the public order courts (Berridge 2013). To understand the popular roots of reformist ideas, it is first necessary to understand what repertoires of action the Islamist political project implemented, and how it intertwined with local and *emic* concepts of social control and authority. A focus on overlapping definitions of morality makes it possible to appreciate how the Islamist version of righteousness became embedded in popular conceptions of social authority.

After its establishment in al-Fath 2, the community of al-Djikhis appointed the members of the popular committee and the volunteers in charge of surveillance. Al-Ḥasan became president of his housing unit’s community committee, and was responsible for organising volunteer patrols. He was the principal intermediary between the people and the police, and monitored offences against the Public Order Laws and what was defined as “negative behaviour”. Al-Ḥasan’s role reformulated the function of the *muḥtasib*, which initially referred to the person responsible for market regulation. Derived from the notion of *ḥisba*, which means the obligation of every Muslim to “promote good and forbid evil”, in cities under Islamic rule during the Medieval period, the *muḥtasib* was the market inspector in charge of controlling weights and measures and guaranteeing commercial transactions. His function gradually evolved into more direct tasks of social control and moral duties (Abu-Lughod 1987; Raymond 1989; Kerrou 2002: 311). The Islamist regime institutionalised *ḥisba* by the creation of the Public Order Police (Berridge 2013).<sup>40</sup> The surveillance of people’s behaviour guaranteed by al-Ḥasan was anchored in local sociality and legitimised by the notion of *adab*. This is an Arabic term that denotes a form of civility, but it takes on a different meaning according to current dominant values and standards of distinction. It generally refers to the knowledge and “humanities” that must be acquired in order to be considered to be “enlightened”. In the Sudanese case, more than having proper religious knowledge, it means demonstrating

<sup>38</sup> Personal interview with Shaykh al-Karūrī, Al-Shuhadā’ Mosque, Khartoum, September 2018.

<sup>39</sup> 2003 Local Government Act; 1998 Constitution 2003 (chapter 6). See also Berridge 2013.

<sup>40</sup> W. J. Berridge recalls that the Public Order Police were essentially the institutionalisation of previous Islamist vigilante groups. For more detail, see Revilla 2021: 138–146.

total self-control, which is associated with the exercise of reason (*‘aql*). Being classified as *mu’addab* (fem. *mu’addaba*) means having a sense of rules and decency relating to a situated rationality and an ability to govern oneself, and by extension others. It suggests the use of self-control of one’s emotions and behaviour, and not losing oneself, always having measured reactions and never showing anger when dealing with everyday local affairs.

When al-Ḥasan was asked about the way he fulfilled his role of monitoring people’s behaviour, he mentioned his own capacity for self-control and reason:

Sometimes it’s very difficult, especially when neighbours fight. You always have to control yourself (*tamsak nafsak*). You have to be calm, to speak with civility. . . You cannot take part or be aggressive, it’s my responsibility (*wazīfa*). When you have this responsibility, you have to be neutral (*muḥāyid*), you have to be higher (*a lā*) than that.<sup>41</sup>

Al-Ḥasan described his reaction as the use of reason (*‘aql*), which stigmatises any form of dispute because any expression of disagreement or conflictuality was seen as a loss of rationality. The *adab* repertoire is akin to a “narrative of exemplarity” (Bertrand 2005: 114) that shapes hierarchies of conduct, traces the borders between social groups and status and establishes this form of management of emotions as the foundation for the government of others.

Transgressions against the regime’s standard of morality are associated with an infringement of civility and are an irrational act. Individuals who do not conform to the repertoire of *adab* are associated with dirtiness, and civility is associated with rationality, cleanliness and modesty:

The small problems, it is Sheikh al-Ḥasan who settles them. If there are bad people in the block, he watches them. He gets to know them and forces them to leave. If there are people making alcohol, he forces them to leave the block in order that the block does not become like what? In order to be a calm area, an area of humble people (*masākin*), without any disorder.<sup>42</sup>

There is no direct mention here of an abstract religious or political project, but rather a common expression of the assimilation between order and humbleness, which the NCP and the Islamist movement took advantage of to build a specific understanding of morality. The instrumentalisation of the notion of humbleness was linked to a localised rationality that associated calmness (*sākin*) with *adab* and social integrity. It also related to a specific perception of cleanliness: “Al-Ḥasan prevents some people, people from outside, from making the neighbourhood dirty (*yesakh-*

<sup>41</sup> Fieldwork notebook, al-Fath 2, July 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Personal interview with Taysir, former popular committee volunteer, al-Fath 2, block 50, April 2017.

*khnu*), making alcohol, or other things like women living alone.”<sup>43</sup> Drinking alcohol or living a lifestyle that was perceived as transgressing the moral rules enforced by the state and the regime came to be related to a form of dirtiness, which is classically a primary form of social hierarchisation (Douglas 1966). The function of this allusion to dirtiness was to trace social borders and preserve residential self-segregation. The reference to “women living alone”, which implies prohibited sex work, was ambivalent, since some women actually “lived alone” without male guardianship but were very close to the NCP and grassroots organisations, which prevented them from being stigmatised (Revilla 2021: 506–511). Likewise, not all well-known consumers of alcohol were denounced and targeted by the committee members. Alcohol consumed at home was easier to ignore, whereas drinking in an open space or in other open places was associated with the idea of pollution and the moral staining of a neighbourhood area.

Much like the repertoire of *multazim*, the injunction to embrace *adab* can be analysed as a “technique of the self” that imposed implicit forms of regulating conduct, revealing a specific mode of distinction. The *emic* use of the notion of *adab* can be understood as a local appropriation of the ideological enlightenment project promoted by the regime through which certain social groups captured abstract ideas of Islamic reform as conceived by the *inqādh* and produced a specific sense from it. Of course, the *adab* repertoire exceeds the Islamist framework and it has taken on various meanings in different periods of time and political contexts. But since the Islamist regime tried to monopolise this register of authority to serve the political legitimisation of NCP representatives in everyday life and to disqualify political competitors, it has to be considered as part of its civilisational project.

### **“Here People Are Like Birds, They Fly With the Wind”: Between Attachment to the Regime and Self-Distancing**

After 1989, the regime established numerous spaces for socialisation, especially at a grassroots level, that created local socialities and produced numerous forms of ambivalent attachment and efforts at self-distancing. This set of attitudes to power and the political sphere escapes the dualism that has usually been established between consent and resistance in the literature. The description below of the common socialities created in the context of grassroots regime institutions shows how it was possible for feelings of attachment and self-distancing to co-exist among NCP followers until the total uncertainty caused by the fall of the regime. In addi-

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<sup>43</sup> Fieldwork notebook, conversation with Fātiḥa, al-Fath 2, June 2018.

tion to giving access to training infrastructures, as mentioned above, the activities organised by members of the popular committees shaped specific socialities, providing members of the NCP or its affiliates with a feeling of being close to state institutions. The police volunteers organised community ceremonies on various occasions that had the main function of reasserting the authority of the state and the party. Their activities intensified during Ramadan, when many volunteers distributed food or small supplies like school furniture and clothes that conformed to the regime’s moral standards (such as veils for women). They also organised food for prisoners jailed in police stations or central prisons to break the fast and helped with the organisation of annual circumcision ceremonies supervised by the Popular and Community Police. Throughout the year, the volunteers oversaw the night patrols that watched over the neighbourhood, which included men who were not members of the popular committees. These distributions and other activities were a source of excitement, a feeling of collectively offering a service to the society and participation in the creation of an atmosphere of friendship that strengthened relations among the members of the popular committees and created an attachment to the grassroots structures of the regime and cohesion among participants.

The same kind of sociality mechanisms was at play throughout the religious spaces promoted by the regime. The Organisation for Islamic Predication (*munazzamat al-da’wa al-islāmiyya*) has funded various structures in the new housing area since 2004. The women representatives of the popular committee, who were also involved in the Sudanese General Women’s Union (SGWU), received financial support to build a *khalwa* exclusively for women. The same kind of religious place also existed for men in al-Fath 2. They represent a space for individualisation, as each participant comes to confront their everyday concerns about religious principles and develops a specific interpretation that aligns with their personal issues (Mahmood 2005). In 2018, the reading sessions at the *khalwa* for women in al-Fath 2 were led by the SGWU representative for the area, who was also one of the pillars of the community police volunteers.<sup>44</sup> She read the Quran and developed her interpretation of it so as to apply it to common everyday situations such as disputes with husbands, problems with children and family issues in general.

The *khalwa* was associated with a rationalised way of dealing with everyday and domestic issues, which was historically the case with Sufi orders (see McHugh 1994). Although it partially reproduced a previous model of governmentality endorsed by Sufi brotherhoods in certain cases, the interpretation given to it by people with ties to the regime apparatus differed greatly from Sufi models of rationalisation. One of the concepts spread among the institutions supported by the regime (through the Islamic

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<sup>44</sup> I followed the activities of the *khalwa* for women in al-Fath 2 between June and August 2018.



Organisation Call or grassroots organisations), which for my interlocutors was radically different from Sufi models of devotion, is *tawhīd*. Unlike Sufism, which institutionalises an intermediary authority with God through the figure of the *shaykh* (pl. *shuyūkh*), *tawhīd* reflects the call for monotheism and proclaims that God is unique and the sole legitimate divinity, removed from any form of mediation. Even though this assertion is actually considerably nuanced by historical works that show how Sufi congregations did in fact integrate *tawhīd* into their own theoretical framework, my interlocutors systematically contrasted the space of the *khalwa* with the religious spaces led by Sufi *shuyūkh*, associating the latter with “subjection to authority”, as one of my informants who participated to the animation of the *khalwa* put it:

Allah *wāhid* [she points her finger up], that is what we teach in the *khalwa*! We don't follow Sufism (*taṣawwuf*)! We don't follow the words of the *shuyūkh*, that let us think there is something other than God! No! Everybody is equal to God! No one can be between you and God! You cannot submit to a sheikh, you cannot kiss his hand! God does not allow it!<sup>45</sup>

This restriction of the perception of *tawhīd* is part of the Islamist movement's ideological work and propaganda that seeks to break the influence of the brotherhoods (the Khatmiyya and Mahdist followers affiliated with the Umma Party, among many others) over society by stigmatising them as religiously deviant. In the case of my interlocutor, adhering to *tawhīd* was potentially a way of distancing oneself from the vertical authority system embodied by the brotherhood orders and subscribing to an abstract idea of power promoted by the Islamist movement, the NCP and the state (Salomon 2016). By setting out a new framework for religious practices and distancing itself from Sufi forms of devotion, the civilisational project transformed the modes of subjectivation, entailing a strong challenge to previous models of authority and a sense of equality.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, this rejection of Sufi brotherhoods has to be interpreted with care. From what I observed in al-Fath 2, certain Umma party members have maintained close ties with the NCP since the time they settled on the fringes of Omdurman,<sup>47</sup> underlining the high degree of flexibility of partisan affiliations. Moreover, the rejection of Sufi modes of legitimation has to be nuanced since the Islamist regime has tended to instrumentalise them for its own profit rather than really suppress them (Salomon 2016).

Paradoxically, by reframing previous modes of authority and local socialities, the anchoring of the civilisational project in people's everyday lives has produced strategies of detachment from the regime and the state, as people create an expres-

45 Personal interview with Khadija, al-Fath 2, August 2019.

46 I subscribe here to Noah Salomon's (2016) main argument.

47 Personal interview with the *'umda* M. 'A. Ḥ, al-Fath 2, February 2017.

sion of their own individuality out of the ideology. After the collapse of the regime, the popular committees were dismantled by the Governor of Khartoum State in April 2019, and by November 2019 the community committees linked to the Popular and Community Police had been suspended.<sup>48</sup> In most cases, it seems that the NCP members I had been in touch with were removed from any local position of power. Others tried hard to blur their previous party ties or hastened to convert to the new political forces involved in the transition, especially the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) (Revilla 2020). Some NCP members denounced the quick about-face of many of their comrades, and remained attached to the political project or adopted sarcastic stances: “Everybody says ‘I am not NCP’, everybody now turns back, the one who was in the section says ‘now I have nothing to do with them’. See, the ones who were with them are now taking over their office here”.<sup>49</sup> My interlocutor pointed out the local office of the NCP in al-Fath 2, which had been seized by the representatives of the native administration and painted blue to cover the previous green paint, which was the official colour of the Islamic movement. Another woman representative of the SGWU and police volunteer, although in opposition to many members of the NCP section, brought up the “development” (*tanmiya*) expanded by the *inqādh* regime:

People don’t remember! They don’t remember who did the development! Who built the bridges! Remember there was no bridge in Halfaya! There was no bridge in al-Fitihab! There was no road to El Obeid! No roads before! No cheap houses before!<sup>50</sup>

These words illustrate many of the contradictions the Islamist project produced. Although it was marked by exclusion policies and the institutionalisation of derogatory regimes for social groups who were considered to be minorities,<sup>51</sup> it also permitted some excluded groups to access housing and public services. In contrast to analyses that associate the *inqādh* with the retreat of the state, I argue that it actually reinforced the power and presence of the state through the broad networks of grassroots organisations the regime promoted. However, these attitudes cannot be interpreted as simple consent to the regime, since the above-mentioned interviewee was actually in open conflict with most of the members of the local NCP section.

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<sup>48</sup> The decision to dismantle the popular committees was taken by army General Murtaḍā Warrāq on 21 April 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Fieldwork Notebook, al-Fath 2, July 2019.

<sup>50</sup> Personal interview with ‘Ā’isha, al-Fath 2, July 2019.

<sup>51</sup> For example, the judicial system, which integrated derogatory regimes for specific tribal groups such as the Morro in al-Fath 2 but also existed for individuals who were perceived as Southerners (*janubiyīn*): see Abdalla 2014; Abdel Aziz Ahmed 2018; Abdul-Jalil 2018.

The speed with which many individuals disengaged from the NCP after the fall of ‘Umar al-Bashīr shows the low level of support for the regime: “People won’t contest what’s happening, even the NCP people won’t contest. Here people are like birds, they fly with the wind.”<sup>52</sup> The notion of “wait-and-see curiosity” framed by Alf Lüdtke (1995: 198–251) may be a good way to characterise the relationship between the inhabitants of marginalised urban areas in Greater Khartoum and the state and the regime. This notion helps overcome the apparent passivity the upper, middle and intellectual classes often complain of with regard to disadvantaged and dominated groups as mostly uneducated and reducing any form of relationship to the state as clientelism.<sup>53</sup> It is also important to recall that the more privileged social categories can have exactly the same attitude towards the general uncertainty that characterises authoritarian modes of government. The ability to adapt to the regime’s constraints and to appropriate its ideological representations cannot be hastily classified as an expression of consent: rather, it is an attitude of waiting to see what the state and regime have to offer in terms of material goods, and their ability to respond to immediate needs and create dedication and loyalty spaces as described above. However, these socialities generated individualisation processes, and despite the efforts of the regime and the NCP to depoliticise every form of public action, it paradoxically yielded a disposition in people to distance themselves from the official political arena, producing weak support for the regime when it collapsed.

## Conclusion

During the summer of 2019, rumours were swirling among the inhabitants of al-Fath 2 about the arrival of Muḥammad Ḥamdān Dagolō, commonly known as Ḥemēdtī, the leader of the Janjaweed militia, which had been renamed the Rapid Support Forces (*quwwāt al-da‘im al-sarī*) since their integration into the national security apparatus in 2013. At the end of Ramadan, everybody was talking about the sheep Ḥemedti would offer to the people of al-Fath for Eid al-Fitr, although there was no official information available. The word then spread that Ḥemedti would come to provide the connection to the electricity grid that people had been expect-

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<sup>52</sup> Personal interview with al-Ḥasan, al-Fath 2, July 2019; Gout 2019.

<sup>53</sup> This was quite obvious in some of the declarations from the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) or the FFC depicting the marginalised neighbourhoods as more under NCP control than any other social class and needing “education”, removing any form of agency from these categories of the population.

ing since the forced settlement in al-Fath in 2003–2004. The profusion of rumours indicates the distant image by which the state was represented for the people of al-Fath. While a racialised understanding of political affiliations might give the impression that because many people in al-Fath identify with the Darfur region or have this identity assigned to them they would “naturally” support Hemedti based on their regional or ethnic attachments, most of them had actually been the victims of the RSF, and the fieldwork I carried out from July to September 2019 showed that opinions were far from being homogeneous.

There was much discussion at the time about the RSF’s participation in the dramatic killing of demonstrators in al-Qiyada on 3 June 2019. There were intense debates in all the everyday spaces: on public transport, in the streets, where tea was sold and among family members. The discussions were passionate and sometimes explosive, showing that the consent it was supposed Hemedti would be given would not be granted. The intense circulation of rumours underlines the fundamental dispossession of power that structured relations between the inhabitants of al-Fath and the state, as well as metaphors of everyday perceptions of domination as distant, intangible and unpredictable (Perice 1997; White 2000). In addition, the rumours that spread in July and August 2019 informed popular expectations from the transition authorities. This displays a certain “curiosity” that oscillated between enthusiasm and perplexity, with regard to both the revolutionary movement and Hemedti’s forces. It also highlights their relative exclusion from the revolutionary process until the end of 2019, and reveals the specific issues they were facing. The creation of the resistance committee of Karari and its outposts in al-Fath may have since changed the dynamics, however, and new fieldwork needs to be conducted in order to answer this question. Although the *inqādh* regime impregnated the popular and everyday conceptions of power, the understanding of everyday life and common political representations goes far beyond the dichotomy of consent and resistance: they need to be analysed for themselves rather than to be seen through a normative lens.

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