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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

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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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