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Highlights from the 1924 revolution

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The ongoing war in Sudan has had and is still having countless tragic consequences. One of them is that it had deprived the 1924 revolution of what was due to her, a proper commemoration for its centenary in Sudan. The war had robbed the Sudanese of the possibility of remembering 1924 collectively, once again, as one last episode of a centenary history of silencing. Indeed, the previous governments, and in particular the last Islamist regime of 'Umar al-Bashir, forgot or manipulated its memory because it was ideologically incompatible with them. But this memory resists, and even if a diasporic celebration as the one that has taken place during the last meeting of the SSSUK will never supersede what should take place in Sudan, it is still very important to make it happen. I take it as a sign of resistance and of the resilience of some its core ideas, as *seeds* that have been spread in Sudanese history, which I want to share with you in this short text.

Pieceing together the story of the 1924 revolution has kept me busy for more than a decade. This long journey is also caused by the the gap between the over-generous archives in London, Durham and Khartoum, and what previous historiography had written about it – something very unsettling for a Phd student as I was when I started my research. In fact, several academic works on the history of nationalism – with the exception of the pioneering research of

Yoshiko Kurita (1989, 1997, 2003) – describe the 1924 revolution through a series ‘negativities’: it was not a purely Sudanese event, because Egyptians were behind it (El-Amin 1986); it was not a people’s revolution, because it was organised by a small elite, a ‘politically immature’ groups of proto-nationalists (Warburg 1978: 94); it was not a moment of unity, as the nationalist groups was divided between factions of northern sons of notables and ‘black’ Sudanese (Deng 2004: 28); it was not a *real* revolution, but rather an uprising, a revolt (‘Abd al-Wahhab Ahmad ‘Abd al-Rahim 1992: 11:84).

It took me long to trust myself and my sources, and a very important part in that was played by the families of activists that gave me their time to discuss the history of 1924 and its meaning, such as the families of ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Latif, Salih ‘Abd al Qadir, Zein ‘Abdin ‘Abd al-Tam, and many others (for a list, see Vezzadini 2019: 298-99). In addition, I was lucky to inherit dozens of interviews of activists who participated directly in the 1924 revolution, published in 1974 this extraordinary collection, *Al-Riwayat al-shafawiyah li-thuwwar 1924* (Oral witnesses of the revolutionaries of 1924). I was lucky enough to be able to combine these qualitative sources with quantitative ones which I obtained by constructing a database that included all the people that were described by the British Intelligence as activists or who were caught in some anticolonial action. The database included key information such as the place of activity, the date, the profession, the ethnic background and the age of the people, and their exact description as it stood in the sources. Notice that I consistently talk about men, as women are not visible in colonial records or even in oral accounts, with the notable exception of al-Azza, the wife of ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Latif, leader of the White Flag League, the movement that ignited the

1924 revolution.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, all the people described in the sources had Arabic names.

At the end of this journey, it was possible for me to discover a certain number of things about 1924 – even if much more remains to be uncovered – I am thinking in particular at the cultural dimension of 1924, the heritage of nationalist anticolonial poems and song written at the time, which is still an uncharted field. Among the various aspects of 1924 that this research brought to light, there are three points that I consider as its highlights: first, the geographical and social diffusion of the movement; second, the question of ‘racial division’ and the racialisation of the 1924 revolution; and third, the nature of the nationalist ideology. I consider these aspects as crucial not only for understanding past Sudanese history, but also for its future, as a heritage of resilience. Indeed, the memory of 1924 is a precious reservoir of symbols of hope, collective struggle and solidarity to be used in moment like the one we are living – part of the revolutionary tradition of Sudan (Kurita 2023).

The first remarkable point about the spread of the nationalist movement is that it included sites all over the Sudan: from El Fasher to Malakal, from Wau to Dilling to Talodi and Renk, from Shendi to Sinnar, and of course Port Sudan, El Obeid, Atbara, Wad Medani, which are the better known sites of unrest; but this spread also in smaller centres such as Hassahissa, Sherkeila, Abu Ahmed, Umm Rwaba, Bara, and so on.<sup>2</sup> One should not overlook the important regional variations in the composition of the movement: for instance, in Port

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<sup>1</sup> Even if in the volume of oral witnesses we find two other women recounting their story: Amina Bilal Rizik, the wife of Zayn al-‘Abdin ‘Abd al-Tam and Nafisa Surur, the lady who sewed the flag of the White Flag League.

<sup>2</sup> For a full list of these places, see Vezzadini 2019: 290. It is probable that this list is not exhaustive.

Sudan, Hadendowa dockers were the protagonists of demonstrations, in El Obeid the movement appealed rather to the trading community, in Atbara to the workers of the Railways, and so on. These different components worked hand in hand with Sudanese civil servants who worked in these centres, and, behind the scenes, with Sudanese officers of the Egyptian army and Egyptian civil servants and officers who helped by teaching their colleagues techniques of anticolonial protest, but who were both barred from joining openly the nationalist movement. Neither participated to demonstration and few of them were arrested, at least, as to Sudanese officers, before the mutiny of November 26.

This leads us to another aspect of this spread, that is the social diversity of the movement. Another element that jumps to the eyes when studying the database of activists is the diversity of their profiles and even more the importance of the popular classes, such as occasional workers, artisans, and small traders, which is very visible in the sources. Take for instance the professions of the men who were arrested for leading demonstrations or giving anticolonial speeches: there we find professions such as carpenter, tailor, shoemaker, fishmonger, cook, ivory turner, shopkeeper, coffee shop owner. There were also several clerks, but they were actually a minority (Vezzadini 2019: 292-93). This reminds us of a short quote by Azza, the wife of 'Ali 'Abdel Latif, kept in *al-Riwayat*, about the demonstration that followed the cadets' march on August 8 :

"me and my mother we wanted to go and see what was happening, so we went to the market, and [what I saw] was something completely

new, because the butcher was shouting and the greengrocer was shouting. We followed them until they reached the headquarter of the District Commissioner. They were used to pour hot water on the demonstrators through pipes. People started to run, and I was asking what is going on, what is happening there? One of them, his name was Babikr, said to me, what do you want to understand, the revolution is coming out of your house and you still want to understand.” (al-Riwayat 1974: 385)

The reason why the grassroots participated is connected to local situations, but, even more, to the wider international context: the global moment of anticolonial agitations that I call “the spring of the colonial nations” which took place after the First World War – in relation to the principle of self-determination of the people that emerged as a (nominal) rule of international law after the war. This wind swiped the colonial world from India to South Africa, from Ireland to Turkey, from Syria to Ghana, from Egypt to Korea. Even if this principle was not put in practice by any of the dominant nations that subscribed to it, it was taken very seriously by the various nationalist movements in the colonial world, leading to a wave of anticolonial protests, some of which were extraordinarily successful, as the independence of Ireland and the creation of Turkey show; and of course, the 1919 Egyptian revolution, the subsequent unilateral declaration of independence of Egypt in 1922 and the democratic election of the strongly anticolonial Wafd party of Saad Zaghlul, which was seen at the time as a one of the greatest victories obtained by a colonized nation. In Sudan, through the Egyptian press, ordinary Sudanese got

access to these exciting news by listening to them as they gathered in coffee houses and markets. The inspiration drawn from Irish, Indian and of course Egyptian anticolonial rebellions is vividly narrated in several oral accounts of 1924 activists.

The second highlight concerns the question of status and ethnic and racial background in the 1924 revolution. The sources unquestionably demonstrate the racial and ethnic diversity of the national movement. One striking visual evidence is the best known of the pictures of 1924, the one that represents four out of five founders of the White flag League (Ubayyid al-Hajj al-Amin, Salih 'Abd al-Qadir, 'Ali 'Abd al-Latif, Hassan Salih).<sup>3</sup>

[insert the picture here?]

These four people were of entirely different origins, going from Southern/Western Sudan to Turkey to central Sudan, yet they were together in that momentous day in which they officialised the foundation of the League. Similarly, 'Ali Mallasi – one of the leaders of the Port Sudan branch – recounted that in spite of the origins of 'Ali 'Abd al-Latif, whose parents had been enslaved and then become free, and who were from Dinka and Nuba origins, the latter was chosen unanimously as a leader during a meeting that included many people from notable families of Northern Sudan (Al-Riwāyāt 1974: 306-307). For another witness, 'Ali 'Abd al-Latif's southern origin was even one of the reason why he was chosen ('Abd al-Karim al-Sayyid 1970: 10). The

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<sup>3</sup> The one missing was Hassan Sharif. The picture was taken on May 15, 1924.

same heterogeneity of background can be found among the people imprisoned for leading demonstrations or giving speeches (Vezzadini 2019: 292-93): for instance, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, the demonstration was led by four people, defined as "Dinkawi," "Mahasi", and two "Muwalladin", that is, at that time, people seen as having an Egyptian or Ottoman descent.

The puzzle is then the following: if we have so many traces of this racial and ethnic heterogeneity, why has 1924 come to be described as led and carried out mostly by people whose origins were from the southern, western and eastern peripheries and the old slave reservoirs of Sudan, called in the sources "detrribalised blacks",?

There is a very important element shown by the analysis of the participants in 1924 that can explain this paradox: we are in a point of time in which people defined as "blacks" could climb the hierarchies of civil service and especially the army, so that an upward social mobility was a real possibility for people defined as such. Army officers like 'Ali 'Abd al-Latif, Zayn al-'Abdin 'Abd al-Tam or 'Abd al-Fadil al-Maz could occupy well-paid positions of responsibility in functions as mamurs or sub-mamurs. In other words, at this point of the history of Sudan, the background of a person did not break his educational and career possibilities. There were of course limitations, as the British in colonial institutions applied a clear *racial* division of labour: positions such as 'qadi' were for instance reserved to people defined as 'Arabs', while 'Blacks' were preferred as army officers. Yet, students irrespective to origins mixed in colonial schools – this is where 'Ali 'Abd al-Latif and Ubayyid al-Hajj al-Amin met for instance – and they continued to share many things as employees of

the colonial state, in a moment in which civil and military administration were still intertwined and imbricated.

A new generation of civilian administrators, whose conductor was the new Civil Secretary Harold MacMichael, came to power, and they had little sympathy for the old policies of the "soldier-administrators". The new leadership shared the view that Sudanese society was 'naturally' divided in ethnic groups whose level of civilisation was related to their 'race.' This new guard came to portray the 1924 Revolution as the outcome of a 'racial disorder' in Sudan, by which people like 'Ali 'Abd al-Latif had been wrongfully allowed to get education and position that were not in harmony with their racial capabilities. 'Black' Sudanese became the scapegoats of a political event that in reality encompassed all Sudanese groups, while the sons of notables were forgiven and forgotten in a refashioned account of the events that erased any trace of them. A much heavier and all-swiping racial policy started from inside the school and continued with the Closed district ordinance in Southern Sudan. This hid the fact that 1924 had been a moment in which the grassroots and the elite, independently of their ethnic, racial and professional background, worked together for the liberation of Sudan.

The last point I shall briefly discuss is the nature of the nationalist ideology of 1924, following a path already opened by Yoshiko Kurita (1989). One of the best sources on that are the petitions in form of telegram sent to the Egyptian and the British governments and to the press. The telegrams insisted on the principle of self-determination, the right of Sudanese to decide for their own destiny; but also on unity, brotherhood, mutual support, the overcoming of

divisions related to religion and origins, as essential principles necessary to fight colonisation. However, these words were reflected in a strategy of political protests aiming to embody these message concretely and symbolically. In fact, at the beginning I could not understand why telegrams written in protest against the arrest of a certain League member were always signed by true names, which made easy for the British to identify the signatories, leading to more arrestations. I ended up understanding that arrestations were an explicit strategy pursued by the League. Imprisonments made activists into symbols of peaceful struggle and sacrifice, and were a means to incite all Sudanese to join the fight. And indeed, the oath of the League was taken only by people ready to what they called "extreme sacrifice", those ready to lose everything they had – their jobs, their families, their freedom – for the liberation of Sudan. Imprisonment had the deliberate objective of igniting protests – and this worked actually very well, as the chronology of 1924 shows. Indeed, it is after the arrest of the five founders and other key members of the White Flag League in July and early August, that all the major events such as disturbances in Atbara and Port Sudan and the large demonstration in Khartoum after the Cadets' "mutiny" (march of protest) happened.<sup>4</sup> The telegrams were thus the means to express this message of unity in the language of diplomacy in the international arena; but they only repeated what was communicated through all many diverse actions, going from demonstration to speeches to imprisonments. I shall end this short text by quoting two telegrams that for me

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<sup>4</sup> It is not useless to remember that what is called the "mutiny" of November begun not by Sudanese army shooting at the British, but by officers asking to join the Egyptian troops that were being evacuated from Sudan after the assassination of the governor general Lee Stack in Cairo. As the officers refused to obey to their British superiors, the British shot and fire was exchanged, as the very last stage of an impossible situation brought to its climax by the consequences of Lee Stack's murder. But the movement defined itself as essentially peaceful, even after that four civilian activists were shot by the police in Atbara in Atbara.

incarnate what just said. Before to read them, it should be remembered that these are colonial hasty translations of originals in Arabic that I never managed to find. Even in this form, I believe that their message breaks through clearly.

“We beg to conveyance of this our protest to both the Egyptian and British Parliaments. Our dignity will not permit us to be bought and sold like animals who have no voice in their disposal. We protest with all our strength for not giving our people the legal freedom to say their word openly and to send those who will be selected by the nation from her sincere sons to at least to be aware of the true decision on the settlement of their future during the Negotiations. It is not for any other person than they, whatever the state may be, to settle the question of its future because the word is only for the nation and she is the owner of the right. We also protest against the secrecy and compulsory work which are adapted for the separation of the Sudan.”

Saleh Abdel Gadir, Ali Abd al-Latif, Hassan Sharif, Hassan Saleh, Obeid al-Haj al-Amin to Governor General Sudan, Khartoum, 15/5/1924, NA of UK, FO 141/806/1

“Your confiscation to our liberty, practising all kinds of injustices, fettering those who are loyal to their country, trying Mohammed Eff. SIRR El Khatm and separating Bashari Eff. Abdel Rahman from their service, is a doing that humanity shoulder [shun?] of it and the civilized nations

dislike it, and therefore we protest against it by the name of the whole Sudanese nation.

Every severity that you met us with, will increase us in steadiness in our position and in the hate of the British Nation who likes colonization by the power of fire.

Cheerful cheerful for the prisoners which are the houses of the freedmen who with pleasure enter the full independency to the Nile Valley under the shade of our Great King Fuad I.

Down with the injustices and may the Nile run free."

El Tayeb Abdin to Governor General, Port Sudan, 28/7/1924, Palace 4/10/50, NRO Khartoum.

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