



2008 Firth Lecture

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Anthropology and the Civilizing Mission in Colonial Sudan

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Introduction

Sudan, it could be argued, holds a privileged place in the history of anthropology. Thanks to scholars such as Charles and Brenda Seligman, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, and S. F. Nadel, it was, in the early twentieth century, a crucible for ethnographic investigation. The research of talented Sudan scholars entered disciplinary canon and became the stuff of lore. Following a successful doctoral defense in Sweden last fall, I witnessed a ritual in which the Chair of the anthropology department donned a leopard skin before congratulating the candidate and offering a champagne toast. Why did Sudan merit such attention, and at such a crucial moment in the development of our field?

The question has an ironic edge. As a doctoral student during the 1970s preparing to do fieldwork in the Muslim north, I hunted for colonial-period studies of the region. I found archaeological reports and historical works but surprisingly little ethnography, and was puzzled as to why. Years later, while doing archival research on the efforts of British colonial agents to teach northern Sudanese women modern birthing and mothering skills, and to end the practice of pharaonic circumcision, I stumbled upon some answers to my student quandary. In light of them my question needs rephrasing: how might we account for the *sorts* of scholarly attention Sudan received under colonial rule?

Today's talk runs at a tangent to discussions in Asad's *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973) but clearly bears upon them, for its focus is imperialism, a process more often recognized from its effects than scrutinized for its contents, a black box in our debates. My purpose is to pry open the box's lid and examine one of its files. I will suggest that the historically specific conditions under which Britain acquired and held onto Sudan, along with the convictions of some influential actors on and behind the scene, led to an atmosphere in which ethnographic research was encouraged and urgently desired. But not everywhere, nor with all Sudanese. And this is not to say that professional anthropology always or wittingly served colonial interests, only that some administrators and their associates thought it could do so, and should. Indeed, as Wendy James (1973) has shown, anthropologists in colonial Sudan were often sceptical of or opposed to British techniques and ideologies of rule. Her observations resonate with Professor Firth's comments on the relationship between anthropology and colonialism set out in his inaugural Radcliffe-Brown lecture to the British Academy in 1972. I quote:

While it has seemed to make sense to advocate that knowledge of the structure and functioning of African and other alien institutions was preferable to ignorance, this knowledge has been regarded by anthropologists primarily as a means to securing more respect for peoples' own values, not as a means of controlling them more effectively. Some anthropologists have explicitly rejected the idea that they should be expected to serve administration policy or proselytizing campaign, or refused to accept a claim of the absolute validity of Western moral standards invoked to enlist anthropological assistance. Many have recorded the disruptive effects of a colonial situation upon the societies they studied and some have specifically examined the significance of colonialism as a social type. Indeed [he goes on] . . . one role of social anthropology has been to supply ammunition for the forces of contradiction within the system. Governments have supported anthropology, but anthropology is dedicated to exposure of the structures and values of the societies studied. This includes making clear the aims and interests of the people as stated by themselves and revealed in their own behaviour, in terms of their own conflicts as well as integrative ties (Firth 1972: 26-27).

While we might demur the assumption of unmediated objectivity in these remarks, clearly there was friction as well as congruence between anthropologists and colonial agents regarding peoples under European sway.

This essay is concerned less with professional anthropologists than with the laity who championed ethnography in colonial Sudan and so contributed to an image of anthropology as indispensable to

the colonial rule. Some were colonial officials, but not all; they included a historian-cum-public intellectual and an entrepreneur. They encouraged certain forms of inquiry with specific groups, and not others, following an implicit agenda that was at least as concerned to curtail Arab influence as to make Sudan prosper or preserve and extend British rule. The continuing spread of Arab social practices to discernibly non-Muslim groups was a major dilemma for Sudan's administration, which owed its position to the defeat of an independent Islamic polity, the Mahdist state. Colonial initiatives to document social and religious differences within Sudan, and between Sudanese and Egyptian Arabs, were epistemic tactics of a not-always-tacit crusade, a claim for western civilization in which the Upper Nile was contested ground.

In highlighting this trajectory I know that I risk exaggerating it. Yet the question of Arab influence and Islam was inescapable in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. It informed the colonial encounter as such, hence the context in which ethnographic research took place. Let me sketch why.

Imperial Sudan

Sudan came under British rule in 1898 when a well-armed force under Kitchener's command conquered a 'rogue' Islamic state centred at Omdurman near the confluence of the White and Blue Niles. The state in question had taken shape in the early 1880s when followers of a charismatic holy-man, Mohammed Ahmed, rose up against Ottoman Egyptian rule. The leader's acolytes, referred to as Dervishes by the British press, declared him the Mahdi or Awaited One in the Islamic version of Armageddon. They felt especially aggrieved because Egypt, under European influence, had lately begun to suppress the slave trade on which Sudan's economy then relied. In 1884, as the Mahdi's power grew, the legendary General Gordon was sent to stifle the revolt on behalf of Queen Victoria and the Khedive. Gordon, a zealous Christian, soon found himself besieged in the Ottoman capital, Khartoum. Two days before British troops arrived to save him, the town fell and Gordon was slain. It was January, 1885.

Over the following decade, British officers stationed on the Egyptian frontier and the Red Sea coast helped arrange the escapes of several Europeans imprisoned in the Mahdist capital, Omdurman. Publications detailing the captives' travails fed the British public "unrelieved descriptions of bloodshed and oppression" (Holt 1970: 224; see also Wingate 1955: 89-102). Along with some twenty-five books about Gordon published within a few years of his death, and several works of poetry and popular fiction that used events in Sudan as their setting—two novels by G. A. Henty (1892, 1903); Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Tragedy of the Korosko* (1898); A. E. W. Mason's *The Four Feathers* (1902); Kipling's verses and stories—this literature built public support for an effort to conquer the Mahdist regime.¹ Geopolitical factors also of course played a role: fears that the French would soon preside from west to east through the sahel, fears about control of the Red Sea ports and Suez canal.

And so, in 1896, four years after Britain had assumed *de facto* rule of Egypt, an Anglo-Egyptian force set out from Aswan, building a railway to ferry troops and supplies through the Nubian desert and up along the Nile. Two years later, news of the campaign's success was joyfully received in Britain. Gordon had been avenged. Science and rational method had prevailed over barbarism and cruelty, Christianity over Islam. Thereafter Sudan was governed jointly by Britain and Egypt, with Europeans in executive posts and Egyptians in supporting roles. When the century turned, Khartoum was rebuilt as a planned, imperial city, with broad avenues, sturdy government buildings, an Anglican cathedral, and Gordon College, one of several monuments to the martyr it contained.

As this last suggests, the production and dissemination of knowledge were central to Britain's project in Sudan. Bernard Cohn observed that British colonial agents strove to understand newly acquired territories by representing them "as a series of facts" whose form "was taken to be self-evident, as was the idea 'that administrative power stemmed from the efficient use of these facts'" (Cohn 1996: 4). The desire to comprehend the world of the colonized, hence control it

¹ Even before Gordon's fatal excursion was proposed, a biography had appeared (1883) and a volume of correspondence from his first mission in Sudan (1881). There were also two books about his exploits in China, plus numerous letters to the press, magazine articles, and pamphlets written and circulated by Gordon himself. For information about Gordon see, for example, Marlowe 1969, Johnson, 1985, Judd 1985.

intellectually and practically, sparked a range of methods—what Cohn calls ‘investigative modalities’—to compile the facts required. An investigative modality includes “the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification” and finally its transformation “into usable forms such as published reports” (Cohn 1996:5). Some modalities were quite general, others firmly linked to administrative concerns. Of the general forms, the ‘historiographic’ was perhaps the most powerful, compelling, and basic. To British administrators, wrote Cohn (1996:5), history had “ontological power” in that it furnished assumptions “about how the real social and natural worlds are constituted.”

Also deployed, often in aid the historiographic, were ‘the survey’ mode (of mapping, collecting botanical specimens, recording architectural and archeological sites), ‘the enumerative’ (establishing ‘certain knowledge’ by assembling numerical ‘data’), ‘the museological’ (collecting antiquities and defining the nature of the past), and the ‘surveillance’ mode (whereby groups of people seen as threats to “the prescribed sociological order” are identified and controlled) (Cohn 1996:7-11). For Sudan the list must include an ‘ethnographic mode’—a form of the historiographic—through which investigators “sought to erase the colonial influence by describing what they took to be authentic indigenous cultures” (Cohn 1996:11). Moreover in Sudan, “authentic indigenous cultures” were those unblemished by the impress of the Arab world and Islam.

Wellcome

Early ethnographic work was linked to Gordon College and oriented around the quest for medically useful knowledge. Its sponsor, Henry Wellcome, was an American pharmaceutical entrepreneur living in London who, in partnership with Silas Burroughs, had prospered from the sale of compressed or “tabloid” medicines, a term Wellcome patented (whence tabloid journalism – for simplified smaller format newspapers and the condensed stories they contained). Wellcome championed British imperialism, befriended explorers, and regarded Africa as an enormous business opportunity.² Scientific medicine was not just the hallmark of Western civilization but the means by which Europeans could rule such an insalubrious place. Wellcome duly produced a line of “Burroughs Wellcome and Company tabloid medicine chests”, durable fitted boxes “designed to withstand rough treatment under extreme conditions” (Bell 1999:58). The first of these, the Congo Chest, accompanied H. M. Stanley on his 1889 mission to save the governor of Equatoria, Eduard Schnitzer (a.k.a. Emin Pasha), from being captured by Mahdist troops.

Wellcome was fascinated by Sudan and eulogized Gordon for having begun “the great work of regeneration in Africa” in attempting to end the slave trade and quell the Mahdi’s revolt. When Kitchener’s “wonderful campaign” succeeded in ending the Mahdist “reign of terror”, Wellcome became a patron of the college Kitchener founded in Gordon’s name. It was, he claimed, “the first step in the rescue, education and uplift of the natives from their state of savagery and disease.”³ Wellcome was convinced that a people’s social and intellectual development depend, not only their race, but also on their health. Traveling to Sudan early in the new century, “he saw for himself the utter desolation that reigned,” and concluded that “disease was undoubtedly the most deadly factor that, unless checked, would defeat the most determined efforts at reconstruction.”⁴ He contacted the fledgling administration with an offer to furnish facilities for scientific research in Khartoum.⁵ Two years later, the Wellcome Research Laboratories⁶ opened on the second floor of Gordon College, under the direction of Dr. Andrew Balfour, Khartoum’s Medical Officer of Health.

With nominal oversight from the education department, Wellcome staff were expected to conduct ‘pure’ research, unconnected to administrative needs or demands (Bayoumi 1979: 123; Daly 1986: 261). The institute’s mandate was broad: to promote technical education; study tropical diseases

² A. W. Haggis, “The Life of Sir Henry Wellcome” Part 3, file copy. Wellcome Archive, WA/HSW/PE/C. 12.

³ *Seattle Daily Times*, May 15, 1917, p. 5. WA/HSW/PE [old cat. Box 43].

⁴ A. W. Haggis, “The Life of Sir Henry Wellcome” Part 3, file copy. WA/HSW/PE/C. 12, p. 357.

⁵ Wingate to Wellcome, 22 Sept. 1901. WA/HSW/CO/Bus/C. 2.

⁶ Becoming, in 1911, the Wellcome *Tropical Research Laboratories*.

of humans and animals peculiar to Sudan, and assist health workers to combat these; perform “experimental investigations in poisoning cases ... particularly the obscure and potent substances employed by the natives”; conduct chemical and bacteriological tests in relation to water, foods, health and sanitary matters; and “undertake the testing and assaying of agricultural, mineral and other substances of practical interest in the industrial development of the Sudan.”⁷ Wellcome’s vision for Sudan was salvific, if never disinterested.⁸ “All Central Africa,” he was quoted, “is going to be made perfectly habitable for the white man. Its agricultural, industrial, and commercial resources will become available. The Niles and their tributaries will teem with the commerce of a numerous and happy people.”⁹ And surely, at the heart of that endeavour would be the Wellcome name.

The Wellcome Research Laboratories became essential to the political project of knowing and developing newly imperial Sudan. Government doctors were encouraged to use its facilities for their studies;¹⁰ staff scientists researched agricultural pests and disease-bearing insects, and devised methods for their control; Balfour himself organized mosquito brigades which, by 1905, had substantially reduced the risks of contracting malaria in Khartoum, a feat that contributed to the town’s image as a hub of modern, scientific order. As historian Heather Bell (1999:56) remarks, “research defined Sudan and the civilizing project of the Sudan government to government officials themselves, and to the wider world.”

WRL findings were published in a series of handsome reports that contained articles by non-WRL authors as well as affiliates and staff. The third and fourth volumes, issued in 1908 and 1911 respectively, ventured into anthropological terrain. In 1906 a Carnegie funded anthropologist, Dr. Alexander Pirrie, joined a Wellcome expedition proposing to measure the physical traits of several southern tribes.¹¹ His posthumous accounts (he perished of leishmaniasis) furnished a classification of southern “Sudanese types” accompanied by photographed “specimens” of their “ethnographical objects.”¹² In the 1911 report Charles Seligman (who, it may be recalled, began his career in medicine) published “The Cult of the Nyakang and the Divine Kings of the Shilluk.” Native healing techniques and religious rites were documented by Captain R. G. Anderson, a military physician, in articles on “Medical Practices and Superstitions amongst the People of Kordofan” (1908) and “Some Tribal Customs in their Relation to Medicine and Morals of the Nyam-Nyam and Gour People Inhabiting the Eastern Bahr-El-Ghazal” (1911). Anderson protested how difficult it was to dissociate native medical customs “entirely from others of a general nature,” (1908:239) given the indefinite “borderline between purely medical and general superstition” which are in Sudan “so blended with religious rite that it is impossible to touch on one without encroaching on the other” (1911:281).

Ethnographic information appeared in these reports alongside technical details of infections such as trypanosomiasis and *kala-azar*;¹³ the chemical properties of gum arabic and Nile waters; the attributes of poisonous snakes, “interesting reptiles,” “scorpions and allied annulated spiders of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan;” the classification of finches and weaver birds; and “municipal engineering problems in the tropics.”¹⁴ An extensive inventory of scientific knowledge, discretely partitioned,

⁷ *First Report of the Wellcome Research Laboratories*, 1904, p. 7.

⁸ See Bell 1999: 61 ff. on the potential benefits to Wellcome of the WRL.

⁹ Wellcome quoted in ‘In Search of Microbes’ *Daily Mail* 25/8/06. Sudan Archive, Durham University, SAD 759/12.

¹⁰ Though personality clashes stalled co-operation for a time. See Bayoumi 1979: 122-27; Bell 1999: Ch. 3; Daly 1986: 260-61; Squires 1958: 4-8.

¹¹ *Third Report of the Wellcome Research Laboratories*, 1908.

¹² Waterston 1908, Vallance 1908. Pirrie died of *kala azar* (leishmaniasis) in 1907, a parasitic disease said ‘rarely’ to affect Europeans; research at the WRTL later led to a treatment.

¹³ Respectively: sleeping sickness and leishmaniasis.

¹⁴ See the Reports of the Wellcome Research Laboratories (1904-10), thereafter Reports of the Wellcome Tropical Research Laboratories.

systematically organized, minutely exact and arcane, was here assembled and promptly distinguished from local thought, which muddles empirical observation with fallacious belief. Science was set apart from 'superstition' but also subsumed it: Sudanese appeared in the journal as specimens in a savage and perilous nature, taxonomic problems to be solved, sources of commercially useful preparations, or rehabilitated Dervish fighters, as Balfour's Arab Sudanese lab assistants were described.¹⁵ The Wellcome reports affirmed the imperial mission to save Sudan from credulous natives, and the latter from themselves.

With Balfour's departure in 1913 and the outbreak of World War I, research was increasingly focused on human diseases and agricultural pests, areas of practical government concern. This, in part, reflected planning for the Gezira project, a massive cotton estate funded by private and government interests, on which administrators pinned the economic future of Sudan. The Wellcome facilities themselves came firmly under government control in 1919. By then anthropological research had been disengaged from other scientific pursuits, though contributions to the classification of Sudanese peoples had proved useful for determining whether a group was weak or strong, indolent or industrious, tractable or an unreliable source of labour for imperial schemes.¹⁶

An 'ethnological' administration

World War I was a watershed for Sudan. At its close an Egyptian nationalist revolt sent currents of unrest rippling up the Nile. In part to quell their effects and loosen Sudan's economic ties to Egypt, Khartoum urgently resumed development work suspended at the outbreak of the war. Efforts now intensified to control disease, and track and ultimately lower maternal and child mortality with an eye to improving the country's workforce. Area knowledge was crucial to postwar 'social engineering' ventures such as these. In 1919, with the Wellcome reports discontinued, Harold MacMichael of the Sudan Political Service founded the journal *Sudan Notes and Records* (SNR), hoping to build a comprehensive picture of Sudan's peoples as an aid for rule.

MacMichael belonged to the notable one-third of the SPS who were clergymen's sons (see Kirk-Greene 1972). He was a scholarly, able, and well-respected official, who in 1926 became Civil Secretary, *de facto* minister of state, second only to the governor-general in the Sudan Government. He held that post for a decade, long enough to ensure the journal's success. SNR published articles by civilian and administrative staff, missionaries, and anthropologists on all manner of 'Sudania': political history, genealogy, folklore, ethnomedicine, religious customs and beliefs.¹⁷ Several officials, driven by boredom or genuine interest as much as a desire to govern well, were ingenious anthropologists and gifted linguists, amateur only in name, and the journal remains an important resource to this day. Authors wrote largely within and about the districts to which they were sent, whose borders had already been defined by their 'ethnic' composition. The resulting mosaic of peoples, each occupying (or thought originally to have occupied) a relatively discrete social and geographical space, was therefore already presumed, and tautologically affirmed in the pages of SNR. The presumption was reinforced when subjects held similar views about themselves.

SNR and other government-funded publications reflect an obsession with ontology much as Cohn (1996:5) described, with contributors sifting through native rhetoric in search of unfettered truth.¹⁸ MacMichael, for instance, in his ethnohistorical research with Arabic-speaking Muslim Ja'aliyyin (1922, Vol 1), argued that native genealogists willfully erred in tracing their descent from the Prophet's uncle, Abbas,¹⁹ and neglecting the stronger Nubian, and ostensibly Christian, strains in their make-up. Such 'willful' errors reduced native genealogies to the status of parables, he

¹⁵ Third Report of the Wellcome Research Laboratories, 1908: 16.

¹⁶ See Bell 1999, Sikainga 1996.

¹⁷ The journal survived well into post-independence and was being revived in the 1990s.

¹⁸ See James 1977 for an excellent analysis of one such debate on the origins of the Funj in Sudan.

¹⁹ The branch of the Quraysh descended from Abbas formed the Abbassid dynasty which ruled the Arab Empire from 750 to (formally at least) 1258.

claimed, making them unreliable guides to what had 'really' taken place and who people 'really' were (1922: 235). The discovery that genealogies are not unvarnished fact was hardly surprising to MacMichael; he knew this was not their point. But he was unwilling to concede that, as socially relevant versions of history, they defied 'impartial' correction.²⁰

In 1924 a serious revolt took place in Sudan, which strengthened the administration's appeal to anthropology. The crisis focused on the thorny issue of Egypt's political role in the country, with dissenters envisioning a unified Nile Valley under Egyptian rule. Sudanese troops mutinied in Khartoum; a few months later, an Egyptian nationalist assassinated Sudan's governor general in Cairo. Khartoum reacted swiftly, expelling Egyptian military, administrators, and professionals, and speeding up the implementation of 'native administration' – indirect rule. This last was undertaken in the belief that Sudanese 'tribes' might be reconstituted if no longer politically viable, or prevented from disintegrating if they were on the point of collapse. A memorandum circulated by the civil secretary's office in 1924 spoke of the district commissioner's task "as that of 'regenerating the tribal soul'" (Sanderson & Sanderson 1981:124). Officials were convinced that authoritarian tribal structures had characterized even acephalous groups in the past; with proper nurturing, their remnants might "develop and perhaps in time ... give birth to genuine 'chiefs'." Thus, "it became one of the major duties of DCs to discover by research this 'ancient governing organisation', and if possible to revive it" (*Ibid.*). So persistent was this quest that in the 1950s, as the Condominium drew to a close, the civil secretary's office crowed, "The effect of these reforms was not only to restore but also to increase the prestige of tribalism."²¹ Tribes that had hopelessly 'lost' their 'coherence' were deemed casualties of Mahdist unrest, the slave trade, or both.

Granted, such events had disrupted social alignments; yet the idea that there had ever existed a stable set of discrete social entities in the region is difficult to defend.²² More problematic still is the notion that 'tribes' so defined (rather than, say, family, village, or herding group) had ever provided Sudanese with their salient affiliations, leadership, and sense of worth.²³ Nonetheless, a host of challenges to colonial government, from crime, to snags in the implementation of indirect rule, to the glimmerings of Sudanese nationalism, were put down to the calamity of 'detrribalization.' Tribal institutions were held to provide a 'stable foundation' for rule; 'detrribalization' was a synonym for trouble, unrest, the expansion of Arab nationalism and Islam.²⁴

The government encouraged ethnographic inquiries mainly in southern Sudan where officials confronted a confusing array of 'primitive' peoples who, ruthlessly exploited by prior regimes, were inclined to defend themselves against this latest invasion of Turuk -- 'Turks' -- as the British were called, harking to the Ottoman past. The first concerted government-funded endeavour was a survey conducted by Charles and Brenda Seligman over three ethnographic expeditions beginning in 1909, with a hiatus between 1912 and 1921. Their work was curtailed by illness but carried on by their "friend and pupil" Evans-Pritchard, on whose research parts of their book, *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan* (1932), relied (Seligman & Seligman 1932:xiii). In it the Seligmans owned that in laying "the foundation of a scientific study of the peoples of the Sudan . . . we have constantly kept before us the necessities of the official, for the greatest need of the administrator is to understand the politico-religious outlook of the subject race: rules of land tenure or criminal procedure are worthless unless there is knowledge of the social fabric and of the attitude towards the supernatural" (1932: xi-xii).

MacMichael's foreword to their volume concurred: "If it be the aim of the government, as indeed it is in the Sudan, to fortify such native institutions as it finds ... are not repugnant to generally accepted canons of decency and justice, clearly it cannot do so successfully unless the beliefs and

²⁰ For more on this issue and the preoccupation of British officials with ontology, see James 1977, Ibrahim 1988; see also Boddy 2007.

²¹ "Feature No. 253, The Position of Tribal Leaders in the Life of the Sudan." Civil Secretary's Office, 16 July, 1953. SAD 519/5/20 (Robertson).

²² See, for instance, Asad 1973, James 1977.

²³ See SAD 519/5/20-20b (Robertson).

²⁴ See Collins 1983, Ch. 8.

traditions upon which those institutions rest are fully understood” (MacMichael 1932: xvii-xviii). The “accepted canons of decency and justice” were selective, however, for well into the 1930s Khartoum was loath to end domestic servitude and helped return runaway slaves to their masters’ care (Sikainga 1996, see Boddy 2007).

Officials on MacMichael’s watch learned that good administration “was largely a matter of applied social anthropology” (Sanderson & Sanderson 1981: 179.) All DCs should attend to the “ethnological side of their work” because, wrote the Governor of Bahr al-Ghazal in 1923, “one of the surest means of gaining the confidence and respect of savage people is to learn as much as possible of their sociology, their life histories, social organization, folklore, songs, etc.” He drew his staff’s “attention to ‘*Notes and Queries on Anthropology*’ which will be found valuable as a guide and assistance,” and offered to obtain copies for those who lacked “as soon as the new consignment has arrived from England.”²⁵ The apparent regularity of that book’s distribution in Sudan is telling.

In January 1929, MacMichael wrote to the financial secretary with a proposal to hire a permanent government anthropologist. The government had, he recalled, already granted funds “to enable Mr. Evans-Pritchard to carry out his researches” and “assist Professor Seligman...[with his] anthropological survey of this country.” Moreover, Evans-Pritchard was required as “a condition of the grant” to furnish “the Sudan Government, within a reasonable time, a report of his studies ... suitable for the use of administrative officials.” Anthropology, MacMichael emphasized, “is a science of vital importance to the European administrator of primitive peoples.”²⁶

[It] is concerned with the study of the social structure, customs, beliefs and ways of thought of the races of mankind. Some understanding of these will be conceded to be an essential equipment of the administrator responsible for the tutelage of primitive races whose mental processes are not as ours. Between the mind of the educated European with its heritage of some centuries of occidental civilization and that of the primitive savage a great gulf is fixed which the former can bridge hardly and with patient study only. But unless that gulf is bridged with at least a slender span, there is little hope of really constructive administration of the primitive by the European. So much is this an axiom, that the well-intentioned administrator has at all times been compelled by force of circumstance to become an amateur though possibly unconscious anthropologist.²⁷

MacMichael’s proposal was haplessly timed. Shelved during the Depression, it was revived in modified form eight years later by his successor, Angus Gillan. Gillan praised the work of professional anthropologists —“in particular,” he wrote, “Mr. Evans Pritchard has contributed very valuable information on certain southern tribes”—but the work needed better coordination, without which ethnographic information was of little practical use. Anthropological research should be tied to government priorities, he said, and thus be more ‘applied’ than ‘pure.’²⁸ Here Gillan seems to have taken a cue from Margery Perham, Oxford colonial historian, biographer of Lord Lugard and a champion of indirect rule. Perham taught summer courses on colonial administration to SPS and Colonial Service recruits. By the 1930s she had become a confidante of key Sudan officials. In her 1933 LSE lecture, “The Political Officer as Anthropologist” Perham extolled the advantages of having a university-trained ethnologist available to advise DCs and maintain an organized collection of information at ‘H.Q.’²⁹

Gillan, wanting to ensure where loyalties lay, advised that a serving member of the SPS be appointed “Anthropological Adviser and Conservator of Antiquities to the Government.” His job would be “to coordinate the various anthropological, ethnological and linguistic studies” undertaken

²⁵ Wheatley to D.C. Wau, 22 Nov. 1923. SAD 403/9/1 (MacPhail). He was likely referring to the 1912 edition, B. Freire-Marreco and J. L. Myers, eds. London: Royal Anthropological Institute.

²⁶ MacMichael to Financial Secretary, 10 Jan. 1929. SOAS (Arkell papers) MS 210522/2/1/1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ “Note on Anthropological and Archaeological Coordination,” Gillan to H.E. (Symes), 19 May 1937. SOAS (Arkell papers) MS 210522/2/1/1.

²⁹ RH Mss Perham 229/4/12.

by officials and missionaries, manage existing “reports by officials on tribes” kept in the civil secretary’s office, and assist in editing SNR which would continue to publish “everything of value” that Khartoum received.³⁰ What was wanted was a comparativist, a survey-ethnographer of the Seligmans’ ilk, not a depth fieldworker of Malinowski’s school. The man chosen for the job was A. J. (Tony) Arkell, former DC in White and Blue Nile Provinces and deputy governor of Darfur, who had an abiding interest in North African archaeology. (Interestingly after retirement he became an Anglican priest.) On Seligman’s advice,³¹ Arkell spent 1938 in Oxford studying for a Diploma in Anthropology under the tutelage of Evans-Pritchard (then a research lecturer) and newly arrived Professor A. R. Radcliffe-Brown.

What of Margery Perham, Gillan’s inspiration for reviving MacMichael’s plan? Without going into the details of her long and illustrious career, Perham began as an Oxford-trained historian whose fascination with Africa had been cemented by a year long visit to her sister, married to a DC in British Somaliland, in 1920-21. Her interests gravitated to colonial administration and led in 1930 to a five-year stint of African travel to study British Native Policy, financed by a Rhodes Trust grant (Oliver 1991, Smith & Bull 1991, Kirk-Greene 1991). Her influence among Sudan officials grew rapidly in the 1930s, when her views on native administration paralleled SPS wisdom and gave it scholarly cachet.³² Moreover, she helped popularize the aims of colonial administrators at home. A frequent correspondent on Africa in *The Times*, she repeatedly set out her vision of “the tribe” – “a kind of force or current,” to quote Roland Oliver, “which could be harnessed to all sorts of modern purposes by those who understood the system” (1991:22). In line with MacMichael, if slightly less cautious, Perham wrote, “the aim of our administration must be to find the true foundations of native society, and build upwards and outwards from them.” Indeed, tribal society should be fostered “into an all-embracing organ of local government, through which all, and not merely a few, of our administrative activities would be expressed.”³³ In 1932 with Rockefeller funding from the International African Institute, Perham studied anthropology with Malinowski at the LSE, having been warned by a senior colonial officer to guard her idealism against the master’s neutralizing spell. Indeed, she once considered doing ethnographic fieldwork with “a single tribe,” having somewhere in Kenya in mind (Lavin 1991, see Salamone 2000). She was an enthusiast for “the African point of view,” by which she meant (she later modified her ideas), enabling ‘the tribe’ to adapt ‘on its own lines’ (Oliver 1991, Lavin 1991, Smith and Bull 1991). This because “the tribes represented ‘reality’ as opposed to the ‘artificial’ state system imposed from above” (Lavin 1991:59).

Perham’s influence on SPS officials, and that of their experience on her views, should not be underestimated. She visited Sudan often and kept up a lively correspondence with several high-ranking members of the SPS. ‘Tribalism’ was for both the healthiest, most responsible method of encouraging social development while defending Africans against all manner of modern ills. And to restore and nurture tribalism, ethnographic research was key.

Containing Arab culture and Islam

Reliance on an anthropological adviser in Sudan did not mean that studies by independent anthropologists ceased.³⁴ These continued to be supported in areas of particular interest. Gillan, for one, “was entirely in sympathy” with a plea from Douglas Newbold, as governor of Kordofan “for an anthropological survey of the Nuba Mountains” that each (for different reasons) considered “vital at this stage of economic expansion affecting a very primitive people.”³⁵ Gillan, Newbold’s

³⁰ “Note on Anthropological and Archaeological Coordination,” Gillan to H.E. (Symes), 19 May 1937. SOAS (Arkell papers) MS 210522/2/1/1.

³¹ Seligman to Arkell, 9 June, 1937. SOAS MS 210522/2/1/1, p. 14.

³² See Perham’s papers kept in the Bodleian Library of Commonwealth & African Studies at Rhodes House, Oxford; the papers of various officials held in the Sudan Archive, Durham University, but especially those of Angus Gillan, Douglas Newbold, and James W. Robertson.

³³ ‘The Future of East Africa,’ *The Times* 13-15 Aug. 1931, reprinted in Perham 1967: 42-43.

³⁴ Several political officers (e.g. B. A. Lewis, Paul Howell) went on to become professional anthropologists.

³⁵ SOAS (Arkell) MS 210522/2/1/1, p.5.

predecessor in Kordofan, had formed a paternal attachment to the Nuba, the collective name for a diverse group of peoples speaking over fifty distinct languages who inhabit the hills of southeastern Kordofan. Some Nuba were relatively Arabized and had been organized as hereditary kingdoms since the sixteenth century; others were 'pagan' and led by 'big men' who owed their position to their wealth or renown as warriors or priests; still others were, like the Nilotic Nuer, acephalous (Sanderson & Sanderson 1981: 94, Nadel 1947.) Well-armed and given to mutual raiding, the Nuba had proved difficult to govern since the early days of colonial rule.

Ethnographic research on the Nuba began in 1937 under S. F. Nadel. Gillan engaged him in the belief that his findings would be useful for developing the Nuba along 'indigenous' rather than 'Arab' lines. Indeed it was critical that Nuba *remain* Nuba (Faris 1973: 157). As governor, Gillan had become alarmed that the region was yielding to northern sway, and pointed to the increased incidence of pharaonic circumcision among Nuba women and girls. That practice, he wrote, was not necessarily connected "with the spread of Islamisation even in the native mind," but instead, with the spread of 'Arab' influence: Nuba seeking to rise in social status had begun speaking Arabic and practicing female genital cutting as markers of prestige. "Personally," wrote Gillan in 1930, "I feel very strongly that it is our duty as guardians of primitive people like the Nuba to prevent the adoption by them of this brutal and dangerous practice."³⁶ Thus ethnographic inquiry was useful not only for enabling indirect rule, but also and firmly related to this, for containing the spread of Islam, Arabic, and the culture of the Arab north.³⁷ Political officers, anthropologists, missionaries—all were deployed to that end. Gillan, like MacMichael, a clergyman's son, had helped secure approval for the Church Missionary Society, the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church, to open schools in the Nuba Hills despite their location above the tenth parallel in the so-called Arab north where Christian proselytizing was technically banned.³⁸ Not every Briton was as adamant as Gillan about the need to suppress northern influence, and some, like Newbold, grew skeptical of the project in light of the missionaries' failure to manage their schools (Sanderson & Sanderson 1981: 188). Yet this was clearly the aim of Khartoum's infamous 'Southern Policy' to which I return below.

Despite the alleged utility of anthropology, few SPS officials read the subject at university, only six in the entire cohort of 393 men over fifty-odd years of rule (Kirk-Greene 1982:36).³⁹ One of these was Elliot Balfour, son of the former Wellcome director, who graduated from Cambridge in 1931. Balfour questioned whether anthropological relativism was compatible with governing. Indigenous institutions were seldom consonant with European ideals, and ethnographic inquiry often clashed with an officer's role in keeping the peace. The effort to sustain 'traditions' considered innocuous while 'modernizing' their practitioners was soon seen as hypocritical by officials as well as the growing class of educated Muslim Sudanese: the former because tradition was being eroded nonetheless, the latter because it was an excuse to block their own advancement. And apropos of Elliot Balfour's remarks, though government had designs for the information that professional anthropologists supplied, it invariably ignored their opinion in deciding matters of policy (James 1973; and see Kuper 1983:103-104).

In contrast to the south, and eventually the rural west and east, it is striking how little ethnographic research, expert or amateur, was conducted among Muslim peoples of the riverain north. A smattering of articles by government educators and CMS teachers in girls' schools (notwithstanding the embargo the CMS was permitted to open schools in the north for Muslim girls)

³⁶ Gillan to Secretary for Health, Education, etc., 3 Feb., 1930. National Record Office, Khartoum, NRO CIVSEC 1/44/2/12, p. 19-22.

³⁷ See also Faris 1973.

³⁸ Wright to Standing Committee, Church Missionary Society Archive, Birmingham University, CMS G3/SN/P1/1934.7 (Feb.) and 1934.12 (Apr.); Standing Committee, Minutes of Conference on the Nuba Mountains Project, 6 Feb. 1933, CMS G3/SN/P1/1933.8. Technically, the Nuba Mountains were in the 'Arab' north and immune to Christian proselytization.

³⁹ All six had Cambridge degrees.

appeared in SNR between 1919 and 1950,⁴⁰ but otherwise little exists. Indeed, because northerners were 'Arab' and Muslim it was widely believed they were already 'known;' in fact, they were taken for granted. Reflecting on the role of anthropology in colonial Sudan, MacMichael wrote, "if local customs and ways of thought were to be respected, so long as they were not repugnant to equity and decency, they must be understood. *In the north this presented no great difficulty . . .*" (MacMichael 1954: 107, emphasis mine). Arabic was the official language of government and spoken in the northern two-thirds of Sudan. All SPS probationers were expected to learn it well enough for their work; cadets took courses at university, sometimes an extra year, learning Classical Arabic and law, and were required to pass exams on these subjects within two years of their appointment. But they were on their own to master the colloquial language—more useful to them by far—for which they relied on Egyptian subalterns and Arab Sudanese. Northern Arabic speakers who held low-grade government jobs or were servants in officials' homes were the colony's most accessible subjects, deceptively familiar to British eyes, if never entirely 'tame.' They wielded a precarious power, being simultaneously cultivated as collaborators and appeased as potential zealots. It is tempting to suggest that their 'known-ness' in the present and purported 'decline' from a nobler (Christian Nubian, and previously Meroitic) past were what made history and archaeology the disciplines of choice for learning about them, rather than systematic ethnography, deemed valuable for fathoming unruly 'others' in the here and now. When ethnographic inquiry was conducted among Sudanese Muslims before World War II, the preferred subjects were nomads, exotic and appealing to sedentary Europeans schooled in the popular Orientalism of the day. In 1937 Evans-Pritchard wrote to Arkell that, upon concluding work among the Nuer and Azande of the south, he would like to research Caucasian Arabic-speaking nomads, preferably the Kababish.⁴¹

Mercantile and agrarian Arabs, the *awlad al-balad* (sons/children of the country), were not only more intelligible to the British, but also culturally akin to Egyptians, Britain's rivals for the hearts and minds of Sudanese. As one former governor wrote, Northern Province "was of course the most civilized . . . with so many of its sons in the educated class, and with tribes and tribal leaders long experienced in trade and travel up and down the Nile."⁴² Yet if the *awlad al-balad* were allegedly more comprehensible and more civilized than other Sudanese, they were often mistrusted by British officials, who were especially wary of Arabs schooled in western ways. Witness a young ADC, describing the road from Gedaref to Kassala in the east, where "bare-footed herdsmen with their flocks—and a sling or a spear—looking like Michael Angelo's David, pass across in front of you under the telegraph wires, while every now and then a beastly Ford goes by full of young quasi-Effendis in tarbooshes—like people in Cairo or Port Said."⁴³ The title '*effendi*' associated with educated Muslim Sudanese was aspired to by those 'detrribalised' townsfolk whose susceptibility to Egyptian political influence and anti-British propaganda was thought to be acute.

Southern Policy

Let me now turn to the issue of Sudan's Southern Policy. During MacMichael's years as civil secretary, native administration was expanded and the influence of 'graduates' and other elements of the effendi class ever more strictly curtailed (Henderson 1965: 58). In 1927 Sudan's governor general, John Maffey used the troubling if not-yet-discredited language of social hygiene to describe the government's direction. "Before the old traditions die," he wrote,

we ought to get on with extension and expansion [of native administration] in every direction, thereby sterilising and localising the political germs which must spread from the lower Nile into Khartoum. Under the impulse of new ideas and with the rise of a new generation, old traditions may pass away with astonishing rapidity. It is advisable to fortify them while the memories of Mahdism and Omdurman are still vivid. . . . The bureaucracy

⁴⁰ E.g.: J. W. Crowfoot (1919, 1922), Ahmed Abdel Halim (1939), Elaine Hills-Young (1940), and Sophie Zenkovsky, (1945, 1949, 1950)

⁴¹ Evans-Pritchard to Arkell, 7 Sept. 1937. SOAS (Arkell papers) MS 210522/2/1/1, p. 48.

⁴² H.B. Arber, "Sudan Political Service 1928-1954," SAD 736/2/21.

⁴³ C.A.W. Lea to his parents, 2 Feb. 1926, SAD 645/7/37.

must yield either to an autocratic or to a democratic movement and the dice are loaded in favour of the latter. If we desire the former, the British Officer must realise that it is his duty to lay down the role of Father of the People. He must entrust it to the natural leaders of the people whom he must support and influence as occasion requires.

In this manner the country will be parcelled out into nicely balanced compartments, protective glands against the septic germs which will inevitably be passed on from the Khartoum of the future.⁴⁴

Native administration, upheld as enlightened self-government, a progressive, 'culturally sensitive' approach, effectively meant promoting the isolation of rural Sudan so as "to avoid any repetition of shocks such as those of 1924" (Woodward 1990: 45).

As early as 1922 the three southern provinces, plus Darfur, and parts of Kassala and White Nile Province had been declared 'closed districts,' barred to outsiders without government license to enter. Worry over the activities of Mahdists and West African pilgrims in the north as well as Muslims in the south lay behind the move (Daly 1986: 405). The same year, a formal directive made English the language of southern administration. Despite these steps northern Sudanese tradesmen continued to operate below the tenth parallel, and Muslim, Arabic-speaking staff held the majority of government posts. Indeed, some British officials considered Islam a civilizing force, "administratively useful because it promoted styles of moral and political behaviour far more intelligible and predictable than those generated by the traditional socio-religious systems of the South" (Sanderson & Sanderson 1981: 81).

Yet following the crisis of 1924, there emerged a consensus among administrators that the south should be braced against potential Arab mischief. This was formalized by MacMichael in his 'Southern Policy' circular of January 1930. The policy "involved two general propositions:"

that the backwardness of southern peoples made necessary [1] the construction of artificial barriers against more sophisticated outside influences, if the basis of local cultures was to be preserved; and [2] the progressive replacement, through improved and extended education, of 'outsiders' by local people in government posts, thus creating a nucleus for further development (Daly 1991: 38).

Only the first step was effected to any degree; the prospect of an educated class in the south was as alarming to officials as the presence of one in the north, and the call to reform southern education was largely ignored.

Methods to limit the spread of northern influence entailed restrictions on dress and personal conduct, matters neither petty nor banal, for the bodily expression of Arab identity in the south was a potentially subversive act. In 1930 MacMichael reported that "substantial headway has been made in the elimination of (northern Sudanese and Egyptian) administrative officials *who would likely render conspicuous*, if not actually disseminate, the influences that are at work in the Central and Northern Sudan."⁴⁵ Southerners were forbidden to wear northern dress; in the Western District of Bahr al-Ghazal, where the social border with the Muslim north was exceptionally porous and blurred, it was prohibited to make or sell Arab clothes, and if an official happened to find some, they were burned.⁴⁶ Speaking English was encouraged, and Arabic, including Arabic words commonly used in English, was gradually (if incompletely) suppressed. Where Arabic was inevitable for correspondence, as in Kordofan, it was taught to 'non-Arabs' in Roman script, thus hindering their access to Arabic literature.⁴⁷ MacMichael, in his capacity as civil secretary, but drawing surely on his reputation as a distinguished orientalist, dismissed gainsayers in a scathing memorandum from 1928:

⁴⁴ 'Minute by His Excellency the Governor General' (Sir John Maffey), 1 Jan. 1927. SAD 403/9/5-6 (MacPhail).

⁴⁵ MacMichael to Loraine, 17 June 1930, FO 407/212, p. 215, emphasis mine.

⁴⁶ Balfour memoirs SAD759/11/40-43; Daly 1991: 44.

⁴⁷ SAD 723/5/45-48, 51-52 (Gillan papers). See also Sharkey 2002, 2003.

It is not necessary to stress the fact—presumably undisputed—that the spread of Arabic among the negroes of the south means the spread of Arab thought, Arab culture, Arab religion, but I would venture to dispute the assumption that these in fact occupy so high a plane as to deserve to be regarded as intrinsically desirable. The religion of the Arab is the fruit of thirteen centuries of discipline and dogma, and it appears now to have reached a stage of world-wide stagnation periodically rippled by political restlessness. ... It has shown, it is true, a wonderful power of inspiring the ignorant to sudden heights of fanaticism, but has it in it the seeds of any real mental or moral progress? Is it not, rather, stationary in essence, and therefore retrograde? . . . ⁴⁸

In fact, he continued, the path of Arabization, while “not worth taking,” would increase the danger to government by extending “the zone in which Islamic fundamentalism is endemic,” allowing rebellious Arabs to call on the south for aid “in the name of a common religion,” or indeed the reverse, “which might become a serious embarrassment.”⁴⁹ But by preventing the spread of Arab culture,

a series of self-contained racial units will be developed with structure and organisation based on the solid rock of indigenous traditions and beliefs ... and in the process a solid barrier will be created against the insidious political intrigue which must in the ordinary course of events increasingly beset our path in the North. ⁵⁰

In light of these remarks it is hardly surprising that even career officials who had assiduously studied Arabic to qualify for the SPS now feigned ignorance of that language in the south (Daly 1991: 44).⁵¹

There is an obvious paradox here, for behind such acts and assertions lies a tacit recognition that social identity is not inherent or primordial, but achieved, and maintained or altered through practice. Indeed, the implication was that for Sudanese, identity *is* practice and no more: while British who learned Arabic scarcely forfeited their essential Britishness, southerners who spoke it put their socio-religious distinctiveness at risk.

Conclusion

I hope to have added a wrinkle to the familiar tale of anthropology and the colonial encounter. Heeding Professor Firth’s comment (1972:27) that one role of social anthropology “has been to supply ammunition for the forces of contradiction within the system,” and taking liberties with what he may have meant by “the system,” I have considered who in colonial Sudan found anthropology useful, in what ways, and why. There an initial concern to glean information about ‘tribes’ as part of the natural environment or potential sources of medicines and labour, evolved into a system of native administration reliant on “unconscious anthropologists” and trained professionals both. Native administration in Sudan was more than a romantic vision or an economical way to rule. It was invoked to stem the spread of political Arabism and Islam at a time, in the 1920s and 1930s, when such forces were understood to endanger imperial dominion. An intriguing upshot was the reflexive neglect of ethnographic research in the colonial Muslim north, where inhabitants were deemed semi-civilized and already well-understood. The priority given to investigating the north’s Arab history and its pre-Islamic Nubian and Meroitic past reinforced administrators’ impressions that northerners were misguided about their true origins and thus unduly committed to their present faith.

Certainly, the support of anthropologically-minded civil secretaries in Sudan from Harold MacMichael on did much to stimulate “the infant industry of anthropology,” in historian Robert Collins’s phrase (1983: 165). MacMichael’s successors – Gillan, Newbold, and J. W. Robertson – kept close counsel with Margery Perham, a leading Africanist who championed ethnography as

⁴⁸ “Memorandum: Arabic and the Southern Sudan” H.A. MacMichael, 10 May 1928, RH Mss. Brit. Emp. s. 421(2).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ On suppressing Arabic, see MacMichael to Loraine, 17 June 1930. FO 407/212.

vital to colonial governance and, in the 1930s, taught lessons on the topic at Oxford to British administrative recruits. Moreover, in the first half of the twentieth century, research by trained anthropologists was partly funded from Sudan's public purse, to which Egypt, the ostensible font of Arab partisanship, ironically contributed a share. The results of these efforts, of course, far exceeded administrators' terms and desires – leaving us gems such as Lienhardt's *Divinity and Experience* (1961),⁵² to say nothing of Evans-Pritchard's Nuer and Azande works. Yet the point remains: ethnography in colonial Sudan was always positioned relative to 'Arab' influence and the potential spread of Islam. Just how that climate shaped the peoples with whom colonial ethnographers worked may not be clear – did it, for instance, suppress regional syncretism, or simply deflect scholarly attention from that process? – yet, where “essential identities” were violently coerced through forced migration the effect must have been significant.⁵³ If, as Pierre Bourdieu (1990:1) advised, “the progress of knowledge presupposes progress in our knowledge of the conditions of knowledge,” then we must be willing to consider how the researches of our forebears were informed by their sociopolitical context, as our own surely is – and my talk surely has been -- today.

⁵² Lienhardt's research was underwritten by the Sudan Government from 1947-50 (1961: vii).

⁵³ The tactics included forced migration. See, for example, Faris 1973, Nadel 1947. See Daly 1986, 1991. Boddy 2007 Part I contains a summary based on secondary and some primary sources.

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