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Regime Transformation and National Formation in Modern Sudan

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Sudan has been one of the focuses of increasing international concern in the last decade either as a base of “international terrorism” such as Al Qaida or as one of the flashpoints of severe ethnical conflict as is developed in Darfour. Sudan has also another face. Recently China energetically engages in oil exploration and production in Sudan to face with her impending shortage of oil supply. On the other hand, it is also a fact that Sudan has been treated in academic circle not only in Japan but also in the world as a whole as one of the marginal areas to be studied in spite of its size and impact on regional development in the Arab world as well as in the African continent. The reason might be found in its conceptual marginality in the Arab world as well as in the Black Africa. Although Sudan occupies the largest territorial area in the African continent, its image is divided between the Arab world and the Black Africa and defies a ready-made identification.

This book is based on the doctoral thesis of the author which was submitted to the Tokyo University in 1993. This voluminous and ambitious book has succeeded in bringing to the fore not only the modern history of Sudan per se but also one of the complicated structures of modern imperialistic world system which took its shape in the history of Sudan. The work is a pioneering contribution to the understanding of the area which has been in general neglected until now. Also it is definitely necessary for anyone interested in advanced researches on the area to go through this work in advance. Sudanese history shows us a complicated dual colonial domination under Egypt and Britain since the beginning of 19th century. The complexity was intensified by the fact that Egypt, although being one component of the Ottoman Empire, itself came under the colonial rule of Britain.
Another complexity was that Sudan was depicted as a country with two different definite compositions, namely the Arab character and the black African identification. In other words nationality, national formation or identification of Sudan was always related to the method of political domination of imperialistic system. The author's understanding of these complexities lies in a dynamic analysis of the concept of national formation. Any concept of nations or nationalities could not be understood without going into class structure and class rule in given conditions at the same time. Any national identification has been always a controversial issue among historians as well as among political scientists.

The complicated Sudanese identity requires a historical and theoretical analysis, as the identity itself is a focal issue to be solved before achieving the national integration or national reconciliation. The modern Sudan as a national state came into existence since 1820s when the Egyptian regime of Muhammad Ali Dynasty tried to dominate Sudan under its colonial rule. However in the 19th century Egypt gradually fell under the rule of Britain. This book focuses on Sudan in the period and it is one of the few dynamic and serious ventures which tries to locate the whole history of Sudan in the imperialist world system taking into account the complicated duplicated or multiple domination of European Powers through the Ottoman Empire and Egypt. For that purpose the book refers to a wide range of documents available in Arabic and Western languages. The academic work covers a long period since the beginning of 19th century until the period of Uprising in 1985 in addition to an analysis of the period before the domination of Muhammad Ali Dynasty. The author's energy poured into the task should be given due respect.

The author's academic interest in the modern Sudan was initiated, according to her remark in the preface, when she analyzed the Mahdi movement and its Mahdi state in the end of 19th century. The Mahdi movement was an initial example of successful national movement against the British colonial rule fought in a religious or Islamic framework. Since then the author's interest extended to the dynamics of mutual interactions between the imperialist policies and the formation of a new Sudan "national" identity formulated in its fight against the imperialism. Her understanding of "nation" is a dynamic one in the sense that "national identity" is not a static one such as a long standing entity from the past without significant change in content but a process of action and reaction between the suppressed people and the ruling imperialist forces taking into account and always re-examining the past national legacies by adapting and modifying them to given stages of history. In some cases the imperialists themselves tried to coin their concept of nations or nationalities from the above for the colonized nations so that those concepts would contribute to break up or to renew conflicts among the people so that their struggle against imperialistic rule could be dissipated. In other words the concept of "nationality" itself should be a
battlefield between the imperialists and national liberation forces. This reviewer agrees in principle to her approach to the issue of national identification. These days even the term “democratization” itself is politically mobilized to interfere in the domestic affairs and to impose specific ruling systems in the Middle Eastern countries. In this sense concepts of nation and nationality are changeable depending upon their interests to be served and the title of the book under review reflects the author’s understanding of national formation.

According to the author the following four aspects in the history of Sudan should be given special consideration. The first one is the relations between the state authority and Islam. Islam in Sudan played different roles in the different circumstances. Islam could be a tool of rule by the state or ruling classes, while it could be an expression of protest by the people. The various political parties representing bourgeoisie also manipulated Islam and its movements. The second viewpoint to be taken into account is the mutual interactions between the Islamic North and the non-Islamic South including Nuba where the non-Muslim people form the majority. The third point is Sudan’s complicated relations with Egypt. Under the same state authority both of the people in Sudan and Egypt developed their complicated and contradictory mutual relations. Quite often Egypt showed to Sudan political models in the form of Arab nationalism or Arab socialism. The fourth point is an approach to the political development in Sudan as a dynamic outcome of interactions including contradictions, balances and alliances among the various social forces and classes. This approach is applied when the author takes up the epoch-making political developments such as Mahdi movement and its state structure, process of the Revolution in 1924, “national movement” until the achievement of independence in 1956 and the political development after the October Revolution 1964. The reviewer is convinced that the author’s approach from this viewpoint makes the book particularly fascinating and outstanding in the description and analysis of those developments.

The introductory deals with the period before the 19th century, namely the pre-modern period and tries to give us a general history of the two Islamic states: Sultana al Funj and Dar Fur Sultan which occupied the present territory of modern Sudan. The author analyses the state authority, trade and commerce, and functions of Islam in the period. At that time the Arab or Muslim identity indicated the participation of a certain social class in the ruling power hierarchy.

After the introductory the first part deals with “the social transformation and national formation in the 19th Sudan.” Under the occupation of Muhammad Ali of Egypt Sudan entered the “modern period” within the territorial framework of “Egyptian Sudan” and a new solidarity was realized among the people under the duplicate rule of Britain and Egypt, which culminated in the mobilization of people into the Mahdi movement and the
establishment of Mahdi state. Merchant class under the influence of neo-Sufism led the movement mobilizing poor peasants against the Muhammad Ali Dynasty. However, although the Mahdi gate a damaging blow to the British it crumbled down in 1898 because of internal contradictions between the merchants and poor peasants.

The second part titled, “Social formation and national formation in Sudan under the British rule: Phase one”, deals with the period of British colonial rule since the end of 19th century until the Revolution in 1924. The period after the WWI witnessed an emergence of the new assertion of national right of self determination combined with the concept of “nation state.” In Sudan also a framework of Sudanese nationalism took its root for the first time. The national movement in Egypt had also an impact on Sudan as a model to be followed. During this period the national movement tried to compensate its weakness by depending upon other foreign powers. The option before Sudan was to choose either Egypt or Britain, to which a temporary rule should be handed over. Any possible option of the Sudanese nationalism was inseparably related to the mutual relations among the various social forces in the domestic politics.

The third part, “Social formation and national formation in Sudan under the British rule: Phase two”, deals with the period since the 1924 Revolution until the independence in 1956. Although the British succeeded in crushing down the Revolution in 1924, she was obliged to reorganize its method of rule and introduced the concept of Native Administration (NA). The NA was developed by the British side by side with the so-called Southern Policy which has had a long standing influence on the difficulty, even now, for the national reconciliation and national formation. The NA was one of the policies for readjustment to the new level of national liberation in order to continue the domination taking into account the new dynamic relations between the colonialist and the colony. This part analyzes the impact of these policies on the characterization of national movement of Sudan.

The final fourth part, “The political structure and national formation in Sudan since her independence”, tries to discuss the concept of nation or nationality after the independence in 1956. In the beginning she takes up the October Revolution in 1964 followed by the Uprising in 1985. The contradictions created by the enforced way of capitalistic development in Sudan was translated into the intensified contradictions among the various nationalities. The author tries to follow its process and tries to locate multiple identifications of Sudan in the context of “Arab nationalism”, various “regionalisms” and “Islamic revivalisms.”

After summarizing as in the above the reviewer would like to give some additional comments. There is no denying the fact that it is definitely useful to analyze the class structures at any given time in the history of Sudan. The author sometime refers to the
analyses given by the communist party of Sudan at each turning point of history. As is well known the communist party of Sudan has been comparatively influential and has had a leading role in the agrarian and labor movement there. However, because of complexities of social relations and level of economic development in Sudan it was a hard task for the party to give correct strategies and tactics to changing situations. For example the party seems to have followed the general strategy which were opposed to the capitalist path of development for Sudan. The strategy seems to coincide with the “non-capitalist path of development” which was prevalent in the 1960s supported by the USSR. The similar category was partly applied to the Egyptian or to the Indian revolutionary movements. In the strategy an implicit understanding was that the USSR represented “the model of socialist society” and it was possible for the less-developed countries to arrive at the stage of socialism without passing through the capitalist stage of development. However, as is known now, the strategy failed in many developing countries. In addition, the USSR collapsed out of its internal contradictions under the external pressure. The period under study by the book relates to the period before the collapse of the USSR. At present, namely, after the collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe the Soviet model lost its glamour because of its negative aspects. The breakdown of Soviet model might force us to approach a different path toward understanding of socialism. In other words any socialism model without experience of capitalist stage or market economy might not be feasible. It is now clear that the public sector does not automatically guarantee “social progress” and the role of private sector could contribute to positive economic development under certain conditions. Sudan as one of the developing countries which suffered from the negative legacies of colonialism has been afraid of penetration of foreign capital as a matter of fact. However, sometimes it may be inevitable to invite foreign capital in order to import new technology and efficient management to modernize its economy. How to reconcile the economic sovereignty with a flexible and practical approach to the private or sometimes even to foreign capital might be a new challenge for any political forces for social progress and development in Sudan. In this connection it seems to be very interesting to note that the communist party has shown a more positive stance towards the “modern sector” which includes the large farms connected to the Gezira Project which was a comprehensive development strategy of the potentially fertile Gezira area.

The second point to be raised is a particular way of democratization observed in Sudan. Out of my limited experience in Sudan when I visited Khartoum to observe the general election in the beginning of 1986, I was impressed with the energy shown by the Sudanese people for democratization. At that time every political party was allowed to take part in the parliamentary election and carried out their political campaigning freely without
any intervention of the authority. The atmosphere was very similar to that in India where free expression of political views has been in general guaranteed to a greater degree. It is interesting to compare Sudan with Egypt from a viewpoint of democratization as the former seems to show a more vivid expression of democratization than the latter. Although the process for democratization has not been smooth and still faces much difficulty at present, it is dangerous to underestimate the energy of Sudanese people for democratization. The book under review succeeds in part to explain the differences between Sudan and Egypt in this respect. The differences between the two countries should be explored and we are interested in the potentiality and reality of democratization of Sudanese people based upon the historical experiences of colonialism and their struggles against the regime.

The third point to be raised is the so-called conflicts in Sudan between the Arab and Islamic North vis-à-vis the Black and non-Islamic South. The conflicts are, as pointed out in the book, manipulated in most cases in order to serve interests of certain ruling social classes. The concept of Arabiyya or Islam was mobilized to extend their field of economic activity to the South. At the same time when the contradictions of capitalist development were intensified racism was leveled against the South. The general public could be organized and mobilized to fight against each other resulting sometimes in disaster and tragedy. It is to be noted, however, that the anti-government forces very often try to solve the conflicts within the framework of Sudan. In other words the nation state, which was formed under the specific historical conditions, is viable to some extent. We should discuss at this stage of history again the sustainability of various nation states from various angles of view. Among the factors for validity, length of history, efforts to unify different social and racial divisions, economic interests of ruling elites, and reactions of surrounding neighboring countries as well as the world system seem to have played an important role to overcome separatist tendencies. In spite of serious mutual confrontations and conflicts among the different confessional groups in the Lebanese civil war, Lebanon as a state survived. In Afghanistan, even though people experienced civil wars among the different ethnic groups after they had succeeded to expel the Soviet forces out of the country, there are very few voices for independent or separation movements based upon national or ethnic groups there and they try to solve their problems within the present framework of Afghanistan. From this angle of view the North-South confrontation in Sudan is expected to give us another model of solution, as the issues involved there are not particular but general in character.

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