The Role of ‘Negroid but Detribalized’ People in Modern Sudanese History

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‘Negroid but detribalized’ is a term used by the British colonial authorities in Sudan in the 1920s to describe a people of ex-slave stock, who traced their origin back to tribes in the south or the Nuba Mountains but had settled in the north and had lost contact with their origins. Although their presence was virtually neglected in traditional Sudanese historiography, which was dominated by dichotomy between the ‘Arab’ north and the ‘Black’ south, these people actually played a significant role in modern Sudanese history, both as a challenge to this very dichotomy between north and south, and as a ‘detribalized’ and hence, in a sense, modern social force. This paper analyzes the role of these ‘negroid but detribalized’ people in Sudanese society for the past two centuries. Since the existence of these people provides an alternative approach to issues of ‘Sudanese nationalism’ or ‘Sudanese identity’, special attention is paid to the question of their self-consciousness and self-identification at successive historical stages.

Keywords: Sudan, ex-slaves, detribalization, Mahdist movement, Revolution of 1924, nationalism.

INTRODUCTION

When, in 1924, the British were faced with the first serious challenge to their domination in the Sudan since their arrival in 1898, and had to cope with a series of widespread anti-British movements (‘the Revolution of 1924’), they attributed it – in part – to the existence of discontented ‘negroid but detribalized’ people in northern Sudanese society. What they meant by this term was a people of ‘ex-slave’ stock, who traced their origin back to the tribes in the south or the Nuba Mountains, but had settled in the north and thus had lost any contact whatever with their original tribes. In the north, they had ‘no place in the social organism’, ‘no ties, no traditions, no trade to which to turn’, and hence constituted a source of disturbance in the mind of the British authorities. The British felt at the same time that they discerned a kind of ‘Sudanese’ nationalism among these people, according to which only ‘blacks’ were regarded as the ‘real Sudanese’, who should rule the country and enjoy the spoils of power.\(^1\)

It is somehow surprising that in recent Sudanese studies the question of these ‘negroid but detribalized’ people has not attracted more attention. For, in the first place, the study of these people, who were uprooted from their original local society and found their way into the northern towns, might reveal to us a most interesting aspect of the changes brought to Sudanese society by modernization. In the second place, as is suggested by the
mere fact that until the twentieth century the designation 'Sudanese' was confined to the 'negroid' southerners only, the study of these 'blacks' seems indispensable for the understanding of 'Sudanese nationalism' or 'Sudanese identity'.

The fact that the question of the 'negroid but detribalized' people has been rather neglected in the study of Sudanese history is, in a sense, a reflection of the historical reality that, after the 1920s, the British succeeded in marginalizing their position, and these people, consequently, lost their social momentum and ceased to play any significant role in Sudanese society after the 1940s. And this marginalization of the 'negroid but detribalized' people in northern society was nothing but an indication of the completion of the division between the 'north' and the 'south', and hence the emergence of the 'southern problem'. In this sense we must regard the question of the 'negroid but detribalized' people not as a general, super-historical phenomenon, but as an historical phenomenon, which came into existence only in a particular historical stage in changing Sudanese society.

In this paper, we will deal with the question of these 'negroid but detribalized' people as an historical phenomenon through an analysis of their state and activities in three stages: (1) under the rule of Muhammad 'Alī dynasty and the Mahdiya; (2) from the beginning of the Condominium regime to the 1920s; and (3) the years just before independence. And, throughout this analysis, special attention will be paid to the question of their self-identification and their attitudes towards the various aspects of 'Sudanese nationalism' of the day.¹

UNDER THE RULE OF THE MUḤAMMAD ‘ALĪ DYNASTY AND THE MAḤDİYA

The intensive and large-scale contact between the north and the south that led to the emergence of the 'negroid but detribalized' people began with the arrival of the Muḥammad 'Alī dynasty in the Sudan. It was under this regime that the upper Nile regions were first exposed to large-scale exploration and thence exploitation. And it was under this regime that slave raids were intensified and even institutionalized. The majority of the slaves thus acquired were incorporated into the Egyptian army as the jihādiya (regular forces), while others were employed as domestic or agricultural labour in northern Sudanese society.

As to their self-consciousness during this period, we know little, although we can find some indication in their social struggles. For example, we know of a revolt among domestic slaves in Berber Province, during which they are said to have attempted to 'seize the land for themselves'.² Among the men incorporated into the jihādiya, there was a great mutiny which broke out in Kassala in 1864-65,³ and of this mutiny we have more details.

It is reported that in this mutiny the rebels organized themselves according to categories such as 'Dinka', 'Nuba', 'Fur' and 'Muwallad' (literally 'those who were born', i.e. meaning here the slaves who were born inside northern Sudan), and fought under their respective leaderships. At the same time, it also appeared – at least, in the eyes of the people on the side of the Muḥammad ‘Alī dynasty – that the rebels were cherishing racial hatred for both the 'Turks and the Arabs'.⁴ The mutiny ended when the rebels surrendered to a certain Ādam Bey, an officer from western Sudan, who was 'racially an Arab, ... but was very dark in complexion and understood the nature of the blacks to such an extent that he himself was taken for as a black'.⁵

However, many points remain vague. For example, they seem to have been classifying themselves along 'tribal' lines to a certain extent, but we are not sure whether this kind of 'tribal' classification was identical with their original way of defining themselves (what might be termed their innate self-consciousness) in their homeland, or was, in itself, a new sort of self-consciousness artificially modified (or even created) in accordance with the way in which they were organized inside the army of the Muḥammad ‘Alī dynasty. Nor is it quite clear whether they actually succeeded in establishing any broader (or 'trans-tribal')
self-identification. And if they did, was it a self-consciousness as members of the *jihādiyā*, for example, or was it a self-consciousness as ‘blacks’? In addition, their attitude towards the Muhammad ‘Ali dynasty itself was not clear. In other words, we do not know whether their mutiny had its origin in their discontent with their maltreatment or was based on their denial of the legitimacy of the regime itself. Concerning their attitude towards the Muhammad ‘Ali dynasty, we should refer to their activities during the Mahdist movement, given that this movement was a direct result of the sixty years of the rule of dynasty and was aiming at its complete overthrow.

At first sight, it seems as if their attitude towards the Mahdist movement was on the whole negative, and, from time to time, even hostile. One of the most conspicuous cases is the mutiny of the *jihādiyā* against the Mahdist state in El Obeid in the years 1885–7. In this mutiny, not only the *jihādiyā* but also the male and female slaves (‘even the slaves in chains’) in El Obeid took part. After manifesting their hostility towards the Mahdist (and Islamic) doctrine by drinking and dancing, they played the Khedival salute, left the town and went into the Nuba Mountains, installed the Khedival flag, and selected their leader to whom they gave the title of ‘pasha’. Allegiance to the Khedive was declared, and it was decided that one should swear by the Khedive’s name. Those who swore by the Mahdi’s name were flogged. It was also decided that anyone found selling arms or ammunition to the natives of the Nuba Mountains was to be punished with death. These rebels, who established ‘a sort of military republic’, were recognized by the neighbouring population as the ‘rulers of the country’, and were supplied by them with quantities of cattle and sesame. Later, however, they began to ‘treat the inhabitants of the district tyrannically’, and were consequently suppressed by the Mahdist army under the command of Ḥamdān Abū ‘Anja. An attempt at a similar movement was observed in Dongola. Here, too, a mutiny was planned by the *jihādiyā*, and the leader was given the title of ‘pasha’, although the plan was thwarted in advance.

Now, as far as these movements were concerned, it is clear that the mutineers were aiming at the restoration of the rule of the Muḥammad ‘Ali dynasty. They declared their allegiance to the Khedive, and attached great importance to rank in the Khedival army. They identified themselves as the Khedive’s soldiers. In the case of El Obeid, although they took refuge in the Nuba Mountains, which were undoubtedly the original home for some of them, they failed to build an equal and friendly relationship with the native population. Instead, they chose to pose as the ‘rulers of the country’, representatives of the Khedival authority in this area.

There was, however, another kind of movement among the *jihādiyā* during this period, namely the *jihādiyā* in the Equatoria Province in 1888–9. Like the movement at El Obeid, this movement (which was led by the ‘Sudanese’ officers of the *jihādiyā* troops in the province) too was committed to allegiance to the Khedive, and was opposed to the Mahdist movement in principle. It was, however, different from that of El Obeid in that it constituted a kind of resistance and mutiny against European influence (embodied by the governor, Emin Pasha) in the province.

Now, let us examine the situation in the Equatoria Province more closely. Although, after the fall of Khartoum (1885), most of the other areas had already fallen under the rule of the Mahdist state, Equatoria, being the southernmost province of the Sudan, was not yet completely in Mahdist hands, and the government garrisons were still holding on. At that time, however, faced with the advance of the Mahdist forces, Emin Pasha (E. Schnitzer), a German who had been the governor of the province since 1878, was thinking of abandoning the province and withdrawing to the south. The ‘Sudanese’ officers regarded this as a betrayal of the Khedival government by this European governor. They also suspected that the governor was conspiring to sell all of them as slaves to the English. (Their suspicion was intensified when H. M. Stanley, the English adventurer, arrived on the pretext of ‘rescuing’ Emin.) As a result, they set out on open resistance, discharged Emin and elected a new governor. The ringleaders of the mutiny issued a declaration, which throws a light upon the nature of their movement:
The Mudir (= governor) has outraged the Province for five long years by acts of despotism, injustice, violence, and extortion, and has favoured people according to his own caprice, to the detriment of others who had better claims, and now, as a culmination of the ignomy, he conspires to sell it to the British, but the hour for reclaiming the rights of the Viceroy (= Khedive) has arrived. We have cast off the yoke and proclaimed a new Government, which will mean the realisation of order and justice for everybody.(17)

Though they were advocating the restoration of the Khedival order, what they were doing, in reality, amounted to a total denial of what had occurred after the 1870s in the name of the Khedive, the most conspicuous feature of which was the growing influence of European administrators. Indeed, the dismissal of a governor appointed by the Khedive and the election of his successor by themselves constituted, in itself, a revolution against the Khedival order; and a direct influence of the deported Egyptian officers who had taken part in the ‘Urābist Revolution has been suggested. (18) The movement of the jihādiya in Equatoria Province was an ‘Urābist Revolution in miniature, and, in this sense, clearly different from the movement at El Obeid, which aimed at the restoration of the preexisting order.

Also noteworthy is the fact that, in the case of the movement in Equatoria, there existed a degree of sympathy between the jihādiya and the Mahdists as both were opposed to European influence. And this sympathy – unlike the case of El Obeid, where anti-Muslim sentiments were expressed by drinking and dancing – was often expressed in the form of sentiments as Muslim co-religionists. Of course, to the jihādiya, the Mahdists were enemies of the Khedive and hence their own, in principle. At the same time, however, it is reported that the jihādiya rebels declared that it was better to surrender to Mahdists than to ‘infidels like the English’. (19) Also, the Europeans in the province believed that the ‘Sudanese’ officers were preaching ‘resistance to the Christians’. (20) (It is worth recalling that in the case of the ‘Urābist Revolution itself, religious sentiments tended to gather momentum, in face of the growing danger of direct European intervention.)

So much for Equatoria. Was there not any further case in which the jihādiya took a more positive attitude towards the Mahdist movement and participated by their own choice? This is a difficult question. We cannot emphasize too much the importance of the jihādiya in the Mahdist state, where they were put under the command of Faḍl al-Mawla Șābūn (Ḥamdān Abū ‘Anja’s brother) and played a crucial role in war and in tax-collecting, being virtually the only force well versed in the use of firearms. In most instances, however, they had been brought to the Mahdist side by force (as captives), not by their own choice. And even after their incorporation into the Mahdist army, it was observed that, in the subsequent Mahdist battles, the ‘black’ soldiers were always put in the forefront, while the ‘Arabs’ stayed in the rear. (21) Above all, had they not been subject to some kind of discriminatory treatment, they would not have risen against the Mahdist state in El Obeid and elsewhere.

It is noteworthy, however, that the incorporation of the major part of the male slaves into the Mahdist state-owned standing army contributed, to a certain degree, to a relative rise in the social status of the ‘negroid but detribalized’ people in this revolutionary state, even if individual ‘Arab’ citizens continued to maintain their racial and cultural prejudices. Many slaves fled from their masters and joined the Mahdist jihādiya in order to obtain freedom. The behaviour of these ex-slaves often caused anger and embarrassment on the part of their ex-masters. (22)

There is no evidence that positively suggests that Mahdist doctrine aimed at the social emancipation of the ‘negroid but detribalized’ people. However, an expression like ‘(if it is the order of the Mahdî,) you should obey even a Shilluk’, (23) which appears in the Mahdist documents, suggests that, in the context of Mahdist cosmology, based on the concept of absoluteness of the Mahdî, ‘racial’ difference was regarded – theoretically, at least – as a matter of no significance. Also, an Egyptian observer noted a relatively tolerant attitude shown by the Mahdists towards the jihādiya and the ‘Sudanese’ officers who had
fought on the Egyptian side and then surrendered (in comparison with their harsh treatment of the Egyptian officers), and went so far as to attribute it to a kind of Sudanese nationalistic sentiment that united the Mahdists and the jihadiya.\(^{\text{(24)}}\)

**THE EARLY CONDOMINIUM PERIOD: UP TO THE 1920S**

In the first few years following the conquest of the Sudan by the Anglo-Egyptian troops and the advent of the Condominium regime (1899), there was a demand for unskilled labour for public works, buildings, and so on, especially in large towns like Khartoum and Omdurman. As a result, a large number of ex-slaves were attracted from the northern villages to these towns. After the immediate demand subsided, however, these ex-slaves showed 'no strong inclination to return to their own district', and just remained in the towns, apparently helped by the cheap price of dura (sorghum, the main foodstuff) even in these large towns. According to the official view, this resulted in the 'collection in the large towns of a population whose natural indolence, untempted by any imperative necessary to work for a livelihood, and lack of responsibility, causes them to become not only a direct economic loss to the country at large, but also a menace to the more orderly and law-abiding members of the urban societies'.\(^{\text{(25)}}\) In order to cope with this situation, the Condominium government introduced the Vagabonds Ordinance in 1905. Then, to facilitate the application of this ordinance, in 1909, a system of registering all 'Sudanese' labourers (i.e. 'Southern blacks as opposed to the Arabs') was introduced, and the Labour Bureau was started.\(^{\text{(26)}}\)

It is worth noting that even the 'black' officers, who rose to the highest social status as 'negroid but detribalized' people, seem to have constituted part of this troublesome 'collection' after their retirement from the service. The British authorities of the day described the state of these 'Sudanese' ex-officers as follows:

A man who joins the army from his tribal home, returns to his old niche there when he retires. The ex-officer class now referred to has no niche anywhere. Its members claim to be Dinkas or the like; they or their fathers have served creditably as soldiers, or even as officers, but they come of slave stock, uprooted a generation or more ago from their tribal home, and have no ties, no traditions, and no trade to turn, once they had left the army. Those who have not risen above the ranks can find their level and earn their living on retirement, but those who have become officers are the less able and willing, according to the degree of their professional pride and efficiency, to revert to the only level they can occupy in civil life, that of manual labour.\(^{\text{(27)}}\)

As a result, they were compelled to 'live mostly in and near Omdurman, nursing the habitual grievance of the unemployable', and formed 'a menace to public security', 'a natural and effective link between their ex-comrades in the army and the worst elements of the civil population'.\(^{\text{(28)}}\) Now, the Revolution of 1924 (which was based on the cause of 'Sudanese nationalism' and the 'unity of the Nile Valley' – i.e. solidarity with the Egyptian people in their common struggle against British imperialism – at the same time, and constituted the first serious challenge to British rule in the Sudan since the overthrow of the Mahdist state) was, according to the view of the British authorities, a disturbance partly caused by the activities of these discontented 'negroid but detribalized' elements.

As to the ideological background of the Revolution of 1924 as a whole, the British were inclined to attribute it to instigation by Wafdist Egypt. In the case of the participation of these 'Sudanese' ex-officers in the movement, however, the British maintained a slightly different hypothesis, namely:

There is also evidence of a definite line of propaganda ... to the effect that the 'blacks'" were the real Sudanese, and that they, and not either the Arabs, Egyptians, or British, should rule the country and enjoy the spoils of power.\(^{\text{(29)}}\)
Again:

There are strong indications of a movement among the black officers in the Egyptian army rising from a feeling that the Sudan is the land of the blacks, in which the English, Arabs and Egyptians are interlopers.\(^{(30)}\)

However, while it is important to pay attention to the role of the `negroid but detribalized' people in the Revolution of 1924, we cannot regard the emphasis on `Sudanese nationalism' witnessed during this revolution as an expression of the hostility of these `blacks' towards the `Arabs'. Take the case of `Ali `Abd al-Laṭīf (the leader of the `White Flag League', which played an important role in the Revolution of 1924), a typical example of a `detribalized negroid' (his father is said to have been from the Nuba Mountains and his mother was of Dinka origin; he grew up in Khartoum and became an army officer) who was advocating `Sudanese nationalism'. We find that his concept of `Sudanese nationalism' included both the `Arabs' and the `blacks', rather than excluding the `Arabs'.\(^{(31)}\) It might be also pointed out that we can see an early expression of his `Sudanese nationalism' in his attempt to form a `Union of Sudanese Widows', a nationwide mutual aid society for the widows of army officers.\(^{(32)}\) This suggests that his vision of `Sudanese nationalism' had more to do with the fact that he was `detribalized' (i.e. he was away from his ancestral homeland, had acquired education and was integrated into the apparatus of the Sudanese state) than with the fact that he was a `negroid'. And for this very reason, perhaps, this type of `Sudanese nationalism' attracted not only the `negroids' but also all the people who were `detribalized' through their participation in the state apparatus (as officials or officers), including the `Arabs'. It is worth noting that, in the course of the Revolution of 1924, among those who chose to answer `Sudanese', when asked by the British interrogators for their `jins (race)' and were consequently flogged, were many people from the northern Sudan too.\(^{(33)}\)

In fact, the British administrators' hostility towards the `detribalized blacks' was directed more to the fact that they were `detribalized' than to their being `blacks'. Being `detribalized', these `blacks' were ready to fight side by side with the `Arabs' in the northern Sudan, as well as with the Egyptians (as is clearly shown by the slogan of the Revolution of 1924, `the unity of the Nile Valley', itself), with whom they had come into contact through mutual participation in the state apparatus as officials or officers. On the other hand, in the eyes of the British authorities, these `detribalized' elements were harmful to the social order – not only in the north – but also in their original `tribal homes' in the south and the Nuba Mountains. When, in the 1930s, it was discussed whether the soldiers of the `Nuba Company' (stationed in the north) should be allowed to return to the Nuba Mountains, the Civil Secretary's Office pointed out that half of the Nuba Company were detribalized `Omdurman Nubas', i.e. sons of ex-soldiers, and so on, and their effect on the native population would be `far worse than that of the real Arab'.\(^{(34)}\)

In this context, it is interesting to note that when the British authorities were talking about `detribalization' of the Nubas, it was Islam that was considered as the main feature of this phenomenon. In fact, most of the `detribalized blacks' who had been separated from their ancestral home and forced to live within northern society were living as Muslims, including the case of `Ali `Abd al-Laṭīf, who was a devoted member of the Ahmadiya Badawiya order.\(^{(35)}\) Consequently, the British administrators' attempt to check the influence of the `detribalized' elements on their tribal homes often took the form of a policy against Islamic penetration.\(^{(36)}\) It is clear that these anti-Islamic policies cannot be explained as an expression of the hostility towards Islam on the part of the Christian administrators. In the case of the Nuba Mountains, for example, the British authorities often criticized the overzealous activities of missionaries, and put stress on the importance of the revival and consolidation of the tradition of good `Paganism'. The essential purpose of the anti-Islamic policies was to defend `tribal' society from the wave of `detribalization'.

It is possible to argue in this context that the policies pursued in the north against the
‘detribalized blacks’ corresponded, to a great degree, to a series of policies pursued in the south in order to defend the ‘tribal order’ – the policy against the ‘Cult of Deng’ and other socio-religious movements, for example. (37) It is worth mentioning that the phenomenon of so-called ‘Neo-Mahdism’, which appeared in the north from the 1920s, in an attempt to mobilize and organize the people around the Mahdi’s son, Sayyid ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Mahdī, was also, at least in the beginning, regarded as a kind of ‘detribalization’ process, and thus was sharply observed by the authorities. (38)

If we return to the problem of the ‘detribalized blacks’ in the north, we find that in the 1900s–1930s period it was proposed to establish colonies for ex-soldiers in various northern provinces, in order to stabilize their lives and thus to prevent them from becoming a threat to social order in the north. (39) However, what was more decisive, perhaps, was the implementation of the so-called ‘southern policy’ (in accordance to which, the south became the ‘closed districts’ and was isolated from the north) during this period. This policy not only hindered the Arabization and Islamization of the south, as has been often pointed out, but also cut off the influx of newly ‘detribalized blacks’ into northern society.

**INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT PERIOD: THE BLACK BLOCK**

In the latter half of the 1940s, Sudan began to advance towards independence. The essential factor seems to have been the social changes in Sudanese society during World War II (such as the deteriorating situation of the peasants and a degree of industrial development inside the Sudan triggered by the interruption of imports), and the subsequent development of the workers’ and peasants’ movement. In response to these popular aspirations, and, in a sense, in order to cope with them, social forces such as government officials, merchants, agricultural capitalists and tribal chiefs set out to establish political parties, which were, roughly speaking, divided into two groups, the Umma Party and the ‘Unionist’ parties.

The former rallied around Sayyid ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Mahdī, who by this time had established himself as a successful agricultural capitalist (making use of a labour force mobilized through ‘Neo-Mahdism’). This party, through a process of distortion (or invention) of an image of the Mahdist movement in the nineteenth century, represented itself as the embodiment of ‘Sudanese nationalism’. It put stress on the notion of the ‘Sudanese nation’ as strictly distinguished from Egypt, and hinted, implicitly, that of the two ‘Condomini’ partners (Britain and Egypt), Britain was more desirable for the Sudanese people.

The ‘Unionist’ parties, on the other hand, were a group of parties that called for ‘union’ with Egypt. It seems that, at the outset, these two groups were not so different, especially in their social basis. However, in the course of the political developments in the area at the end of the 1940s (since 1946 Egypt had witnessed an upsurge of anti-British sentiment and was beginning to provide a model for a workers’ and peasants’ movement in the Sudan, too), gradually, the ‘unionist’ parties began to be compelled to reflect the popular aspirations more than the Umma Party. This tendency was especially conspicuous in the case of the Ashiqqa’ party.

In the spring of 1948, the British authorities declared their intention to establish a so-called ‘Legislative Assembly’ without any effectual powers. This device, which was introduced to appease the upsurge of popular movements, was severely criticized by the people themselves. Demonstrations spread all over the country, and the ‘unionist’ parties boycotted the elections. As a result, the Legislative Assembly that came into being in November was a complete fiasco, including only the members from the Umma Party and some pro-British officials and tribal chiefs.

Amid this situation, we come across an organization called ‘Black Block’ (al-Kutla al-Saudā’), which can be regarded as the last political expression of the ‘negroid but detribalized’ people. Let us try to analyse the role this organization was playing in
Sudanese society in the 1940s (the first half of the following descriptions is mainly based on interviews with Dr Muhammad Adam Adham, who had been a leading member of this organization, at Khartoum in 1985-6.)

Al-Kutla al-Sauda' was an immediate successor of an organization called ‘the Society for Sudanese Unity’ (Jam‘iya al-Wahda al-Sūdāniyya), which had been established in 1942, during World War II. This ‘Society for Sudanese Unity’ was established mainly by ex-soldiers from the south and the Nuba Mountains and their sons, who were living in the northern towns. The leading members were as follows:

President: ‘Uthmān Mutawallī (ex-officer of Daju origin from Dar Fur)
Vice-president: Zayn al-‘Abdīn ‘Abd al-Tāmm (an ex-officer, formerly a leading member of the White Flag League and a close friend of ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Laṭīf. A Dinka from his father’s side. His mother was from the northern Sudan.)
Treasurer: Muḥammad Ādām Adham (a doctor. His father was an ex-officer of Daju origin. His mother was Zayn al-‘Abdīn ‘Abd al-Tāmm’s sister.)
Secretary: ‘Abd al-Nabī ‘Abd al-Qādir (a civilian employee in the army. His father was of Shilluk origin. His mother was an Egyptian.)
Vice-secretary: Ḥasan Marjān (a civilian employee in the army. Of Dinka origin.)

The first general assembly, in which nearly 4,000 people took part, was held at Omdurman. The structure of the organization was as follows: a general assembly (2,000 people), an administrative committee (45 persons) and an executive committee (15 persons). According to Dr Muhammad Adam Adham, the organization was founded as a result of the desire of the people from the south and the Nuba Mountains to raise their standard of living, and started as a mutual aid society. In order to facilitate the Sudan Government’s approval, it had adopted the word ‘co-operative’ in its official name too (Jam‘iya al-Wahda al-Tawwuniyya al-Sudaniyya). The word ‘unity’, however, meant unity of the Sudan. It was an implicit expression of the society’s opposition to the British policy of the separation of the south from the north.

In 1948, the society changed its name to the ‘Black Block’ and moved towards overt political activities. According to Dr Muhammad Ādam Adham, the Black Block’s main policies were opposition to the ‘southern policy’ and the improvement of living standards of southerners. It accepted the northerners at the level of the general assembly. It was open both to Muslims and Christians. It never was a ‘racist (‘unsuri’)’ movement. It called itself the Black Block, however, in order to emphasize the fact that all the Sudanese were ‘blacks’, including the northerners who regarded themselves as ‘Arabs’. To express these views, the Black Block issued an organ entitled ‘Ifrīqiyya (Africa)’ in Arabic. According to Dr Muhammad Ādām Adham, the Black Block was seeking to realize union with Egypt, too, believing that the two countries were culturally inseparable. However, it did not accept Egyptians as members, since it was important to realize unity inside the Sudan first.\(^{(40)}\)

Now, at first impression this organization suggests a continuity with the White Flag League, which played an important role in the Revolution of 1924; and the Society for Sudanese Unity, which preceded the Black Block, reminds us of the Union of Sudanese Widows, established by ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Laṭīf. Emphasis on unity between the south and the north, and the commitment to the cause of solidarity with Egypt (after establishing a Sudanese nationalism that embraced both the south and the north) are also elements that might suggest a continuity with the White Flag League.

If we look more closely into the political situation that surrounded the establishment of the Black Block, however, we find that its role in Sudanese society in the 1940s was totally different from that of the White Flag League in 1924, for three main reasons.

Firstly, it came into being in autumn 1948 as a political body supporting the Legislative Assembly, which was severely criticized and boycotted by all political opinion except the Umma Party. In fact, two members of the Black Block – Zayn al-‘Abdīn ‘Abd al-Tāmm and Dr Muhammad Ādam Adham himself – took part in the elections (in the western district of Khartoum and in Omdurman, respectively) and were returned to the assembly. In other
words, whatever might have been their subjective intention, objectively speaking, the Black Block was acting in the interest of the British authorities.

Secondly, the Black Block constituted, in this way, an obstacle to the activities of the Unionist parties such as the Ashiqqa' and was consequently threatening the cause of union with Egypt, though the Black Block itself was — again, subjectively, at least — committed to this cause. Objectively speaking, the Black Block was, in this respect, complementing and strengthening the activities of the Umma Party. It is noteworthy that in the elections to the Legislative Assembly, the Umma candidates withdrew from constituencies in which the Black Block candidates ran.41)

Thirdly, it is interesting to note that, in performing this kind of function in Sudanese politics, the organization's claim to 'blackness' turned out to be a useful political asset. Although the Black Block itself never admitted it, it is rather difficult to totally deny the fact that this organization was tinged by a kind of 'racist' tendency (even if it was not racism on the part of strong, discriminating people, but racism on the part of weak, discriminated-against people). As we have seen, the organization accepted the 'northerners' at the general assembly, but not at the level of the administrative committee and the executive committee. This is in sharp contrast with the fact that in 1924 — although the British authorities attributed a great part of the activities of the White Flag League to the social ambitions on the part of the 'black' officers — the White Flag League itself never advocated 'black' racism, and stuck to the ideal of 'Sudanese nationalism'. Whatever might have been the intention of the Black Block itself, its emphasis on 'blackness' was effectively utilized and manipulated by the British authorities in striking a blow at 'Unionist' parties and complementing the 'Sudanese nationalism' of the Umma Party.

How can we explain this change in the political role of the 'negroid but detribalized' people in Sudanese society? Perhaps it might be attributed to the fact that, as a result of the 'southern policy' and the interruption of the influx of newly 'detribalized' elements into northern society, the 'negroid but detribalized' people who were left alone in the north during this period were gradually losing their social momentum and beginning to form a part of the urban middle class. What is striking in the arguments made by the Black Block is their abstractedness and the remoteness from the political reality of the day. We find, for example, in an article published in Ifrigiya magazine, the British authorities described as a 'democratic' government.42) Again, the necessity for unity with Egypt was explained, not on the concrete basis of the common struggle of the peoples of the two countries, but in most general terms, on the basis of cultural ties that had existed between the two countries 'since the ancient times'.43)

In fact, the excessive emphasis on 'blackness' itself was perhaps — paradoxical as it may sound — a reflection of the fact that these 'negroid but detribalized' elite who constituted the leadership of the Black Block had been cut off from their original home and were becoming increasingly indistinguishable from the rest of the northern elite. Although they put stress on 'blackness' and excluded the 'northerners' from their movement implicitly, they themselves by now had been rooted inside the northern society for generations in most cases. They were Muslims by birth, and thought, talked and wrote in Arabic. As we have seen, the organ of the organization, Ifrigiya itself was being published in Arabic. We might suppose that at this stage the distance between the Black Block and southern society was actually not very different from the distance between the other northern political parties and southern society. The claim that the Black Block was more 'black' than the other northern parties was, so to speak, more or less ideological.

Thus, by the 1950s, the 'negroid but detribalized' people in northern society were no longer a dynamic social and political force. At the same time, it was the beginning of a new stage, in which Sudanese politics came to be characterized by a severe conflict between the 'north' and the 'south'.
POSTSCRIPT

The original version of this paper was submitted to the Second International Sudan Studies Conference held at the University of Durham in April 1991. I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of the late Professor Richard Hill and the late Professor G. N. Sanderson, both of whom helped me to revise it, by giving me their valued comments and advice.

NOTES

(1) FO 371/10905, Report on Political Agitation in the Sudan.
(2) In the past few years, some very interesting work on the problem of ex-slaves has begun to appear. See, for example, Richard Hill and Peter Hogg, A Black Corps d'Elite: An Egyptian Sudanese Conscript Battalion with the French Army in Mexico, 1863–1867, and its Survivors in Subsequent African History (Michigan State University Press, 1995); Ahmad Alawad Sikainga, Slaves into Workers: Emancipation and Labor in Colonial Sudan (University of Texas Press, 1996); G. P. Makris, Changing Masters: Spirit Possession and Identity Construction among the Slave Descendants and Other Subordinates in the Sudan (Northwestern University Press, 2000); and Muhammad Ibrāhim Nuqud, `Alāqāt al-Rīq fī al-Mujtama‘ al-Suddān (Cairo, 1995). The present paper is complementary to these, but what distinguishes it from the others to a certain degree is its special interest in the political role of the ‘negroid but detribalized’ people and in the question of their attitude towards nationalism.
(3) Dar al-Watha‘iq al-Qawmiya (Khartoum), Darfur, l/30/157, Mr. Willis’ Report on Slavery, 1926, p. 3. At present, we do not have any details of this revolt of domestic and agricultural slaves which is said to have taken place in the northern province. Still, there might be some connection between this revolt and the revolt of slaves in 1844, in which there is said to have been an arrangement between the slave soldiers in the jihādiyya and the slaves working in other sectors (indigo factories, domestic services in northerners’ households, and so on). See Richard Lepsius, Letters from Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Peninsula of Sinai (London, 1853), pp. 190–3; Muhammad ‘Abd al-Raḥim, al-Nīdā’ fī Dāf’ al-Ifārā (Cairo, 1952), p. 299; Ḥamīdīnālāh Muṣṭāfa Ḥasan, al-Idārā al-Miṣriyya fī al-Suddān 1821–1848: Dirāsā al-Idārā al-‘Aṣkāriyya (Cairo, n.d.), pp. 268–70.
(6) Ibid., p. 244. According to Douin, on the other hand, Ḥamād Bey himself was a ‘black colonel’ of ex-slave origin. Douin, Histoire, p. 195.
(8) Shuqayr, Ta‘rikh, p. 710.
(9) Ibrāhīm Fawzi, Kitāb al-Suddān bayna Yaday Ghurdún wa Kitshinir (Cairo, 1901), vol. II, p. 101.
(10) Shuqayr, Ta‘rikh, p. 710; Slatin, Fire and Sword, p. 395.
(11) Ohrwalder, Ten Years’ Captivity, p. 197.
(13) Slatin, Fire and Sword, p. 399; Shuqayr, Ta‘rikh, p. 713. This famous Mahdist amir, Ḥamādīn Abū ‘Anja, is said to have been of Mandala (a community of ex-slaves which was dependent on the Baqqara tribes in Kordofan) origin, and thus was near to the category of ‘negroid but detribalized’ people.
(16) Shuqayr, Ta‘rikh, p. 763.
(18) Shuqayr, Ta’rikh, p. 763. In Smith, Emin Pasha, p. 214, there is a reference to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and Ahmad Maḥmūd, who had been exiled to Equatoria as a result of their participation in the ‘Urabist Revolution and consequently took part in this mutiny against Emin, too. It is not clear whether they were originally Egyptians or Sudanese (from the south or the Nuba Mountains, for example) who had entered the military or governmental service and happened to be in Egypt at the time of the ‘Urabist Revolution.

(19) Soghayroun, Sudanese Muslim Factor., p. 25.


(21) Ohrwalder, Ten Years’ Captivity, p. 112.


(24) Ibid., pp. 158–9, 256.


(26) Ibid., pp. 3, 10. The text of the ‘Vagabonds Ordinance’ (‘the Vagabonds Ordinance 1905: An Ordinance for More Effectually Dealing with the Idle Persons and Vagabonds’) is attached to this report as an appendix.


(29) Ibid., p. 8.

(30) Ibid., p. 33.


(33) See Kurita, ‘Concept’.


(37) The British authorities suspected the existence of a certain ‘cult of Deng’ (or, more accurately speaking, the ‘cult of the son of Deng’) behind a series of rebellions that took place in the south from the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1930s. According to the British authorities, this cult constituted a serious menace to existing ‘tribal order’. See C. A. Willis, ‘Cult of Deng (draft)’ in Dār al-Wathāʾiq al-Qawmiya (Khartoum), Civ. Sec. 36/2/4, Disposal of Troublesome Kujurs.

(38) Dār al-Wathāʾiq al-Qawmiya (Khartoum), Civ. Sec. 56/2/18, ‘A Note on the Recent History of Mahdism and the Government’s Policy Towards This Movement (1925.11/16)’.


(40) Interview with Muḥammad Ādam Adham, Khartoum, 17 Feb., 13 Nov. 1986.

(41) FO 371/69251, 8070, Appendix A, Memorandum on the Elections to the Legislative Assembly 1948, p. 5.

(42)Ifriqiya, No.7 (16 June 1948), pp. 3–5.

(43) Interview with Muḥammad Ādam Adham, Khartoum, 13 Nov. 1986.