PASTORAL NILOTES AND BRITISH COLONIALISM

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ABSTRACT

The pastoral Nilotic-speaking Atuot of the Southern Sudan, as well as their neighbors, the Nuer and Dinka, responded to the two phases of British colonial rule in the Southern Sudan in two rather different ways. This essay examines the nature of these responses, first to a general lack of administrative policy and then to a policy which could be characterized as one of benign neglect.

They look upon these white men with awe as well as affection, which, as time goes on, is still increasing, because they know in all matters of dispute or crime each individual native or chief will be treated with perfect justice and fairness . . . A savage in his heart of hearts is just as capable of knowing right from wrong as any white man (Millais 1924:162).

To the pastoral Nilotic speaking Atuot of the Southern Sudan, the first cadre of British administrators in their country during the last decade of the 19th century appeared as yet another transient collection of aliens who would claim to govern them, but would disappear once again, as had the Turks, Egyptians, Khartoumers, Mahdists and French before them. The eventual demise of British colonialism and imperialism was inevitable, yet surely this remained beyond the ken of any individual Atuot in the 1890s. Few material relics of British presence in the Southern Sudan have weathered the past half-century, and the administrative effects of British rule in the rural hinterland were equally ephemeral. Colonial rule in the Southern Sudan was experienced more as an aftershock with its reverberations severing the facade of national unity in the course of a seventeen year civil war, erupting on the eve of independence in 1955.

There were two distinct phases of colonial presence among the Atuot and other pastoral Nilotes of the Southern Sudan. The first was characterized by a general lack of policy. The second period was one in which the British were more neglectful than mindful of the responsibilities they had declared as their mission. Correspondingly, one can discern two rather different types of response by the Atuot toward foreign domination.

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Each succeeding representative of the missionary, merchant and explorer category that traversed Atoutland during the last century parted with the definite impression that these would prove to be a difficult people to subjugate. For example Gessi (1892:213) noted "a tribe called Atuot which is till now independent and its presence renders travelling dangerous." To effect a change in this situation he "sent 300 men armed with guns to make a simple demonstration, but my people were forced to retreat on finding they were facing thousands of Atuot" (1892:337; see also Petherick 1869; Schweinfurth 1873; Poncet 1864; Gray 1961; Collins 1971). Forced to retreat temporarily, the aliens were only to appear once again with stronger arms.

Throughout the British colonies, where there existed some material symbol of the indigenous polity, as in Buganda, Ashanti or even India, establishing a presence was a relatively simple matter. In the acephalous pastoral societies of Africa, however, the initial presentation of the royal facade was a rather more illusive goal. The resistance on the part of the Nuer and Dinka through the medium of prophets is a well disseminated illustration of this problem (see Lienhart 1961; Evans-Pritchard 1956; Beidelman 1971; Burton 1979; Johnson 1979). Though 1898 is the official date history records as the moment British forces "recaptured" the Sudan following the wars against the Mahdi and his followers, it ought to be born in mind that the praxis of the undertaking, as distinct from the associated pomp in the Foreign Office, was clearly more a process than an event. As this paper suggests, the exercise was less a pro forma detail of administration than a discontinuous effort of trial and error.

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At the international level British policy in this general region of Africa was oriented primarily toward maintaining control over, and access to, the White Nile. It was argued that if the French were able to establish a trans-continental dominance on an east/west axis, the enormous British investment in Egypt would evaporate with the Nile River (see Brown 1969; Riker 1929; McKay 1943; Sanderson 1965; Collins 1962; Robinson and Gallagher 1961). The problem was finding the people within the region, who were clearly less predictable than the Nile flood. The Atuot, like the Nuer and Dinka, are a people whose lives and livelihood are oriented toward the pastoral onus. Due to ecological and geomorphologic features of the land they inhabit, this mode of adaptation necessitates systematic seasonal migrations between fixed points in accordance with seasonal rainfall patterns. Long before the arrival of the British, Atuot had by necessity learned to protect their herds from raids by neighboring peoples and had gained considerable experience in the same exercise during the years of slaving and the ivory trade. As one could expect, the British found time and time again that the people they claimed to govern simply could not be found, or if they were, their cattle were inevitably some distance off in the temporary care of political allies. When word spread that a patrol was in the area, Atuot took off to the forest to scatter their cattle among kinsmen and took cover for their own well-being. No records exist describing the initial encounter; what history that does exist consists of British accounts of their efforts aimed at subjugation.

District headquarters were established in small towns which had served as staging grounds during the slave trade. The initial aims of the government were oriented toward "keeping the peace," building rest houses, clearing roads and collecting grain, ivory and livestock to be resold at controlled prices. As a matter of policy the task of education was allotted to a variety of missionary societies (see Gray 1961; Beshir 1969; Trimmingham
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1948; Jackson 1960; Henderson 1953; Hill 1965). Sanderson (1976) suggests that in the early years of administration the small towns were less than administrative headquarters of provinces than the rear and advanced bases for patrols. Likewise Comyn (1911) stated that these punitive patrols were undertaken more often than not to give someone a promised brevet or decoration. As late as 1920, the Legal Secretary of the Anglo-Egyptian government in Khartoum declared the southern undertaking to be an abject failure as evidenced by the excess of expenditure over revenue (see Sanderson 1976; Santandrea 1967; Collins 1971). Archival sources of this period largely contain reports on the many punitive raids conducted against local peoples, resulting in the looting of herds and the destruction of crops, homesteads and villages. On occasion these operations involved the R.A.F. with land and river assaults. The Foreign Office in London endorsed indiscriminate homicide opining that in order to “control the savages who inhabit the region, a strong and direct military presence was essential” (Lord Cromer, cited in Sanderson 1976). Thus the Atuot were classified as “wild folk” by the resident British official in 1924, which resulted in the erection of a post in their country. Those who were involved in the task were instructed, “Don’t try to capture cattle if there is the slightest chance of loosing them; much better to kill them if possible . . . The main point is that the Atuot should loose them.” Administrative boundaries, like those of the Sudan itself, were drawn with military expediency as the rule of thumb.

More generally throughout the Southern Sudan during the 1920s colonial presence was confined to riverbanks and on the northern and southern fringes of pastoral country. In 1924, the district commissioner of Upper Nile Province reported that he “rarely saw more than the distant backs of Nuer, and then only fleetingly” (cited in Sanderson 1976). When they were encountered however, the British proceeded to carry on an older tradition by shooting at local peoples and doing their best to deprive indigenous peoples of their essential goods and valued items. In the next decade the Nuer would complain to Evans-Pritchard, “You raid us, yet you say we cannot raid the Dinka” (Evans-Pritchard 1940:11). This first phase of administration evidenced the British to be adept at alienating local peoples and inept at governing them (see especially Collins 1967). The periodic punitive raid was understandably perceived by pastoralists as an invitation to warfare. The presence of armed police effectively increased and encouraged physical violence (see Deng 1972:79). The colonial administration systematically went about creating the problem they were attempting to solve and in the process Southern Sudanese were made to suffer for a poorly organized, insufficiently staffed and financed, inadequate part-time government. By 1927 there were only five Britons in the Southern Sudan who were considered to be qualified in local languages — among a population of more than four million people. Often one has the feeling when perusing memoirs penned by former administrators, or “bog barrons” as they were known, that they did little more than provide certain niceties for the especially adventurous post-Victorian antiquarian.

As has often been noted, the guiding principle of indirect rule was riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions. Among the pastoral Nilotes, “chiefs” were to come forward to act as tribal leaders. Those familiar with the ethnography will realize that such figures simply did not exist in the traditional context since the very organization and process of politics in these societies was inconsistent with centralized authority. Collins (1971) suggests that the baffled Britons tried to force Atuot. Nuer and Dinka notables into the role of Arab sheikh or Zande prince (see also Santandrea 1967; Sanderson 1976:8). In
addition to these as well as numerable related misunderstandings, an essential problem arose from the fact that British representatives were so few in number; coupled with the occurrence of illness and leaves of absence, it was likely that no more than six European administrators would be in a province at a given time (Santandrea 1967). The intermediary positions were filled by Northern Sudanese and Egyptian ma’murs, that is, by peoples whose collective history demonstrated a profound disregard toward Southern Sudanese, who had at one time been regarded as abiid or slaves, for centuries before.

Following a series of particularly bloody and destructive punitive raids against the Aliab Dinka a respected elder from the region complained to a local missionary,

We are willing to submit to the government and to pay taxes but let the government not send non-British ma’murs to rule us nor use black policemen. Let none but the Englishman be sent to rule us. If there had been no Arab ma’murs there would have been no fighting (cited in Collins 1967:82).

The Arab and Egyptian functionaries were often accused of embezzlement, personal exploitation of local resources, including consumption and sale of goods collected as tax and most importantly, of carrying out their administrative duties with scant regard for, and little understanding of, local custom and usage. Direct exploitation rather than indirect rule seems to characterize this state of affairs. Likewise, the punitive expeditions normally involved only one or two British officials, a regiment of Northern Sudanese or Ugandan soldiers along with a fluctuating supplement of so-called “friendlies” who were often traditional enemies of the tribe being punished. These individuals consented to comply with British directives when they saw it to their own advantage in getting their own back. To the British payment of tribute in this manner was a symbol of subject status. To individual Dinka, Nuer or Atuot, however, this was understood as buying government protection and goodwill. It afforded the chance of observing benevolent neutrality and at the same time, the opportunity to settle their own affairs by their own fashion.

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As of 1930 a notable change in this general situation was heralded by the declaration of a “Southern Policy” for administration, notable all the more so in its absence during the preceding thirty-two years. Thus began the virtual elimination of Arab ma’murs from positions of responsibility as well as the prohibition of artifacts of a social and material nature that were reminiscent of Islam. The administrative offices were filled by Southern Sudanese who had gained a primary education in English. There was also a notable change in attitude on the part of British officials toward local peoples. The explicit racism of the preceding years was blanketed by an outward expression of care and paternalistic interest. In their memos to higher authorities, commissioners began referring to “my chaps” rather than to “the bloody savages.”

The first article of the memorandum titled the “Southern Policy” stated that the aims of the Anglo-Egyptian government in the South were to

. . . build up a series of self-contained racial or tribal groups with structure and organization based on whatever extent of equity and good judgement permit, upon indigenous customs, traditional usage and belief (cited in al-Rahmin 1969).

With the comfortable distance historical perspective allow it is relatively easy to see that this policy would have inevitably led to civil war. As indicated, administrative officials
were now to begin to learn native morals, traditions and languages. This was the same period in which a number of younger anthropologists who were later to be recognized internationally for their studies, undertook fieldwork at the behest and through the auspices of the Anglo-Egyptian government. As a result of an easier and more profitable development of the Northern Sudan, this region of the country "advanced" at triple step to conditions and wages and prices in the South. The Gezeria cotton scheme, for example, employed thousands of northern Sudanese to produce the crop which was sent either up the Nile or by rail for export to Birmingham cotton mills. Meanwhile, the only permanent means of transport in the Southern Sudan was the river Nile, which was itself only seasonally navigable. At the dawn of independence a great number of northern Sudanese had acquired literate education and had been drawn into the evolving market economy. The dilemma of separate development had surfaced as the direct outcome of British colonial policy.

Against the background of these factors it is possible to gain a better appreciation of the Atuot response to colonial rule. While they had systematically underdeveloped an area the size of England, the British were able after a while to implement a system of government, along with the codification of legal precepts. Little has to be said in reference to "chiefs" who were accorded authority they never wielded previously: the new statuses were politically and socially inosculate. Once the British got off their horses and sat beneath trees to mediate disputes, they began to make a positive contribution toward peaceable administration. The pastoralists realized that advantages could be obtained from formal facilities for litigation with the sanction of law behind them (cf. Burton 1978). Paul Howell, once a district commissioner in Nuerland recalls, "... Nuer took kindly to a system which enabled them to raise disputes which in the past they would have had little or no chance of settlement, at any rate, without violence" (Howell n.d.:3). This particular circumstance offers some measure of evidence in support of Hocart's claim that "government is not a social necessity but is the result of social activities already carried out before the differentiation of administrative status and function" (1970; cited in Needham 1978). Prior to the colonial period, legal and political authority was vested in a variety of ritual experts, who, inspired by divinities of one sort or another, offered sacred sanctions to the proceedings of secular affairs.

In light of their martial superiority, Atuot collective representatives regarding the British accorded them a status associated with their own concepts of divine power. Surely, like the powers of God, the British controlled a power to kill from afar and to promote peaceable relations. Hence, while they made good use of the mundane affairs of government once it was implemented, as a class of people, the British were called aceke, an Atuot term derived from the verb "to create (cak)." Along with establishing an orderly system of legal self-help, the British also introduced a medical cure which, to the Atuot, partok of a divinely inspired healing power: penicillin. Throughout my period of residence in their country Atuot would approach me and demand wel Dingileese, the "medicine of the English."

Compared to the situation in the 1920s, a radical change had obviously transpired. Initially perceived as marauders of a different color, the British came to be considered benevolent overlords who advanced their desires for physical and spiritual well-being. Where endless controversy had reigned in such matters as the settlement of bridewealth cattle or compensation for divorce or homicide, Atuot could now state, wadaguk aceke a
thil ke dong. "what is written by the government does not grow old." The first
generation of appointed chiefs, some of whom were still alive during my fieldwork,
recalled their association with the British with a sense of pride and accomplishment. On
one occasion, after conversing with a former chief, he brought out his robe and sword of
honor that had been awarded him by the British for his services. "These," he said in
measured tone, "were given to me by your people, the Dingileese, for my work as chief.
I keep them now because the land has changed again."

There can be little doubt that many Atuot who retain their time honored mode of
pastoralism recall the days of British rule with sad longing. The civil war between Arabs
and Black Africans which followed their departure is still a lively memory. Yet there is a
sad paradox to this, noted recently by F. M. Deng (1978:158) in a discussion of the
post-colonial relations between northern and southern Sudanese. For the Nilotic
pastoralists,

. . . the British are the source of the peace, security and dignity that known history has
given them. This has blinded [them] to the British shortcomings whose consequences
paradoxically plunged the country into a civil war almost as grave in magnitude as the
upheaval from which the British had extricated them in the first place.

NOTE

1. The Atuot are a group of Nilotic-speaking pastoralists, estimated to number 35,000, living in
Lakes Province in the Southern Sudan. Field research in Atuotland (October 1976-November
1977) was made possible through grants provided by the Social Science Research Council and
the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. To date, published sources on the
Atuot are limited to Burton 1977, 1978a, 1978b, 1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1980c. It should also be
noted that due to such events as civil war and the unfavorable conditions in which colonial
archives have been maintained in rural districts of the Southern Sudan, very often government
reports are either entirely unreadable because of white ants, or the necessary indexing pages
have been otherwise destroyed. Hence, I have often been unable to cite the proper reference of
files which I had access to in Atuot country.

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