

Sudan Nationalism or Sudan Nationalisms?

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Abstract

Unlike the prevalent focus on Sudan nationalism as the realm of elites and middle classes, this paper seeks to investigate the history of the Sudan working class nationalism and its wider association with the Sudan Communist Party (SCP). Scholars of the working people in Africa and the Middle East are agreed that Sudan working class is a grossly understudied community. Peter Cross sees this focus on elite nationalism as unwarranted because the working class in the Sudan achieved unionization “early and effectively.” The nationalist “activity of the CP,” Cross continues to say, “would not be understood without reference to its grass-root activities among the working class.”

This paper will specifically discuss the unrelenting fight of the SCP and the Sudan Federation of Trade Unions in colonial and postcolonial Sudan to equalize wages between workers in northern (typically described as Arabs and Muslims) and southern (typically described as “negroid” and “heathen”) Sudan. The latter workers were heavily discriminated against in colonial wage policies. I will argue in the paper that missing out on the politics and sentiments of the communist and working class nationalism obscured race politics in the country. This politics has been typically viewed through the prism of a Muslim/Arab semantic framework. Ahmad Sikainge poignantly tells us what we leave out in Sudan studies when we “delegitimize” the communists. He argues that the link between the labor movement and the SCP raises important points. “In the first place, it defies the essentialist notions that Muslim societies can only be understood through the prism of religion.”

[In addition to usual warnings of quoting a work at this stage in its authorship, I would like to say I did the writing of this paper away from my usual library base. This made a number of my citations incomplete and awfully unreliable.]



Southern Sudanese have always described northern Sudanese categorically as “sons of Zebir Pasha,” the notorious statesman-cum-slave trader, a la Tippu Tip, who hunted for slaves in South Sudan in the 19th century. The epithet is so potent that Abd al-Khaliq Mahjub, the Secretary of the Sudan Communist Party (SCP), (1949-1971), at the Round Table Conference held in 1965 to resolve the southern problem, found it too sweeping to be true. With his back to this historical, racial wall, Mahjub retorted, “I don’t quarrel with those who remind us of the skeleton in our closet. Likewise, I would like to remind our detractors that the sons of Zebir a communist party that has the interests of all the Sudanese at heart.”

Was this communist optimism of the potential of racial harmony in the country just rhetoric? If not, what grounds did Mahjub, the brain behind the “the outstanding brains” of the SCP (Metrowich 1967, 72), have for this hopefulness? This paper will examine the SCP’S praxis to see if this buoyancy of the secretary general of the party was justified. The paper will highlight the history of the practice of the party and the working class, over which it held sway throughout the late 1940s to the late 1960s, at large to end the disparity in wages in the country and remove the injustice of paying southern Sudanese less than northerners that originated in the colonial period.

Defining the Terms of Reference

I will stop briefly here to size up the two concepts or realities under review in this paper, namely the SCP and the colonial wage disparity in Sudan. To better understand the racial optimism of Mahjub one needs to have an idea of the weight of his party in Sudan politics. One also needs to have a good view of the extent of the wage disparity in the country and its colonial origins.

The SCP is hardly taken notice of in scholarship of African radicalism or in connection with the perennial political crisis in the country. Although African scholarship on radicalism has been aware that something revolutionary and unusually instructive has been going on in Sudan, it never came around to engage this experience. The SCP that published plentifully in Arabic has been inaccessible to scholars of radicalism in the continent. However there has always been a lingering hunch among these scholars that the SCP’s various experiments hold the key to a better understanding of radicalism in Africa. Ben Turkok alone pointed to this potential in 1966 and again in 1987. In 1966, Turkok admits that his ignorance of Arabic



precluded him from studying the experience of the SCP that has, together with South Africa, a long history with Marxism unlike the rest Africa. He ran though into a single newsletter published in English by SCP and few other writings and concluded that the party's tactics of navigating alliances or enmities with the military and coming out intact is unique and has not been exhibited in no other neocolony (1966). Again in 1987, Turkok describes as "quite extraordinary" the party's pragmatic, yet principled, praxis for establishing a strategically correct relationship between the struggle for democracy and the struggle for socialism—something that has evaded many others in Africa (1987, 19, 153).

Missing out on the communist and working class nationalism obscured race politics (and other disenfranchised groups politics for that matter) in Sudan. This politics has been typically viewed through the prism of a Muslim semantic framework. Ahmad Sikainge, an astute scholar of labor politics in Sudan who grew up in its hub, Atabra, poignantly tells us what we leave out in Sudan studies when we "delegitimize" the communists. He argues that the link between the labor movement and the SCP raises important points. "In the first place, it defies the essentialist notions that Muslim societies can only be understood through the prism of religion" (2002, 6).

I will briefly provide a few electoral statistics to underline the mass following of the party particularly in urban centers. In 1965 elections for a constituent assembly it got 20516 out of 82876 votes in Khartoum province. Mahjub ran neck to neck with Ismail al-Azhari, the first prime minster of Sudan, in the famous southern Omdurman South constituency in Khartoum province. In the 1968 election however Omdurman South sent Mahjub to Parliament with flying colors. The party also won 12 of the 15 seats assigned to high schools and college graduates in 1965 elections. Those deputies were voted out of the assembly in December 1965 by an Islamic alliance that was apprehensive of the rising influence of the SCP. Ironically, the party won easily a by- election in northern Khartoum, the site of the constituent assembly itself, when the assembly was finishing up its discussion on tightening up an anti-communist law. In addition to Mahjub seat in the 1968 election, the party won that of Atbara. This working class town elected al-Haj Abd al-Rahman, a former fitter with the Railway Department, the deputy secretary of the Sudan Trade Unions Federation (STUF), and a member of the central committee of SCP, on a workers alliance ticket. In 1986 election the general secretary, who succeeded Mahjub who was tragically executed by President Nimerie



after the July 1971 allegedly communist coup, and a member of the central committee were elected to Parliament in the capital city. Two other known leftists ran as independents in their communities and won.

Although obscured in the literature of African radicalism, the SCP has been noted for its influence among the working class. Peter Cross laments the state of the history of the Sudan labor movement. He continues to say that this neglect would “appear unwarranted” because Sudan working class achieved unionization “early and effectively” (217). “The activity of the CP,” he continues to say, “would not be understood without reference to its grass-root activities among the working class” that played a decisive role in the nationalist movement in the country.

The specific details of the wage disparity between northern and southern Sudanese can wait to be investigated by a historian better qualified than the present writer. Suffice it here to highlight a few aspects of it for the reader to have a sense of the politics of this injustice. Generally speaking however one finds that a salary paid to a southerner was determined against that paid to a northerner of less expertise and then reduced some. In 1950 the British made the first attempt to “introduce scales and link the southern structure with that in the north. The link was found in the “similarity between the best local non-transferable southern artisan and the northern second class artizan, both in their skill and the pattern of budgets of the income groups to which they belonged. Therefore the scale for the best skilled local artizan was constructed to be about 75% of the second class artisan in the north, thus giving them the same real wages” (Wakefield Report 1951, 23). Southern artizans of the public works department in the Upper Nile were paid against their respective scales in the North “reduced by 15% which represented the difference between the cost of living in Khartoum and Malakal [capital of the Upper Nile Province]” (1951, 24).

The Equatoria province, the home of the Zande scheme and a focus of our investigation here, did not fare well even in comparison with the two other southern provinces, namely, Bahr al-Ghazal and Upper Nile. Wakefield Commission appointed in 1950 to set the wages of the unclassified staff in Sudan, adopted three regional systems in the South. Equatoria was identified as region “A” and rates of pay for employees were designed round the costing of Zande towns (Yambio and Meridi). These rates were the lowest (2,650 to 8,400 Egyptian pounds) compared even to Bahr al-Ghazal (Region B) and Upper Nile (Region C). The rates



for the former varied between 3.100 and 8.750 Egyptian pound. In the latter they varied between 4,250 and 9,600 Egyptian pound (1951, 51-62).

Wage disparity between the two parts of Sudan was a colonial legacy. It found its rationale in the British concept of Sudan as comprising two races; the advanced Arab Muslim of the North who received the a lion's share of colonial "development" schemes, and the African "negroid", "pagans" of the South who missed out on these schemes. The British were careful to disrupt contact between these two communities lest southerners would be swept of their culture by Islam and Arabism. This racial politics was responsible for the "Closed District" policy of the first decades of the twentieth century by which the South (in addition to parts of Darfur, Nuba Mountains, and Blue Nile region) were administered separately from the North until the time the British would relocate it in a suitable territory in East Africa. At these closed districts the British drew the line between Muslim Arab Africa and "negroid pagan" Africa. Christian Missions were given free hand in the closed districts monopolizing evangelization/missionizing and education of natives. Muslim nationalists of course were green with envy.

Various sources of Western and colonial knowledge went into the construction of this wage system disadvantaging the South. Racial as well as business theories reinforced each other in this determination. From a white racist vantage point, the wage disparity stemmed from a colonial "patriarchy" tying "morality to money." (Collins 1987, 329). "There was a deep abiding belief that that primitive people did not know how to deal with money." (1987, 330). In assuming moral authority over "childish" colonized, the colonizers also "assumed responsibility for the means to express this behavior" Money, for the colonial patriarch, was evil and too much of it in the hands of the inexperienced would only lead to harm." The British colonialists thus depressed Zande wages to rescue them from being corrupted by the "hitherto unheard of huge amounts of money" the project had put at their disposal "where very little had existed before" (1987, 329).

Not knowing how to handle money is common in the species. As Collins rightly points out that not even many elite know how to deal with money (1987, 329). This is the reason why they resort to personal councilors to help them out. The Zande of the scheme wanted money "and knew its value in their local context. If they spent money on something "foolish," that



usually means it was spent on something that the British thought they should not buy” (1987, 330).

Mission threw their two cents in this racial construction of wages. This Western belief in the inability of primitives to handle money or “knowing best what was good for them” was “deeply instilled in the missionary mind.” Missionaries in southern Sudan were “strong supporters of wage control, for Christian teachings expounded at length on the sin stimulated by money.” There was another side to the coin though. In being hard pressed for funds, the missions “did not want to compete in a free market for skilled manpower if they had to pay commensurate salaries.” Collins put his finger on a cultural irony here: “Yet it is astounding how little either officials or missionaries thought of the contradictions, almost hypocritical between their free-trade views of economic relations in general and totalitarian state control of the southern economy in particular. . . . If they had been true advocates of free trade, they would have let the Southern Sudanese himself decide how to spend his pounds and piasters—whether to willow in misery in a white shirt and hat, with a pack of cigarettes or remains blissfully happy sitting under a mango tree with Merissa (beer) and a bark cloth wrapped around his waist!” (1987).

Business thrift came to reinforce, or rationalize, this racial measure in determining wages. This business-minded rationalization took two forms:

- 1- Of the two theories of wage determination, *Wakefield Report* adopted the one that maintains that “labor of the same grade should receive different wages in different regions” just like paying labor “at a different rate from labourer in another” (1951, 13). *The Report* disapproved of equal pay in no uncertain terms: “To attempt, in spite of economic differences, to pay the same real wages in all regions would be to do the less developed regions great disservice. Were real wages to find to be fixed too high in relation to the productivity of labour, commercial concerns would economize in labour, and unemployment would ensue” (1951, 14). *The Report* was critical of the other theory that calls that “wage rates should be deliberately be raised in underdeveloped areas to the level of those in more regions.” This position argues that the recipients of these high wages in areas would feed themselves better thus enabled “to work at greater intensity, their output will therefore be higher, and so they will be worth the high wages” (1951, 14). But *the Report* was not sure if this raised wages



would be “wasted in buying unnecessary luxuries” instead (1951, 14-15). Liquor was commonly identified as the luxury southerners would indulge when paid wages incommensurate with productivity. Further, such extravagant wages would lead to laziness because employees “can obtain all the money they desire for maintaining their conventional type of life by working less.” The high-wage argument, the Report states, “puts the cart before the horse” for “increase in real wages must be slow and keep in step with the increased output of labour, but they must not precede it” (1951, 15). This politics of differential wages is untenable in an economy where the government was the largest employer, and in a region of a country in which development had never been a colonial concern. The economic terms in which *the Report* justified depressing wages in the South, are misguided. The Southern policy was geared to protecting the South from development. Culture (that is, saving southerners from “superior” northerners”) rather than economy was the determining factor in that policy. When the government revised its infantilizing the South to incorporating it in the country at large it should have taken this culture history into consideration in determining wages. Economic frugality should have given way to political prudence. Wage disparity came to haunt Sudan for a long time into the independent era.

- 2- Economic frugality again reared its head in the course of wage determination of the Zande scheme, officially known as the Equatoria Agricultural (EAP). The project was a comprehensive developmental scheme by which the Zande, the single Bantu community in southern- and westernmost of Sudan, grew cotton and sugar cane. Processing these products went hand in hand with growing them. Anzara became the industrial center of the scheme’s cotton. Robert Collins discusses the transition of the EAP from a self-sufficient enterprise, as originally envisioned to help bring out Zande “social emergence,” to a commercial enterprise designed to produce profit. The originator of the project, Tothill, insisted “that the price paid to Azande for cotton be sufficiently high to provide a real incentive to cultivate.” Khartoum British officials opposed Tothill’s plan. For them it was a financially unsound “subsidized price structure.” (Collins 1987, 318). This transformation of the project to be a profit-generating enterprise was completed when it disconnected from an advisory committee, comprising local administrators and experts and project officials,



established to “consider the social implications of the Azande development program.” In divorcing itself from local politics and aspirations, the project became a “remote body whose unexplained activities and secrecy were fertile ground for their [Zande] suspicion that the purpose of the scheme was exploitation, not development” (1987, 319). The starkest case of subjecting the project to “sound business principles” was when Anzara cloth in Zandeland was sold “at 20 percent higher than in Khartoum” (1987, 326).

The History of Southern Nationalism No One Wants you to Know

Wage disparity began irking southern labor as early as the 1930s. We will leave out in this labor history the many strikes southerners went into to protest their dismal salaries (Daly 1991; Beshir ; Cross 1997) to focus on two aspects of the evolution of unionism in the South. We will first describe the rise of the Southern Officials’ Welfare Committee (SOWC) in 1947 and its fight for wage parity with the North. We will also describe and account for the labor rest in Anzara, the site of the industrial complex of the EAP Agriculture Scheme in 1955.

In the early 1940s the British had second thoughts about the Southern Policy which they had adopted since the 1920s. In anticipation of a southern strong aversion to join the constitutional changes going in the north, believed to prepare the Sudan for self-rule in an unspecified future, the colonial administration held the Juba Conference on June 21, 1947 to vet southerners’ views in the presence of hand-picked representatives of the north. James Robertson, the civil secretary of the governor general, was astounded by the southern effendis (school-graduates government employees) who made a 180 degrees change of position in the second and last day of the conference: from opposing integration in the northern constitutional evolution in the first day of meetings to endorsing them wholesale in the second day. He is convinced that an understanding between Judge M.S. al-Shinqiti, a diligent northerner delegate to the conference, and the southern effendis on equal pay (1974).

Southerner nationalists have always refused to recognize the decision of Juba Conference that supposedly mandated the unity of Sudan for better or for worse. One of their strongest arguments is that the northerners had tricked southern delegates into the trap of unity. Shinqiti became the devil incarnate in southern nationalistic circles for his role in turning southern



effendis from their reservations toward unity with the north to fully endorsing it. In retrospect, falling for the temptation of equal pay is currently viewed as stooping too low in a matter of vital importance like the fate of their part of the country. Stanislaus Abdalla Biasama, the veteran southern politician and delegate to Juba conference, said in his recently published memoirs (n. d.) that nothing of the sort said by Roberson had happened at Juba.

The change of heart of southerners Juba was dramatic. Southern effendis, who were describing themselves on the first day of the conference as young brothers to northerners who could not swim with them in the same political river, suddenly chose to test these tumultuous waters. The British chair of the meeting was astounded by the change and wanted to know what caused it [The British of course did their coaching before the conference believing, according to a district commissioner posted in the South, that such tutoring “was needed, indeed justifies lest the conference turn out a farce” (Daly imperial, 239). Al-Shinqiti was active on the scene and behind it. He was in the session outspokenly, and almost singularly, representing the northern nationalists’ views encapsulated in their famous slogan: “Down, Down Colonization. No Separation for One Nation.” Behind the scene he was negotiating with southern effendis the terms of the unity deal.

He apparently struck a nerve. As said before raises may look retrospectively demeaning. But the disparity in terms of service between northerners and southerners was real and southerners had been extremely insulted by it. Rt. Rev. Bishop A.M. Gelsthrope wrote to Margret Perham and James Robertson about it after touring the South in 1948. He said that the impetus to elite southerners to unite with the north was to obtain equal pay. In achieving this professional goal, they would rid themselves of their inferiority complex and the “*abd*” (slave) mentality vis-à-vis the northerners whose forefathers enslaved them in the 19th century. But there was a caveat to this according to the Reverend. No sooner southerners achieved parity with northerners they would part ways with them by asking the world at large to support their claim to a separate national identity. This could only happen if missions would be given free hand in the country for five more years (SAD 521/11/24-25, March 20, 1948).

The demand for wage parity in colonial Sudan was picked up and fought for by SOWC. We will highlight its efforts to redress this wage injustice. For contemporary southern elites and activists SOWC is a non-event. No reference is made to it in mainstream histories of the South. In being totally focused on injustices suffered by the South under the northern



nationalists in government, Southern nationalists and their historians ignored the anti-colonial roots of southern activism. Suffice it to say that M.O. Beshir's two popular books on the southern Sudan question (1968; 1975) mention SOWC once in passing when listing of the organizations that emerged in the 1940 expressing political consciousness in the South. The committee is described in the book as arising in 1947 concerned "with wages and salaries." Thanks to a successful strike, Beshir states, salaries of its members and southern laborers were improved (1975, 46). It is worthy of note that Beshir mentions the disparity in northerners' and southerners' wages only when certain political developments had led to positive adjustment of southern terms of service (1968, 57-58; 68). He does not seem to be interested in the union dynamics and political consciousness we have been investigating in these pages.

This deletion of the SOWC from history books is odd due to the fact the committee was briefly and meaningfully discussed by Joseph Garang (1932 -1971), a southern member of the politburo of the SCP Communist Party and minister of the first cabinet of President Nimerie's regime (1969-1985), in his popular booklet, *The Dilemma of the Southern Intelligentsia*. It first circulated in mimeographed form published underground by the SCP in 1961 and was republished in 1971 by the Ministry of Southern Affairs.

Although not devoted to the history of SOWC, Saverino Ga'le (2000) and Mohammed al-Khayr al-Badawi's *Qitar al-'Umr* (2007) brought out the anti-imperialist nature of the association, namely, the opposition to the British-informed differential terms of service between northerners and southerners. Ga'le traces the impetus to form the rise of the association to the late 1930s. In this early stage of the society the southern effendis petitioned the governor of Bahr al-Jabal province (Juba was its capital) asking redressing their professional plight. He was rude. After bragging of the width and breadth of the territory under his power in which southerners' fathers and grandfathers were buried, he told the petition bearers to go and tell their colleagues that they had been severely and officially reprimanded by him. That was the end of the story as recorded.

The committee was reformed in 1947. From Ga'le's history of its rise (142- 152) one gathers that southerners could no longer tolerate the disparity between theirs and northerners' terms of service. He tells about coming to Juba and visiting Nimra Talata (Number Three), a neighborhood where southern officials lived. He could see that even the houses allotted to



northern longshoremen of Juba river port were more decent than those of Number Three let alone those assigned to northern officials like him. These injustices led southern officials to form SOWC in 1947. Juba was made its headquarter with chapters in Kapoeta, Toit, Yei, Amadi, Meridi, Yambio (Bahr al-Jabal province), Malakal (Upper Nile province), and Wau (Bahr al-Ghazal province). In March, 1947 they petitioned the governor general via the governor of Bahr al-Jabal province (rechristened Equatoria) to look into their complaints of their dismal terms of service and their demand for parity with northerners. In June of the same year Juba Conference, as mentioned earlier, was held. Apparently al-Shingiti alleged success in persuading southern elites (and not southern notables and chiefs) to vote for unity was because he addressed the parity issue about which southerners had had strong feelings. However they waited in vain for al-Shingiti to deliver. They had to go into strike for three days in October 1947 to protest their bad terms of service. A contingent from the Southern Corps was sent by the British to cow the protesters and the town. Some of the leaders of the movement were arrested. But the southern soldiers of the Corps had a change of heart after they knew of the reason behind the strike. They were said to have mellowed a lot in handling the situation. Robertson, the civil secretary at the time, says they reconsidered southern terms of service after the conference. But this redressing of the injustice was enormously helped by a strike of southern staff as we will see shortly.

M.K. al-Badawi, a northern Sudanese who resided in Juba at the time working for the government Juba Hotel, describes a more inclusive SOWC. He was a member of it and so were many other northerners in Juba. Furthermore, he assigns to the association other roles in community reform and education. For its care for the professional promotion of its members and community reform, SOWC, in al-Badawi's view, was a southern "Graduates' Congress." This Congress was the northern nationalist organization comprising modern school graduates (effendis) to which the ultimate decolonization of the country is attributed. But al-Badawi is unique in publishing the text of the memorandum submitted by the SOWC to the governor general. He translated it into Arabic at the heat of the moment in 1947 and smuggled it out of Juba to be published in *Sawt al-Sudan* daily in Khartoum. In his book al-Badawi (2007) expresses his surprise that except for Mohamed Omer Beshir none of the books about the history of modern southern Sudan made any mention of this memorandum. [Khayr did not specify what of Beshir's book referenced the memo. None of the 3 books by Beshir directly addressing the



national and southern issue I consulted so far made any mention of this memo. I suspect I will probably find it in his book on the history of education in Sudan since the memo criticized the mission education in the South. I will keep looking].

The anti-colonists beginnings of the southern nationalist movement come out clearly in the petition. Three nationalistic elements of the petition stand out:

- A) Their call for equal pay with northerners should not be dismissed on the pretext that the South was backward. Southerners are Sudanese citizens and are entitled to equal treatment with other citizens. The other pretext that southerners would squander raises on liquor is untenable. Few would do it, many others would not. Drunkenness is a problem faced by all countries great and small suggesting that no one could have been a judge on this formidable problem.
- B) They protested dividing the country into southerners and northerners in the first place. The administration stood guilty for this splitting of citizenry that was unheard of in other countries. It is true that Southerners look darker but so do a great number of the northern Sudanese. No wonder because southern blood runs through their veins. They protested the excuse of paying southerners less than northerners on grounds that living in the South was not costly like it was in the north. They argued that living standards in rural areas in both north and south were the same. But they lived in towns and they demand to obtain town salaries enjoyed by northerners.
- C) They asked for equal opportunities with northerners in education. They objected to two cardinal educational, colonial “sins,” namely, trusting southern education to Missions and sending few students to Uganda for high education. These measures were adopted by the British in the context of their “Southern Policy” (1930) to develop this part of Sudan separately from Arab and Muslim northern influences until the day its territorial identity was determined. The speculation was that the South would either be annexed to Kenya or Uganda. Arabic was thus not taught to southerners in anticipation of this change of national identity. SOWC attacked this policy from all sides. They wanted the government to open schools because the missions did not have the means to support a meaningful education to southerners. When they did they asked for school fees beyond the means of families. Uganda, on



the other hand, was highly selective on whom to admit of southern students in her schools. A sizable number of these students would be rejected by the Ugandans and returned empty handed. The petition asked for the teaching of Arabic in southern schools to enable its graduates to continue their education in their country rather than beg it from somewhere else.

The petition finally asked the governor general to improve the living standards of the southern educated to encourage families to send their daughters and sons to school. Their shabby life as government officials was a bad advertisement for education. Families, who would see their lowly life, would be discouraged to send their kids to school.

The War of Northern Nationalists

The fifty-second session of the first Sudanese, self-rule Parliament (Saturday December 31, 1955) stands out for addressing uniquely citizenship and race construction. In this session elite and working class nationalism collided and parted ways to this day. The session was devoted to discuss the section about citizenry and its right in the transitional constitution. Hasan al-Tahir Zaroug, the only communist MP, asked the following question:

-In the second section of the constitution we find the following: “No Sudanese shall be denied his rights to holding public office, private jobs, or appointment in any position, trade, or work with reference to his place of birth, religion, race, or sex.” This is indeed a great statement. But what do we find in reality? We find five thousand registered unemployed in Khartoum alone. We also find that the wages paid to southerners are by far less than those paid to northerners even when they perform the same work.

The Speaker, Justice Babiker Awadallaha, who later headed both the judiciary and executive, interjected:

-Can the honorable member explain to us the relationship between southerners’ wages and this constitution?

- I mean that there shall be no racial discrimination. It does not stop here. We also find that women teachers are paid less than male teachers and subjected to different and worse terms of employment even when they have the same qualification and work in similar schools.

- This is also off the point.

- This is why this section of the constitution remains idle talk until legislations are implemented to establish the principle of equal pay to equal work, increase the rate of employment, and reform terms of service via directed development of the national economy.



This early confrontation between northern Sudanese nationalists will reverberate in the dismal corridors of Sudan race politics. Although hardly noticed in the writings on race and gender tragedies in Sudan, this conflict between elite and working nationalism is real and epic.

At the time when organized labor, influenced by the communists, was relinquishing its “wages of northeness” Congress northern graduates nationalists were unwisely grabbing the spoils of victory over colonialism to the exclusion of southerners. The pan-Sudan process of Sudanization after the removal of the British turned to a strict program of northernization. Only 6 southerners were given administrative position of the spoils of 734. Southerners, who wanted the British to stay to “southernize” their part of the country rather than “Sudanize,” it (Daly 1991, 382) would be distraught by this “northernization” of the process. The *Reort of the Comission of Inquiry in disturbance in the South, August 1955* (1956) attributed the 1955 mutiny of the Southern Corps in Equatoria province, which killed 255 northern civilians northern civilians (including 16 women and 20 children), to the disappointment of southerners officials in the Sudanization process. They were shocked that the ruling party, the National Unionist Party, would turn back on the extravagant promises it made to them respecting their Sudanization opportunities in both the South and North.

The excuse for this northern invasion of the South was worse than the deed itself. Ismail al-Azhari, the erstwhile leader of the nationalist Graduate’s Congress and the prime minster of the self-rule government, asserted that “no southerner was fit to occupy post above assistant district commissioner” (Daly 1991, 383). Yet the report showed political acumen in saying that questions of qualifications, the alleged test the southerners did not pass to obtain many senior jobs, should have been put aside. Instead political consideration should have had the upper hand.

It was Bullen Alier, one of the leaders the anti-imperialist SOWC and cabinet minister in the 1954 self-rule government that carried out the Sudanization, who complained “publicly that each boat and aircraft . . . brought northerners for appointment to the administration, police or the army, and the flow at times looked like an invasion” (1991, 383). This critical position caused fallout with his party. An editor wrote asking the removal of Bullen from the cabinet on the ground that he hated northerners and made it public that he would “southernize” his ministry, the Ministry of Animal Resources, rather than Sudanize it. Worse, Bullen, the editor wrote, would southernize throwing qualification to the four winds. The editor took this



disrespect to qualification as a sign that Bullen, a “lowly” administrator of the sub-Mamur type before becoming a minster, wore a shoe bigger than his usual size. Bullen was eventually forced to issue a statement reiterating his loyalty to the ruling NUP and the government. The source of this story about Bullen believed that there was an additional context to it pertaining to a conflict in the ruling party (*al-Saraha* 2 November, 1954). But this is another story.

Sudanization has been an unfolding grievance fueling the Sudan civil wars led by ethnic and regional petit bourgeoisie. The damage it brought to the fabric of the country belies bureaucrats like P.G.D. Richard, the trade commissioner in Sudan during the transitional period, who said that “Sudanization had been carried out with dangerous haste but without disastrous results” (Daly 1991, 380). The southerners were the first community to openly protest the northernization of the Sudanization process. Two revisions of the process were made in 1972 (after the Addis Ababa agreement) and 2005 onwards (after the Nivasha Agreement in 2005) to redress the injustices befalling the southern elites. Sudanization now goes by the name of “sharing wealth and authority” emphasized by the petit bourgeoisie of Darfur and other marginalized regions in Sudan.

Sudanization has been described as a sign of northern greed and bigotry. This racial take on the process needs to be taken with a grain of class analysis. Northerners were of two minds regarding fairness to southerners and other marginal communities in sharing authority and wealth as clearly shown in the fifty-second session of the first Sudanese parliament mentioned earlier. Unlike the Congress nationalists who indulged in the spoils of colonial power, working class nationalism, inspired by the communist-led FSWT, was relinquishing its “wages of northerness.” In calling for equal pay, FSWT was engaging in a unique political generosity dubbed “unlearning privilege” by Spivak. The communist touch on this class behavior is usefully captured by Mustafa, an expert on labor relation, who praised the Sudanese union tradition for being animated by a savvy political education. It addressed the labor issues from a political economy standpoint (1993, 2).

Martin Daly attributes the failure of northern nationalists in government to meet the standard of fairness in Sudanization, among other transition tasks, to the pressure exerted on their government “of skilled politicians but inexperienced statesmen” (Imperial 362). But there are indications that the malice went further than mere incompetence. It is occupational/educational rather than racial. The Congress graduates did not develop a



political awareness of the southern question beyond annexing it to the north. The South was the colonial “forbidden fruit” as summed up in a title of a famous book on the British Southern policy.

Thus the southern question became all about northern nationalists rather than southerners. For, although the Graduates’ Congress had chapters in the major southern towns, it did not involve itself in the southern fight for equal pay. Its concern with the Southern question was rather tilted toward the intent of the colonial South Policy of separating the South from the North. The Congress demanded the “removal of restrictions on Northern traders, the expansion of educational facilities, the unification of the educational system and the cancellation of financial aid to missionary schools” (Beshir 1975, 45-46). These demands were of course nationally sound and southerners at the time might have nothing to quarrel with. In fact, we have seen southern officials calling for almost the same demands in the course of their union action to raise their salaries. It was just amazing how the Congress missed out on the wage disparity issue which alone made sense of the other demands emphasized by the Congress.

This political immaturity of the Congress may be accounted for by a subterranean religious nationalism underlying its southern politics. The kind of activities performed by its chapters in the South, whose members were exclusively northerners, is indicative of this cultural bias. These chapters were building mosques in the South or subsidizing Koranic schools. The case that galvanized them most was the removal of a chief from office because he had opposed missionary education among his Muslims people (Beshir 1975, 46).

In the rare cases northern nationalists referenced wage disparity and attending injustices it was all rhetoric and light. *The British Tragedies in Sudan*, a black-book-like, was written to support the case for self-determination presented in 1964 by the Sudan delegation to Egypt, both a co-domino and sponsor of nationalists. This black book uncovered the economic exploitation of the South under the British but not before devoting the first paragraphs to the nakedness of southerners, which irked northerners a great deal, and how the British reinforced this indigenous attitude toward nudity by causing cloth to be in short supply. On the economic level, the black book complained that the government controlled pricing southerner’s cattle and honey and paid them peanuts. Merchants (mostly northern Sudanese) failed to make any profit from these products because of exaggerated taxes and other fees. On the specific



question of the disparity of wages the black book protested paying workers 15 milliems for a day work which was not enough to support a family. Southerners returning from Uganda, according to this book, were paid 120 piasters monthly. The British fired them when they protested this meager pay. These southerners even came to the Graduates Congress in Khartoum to explain their problem. Importantly, the book criticized the wage disparity between southerners and northerners. A southerner's salary would be less than what a sayais of a northern official got. The government also determined beforehand that a southerner salary would never exceed four pounds after a service of twenty years. Arabic language was not taught in the South. Teachers from the north were not transferred to the South unless they were Copts or Christians (1946, 145-146).

This anger over wage disparity in the country was all heat and no light though. In real terms the nationalists of the Congress neither asked the government to remove this injustice in a resolute manner nor addressed it when they held the reins of power after the independence of the country. The communist PM, who raised the disparity of wages in the course of a debate on rights of citizens in a draft constitution in 1955, as said earlier, was ruled out for being off the point.

The graduates nationalists could have been excused for lack of statesmanship had it not been that they got the best advice about how to engage the south from the Sudan Trade Unions Federation (STUF) In its overall strategy strengthen the anti-imperialist alliance (of which the newly installed self-rule government was a member) that brought colonialism to its knees, the federation kept the government abreast of its vision for an independent Sudan. No sooner than the self-rule government took office the federation sent a letter to the government on issues of concern to workers. The government ignored the federation and embarked on an aggressive policy against its various affiliates. In May 20th, the federation again wrote to the government reminding it of its earlier letter. One of the four urgent issues the federation raised in this letter was the implementation of equal pay for equal work in the south. The letter described this implementation as vital for the working class and the Sudanese people at large. It stated that the working class had always protested this disparity strongly recommended by colonial experts such as R.C. Wakefield in his famous report (1951). The federation was astounded to find that nationalist ministers continued to suffer from these colonial hangovers. The letter specifically protested a statement by the minister of finance on April 20,



1954 refusing to equalize salaries in the two regions of the country on the ground that this procedure would interfere with the working of supply and demand. This statement, in the view of the federation, showed that the government had abandoned its commitment to develop the South out of a long colonial neglect. For how could one develop such a place without raising its standards of living by increasing the purchasing power of its people?

To put its foot where its mouth was the federation decided to send a full-time organizer to build its chapter in the South. The choice fell on Taj al-Sir Hasan Adam (1925-), a tested union leader of the remarkably radical Railway Workers Trade Union (Sikainge 2002). He is a skilled laborer who got his training in the Railways industrial school. His political instincts showed first when he joined the youth league of the Graduates' Congress. His activism attracted the attention of communists to him. After a 3-month term of imprisonment for leading a demonstration in 1948, he was approached by Gasim Amin, the charismatic leader of the railway workers and the SCP, and talked him into joining the party. He was fired from the railway department in 1954 after serving a 6-month term for leading a demonstration in 1953. He was sent by the federation to Hungary to obtain formal studies in trade unionism. On returning he was dispatched to the South to help build trade unions there. He succeeded in organizing the southern workers in wood sowing and accompanied their delegates to the annual conference of the federation. His plan to go to the Anzara in the Equatorail province, the site of the various industries associated with the Zande cotton scheme, where a lively mobilization for equal pay had been afoot, was frustrated by the 1955 mutiny of the Southern Corps mentioned earlier.

The federation did not let go. On November 2, 1954 the president of the organization, Muhammad al-Sayyid Salaam, a mechanic of the Mechanical Transport Department, wrote a front page piece on equal pay titled 'Hair Cream and Cologne.' In it he told the story of the prime minister's visit to the South preceded by the news of raising the salaries of army soldiers, policemen, and prison wardens. A policeman, according the prime minister's plan, got seven Sudanese pounds whereas a worker remained stagnant with a salary of a pound and a half. Ignored, the workers, who had gone into strikes before to obtain equal pay, encircled the prime minister protesting this partial modification of salaries. They did not like to be discriminating against one more time; favoring the military and semi-military personnel this time around. The minister of Social Affairs, who had been antagonizing the federation at the



time, addressed the crowd. He asked them to remove from their leadership those Khartoum softies who used hair cream and put cologne after taking bath. Salam was surprised to hear this from this particular politician who had been viewed, with others of his party, as “the Continental Hotel anti-colonialists.” The hotel was a lush Cairo lodging for Sudanese Congress nationalists. He reminded the minister that his federation’s comrades had never stayed at the Continental from which they could have picked up these sassy habits.

What Happened in Anzara Remains in Anzara

The wage disparity between northerners and southerners was put in sharp relief by the labor unrest in July 1955 at Anzara. What was warning about this unrest was that it happened one month before the mutiny of the Southern Corps in the Equatorial province in August, 1955 in which northern government officials and members of their families were killed. This mutiny was the first bloody encounter between the Southern nationalists and the northern-dominated government. It marred the relation between the two parties ever since.

The Report does not mince words in pointing out that the communists were behind the labor unrest in Anzara. Communism, the Report states, found its way to the South thanks to the northern officials and other foreign elements transferred to the region. Communist’s activity increased starting from December 1954 including a visit of a delegation of the Anti-Colonialism Front (an alliance of communists and other leftist nationalists) to the Equatorial province in January and February 1955. Workers in the EAP came under the influence of this communist work especially those of Anzara who had already formed a union to defend their rights. Amazingly, the communists, who used Arabic in all their literature, translated their leaflets into the Zande language in a rare communicative act in which injustices speak an indigenous, oral tongue. These leaflets recommended to the workers going into strikes as the most tried and effective weapon of the weak. Leaflets also tried to explain the roots of poverty in the South and suggested ways to overcome it. They also asked that the three provinces of the South should be given local autonomy in the framework of a united Sudan. Importantly, the leaflets strongly argued for equal pay for equal work as a ground for the equalization of wages in the entire Sudan.

It did not take long, according to the Report, for things to take a confrontational turn between the EAP and the cotton farmers and Anzara workers. Farmers refused to turn their cotton to



the EAP in protest of the low price offered. Workers entered into a general strike on the 4th of February 1954. Relations between the EAP and its employees kept deteriorating until the eruption of the violent demonstrations of the 26th of July, 1955. In July, the EAP laid off 300 workers. The Report thinks this measure was unwise and attributes it to the influx of northerners to take positions of responsibility and privilege in the project. At least southerners, the community concerned most by the procedure, perceived as a northern invasion.

What added to the tension was a trial taking place at the same time for a southern MP on false and deliberate accusation by the self-rule government. On the trial day, July 26, the workers petitioned the manger of the EAP asking for raises. They threatened to go into a general strike on August 1, 1955 in case the management did not comply with their demand. No sooner than the submission of the petition signed by 90 workers to the mangers squabbles ensued between northern and southern officials. The manger, a northerner, summoned a southerner identified by a northerner as the provocateur par excellence. In protest 250 workers, armed with sticks and work tools, left the workshop to demonstrate in front of the manager's office asking for the release of their colleague. They destroyed office windows and a few officials got mild injuries. After the release of their colleague the demonstrators walked to the market place and more southerners joined them. Their number was estimated to be one thousand demonstrators. Threateningly, some of the new "native" recruits carried spears. The three police of Anzara were outnumbered and overwhelmed. On being told of these difficult developments, the district commissioner of Yambio, the administrative headquarter of the Zande, dispatched his deputy and a police officer at the head of a force of 16 soldiers and policemen too contain the situation. In Anzara they found that the demonstrators had wrought havoc in the market. They looted shops owned by northerners and killed a northern trader. The deputy district commissioner lined his force 150 yards from the demonstrators and asked them three times in Arabic to disperse. They did not. Untrained as he was, he tried to throw a gas tear bomb at them. It nearly blew in his face. In a situation reminiscent of George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant*, he, in keeping with image with the "natives," continued shooting these bombs. He successfully threw two other bombs but they did not go off anyway. The demonstrators did not budge. Instead they moved on toward the police line. The deputy district commissioner asked the police officer to shoot to kill. The officer asked the demonstrators three times in



Arabic to disengage to no avail. He ordered one of his men to fire to kill a demonstrator who had led the advance of the “mob.” The bullet brought the man dead to the ground. The force was then asked to fire to kill. The demonstrators turned back and disappeared into the woods. The deputy district commissioner was again trying his hand at throwing tear gas bombs even after the evacuation of the place. He threw a last tear case at the demonstrators on the run. Luckily, it worked this time. He also ordered his force to shoot live bullets. The two soldiers armed with Berene and Austin were ordered to shoot straight evidently in a show of force to intimidate those who would be tempted to reignite the confrontation. The police officer shot one last bullet to put a “full stop” to the tragic episode. The force left the place and the collection of victims’ dead bodies (6 as a result of bullets, 2 trampled on by the panicked demonstrators, and 2 drowned in fleeing the scene) was left to a police officer who came from Yambio late in the fight. Worse, the Report found that two northern merchants were firing at the demonstrators in unison with the Yambio force.

The Report goes a little bit in detail of how the authorities mishandled the Anzara chain of events to embitter southerners and mobilize them against the newly-installed nationalist government. The mutiny of the Southern Military Corps of August 1955, a watershed in southern politics switching from peaceful means to violent ones, was in part fueled by the Anzara tragedy:

Despite this communist activity evidence does not bore out that southerners understood Marx’s and Lenin’s theories or cared for them. Native chiefs were in fact perplexed by communist leaflets and turned them to authorities’ to look into them. Evidently not even southern elite cared for communist theories yet slogans calling for “equal pay for equal work” and “three mini-parliaments in Juba, Malkal, and Wau;” the three capitals of the three southern provinces, caught their attention. Anti-northern slogans also appealed to them. Blame for the 26th of July events cannot be put on the shoulders of the communists though. They can be attributed rather to the tensioned labor relations in Anzara coupled with general anxiety prevalent in the political atmosphere at the time.

Al-Badawi, the northern Sudanese whom we have seen unusually involved in the SSWA, also showed up in troubled Anzara. He joined the EAP in 1954. He immediately began working to form a union for the employees of the project in the town. He was coached in the process by his friends in the Khartoum leadership of STUF. The first meeting of the union was a success



attended by 300 employees mostly southerners. The disparity of wages hit home for al-Badawi when he realized that Joseph Tumbura, a Zande engineer and a graduate of the prestigious Khartoum Technical Institute (KTI), had been paid less what a servant of a northern Sudanese official earned or ¼ of the salary assigned a semi-skilled laborer from the north. Negotiations to redress this obtrusive injustice, followed closely by other southern staff, came to nothing. As a result the union went into a one-day strike. Few northerners crossed the picket line.

A month later the workers struck again pursuing their demand of equal pay. To break up the unity shown by the northerners and southerners in the union, the management sought to drive a wedge between them. It accepted the demands advanced by the former. In response to their demand of doing proper maintenance to their factory houses, the management provocatively sent southern workers to perform the job. This double dealing broke hell loose and hatred of northerners peaked high. A meeting called to rein on this racial tension failed to bear fruit. Southern staff, really and not figuratively, “drummed up” their demands by beating on drums. They also came with their local weapons. They attacked the northerners who shouted down al-Badawi, one of their own and union leader. A group of five northerners, sympathetic with the position of southern staff, led by al-Badawi, succeeded in protecting the other northerners and accompanied each safely to his house. Southerners remained in meeting all night determined to prevent northerners from crossing the picket line in the morning. Luckily, a Zande administrator, Barnaba Kisanza, was around and met with the southern workers and talked them into a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Consequently, the union split into two factions on racial lines except for a few northerners who stuck it with the southerners.

A documentation deception, a la optical deception, occurred in the recording of the labor unrest in Anzara in 1954 that was only cleared up in 2007. The Report identifies the communists most active in Zande land as Benjamin Bisara, a Zande health inspector, and an Egyptian doctor. Bisra came into prominence later because he won a Zande constituency in the 1958 Parliament as an independent candidate supported by the communists. The identity of the Egyptian doctor remained a mystery until the appearance in 2007 of *Mashawir al-Haya* (Walks of Life), the postmously published memoir of Mustafa al-Sayyid (d. 2003). It was Mustafa, a Sudanese eye doctor, who was wrongly identified as a foreign physician. Yet the authors of the Reports had at least some grounds in misidentifying him. He was perhaps



unusually white for even the largely swarthy Egyptians, a graduate of an Egyptian medical school, and married to an Egyptian woman.

Mustafa was a phenomenal communist. He singlehandedly built the first communist cell among the Sudan Railway Department in Atbara in 1946 when he was still a student at Kitchener Medical College, a union leader of Khartoum University College and a newly recruited member of the Sudan National Liberation Movement (HASITO, as initialed Arabic) (1946), the precursor of the Sudan Communist Party (SCP). He literally flung himself at these young workers in one of his college vacations in Atbara, the Railway Department' headquarter. He just walked into the Industrial Schools Graduates Club in the town and talked those who welcomed him into being communists. It worked. His recruits became the national founders of the SCP and the labor movement. They led the Railway trade union whose astute unionism and politics are admirably discussed in Fawzi (1957), Taha (1978), Cross (1997), and Sikainga (2002). Mustafa's original cell included Gasim Amin, the charismatic labor and communist leader, al-Sahfi' Ahmad al-Sheikh, a member of the Politburo of the SCP and secretary general of the Sudan Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU) tragically executed by President Nimerie in 1971, and Ibrahim Zakria, the first organization secretary of SCP and the secretary of the World Federation of Trade Unions in Parah.

Mustafa's passion and capacity for radical politics showed again when he was transferred to Meridi, a town in Zande land, in 1954 to be its medical officer. He conscientiously worked to represent the "other northern Sudanese" to give southerners a hope of racial harmony. He knew he was fighting an uphill battle to bolster the lowly image southern had formed about the exploitative northern merchants amongst them. The "colonial" air of the northern officials who "invaded" the South via the Sudanization process during the self-rule era (1954-1956) did not help either.

His tactics to be the other northern Sudanese took various forms. He drew the line between him and the northern merchant class. His first medical reform was to prevent these merchants from trading in drugs. He took what they had had off the shelves of the merchants' stores and back to the hospital pharmacy. Furthermore, he got himself involved in his nurses' standards of living and talked them into forming a union coached by his friends and disciples in the Khartoum SFTU. Importantly, he developed a close relation with Bisara, the Zande health inspector, who he came to know after a heated discussion about race relations in the country



during a campaign to fight sleeping sickness. They struck a closeness that led to a formation of a branch of the SCP and chapter of the Anti-Democratic Front. The latter appealed to Zande sultans as well as ordinary folks. Mustafa was asked to address Zande meetings a couple of times.

Conclusion

Because of the dominance of Islamic semantics in the current racial and social conflict in Sudan one may be tempted to ask if the workers' position in the 1950s was not a racial fantasy whose chances to succeed were nil. Whatever role Islam played in inspiring these workers into their call for racial harmony (or could have played in disrupting it) is a moot point. I myself believe, as a good Muslim should, that Islam indeed played a great role in reinforcing the sense of union justice shown by these workers. But this needs to be discussed separately. What needs to be emphasized here is that this call for racial equality did not arise to resolve an Islam-made racial conflict in the country. It rather emerged in the course of an honest attempt to decolonize properly in order to bring together the fragments of the newly independent nation. Put another way, the call wanted to remove from government books a Western-made injustice suffused with colonial and missionary knowledge. This knowledge disadvantaged the South in wage determination.

Was Mahjub overconfident in arguing that the "sons of Zebir" cannot be frozen into history condemned to a fixed racial construction of southerners? Not really. Even as he spoke he might have been privy to a decision taken by the government of the October Revolution of 1964, in which his party and associates were in the majority, to form a commission to revise wages in the country. One of its decisions three years later was to equalize payment to southern day workers with their compatriots in the north. Nine months latter of Mahjub's sure words of the potential for racial harmony in the country, Mahjub's party would be banned by an Islamic political alliance that felt seriously threatened by the various social and racial fantasies like Mahjub's enlivening the imagining of Sudan. This alliance was closely watched, if not edged on and supported, by conservative Islamic regional powers in tandem with neocolonialism. Islam, the virulent political metaphor we see in contemporary Sudan politics, originated in these circumstances. The narrative of the northern Sudanese as bigoted racist, a



la “sons of Zebir,” has never allowed Mahjub’s radical racial fantasies to filter into its construction.

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