Forgotten nationalism

MEMORY AND HISTORY OF THE 1924 NATIONALIST REVOLUTION IN THE COLONIAL SUDAN

In the post-colonial world, founding fathers are generally connected with the anti-colonial struggle, people such as Leopold Senghor in Senegal, Sa'ad Zaghlul in Egypt, or Ahmed Ben Bello in Morocco. The Sudan is very atypical in this respect. At present, Sudanese people seem to have forgotten the event, the «1924 revolution» that for the first time in Sudan's history brought forward the idea of the country being a nation-state.

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THE FORGETTING of the revolution is indeed peculiar, since the movement that led it, the White Flag League, was ideologically more advanced than the subsequent nationalist movements. The leaders of the League believed that all the Sudanese, in spite of their cultural difference, needed to work together for the construction of a united Sudan.

In a country that not only has the prime of being the largest state in Africa, but also of having experienced the longest civil-war of the entire continent (1955-1972 and 1983-2005), the collective oblivion of the 1924 revolution and of its ideology is very significant. There is a long history of conflict of opposition in the Sudan. The «African» south has a long tradition of opposition to the northern or central Sudan, which regards itself culturally, linguistically and religiously «Arab.» During the 19th Century, an intense slave trade displaced thousands of Southerners from their homeland to the northern Sudan and to the Middle East. Later, British colonization isolated the South even more, with the so-called «Southern Policy» and the «Closed Districts Ordinance»: in- and out-

migrations from the South of the country were discouraged, for it was seen as a threat to the «tribal» structure of the South. The situation was further aggravated by the fact that no extensive economic investment was directed to the South during the colonial time, so that the development of the country was strongly unequal. It must be said that the South was not the only economically marginalized area: Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, the poorest areas of the Nubia and finally some areas of the Eastern Sudan were all in the same situation. However, in the South, these inequalities were much sharper: for instance, there were no Government schools. There were only schools run by missionaries. The result was that, at the time of independence in 1956, these two areas were fundamentally alien to each other. Later, the complete mismanagement of the southern areas by the northern government completed the work of the colonial administration, and sparked a civil war that made millions of casualties and ravaged the South.

To date, after the signature of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005 between the Sudan People Liberation Army (SPLA/M) who controls the South, and the Sudan Government, the war has moved to another marginalized area, Dar Fur, and risks to spread into the Eastern Sudan. People seem to have understood that arms are the only language that the Government understands. While the CPA has marked a historical turning point, the reality is that the peace agreement has not encouraged the state to promote initiatives of reconciliation to concretize the unity of the country. According to the CPA, six years after the agreement was signed, the Sudanese people are supposed

to vote to decide either to remain united or to separate into two countries and most people think that the result will be separation.

Turning back to the 1924 revolution, the issue is therefore to understand the reasons why the ideology of a movement that at that time was very popular, and that preached the unity of the Sudan, has failed to have a durable impact on the minds of people. As I shall show, the question is not why it failed to achieve the immediate target of independence, but rather why its ideological heritage has been so completely forgotten.

The White Flag League

The White Flag League was the first movement in the Sudan to start an open struggle against the British colonial rule based on a nationalist ideology. The status of the Sudan since 1898 was one of an 'Anglo-Egyptian Condominium.' In practice, this meant that the British administration governed the country, while Egypt contributed substantially to its budget. Also, a large number of Egyptian personnel were employed in the middle echelons of the colonial administration. The balance of power between the two countries over the Sudan was shaken by the independence of Egypt from Britain in 1922. The new status of Egypt required a redefinition of the status of the Sudan. Not only Egypt, but also most of the colonial world was in a state of unrest after the Great War, as an effect of two main factors. On the one hand, the economic and social impacts of the First World War were harsh, especially in countries like India and Egypt. On the other hand, the end of the war strengthened a different conception of international

relations, best represented by the 14 points of Wilson: these called for the self-determination of people and for the coincidence between nation and state.¹

It was in this historical context that the White Flag League was formed. Its members aimed at proving that the choice of the Sudanese was for the «Unity of the Nile Valley» and the end of British domination over the Sudan. Ideologically, the League promoted an inclusive conception of Sudanese identity. They considered all the Sudanese as the sons and daughters of the Nile, from its origins to its end; The Nile was the symbol of the White Flag League. It was a movement inspired from reformist Islam, but religion was not its focus.² The ideology of the movement was centred around the nation and on its unity in diversity: all the Sudanese, of all religions, had to be brothers and unite against the British. Thus, the movement welcomed everyone who was ready to fight.

The White Flag League was composed of about 120 members, even if the number of political activists was much higher.³ The role of the sworn members was to stir political agitation amongst different social groups, such as retired soldiers, students, merchants, notables and so on, in various parts of the country. To do so, they sought to establish parallel organizations who were asked not to undertake open action, but to play a supportive role and to stir secretly discontent against the British. In addition, the White Flag League created branches of the movement in Medani, Obeid, al-Fashir, Port Sudan and Atbara, but also in the South and Nuba mountains, in centres such as Talodi and Wau. Socially, the White Flag League was composed of a range of classes and social

groups.⁴ The sworn members belonged to very different occupational categories; some of them had an illustrious descent, while others had slave origins. However, tribal membership and descent did not matter within the League. For instance, its leader Ali Abd al-Latif was an officer of the Army with origins from the Dinka, Nuba, and Dunqulawi groups; he was also of partial slave descent.

The White Flag League leaders made use of all available means to spread their ideology, such as art, literature and music. Nationalist songs and poems were composed. Still today some of these are emotive symbols for the Sudanese, even if dissociated from the context of their production.

The activities of the League spanned from June to December 1924, the last of which coincided with the assassination of Sir Lee Stack, Governor General of the Sudan, on the 19th of November 1924. His assassination in Cairo gave a ready justification for the evacuation of the Egyptian Army from the Sudan. At the same time, spies of the Government undermined the movement from its very beginning, and between July and August 1924, all the leading members of the League were in prison. As the movement continued its activities, more people were imprisoned, and in the files of the intelligence reference one can find that more than 1000 people were denounced as activists. The educated class was beheaded, and after 1924, the graduates were subjected to hostility from the Government.

However, this failure cannot be considered a surprise. It is hardly credible that Britain would have considered the possibility of leaving the Sudan to Egypt. Even if the impact of the White Flag League was

almost non-existent at the negotiating table of the great powers in London or Paris, it had the crucial impact of politicizing the Sudanese, and of bringing the idea of the Sudanese nation to the farthest corners of the country. The level of popular participation was inferior to the one in Egypt or in India, but it was still remarkable considering that this form of resistance inspired by nationalist ideology was completely new to the Sudan. The leaders of the League themselves did not put much hope in their immediate success, and they believed that their most crucial target was to make people aware of the conditions of the Sudan as a colonized nation. The defeat of the white Flag League in the arena of ideology and of history will bring us to the second point: the perception of the White Flag League in the Sudan today.

Is Ali Abd al-Latif the son of John Garang?

The university students in Khartoum that I interviewed in 2004–2005 stated that they had never been taught about the 1924 revolution at school. In addition, the majority of the interviewed persons of older age, born before the independence of the Sudan and belonging to the educated class, could not name the leaders of the White Flag, unless they were of close kin. There was also an overwhelming tendency to mistake the leaders of the League with the ringleaders of the November mutiny in 1924, such as, Abd al-Fadil al-Maz or Hassan Fadl al-Mula. This mutiny was one of the conclusive events of the revolution, after the assassination of the Governor General and the withdrawal of the Egyptian troops. It was also the only violent episode of 1924.

The young informants from the South and the Nuba Mountains knew relatively more about the revolution, in particular about Ali Abd al-Latif and the other people of Southern or Nuba descent in the League. However, their version of the story tended to ignore the rainbow of groups that composed the movement and saw the 1924 revolution as another example of how the Northern government crushed the opposition of the Southerners. This view is related to the fact that both Ali Abd al-Latif and the ringleaders of the November Mutiny are perceived as having a Southern descent.

In addition, the image of the leader of the League Ali Abd al-Latif has repeatedly been used for political purposes. The last time this happened was in relation to the signature of the CPA, in January 2005: few months before that, several articles about the 1924 revolution appeared in one of the most important newspapers in Khartoum, *Al-Ayaam*. These articles repeated the same facts about the White Flag League that one finds in the classic literature about colonial Sudan: they tended to be rather self-congratulating portraits of the Arabized central Sudanese groups (often referred to as the «riverain Arabs» meaning the populations that settle around the river Nile in the northern Sudan), which was so forward to include a Southerner in their nationalist movement; all is coloured by some «gossip» about the relations among the various members of the League, their betrayals, and so on.⁵ Still, people did not seem to have been shaken by these historical narrations and their knowledge about the revolution was not deepened.

Even more interesting was the reaction

of people to the publication of the picture of Ali Abd al-Latif. After the signature of the CPA, and just one month before his tragic death in August 2005, John Garang, the leader of the SPLM, visited Khartoum in order to show the Sudanese that the times had changed. This visit was very significant, as Garang had left Khartoum in 1983 to re-start the civil war in the South. This was his first visit since then, and he wanted to signal that the war had really ended. The celebrations were overwhelmingly crowded; people were even listening to his speech from the roofs of the houses. Before the visit, posters of the picture (below) linking Garang with Ali Abd al-Latif were hung on the walls of Khartoum.

Ironically, this picture has provoked the curiosity of many who wondered who Ali Abd al-Latif was. Some thought that perhaps he was the son of Garang, despite the

date on the picture made this assumption quite improbable. This is but one example of the general ignorance on the subject. It is interesting to notice that another wave of interest from the part of the Sudanese Government toward the White Flag League happened in very similar circumstances, in the occasion of the Addis Ababa

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peace-agreement in 1972 between the Southern rebels and the Sudanese Government, during the times of Nimeiri's dictatorship (1969–1985). Nimeiri tried to find in Ali Abd-al Latif a historical precedent to his dictatorship. Nimeiri mistakenly, believed that the anti-colonial struggle had been driven by military forces, such as his own government. He conveniently ignored that the White Flag League was a political and not a military movement.

In 1974, Nimeiri financed a group of researchers to gather oral witnesses from the old 1924 activists in order to confer decorations to their honour. These interviews are still among the most precious sources for the history of nationalism, despite the unsympathetic attitude of the interviewers.⁶ Still, Nimeiri's efforts failed to portray Ali Abd al-Latif and his colleagues from the League as heroes of a nation in search of identity. Nimeiri and the present Government tried to change the perception of the history of the 1924, but both of these efforts failed. The families of the

White Flag League Members have tried to keep the memory of the 1924 alive, but in spite of this, they have not been able to have a far-reaching impact on the Sudanese. Nevertheless, all the information about the League has been lost in areas where this work of preservation of historical memory has not been undertaken, as in Port Sudan.

One possible key to understand the dynamics of forgetting is captured through a statement of one of my aged informants. She was one of the pioneers of women rights in the post-independent Sudan, and belonged to an old and illustrious family. According to her, the White Flag League failed because of the best Sudanese families did not take part in it; instead, the people of the League were from «unknown» families, who neither could be trusted, nor be entitled to political positions of responsibility. She was strangely unaware of the fact that the White Flag League also included members of her own extended family. She, as many like her, considered that having an illustrious Arab genealogy was the pre-requisite to political excellence. Therefore, the dynamic of historical forgetting seems to be connected with the consolidation of an elitist «Arab» intelligentsia.

In fact, it is clear that the reason of both the historical forgetting and the tarnished reputation of this revolution is the widespread conception that its members, first, were of low descent, and second, were paid by Egyptian officers that eventually betrayed them by withdrawing their support during the November Mutiny. The people that are associated with the League have no honour in the eyes of many Northern Sudanese. The question that I shall try to answer is therefore how this image of the

White Flag League has been constructed. I believe that this is connected with the immediate response to the 1924 events of both the British rulers and of the traditional Sudanese notables.

Erasing, dividing, and recreating: British response to the White Flag League

The most effective reaction from the British rulers to the threat represented by the nationalism of the White Flag League consisted of a manipulation of the historical evidences, and in an able variation of the «divide and rule» strategy. In the colonial documents, the British presented the events of 1924 merely as an intrigue of the Egyptians, with the purpose of making the Sudan an Egyptian colony.

According to this interpretation, the Sudanese were historical enemies of Egypt since the Turkish-Egyptian invasion of the Sudan in the 19th Century; therefore, no «good» Sudanese could ever accept to become one country with Egypt. Thus, the Egyptians had to search for allies among the «anomalous» Sudanese, people of a low status who would be willing to accept any conditions, for the sake of power. For the British, these «anomalous» Sudanese included, on the one hand, the «*muwalladin*,» a term which indicates the offspring of intermarriages between Egyptians or Ottoman citizen and Sudanese; and, on the other hand, the group labelled, paradoxically, as «Sudanese,» (in Arabic «*Sudani*») a term used in opposition to «Arabs.»⁷ The term «Sudani» included precisely people like Ali Abd al-Latif and various other officers that took part into the League, whose origins were from the marginalized areas of the Sudan, such as Darfur, the Bahr al Ghazal or the Nuba

mountains; their grandparents had later re-settled in the north, usually because of slavery or wars. Since these people had usually lost every link with their homeland, they were named in official documents «Detribalized Negroid.»

By underlining the difference between the «better Sudanese» and these «anomalous» ones, and in particular of the so-cal-

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led «Detribalized Sudanese,» the British wished to emphasize a category, the tribe, that at this historical moment were about to disappear.⁸ In fact, detribalization was a phenomenon affecting not only the «*Sudani*» or the «*Muwalladin*» but also the majority of the inhabitants of the urban centres. Thus, all the members of the White Flag League could be defined as «detribalized.»

Few historians of the Sudan have realized that the social mobility from the establishment of the Condominium up till the early 1920s was actually very high.⁹ In fact, wages were very high and allowed for a rapid accumulation of capital to re-invest in land, or, if possible, in education, primarily because of the scarcity of labour force. One has to remember that Sudan was facing a global market that intended to be pervasive and change the modes of consumption of people. Some people were in the position of seizing this, while others were not. This is why many people who did not necessarily belong to the most pre-

stigious families, but who had accumulated wealth or had rendered service to the British rulers, could be accepted in schools; education could give them a position in the administration of the colonial state. At the same time, the educated were very few and saw themselves as an elite. The Egyptian Army was another motor of rapid social mobility: during the time of Wingate, the first Governor General of the Sudan, a civil administration was not yet in place and the soldiers were given administrative tasks. Belonging to the army meant being invested with responsibility and wealth. Thus, economy was the greatest agent of detribalization.

Detribalization must not be seen as the forgetting of one's origins. On the contrary, tribal membership and status were still very important elements of differentiation among urban settlers, and the League's members were aware of this.¹⁰ At the same time, in the urban context, tribal links were soon sided by other kinds of networks solidarity, for instance the one acquired through work, neighbourhood and education. This solidarity could, if not replace at least be more active than the one based on tribe and on origins. For instance, the very early presence of strikes in the Sudan shows that workers were capable of efficient mobilization in spite of their different origins and status. The role of education in building a sense of unity is also crucial: even if the British tried to favour the admission of «Arabs of good family» to higher education, this criteria was not yet as exclusive as it would become later, and indeed schools were multi-national and multi-confessional. This process of «detribalization» was seen by many of the British administrators as degeneration, and,

after 1924, they planned more carefully who were to be admitted to school and how to allocate power. Moreover, the epoch of the soldier-administrators had come to an end: the officers were replaced by civil employees, and now the army did not constitute a powerful motor of social mobility anymore. Instead, the racial exclusivity of civil positions increased, and during the following ten years only the Northern «riverain» elite was given access higher education.

The British policy of restricting education failed to avoid the rise of nationalism from the mid 1930s and onward. It succeeded, however, in creating an Arabized elite, who considered descent and education as a double source of legitimacy.¹¹ For this elite, education was a necessary apprenticeship of the mechanisms of the modern state, where they would have learnt to assume the leadership of the Sudan. However, this leadership was already inscribed in their own blood. The elite was no longer multi-national and multi-racial, but a very restricted and exclusive group.

The traditional notables also played a crucial role in shaping the British reaction to the activities of the White Flag League, and took part in the consolidation of the Arab identity of the north. With colonialism, the role of the tribal and religious notables became one of mediation between the colonial subject and the alien power. In the Sudan, this mediation was even more necessary because the British had only a risible armed presence in the country. This gave the notables, in particular those from the more economically or politically strategic areas, a remarkable power with which to face the British. Until the rise of a nationalist movement, the notables had repre-

sented the only political partner to whom the British had attributed legitimacy; the only one entitled to suggest what was right or wrong for the Sudanese people.

On the other side of the political arena, there were the people of the White Flag League, for which descent and tribal division did not matter, and who were fighting to convince the Sudanese public opinion of their nationalist cause. Even if they respected the authority of tradition, their very ideology and popularity represented a serious threat to the notables, who responded violently by rejecting the League ideology. The stable support of the notables was crucial, and allowed the British rulers to use a heavy hand against the nationalists. As a consequence, the official interpretation shaped by the British about the causes of the 1924 events was fully endorsed by the notables. The fact that the Sudanese political life has since then been dominated by the alternation of the same forces has surely played a role in the continuity of this interpretation until today.

Arabism and historical forgetting

In conclusion, the «divide and rule» strategy of the colonial rulers fostered the division (often referred to as «re-tribalization») and racialization of the Sudanese groups and created the conditions for the development of an Arabized elite. This policy was consciously applied to prevent the rise of nationalism, as this ideology is based on the alliance of different groups for the national struggle. After the independence, the arabized elite has not been able to overcome its own narrowness, and has proved to be incapable of understanding diversity. Its greatest failure has been the imposition of a series of cultural, political,

and economic impediments, such as the fact that an individual has to assume an arabized identity, in order to be considered Sudanese. And such a policy automatically excludes all those that claim an alternate cultural belonging. Here, cultural differences become an excuse for economic marginalization and exploitation. The narrowness of the arabized elite, which has been one of the direct causes of the civil war has for similar reasons, been responsible of erasing the heritage, the memory, and even the pride of the 1924 nationalism.

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- 1 Callahan, M. D., *Mandates and Empire, The League of Nations and Africa 1914-1931*. Sussex Academic Press, Brighton Portland, 1999.
- 2 Hassan Nujaylah: *Malamih min al-mujtama' al-sudani*. 1964
- 3 List of the White Flag League members found in the house of Hassan Midhat, not signed, not dated, in Northern Province 1/21/207, National Record Office Khartoum (hereby NRO).
- 4 The information is from the thousands of documents produced by the Intelligent Department, at the NRO and Public Record Office in London (hereby PRO); among the files studied, particularly important are in PRO: FO 141/805/2, FO 141/810/3; FO 141/806/1; in NRO: Palace 4/9/ series from 44 to 55. The information collected is gathered in a database, which contains the information available from the file on each of the persons mentioned as political activists.
- 5 See for instance: «Al Ayam», Khartoum, 12.1.2005.
- 6 *Al-ruwayat al-thafawiya li-thunwar 1924*, Markaz al-tawthiq. Maahad al-dirasat al-afriqiyya wal-as?wyya, Jiam'at al-Khartum, Khartoum April 1974.
- 7 The term «Sudanese» indicated also the nationality, according to the context. See for this question, Makris, G. P., *Changing Masters, Spirit Possession and Identity Construction among Slave Descendants and Other Subordinates in the Sudan*. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 2000.
- 8 The very concepts of «tribe» and of «detrribalization» are put in quotation marks for they reflect the ideas of the British rulers on Sudanese society. About the conception of «Negroid but detrribalized», see also: Kurita, Y.: «The role of the 'Negroid but Detribalized' People in the Sudanese Society», in *Second International Sudan Studies, Conference Papers, Volume 3: Sudan, Environment and People*, 8-11 April 1991. University of Durham, Durham 1992
- 9 Among them: Kurita, 1992, op. cit, and Bakheit, J. M., *British Administration and Sudanese Nationalism 1919-1939*. PhD Thesis, Cambridge University, 1965.

10 For instance, the social bar in the case of marriage remained very strong, also among the first nationalists. From the most complete life stories available to the present author, such as the one of Ali Abd Al-Latif, Saleh Abd al-Qadir, and Zein Abdin Abdel Tam, it is possible to see that the bride was always of status similar or inferior, but never superior, to the status of the groom.

11 Sanderson, G. N. , «Indirect Rule in the Northern Sudan as an anti-nationalist strategy 1920-1939», in Gadir Hag Al-Safi Mahasin Abdel ed., *The Nationalist Movement in Sudan*. Sudan Library Series (15), Institute of African and Asian Studies, University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 1989, pp. 63-110.