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Sudan: The Southern Provinces

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Dear Mr. Nolte,

If my experience is at all typical then the average American is likely to pass through three stages in his understanding of Africa. First, there is the vague image of an entire continent of steaming jungles, naked blacks living in grass huts, and wild animals -- the picture born of innumerable Tarzan movies and a few random missionary stories remembered from early days at Sunday School.

Then with a bit of familiarity this monolithic conception of the Dark Continent breaks down. Much of Africa is desert or prairie, and there are several sections boasting a near ideal climate. Roughly one African in every five is, after all, white, not black. Several impressive modern cities exist -- Cairo, Salisbury, Casablanca, Nairobi. And the educated African nationalist leader with his clothes (and often ideas) cut in England or France -- Mboye, Touré, Mouphouet-Boigny, Nkrumah -- is obviously not the child of a grass hut civilization.

Unless one has the opportunity to get off the major routes of communication in Africa (which are almost invariably by air), he may remain in this second stage of understanding Africa. Among Americans, only the missionaries, the occasional economic aid specialists who are posted in areas remote from the capitals, and a handful of anthropologists are likely to move on to stage three -- to the level where one, while realizing that pockets of modernity and civilization exist in what is properly called Black Africa, also rediscovers the primitive Africa of those childhood movies.

On a recent visit to the Southern Sudan (the three provinces of Bahr al Ghazal, Equatoria, and Upper Nile, only lightly touched by Arabic or Islamic civilization) I had a chance to enter briefly into this third stage.

After a minimum of delay in getting the permit (the South remains a "closed area" and all foreigners are required to obtain an entry permit from the Ministry of Interior) and arranging transportation, I boarded a Sudan Airways DC-3 on its way from Khartoum to Wau, the capital of Bahr al Ghazal (River of gazelles) Province.

The Governor, his deputy, and also the Military Governor (an innovation under the present regime) were on hand to meet the plane. The specific reason in this case for their presence was the arrival of the Pakistani Ambassador and his wife for a brief visit. However, I was later to find that the top officials usually meet all planes (two per week on the regular schedule), for this provides a welcome diversion to a somewhat

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monotonous routine in a part of the world definitely unfamiliar to the average Northern Sudanese.

A few minutes drive on a dirt and pebble, all-weather road took us from the airport to the capital city. Boasting a population of about 6,000, Wau, more than anything else, evoked images of various Boy Scout camps back home. There was no urban-type concentration. A few wooden houses might well be clustered together, but then separated from the rest by an open space as large as a football field. There was an abundance of trees -- a blessing in this hot climate. Frank Lloyd Wright should have been pleased with the way the architecture fitted into the natural setting, for the "city" had quietly and unpretentiously made room for itself without disturbing things too much.

The only way I could be sure I was passing the "business district" -- a string of some dozen small shops -- was by noticing several old-fashioned manual Singer sewing machines on the shaded front porches. For just as the sale of cotton piece goods constitutes the major retail trade for Wau, sewing the cloth into simple clothes is the main service industry. (The sewing machine operators are always men.)

Still, Wau is the province capital, and like all urban centers in simple societies it is advanced by comparison with the surrounding countryside. The first glimpses of the real, unspoiled hinterland began from the window of my room in the government rest house (there is no hotel in Wau). From there I could see primitive tribesmen, some stark naked, walking along the river bank or waiting, with that infinite patience of people to whom time is reckoned in seasons, for the ferry to take them to the other side of the river.

Across the river were bona-fide grass huts constructed from the very thick grass that grows in the bottom land. In the river itself, I saw one or two boats made of carved-out tree trunks. And, as a final touch, tribal drums were to be heard after sunset.

Walking down to the river later, I noted a weather-beaten sign reading "Governor's Walk." Apparently, at some now forgotten date, a British governor, or perhaps his wife, hit upon the happy idea of uprooting a few small bushes, throwing down a bit of sand and gravel, putting up a wooden sign, and thus turning this spot of considerable natural beauty into a sort of official esplanade. Was it conceived in puckish humor or dead seriousness?

The following day a trip 93 miles north to the village of Aweil gave more evidence of what primitive existence really means. This area is a center of the Dinka, a tribe of cattle raising nomads who slaughter and eat their cattle only when the threat of famine so demands. Good times permitting, the cattle are hoarded and prized as wealth, or used for the purchase of brides (unlike the Arab custom where the preferential marriage is to the first cousin, the Dinka marry outside the immediate tribe). Of the Southern tribes, the Dinka are the most resistant to change, but also most capable of reaching an adjustment with the Northerners. This is not as paradoxical as it sounds. As a strong, well-knit group, they are not easily bowled over by outsiders trying to push them one way or another. On the other hand, their life is similar to that of their neighbors, the Arab Baggara tribes of southern Kordofan and Darfur, and the Dinka are thus in a position to assimilate

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new ideas unwittingly. In addition, being proud and self-confident, their relations with the Northerners are not necessarily those of a group reacting from a psychology of inferiority or fear -- as is unfortunately the case among the tribes of Equatoria Province.

This all sounds fine, and certainly more than one former British D.C. has taken the next step of lauding this savage nobility. I most heartily disagree, and if pressed to choose between the two evils of the most pretentious 19th Century variety of "white man's burden," and this idea of the noble savage, I would opt for the former.

I could base my argument on mortality rate, on debilitating and unnecessary sickness, on the comparison between a pretty, buxom Dinka girl and that worn-out hag who may well be less than 10 years older. These, however, are not the essential points. Longevity and health are modern blessings, but civilization is not. The crux of my argument is found in the faces of these people -- faces revealing an animal-like stupor, empty eyes looking out on a world not to be questioned, understood, defied or even regarded.

I am not insisting that all the world be like us modern Americans. I think I can understand and sometimes appreciate the extreme fatalism of an old-fashioned Muslim; the excessive humanism of an ancient Greek; Japanese family worship; even the Hindu caste system; but to praise the virtues of a life in which people hardly rise above the sentient level of the cattle they tend -- that is a bit too much.

In other words, like any good tourist, I can marvel at the unfamiliar sights of this strange, remote part of the world, but I can not really develop a lively interest in the intricacies of its life. I consider much more important an analysis of the outside forces at work to change this primitive existence. So, I propose to leave the details of the way of life of the Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk and the scores of other tribes in the three Southern Provinces to others more competent and more interested, and consider instead the forces of change at work in the Southern Sudan.

These forces are several, but in large measure they may be subsumed under a single label --



Dinka Girls

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the impact of an independent, Northern-directed Sudan upon the South. This is not just the pressure of a more economically advanced society. It is the juxtaposition of two different worlds. The Sudan, it is worth remembering, is a member of the Arab League. Racially, the Sudanese have, admittedly, little Arab or Egyptian blood, but this is of small importance. There can be no doubt that the Northern Sudan is devoutly Muslim, Arabic-speaking (we are glossing over non-native Arabic speakers in the North such as Beja, Nuba or Dongolawi, because it is quite clear that these languages have no more prospect of future expansion than, say, Basque in Europe), and decidedly more inclined to look north toward Egypt and the Arab states, rather than south toward Black Africa, for its politico-cultural identity. Also, from every generally accepted standard, the Northern Sudan constitutes a cohesive nation.

This is just not the case with the Southern Sudan, a babel of tribes and native languages which also lacks religious unity. Christian missionary efforts have achieved only faint success, and to date Islam has done little better (though now picking up speed). Although extravagant claims are made on both sides, it is probably more accurate to state that neither Christianity nor Islam can claim more than 10 to 15% of the total Southern population.

Why then are these three provinces included in the Sudan? In brief, 19th Century statesmen were more concerned with dividing up Africa in a way that would avoid European war rather than on clear ethnic lines. Further, before the Mahdist revolt, Egyptian control of the Sudan had, in fact, extended to what is now the Southern Sudan. That the area was used mostly for slaving is quite another matter. In addition, when the Anglo-Egyptian forces recaptured the Sudan 1898, there was considerable pressure to push on down to the previous border, for the French, under a certain Major Marchand, were conducting a free-wheeling annexation campaign in the area. The result: a "Fashoda incident" well known to students of diplomatic history, and three Southern provinces securely joined in the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. (Fashoda, renamed Kodok, is located in the Upper Nile province.)

The great differences between Northern and Southern Sudan were quickly perceived by the British administrators on the spot after the establishment of the Condominium, and herein was born the famous (or infamous, according to your point of view) British "Southern policy." Actually, this policy which amounted to treating the South as a separate country existed from the earliest days, but it was formalized and intensified after 1929. Nationalist leaders in the Sudan now like to attribute most of their present difficulties in the South to the British policy of separation, but to take such a view is to get the cart before the horse. The British did not create the differences between North and South. Rather, the undeniable existence of these differences was held to require a special policy, leading perhaps even to eventual amalgamation of the South with Uganda.

This British policy was not (I am convinced) a diabolical plot. It did, nevertheless, render a disservice to all parties concerned, for when shortly after the Second World War the British reversed themselves and began working for a single, unified Sudan, steps taken under the earlier policy proved a real stumbling block.

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This change of British policy in the South coincided with (in fact stemmed from) the more intensive stage of the political and diplomatic battle leading to independence. The Southerners were, unfortunately, in no way prepared to take part in these complicated political maneuvers. There is considerable truth in everyone's charges on this subject. The Southerners were cajoled, threatened and given exorbitant promises by Northerners, Egyptians and British. The advice of missionaries must also have played its part.

The upshot was the August 1955 mutiny of Southern army troops and the resulting disturbances among the civilian population of the South. Just like the famous Indian Mutiny of 1857, the actual numbers involved were not great, but the political impact was far-reaching. The ugly fact that force was the only real thread binding the two regions together was brought out into the open, as was the equally harsh fact that the South had no real choice. None of her neighbors were interested in annexing the three provinces, and it was certainly clear that this region had neither the personnel nor the economic system to stand alone.



Warrior from the Shilluk (one of the major Southern tribes)

The Southern disturbances were soon quelled by the Sudanese Army, and since that time a watchful, understandably suspicious Northern army and administration has ruled the South. After almost four and one half years, what seems to be the result?

First, although the average Northerner does not really respect the Southerner as an equal, it would seem that the Northern administration has been generally quite fair and decent. There is little sense of "mission" about their work, and most of them quite frankly admit they would rather serve anywhere else in the Sudan, but they do their routine jobs in the easy-going, unexcitable way of ruling the British taught them. On balance, this is possibly the best tactic for such a delicate situation.

The restrictions on Northern entry into the South, which were part of the British "Southern Policy," have been removed, and quite a number

of Northern small merchants have moved in. There is some risk in this. The earlier generations of Northern traders in the South were a pretty mean, usurious gang -- most unlikely candidates for furthering a peaceful national unification. However, a much greater intermixture of the two peoples is probably necessary to help bridge the cultural gap, and such risks must be taken.

Arabic and Islam are both on the increase. Much of this is planned. The education program calls for a gradual replacement of English by Arabic as the major language of instruction, and the Sudanese Grand Qadi has just completed an extensive tour of the Southern Provinces in which he laid the cornerstone for several new mosques. However, much of this increase in Arabic and Islam is a natural and understandable unplanned development -- the usual process of accommodation to a newly dominant power. There is also no escaping the fact that this development will be, in large measure, at the expense of Christianity.

Finally, probably the most important factor working to change this primitive society and achieve some sort of unification is economic development. A railroad connecting Wau with Khartoum (and thus the whole Northern system) is expected to be completed in May of this year. Research is well under way in the Bahr al Ghazal region for the production of enough rice to fill the Sudan's needs (conditions are apparently ideal -- seed can be planted in the bottom land after the flood waters have receded, there is no need for transplantation as in so many rice-growing areas, and no artificial fertilizers are required). Coffee, tobacco and some cotton are being grown successfully in Equatoria. Also, more Southerners are coming north to work, and are apparently adjusting better to the requirements of a cash economy than at any time previously.

With trade, improved communications, the spread of a common language, and a slight increase in the standard of living, perhaps the backward South can be integrated into a unified Sudan. When one observes that the British administrators and the missionaries, both equally dedicated, were able to accomplish so little in five decades, this factor of economic development and a more intensive intermixing of the two peoples looms as the only really practical solution. As an aside it might also be noted that



Typical Northern Sudanese

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much of this economic development can be fostered or hurried by a foreign technician "on the spot." Here, and not in Khartoum, is the place for a really effective Peace Corpsman, but he would have to combine technical skill with old-fashioned missionary zeal for the climate is debilitating and amenities few.

In short, mixed with the fear that the Southern people in their weakness and backwardness could well be exploited again just as in times past is a hope that solid gains toward peaceful unification and mutual benefit can be realized.

So I leave the Dinka of Wau and Aweil with the fond hope that the next time I see him he will not be so picturesque in his tribal nakedness, but, in compensation, his eye will reveal that gleam of one who is beginning to think in terms of trying to make a better world for himself and his heirs.

Sincerely,

Leon Carl Brown

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