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DAVID E. MILLS,
*DIVIDING THE NILE. EGYPT'S ECONOMIC
NATIONALISTS IN THE SUDAN, 1918-56*

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The “Unity of the Nile Valley” (*wahda wadi al-nil*), which was the term that evoked a popular political ideology that was widespread in Sudan and Egypt until the 1950s, described a peculiar form of nationalism. Its ideologues did not postulate that Sudan and Egypt were one nation, but that they were two halves that had been unjustly separated but were destined to be reunited. For the Egyptians, sharing the river Nile made Sudan a natural appendix of Egypt, while for many Sudanese, Egypt was a “blood brother” with which they shared a set of fundamental national traits.

This book makes an important contribution to the abundant literature on Sudanese and Egyptian relations in the twentieth century in two ways: first, because it covers a facet – its economic aspects – that has been systematically neglected in studies on nationalism, and second, because it goes much further than any previous research – at least any that is known to this reviewer – on how Egyptian-Sudanese economic relations functioned from an Egyptian perspective.

The main argument underlying this book is that Egyptian politicians failed to pass effective measures to bind the Egyptian and Sudanese economies together, and that this was one of the reasons why, despite the endless discussions and speeches on the importance of concluding the Unity of the Nile Valley, it never became a reality. Egyptian politicians were aware of the importance of creating an economic framework for unity, and developed strategies to make the two economies more interdependent, but their efforts came to nothing each time. The book under review recounts the story of these failed attempts. I shall first describe its content, and then move on to my analysis.

In the first chapter, the author addresses the question of whether the idea of “Unity of the Nile Valley” corresponded to a ‘reality’ of people who had been “ethnically and racially united for millennia” (p. 15). His answer, like that of many Sudanese nationalists, is that there were as many differences as there were affinities. The very geography of the Nile is a case in point: according to which pair of eyes is doing the looking, the Nile can be viewed as either a symbol of unity or a symbol of division. This same river that flows through the two countries is punctuated by six cataracts north of Khartoum, which make navigation difficult and dangerous.

The second chapter explores the various Egyptian agreements with Sudan as regards both the waters of the Nile and Sudan development projects. Although they were praised as victories for the Egyptian government and evidence of Egyptian involvement in Sudan, these agreements also fostered separation in many different ways: the 1929 agreement, for instance, authorized a separate administration of the Nile waters. Moreover, large infrastructural works (such as the Jabal Awliya dam) and development projects (such as the Lake Tana project), which were financed in large part by Egypt, fostered the expansion of a cotton monoculture, which came to compete directly with that of Egypt. Chapter 3 pursues the issues raised in Chapter 2, and describes the new phase in the financial relations between the two countries that was inaugurated by the 1936 Treaty, when the Second World War was looming and Britain had to rush to secure its position in Egypt. As a note of criticism, the two chapters would have benefited from including more background to Sudanese history. In fact, the crisis of 1924 (for the Sudanese, the Revolution of 1924), which the author only refers to, without explaining it, was a watershed in Egyptian-Sudanese relations. Prior to 1924, thousands of Egyptians worked in either the Sudanese administration or the army (Sudan did not have its own army at that time; it was created as a consequence of 1924).¹ Moreover, according to the tables on trade reported by the author in the chapters that follow, trading patterns appear to have been more in favour to Egypt than they were in subsequent decades. In any event, the majority of Egyptians were evacuated from Sudan after 1924 because they had been blamed for being primarily responsible for the 1924 Revolution. From this perspective, the 1936 Treaty represented a new beginning, and civil administration and trade were reopened to Egyptians. Egyptians politicians then sought to make up for lost time, and a series of institutions were created to foster trade with Sudan, which the author reports in detail, such as the position of Egypt’s Economic Expert and the funding of a permanent Khartoum

1. According to Beshir, in 1920 there were 1,795 Egyptian employees in the various government departments, compared with 1,523 Sudanese, 506 British, 166 Syrians and 102 “Others”. Beshir, M. O. 1969, *Educational Development in the Sudan, 1898-1956*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 198.

Exhibition as a window for selected Egyptian goods. Each of these initiatives was ultimately ineffective, however.

Chapter 4 describes what was perhaps the main obstacle to trade: transport. In spite of the rapid construction of a railway line between Wadi Halfa and Khartoum in 1887, during the expedition against the Mahdiyya, the line was not extended any further, which meant that it ended in Wadi Halfa in Sudan and began again in Shellal, in Egypt. The movement of goods and people between these two points was a burdensome business: merchandise had to be unloaded from the train, inspected by customs, loaded on to a steamship, unloaded and inspected again, and then reloaded on to a different train, all in the terrible heat of a desert climate. Sea transportation was not always a feasible alternative: although the distance was certainly shorter, it was much more expensive than the overland route. Besides this already formidable obstacle, Egyptian traders had to pay a multitude of fees (such as the annual fee for commercial permits or export certificates from the administration), even though the free circulation of goods (meaning tax-free) between the two countries had been established from the outset. In a similar fashion, the 1936 Treaty recognized the free circulation of Egyptian people, but they still had to obtain a visa and pay a fee to travel to Sudan.

Chapter 5 focuses on Egyptian investments in Sudanese agricultural land. Any efforts in this area were hindered by the fact that right from the start, the Sudanese government imposed severe restrictions on foreigners acquiring land in Sudan, making it virtually impossible to do so. The Egyptian nationalist elite thought of other ways to occupy Sudanese soil, namely by encouraging peasants to move there, partly to solve the overpopulation problem, but in spite of repeated talks, very little was actually done, in part because Sudan was not attractive to most Egyptians.

Chapters 6 and 7 are respectively dedicated to Egyptian exports to Sudan and to Sudanese imports to Egypt. Sudan depended on Egypt for only a few products, but none occupied a central role in the Egyptian economy. The first of these was "a cotton-silk/artificial silk mixture produced by Egyptian artisans of Naqqada in Upper Egypt that had a well-established, exclusive market in the Sudan" (p. 192). The most important item of the Egyptian economy, cotton piece-goods, did not find a market in Sudan, on the other hand; the piece-goods sold by other international producers, first of all Japan, but also India, Italy, and Britain, were far more competitive. The second most important Egyptian export item was sugar; it was so essential to Sudanese life, however, that it quickly became a Sudan government monopoly, and was sold by the government to retailers at a much higher price than that at which Egyptians sold it to the government. Trading with Sudan was not, therefore, a lucrative business.

On the other hand, apart from cotton, Egypt was one of the main importers of Sudanese raw and semi-raw materials: wood, untanned hides, sesame seeds and later cotton seeds, *dhurra* (millet) and other grains, and last but not least, livestock. Except for livestock, however, the market was characterized

by large annual fluctuations, because the two markets were not interdependent but complementary: peaks of sales occurred either when Egypt had special needs for certain Sudanese goods or when Sudan produced more than usual. In the case of livestock, however, Egypt relied almost completely on Sudanese imports. It should be emphasized that cattle was central to Sudanese economic and social life; for instance, herders preferred to keep their cattle if the sale price was too low. The cattle trade was heavily regulated by the government, however, and had to observe a number of cumbersome procedures, such as the clearance of the “certificate of purchase from a public market or a certificate of export from a provincial governor”, the use of licensed steamships on the Halfa-Shellal route, and quarantine (p. 247).

By the end of the volume, the reader will undoubtedly have learnt a number of important characteristics of Sudanese-Egyptian trade: both the Sudanese and Egyptian administrations prioritized policies that facilitated the expansion of international trade rather than do business with each other. “The only participant in the economy with a distinct advantage was the Sudanese Government” (p. 179), argues the author, and he explains that government strategy was two-fold: to protect its citizens from foreign exploiters (by not selling lands to foreigners, including Egyptians), and to capture most of the benefits of import-export flows. This was the principle underlying customs policies, for instance: the Sudan government preferred to keep customs duties low (in contrast to Egyptian policy) in order to attract more foreign goods to Sudan, rather than to increase them to favour a local (Egyptian-Sudanese) market that would eventually have discouraged international investors and lowered the income from customs procedures (p. 197). Therefore, while the Sudan Government did not implement any specific measures to hamper Egyptian trade with Sudan, it did nothing to encourage or protect it either. Even though Egyptian goods circulated inside Sudan tax-free, most were not competitive enough to win Sudanese markets. On the other hand, the Egyptian government never invested in anything more substantial than feasibility studies to boost its economic partnership.

At a time when “slow research” is a luxury, this work is particularly praiseworthy. The author has sifted through an impressive amount of Arabic sources in the National Archives of Cairo, a site that it is usually difficult to access, including the series of journals published by various Egyptian chambers of commerce, the most important Arabic newspapers of the time, minutes of parliamentary debates, and Egyptian government reports. Similarly, the author shows an impressive command of the secondary literature in Arabic: it is quite rare in works on Middle Eastern Studies in English to find a bibliography in Arabic that is as long as the English one, as is the case here.

My criticism of the book must be made from the perspective of an historian of colonial Sudan. As the author himself admits when he writes “This study is ultimately a history of Egyptians” (p. 2), the book’s weak aspect is its limited use of Sudanese history and Sudanese perspectives. Although it is true that it is not the author’s purpose to look at the question through Sudanese

eyes, and that this is not a book on the social history of the Sudanese economy, a more intimate look at Sudan would have been beneficial. The first glaring absence is a discussion of the milestones in Sudanese history and its periodization. Sudan has experienced very different administrative phases that corresponded to very different ideas on native policies and practices, and this in turn had repercussions on the Sudanese attitude towards Egypt and Egyptians. Besides the case of 1924, which I have mentioned above, the Second World War also marked a divide in native policy between the pre-war era of Indirect Rule and the new development policies of late colonialism. Even an outline of the general framework would have helped the reader place some of the institutions and initiatives the book mentions diachronically, and given a sense of historical change. In addition, the main question asked by the book is why and how certain Egyptian economic policies did not succeed, but it does not address the question of historical change. Learning about causes and reasons, however, sometimes has the effect of flattening the phenomena being described.

A case in point is the discussion in the first chapter about the Unity of the Nile Valley. The author wonders whether this motto was merely a discourse or was instead something 'real'. The problem with the answer he gives ("it was somehow unreal") is that it does not take account of them any ways in which the idea of unity of the Nile Valley can be understood, as well as the complex relationship the Sudanese have with it. Egypt represented different things to different people at any one time: for many people, Egypt was a popular symbol of anti-colonialism, while for others it was a hated symbol of oppression, as was the case for the victims of Turco-Egyptian rule (1821-1885). Many looked on Egypt as a site of modernity, intellectual inspiration and learning, however, and by reading about Egypt and learning from Egyptians, the Sudanese were in a position to identify a host of stimulating techniques, from how to print a newspaper and run a radio station to how to write a novel and how to protest. Finally, for many people, Egypt represented family.

This is particularly evident in the case of Sudanese-Egyptian merchants. In a final important section of Chapter 7, the author examines the traders who were engaged in Egyptian-Sudanese commerce. True, the most important import-export companies were multinationals owned by foreigners, such as the Tutunji family, which was of Syrian origin, while others were Greeks, Armenians, British, Italians, Americans, Indians, and so on. According to the author, "a fair characterization of the Egyptian entrepreneur in the Sudan would be an individual most active in northern and less developed Sudanese regions, with often long-established business relations and reliant on less lucrative commercial spheres" (p. 258). On the other hand, he argues, between 1930 and 1950, new Egyptian merchants found it difficult to establish their trade in Sudan (p. 264). Several of these points are convincing, notably the fact that no new Egyptian company managed to create a fortune in Sudan after 1936. On the other hand, it is more difficult to accept the

argument that this kind of less lucrative trade did not foster Nile Valley nationalism, and, second, that Sudanese-Egyptian local traders were an insignificant part of Sudan's economy.

Authors such as Kapteijns and Spaulding, Ewald, Bjørkelo and Manger have described the peculiar, cosmopolitan nature of Sudanese trade at least from the nineteenth century,² and as Mills also notes, Egyptian traders depended on the Sudanese. They did more than this, however: they also married them, and established family networks that extended between the two countries and were the artery of the Sudanese economy.³ During the first two decades of the Condominium, the label "Egyptian" defined people in an uncertain way. If one looks at the life stories of the "agitators" whom the Sudan government described as Egyptians or *muwalladīn* (sons of unions between an Egyptian and a Sudanese) in 1924, one discovers how changing, uncertain, and ambiguous this attribution was.⁴ The full story of what happened to this 'Egyptian' community after 1924 in terms of a change of identity, at a time when the Sudan government was putting all its effort into severing the personal and political links between the two countries, still remains to be discovered. What is certain is that what it meant to be Egyptian in Sudan must have been affected by this. Generally, the position and identity of the Egyptian trading community was transformed in accordance with policy changes. Considering all of this, it is hard to believe, as the author does, that Sudanese-Egyptian trading links were not vehicles for nationalism, or that Egyptian trade did not foster nationalistic bonds in Sudan.⁵

I would argue that the reason why the author underestimates the Egyptian-Sudanese traders has something to do with the sources he has used, which mostly consist of official documents and Egyptian press reports. From the

2. Bjørkelo, A. J. 1988, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya: Peasants and Traders in the Shendi Region, 1821-1885*, Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ewald, J. J. 1990, *Soldiers, Traders, and Slaves: State Formation and Economic Transformation in the Greater Nile Valley, 1700-1885*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. Manger, L. O. 1984, *Trade and Traders in the Sudan*, Bergen: University of Bergen-University Book Store. Kapteijns, L. and J. Spaulding, 1982, "Precolonial Trade between States in the Eastern Sudan, ca 1700 - ca 1900", *African Economic History*, no. 11: 29-62.

3. Sharkey, H. J. 2000, "The Egyptian Colonial Presence in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1898-1932," in J. Spaulding and S. Beswick, *White Nile, Black Blood: War, Leadership, and Ethnicity from Khartoum to Kampala*, Lawrenceville, N.J.: Red Sea Press, pp. 279-314.

4. I have discussed the question of Egyptian presence in Sudan at several points here: Vezzadini, E. 2015, *Lost Nationalism: Revolution, Memory and Anti-Colonial Resistance in Sudan*, Woodbridge, Suffolk, (GB); Rochester, NY, (US): James Currey.

5. People whom the Sudan Government defined as *muwalladīn* made up a sizeable part of the revolutionary activists of 1924, including three of the five founders of the White Flag League nationalist movement.

numerous quotes he uses, it seems clear that the Egyptian state did not consider – and arguably did not “see” at all – this blurred category of small Egyptian-Sudanese traders as a potential carrier of its nationalist project. Thus, the main argument that runs throughout the book – that the failure of Egyptian economic endeavours in Sudan was one of the causes that led to the hypothesis of real political unity with Egypt being dropped so rapidly when independence came – is in my view only partially true. It is true because the efforts of the Egyptian State were unsuccessful, but it is not true in that many traders who had personal links with Egypt genuinely believed in the idea of unity. In Sudan today there are perhaps few social categories that have as extensive links to Egypt as the Sudanese trading community. What is clear, however, is that there was a fairly intractable gap between these Sudanese/Egyptians and the Egyptian political elite in Cairo.

In spite of these issues, this book is a real mine of information, and offers important pieces of the puzzle of writing a social history of trade in colonial Sudan. It is erudite and enlightening, and while not being easy reading – mostly due to the author’s dense writing style – for the breadth of the subject it covers and the amount of detail and information it includes, it is nevertheless an excellent work and rewarding reading.