Durham E-Theses

Courts, councils and citizenship: political culture in the Gezira scheme in condominium Sudan

Clarkson, Anna Ingerith

Courts, Councils and Citizenship:

Political Culture in the Gezira Scheme in

Condominium Sudan

Anna Ingerith Clarkson

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the University of Durham,

Department of History

2005

ABSTRACT

Courts, Councils and Citizenship: Political culture in the Gezira Scheme in Condominium Sudan

Anna Clarkson

The Gezira Scheme of northern Sudan has been consistently portrayed as a totalising institution which imposed a distinctly new form of social and economic organisation upon a tenant body. This study reassesses the impact of the Gezira Scheme, suggesting that the changes brought by the Scheme were of degree rather than type, and did not disrupt the cultural values at the heart of society. It credits the Sudanese actors within the Scheme with an agency previously denied to them, and looks holistically at the region's experience of governance. The Scheme is thus seen not as a controlling and oppressive institution, but rather as a tool used by a flexible and forward-looking society to improve personal circumstances. To these ends both the economic and administrative structures of central government were embraced and adapted to meet pre-existing cultural values whilst retaining the existing flexible forms of community authority.

Tenants used a system created as a result of a flawed government imagination of Gezira society to pursue existing aspirations that had formerly been attainable only by a small wealthy elite. In this way, a tenant elite was created that defined itself economically and ethnically in relation to a majority non-tenant population. With devolutionary policies responding primarily to the needs of the Scheme, this economic dominance of tenants was reinforced by their political dominance of institutions of local governance. Experienced in mediating with central state structures, the tenants who controlled courts and councils were able to control their own experience of governance. Tenant elitism was ultimately revealed through the establishment of a self-identified interest group that was organised institutionally from the 1940s. Embracing both government and Scheme, tenants campaigned in defence of stated financial 'rights' based on a notion of elevated citizenship. However, the inability of all tenants to attain these universal aims split the tenant body and established a future pattern of instability within the Gezira Scheme.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

ADC   Assistant District Commissioner

BNP   Blue Nile Province

DC   District Commissioner

GBA   Gezira Board Archive

NRO   National Record Office Archive, Khartoum

RHA   Rhodes House Archive, Oxford

SAD   Sudan Archive, Durham

SGR   Sudan Government, Annual Report on the Finances, Administration

            and Condition of the Sudan

SWTUF   Sudan Workers Trades Union Federation

TRB   Tenants' Representative Body

GLOSSARY

Durra	*Sorghum vulgare.* A food crop grown in the Gezira Scheme's rotation .
Effendi	Title of address for Western-educated non-European man. Collective noun – effendia.
Feddan	Unit of land measurement. One feddan equals 1.038 acres.
Fiki	A man considered to have holy powers.
Gism	A territorial unit of administration below the level of districts.
Khut	A territorial unit of administration below the level of gisms.
Lubia	*Dolichos lablab.* A nitrogenous fodder crop grown in the Gezira Scheme's rotation .
Mahdia	A movement led by the self-proclaimed Mahdi ("the rightly guided one"), Muhammed Ahmed. In 1885, he and his followers gained control of Khartoum and established a central state which lasted until the Anglo-Egyptian 're-conquest' of 1898.
Mamur	A district office official, generally Egyptian or Sudanese.
Meglis	A process of communal consultation within a community.
Merkaz	The district office run by central government.
Nazir	Title given to a leader of a tribal section.
Omda	Administrative title for the head of a group of villages.
Omodia	Unit covered by an omda's jurisdiction.
Qadi	Judge in the Islamic law courts.
Shayl	Institution of mortgage, generally of crops.

Sheikh	Title used widely as a demonstration of respect, but also directly incorporated into the administrative hierarchy referring to identified administrative leaders.
Sufism	A form of Islam, emphasising the role of Sufi Sheikhs as providing an avenue or path to God.
Sulta	Inherent authority.
Tariqa	The hierarchical organisation led by a Sufi Sheikh.
Turkia	The period, 1821-1885, in which the Turko-Egyptian regime, headed by Muhammad Ali of Egypt, controlled most of Sudan. I have adopted this form of transliteration for purposes of consistency.
Ulema	Religious leadership within the orthodox Islamic hierarchy. Singular, *alim*.
Wakil	Agent or manager. Particularly used in the context of *wakil* sheikhs, promoted by the government to mediate between tenants and agricultural management.
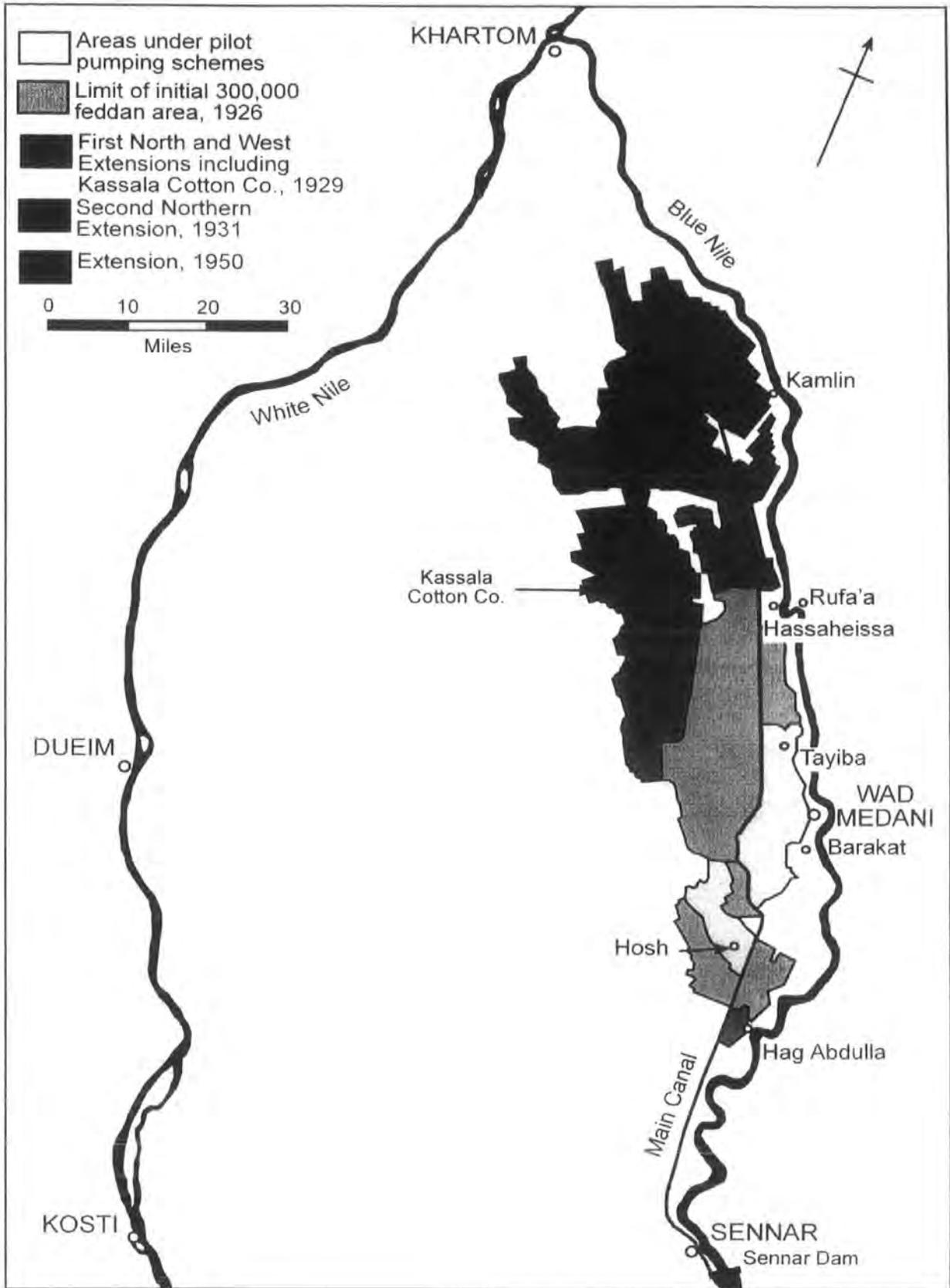
Figure 1: map of the Gezira Scheme

The map includes a legend with the following entries:

- Areas under pilot pumping schemes
- Limit of initial 300,000 feddan area, 1926
- First North and West Extensions including Kassala Cotton Co., 1929
- Second Northern Extension, 1931
- Extension, 1950

Scale: 0 10 20 30 Miles

Labels on map: KHARTOM, Blue Nile, White Nile, Kamlin, Kassala Cotton Co., Rufa'a, Hassaheissa, DUEIM, Tayiba, WAD MEDANI, Barakat, Hosh, Hag Abdulla, Main Canal, KOSTI, SENNAR, Sennar Dam

INTRODUCTION

The development of the people along their natural lines, is the
Government believes, essential; and organised improvement of
material conditions will not be allowed to result in the loss or
debasement of the traditional ideas which form the basis of the
character of the people.[1]

Such was the key point of the speech given by Lord Lloyd, the British High
Commissioner for Egypt, as he presided over the opening of the Sennar Dam on 21
January 1926. Nearly two miles across and supplying over 600 miles of canals, the
Sennar dam irrigated an initial area of 300,000 feddans, and was gradually extended to
reach a total of one million feddans by the end of the Condominium.[2] As a feat of
engineering it was almost without parallel in colonial Africa. However, although it was
duly celebrated as a symbol of modern progress, especially by the investors and cotton
producers in Britain who were hoping for significant financial reward, there was also
considerable unease within political circles. Lloyd reflected this uncertainty in his
speech, which found common resonance within official circles that were newly
enthralled with extreme versions of the policies of Indirect Rule. Planned and operated

---

[1] Lord Lloyd quoted in Leo Weinthal and James Finlay (eds.,) "Special Sudan Number Commemorating
the Official Opening of the Sennar Dam", *African World,* (1926), p. 33
[2] Ibid., and Arthur Gaitskell, *Gezira, A Story of Development in the Sudan,* (London, 1959), pp. 98, 291.
One feddan is equal to 1.038 acres.

in response to the government's financial needs, the Gezira Scheme stood as a beacon of modernity in an otherwise administratively conservative landscape. Driven by economic motivations, the social outcomes of the Scheme were rather less well considered, and Wasey Sterry, the Legal Secretary spoke for central government when he stated in 1923, that "until the thing has developed more it is not clear what we want".[3] Reliant upon the Scheme for providing state revenues, social organisation was primarily dictated by management considerations of agricultural efficiency. In this way the Scheme became an anomaly within the Sudan, viewed as a unique region of social and economic experimentation.

In light of the unique size, organisation and supervision patterns introduced to the region, it has been the structure of the Scheme that has dominated written accounts of the area. Colonial states throughout Africa had attempted to introduce agricultural cash crop production into existing economies, but none invested so heavily in infrastructure, supervised production so thoroughly, or were as dependent on any one scheme for national revenue. As early as 1904, Sir William Garstin, the irrigation engineer noted the suitability of the Gezira plain lying between the Blue and White Niles, south of their confluence at Khartoum, for gravity irrigation.[4] In response to the Sudan government's need to support itself financially, the Scheme was designed in 1911 to produce cotton as an export cash crop after the British Cotton Growing Association pledged to lobby the British government for financial support for its construction.[5] Still unable to finance the management costs of the Scheme, the government approached the Sudan Plantations Syndicate, managers of a pump irrigation scheme at Zeidab in Dongola Province to become partners, thus establishing a unique private-public model of enterprise.[6]

---

[3] National Record Office Khartoum, (NRO) 1Civsec 2/13/57, Wasey Sterry, Legal Secretary to C.S. Lyall, Civil Secretary, 12 November 1923.

[4] William Garstin, *Report Upon the Basin of the Upper Nile with Proposals for the Improvement of that River,* (Cairo, 1904).

[5] The British Cotton Growing Association, *Memorandum on the Development of Cotton Growing in the Sudan,* (British Cotton Growing Association, series no. 43, November 1910).

[6] Leigh Hunt had been granted 10,000 feddans of land as a concession in 1904. Hunt managed this concession under the name of the Sudan Experimental Plantations Syndicate from that date, but in 1907, after considerable losses, the company was reorganised and renamed the Sudan Plantations Syndicate under the direction of D.P. MacGillivray and Alexander MacIntyre. See Gaitskell, *Gezira,* pp. 51-2

In 1911, the Syndicate was given control over the experimental cotton station at Tayiba in the Gezira. Tenancies of thirty feddans were created, in which tenants cultivated a set rotation of ten feddans of cotton, five feddans of both durra [*sorghum vulgare*] and the fodder crop lubia [*dolichos lablab*], and ten feddans fallow. This was later changed to forty feddan tenancies, allowing for a double fallow period. These original experiments at Tayiba worked on the basis of tenants renting plots at a fixed annual rate from the Syndicate in return for control over the crops grown. However this soon proved unprofitable for the Syndicate, and a new profit-sharing arrangement was established in 1913, which became the basis of the concessionary agreement with the government providing for Syndicate management of the Gezira Scheme for an initial period of ten years.[7] The government agreed to pay for all infrastructure costs in return for 35% of cotton profits. The Syndicate was to manage the Scheme, including the cultivation and selling of cotton for a 25% share of profits, while the tenants – responsible for the labour on the Scheme – gained the remaining 40%.[8] This was to prove to be the economic model of the Scheme until 1950, when the Syndicate's concession was ended and the nationalised Gezira Board took over the management of the Scheme.

Delayed by the First World War, the Scheme was not fully operational until 1925, when the Sennar dam was completed. In 1927, the smaller sister company to the Syndicate – the Kassala Cotton Company – was relocated to an early extension of the Gezira Scheme. Although technically a separate company, with its own shareholders, it was run on the same lines as the Syndicate, and henceforth both companies will be referred to by the single name of the Syndicate.[9] The size alone made the Gezira Scheme unique as an irrigation scheme, but it was in its organisation that the real impact of the Scheme was felt. In order to retain effective control over the Scheme, the land was compulsory rented from owners who were paid a flat rate of ten piastres per feddan. Tenancies were then distributed to Gezira inhabitants based partially on pre-existing landownership patterns. Those landowners with more than 80 feddans were provided with two standard

---

[7] Gaitskell, *Gezira*, pp. 59-71.
[8] Ibid., p. 70.
[9] Ibid., p. 131.

tenancies, and allowed to nominate tenants for up to two additional tenancies. Those owning between 40-80 feddans were given one tenancy, and the remaining tenancies were distributed among residents.

Having gained a tenancy, a tenant had to follow a strictly controlled cultivation regime, which placed the growing of cotton in a tight eleven month timetable of sowing, weeding, picking and clearing. In order to ensure that this cultivation was done to the high standards expected from the Syndicate and government, the Syndicate arranged a system of intensive agricultural supervision. In every year from 1924 there were over one hundred British field inspectors employed by the Syndicate to directly supervise each tenant's cultivation, and in the late 1920s, when at a height, these figures were much closer to two hundred.[10] This contrasts starkly with the numbers of government-employed staff in the province, which in 1924 stood at twelve.[11] With approximately 20,000 tenants in the Scheme, a direct relationship was formed between an agricultural block inspector and tenant in ways that were not possible between government staff and individuals in any region of Sudan.[12]

The economic structure and the organisation of the Gezira Scheme was so unique, so controlled and tied so directly to the financial fortunes of the country, that it has been the focus of all subsequent works on the Gezira region.[13] This primary concern with the structure of the Scheme has inevitably created a top-down analytical approach that has emphasised the motives and power of the dominant partners of state and Syndicate. It has also focused attention upon the tenant population at the expense of the extensive non-tenant population. The result of this bias has largely been to produce entirely economic, Scheme-centred commentaries that have ignored non-economic activities also

---

[10] The Sudan Gezira Board, *The Sudan Gezira Board British Staff Register: incorporating the defunct Sudan Plantations Syndicate and Kassala Cotton Company,* (Khartoum, 1953).

[11] Sudan government, *Quarterly List* (Khartoum), 1924.

[12] Anthony Kirk-Green, "Thin White Line: the Size of the Colonial Service in Africa", *African Affairs,* 79, 314, (1980) pp. 25-44, at p. 29.

[13] For example; Gaitskell, *Gezira*; Anthony Barnett, *The Gezira Scheme: An Illusion of Development* (London, 1977); Victoria Bernal, "Colonial Moral Economy and the Discipline of Development: The Gezira Scheme and 'Modern' Sudan", *Journal of the Society for Cultural Anthropology,* 12, 4, (1997) pp. 447-479.

existing within the region. To be fair, this assessment has reflected the documentary sources left by British administrators, who were themselves preoccupied by the structures of the Scheme. However, in reproducing Condominium biases, historians have failed to understand how the Scheme interacted with other influences including governmental administration and existing cultural and authority structures.

Arthur Gaitskell's book, *Gezira; A Story of Development in the Sudan,* published in 1959, remains the most comprehensive survey of the Gezira Scheme. As an employee of the Sudan Plantations Syndicate from 1925, and manager from 1938-1952, Gaitskell was a prolific writer and thinker, who left an invaluable description of the growth and management of the Scheme. Gaitskell made a significant critique of the management of the Scheme, and throughout his work, sympathy for the tenant having to adapt to the new stringent working conditions is apparent. A product of his time and position he remained wedded to the idea of development and modern progress being brought through the structure of the Scheme. From the 1970s a more radical perspective influenced by the theories of underdevelopment took a more critical stance. In particular, Anthony Barnett in his 1977 monograph *The Gezira Scheme: An Illusion of Development,* described the Scheme as an authoritarian system of exploitation.[14] Barnett's work was important in shaking up the rather self-satisfied air that had come about through an uncritical acceptance of the Scheme's success, especially in developmental circles. By challenging accepted wisdom, a belated reappraisal of the Gezira Scheme was made, in which the tenants rather than government or Syndicate became for the first time the primary focus. However, by looking to place blame for what he saw as a crisis in the 1970s, Barnett oversimplified relationships within the Scheme during the Condominium and narrowed the economic analysis of the Scheme even further to rest on the perceived exploitative relationship between government and tenants.

Victoria Bernal has more recently re-explored the issues of state exploitation of tenants within the Gezira Scheme. Influenced by both Barnett and Foucault, Bernal has

---

[14] Barnett, *The Gezira Scheme,* pp. 161-2.

described the Scheme variously as a "disciplinary institution", "a system of domination", and "a system of forced labour".[15] This approach has allowed her to explore the "legal fiction" of the partnership agreement and the increasing restrictions tenants faced under strict supervision.[16] Bernal also emphasised the minutiae of the changes established within the Scheme, detailing the effects of new physical boundaries, and the impact of new agricultural timetables on Gezira inhabitants.[17] However, in portraying the Scheme as a "conflict between the colonial order and its Sudanese subjects", Bernal was again guilty of oversimplifying relationships within the Scheme, and failing to recognise what was in fact a largely positive response by tenants towards both the Scheme and the government.

Bernal's work crucially ignored a raft of studies that had throughout the 1980s explored economic relationships within the Scheme. Mark Duffield and Jay O'Brien in particular widened the horizon beyond the state-tenant relationship to investigate the crucial role of permanent and semi-permanent labouring populations within the Scheme. In focusing upon the distinctive West African communities within the Gezira region, Duffield demonstrated the economic importance of seasonal labour within the Scheme and examined the links between cultural identity and economic position to provide invaluable insights into the relationships both within and between West African/Takari and riverain Sudanese communities.[18] These ideas were developed by Jay O'Brien in a series of articles exploring the relationships between tenants and the wage-earning agricultural labourers employed by tenants.[19] In doing so, O'Brien exposed once and for all the fallacy of the tenant-cultivator image, and showed tenants to be the supervisors of

---

[15] V. Bernal, "Colonial Moral", pp. 447, 460, 468.

[16] Ibid., p. 449, 463.

[17] Ibid., pp. 447, 462-3.

[18] Mark Duffield, *Maiurno: Capitalism and Rural Life in Sudan*, (London, 1981); Idem., "Change among West African Settlers in Northern Sudan", *Review of African Political Economy*, 26, (1983), pp. 45-59.

[19] Jay O'Brien, "The Political Economy of Semi-Proletarianisation Under Colonialism: Sudan 1925-50", pp. 121-147, in B. Munslow and H. Finch (eds.,) *Proletarianisation in the Third World: Studies in the Creation of a Labour Force under Dependent Capitalism*, (London, 1984); Idem., "The Social Reproduction of Tenant Cultivators and Class Formation in the Gezira Scheme, Sudan", *Research in Economic Anthropology*, 6, (1984), pp. 217-241; Idem., "Toward a Reconstitution of Ethnicity: Capitalist Expansion and Cultural Dynamics in Sudan", *American Anthropologist*, 88, 4, (1986) pp. 398-907, Idem., "The Calculus of Profit and Labour-Time in Sudanese Peasant Agriculture", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 14, 4, (1987) pp. 454-468.

a huge seasonal labouring force – in large part made up of West African seasonal migrants. Not only did he show that lines of class conflict were more complex than simply lying between tenants and government/management, but that the varying economic means of tenants created an internal class structure, most visible in their variable ability to hire labour. Emphasising the different levels of tension in both class and ethnic terms, O'Brien contended that capitalist penetration into the Gezira created numerous lines of conflicting class interests. More support for a class model of social relationships in the Gezira Scheme has been provided by Tim Niblock. His study *Class and Power in Sudan*, remains the best socio-economic survey of Condominium Sudan, and like O'Brien, Niblock examined the lines of inequality existing within the tenant body between those who were able to benefit from the colonial-sponsored economy and those who were not.[20] Most importantly, Niblock recognised the importance of the previously ignored tenant-managed institutions; the Tenants' Association and the Tenants' Union which developed in the early 1950s, although he was not able to engage fully with the social implications of these institutional developments.

Other minor works on the Gezira exist, but often these have perpetuated misconceptions, and have done little to advance the cause of research. For instance Anthony Cheesboro's disappointing thesis "Administration and Change in the Gezira Scheme and the Sudan, 1938-1970", restates existing ideas of exploitation and class formation, but with the additional contention that a tenant class joined forces with an educated urban official *'effendia'* class to oppose the common enemy of government.[21] Without providing any compelling evidence, this theory rests on poor supposition and contradicts many tenant assertions of quite a separate identity. In general though, studies of the Gezira Scheme have made important contributions to the understanding of the importance of wealth and the control of tenancies to social relationships within the Gezira Scheme; clearly demonstrating that economic relationships between tenants, state/management and labour were a crucial element of Gezira social life. However, as

---

[20] Tim Niblock, *Class and Power in Sudan: The Dynamics of Sudanese Politics, 1898-1985* (Albany, 1987).

[21] Anthony Cheesboro, "Administration and Change in the Gezira Scheme and the Sudan, 1938-1970", (unpublished Ph.D thesis, Michigan State University, 1993), p. 48.

analyses of the wider role that the Scheme played within the region they have significant weaknesses. The exclusive focus upon the economic and structural elements of the Gezira Scheme has resulted in a portrayal of the Gezira Scheme as a totalising institution controlled by state-led policies, and fundamentally altering the social and economic landscape. This intensely narrow focus upon economic change has been at the expense of understanding important aspects of continuity.

The degree to which the colonial states were able to impose structures and change upon African societies has recently been much debated, and within this debate the Gezira Scheme provides an interesting case study. Studies of the Gezira which focus on the transforming power of the colonial state fit closely with a trend in the wider African historiography that has focused upon the changes brought by colonial states. In part these changes have been have been described as the result of coercive state-driven policies. The ability of the colonial state to implement and direct controls over its subject population, albeit in an often unobtrusive manner is at the centre of Timothy Mitchell's sophisticated retelling of the story of colonial dominance within Egypt. By emphasising the "phenomenon of the rule of the institution" Mitchell introduces the notion of "techno-politics", by which unfamiliar Westernised structures of power dominated colonial society and created new measurable and thus controllable social and economic boundaries.[22]

But studies elsewhere in Africa have increasingly questioned the novelty and power of colonial institutions – whether 'techno-political' or 'neo-traditional'.[23] They have presented twentieth century African developments as not solely controlled by the state, and have analysed the partnerships that emerged between the state and certain privileged members of society. Martin Chanock has in this way examined the role of community elders in providing a definitive form of customary law, which was then fixed in writing

---

[22] Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*, (Berkeley, 2002) pp. 9-10.
[23] Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa", in E.J. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.,) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983) pp. 211-62; Thomas Spear, "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa", *Journal of African History*, 44, (2003), pp. 3-27.

by the state in Malawi and Zambia.[24] Mahmood Mamdani has proved particularly influential in positing the idea that the colonial period led to an increase in what he has termed 'decentralised despotism'. He is persuasive in suggesting that the colonial state's desire for 'big men' to administer regions was seized upon by various local power brokers to increase their own power base at the expense of other authority figures. Over time this state reliance upon specific individuals created local despots, and undermined what had previously been multi-focal authority structures.[25]

If these studies have emphasised the power of the state (and co-opted African elite) to change the basic fluid nature of African society by creating more static structures, other works have emphasised continuity of basic social structures and cultural values throughout the colonial period. Sarah Berry and Keletso Atkins have both examined the comparative weakness of the colonial state, and its inability to impose unwanted changes upon the societies over which they had nominal control. Suggesting that colonial governments were in fact limited by among other things, inadequate personnel, their own ideological uncertainty, and the necessity of cooperation with colonial populations, Berry argues that social institutions retained their pre-colonial fluidity within the colonial state. This is not to say that new structures were not introduced, but that African societies proved adaptable, frequently able to appropriate those new structures to their advantage and fitting them into an existing cultural value system.[26] Thus while Berry acknowledges that "farmers have not been able to escape the presence of the state", she adds that "nor have they necessarily wanted to: gaining access to resources and opportunities often means working through as well as round the system." [27] Modernity, although challenging and often difficult for colonial regimes, was fully embraced by Africans when it suited their aspirations. But while the imposition of economic and administrative changes proved at least superficially successful and were

---

[24] Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia,* (Portsmouth, NH, 1998).
[25] Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, N.J., 1966).
[26] Sara Berry, *No Condition is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa,* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1993), p. 6; Thomas Spear, "Neo-Traditionalism".
[27] Berry, *No Condition is Permanent,* p. 64.

often appropriated by Africans in positive ways, the attempt to change cultural values proved much more difficult.[28] This is not to say that African societies remained unchanged or static, rather that African societies proved able to adapt and respond to changed circumstances without losing the inherent cultural qualities that were central to self-identification.

It is this new raft of Africanist literature looking at relations between state and society that influences this study. By placing African actors, both tenants and non-tenants at the centre of the study, and analysing the local motivations that allowed the Gezira Scheme to function, the Gezira Scheme area has been viewed in its totality rather than as a totalising institution. Although the coercive state approach provides an attractive framework for the study of a region in which new economic structures were so dominant, this approach invests the state with too great a power, and fails to recognise that the supposedly coerced population were in fact active collaborators in the creation of the Scheme. By understanding that the structures of the Scheme were able to be moulded to fit closely with pre-existing (and consistently misjudged) cultural values and aspirations of Gezira residents, the Gezira Scheme can be viewed as providing opportunities as well as limitations and resulting in continuities as well as changes.

Such an approach is of course inevitably limited by the available source material. Reliant upon the same documentary sources used by previous studies, the official bias towards the structure of the Scheme and towards the male tenants within the Scheme is all too evident. However, armed with a distinct set of questions, it has been possible to derive important insights into non-Scheme structures, particularly the development of judicial and administrative systems. Focusing upon both government and community use of institutions, the unique nature of the Gezira region is explored. In this way it is demonstrated that despite the very obvious measures taken by the state to intrude into the administrative and economic life of Gezira inhabitants, that this intrusion did not result in radical change and was itself only partially successful. Although Scheme

---

[28] Keletso Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give us our Money! – The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900,* (London, 1993), chapter six.

structures have been deliberately kept in the background for much of the study, it is the Scheme that influenced all other regional developments, and in doing so created a new elite of tenants, who controlled all local state apparatus. This dominant tenant population embraced the state as a means of furthering their existing cultural values, and narrowly channelled its impact to retain a large degree of space free from state interference. However, this is not to ignore the economic structures of the Scheme itself, and it is an active battle at the very centre of the Scheme that provides the climax of this story. For this purpose, previously unused source materials from newspapers, the Scheme's headquarters and personal memoirs have been employed to present in detail the story of the conflict between two rival bodies claiming to represent tenants. It is this conflict (over the best means to present universally accepted demands) that clearly demonstrates the fact that rather than opposing a state that imposed a unpopular and restricting economic structure upon them, tenants in fact embraced both the Scheme and the state as a way of meeting culturally established aspirations.

In suggesting that what has to date been viewed as a centrally-imposed and largely unpopular alien economic structure was in fact fully embraced by tenants, this study also demonstrates that government understanding of the cultural values and socio-economic organisation of the society they governed was flawed. In chapter one, the British imagination of Gezira society throughout the Condominium is at once shown to be of crucial importance in developing government policy, and at the same time founded on the most uncertain, fragile and changing notions. The only consistency lay in the theme of past dislocation through war, migrations and famine which accounted for the fractured state of twentieth century society. Although this understanding of Gezira society allowed the government to see the region as a blank sheet suitable for economic development, it overlooked the fact that the Gezira was historically a sophisticated and complex hierarchical society that was accustomed to mediating with central state authorities and demonstrated considerable structural continuity. Revealing far more about government ideology than about Gezira society, this British imagination masked important continuities in Gezira values and structures. The resulting discrepancy between social reality and government imagination created a situation in which the

government failed to understand local motivations. This pattern of government misunderstanding created space for local inhabitants to take advantage of economic structures that were introduced by the government, using them in ways that challenged the government's own ideological designs.

With a simplified imagination of Gezira society, the actual complexity of the social structures of the region was largely ignored. Chapter two explores the ways in which the government set about forming a simplified and fixed administrative hierarchy. The government's imagination of past dislocation provided the freedom to impose the structures the government wished, and sheikhs, omdas and Khuts were introduced, replaced or abolished in order to create a 'rational' administrative structure. However, it cannot be assumed that this administrative tinkering and Mamdani-esque centralisation process was able to alter society fundamentally. This would accept too readily the government's rhetoric of change and ignore the considerable continuities that the government itself worked hard to achieve. Craving stability, the government made great efforts to work through existing figures of authority, resulting in a continuity of administrative personnel within identified patrilineages from the previous Turko-Egyptian and Mahdist regimes and into the Condominium. It would also confer upon the government a greater degree of authority than it actually had, and deny the effective resilience of Gezira society to change. Communities had long experience of living within central state structures, and saw the benefits of mediating through identified gatekeeper figures. In fact, despite the official centralisation of authority that occurred through the creation of administrative specialists, the flexibility and multiplicity of authority structures including religious figures and informal councils of elders remained.

As shown in chapter three, this administrative flexibility continued throughout the first two decades of the Condominium, as the government relied upon informal and dispersed means of administration within communities. Largely concerned with judicial procedure in the first years of British rule, and with no formal or supervised procedures of dispute settlement away from government centres, officials were pragmatic in using whatever figures of community authority were most effective. This flexibility and ambiguity of

judicial settlements reflected the government's own uncertainty about the most suitable form of judicial procedures, resulting in a central role for undefined 'custom' both within the government-controlled *merkaz*, and within unsupervised community settlements. It also provided for considerable continuity in the use of multiple figures of authority, which together with the considerable choices of formal and informal means of judicial settlement meant that flexibility remained the hallmark of early Condominium authority structures.

Chapter four explores the response of Gezira communities to the increasing regularisation of judicial administration from the 1920s. For although custom remained central to the content of settlements, procedures were increasingly regularised and Indirect Rule policies established a centralising tendency as traditional authority was interpreted as residing in a single patriarchal figure. Despite the language of tradition and devolution these policies actually brought the state ever closer to the population as identified sheikhs became extensions of the *merkaz*, presiding over bureaucratised courts, whose powers were sanctioned directly by the government. These developments occurred at the same time as the Gezira Scheme was fully opened, and courts, first seen by the government as bulwarks of tradition in a landscape of potentially corrupting modernity, soon became viewed as potential vehicles for administering that modernity. These emblems of the state were soon embraced by Gezira inhabitants who saw in them enormous potential to settle disputes in a complex and mobile society, in which large numbers of relationships were formed outside an individual's community. Although these new structures were actively used for external dispute settlement, the lack of internal community disputes brought to these courts suggests that other informal mechanisms remained important. Despite attempts to centralise and formalise authority, flexibility remained central to administrative procedure, and the institutions themselves were adapted by both the communities and the state to fulfil a wide range of contemporary needs.

Chapter five follows the government's promotion of both local government and agricultural council structures; a development that illustrated the government's changing

imagination of the past and the increasing reliance upon Sudanese bodies to provide front line administrative services. Although bringing far fewer changes that the government's rhetoric would suggest, councils were uniquely controlled by agricultural inspectors and by executive officials; and conciliar devolution brought the state ever closer to communities, in an aim of establishing modern universal bureaucratic institutions of governance. This trend which encompassed the whole of northern Sudan was particularly enhanced within the Gezira, as 'modern' governance was introduced to keep pace with 'modern' economics. As a unique area of economic experimentation, so the Gezira Scheme region became an arena of administrative experimentation which was directed firstly by the needs of the Scheme, and then by the considered social needs of its 'sophisticated' population.

In chapters six and seven, it is shown how the devolutionary experimentation came to specifically benefit the lives of tenants within the Gezira Scheme at the expense of non-tenants. All councils were controlled by tenants, despite the fact that they were not the numerically dominant section of the population and developments such as devolving duties of agricultural supervision, and the creation of village and block councils were explicitly aimed to improve the lives of tenants. In this way, citizenship, in the sense of having access to and control over structures of governance, was directly associated with tenants status. Although the established patrilinages might have maintained the control over the leading positions on councils, a gulf was increasing between an identifiable tenant population and those who did not have tenancies, which was expressed not only economically, but within the very structures of local government.

Not only did the Gezira experience an unprecedented expansion of local government structures, but it also embraced those structures in ways very unlike other areas of Sudan. Councils might have been government-controlled institutions, but mediation with the government was viewed by the tenant-dominated bodies as beneficial, providing access to government-controlled resources and as a way of controlling their own experience of central governance. Fitting with pre-existing notions of multi-focal authority, councils were popular among tenants in the Gezira, and seen as a means of

potentially empowering the individual as well as the community. The tenant population of the Gezira which dominated councils thus proved able to adapt to what were considered by the government to be highly significant structural changes within the institutions of governance. In fact, despite the government's emphasis upon change, and its creation of intensely regulated elected bureaucratic institutions based upon new units of administration, the continuities are striking. Community representatives had long mediated with the state, and the formalisation of this process provided ever more opportunities, while also channelling state intervention away from other parts of community life.

The last three chapters of the thesis return to the familiar ground of economic relationships within the Scheme. Rather than being an exploitative and unwelcome economic structure, chapter eight demonstrates that the Gezira Scheme was welcomed by tenants who saw in it the potential to achieve culturally embedded aspirations. The Gezira region was a hierarchical society, which highlighted control over labour as a social ideal and looked down upon manual labour. Wealth and control over land were the necessary prerequisites for attaining this cultural ideal and subsequent status, and it was these things that the Scheme appeared to offer. The Scheme was therefore embraced by those who became tenants. Despite rather vague initial British aims of establishing a broadly egalitarian peasantry, tenants proved able to adapt the structures of the Scheme to reflect the existing cultural values of Gezira society and in the process place themselves at the apex of that society.

As explored in chapter nine, it was the distinction between tenants and labourers rather than any differences within the tenant body that were culturally most significant, being directly linked with notions of citizenship and rights. This was in part a reflection of the growing economic divide between tenants and non-tenants, as profits from tenancies rapidly increased throughout the 1940s. With the franchise based upon property requirements that tenants automatically met, this economic dominance was also translated into the political dominance of tenants within the Gezira. This dominance of tenants was also articulated in nationalistic terms, as tenants proclaimed an Arab

'ownership' of the Scheme and opposed any non-Arab infiltration of tenant holdings. A concerted campaign in the late 1940s against non-Arab and non-Sudanese tenants succeeded in weakening the position of the large communities of West African labourers within the Scheme. Making a direct association between ethnic status, economic status and citizenship, non-tenant populations and West African populations in particular were socially and politically alienated, while tenant status automatically brought privileges.

Within chapter ten it is shown that these privileges became increasingly couched in terms of rights, as from the mid 1940s tenants began to reassess their relationship with state and scheme management. This relationship should not be seen as being based on opposition. At no time did tenants question the premise of the Scheme, for the social defects of the Scheme were passed onto those who were employed to labour on the tenancies. Rather, tenants aimed to improve their individual circumstances and consolidate their position as landlords through gaining greater control over the financial management of the Scheme. Accustomed to mediating with agents of the state and the Syndicate, tenants saw those structures of governance as a potential source of support and consistently embraced institutional and governmental mechanisms as a way of achieving their aims. This is demonstrated in the most dramatic event in the period; the split of the tenant body between those who supported the established figures and structures of mediation within the Tenants' Association, and those who supported the more radical institution of the Tenants' Union.

It is easy to emphasise the differences between these two groups. The Tenants' Association was made up of the existing administrative elite, barely unchanged throughout the Condominium. The Tenants' Union used a language borrowed from the labour movement, of exploitation and oppression. However, to take these differences at surface value is to miss the essential similarities that defined the tenants' movement as distinctive from any other social movement within the Condominium. Behind the language, both bodies aimed to achieve exactly the same demands which revolved round gaining greater profits from the Scheme, and both attempted to control their own experience of government through institutional mediation. The aspirations of both

bodies were identical and reflected the long-term cultural values of Gezira society. It was the differential ability to achieve this aspiration that proved the divisive element. The different economic resources within the tenant body identified by O'Brien and Niblock are thus key to understanding the unstable 'political' climate within the 1950s Gezira Scheme, which continued to effect the post-independence landscape. However, these differences were one of degree on the same spectrum, and were consistently distinct from the aspirations of other groups in Sudan, whether urban labour or rural 'tribal' movements.

What was occurring within the Gezira Scheme was the development of a particular self-defined elite. Although quite distinctive as it reacted to the unique conditions of the Scheme, this development was part of a wider movement that saw the consolidation of an Arab riverain northern Sudanese elite. This phenomenon has been well documented within the literature upon Sudan. After independence, a body of northern Sudanese scholars wrote a series of political histories celebrating the independence of Sudan.[29] The story of Sudanese history was presented as a nationalist struggle in which northern, urban, educated and ethnically Arab parties dominated the movement to gain independence for the entire nation and subsequently controlled the future shape of the nation. More recent scholarship has identified this cultural narrowness as a fundamental weakness, consequent on an uneven 'development' during the Condominium which created dominant and periphery regions, identified along lines of religious, ethnicity and economy.[30] The same point has been made by Douglas Johnson in direct reference to the cultural, economic and political alienation of the southern regions of Sudan from the north.[31]

This phenomenon of Arab riverain dominance existed prior to Condominium rule. Ahmad Sikainga describes the increase of non-Arab slave ownership among northern

---

[29] See for example, Muddathir'Abd al-Rahim Tayyib, *Imperialism and Nationalism in the Sudan: A Study in Constitutional and Political Development 1899-1956* (Oxford, 1969); Mohammed Omer Beshir, *Revolution and Nationalism in the Sudan* (London, 1974).

[30] Peter Woodward, *Condominium and Sudanese Nationalism* (London, 1979); Idem., *Sudan: The Unstable State, 1898-1989* (Boulder, Colorado, 1990).

[31] Douglas Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Oxford, 2003), p. xviii.

landowners under nineteenth century Turko-Egyptian rule, while Anders Bjørkelo's study of nineteenth century Shendi demonstrates the degree to which riverain Sudan became the focus of colonial administrative and economic life.[32]   However, this dominance of the centre increased disproportionately during the Condominium, as social, administrative and economic developments focused upon the riverain region. With the isolated example of Port Sudan, all agricultural and industrial investment was made in the central riverain region. With the Three Towns acting as the economic and political hub of the nation also based upon the Nile, the dominance of that region was complete. Thus although this region was not politically homogenous, it was its shared ethnic, religious and economic background that dominated the national agenda. Heather Sharkey demonstrates this most forcefully in her study of culture and nationalism in Condominium Sudan, in which she describes the "narrow social construction of the Northern educated elite."[33] Suggesting that those chosen to gain a secondary education came predominantly from the northern riverain regions, Sharkey portrays the resulting nationalist movement led by educated Sudanese as representing a narrow range of interests that "define[d] the Sudanese nation in their own social image".[34]

The Gezira Scheme was at the centre of this narrow form of Nile valley elite development. It established a vocally riverain Arab tenant population in a landscape in which all those without tenancies held an ambiguous position in relation to the state.

And yet despite riverain-centred nationalism gaining support throughout the region, tenants consistently saw themselves as distinct from other riverain elites including the skilled working elites affiliated to the Sudan Workers' Trades Union Federation (SWTUF), and the educated *effendiya*. Viewing themselves as a new class of landlords, tenants straddled the rural and the urban, the traditional and the modern in ways that provided them with a unique self-image. This in turn allowed tenants to react towards the state in quite distinct ways. By embracing rather than opposing the Scheme and the

---

[32] Ahmed Alawad Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers: Emancipation and Labor in Colonial Sudan*, (Austin, Texas, 1996). Anders Bjørkelo, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya: Peasants and Traders in the Shendi Region, 1821-1885* (Cambridge, 1989).

[33] Heather Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (Berkeley, 2003), p. 39.

[34] Ibid., pp. 8, 19.

state, and becoming fully involved in the institutions that mediated with those structures, tenants were able to defend their specific economic interests while retaining their pre-existing cultural values. By demonstrating flexibility, and seizing opportunity, tenants moulded the structures imposed upon them by the state to ways that proved greatly advantageous. Colonial dominance, even in the Gezira Scheme with its unique structures and high degree of supervision was thus never as complete as has been considered.

IMAGINING THE PAST

"To have knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it", so Said summed up the importance of knowledge of 'the subject' by colonial powers.[1] The European search for 'truth', together with the practical necessity of ruling an unknown and potentially subversive population, motivated colonial governments to try and understand the culture, social structure and condition of the society in which they found themselves. In doing so, Said argues, the coloniser established a particularised and Euro-centric vision of the colony that tells the observer more about the colonial state than about the society of study.[2] Bendedict Anderson and Timothy Mitchell have both explored the ways in which colonial governments attempted to gain this knowledge of 'the other'. Labelling and categorisation were powerful ways of mapping the subject, making it "picture-like and legible, rendered available to political and economic calculation."[3] Censuses, maps, and at a later date, ethnographies were further tools by which colonial powers dominated and reordered society, making it intelligible to Western thought. In this way, the colonial subject became objectified as a set (and intrinsically fixed) museum piece in a European construction of exotic society. In the Sudan, a well documented past going back to the seventeenth century, was understood as a succession of clearly defined regime changes. It was these distinctive regimes (and the assumed social dislocation that coincided with the regime changes) that became the focus of much Condominium

---

[1] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978), p. 32.
[2] Ibid., p. 32.
[3] Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 33; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities; Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991), Chapter ten.

study, and consequently of Condominium understanding of northern Sudanese society.

Colonial understanding of the subject was not just an intellectual conceit, it was central to the policies that were implemented and the experience of colonial governance. It affected every level of administration, influencing the government's identification of viable and 'suitable' local leaders, and conversely the undesirable elements of social organisation. However, knowledge is subjective; it is formed through the framing of certain questions, through the context of one's background, and the vagaries of fashion. As Donald Reid has demonstrated, no colony was ever really a blank page to an official, "the question is which preconceived filters one used and how these clarified or distorted encounters with... realities".[4] Seen as objects of study, commentators categorised 'the other' in ways that supported government policy. This too frequently resulted in a simplistic and static vision of African society based on "public perceptions of the indigenous population which were based on a set of misguided assumptions and foregone conclusions".[5] As Sara Berry has stated:

> For much of the colonial era, many Europeans assumed that
> African communities consisted of mutually exclusive
> sociocultural units – tribes, villages, kin groups – whose customs
> and structures had not changed very much over time.[6]

This conception of African culture allowed commentators to make sweeping generalisations and conclusions, based upon a conception of society that existed in bounded patriarchal units with clearly identifiable leaders that suited the needs of colonial powers.

Reflecting contemporary concerns and social ideals, the interpretations of Sudan's pre-Condominium past were based upon a series of official narratives, each of which failed to understand the structural complexities of Sudanese societies and consequent motivations of the population. Immediately after the establishment of the

---

[4] Donald M. Reid, "Cromer and the Classics: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Greco-Roman Past in Modern Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 32, 1, (1996) pp. 1-29, at p.1.
[5] Atkins, *The Moon is Dead!*, p. 3.
[6] Berry, *No Condition is Permanent*, p. 27.

Condominium, criticism of nineteenth century regimes was used to justify Anglo-Egyptian rule. By the 1920s Indirect Rule policies dominated government analysis, developing a tribal-centred understanding of the past, while a rejection of this tradition from the 1930s led the way for a feudal approach to past social relationships. The vision of social organisation may have been uncertain, but all focussed upon the differences between past regimes, emphasising dislocation and change rather than continuity. Although British officials within the Gezira had a more sympathetic understanding of the region, local voices were unable to change that central dominant vision. Colonial interpretations had the effect of fixing Sudanese history in the government's mindset and this vision of past disruption in the Gezira region was particularly useful in establishing the notion of a blank sheet upon which pragmatic administrative and economic policies might be imposed. However, by seeing uncertain and changing Condominium imaginations as revealing far more about Condominium ideology than about Gezira society, many of the accepted 'truths' about the region; for instance that it was depopulated at the end of the nineteenth century and that the Gezira Scheme was an unwelcome and oppressive institution, can be reassessed.

The Creation of an Enemy

Sudan had been highly visible within the British public imagination throughout the nineteenth century. It was the backdrop against which a series of Europeans had exerted their dominance of the exotic, through highly publicised explorations along the Nile.[7] In contrast with the light and civilisation that these explorations were deemed to represent, Sudan stood as a symbol of barbarity and Eastern despotism, being famous as a centre of the slave trade so actively opposed by British interest groups.[8] However, it was the fall of Khartoum in 1885, and the death of General

---

[7] See for example John Petherick, *Travels in Central Africa, and Explorations of the Western Nile Tributaries* (Farnborough, 1968); Samuel Baker, *Ismailia: a Narrative of the Expedition to Central Africa for the Suppression of the Slave Trade, Organized by Ismail, Khedive of Egypt* (London, 1874); John H. Speke, *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (Edinburgh, 1863).

[8] Gabriel Warburg discusses the pressures of British anti-slavery interest groups on British policy makers in "Some Social and Economic Aspects of Turko-Egyptian Rule in the Sudan", *Belletin dört ayda bir çikar*, 53, (1989), pp. 769-795 at p. 770.

Charles Gordon, that propelled Sudan to the centre of British national consciousness. His demise at the hands of the Mahdi's 'dervish' forces, became an emblem of tragedy and an outpouring of hagiographic literature emerged to mythologize Gordon and push Sudan's 'suffering' to the forefront of British imperial consciousness.[9] This dramatic style became the template for all observations upon the Mahdia, which as Norman Daniel has stated "was presented – or presented itself – in a series of particularly vivid scenes from melodrama."[10]

Despite Gordon's death, the immediate reaction to the Mahdist uprising in Britain was sympathy towards a nation throwing off "the odious yoke of the Egyptian Government".[11] William Gladstone, in his awkwardly anti-imperialist stance believed the Sudanese were a people "struggling rightly to be free", while Henry Russell described "flagrant instances of corruption, incapacity, oppression, and plunder" of the Turko-Egyptian regime as justified motivation for the revolt.[12] However, British sympathy for the underdog could not survive the latter making the transition to government. As the Mahdist regime under the rule of the Mahdi's successor, the Khalifa Abdullahi, became established from 1885, earlier sympathetic interpretations "receded as notions of despotism, of fanaticism and of cruelty took its place".[13]

Reginald Wingate, as director of military intelligence of the Egyptian Army during the period leading up to the Anglo-Egyptian invasion of Sudan, was the central figure in a propagandist portrayal of the Mahdist regime and painted a picture of a tyrannical Mahdist government conducting "a reign of terror" in a ruthless mission to maintain power.[14] Wingate also compiled and translated the works of two well-

---

[9] See for example Gerald Graham, *Last words with Gordon* (London 1887); Henry William Gordon, *Events in the Life of Charles George Gordon from its Beginning to its End* (London, 1886); Archibald Forbes, *Chinese Gordon: a Succinct Record of his Life* (London, 1884).

[10] N. Daniel, *Islam, Europe and Empire* (Edinburgh, 1966), p. 416.

[11] J. Morley, First Viscount, speaking in the Commons, February 1885, quoted in; Daniel, *Islam, Europe and Empire*, p. 421.

[12] Gladstone, speaking in the Commons, May 1884, quoted in Daniel, *Islam, Europe and Empire*, p. 423; Henry Russell, *The Ruin of the Soudan; Cause, Effect and Remedy: a Resumé of Events, 1883-1891* (London, 1892), pp. 14-15.

[13] Daniel, *Islam, Europe and Empire*, p. 424.

[14] Francis Reginald Wingate, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan: Being an Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahdiism, and of Subsequent Events in the Sudan to the Present Time* (London, 1891), pp. 227-228.

known European prisoners of the Mahdi, Father Joseph Ohrwalder, and Rudolph Slatin Pasha.[15] Bringing together the romance and trials of adventure travel in exotic lands with a frisson of brutality and drama, the Mahdist leaders were portrayed in these writings as randomly brutal, despotic and hypocritical. Slatin's testimony was used as the basis of an official report in 1895, which concluded; "immorality of every description prevails throughout the Soudan".[16] Depopulation was frequently used as symbol of this degeneration, and Slatin's statement that "at least seventy-five per cent of the total population has succumbed to war, famine, and disease, while of the remainder the majority are little better than slaves", became accepted as fact.[17]

While the Mahdia was the immediate concern of the late nineteenth century European agenda, there was also significant focus upon the Turko-Egyptian regime as providing the historical context to the Mahdia. In 1821, Ismail Pasha, on behalf of his father, Muhammed Ali, Khedive of Egypt, invaded Sudan and established a colonial government that was to last until the fall of Khartoum in 1885.[18] Slatin, in his condemnation of the Mahdia, portrayed the Turkia as a civilising experiment, subsequently destroyed by the Mahdia:

> Nor can I recall any other instance in modern times of a country
> in which a semblance of civilisation has existed for upwards of
> half a century, falling back into a state so little removed from
> absolute barbarism.[19]

More moderate assessments portrayed the regime as progressive and civilising in intent – bringing centralised justice, education and a bureaucratic administration – but as fundamentally flawed in practice.[20] Inefficiency, corruption and excessive taxation were seen as the hallmarks of the Turkia; a regime viewed as a failed Oriental imitation of European systems of bureaucratic government, and condemned all the more for its failure to match those systems.

---

[15] Joseph Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdi's camp, 1882-1892,* (ed., F.R. Wingate, London, 1892); Rudolph Slatin, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan: a Personal Narrative of Fighting and Serving the Dervishes, 1879-1895,* (trans., F.R. Wingate, London, 1896).
[16] Sudan Government, *Reports on the Finances, Administration, and Condition of the Sudan* [*SGR*] 1895, pp. 4, 9.
[17] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, p. 623.
[18] For a narrative history of the Turko-Egyptian regime, see Richard Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881* (London, 1959).
[19] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, p. 622.
[20] Russell, *The Ruin of the Soudan*, pp. 4-15.

The Turkia was known by the Condominium government as "the old government", and officials were clearly aware of the close parallels between the two colonial regimes. However, despite acknowledging the structural similarities, it was portrayed as but a faint image of a true modern European government, for although in Winston Churchill's words, "it preserved the magnificent appearance of Imperial dominium", including representatives of other nations, international trade and bureaucratic reporting, "yet all was a hateful sham".[21] Colonialism was at once defended as a positive marker of social progress, while being marked as the preserve of European powers. The perceived result of Ottoman misrule in Sudan was viewed to be social and economic dislocation, highlighted by, among others, Samuel Baker, who in the 1860s described the areas around Khartoum as deserted and depopulated:

> The rich soil on the banks of the river, which had a few years since been highly cultivated, had been abandoned... Villages once crowded had entirely disappeared; the population was gone. Irrigation had ceased. The night, formally discordant with creaking of countless waterwheels, was now silent as death. There was not a dog to howl for a lost master. Industry had vanished; oppression had driven the inhabitants from the soil.[22]

A Lost Kingdom

While the focus of assessment at the end of the nineteenth century remained on the immediate past and its destructive nature, there was also an attempt to describe the indigenous tradition of Sudan prior to nineteenth century colonial rule. Educated in the classical tradition, European commentators sought to root a culture in past civilisations as a way to understand the present. Such a background provided Sudanese culture with status and pedigree, and emphasised the destructive qualities of the more recent regimes. The Fung kingdom based on the city of Sennar, had

---

[21] Winston Churchill, *The River War: An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan* (London, 1900), pp. 21-22.
[22] Baker, *Ismailia*, pp. 22-23.

attracted European visitors from the seventeenth century who wrote accounts of an exotic kingdom. These visitors had held an uncertain position within the kingdom; at times courted with favour, at others held virtual prisoner, on permanent display and profoundly isolated from all that was familiar. As a result, their accounts of their experiences were ambiguous and frequently contradictory.

Poncet visited the Fung kingdom of Sennar in the 1690s, becoming the King's physician, and wrote the most enduring image of the kingdom at its supposed height. He emphasised a central state presided over by a divine and powerful monarch. Although his original manuscript contains much that suggests this was far from an extravagantly wealthy or grand city, describing the palace as "nothing but a confused heap of buildings", later interpretations of his work emphasised the accounts of riches, and elaborate rituals.[23] By the 1770s, when James Bruce visited Sennar, his observations compared unfavourably with the image he had built up from Poncet's writings. He concluded "Sennaar was in ruin and was not like it once was."[24] These and similar travelogues were the main sources for late nineteenth and early twentieth century writers, and created a perception of decline that became the template for European understanding of the past. If the accounts of travellers were themselves contradictory, then early Condominium officials drew from them selectively to paint a picture of a glorious past that had all the hallmarks of a powerful centralised state – wealth, divine monarchs, and an army – which underwent a process of decline until there was no longer any visible evidence of this past. This image was all the more powerful for having only the slightest evidence. The idea of an African state within the harsh plains of Sudan was intoxicating; it flourished in a European imagination that throughout the nineteenth century had fed on the tales of the Arabian Nights and the Arthurian legend.

Russell was the first European observer to fit this early Sudanese history into a chronology that led directly to the Turkia and Mahdia. He set out a vision that was to become the foundation for Condominium attitudes towards the past. He described an influx of Arab tribes under the guidance of a single chief, Beni Ommia, migrating

---

[23] Charles Jacques Poncet, *A Voyage to Aethiopia, Made in the Years 1698, 1699, and 1700* (London, 1709), pp. 19-23.

[24] James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (Edinburgh, 1790), p. 436.

into Sudan during the seventh and eighth centuries and intermarrying with the original "negro tribes of Fung and Hamagh".[25] An Arab identity was thus imprinted upon the Fung kingdom. Sennar, as the seat of the Fung king, was the focus of Russell's work; "a centre of attraction for men of learning", with a "worldwide reputation".[26] The seventeenth century kingdom epitomised the golden age of Central Northern Sudan, and stood as an era in which order prevailed, and the structures of an indigenous centralised state (the most attractive, because familiar, form of governance to British colonial officials) flourished. However, the rot of decline was already set: "Strange to say, however, this exceptional prosperity seems to have been doomed to almost immediate collapse."[27] This collapse was attributed in part to the inherent flaws within that indigenous kingdom, and in part to the degenerative tendencies of the subsequent centralised oriental regimes.

Condominium Assessment

This broad outline of events was to remain at the centre of Condominium interpretations of the past, by which the government was able to present itself as the salve to the condition of decline. In this way the portrayal of the past lent legitimacy to the latest colonial encounter. Once in power, British officials attempted to understand the past within the present. This was a task that Cromer (albeit with unintentional irony) showed was full of difficulties for the administrator with preconceived opinions:

> No casual visitor can hope to obtain much real insight into the
> true state of native opinion. Divergence of religion and habits of
> thought; in my own case ignorance of the vernacular language;
> the reticence of Orientals when speaking to any one in authority;
> their tendency to agree with any one to whom they may be talking
> the want of mental symmetry and precision which is the chief
> distinguishing feature between the illogical and picturesque East

---

[25] Russell, *The Ruin of the Soudan*, pp. 2-3.
[26] Ibid., pp. 3-10.
[27] Ibid., p. 3.

and the logical West... and the fact that the European and the

Oriental, reasoning from the same premises will often arrive at

diametrically opposite conclusions – all these circumstances place

the European at a great disadvantage when he attempts to gauge

Eastern opinion.[28]

The attempt to know 'the other' through this haze of potential misconception resulted in broad categorisation with little useful content, particularly before the Condominium began when sources were limited. Wingate in 1892 divided the Sudan into five ethnographic classes based on ethnicity and economy, from the 'great camel owning Arab tribes' to 'cattle owning negroes'.[29] However, the present was always seen in terms of the past, and the theme of decline was constantly repeated. The first examinations of the country under Condominium rule detailed ruined towns, abandoned *saqias* [irrigation devices along the Nile], and huge declines in population. The 1903 Governor-General's annual report estimated that the population of Gezira province prior to the Mahdia was 550,000, which was reduced over the sixteen years of Mahdist rule to only 150,000, figures that were in line with the evaluation of population decline throughout the country.[30] As Daly suggests, such exaggerated statements of population decline "went unchallenged because they confirmed the worst", and thus legitimated the new administration.[31] Evidence of Sudanese prosperity did not fit into the government's image of a war-torn country redeemed by British rule. William Garstin's description of Wad Medani as "the most prosperous town in the whole of Sudan", with many areas in the region growing good crops, was therefore a rare exception to the general vision of gloom.[32] Instead, the theory of decline and dislocation was propagated at the highest levels, with Wingate as Governor-General from 1900 to 1916 justifying the official statistics demonstrating drastic population decline:

That the loss of life...should represent upwards of 75 per cent of

the total population seems almost incredible, but, from my own

personal experience, I can vouch for the comparative correctness

---

[28] Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt* (London, 1911), p. 6.
[29] F. R. Wingate, *The Sudan Past and Present* (Woolwich, 1892), p. 2.
[30] *SGR* 1903, p. 3.
[31] Martin Daly, *Empire on the Nile: The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan 1898-1934* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 19.
[32] Ibid., pp. 21-22.

of these figures. One has only to travel through the country to realize the terrible ravages of Dervish misrule, of which there is such painful evidence in the wholesale destruction of towns and villages, and the enormous tracts of once cultivated land now either a barren wilderness or overgrown with thorns and high grass.[33]

The Gezira plain itself was popularly seen as an empty wasteland. In 1898, Albert Gleichen concluded that the Gezira was "thinly peopled and little cultivated", a fact directly attributed to the previous Turkia and Mahdist regimes:

It could be made to produce three times what it does at present, but they themselves say that the old Egyptian rule totally suppressed all habits of industry.[34]

The idea of the Gezira being abandoned was a powerful image. Previously understood to be the "granary of the Sudan", the Gezira was now described as "a sterile waste."[35] For the majority of the year the Gezira plain was a dry, utterly flat and featureless plain stretching as far as one could see in any direction. It was understandable that this landscape aroused dismay in the European observer. It neither offered the obvious fertility of green Europe, nor the picturesque harshness of the desert; this was emptiness at its most dismal.

Tribal Beginnings

By the early twentieth century, the idea was firmly established in British thought that a succession of centralised regimes had existed within northern Sudan, all of which were associated with eventual decline and disaster. Although the focus remained on the central state, the understanding of local society was centred on the patriarchal leadership of organised units of population. It was clearly understood that below the level of the state, there were hierarchies of power, with distinct leaders and subjects.

---

[33] *SGR* 1903, p. 4.
[34] Albert Gleichen, *Handbook of the Sudan* (London, 1898), p. 91.
[35] Ibid., p. 90.

George Hoskins, travelling up the Nile north of Khartoum in the nineteenth century had described his meeting with "Sheakh Sayd, the chief of the Adabes... [whose] family have held this title from time immemorial: the stamp of nobility is marked upon his high forehead; and there is an expression of dignified mildness in his countenance which commands respect".[36] This idea of innate noble and autocratic Arab leadership being contained within specific families or lineages continued into the twentieth century. The identification of such seemingly bounded political units as 'tribes' was also to become highly influential.

The terminology of 'tribes' had become a favoured description of African society, promulgated by nineteenth century Europeans struggling to understand the fluid and unfamiliar societies in which they found themselves. Originating in the descriptions of pre-Christian Europe, it brought with it connotations of evolutionary delay, and was vague enough to mask the real lack of European knowledge of African social structure in their infinite variations. By 1900, 'tribe' was an important (if dangerously undefined) ideology of colonial administration, and John Maxwell, Governor of Khartoum wrote to Wingate about the importance of province boundaries being "left vague until we survey it piecemeal and know tribal boundaries".[37] Recent works have exposed the weaknesses of the fixed tribal categories favoured by colonial administrations:

> Africa was not... composed of tribes or ethnic groups with distinct boundaries. On the contrary, the dominant characteristics of pre-colonial 'societies'... were mobility, over-lapping networks, multiple group membership and the flexible, context-dependent drawing of boundaries.[38]

Crude though it was, the ideology of tribes became an increasingly important tool of social analysis and administrative understanding and the Compendium of 1905 had devoted an entire section to the detailed labelling of Sudanese tribal groups.[39]

---

[36] George Hoskins, *Travels in Ethiopia, above the second cataract of the Nile* (London, 1835), pp. 45-6.

[37] Sudan Archive Durham, (SAD) 270/1/42-43, Maxwell, Governor Khartoum Province to Wingate, Governor General, 10 January 1900.

[38] Carole Lentz, "'Tribalism' and Ethnicity in Africa; a Review of Four Decades of Anglophone Research", *Cahiers des Sciences Humaines*, 31 (1995), pp. 303-28 at p. 319.

[39] Albert Gleichen (ed.,), *Compendium of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (London, 1905).

Early Condominium reliance on devolution to identified patriarchal leaders was synthesised with the existing grandiose vision of the central state of the Fung kingdom within H.C. Jackson's monograph on the Fung in 1912. Relying on Poncet for details regarding the richness of the kingdom at its supposed height, Jackson detailed an Arabian Nights fantasy of a strong, central and wealthy monarchy, and juxtaposed images of opulence and brutal oppression, hospitality and treachery. But onto this fantastic tapestry was woven a more prosaic tale of administrative organisation. With an emphasis upon co-opting existing 'tribal' structures, he made clear parallels with contemporary Condominium rule:

> Like the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan of to-day, it was a
> conglomeration of many different tribes, very loosely bound
> together by self-interest, under the suzerainty of a more powerful
> people. There was, however, this difference: whereas to-day the
> Government exercises definite tangible authority over the people
> under its charge, the influence of the old Kings was of a rather
> shadowy and undefined character, limited to the imposition of a
> more or less nominal tribute on the tribes within the boundaries of
> their kingdom.[40]

Although centralised under a monarchy, the administration of Fung society was described by Jackson as being left in the hands of tribal chieftains, or vassal chiefs, who had "considerable latitude in the choice of methods they might employ for the administration of their respective districts".[41] By these means Jackson attributed the success of the Fung kingdom in ruling a large swathe of Sudan, to a policy of devolution by which "they made a point of ruling by means of the local chieftain instead of introducing some carpet-bagger from Sennar".[42] This 'tradition' appeared to 'prove' the historical existence of political and economic tribal units throughout central northern Sudan, and thus was used to justify Condominium practices of decentralised rule.

---

[40] H.C. Jackson, *Tooth of Fire: Being Some Account of the Ancient Kingdom of Sennar* (Oxford, 1912), p. 2.
[41] Ibid., p. 89.
[42] Ibid., p. 89.

The Condominium government's increasing focus on simplistic tribal forms was encouraged by the nature of rural society in northern Sudan. Away from the Nile, communities remained largely nomadic, organised in close-knit patriarchal clan lineages that identified themselves socially, politically and economically by tribal names.[43] Such communities became understood as the norm and any deviation from this ideal type was viewed as an aberration. Greater confusion was created by the universal use of tribal names throughout Sudan, including settled riverain areas. Sudanese self-identification patterns included lineages and sections within larger 'tribal' units, which were presented as the basis of social organisation structure. Just as the British found the categorisation of people useful, so did the populations themselves, and the 'creation' of common histories and genealogies was an established technique of establishing distinct groups against 'the other'. Thus Herbert St. George Peacock who was in charge of the land surveys in Gezira from 1906-1910 was able to identify twelve different 'tribal' groups within the single district of Messellemia.[44] As Carole Lentz has stated, "precolonial 'ethnic' ideologies of a common ancestor and history were also invented and propagated by cultural specialists to establish new 'we' groups".[45] British officials all too often took this self-evaluation at face value, describing an 'ideal form' of tribal organisation as being social reality rather than observing actual social interaction. In reality an "asserted ideology" was a way in which a community was able to maintain a value system and create a set of (sometimes only nominal) relationships and obligations that formed an inclusive group.[46] The failure of image and reality to match, led to a running problematic throughout colonial discussions on tribal organisation. The terminology of lineage and tribe was too blunt an instrument to define the complexity and variations of African social reality, but despite this, it remained the key analytical tool for British observers when describing 'traditional' African society.

---

[43] Harold MacMichael, *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan: and some account of the people who preceded them and of the tribes inhabiting Dárfur* (Cambridge, 1922).

[44] Herbert St. George Peacock, *A Report of the Land Settlement of the Gezira (Mesellemia District)* (London, 1913), p. 36.

[45] Lentz, "'Tribalism' and Ethnicity in Africa", p. 319.

[46] Phillip Carl Salzman, "Ideology and Change in Middle Eastern Tribal Societies", *Man*, 13 (1978) pp. 618-637, at p. 625.

With the emphasis upon tribes, commentators found it difficult to understand society in other ways. Nonetheless those officials living and working in settled riverain northern Sudan on occasions provided a more subtle study of society, providing clues as to the distinctiveness of riverain society. The result was an analysis of the Gezira as being a hierarchical village-based society, divided by differential access to resources between those who controlled access to land, and those who were dependent on gaining access to this land. Gleichen, in 1898 identified two groups of noblemen and commoners; "upper classes [who] spend a life of indolence and dissipation", and "abject slave[s], whether of a private master, or of a despotic king".[47] J.G. Matthew writing in 1909 agreed that there was a clear distinction between those who owned land, and those who did not, and described the relationship between these two economic groups, as being articulated through a system of rents and tenancies. This according to Matthew resulted in "a system of hereditary landlords owning large areas which they let to the cultivating classes; the small freeholder being almost non-existent."[48] Peacock reinforced this vision of private landownership through his work on the land settlements of the Gezira, which in contrast with predominantly pastoral regions, concluded that private and unequal landownership had formed the basis of the past Gezira economy;

> [P]rivate ownership in the Gezira had been recognized in the past as long as living man remembered. It had been recognized by decisions in land cases and by previous land commissions during the present government and it had been recognized during the Mahdia, during the Turkia and during the period of the Fungs. There are old documents in existence proving grants by the Fung Sultans to individuals and documents of title have passed between the parties from ancient times until the present day. Land has been cleared and cultivated by individuals, land has been sold and mortgaged until the present time and a determination not to recognize private ownership would have been not only unjust but a political danger.[49]

---

[47] Gleichen, *Handbook of the Sudan*, pp. 91-92.

[48] J.G. Matthew, "Land Customs and Tenure in Singa District", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 4, (1921) pp. 1-19, at p. 1, (although not published until 1921, the author states that the paper was first written in 1909).

[49] Peacock, *A report of the Land Settlement of the Gezira*, p. 36.

Peacock had to defend his analysis of private ownership by untangling the multiple identity markers used by individuals, for although he acknowledged that land "may be spoken of as [tribal]... in fact the individual owner is known and resents encroachment by a member of the tribe as much as by any outsider."[50]

For Matthew, private landownership, and the economic imbalances that it created, was the base for all pre-Condominium riverain socio-political organisation. He saw villages as dominated by landowners; either the sheikh of the village himself, or more commonly by a large estate owner. The latter would manage his land through the appointment of a village sheikh who brought people to settle the land and collected their rents; "The sheikh is in fact the land or estate agent, and by his means the cultivation of the land is assured, and consequently the landlord's rent roll increased."[51] Land title was achieved through grants by the Fung Sultans to either vassal chiefs of 'tribes', or holy men building religious estates. Title to land was also achieved under the Turkia, when land use and ownership was encouraged in an attempt to increase tax revenues. However, Matthew noted a distinct preference by those he spoke to, of titles granted under the Fung, which were perceived as holding greater legitimacy than more recent claims.[52] According to his work, it would seem that the Sudanese population in sedentary northern Sudan had a particular preference for the manner in which they represented their claims. Historical continuity of access to land and the direct link with the Fung monarchy that landownership represented were powerful symbols of authority and legitimacy.

The Gezira might have been seen as an aberration, but for the first twenty years of the Condominium it was an aberration that was able to be contained in a government policy that provided considerable leeway for regional difference. By the 1920s, in the face of nationalist pressures in both Egypt and Sudan, and increasing fears of the 'modernised' educated sectors of colonial society, increasing emphasis was put on the 'tribe' as a moderating and traditional institution. In a more considered way than before, the tribe became the prism through which both the present and the past were explored. Under Sir Lee Stack, Governor-General 1917 to 1924, tribes were

---

[50] Ibid., p. 50.

[51] Matthew, "Land Customs and Tenure in Singa District", p. 1.

[52] Ibid., p. 2.

officially incorporated into the administration with the 1922 Power of Nomad Sheikhs Ordinance providing legislation for 'tribal' leaders to wield defined powers. However, it was under the governorship of Sir John Maffey, between 1927 and 1934, that the highly fashionable policies of Indirect Rule were formerly adopted within Sudan, by which tribal structures were highlighted as the administrative base of Condominium rule. Presenting less of a distinct change in policy than some have argued, this new rhetorical direction did nonetheless become highly influential within the Sudan Political Service.

Harold MacMichael was at the forefront of the tribal presentation of Sudanese society, and his 1922 *History of the Arabs in the Sudan,* became one of the key texts for British officials during the Condominium. MacMichael analysed the history of the Sudan through population movements from the Arabian peninsular and the establishment of working societies based on descent lines originating in these movements.[53] Unlike many other areas of Africa, the tribal distinctions within northern Sudan were not considered to be based upon ethnic differences; all of MacMichael's subjects were considered 'Arab', the implication being that there was a more fundamental distinction between Arab and non-Arab populations. However, despite this perceived tie of ethnicity, there also existed an undercurrent of debate that saw hierarchies of 'Arabness', in which the noble nomad was portrayed as the 'true' Arab, "their tribal system unimpaired from generation to generation", while settled town and village dwellers were "idle, dissolute, drunken [and] demoralised".[54] The supposed aberration of the lack of tribes in the settled Gezira could thus be as seen as due to the population being 'failed' Arabs.

Highly influential, MacMichael's work affected the understanding of the indigenous Sudanese society prior to colonial rule. In the early 1920s a proposed (but never completed) provincial handbook collated a history of the Blue Nile Province, which emphasised the idea of the tribe as the central political structure of the past;

> It is easy to exaggerate the degree of organisation and civilisation
>
> of the Fung Kingdom. Not withstanding the statements of

---

[53] MacMichael, *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan,* pp. 195-196.
[54] Ibid., p. 237. See also Wingate *The Sudan Past and Present,* p. 2.

authors of enormous sums paid in gold as tribute to the Fung

kings, it is more probable that they obtained a nominal tribute

from those provinces whose de facto rulers were prepared to pay

a reasonable sum for a free hand in their own affairs, protection

from interference from outside, and support in case of need

against internal troubles.[55]

The emphasis had slightly but significantly changed. Rather than celebrating past monarchical and city-state structures, the Fung kingdom was now looked to as an era in which "tribal organisation was highly developed and universal".[56]

The idea of dislocation and disruption since the Fung period remained a powerful impulse. Just as the Turko-Egyptian and Mahdist regimes had been deemed responsible for the economic devastation of Sudan, so too were they blamed for the undermining of tribes in the Gezira, through large scale artificial tribal movements. As the province handbook stated; "The disintegration of the Gezira tribes was part of the policy of the Khalifa", conducted by drafting tribesmen into the army and transplanting large numbers of Gezira inhabitants into the Khalifa's capital, Omdurman, while members of his own tribe were given the resulting land.[57] The handbook concluded:

To these causes it is to be attributed the tribal disorganisation

which we find in the Gezira to this day, and which distinguishes it

from any other part of the Sudan except perhaps the southern end

of Kassala province.[58]

In a climate of post First World War doubt, the tradition of the colonial administrator as amateur historian and anthropologist begun by Jackson and MacMichael, flourished within an environment that idealised a reinvented past. With 'the tribe' as a framework to understand African social organisation, no matter how diverse, and surrounded by populations eager to share genealogical stories that fitted into that broad all-encompassing model, multiple analyses of Sudanese society in the form of

---

[55] National Record Office Khartoum (NRO), 1Civsec 57/31/12, "Compilation matter for Blue Nile Province (BNP) Handbook, vol. II, 1922?".
[56] Sudan Government, *Memorandum – General Administrative Policy*, (Khartoum, 1926) (first printed in 1922).
[57] NRO 1Civsec 57/31/12, "Compilation matter for BNP Handbook, vol., II".
[58] Ibid.,

tribal and genealogical surveys were produced. In the early 1930s, administrators within the Gezira picked up on these trends, and despite reservations, attempted to apply them to the sedentary 'tribes' of the region.[59]

However, although using the accepted tribal terminology, the social surveys of the Gezira did not describe the ideal tribal forms outlined by MacMichael. In studying the sedentary populations of the Gezira, it was found that within the same village people would identify themselves as belonging to several different tribes. Despite the ideological self-identification of the Gezira population with the structures of lineages, sections and tribes, it was in practice an unwieldy terminology of limited use. Tribes were not a primary identifier within a society as fractured as the Gezira, and this fact was recognised by commentators including Arthur Huddleston, the province Governor, who described the Gezira as being "very mixed tribally", with many areas unable to be categorised as part of any tribe.[60] Thus although unable to shake off the language of tribes, the Gezira surveys in fact provided a more subtle picture of social organisation, wedged uncomfortably within the established idiom. In this picture, the village loomed large as a unit of both genealogical and social organisation, and the holy man gained a pre-eminence as the founder of both village and *tariqa*.

According to Henderson, Assistant District Commissioner (ADC) Wad Medani, the founder of the Arakiin tribe was Amud wad Ahmed, who arrived from the Arabian peninsula in the early 1500s. He established a 'university' and 15 *khalwas* [religious schools] within the Gezira, and became a powerful figure both in the temporal and secular worlds. The direct descendants of Amud succeeded to his position of religious and secular leadership, while other male lines of the family established separate sections and lineages through their autonomous foundation of new villages, yet remained tied together through the bonds of blood and ancestry.[61] It was clumsy,

---

[59] See NRO 1Civsec 66/2/18, K.D.D. Henderson "Arakiin Tribe", 1930; NRO BNP 1/31/242, W.F. Crawford "Note on the Khawalda", 28 December 1930; NRO BNP 1/30/222, R.V. Bardsley "Notes on the Halawin", n.d. (1930s); G.B. Tame "Legends of the Halawin of Blue Nile Province" *Sudan Notes and Records*, 17, (1934), pp. 201-216; J.A. Reid (ed.,) *Notes on the Tribes and Prominent Families in the Blue Nile Province* (Khartoum, 1935).
[60] NRO I Civsec 1/16/50, A.J.C. Huddleston, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 11 March 1927.
[61] NRO 1Civsec 66/2/18, K.D.D. Henderson "Arakiin Tribe", 1930.

but such works did attempt to amalgamate the ideologies of Arab migrations and lineage descent, with the complexities of Gezira village life. However, emphasis on the tribe accentuated differences rather than similarities, and stopped potentially fruitful research into the existing structures of influence and authority that did not rest on a tribal base.

Reinterpreting the Past

Thus at the height of the tribal analysis in the 1920s and early 1930s, Gezira administrators were facing the realisation that local society did not fit into the archetypal tribal model. One response to this problem was to see the existing situation as a distinct break from the past, and to place the blame for this dislocation onto the Turkia and Mahdist regimes. Now in addition to the existing moral and economic crimes of those regimes came the accusation that they had destroyed the central tribal structures of the indigenous population under the Fung:

> Up to the advent of the old Egyptian government, the different
> tribes had kept their property and boundaries distinct. Since then,
> however, chiefly to counteract the power of the Gezira tribes
> when united together, tribesmen from the north were encouraged
> to come in; and influence and power was given often to officials
> who were not natives of the place.[62]

G.B. Tame described the result of Ottoman occupation among the Halawin as being tribal disarticulation. In reaction to the new regime, the existing Sheikh of the Halawin, El Feki Mohammed el Dau, was said to have run away and two sheikhs appointed in his place over different sections of the tribe, upsetting established personnel and structure.[63] This idea of change and social disruption was articulated at the highest levels, and was presented publicly. The official publication on the opening of the Sennar Dam in 1926 played upon these images of tribal disarray and

---

[62] NRO ICivsec 57/33/12, "Compilation matter for BNP Handbook vol. I, 192-?".
[63] G.B. Tame "Legends of the Halawin", p. 208.

destruction when it stated; "In 1886 the Khalifa summoned the inhabitants of the Gezira to Omdurman, so that in 1886 and 1887 the country was deserted."[64]

This analysis of tribal structures having been recently disrupted was too simplistic. The Gezira had long been an outward looking society in the centre of trade routes and in touch with urban centres and modern ideas. A history of private land ownership and complex pre-scheme relations between landlords, sharecroppers, tenants, and smallholders, together with multiple forms of profit-sharing accounting, had established a hierarchical society based on unequal access to resources.[65] It had been settled by sedentary populations for several hundred years, and politically, it had been villages rather than large tribal confederations that were the dominant focus of identity, even though genealogical identities based on 'tribal' lineages continued to exist. Villages along the Nile were based upon ancient patterns of settlement, while the use of the rainland hinterland has been documented from the early seventeenth century, when fully functioning villages emerged with close economic and administrative ties to older river bank settlements.[66] Within the village, different patrilineage, tribal and *tariqa* [Sufi religious groupings] identities played a role in village interactions, and thus tribal identity was only one identity among many. In a 1960s study of Bashaqra villages (an area integrated into the north-eastern part of the Gezira Scheme), the trend towards residential zoning on the basis of these multiple forms of identity was clearly identified.[67] However, despite these overt distinctions, the same study concluded that "one of the characteristics of the villages... is precisely their unitary structure, in spite of being tribally and religiously heterogeneous".[68]

The ethno-tribal terminology so popular in the 1920s and 30s thus failed to engage effectively with the existing social structures of the Gezira region. Rather than view the Gezira as a distinctive region in which tribes had never played an important economic or political role – an argument that would have undermined the entire

---

[64] Sudan Government, *Notes on the Gezira Irrigation Project* (London, 1926), pp. 4-5.
[65] Georges Brausch, "Change and Continuity in the Gezira Region of the Sudan", *International Social Science Journal*, 16, 3, (1964), pp. 341-356.
[66] G. Brausch, P. Crooke and J. Shaw, *Bashaqra area settlements, 1963: a case study in village development in the Gezira scheme* (Khartoum, 1964), p. 18.
[67] Ibid., p. 80.
[68] Ibid., p. 80.

premise of Indirect Rule policies – it was easier to view the tribal structures of the Gezira as effectively destroyed by the policies of coercive nineteenth century regimes. Thus the ethnographic study of the region concentrated largely on the Fung era. The migration thesis popularised by MacMichael was enthusiastically applied to the ethnic origins of the Fung, and a lively debate on this subject occurred within the pages of Sudan Notes and Records from the 1920s with no less than ten articles or notes of correspondence entitled "Fung Origins".[69] The debate revolved around geographical (and thus ethnic) origin of the Fung Sultans, with southern Blue Nile, (Shilluk), West Africa and the Arabian peninsula being the identified as the potential origins of tribal migrations.

However, these studies, while tied to a tribal language, continually refuted the idea of neat bounded political, economic and social tribal units existing at any time in the Gezira's past. As early as 1930, J.D.P. Chataway was writing that "Fung is not the name of a tribe so much as of a ruling family", and Leonard Nalder agreed, describing the Fung rulers as a "small aristocracy who imposed their rule on alien subject populations".[70] In this way, the Fung were cast as the head of a 'feudal' society. This trope of feudalism fitted directly into the European understanding of pre-modern European nations and was as romantic a vision as was the oriental kingdom or the nomadic camel-riding Arab. Nalder painted a picture of a glorious feudal past:

> These paladins with their armour and armoured horses, their
> excaliburs and troubadours, their puntilios, their challenges and
> single combats, strangely recall our own Middle Ages or the
> Border Ballads.[71]

In explaining why these structures were "so unlike anything found in the Sudan today", the Turkish and Mahdist regimes were once again convenient scape-goats, and the nineteenth century described as a period that saw "the break-up of a feudal

---

[69] See for example, L.F. Nalder "Fung Origins", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 14, (1931), pp. 61-66; J.P.D. Chataway "Fung Origins", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 17, (1934), pp. 111-117; A.J. Arkell "More About Fung Origins", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 27, (1946) pp. 87-98.

[70] J.D.P. Chataway "Notes on the History of the Fung", *Sudan Notes and* Records, 13, (1930), 247-258, p. 249; Nalder "Fung Origins", p. 62.

[71] L.F. Nalder "Tales from the Fung Province", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 14, (1931), pp. 67-104, at p. 67.

system, of misgovernment, anarchy and bloodshed."[72] The inference was unchanged; social dislocation and destruction from external regimes had destroyed the social structure of the indigenous society. This basic premise gave theorists freedom in exploring the distant past, with no need for the past to correlate with the present. It is no surprise therefore, that explorations of the past, and theories about the 'real' form of indigenous Gezira social structure were subject to fashion and trend.

Upon Stewart Symes becoming Governor-General in 1934, the emphasis of central government policy moved away from the tribe as the focus of social organisation. Recognising the inefficiencies of Indirect Rule, Symes returned to a dual system of government, which at its heart made a distinction between the needs of rural and non-rural regions. Symes introduced a programme of local government, in which educated Sudanese and 'traditional' leaders would work together.[73] In this context, administrators were freed from the requirements of viewing society through a tribal lens. It subsequently became increasingly possible to understand the contemporary non-tribal nature of Gezira society by acknowledging that tribes had never formed the primary social identifier of the Gezira population.

Study of the past became less focussed on the ethnic identification of members of the population and increasingly concerned about their position within an economic system based on what were imagined as feudal relationships. These relationships reflected what were described as unequal and hierarchical systems of land ownership and use, and channels of tribute. This was no less a form of classification than ethnicity, and fitted directly into the British preoccupation with economic functions within the Gezira. This interpretation combined the great state and tribal models of the past, assuming there to have been a central hierarchical system imposed onto subsidiary tributary tribal areas, which were themselves organised in a hierarchical and feudal mould. Gaitskell took the opportunity this new political atmosphere offered to articulate a socio-economic history of the Gezira in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It might not have been couched in the full terms of feudalism, but it looked to that past as the heritage of the Gezira, resulting in a "static

---

[72] Ibid., p. 67.
[73] Sir Stewart Symes, *Note on Administrative Purposes in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (Khartoum, 1938).

society", in which wealth was concentrated in "the hands of a few large landowners and merchants on whom the general population were more or less dependent clients."[74]

The feudal ideal was the central focus of the work of O.G.S. Crawford, who in 1951, wrote an authoritative account of the Fung era, drawing all previous European writings together in one volume. The most important innovation of Crawford's work was to expand on the detailed workings of the political structures of Fung society. Writing within the context of government policy that was increasingly concerned with administration, local politics and bureaucracy and coinciding with the passing of the 1951 Local Government Ordinance, Crawford provided a thorough analysis of the bureaucratic workings of the Fung administration. In contrast with earlier idealistic images of tribal authority, Crawford instead looked favourably to the urban centre of Sennar, in which a Council of State assisted the king in decision-making, and a "cadi" [sic] administered justice.[75] The devolution of authority to the provincial nobility was portrayed as a central element of Fung administrative organisation, and "except for the purchase money paid for accession and occasional presents he [a Mek] was entirely independent and governed as an absolute ruler."[76] This hierarchy, Crawford argued, continued to the village level, with each provincial Mek appointing district officials, who in turn appointed village sheikhs, and a clear link was made between the local and the central in the organisation of taxation and tribute. Even if circumvented by payments of bribes, the concept that provincial leaders were appointees of a central government was important in suggesting the existence of a hierarchy of authority emanating from a central body.

The image of the Fung kingdom had turned a full circle, returning to the vision of a centralised state overseeing a hierarchical society that had been current in the earliest years of the Condominium. In the seventy years of British commentary on the social structures of northern Sudan the official 'knowledge' of the society that they ruled repeatedly changed. A series of tropes reflected past Gezira society as based upon a

---

[74] SAD 418/6/12-35, A. Gaitskell, "A proposal for the future development of the Gezira Scheme" (Khartoum, 1938).

[75] O.G.S. Crawford, *The Fung Kingdom of Sennar: with a Geographical Account of the Middle Nile Region* (Gloucester, 1951), p. 222.

[76] Ibid., p. 62.

central state, upon a tribal confederation, and upon a feudal hierarchy. Each successive vision was presented as the true reflection of the past. There was not here the confident espousal of a single grand narrative of the pre-colonial past assumed by Said to be part of the colonial authority structure. Knowledge and power were clearly connected but both were uncertain and shifting, responding to expectations and contemporary political policy as much as to structures on the ground. In part, the inability of colonial administrators to paint a consistent picture of the Gezira's past was a response to its considerable complexity as a society. The Gezira failed to live up to the ideal image of Arab tribes of large homogenous units with patriarchal leaders found in other areas of Sudan. Instead identities were many and overlapping, and power was equally diffuse although generally related to economic wealth. Nonetheless, even if the colonial 'knowledge' project was indecisive, Mitchell and Anderson have demonstrated the importance it had to the colonial state. Large quantities of time and energy were expended in the search for the 'truth' about the society over which they ruled and the conclusions drawn were central to the way in which northern Sudan was ruled.

The one abiding theme of all visions of the Gezira's past was that of recurring dislocation as the successive Fung, Turko-Egyptian and Mahdist regimes weakened and fell during the nineteenth century. By dividing Sudan's history into periods correlating with distinct central regimes, Condominium analysis of the past consistently assumed the primacy of the central state, even when discussing non-state structures. Central policies and ideals were counted on to accurately reflect social reality, and so regime change was believed to result in social change and dislocation. Thus it was the differences between the regimes and the supposed disruptions brought by political take-over that were highlighted, and not the continuities at the local level. This approach to the past remained at the heart of all Condominium attitudes, no matter what model of 'indigenous' social structure lay behind it. As the last word on Condominium attitudes towards Gezira's past, Jackson in 1955, used a language indistinguishable from that used by Wingate at the start of the Condominium:

> For seventeen years, until the battle of Omdurman, the fires of
> war had rushed across the Sudan: they overleapt mountains,
> bestrode the spongy swamps and sped unhindered through the

peaceful cultivation. The havoc that they wrought cannot be measured merely by the ruined crops, the starving cattle, the devastated homes and the famished remnants of the population. Nearly six and a half million men, women and children perished in the flames.[77]

Nineteenth century dislocation remained a working template for understanding the twentieth century throughout the Condominium. In this context, the Gezira's difference from both the perceived 'golden age' of the Fung kingdom and the more obviously 'tribal' areas of northern Sudan was viewed as an aberration resulting from past disruption. However, state power was rarely so effectual and there are enough clues to suggest that continuity rather than dislocation was the more important theme of Gezira history. The work conducted by Gleichen, Matthew and Peacock all suggest the stable and long-term nature of social and economic relationships in the Gezira, while a re-reading of the ambiguous accounts of Poncet and Bruce cast doubt on the idea of there ever being a 'golden age' of a glorious centralised state.

Post-Condominium studies, although often remaining focused on regimes and continuing the series of historical tropes based upon contemporary understandings of society (most notably within Jay Spaulding and Lidwien Kapteijns studies of class formation) have provided increasing understanding of the continuities at the heart of northern riverain Sudanese society.[78] In particular, Anders Bjørkelo, and Neil McHugh have demonstrated the degree of continuity of personnel in positions of authority, both within and outside of the administrative hierarchy.[79] These and other works have demonstrated that the Gezira was an area that had long been socially organised within multi-tribal settled villages in which numerous patrilineages vied

---

[77] H.C. Jackson, *Behind the Modern Sudan* (London, 1955), p. 76.

[78] Lidwein Kapteijns and Jay Spaulding, "History, Ethnicity and Agriculture in the Sudan", pp. 84-100 in G.M. Craig (ed.,) *The Agriculture of the Sudan* (Oxford, 1991); J. Spaulding "Farmers, Herdsmen and the State in Rainland Sennar", *Journal of African History*, 20, (1979), pp. 329-347; J. Spaulding "Slavery, Land Tenure and Social Class in the Northern Turkish Sudan", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 15, (1982), pp. 1-20; See also Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan;* Peter Holt, *The Mahdist state in the Sudan, 1881-1898: a Study of its Origins, Development and Overthrow* (Oxford, 1958); Farah H. Adam "Agrarian Relations in Sudanese Agriculture: A Historical Review", *Sudan Journal of Development Research*, 1, 2, (1977), pp. 33-44, at pp. 35-36,; Mohammed Hashim Awad, "The Evolution of Landownership in Sudan", *Middle East Journal*, 25, 2, (1971), 212-228.

[79] Bjørkelo, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya;* Neil McHugh, *Holymen of the Blue Nile: The making of an Arab-Islamic Community in the Nilotic Sudan, 1500-1850* (Eveston, Illinois, 1994).

for power in both secular and non-secular arenas. Economically, private landownership had formed the basis of wealth and status throughout all regime changes, and was the structure around which hierarchical relationships formed. This was a complex society, with diffuse power structures and multiple identities gradually evolving over centuries. Regime change may have brought some changes, but it did not bring about the far-reaching disruptive effects so commonly assumed throughout the Condominium. In attempting to reduce the past to simplistic forms, the colonial state consistently failed to understand the structure or the motivations of the Condominium Gezira. The subsequent chapters of this study will show that this flawed British imagination of the past masked a reality of substantial continuity in social structures and social values.

2

FINDING LEADERS

Suggesting that "an absence of ascribed social positions in an open-ended egalitarian society" allowed any member of a society to potentially hold a position of leadership, Charles Lindholm claims that diffuse power was an essential element of settled Arab society.[1] Certainly within the Gezira, authority structures of the early twentieth century were distributed widely and were "intrinsically... difficult to measure".[2] With multiple social contacts arising within networks of villages, there was no overarching position of leadership. There was frequently more than one recognised sheikh in a village, and merchants, holy men, landowners and administrative functionaries all existed alongside one another. Nonetheless, although power structures were potentially open to all, in fact the influence brought by positions was nurtured over generations to create family lineages in communities throughout the Gezira that were intimately associated with power and authority. With the income potential of rents, trading profits or religious gifts, these positions of influence were closely tied to monetary wealth and could be consolidated through reinvestment in land, new irrigation techniques and slave labour.[3] Moneylending using the mortgage institution of *shayl* was another method in which those with some capital were able to consolidate their position of authority and elite status.[4] This correlation between wealth and socio-political status has frequently been made by commentators on the Nile valley. Tim Niblock has argued that "Personal wealth... buttressed an existing

---

[1] Charles Lindholm, *The Islamic Middle East: Tradition and Change* (Oxford, 2002), p. 261.
[2] Ibid., p. 261.
[3] Spaulding "Slavery, Land Tenure and Social Class", pp. 13-17.
[4] Martin Wilmington, "Aspects of Moneylending in Northern Sudan", *Middle East Journal*, 9, 2 (1955) pp. 139-146.

position of social influence or social control", and Ahmad Alawad Sikainga remarks that village hierarchies and social differentiation were based upon land ownership.[5]

With wealth (together with the less measurable attribute of personal charisma) acting as a key indicator of authority, power was not the preserve of any one category of persons. In effect, religious leaders, merchants, state-sponsored administrators and landowners were all influential figures throughout the Gezira region. There was no single pattern or rule, and different communities were organised upon different principles. Communities such as Tayiba, which were founded by holy men in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, remained under the personal authority of the religious founding family.[6] Trading centres such as Messellemia, were dominated by numerous and competing landowning merchants. [7] Other settlements were themselves more diffuse and recognised multiple forms of authority based upon knowledge and upon identities such as tribe and patrilineage. For instance, the village Udeid el Bahaqra had four recognisable factions organised by patrilineage, while most villages recognised the authority of the local feki and those who had expertise in 'knowing' land rights.[8]

This complexity of multi-focal authority relationships gave considerable flexibility and choice to the population, but proved inimical to the interests of governmental administration. Desiring to find 'big men' to whom administrative tasks might be delegated, this diffuse elite failed to correlate with the government's patriarchal image of authority and was viewed as a result of past dislocation. Seeing the Condominium as a new beginning, the government applied a pragmatic policy of administrative centralisation. Using a pick and mix approach to existing structures of authority, the government created a simplified administrative hierarchy, which responded to the perceived needs of administrative efficiency and 'political' suitability. Looking for the most 'suitable' local leaders based upon criteria including loyalty, local influence, community acceptance and administrative ability,

---

[5] Niblock, *Class and Power*, p. 50; Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers*, p. 116.
[6] McHugh, *Holymen of the Blue Nile*, pp. 176-179.
[7] Anon., "A History of the Sudan, 1822-1841", in *On the Frontiers of Islam – Two Manuscripts Concerning the Sudan Under Turco-Egyptian rule 1822-1845* (trans., R. Hill, Oxford, 1970), p. 29.
[8] Brausch, Crooke and Shaw, *Bashaqra Area Settlements*, p. 72-73.

colonial governments moulded local administrative structures to form clear, organised and understandable points of mediation between the government and local communities.[9] Within the Gezira, this attempt at administrative centralisation, while viewed by the government as bringing significant changes, in fact resulted in considerable continuity of administrative function and personnel from past regimes. Other continuities were also striking, and the ability of communities to work with both the centralised administrative specialists and other forms of pre-existing authority demonstrate the familiarity that Gezira communities had with mediating with central state structures. This experience of mediation meant that communities, individuals and the state all involved themselves in negotiating the form which administrative centralisation would take, and demonstrated the considerable ability for communities to control their experience of governance.

A Template of Authority

The idea that British officials ruled in a direct manner in the first years of the Condominium has been popularised in many histories of the Condominium.[10] In fact, the limited personnel and resources of the government, together with the considered importance of stability meant that from its inception the government relied upon local allies to fulfil administrative duties and maintain basic security at the local level. [11] Herbert-Horatio Kitchener outlined the framework for devolved Condominium administration in his 1899 "memorandum to Mudirs" [provincial governors]:

> The task before us all, and especially the Mudirs and Inspectors,
> is to acquire the confidence of the people, to develop their
> resources, and to raise them to a higher level. This can only be
> affected by the district officers being thoroughly in touch with the

---

[9] Marshall Clough, *Fighting Two Sides: Kenyan Chiefs and Politicians, 1918-1940* (Niwot, CO, 1990), p. 14.

[10] See for example, J.S.R. Duncan, *The Sudan: A Record of Achievement* (Edinburgh, 1952), p. 101.

[11] Martin Daly, *The Sidir: Sir Reginald Wingate and the British Empire in the Middle East* (Philadelphia, 1997), p. 139.

better class of native, through whom we may hope gradually to influence the whole population.[12]

It was judged that a stratum of indigenous leadership was required to help direct the colonial enterprise, but the definition of this 'better class' was deliberately left vague, providing space for the varied social conditions found throughout Sudan, and allowing for significant flexibility in Condominium administration.

Both efficiency and stability were at the heart of this government policy. Believing their own propaganda about the destruction brought about by the wars and supposedly corrupt regimes of the nineteenth century, the primary objective of the British-led administration was

The replacement of the chaos of the past by an orderly system which should give justice to all and lead to the development of the country, social and economical, for the benefit of its inhabitants, without detriment to Egypt.[13]

As conquering and alien rulers, British officials were understandably fearful of inciting an antagonistic response from the newly subjected population. However, the task of establishing a working administration was frequently viewed as an uphill battle. Jackson, in his memoirs wrote of the slow

transition from war to peace... All administrative channels had, like those of navigation, been blocked during the Turkiyya and the Mahdia. The authority of the sheikhs and tribal leaders had been broken down and the rebuilding of native administration was a long and gradual process.[14]

Although bewailing the destruction of past authority (or perhaps because of it), the government was also keen to appropriate structures of authority that already existed. Thus it was that in the very face of rhetoric emphasising destruction there was considerable continuity in the authority personnel of northern Sudan.

Continuity of official power was however dependent upon a specific image of power established within the colonial mindset. While past administrators, and secular

---

[12] Kitchener quoted in Harold MacMichael, *The Sudan* (London, 1954), p. 75.

[13] MacMichael, *The Sudan* (London, 1954), p. 73.

[14] Jackson, *Behind the Modern Sudan*, p. 85.

'notables' were supported and promoted, religious leadership in the form of Sufi holy men or *fekis,* was actively side-lined. Despite recognising the "enormous power, wealth and influence" of religious figures as "spiritual guides of the people and the teachers of the young", they were consistently seen as a negative influence.[15] Russell talked of holy men as an "invasion", while Wingate described sedentary villages as being "over-ridden by a most shameless set of *fekis* or religious teachers".[16] Much of this suspicion of Sufism came from its perceived association with the leadership of the Mahdia, as Muhammed Ahmed who declared himself to be the Mahdi in 1881, had been taught by several acknowledged Sufi teachers including Sheikh Ghorashi of the Halawin in the Gezira.[17] In fact once having gained power, Muhammed Ahmed, and his successor the Khalifa Abdullahi proved hostile to any rival powerbase including Sufi *tariqas.*[18]

Nonetheless, the connection was made, and then repeatedly reinforced through a series of 'religious' uprisings during the early Condominium.[19] Although never the danger they were perceived to be, the government, still unsure of its own position, saw these uprisings as a considerable threat to political security, especially after the government inspector Scott Moncrieff was killed in the 1908 Haboba uprising in the Gezira.[20] Despite the fact that such uprisings tended to be the work of individuals and were not related to organised *tariqas,* the link between unorthodox Islam and political instability was firmly established. Suspicion continued to set the tone of the government's relationship with Sufism until the end of the First World War; a period which in contrast saw the official face of Islam headed by the Ulema receive government sanction and support.[21] Officially therefore, village-based holy men were not part of the Condominium administration, but the government was not able to regulate the unofficial role that they undeniably had. As Gabriel Warburg has stated, "the functions of these leaders far exceeded the teaching of Islam", and their customary roles as the keepers and teachers of religious knowledge, literacy and

---

[15] Russell, *The Ruin of the Soudan,* pp. 24-25.

[16] Ibid., pp. 24-25; Wingate, *The Sudan Past and Present,* p. 2.

[17] NRO BNP 1/30/222, R.J.H. Hillard, DC North Gezira to Robert Mayall, Governor BNP, 14 August, 1936.

[18] Holt, *The Mahdist state in the Sudan,* p. 106.

[19] Daly, *Empire on the Nile,* pp. 119-129.

[20] For more details on the Haboba incident, see *SGR* 1908, pp. 4-5.

[21] Gabriel Warburg, *The Sudan Under Wingate: Administration in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1899-1916* (London, 1971), p. 95.

genealogical tradition meant that they remained central and powerful figures within communities, particularly within those communities that were historically built upon religious foundations.[22]

The Sheikh

The government, however, was concerned with identifying and establishing a secular leadership. Conceptualised primarily in terms of patriarchal authority, the figure of the 'sheikh' lay at the heart of the British imagination of Arab authority structures. Never defined, the term 'sheikh' passed as a title for all types and levels of authority. From village headmen and respected elders to influential 'tribal' and urban-based religious leaders, the expression 'sheikh' was widely used as a term of respect and general authority.[23] Slatin, while governor of Darfur, made no terminological distinction between the recognised leaders, and "issued orders to all Sheikhs, both great and small," while in Khartoum, qadis, the Mufti, the president of the Ulema and a Professor of Science all signed a petition using the title 'sheikh'.[24] In its flexibility and ambiguity such terminology was useful in denoting a general sense of authority and leadership; however it failed to fulfil the needs of the British administration in defining a hierarchy which they could incorporate into a colonial administration. As the Turko-Egyptian regime had done before them, extra terms were gradually introduced by the government, through which the different levels and types of sheikhs could be identified.

Sheikhs became associated with a specific position in a hierarchical administration and were recognised by the government as the primary (if not sole) figures of community authority. By 1912, nazirs had been appointed as paramount chiefs of large tribal areas, and omdas nominated as the leaders of village groups in sedentary

---

[22] Gabriel Warburg, "Popular Islam and Tribal Leadership in the Socio-Political Structure of North Sudan", p. 234, in Menahem Milson (ed.,) *Society and Political Structure in the Arab World* (New York, 1973). For a more detailed analysis of the customary importance of holy men within the Gezira, see McHugh, *Holymen of the Blue Nile*.

[23] Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism*, p. 145.

[24] Slatin, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, p. 91. Charles Gordon, *General Gordon's Khartoum Journal* (ed. Lord Elton, London, 1961), p. 420.

areas.[25] Khuts were also re-established as territorial units in riverain areas, whose sheikhs had jurisdiction over omdas and village sheikhs. The process by which these terms were appropriated by the Condominium remains unclear. They were Turkish titles and were creations applied to northern Sudan in the 1850s.[26] Whether British officials saw them as 'traditional' terms, or realised their recent origin, whether there was government memory of the terms, or whether they relied upon Sudanese self-portrayal, remains moot. Whether British, Sudanese or Egyptian led, the effect of using these terms was to fix the terminology of leadership and create an administrative and hierarchical bureaucracy staffed by appointed Sudanese leaders. With only one recognised sheikh per village, the Condominium government eliminated any ambiguity that the former flexibility of the term 'sheikh' had established, and undermined the competitive egalitarianism that had previously existed among a wider elite body. This fixing of titles – each with its defined meaning and place in a hierarchy – became an important element of British knowledge of and dominance over Sudanese society. Focusing upon specific individuals as the embodiment of community leadership at the expense of other figures of authority within communities, this established a process in which a fixed and increasingly centralised bureaucracy was created.

The correct usage of titles was an issue that repeatedly surfaced in administrative debates in an attempt to rid the system of ambiguity. Within the Gezira the correct terminology for the highest level of indigenous leadership remained contentious. Given the uncertain British awareness that the Gezira was not tribally organised, the overtly 'tribal' title of 'nazir' was deemed inappropriate. Instead, the pre-existing territorial terminology of khuts was promoted; a distinction that was outlined by C.S Lyall:

> The title of 'Sheikh of Khut' should denote roughly the
> equivalent of Nazir in standing but be applied, as the Arabic of
> the term clearly suggests, to the head Sheikhs of certain large
> Districts, irrespective of whether all the people under him are one
> tribe or not, e.g. in sedentary provinces such as the Blue Nile
> Province, where the term was in fact in use some few years ago

---

[25] SAD 299/2/184, "List of Sheikhs and Notables of the Sudan, Present at Port Sudan", 1912.

but where it was for a time and without any particular warrant,

replaced by the quite inapplicable title of Nazir.[27]

Although the Gezira was understood to be territorially rather than tribally organised, the sheikh of khut was still viewed as a patriarch, with considerable social and political influence over the population of 'his' territory, and the ability to represent the interests of 'his people' to the government.

The sole exception to the relative insignificance of tribal identity in the Gezira was the Halawin tribe. Due to the driving personality of Mohammed Imam Haboba in the nineteenth century, the Halawin had developed from "a wandering harmless tribe content to pay customary dues... to their overlords, the Shenabla", to "the most powerful and most closely-knit tribe in the Gezira."[28] Cohesive and distinct, the Halawin conformed to British expectations of an Arab tribe, and were particularly favoured by the government who saw their tribal values as the basis for their reputation as the best and most prudent cultivators in the Gezira.[29] Elsewhere, the government found tribal boundaries confused, frequently finding two or more tribal groups based in the same village.[30] 'Tribal' authority however remained the template upon which other forms of authority were modelled, and khuts throughout the Gezira were known by the tribal identity of the sheikh of khut's lineage. The idea remained that even outside of functioning political tribal units, authority resided in particular lineages, in which were to be found leading sheikhs with the qualities of personal influence, good character and knowledge of leadership from hereditary experience.

An Administrative Elite

Without clear territorially defined tribes, the administration was unable to promote men on the basis of their leadership of established tribal units. Instead they relied on men who had proven administrative ability within both the previous Ottoman and

---

[26] Bjørkelo, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya*, p. 46.

[27] NRO BNP 1/33/253, "Extract from Civil Secretary's comments on the Governors' meeting 1923".

[28] NRO BNP 1/30/222, anon., "Notes on the Wad Haboba Incident", 191[?]; R.V. Bardsley, "Notes on the Halawin" 193[?].

[29] NRO BNP 1/30/222, anon., "Administrative note on the Halawin", 14 November 1944.

53

Mahdist regimes, although by using Turkish terminology at the expense of Mahdist terms a political repudiation of the Mahdist regime was made. This use of past administrative structures was highly selective. Figures of large scale authority did exist in the pre-Condominium Gezira, most notably in the person of Ibrahim Ahmed el-Sunni, who was the chief administrator or Aamil of the Gezira during the Mahdia, and "virtually ruled" the region; a fact recognised by the Condominium authorities, but not replicated.[31] It was not that as a member of the former regime el-Sunni was distrusted; his family in fact remained highly influential as omdas of Wad Medani town. It was rather that the government's focus on tribal unity meant that purely territorial autocracy was seen as inappropriate. Smaller units became the focus of leadership within the Gezira, and subsidiary Ottoman and Mahdist Sudanese officials and their families were cultivated and given the trimmings of tribal authority. The sheikhs of khut therefore came from established administrative families and at this level, the centralising of official authority under the Condominium only replicated the actions of previous centralised administrations. In this way, Sheikh Musaad Mohammed, the sheikh of the Shenabla Khut, in Hassaheissa district came from a wealthy landowning family of 'nazirs', while Mohammed Hamadnalla of Kamlin, who was a sheikh of gism during the Turkia and an emir under the Mahdia, became successively a sheikh, an omda and a sheikh of khut during the Condominium.[32]

The government was thus able to identify a number of well established families, whose combined interests in positions of official administration, trade and landownership meant that they were in a prime position for incorporation into the Condominium administration. Continuity was key, just as John Lonsdale has stated of colonial Kenya at this time:

> [The same] men of power have enjoyed control over the same
> unchanging key assets of land in the locality and access to the
> wider institutions of the state. they have learned to exploit, co-
> opt, or, in the last resort, to accommodate themselves to social

---

[30] NRO Civsec 1/16/51, Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 22 May 1929.
[31] SAD 661/4/33, K.D.D. Henderson, "The Forgotten Generation", n.d.,
[32] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 9 June 1928; NRO 1Civsec 1/16/52, J.A. Reid, acting Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 27 September 1930.

and economic change and in so doing subject change to the authoritative audit of the past.[33]

The influence of such families over the local community was highly regarded by the government, and their support was cultivated by giving members of the family administrative positions and titles which incorporated them into the administration. Even if not always living up to administrative expectations, the government continued to recognise the administrative position of those leading families and thus the lesser abilities of men like Sheikh Mohammed Musaad of the Shenabla were accepted in return for his local influence. As J. Richardson, Assistant DC of Hassaheissa admitted of this sheikh: "he is not a very clever man and to Englishmen he is all things to all men, but he is excellent at dealing with his own people and the many outsiders".[34]

This local influence and power of particular lineages was highly regarded by the state, and all efforts were made to recognise particular sheikhly families, even if individuals were dismissed. Authority was seen as being contained within the wider patrilineage rather than simply being hereditary; a perspective that was justified by the historical example of the Arakiin family in which "the succession of an elder son of a senior branch has been the exception rather than the rule".[35] Thus it was that, unimpressed with the immediate heirs of the nineteenth century Halawin leader Mohammed Imam, they appointed Abdulla Musaad from the family of Imam's cousin to act in the official capacity as leader of the Halawin.[36] This practice replicated the theory of competitive egalitarianism engrained within the multi-focal power structures of the Gezira, but did so in a very narrow manner. No individual was ever entirely secure within a position, which might (if inefficiency or corruption could be proved) be withdrawn, but the family from which sheikhs of khut and other leading administrators were chosen might be confident of retaining the position within the lineage. As Paul Dresch has stated, "almost always a Shaykh comes from a family of shaykhs", but that within each such family "there is an important element

---

[33] John Lonsdale, preface of Clough *Fighting Two Sides*, p. xiii.
[34] NRO BNP 1/1/1, J. Richardson, ADC Hassaheissa to Huddleston, Governor BNP, 11 February 1927.
[35] NRO 1Civsec 66/2/18, Henderson, "Arakiin Tribe", 1930.
[36] NRO BNP 1/30/222, Bardsley, "Notes on the Halawin" 193[?].

of choice".[37] In following this model, the government reinforced the idea of patrilineal and patriarchal authority, and the validity of an unequal society.

In return for providing administrative duties and a vital point of mediation, those families incorporated into the administration gained significant advantages. As Marshall Clough has remarked of Kenya:

> As principle mediators and avenues of access, chiefs occupied a crucial position. They kept ambitious men and men with grievances from direct contact with the British. They controlled what their people knew and expected of them. Successful chiefs became local institutions after a period of years, regulating the response of the people of their areas to the changes brought about by the Europeans.[38]

In addition, many of those men chosen to be sheikhs of khut came from lineages that controlled Sufi *tariqas*, extending their influence in fields beyond the government's reach. Such lineages spread their interests by placing different individuals from the same family in positions of secular and religious authority. Thus Mohammed Ismail Isa, the religious khalifa within Masid village, Laota block, was the brother of Ahmed Ismail Isa, the Sheikh of Khut.[39] Consistently fearful of the uncontrolled power of Sufi leaders, the government claimed that leading families put forward their man "of most character" into the channels of religious authority, while producing "for Government requirements the less important member of the family."[40] Whether lacking character or not, this policy allowed certain families within the Gezira to consolidate their power base by investing in multiple forms of authority.

---

[37] Paul Dresch "The Position of Shaykhs Among the Northern Tribes of Yemen", *Man* 19, 1, (1984), pp. 31-49, at p. 36.
[38] Clough, *Fighting Two Sides*, p. 18.
[39] NRO BNP 1/1/1, W.P.D. Clarke, ADC Kamlin to Huddleston, Governor BNP, 25 February 1927.
[40] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 9 June 1928.

Community Gatekeepers

Below the level of the grand Gezira families that provided the administration with the sheikhs of khut, the identification of authority structures proved more difficult. Whereas the ability to mediate between groups was widespread within the community, the Condominium government (as had centralised regimes before it) wanted a simplified official face. It was deemed essential for the government to identify certain individuals within every village who would mediate between the government and the wider population. Official administrative power was thus centralised in the figures of administrative specialists. Government-recognised sheikhs were the public face of a community and "a necessary link to the state bureaucracy" for both communities and government.[41] The mutual benefits from this mediation were strong. The government had someone on the spot with (if chosen correctly) local respect to enforce orders, collect taxes and disseminate information. The community had a person to defend them from the excesses of the state and to negotiate a favourable position.

Identifying such figures however, proved more difficult than at the higher echelons of power. Not only was the Mahdia blamed for forced tribal mass migrations, there was also believed to have been a concerted attack on the basic structures of community authority throughout the Mahdia. Wingate described a "reign of terror" conducted by the Mahdist leadership against existing sheikhs:

> The court sat day and night, hearing trumped up charges and false
>
> witness against petty sheikhs, and many lost their heads and were
>
> succeeded in their power by their slaves.[42]

Even if not personally displaced, communities were portrayed as facing upheaval as sheikhs transformed themselves into "the commander of an unruly contingent of freebooters instead of being the leader and arbiter of a peaceful community."[43] in other communities, the sheikh was believed to be a scapegoat, shielding the

---

[41] Robert Fernea, *Shaykh and Effendi: Changing Patterns of Authority among the El Shabana of Southern Iraq* (Cambridge, Mass, 1970), p. 134.

[42] R.F. Wingate, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan*, p. 227-8.

[43] Sudan Government, *Memorandum - General Administrative Policy*, p. 2.

community from the excesses of corrupt nineteenth century regimes.[44] Thus while stability was important and leading families were backed up by the administration, the notion of destruction freed the government from sticking to all structures of authority that they found.

This mind-set allowed the Condominium government to follow a pragmatic approach in the recognition of leadership and the development of social policy. The perceived destruction of the past permitted a pragmatic 'pick and mix' attitude to social administration, allowing the government "to adopt or adapt whatever was found good and to reject or modify whatever was found bad".[45] In this climate the opportunity was taken to assess the personality and past record of individual sheikhs, and change, especially among village sheikhs was acceptable, so long as it brought administrative benefits for the central government. As a memorandum first published in 1922 stated:

> The crux of the matter lies in the character of the individual
> Sheikh, and here our policy is clearly defined. So long as the
> Sheikh remains loyal to the Government, carries out its orders
> with reasonable expedition and efficiency, and retains the respect
> of his people, he is supported. If he proves himself disloyal or if
> from moral failure he ceases to retain the respect of his people he
> is replaced. If he is merely inefficient he is given every chance
> and is only deposed if his failure is complete – in which case he
> would almost certainly have also lost the respect of his people.[46]

Empowered and bound to maintain social order, collect taxes and to make summons on behalf of government officials, village sheikhs and omdas became agents of the government administration, to be appointed and dismissed at government will. As administrative adjuncts to the central government, the qualities of leadership prized by the government were thus centred upon administrative ability, and an administrative elite emerged, directly sponsored by the state. Doing what central state structures had done before them, the British administration incorporated

---

[44] NRO BNP 1/41/307, Crawford, Commissioner Gezira Area to Clarke, Governor BNP, 14 July 1932.
[45] Sudan Government, *Memorandum*, p. 2.
[46] Ibid., p. 3.

members of local communities to act as mediators between the population and the government, based on their ability to communicate between these spheres, and to extract taxes and maintain order.[47] Although looking back to the past, this policy was openly pragmatic, based upon ideas of management efficiency rather than inherent custom, and placed the government at the apex of the hierarchy, with the power and willingness to change individuals who did not meet the government's idea of leadership.

However, sheikhs were not simply government lackeys or local despots. Instead, those recognised as sheikhs relied upon local support, balancing local wishes with government requirements.[48] Some managed to walk this tightrope, many others failed. Between 1903 and 1912, out of approximately eight hundred villages within the region, 94 village sheikhs resigned and another 199 were dismissed throughout the Gezira, "for various reasons".[49] These changes were not necessarily substantial for, as suggested, positions tended to be reallocated within the same 'sheikhly family'. However, the high turnover does suggest a substantial period of negotiation, before community gatekeepers suitable to both government and local communities were situated throughout the region. Many of these dismissals were directly related to their administrative failures, such as that of Ahmed Mohammed El Zein of Wad el Zein village, dismissed for the embezzlement of funds.[50] However, for the government, local influence and community respect were central requirements of sheikhs, and these criteria were consistently highlighted over other qualities. Thus, other than in cases of gross negligence, community support (or lack of) was the most compelling factor in securing a sheikh's position. A sheikh whose community did not support him was unsatisfactory; it was administratively inefficient, and laid the seeds for the growth of discontent.

The intersection of interests between government and local communities, as to who were suitable figures for this mediatory position was strong. Both were looking for strong and influential individuals, and "the Government was, generally speaking,

---

[47] For details of the incorporation of Sudanese into the Turko-Egyptian bureaucracy, see Bjørkelo, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya.*

[48] Clough, *Fighting Two Sides*, p. 16.

[49] *SGR* 1903-1912.

[50] NRO BNP 1/33/253, Personality sheet on Ahmed Mohammed El Zein, 7 December 1925.

content enough to accept the choice of people in this matter and prepared to adjudicate in cases of doubt."[51] With the government encouraging a policy of popular consent, villages retained a certain power over their administrative sheikhs. This had little impact upon the higher echelons of established authority, and Sheikhs of Khut and omdas demonstrated considerable ability to retain their position. At the lower level of villages however, leadership was less fixed and disputes for sheikhships, occurred frequently, as MacMichael stated, "in inverse relation to their importance".[52] That village support for the centralised position of an individual could be taken away at any time is suggested by MacMichael who described the numbers of villages that "lost no time in rejecting men who had misused their authority or whom they regarded as usurpers."[53]

Sheikhly power was therefore neither entirely invented nor entirely despotic. Administrative power was indeed officially centralised through the government's recognition of individual sheikhs, but this was not a new development, nor was this power complete or permanent. When competing alternatives existed and centralised power was contested (even if only from within the same family lineage) then the power of community leaders was to an extent restrained. With the position of administrative sheikh bringing with it honour, power and the ability to control resources, competition for the position of sheikh was often fierce. Certainly the segmentary nature of lineage society within the Gezira allowed groups to expand and unite against common external opponents, but also to retract and fractionalise in heated localised competition that split communities into factions. Authority was typically located within particular lineages or families, but it was not without its challengers. Although accepting the idea of administrative centralisation, there was often considerable hostility towards the individuals within those posts, and factional disputes frequently erupted throughout the Gezira in competition for control of administrative positions. Within the Halawin for example, this internal political

---

[51] Harold MacMichael, *The Sudan*, p. 82.
[52] Ibid., p. 82.
[53] Ibid., p. 82.

wrangling occurred between the four main factions of the tribe at a tribal and a local level.[54]

Most critically, Mamdani's thesis of local despotism relies upon an assumption of effective colonial power to impose authority structures upon the landscape, which certainly did not exist within the early Condominium. Always reliant upon working with existing structures of authority, this government weakness was clearest in cases in which the existing authority structures did not coincide with the government's notion of idea authority, but continued nonetheless. Such was the position of Abdel Bagi Hamed el Nil of Tayiba, who as the accepted religious leader of the Qadiriya tariqa, did not hold any recognised administrative position himself. However, his religious influence, together with his considerable wealth and land, meant that he was one of the most powerful figures in the Gezira.[55] He consolidated his powers by controlling those holding administrative positions such as Mohammed Ahmed El Tom Abu Agla, who was the sheikh of Arakiin Khut and both relative and follower of Hamed el Nil. He also appointed subsidiary village sheikhs over villages whose land he owned, including Tayiba village itself, whose nominal sheikh was Ulum, a slave of el Nil. When an argument between Ulum and el Nil brought the government's attention to Ulum's dependent slave status, the latter gave Ulum his freedom in an attempt to enforce the independence of administrative positions. However, in response, el Nil retaliated in ways that allowed him to regain his control over the village, undermining the authority of Ulum to the extent that just one year later his position as sheikh was untenable.[56]

Despite the government's focus upon change, the structures of local governance during the first twenty years of the Condominium were ultimately closely related to those of previous regimes. Where the state saw discontinuities, there were actually continuities. The Gezira was a society familiar with administrative hierarchies and with mediating with central states and was able to adapt and to co-opt the structures

---

[54] NRO BNP 1/31/241, R.V. Bardsley, DC Rufa'a to Iles, Governor BNP, 22 January 1919.

[55] On his death in 1952, the government reported that he was one of the most influential individuals in the Gezira, and that he owned 8,000 feddans of land. NRO 2Civsec 30/1/3, BNP Monthly Diaries, 1952, January.

[56] NRO BNP 1/1/1, Geoffrey Barter, DC Medani to Huddleston, Governor BNP, 27 February 1927; NRO BNP 1/33/253, Barter, DC Medani to Governor BNP, 2 April 1927.

imposed by the Condominium government with comparative ease. Where obvious figures of administrative authority existed, they were incorporated into the new administration as sheikhs of khut and omdas, for as Sharkey states:

> British officials respected or absorbed extant status hierarchies
> and reinforced them...[they] did not create status differentials but
> fortified existing ones.[57]

Numerous individuals and families were in this way recognised as the official mediators between their communities and the government by successive regimes, such as Mohammed el Masri el Kheiri, who was appointed village sheikh in 1902 and omda in 1911, and whose father was both a sub-governor during the Turkia and an emir during the Mahdia.[58] The centralising trends of the Condominium government were therefore nothing new, but reflected the earlier policies of central governments throughout at least the nineteenth century. Where community leadership was less easily defined, sheikhs were appointed and dismissed from a variety of competing lineages according to both the government's notion of efficiency and the community's level of support in a long process of negotiation to find suitable community leaders. This was a process in which communities more than the government influenced the outcome. Unfamiliar with local politics and without the resources to impose unwanted structures of authority upon communities, the government was reliant upon working with those figures that had the greatest support.

Although frequently expressed in terms of dislocation and destruction of authority, the problem faced by Condominium officials was in fact more closely related to the effective continuation of authority, which in the complex society of the Gezira resulted in a plethora of authority positions. The problem was one of too much authority remaining rather than too little. Holding a suspicious attitude to elements of multi-focal authority structures (in particular to religious power) and needing an efficient apparatus through which to channel government policy, British authorities streamlined the official face of community-level authority. In officially recognising only certain individuals as the mediators between community and government, an

---

[57] Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism*, pp. 18-19.
[58] 1Civsec 16/5/20, Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 29 June 1930.

attempt was made to centralise and standardise authority. Gradually a situation was arrived at by which there was one village sheikh per village, one omda presiding over several villages, and one sheikh of khut in charge of a defined territorial area. However, below this level of official administrative centralisation remained a plethora of social, economic and religious influences. Although constrained by the centralising limitations imposed by the government, government policies did not eradicate the multiple foci of authority, which remained entrenched within the social structure of the Gezira. Structures of authority remained diffuse, refusing to form a single pattern of relationships. In some cases these multiple structures were controlled by one dominant lineage. In others, various wealthy families held positions of informal authority and invested in non-administrative means of gaining power; controlling religious *tariqas,* expanding landholdings and trading ventures and in charitable giving within communities. In all cases, authority was flexible and the Condominium government demonstrated little ability to alter the structures of local governance that had existed upon its arrival.

3

ADMINISTERING CUSTOM

The mediation of disputes was of central concern to an administration in which administrative and judicial powers were virtually indistinguishable. The *merkaz* as the physical location of district government stood as an emblem of the combined powers of the central authorities, containing not only the colonial administrative offices but also the police headquarters, the prison and courtroom. With government personnel severely stretched, it appeared inevitable that the same mix of judicial and administrative powers would be delegated to those identified as community leaders, resulting in a centralised Sudanese administrative elite. However, this was a gradual process in the Gezira region, and during the first twenty years of the Condominium, failed to have any significant impact as 'custom' with all its ambiguity remained the central hallmark of both formal and informal judicial processes. Warburg argues that the effect of British administrators using and interpreting custom was to "undermine tribal leadership... obstructing the natural course of development of tribal laws and customs".[1] However, this understanding of custom as a traditional construct distinct from the 'modern' ideas of the government fails to understand the complexity of custom as a series of tools allowing communities to adapt to and engage with external developments. The values lying behind what has been called custom may not have greatly changed, but the ways in which those values could be translated into actions were almost endless.

---

[1] Warburg, *The Sudan Under* Wingate, p. 136.

A distinction between formal and informal judicial structures was made in early condominium policy. Government-identified Sheikhs did have a small formal role in Condominium judicial administration, but it was upon the informal mechanisms of community settlements that the government relied. The result was a truly devolved and largely hidden community justice system that did not centralise power or codify law. In the first twenty years of the Condominium, the desire of communities to settle disputes through informal and internal mechanisms was consistently demonstrated. Use of parallel government judicial structures only occurred when these internal mechanisms broke down, or as a means to access government controlled resources. Ideas of custom were central to each judicial form, and the continuing ambiguity of custom created a broad and flexible range of interpretations offering an aspect of choice to the population.

Before the nineteenth century, official judicial procedures within the Gezira were located within parallel hierarchical systems of courts headed by the Fung sultan and Islamic judges. In addition, local sheikhs and *fekis* settled disputes within and between communities.[2] Under Ottoman rule, Turkish codes of centralised civil and military law were imported to Sudan and administered by paid government officials. Shari'a law was administered by a strengthened *ulema,* and local custom was recognised in civil matters and "dispensed by local notables."[3] During the Mahdia, the secular apparatus of justice was disbanded in favour the Mahdi's (and subsequently the Khalifa's) personalised interpretation of Islamic law, but again, local men of influence were required to maintain basic order within communities.[4] Thus preceding the Condominium, a multiple range of authorities existed for the settling of disputes within and between communities and central powers. Over the course of the condominium a similar system existed, with the government reliant upon a range of formal and informal judicial procedures.

It has been argued that Europeans, informed by ideas of equality before the law and the belief in universal and predictable notions of rights and wrongs, struggled with

---

[2] J. Spaulding, "The Evolution of the Islamic Judiciary in Sinnar", *International Journal of African Historical Studies,* 10, (1977), 408-426.

[3] Zaki Mustafa, *The Common Law in the Sudan: an Account of the 'Justice, Equity, and Good Conscience' Provision* (Oxford, 1971), p. 37.

[4] Holt, *The Mahdist state*, pp. 112-116.

the ambiguity of customary settlements.[5]   Just as the need to know, and thus dominate, 'the other' had led colonial administrations to categorise people into tribes, so it compelled them to frame codes of procedure that were regularised and universally applicable.   Recent works have emphasised the controlling nature of colonial governments in fixing and formalising customary judicial procedure.[6] By seeing customary law as something extant, whole and definable, able to be written down and codified, it has been suggested that it was transformed from the fluid and shifting forms of dispute settlement existing in pre-colonial periods to a rigid, fixed and frequently 'uncustomary' system.[7] Chanock has further suggested that the colonial need to know and to understand social procedures, provided space for an elite social interest group to offer a definitive and homogenous version of customary law.[8] However, across northern Sudan the emphasis of the judicial system in the first twenty years of the Condominium was upon informality and continuing fluidity. It was in this context of continuing fluidity that the ability to interpret custom became a powerful tool. However the lack of bureaucratisation meant that this ability was diffuse and non-centralised in the first two decades of the Condominium.

Custodians of Custom – The Ambiguity of Government

The immediate administrative emphasis of the Condominium government was upon creating a legal framework that gave officials the power to punish offences. In 1899, the government passed the Penal Code and Code of Criminal Procedure. These codes imposed rigid and 'Westernised' legal boundaries onto a non-Western population in a classic case of colonial dominance. Through the categorisation of crimes and the detailing of procedure, an attempt was made to make law definite and set. The codes created a formal and hierarchical structure of law with clearly delineated rights and wrongs, fixed notions of criminality and particularised punishments. In its written form there was no compromise made to local

---

[5] Kristin Mann, and Richard Roberts (eds.,) *Law in Colonial Africa* (London, 1991), p. 4.
[6] See Spear "Neo-traditionalism and the limits of invention", for a review of current literature.
[7] Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order*.
[8] Ibid., p. 77.

understandings of criminality; an arena of distinct and rigidly defined law had been created.[9]

Headed by the Legal Secretary, and governed by the ultimate authority of the Governor General, there were in fact only three High Court judges employed by the government.[10] Lacking an effective judicial staff, the administration of these codes was delegated to provincial and district government officials. Under the Penal Code, five subordinate classes of courts were created; a Mudir's, or provincial governor's court consisting of three magistrates including the Mudir; a minor district court also consisting of three magistrates with one at least being of second class; and three magistrates' courts of the first, second and third classes. These courts allowed government officials of qualified rank, to try cases within specific boundaries relating to offence and sentencing as laid out in the Penal Code. The hierarchical nature of the system meant that powers diminished on a scale based both on rank of officials and the nature of the court. And while magistrates of first and second classes – the provincial governor and British district inspectors respectively – could try cases both in court settings and summarily at lower sentencing powers, magistrates of the third class, namely Mamurs, could only try cases summarily.[11]

However, the Penal Code was only half of the formal legislation introduced at the start of the Condominium, and one year later the Civil Justice Ordinance was passed. In the guise of formal bureaucracy, this ordinance was in fact founded on ambiguity. It was this considered ambiguity of the civil ordinance that established flexibility as the dominant influence upon the legal administration during the Condominium. In contrast with the concern to rid leadership titles of ambiguity, government policy actively retained an ambiguity in legal procedures. Knowing only that they wished to work to the tone of existing custom, but unsure of what this existing custom was, civil law remained an essentially unfixed body of legislation. As Cromer stated:

> [I]t was not thought advisable to create a body of substantial civil
>
> law at a time when all that was known of the customs of the

---

[9] Sudan Government, *The Sudan Code of Criminal Procedure, 1899* (Cairo: 1899).
[10] Zaki Mustafa, *The common law in the Sudan*, p. 59.
[11] Sudan Government, *The Sudan Code of Criminal Procedure*, 1899.

people was that they probably differed from those of any country whose legislation could have been taken as a precedent.[12]

While the ordinance instituted a formalised hierarchy of courts and court procedures in the model of the Penal Code, it did little to legislate for particular rules or laws. The only fixed civil laws related to land and some forms of taxation, and the dominant feature of the Ordinance was in its provision of guidelines for the administration of civil justice by prevailing 'custom', with the only proviso that judgements should conform to "justice, equity, and good conscience".[13]

British officials thus found themselves acting as judges within a narrow style of criminal law, and as the custodians of a civil law which was based on largely unknown custom and on vague notions of equity and common sense. Aiming for stability and a return to the situation prior to 'Dervish contamination', the elevation of custom was a way of gaining the confidence of the population. G.E. Matthews, Governor of Upper Nile Province expressed common opinion when he wrote in 1908; "so long as we decide cases according to equity and common sense, and avoid legal technicalities, we shall hold the confidence of these tribes."[14] However, without detailed written legislation, the administration of civil law by government officials was conducted only "according to their understanding of customary law."[15] In practice this understanding was influenced by what colonial officials knew best, the common law system of English law.[16] The flexibility of the legal structure allowed the government to influence custom by melding local traditions with what they saw as the best of European custom, "retaining the best of the native customs while modifying them by such western practices as were suited to an evolving civilisation."[17] Ambiguity remained at the centre of the government civil judicial system, with vague and unverifiable notions of custom, mixed with equally vague notions of universal justice existing as the basis of the law. By these means,

---

[12] Lord Cromer in, SGR 1903, p. 17.

[13] Sudan Government, *The Sudan Civil Justice Ordinance 1900*, (Cairo, National Printing Office, 1900).

[14] SGR 1908, p. 663.

[15] Douglas Johnson, "Judicial Regulation and Administrative control: Customary Law and the Nuer, 1898-1954", *Journal of African History*, 27, (1986) 59-78, at p. 62.

[16] Egon Guttman, "The Reception of the Common Law in the Sudan", *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 6, (1957), pp.401-417.

[17] Jackson, *Behind the modern Sudan*, p. 67.

government authority was firmly established as a hierarchical and formal apparatus but applying a mix of fixed and fluid regulations.

Controlling Custom

This lack of codification of custom left space for contestation and raises many questions about who controlled the interpretation of custom. Custom was corruptible, open to administrators influence and political manipulation. The fluidity of a law based upon custom was distinctly advantageous to an administration that had only a limited knowledge of the society it ruled, and was uncertain about the direction it wanted society to take. As Brett Shadle has posited;

> British officials believed that reducing African custom to written law and placing it in a code would 'crystallise' it, altering its fundamentally fluid or evolutionary nature. Colonizers naturally harboured intentions of using the law to shape society but a fluid, unwritten law provided much greater latitude to pursue these goals.[18]

The continuing ambiguity of civil and large parts of criminal law allowed change, and gave the administration the space to decide what direction this change was to take. A further benefit of using custom as a basis of law was in its efficiency. Settlements by custom generally gained wider approval than those made according to alien legal codes, and did little to disrupt existing community structures or culture.

Even the application of the Penal Code was subordinate to the understanding of custom, and the importance of accepted settlements. Pragmatism was the order of the day, even when it flew in the face of European convention. Understanding that "the same crime committed by a Sudanese black, a Jaalin Arab, or a Kababish nomad would probably not be fairly met by the same punishment", British inspectors were

---

[18] Brett Shadle, "Changing Traditions to meet Current Altering Conditions: Customary Law, African Courts and the Rejection of Codification in Kenya, 1930-60", *Journal of African History*, 40, (1999), 411-431, at pp. 411-2.

encouraged to seek settlements that accorded with local understandings of fairness.[19] In particular, the statutory punishment of life imprisonment or death in the case of murder was on occasions remitted in favour of a payment of blood money and a token sentence of imprisonment.[20] Community acceptance of government decisions was a primary motivation for the administration.

However, despite the emphasis upon local custom, the law as applied by British officials failed to be as fluid as communities wished. A case that occurred in Wad Medani – in which charms bought from a *fiki* were associated with a man's death – was accepted locally as a case of black magic.[21] Kenneth Henderson, province Governor also wished it to be interpreted as a case of magic, on the basis that that was the man's intention in using the charms. However, Henderson was acutely aware that such a premise would not be accepted in a criminal court, and thus predicted that the man would be acquitted. Although the final case outcomes are undocumented, this reveals much about the government's confused attitude towards local custom, and the ongoing debates over the application and direction of law, that occurred within the administration.

Just as custom was open to manipulation and direction by government officials, so the free interpretation of custom potentially empowered the identified elite of 'tribal' and community leaders by giving them the ear of government. Chanock focuses upon this potential to suggest that control over customary law became a central arena of contestation within communities.[22] Certainly, administrators' understanding of custom was gained primarily through discussion with community leaders, and administrators unfamiliar with local custom frequently approached community mediators; administrative sheikhs, religious figures and 'councils of elders' to apply their knowledge and authority to the case. Not only did community leaders know the background to cases, but it was felt that indigenous forms of dispute settlement, "emphasizing intermediaries and intermediation, delegations, dyadic diplomacy, compensation, truce and final reconciliation and peace-making" were frequently

---

[19] SGR 1904, p. 57.
[20] Warburg, *The Sudan Under Wingate*, p. 126.
[21] SAD 537/10, Henderson to his mother, 29 April 1927.
[22] Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order*, chapter 4.

superior to anything offered by the DC.[23] Thus, when struggling with knowing what legal or customary principles to apply to a case brought against a *fiki*, whose claim to cure a sick donkey was undermined when the donkey was eaten by a hyena, H.C. Jackson, DC Sennar, simply passed the whole case on to a local council of elders.[24] Community mediators, and particularly the administrative elite remained the acknowledged experts of customary law, and the government provided them with considerable judicial space in which to operate. That this could work to the advantage of sheikhs is demonstrated in the ability for them to portray formerly communal lands as their own property during the process of land registration in the first decade of Condominium rule.[25]

However, it was over the issue of slavery – in which custom came up against enshrined Western notions of individual liberty – that the elite gained their most emphatic win. Despite the fervent anti-slavery stance prevalent within Britain itself, the policy taken towards slavery in the first years of the Condominium was intensely pragmatic and favoured the slave-owning elite. Although finding the institution of slavery distasteful, the British were convinced of its customary role in Sudanese economic life.[26] In an effort to maintain a level of continuity and social and economic security, the administration followed a policy of giving freedom papers only to those who requested them, and not interfering in any cases that were not brought to the government's attention.[27] Even on the occasions of a slave's request for freedom, DC's were to make all efforts to mediate between slave and master and encourage the slave to stay.[28]

This policy was sanctioned on the understanding that domestic slavery was not only an integral part of northern Sudanese society, but was a benign institution. The distinction was made between domestic slavery and the trading in slaves; "the object of the whole thing [slave policy] being to stop trading in humanity rather than to

---

[23] Richard Antoun, "Civil Society, Tribal Process, and Change in Jordan: An Anthropological View", *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 32, (2000), pp. 441-463, at p. 446.

[24] H.C. Jackson, *Sudan Days and Ways*, (London, 1954), pp. 48-9.

[25] Niblock *Class and power in Sudan*, p. 15

[26] Warburg, *The Sudan under Wingate*, p. 51.

[27] Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers*, pp. 44-50.

[28] NRO BNP 1/28/211, 'Regulations as to Sudanese Servants, 1907'.

disturb slavery as an institution where it was not particularly harmful."[29] Summing up the government's benign understanding of slavery within the Gezira, the Assistant DC of Hassaheissa wrote; "all the larger sheikhs have so-called slaves, and the richer ones a fair number of them; they look after them very well, treat them well, and allow them practically unlimited liberty." [30] This interpretation of slavery deliberately supported the existing status quo, and the government failed to abolish slavery in the fear that it would "alienate the section of Sudanese society that has been till now loyal to government."[31] The support for the 'big-men' of Sudan was deemed as a more important consideration than any moral queasiness felt towards slavery.

That the elite took specific measures to defend the 'customary' right to own slaves was demonstrated in the deputation of sheikhs that arrived at the office of the DC in Medani expressing their concern at the government's action of giving freedom papers to each slave that asked for one.[32] It was only when the elite began to see greater advantages in the abolition of slavery that the defence of this custom was stopped. The disadvantages of having to feed and house a slave all year round and support him in old age, soon became apparent when compared with the cost of short-term hired labour. With labour migration patterns emerging in response to the needs and opportunities provided by the Gezira Scheme, hired labour became a more efficient manner of farming, and the elite actually looked to the government to abolish slavery as a means for them to escape their obligations in the upkeep of slaves.[33]

[29] NRO BNP 1/18/112, 'Minutes of the Gezira District Commissioners' meeting', 24 December 1928.
[30] NRO BNP 1/28/211, ADC Hassaheissa to Governor BNP, 29 February 1924.
[31] NRO BNP 1/28/211, Huddleston, Governor BNP to Lyall, Civil Secretary, 22 December 1924.
[32] NRO BNP 1/28/211, D.I. Coates, ADC Medani to Huddleston, Governor BNP, 24 January 1926.
[33] NRO BNP 1/28/211, E.J.N. Wallis, Commissioner Gezira Area to Huddleston, Governor BNP re; comments by Sheikh Ahmed Ismail Isa, 9 February 1927; See also Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers*, p. 104 and Jackson, *Sudan Days and Ways*, p. 44.

Petitioning the *Merkaz*

However, although the administrative and economic elite may have defined custom, its application in law did not always defend their interests. With no code, conceptions of fairness and interpretations of custom as held by sheikhs and by the DC, frequently clashed, and in the cases that came to the attention of the government official, it was invariably the interpretation of the latter that won. The government saw itself as a force to eradicate what was seen as endemic corruption among sheikhs. This perception of overriding corruption was summed up by the publication of a case, apocryphal one assumes, in which a village sheikh settled a claim of a theft of three sheep by giving one sheep to the injured owner in case there had been a theft, one sheep to the accused in case there had not, and one sheep kept by the sheikh as payment for his work.[34] It was against such cases of elite enrichment that the government aimed to defend the 'common man'. The government prided itself on its openness, and the ability of even the 'poorest inhabitants' to petition the government directly. The 1907 annual report described this process as 'unwritten law' with "no effort... made by the local officials to curtail this popular privilege."[35] Despite its reliance upon internal mechanisms, the government was able to maintain its power through the establishment of a hierarchy of judicial procedures, in which customary settlements became subject to the higher authority of government officials. With a general suspicion of the very elite they co-opted, and an ethos of detached fairness, opportunities did exist for successful challenges against the elite.

That the *merkaz* was not a rubber stamp for the elite's interpretation of custom is demonstrated in the frustration aired by a village sheikh against the judgement of a DC. When J.W. Robertson as ADC Rufa'a sentenced a man to ten years for the culpable homicide of two men killed in a fight, the sheikh complained "as he considers two years quite enough – one for each man".[36] However, the extent to which the judgements of the *merkaz* actually benefited the less well off was limited. Freedom papers for slaves were rare, with only 113 papers granted in the ten years

---

[34] SGR 1905, p. 38.
[35] SGR 1907, p. 154.
[36] SAD 531/2/1-111, Robertson to his mother, 18 January 1923.

from 1915 to 1925 in Medani district, as against an estimated 5,700 'servants' existing within the district.[37] Furthermore, the high number of successful claims for the recovery of loans worked to consolidate the economic position of the elite, despite official sympathy towards the debtor crippled by what were seen to be excessively high usury rates.[38] Through the manipulation of custom and the legal codes, elites were frequently able to retain and consolidate their privileges. The government's desire for stability only reinforced this trend.

Access to the government was further countered by the difficulties of taking cases to the *merkaz*, either because of distance, because of an intimidation of the formal procedural process, or because of the potentially alienating effect this would have in a person's community. However, despite these deterrents, the Governor-General received approximately one thousand petitions annually during the first years of the Condominium, relating to a wide range of issues.[39] At the district level, it was predominantly the poor and alienated who came for assistance as it was this group that had the most to gain from such appeal to government strength, although as seen in the case of slavery, the elite also turned to the *merkaz* to defend and back their interests. The amount of time spent by district commissioners in dealing directly with members of the public demonstrates clearly the willingness of individuals to use the machinery of central government.[40] Familiar with the idea of centralised and alien authority under former central regimes, the population readily saw the government as a point of arbitration and appeal.

Petitions generally related to issues directly controlled by the government, such as taxes, licence fees or unpopular sheikhly appointments.[41] On other occasions petitions were heard appealing decisions made by a sheikh and considered

---

[37] NRO BNP 1/28/211, Barter, DC Medani, to Huddleston, Governor BNP, 23 March 1926. A similarly high figure of 3,500 'servants' was made for Hassaheissa district; Corfield, ADC Hassaheissa, to Huddleston, 20 March 1926.

[38] SGR 1906, p. 75.

[39] SGR 1907, p. 154. Subjects of early appeal to the Khartoum authorities included requests for employment and questions regarding building and other regulations, suggesting an awareness of the specific powers of central authority.

[40] Henderson as ADC Medani spent four hours a day trying cases brought to him. SAD 537/10/13 Henderson diary entry, 22 June 1927.

[41] Ibid., 5 January 1927.

unsatisfactory.[42] However, as well as appealing against existing judgements, the *merkaz* court was also actively used by communities on occasions when formal judgements (backed by government authority) were required. The high number of cases brought to district civil courts by merchants aiming to recover loans given on credit suggests the unsuitability of local settlement mechanisms for this means. This was especially true in cases in which the merchant was from outside the area. In these cases the merchant had no relationship with a local sheikh, and thus was unwilling, or unable to use such personages as figures of arbitration, and subsequently sought justice at the *merkaz*.[43]

Incorporating Sheikhs

Historians have frequently portrayed the early years of the Condominium as a direct administration.[44] However, there were severe limitations on the effectiveness of government officials in the administration of justice. District officials who were responsible for the administration of justice were remote from the lives of most people. Treks, although a crucial element of the British administration, were infrequent and their very public nature made private recourse to the touring DC difficult. Thus those identified as the leaders of communities were incorporated into the system of centralised justice. Through the requirements of government-recognised sheikhs to make summons and report certain crimes, sheikhs were a visible part of the formal judicial and administrative procedures of the Condominium.

However, this formal use of sheikhs was only a minor aspect of their 'judicial' role. The Condominium administration was also heavily reliant upon informal arbitration to resolve local disputes. The inability of government officials to fully administer the judicial codes interacted neatly with the government's idealisation of 'tribal'

---

[42] Jackson, *Sudan Days and Ways*, p. 43.

[43] SGR 1906, p. 349.

[44] Sarah Voll for instance states that "the theory of native administration was adopted only after a long period of direct rule". S. Voll, "The Introduction of Native Administration in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan" *Al-Abhath*, 24, (1971) pp. 111-123, at p. 111.

structures and the desire to empower community leaders. The 'customary' judicial authority within communities was supported, and sheikhs were "encouraged to maintain order among their own adherents, and to deal with minor misdemeanours themselves, as they had done for generations past."[45] This policy was explicitly intended to shore up tribal authority, and Matthew emphasised that "provided neither cruelty nor extortion is practised we should be careful to avoid the danger of robbing chiefs of their power."[46]

The essence of these community settlements was flexibility. As Anthony Disney reported;

> There was no formal code, or system, but a vast corpus of
> unwritten law, carried in the minds of the tribal and village elders,
> varying from place to place in accordance with local requirements,
> changing to meet new needs and acceptable to the people.[47]

The government made no attempt to categorise custom as it was practised within the community, seeing rival authorities within the community and the right to appeal to the *merkaz* as safeguards to abuse. Suitable mediators were found throughout the community in the form of government sheikhs, religious men, and community notables, all of whom might work independently, or as a group. The key was to find an acceptable authority to all parties involved in the dispute. As with the flexibility of custom, the figures of authority were also flexible, and were not confined to government-identified leaders. For instance Sheikh Abdel Gader Ahmed el Bedawi, also known as Fiki Wad Hashi had no officially sanctioned position, but was famed for his mediatory skills and "exercise[d] the common right to arbitrate in disputes voluntarily brought to him for settlement."[48] Dealing with all types of cases; criminal, civil and Shari'a, Wad Hashi offered advisory compensation solutions to disputes in a process that proved popular with litigants and enjoyed "a very good repute".[49]

---

[45] Jackson, *Behind the modern Sudan*, p. 110.
[46] SGR 1908, p. 663.
[47] Anthony Disney, "English Law in the Sudan, 1899-1958", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 40, (1959) pp. 121-123, at p. 121.
[48] NRO BNP 1/1/1, anon., "Note on Fiki Wad Hashi", n.d.
[49] Ibid.,

The importance of independent religious leaders in dispute settlement and as general community power brokers was, by the 1920s openly recognised by the government despite the continuing lack of official sanction. Recognising that religious leaders "do exercise a good deal of influence which exists not by virtue of encouragement on the part of Government but by virtue of 'old traditions'", unofficial use was made of these channels of authority.[50] With practical results a higher priority than ideology, the forms of judicial authority within communities remained virtually unchanged in the first two decades of the Condominium, continuing to be based upon a multiple range and forms of authority. Notably these informal judicial structures remained largely independent and unsupervised by government officials. There was no formal apparatus of personnel, procedure or paperwork, settlements went undocumented and remained for the most part invisible to colonial administrators during the first half of the Condominium. It is therefore very difficult to get an impression of the ways in which Gezira communities settled their disputes. However the flexibility and dispersed authority of 'judicial' authority within the Gezira is suggested by the forms of dispute settlement during the process of land registration within Messellemia district, in which sheikhs, omdas, notables and holy men were all called upon to act as mediators between antagonistic parties.[51]

Administrative sheikhs may have been appointed and recognised by the government, but they did not necessarily have more community-sanctioned power because of their position. As R.V. Bardsley, new Governor of Blue Nile Province stated; "the religious head of any given family exercises, without Government sanction, more power than the Government administrative representative – and in the majority of cases he is the better man in every way."[52] In this structure, the government sheikh held an uncertain position. He generally had considerable authority in his locality, but was not necessarily dominant. His was a specific role in which he acted as a mediator between the community and the government. He was at the same time "a direct, if sometimes passive, agent of external authority", and "the principal

---

[50] Huddleston, Governor BNP to all DCs BNP, 3 February 1927, (emphasis in original), for instance Huddleston requested the services of an omda and a religious leader in settling a blood dispute in a village near Wad Medani. SAD 537/10, Henderson to his mother, 5 August 1927.

[51] Peacock, *A Report on the Land Settlement*, p. 46.

[52] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 9 June 1928.

spokesman for the community and a patron of its interests."[53] The recognition of government provided the opportunity for the extension of power; however this mediating role was also potentially limiting forcing the sheikh to balance the demands of government and the wishes of the people.[54]

In whatever form, there was a consistent preference for communities to settle their own disputes when possible. Jackson summed up this preference of villages to retain control over the processes of justice in a typical dismissive manner,

> Litigation being to them what football or cricket is to the average
> Englishman, it was much more satisfying and encouraging to play
> on the home ground under the village tree than it was to play an
> 'away match' at District Headquarters.[55]

This light-hearted understanding of community justice vastly undervalued the importance of a community settling its own internal disputes, and in the process maintaining the working structure of a community. Observing a judgement passed by Sheikh Mohammed Musaad of the Halawin, Richardson asked "the victim", (the accused on trial) whether he wanted the case to be re-tried at the *Merkaz*.[56] To the Richardson's surprise, the offer was declined. The *merkaz* might have offered a more lenient punishment, but in its external judgement, and its concern to punish rather than negotiate an outcome acceptable to all parties, *merkaz* judicial settlements were unable to provide for the re-establishment of normal relations so necessary within small communities. Even if not applying a fixed code, British dualistic conceptions of justice, with a victim and victor, and punishment relating solely to crime, rather than context, worked to fix notions of justice. Communities aimed to avoid this process through settling as many of their own judgements as possible.[57]

---

[53] Marvin G. Weinbaum "Structure and Performance of Mediating Elites", In I. William Zartman, (ed.,) *Elites in the Middle East* (New York, 1980), p. 156.
[54] Marshall Clough, *Fighting Two Sides*.
[55] Jackson, *Behind the Modern Sudan*, pp. 112-113.
[56] NRO BNP 1/1/1, Richardson, ADC Hassaheissa to Huddleston, Governor BNP, 11 February 1927.
[57] See Johnson, "Judicial Regulation and Administrative control", for an analysis of the different conceptions of justice within Condominium Sudan.

The Availability of Choice

In addition to settlements given at the *merkaz* and within the community, the formal structure of Shari'a courts tried civil cases between consenting Muslims under the jurisdiction of educated *qadis*. Seen as part of customary authority in northern Sudan, the government made a concerted attempt to strengthen the structure of Islamic law. Like tribal structures, the institutions of Shari'a law were perceived as having suffered severe dislocation under the rule of the Mahdi. The 'traditional' role of orthodox Islam was thus evoked by Sir Edgar Bonham-Carter, who wrote in 1901 "Under the old Government every place of any pretensions had its Cadi".[58] The value of this tradition was particularly high in the context of the suspicion held towards unorthodox Islam, and its evocation of the spectre of the Mahdia. The strengthening of orthodox Islam became a central aspect of early Condominium policy, allowing as it did, the government to attack Sufism, while still presenting themselves as the supporters of Islam. Thus by actively supporting the *ulema*, "the government received an orthodox Muslim sanction for its actions."[59]

In 1902, the 'Sudan Mohammedan Law Courts Ordinance' provided for a reformed Islamic judicial system, and as with the other legal codes it formed a hierarchy of courts in districts and provinces, and a high court in Khartoum. Through this ordinance a formal apparatus of Islamic law was established and ultimately controlled by the government. Not only was the Grand *Qadi* appointed by the Governor-General of Sudan, but all Egyptian *Qadis* entering Sudan were first vetted by Slatin and Bonham-Carter before being 'appointed' by the Grand *Qadi* of Egypt.[60] Through such stringent controls and the reduction of court powers, the Sudan government was able to develop an institution which supported it.

As long as the Shari'a courts did not present a challenge, then they were left to conduct their business with a high degree of independence. Islamic courts maintained an independent appeals system and internal systems of inspection in part because of

---

[58] Edgar Bonham-Carter quoted in Donald Hawley, *Sandtracks in the Sudan*, (Norwich, 1995), p. 72.
[59] Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, p. 123.
[60] Warburg, *Sudan Under Wingate*, p. 17.

the obvious lack of Islamic legal qualifications of government officials. However, the absence of government discussion about Islamic law also suggests a lack of interest in Islamic law other than in its ability to maintain stability. This was demonstrated in the ambivalent attitudes to legal practice. Not only were non-orthodox practices permitted, they were actively encouraged if this was to maintain order among populations that considered their customary interpretation of Islamic law to be orthodox. As Cromer stated

> The men appointed Deputy Kadis [sic] are usually men who have
>
> a reputation in their own villages of being men of religion and
>
> who are consequently respected. Their decisions, though wrong
>
> in form and possibly in law are based on a knowledge of the
>
> people and are usually regarded by them as just.[61]

As with other forms of judicial administration, the emphasis was upon consensus and acceptance rather than strict codification, and ambiguity was tolerated in the cause of stability.

While Shari'a courts had powers to decide cases of personal status, they also had jurisdiction in wider civil issues if all parties agreed.[62] This ability gave considerable scope for public assessment of the differences between court procedures and the potential benefits of the different facilities. Henderson wrote that women in particular frequently found the Hanafi code of orthodox courts more favourable (and more accessible) than the Maliki interpretation of Islamic law, which was the stronger influence upon custom throughout most of northern Sudan.[63] Once again, it was the poor that had the greatest potential gain through using these courts and were the most frequent litigants. Popular use and approval of these courts was demonstrated in the increase in fees taken and in the long term demand for a court in Managil which was finally granted in 1910.[64]

The British administration thus recognised three systems of justice: that of the legal codes administered by government officials; customary law administered by local

---

[61] SGR 1903, p. xxxiii.
[62] M.I El Nur, "The Role of the Native Courts in the Administration of Justice in the Sudan", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 41 (1960), pp. 78-87, at p. 79.
[63] Henderson, *Set Under Authority*, p. 51
[64] SGR 1906, p. 356 and 1910, p. 608.

leaders; and Islamic law administered by an appointed educated judiciary. They thus returned to a multilayered system not dissimilar to that established by the Turko-Egyptians in the nineteenth century. With the exception of Shari'a courts being unable to try criminal cases, and capital crimes always being judged by government officials, the jurisdiction of these systems overlapped greatly. In effect this gave the population of Sudan a choice of formal institutions to which they could take their disputes. While taking into account the limitations in gaining access to sometimes remote district offices or Shari'a courts, this "availability of externally constituted hearing agencies changed the options" and potentially empowered people.[65] A person might turn to the *merkaz*, the sheikh, the *qadi*, or other religious figure, or he might turn to several of these authorities in appeal until he got the judgement that he was looking for. These decisions (and limitations upon them) were formed on the basis of the type of the case and the circumstances of the individual.

Ambiguity remained the main feature of Condominium judicial processes throughout the first two decades of the Condominium. Vague notions of 'custom' formed the basis of procedures in the civil suits at the *Merkaz* as well as community-based dispute settlements. British officials presented themselves as the disseminators of custom within a formal and hierarchical setting, in which it was never clear whether fixed rules or flexible solutions were the dominant policy. Away from the *merkaz*, the government relied upon community leaders to settle disputes that the government could not. In contrast with the *merkaz*, these community settlements were informal and undocumented. As with Islamic courts, they retained practical independence, with only rare government interference. The common theme was the decision not to codify 'custom', or to impose rigid interpretations of the law. Based largely on custom, judicial processes remained for the most part flexible, for 'custom' could and did mean many things.

The control of these judicial processes, and the interpretation of custom brought considerable power to individuals. In particular, the wealthy elite with the ear of government officials were able to gain significant advantages by presenting themselves as the guardians of tradition. As the gatekeeper between the worlds of

---

[65] Falk Moore, *Social Facts and Fabrications*, p. 170.

the government and the community, the sheikh was in a central position in the community. However, during the first twenty years of the Condominium, the sheikh, while recognised by the government, had few formal powers and was unable to assume total command of community judicial administration. The very role of sheikhs as gatekeepers meant that they balanced a delicate line between communities and the government. The existence of other individuals with mediating powers meant that these powers were shared and dispersed throughout the community.

From 1920, this flexible situation was to end. Until that date third class magistrates who sat on Mudir and Minor District courts as provided by the Code of Criminal Procedure, were all appointed from Mamurs, thus retaining an effective separation between community and government machinery. In 1920, the same legislation was used to appoint Sheikhs and Omdas, and in that year, all Sheikhs of Khut within the Gezira were appointed third class magistrates.[66] Although this was a continuation of their administrative, government appointed role, the incorporation of 'native leaders' into the formal judicial bureaucracy of government marked a considerable departure from previous policy. As government servants, sheikhs were required to both administer custom within the community and apply formal codes from the *merkaz*. In recognising only Sheikhs of Khut and a limited number of Omdas, the government began the process of centralisation of official powers within the personnel of government-identified sheikhs that was to become the theme of subsequent policy.

---

[66] Sudan Government Gazette, no. 360, 1 June 1920, p. 1268.

4

CREATING COURTS

After twenty years of applying 'customary law' from the *merkaz* and relying on virtually hidden forms of judicial settlement at the local level, the active application of Indirect Rule marked a transformation in the ways in which judicial settlements were reached. As Sally Falk Moore has stated; "When 'customary law' is treated as a set of mandatory substantive rules enforced by a court rather than as a set of guideline norms used by a primary group to manage the affairs of its members a major reinterpretation is involved."[1] Government policies formalised and bureaucratised judicial procedures with an aim of creating accountable bodies considered necessary for equitable administration. The period after 1920 saw the formal bureaucratic judicial procedures previously confined to the government extend into the community. A series of legislative reforms gave defined judicial powers to government sheikhs and began to officially centralise power at the community level. This government-driven process was embraced by Gezira communities who used courts as a way of controlling their own experience of formal justice and governance. At the same time existing informal methods of dispute settlement were also retained away from the centralised control of the government resulting in the continuation of a flexible system of judicial settlement.

The process also demonstrates a concerted attempt by the government to shape the direction of Sudan's future by strengthening the supposedly traditional and tribal

---

[1] Moore, *Social facts and fabrications*, p. 170.

elements of society, with rural sheikhs seen as the 'natural' custodians of customary law. By the mid-1920s, the theory of Indirect Rule had become a central element of government self-identification.[2] Inherently conservative and suspicious of the desire of the educated urban effendi class for political change, the involvement of the latter in the political unrest of the early 1920s hastened the desire of the government to give increasing powers to 'traditional' leaders whose interests were believed to ally more closely with the government. In October 1924, Guy Pawson, the Deputy Governor of Blue Nile Province, outlined the supposed dangers posed by *effendia* when he described *mamurs* as men who

> [I]nherit the Egyptian love of personal power and the Egyptian dislike of the powerful Nazir or Omda... They have no conception of themselves as men of less importance than the Nazirs and Omdas of the district, while by an alteration in their dress and mode of life, they raise a barrier between themselves and their own people... With the whole structure of rule by native chiefs still to be built up, the danger from a powerful native official class [is] very real.[3]

The introduction of a policy that relied on stringent notions of tribal 'tradition' at the same time as the Gezira Scheme – with its decidedly 'untraditional' structures – was about to be opened, was a contradiction that proved a running problematic for the government.[4]

The legislation of the 1920s attempted to counter the 'threat' that the growth of a modern educated and non-tribal population posed, by giving greater powers to 'traditional' authorities. In actual fact the continuing drive for efficiency meant that the legislation created a bureaucratic structure of courts, which worked as extensions of the *merkaz* and were far from traditional and far from being effectively devolved. With salaried personnel, native courts administered criminal and civil codes in a similar way

---

[2] Voll, "The Introduction of Native Administration", p. 111.

[3] NRO 1Civsec 50/2/10, A.G. Pawson, Deputy Governor BNP, "Note on the native Mamur and Sub-Mamur as effecting the government policy of centralization", 1924.

[4] Berry notes that this desire for a controllable 'Westernised' economy, at the same time as wanting to retain traditional norms within a society was an inherent contradiction of all colonial regimes. *No Condition is Permanent*, p. 8.

to the government offices, taking over many of the same duties that had previously been conducted by the *effendi* class.[5] They were also closely monitored by the *merkaz*, thus effectively remaining part of the *merkaz* infrastructure. Sudanese use of these courts reflected the alien nature of the institutions. They were viewed as bodies through which Sudanese might communicate with external communities and authorities. Central to the courts' role within the Gezira was the cotton Scheme, and courts became central to the functioning of the Scheme, mediating in the labour disputes and imposing the agricultural ordinances that government administrators simply could not oversee. This subordination of judicial and administrative purposes to the needs of the Scheme illustrates that despite the traditional rhetoric, native courts were 'modern' institutions cloaked in a thin guise of tradition.

Processes of Devolution

The Milner report of 1920 gave official sanction to the process of administrative and judicial devolution to local leaders, with its conclusion that

> Decentralization and the employment, wherever possible, of native
> agencies for the simple administrative needs of the country, in its
> present stage of development, would make both for economy and
> efficiency.[6]

Under General Sir Lee Stack, who held the position of Governor General from 1917 to 1924, this report formed the basis of a dual policy. Mamurs and other educated and trained Sudanese were still seen to hold a vital position in the administration and public services of Sudan, but the positions of 'traditional' leaders were increasingly formalised with the provision of official powers.

---

[5] In the 1928 budget, £E.15,000 was allocated for the purposes of 'devolution', most of which was to be spent on 'adequate remuneration' of tribal leaders sitting on courts. Voll, "The Introduction of Native Administration", p. 119.
[6] Sudan Government, *Memorandum – General Administrative Policy*, p. 1.

The devolutionary policies of the 1920s were primarily formulated in judicial rather than administrative terms, on the grounds that this "follows traditions better", and resulted in a formal system of 'native courts'.[7] The government's understanding of past traditions shaped these policies and thus in 1922 the Powers of Nomad Sheikhs Ordinance recognised:

> [I]t has from time immemorial been customary for native sheikhs
>
> sitting alone or assisted by their tribal or district elders to exercise
>
> powers of punishment upon those subject to their tribal or local
>
> jurisdiction and of deciding disputes among them.[8]

By extending formal judicial powers to tribal sheikhs the government attempted to bolster the authority of 'traditional' tribal leadership. The Ordinance provided for each appointed tribal sheikh, sitting individually or as president of a court to try certain offences in his position as tribal leader rather than as a government magistrate. Judicial procedure was regularised and formalised through the listing of offences and punishments within the courts authority by warrant, but custom, which was at the heart of a court's powers remained uncodified. However, although an important event in the legal history of Sudan, this ordinance had little effect within the settled region of the Gezira. It was not until 1926 that officially devolved courts were established in the area by means of the Village Courts Ordinance.

In February of that year, Huddleston, the Governor of the Blue Nile Province, wrote to the Civil Secretary requesting the application of the Village Courts Ordinance to the province and identified the *omodia* as "the most convenient unit from which to establish courts."[9] Thus although termed village courts, and seeming to recognise the social importance of the village unit, the name was an anomaly, bringing together a number of villages under the jurisdiction of one court, the president of which was the omda. A permanent panel of members was appointed by the government. There were to be no more than four members from any one village, and each village sheikh was appointed

---

[7] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, Huddleston, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 11 March 1927.

[8] Powers of Nomad Sheikhs Ordinance 1922, Sudan Government Gazette, No. 396, 1922.

[9] NRO 1Civsec 1/50/133, Huddleston, to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 23 February 1926.

ex-officio member. Although members had the automatic right to sit on the court in the case of an inhabitant of their village being involved in the case, in every other case they were not allowed to sit as members unless invited.[10] Based upon the idea of a group of village 'elders', the ordinance actually centralised authority onto the omda, and lacked the fluidity of previous communal settlements. These courts had the jurisdiction to try scheduled minor offences and award fines of up to £E.2, and to determine civil suits to the value of £E.2.[11]

These courts quickly became an established feature of the Gezira landscape with 23 established within the area of the Gezira Scheme by 1927, and 42 by 1928.[12] Their value in trying both civil and criminal cases was soon announced with Huddleston writing as early as March 1927 that "the success of these courts has far exceeded my expectations".[13] Throughout 1927, 328 cases came before village courts in Hassaheissa district and it was estimated that "at least one third of these cases would otherwise have come to the DC."[14] The inference was that not only did village courts settle cases formerly mediated informally by local leaders, but they were also able to incorporate cases previously heard at the *merkaz*. Thus the mamur of Hassaheissa district heard only 127 cases during 1928, while the omda of Hassaheissa town heard a total of 329 cases. As the annual report stated, "Far fewer petitions and petty quarrels have been brought to the offices of the district commissioner and Mamur and people do go straight to the Omda, which is most encouraging."[15]

Under the Governor-Generalship of Sir John Maffey, these first devolutionary steps became a rush. With a fervent belief in the ideas of Indirect Rule, Maffey aimed to further strengthen traditional authorities, "thereby sterilising and localising the political germs which must spread from the lower Nile into Khartoum."[16] In 1927, the Powers of

---

[10] NRO 1Civsec 1/50/133, "Regulations for Village Courts", 1926.
[11] El Nur, "Native Courts", p. 82.
[12] NRO BNP 1/27/201, BNP Annual Report 1928.
[13] NRO 1Civsec 1/50/133, Huddleston, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 18 March 1927.
[14] NRO 2BNP 42/2/10, BNP Annual Report 1927.
[15] NRO BNP 1/27/201, BNP Annual Report 1928, emphasis in original
[16] NRO BNP 1/1/1, 'Minute by His Excellency the Governor-General' 1 January 1927.

Nomad Sheikhs Ordinance was replaced by the Powers of Sheikhs Ordinance, which increased the official powers of sheikhs. Just one year later it was itself replaced by the Powers of Sheikhs Ordinance, 1928, which extended the ordinance to settled areas. Like the earlier ordinances, it provided for nominated Sheikhs sitting individually or in *meglis*, to try a wide range of designated offences under the Sudan Penal Code, and on the basis of custom. It did not allow courts to try offences that were contained in other government ordinances.[17] This series of legislation extended the codified concepts of criminality to sheikhs' courts, and both opened opportunities to courts and at the same time restricted them in other ways. However, the focus of these institutions continued to be the application of custom, which remained open to interpretation.

Huddleston had grave doubts about the value of the 1927 Ordinance, believing that it was still too tribally constructed for application in the Gezira:

> There is clearly a great scope for an increase of judicial devolution in
> the Gezira Scheme, but of large parts of the Scheme it can be said
> that there is no individual of real authority, and that no tribal
> discipline exists.[18]

Huddleston instead suggested that the Scheme be included under the Courts of Elders Ordinance, as then provided only for urban areas.[19] These courts, with their emphasis upon codified law rather than custom, Huddleston suggested, would overcome the necessity of 'resurrecting' tribal identities. He argued for the specific needs of the Gezira Scheme when he wrote of the courts of elders; "I feel that it will probably be found that these courts suit sophisticated rural areas better than courts to be established under the Powers of Sheikhs Ordinance."[20]

---

[17] El Nur, "Native Courts", p. 82.
[18] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, Huddleston, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 2 April 1927.
[19] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, Huddleston, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 11 March 1927.
[20] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, Huddleston, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 2 April 1927.

A Sophisticated Rural Area

Thus began a debate over the specialised nature and identity of the Gezira Scheme, which as 'a sophisticated rural area' failed to come within the accepted rural/urban dichotomy through which the government operated its devolutionary policy. Contradiction was at the heart of government policy as regarded the Scheme. In the climate of Indirect Rule, the government had to justify the creation of a highly centralised and intrusive agricultural Scheme, which had in its planning stages prior to the First World War been a straight-forward revenue-generating project. Driven by the necessity to find internal revenue, and tied to the Scheme by debt, the government on one hand looked to the Scheme as a positive beacon of modernity. On the other, prevailing conservative ideology led officials to fear the corrupting influences of change and development. Uncertainty and a lack of preparation were the hallmarks of government policy towards the Gezira and C.S. Lyall, Civil Secretary in the years immediately prior to the Scheme's full opening, stated:

> [I]n practice the social organization in the Gezira will probably work itself out gradually and satisfactorily without Government interference and I think it would be a mistake for the Sudan Government to have any cut and dried policy with regard to it now.[21]

In the meantime, the focus was upon preserving as much of the past as possible. There were no changes made in district boundaries, meaning that at the time of opening, the Scheme was part of three districts, spanning areas within and outside of the Scheme. In 1928, the position of 'Commissioner of the Gezira Area' was created to coordinate administrative policy within the Scheme area, but he remained subordinate to each of the District Commissioners of the North Gezira and South Gezira.[22] Thus although the distinctiveness of the Scheme was acknowledged, it was not allowed to dominate administrative policy. An attempt was made to control the administration of the Scheme

---

[21] NRO 1Civsec 2/13/57, Lyall, Civil Secretary to C.A. Willis, Director of Intelligence, 10 November 1923.

in exactly the same way as all other administrative areas of Sudan, divorcing it completely from the agricultural concerns of the Syndicate. By separating administrative and agricultural functions, the government attempted to maintain the social authority of village structures and allow modernisation to impinge solely on economic life.

Even so, the dangers of modernisation as symbolised by the Scheme were acutely felt. Upon becoming Governor of the Province in 1928, Bardsely articulated his fears:

> There is a distinct danger of the artificial divisions necessitated by the Gezira Scheme, not gradually, but rapidly undermining tribal traditions and I look to these courts to preserve it. The sudden and rather unexpected elevation to a position of comparative affluence, the influx of strangers – characters good and bad – which money attracts, the spendthrift nature of the majority of the population prompted chiefly by the traditional desire for outward and visible display cut at the very roots of any tribal discipline, and not only tribal discipline but family or home discipline and tradition, which is, of course, the foundation of the tribal and social system... The proper corrective to the disintegrating influences inseparable from commercial development, is, in my opinion, judicial powers which are, in fact, readily appreciated and respected by the people.[23]

Although the lack of socio-political tribal units in the Gezira had been one of the enabling factors for the Scheme, in the climate of the late 1920s, it was seen as distinctly problematic.

These concerns prompted the government to promote tribal 'traditions', in the form of judicial powers throughout the Scheme, and despite the unique conditions of the Scheme, it was treated officially in the same way as any other settled rural area of Sudan. For this reason MacMichael as Civil Secretary was adamant in his wish to keep

---

[22] Sudan Government, *Notes on the Gezira*, p. 23.

[23] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 9 June 1928.

courts of elders restricted to towns, and overrode Huddleston's request for the uniqueness of Scheme conditions to be administratively recognised.[24] With a far from subtle analysis of the past as a positive utopia, sheikhs' courts were seen as a bulwark against the influence of the new agricultural administration, providing recognised and extensive powers to 'traditional leaders'. Thus the processes of centralisation and bureaucratisation, begun in the creation of village courts continued in these sheikhs' courts. Despite the rhetoric of tribalism – with the courts given tribal names – the courts were based on the existing territorial unit of the khut, with the sheikhs of khut acting as presidents.[25] It was actively recognised that the main concern within the Gezira "was not so much a matter of regularising customary punitive powers as of forming some kind of native authority."[26] By giving existing sheikhs of khut new judicial powers and formal position, the government attempted to increase the prestige of the administrative elite, and even looked upon these institutions to "resuscitate tribal tradition and authority which - a few years ago - was moribund."[27] Further, by forming courts based upon existing units rather than the new agricultural block boundaries of the Scheme, the government enforced the separation between the agricultural and administrative spheres.

However, if the fortunes of sheikhs' courts were rising, the same could not be said for village courts. Created under separate legislation, the greater powers of sheikhs' courts soon made village courts irrelevant. The powers of the village courts were so small in comparison to the sheikhs' courts, and the kinds of offences they were allowed to try so limited, that the sheikhs' courts had an adverse influence on the utility of the village court. As Bardsley complained:

> More than half of the civil suits tried in sheikhs courts in Medani
> district in April were for under £2, and therefore within the scope of
> village courts, but village courts lack influence and machinery to
> enforce judgments, and so villagers prefer to go to sheikhs courts...

---

[24] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, MacMichael, Civil Secretary to Huddleston, Governor BNP, 3 March 1927.
[25] Rhodes House Archive, (RHA) MSS PERHAM 543/3, Blue Nile Province devolution file, undated.
[26] NRO BNP 1/1/2, Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 6 March 1930, emphasis in original.
[27] Ibid.

> We have Native Benches of Magistrates to administer the Code and
> we have sheikhs courts to administer native custom. Village courts
> are neither the one thing or the other and ought either to be abolished
> or brought into line with the sheikhs courts.[28]

The attempt to use village courts as the middle ground between Sudan's rural and urban extremes had failed. Until the creation of the Native Courts Ordinance of 1932, which brought all existing 'native court' machinery into line and gave village courts the same powers on a smaller scale, the Gezira struggled with an unsatisfactory arrangement of a hierarchy of courts with overlapping jurisdiction.

As a temporary solution, and to raise the status of omdas, whose judicial powers were becoming subsumed under those of sheikhs of khut, it was allowed that the presidents of sheikhs' courts could delegate their individual powers to nominated sheikhs and omdas. In effect this gave the existing presidents of village courts powers in line with those of the larger sheikhs' courts, allowing them to act more effectively as minor sheikhs' courts. These nominated sheikhs had fining powers of up to £5 within the Scheme area and £3 outside of the Scheme, contrasting with the £15 of the presidents of the sheikhs' courts.[29] By August of 1930 this policy was seen to be a success and the monthly diary reported that though "the courts are still busy with wage claims, [they are] learning to leave the lesser cases to the Omdas for settlement."[30]

Although originally intended to act as a bastion of tradition, the structures that emerged from this process of devolution became intimately connected with the Scheme and the processes of modernisation. By 1930 a hierarchical, bureaucratic apparatus had been created, staffed by salaried Sudanese. With no greater ability to apply 'customary law' than they had had previously, the major impact of the sheikhs' courts was to create decentralised versions of *merkaz* authority, with close *merkaz* supervision. Courts were far from 'traditional' in the way that they worked. The fact that courts were now

---

[28] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/51, Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 22 May 1929.
[29] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/52, J. Reid, acting Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 1 October 1930.
[30] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/52, extract from monthly diary, August 1930.

accountable, bureaucratic structures, open to inspection and required to keep records, was a distinct departure from what had been before. Procedure was formalised in court room settings, and members of courts were no longer simply local 'worthies', they were also officials held to account by both the public and the government. The courts themselves proved to be less than sacred traditional structures as the amalgamation of courts in the late 1920s and early 30s demonstrated.[31] Together with a gradual process of adapting the boundaries of judicial authority to fit with agricultural boundaries, it soon became clear that it was the needs of the Scheme rather than tribes or other 'traditional' forces that were the controlling influence on British devolutionary policy in the Gezira. As J.A. Reid, while acting Governor of the province stated:

> The irrigated area brings with it numerous disputes between tenant and labour, petty affrays, thefts etc., and an Arab court can settle these on the spot in a manner acceptable to the people.[32]

Institutional Gatekeepers

The relationship between tenants and their labourers – who were predominantly recruited from outside the Gezira region – frequently resulted in dispute and native courts became the primary apparatus for the settlement of these disputes. Of the 130 civil cases heard by the three courts in Medani district in June 1929, the large majority were "claims by labourers in the Scheme for wages from tenants", and it was soon admitted that

> the work of the native courts in settling disputes over payment of wages and arising out of the work of the Scheme has become so much part and parcel of the administration of this area that it would be difficult to envisage to administer without these native courts.[33]

---

[31] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 9 June 1928.
[32] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/52, Reid, acting Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 27 September 1930.
[33] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/51, extracts from BNP monthly diary, June 1929 and March 1930.

The type of work courts were dealing with became so linked with the Scheme and with labour migrants in particular, that patterns were soon identified by which the workloads of courts were identified with the agricultural calendar, and in particular with the annual influx of labourers at picking time.[34]

Courts soon became a significant focus of judicial life in the region. In 1935 a total of 2,499 cases were formally tried by the native authorities of North Gezira; 986 in the sheikhs' courts, 411 by sheikhs of khut independently and another 1,102 by omdas and village courts. Of these, 71% were instituted in native courts themselves, with only 29% of cases suitable for trial by native authorities forwarded by the *merkaz*. Although the number of cases remained very similar, the percentage of cases brought straight to native courts increased to 78% by 1937.[35] These figures were encouraging to the government, showing as they did "that Sheikhs of Khut and Omdas have retained a large measure of their inherent '*sulta*'".[36] Certainly, they suggest that the devolved courts were popularly viewed as the most appropriate institutions to use in certain circumstances. Gezira courts soon became indispensable to both the government and Syndicate. They were seen as increasing administrative and agricultural efficiency by settling disputes "quickly and on the spot" allowing people to get on with the work of cultivating cotton rather than travelling to the more distant *merkaz*.[37] The conditions might have been far from traditional, but the ability of sheikhs to settle disputes and influence communities were seen as both timeless and endlessly flexible. Custom was used in its loosest possible sense, and it was this flexibility that was relied upon.

Ironically, while these quasi-traditional institutions were widely used for new types of dispute, they were not generally used to resolve the type of dispute that occurred traditionally within communities. These internal disputes were less likely to be tried in formal court settings, and informal community settlements remained important. The monthly diaries of 1938 reported that "many of the cases are settled more or less out of

---

[34] Ibid.
[35] NRO 1Civsec 1/17/54, W.H.T Luce, ADC North Gezira to Mayall, Governor BNP, 5 June 1938.
[36] Ibid.
[37] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, Huddleston, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 11 March 1927.

court and do not appear in the Registers, though members of the court do a lot of work on them."[38] It thus appears that native courts were seen primarily as a means of formal communication and bargaining between permanent communities and 'outsiders'. Convenient in locality for all parties, native courts were the favoured means of arbitration for cross-community disputes, and the evidence suggests that migrants preferred to use local courts instead of the *merkaz*.[39] The ability to incorporate outsiders was a significant aspect of these courts, and courts showed surprising tenacity to uphold the rights of labour against those in the community attempting to defraud them. Although seemingly working against their own community interests, these actions defended a right to individual accumulation that was enshrined within the Gezira, and were essential if communities were to continue attracting the ever-needed labour to the locality.

Just as the judicial and administrative authority of the government was combined within the figure of the District Commissioner, so too was the sheikh seen as the embodiment of authority within the community. The government had long taken advantage of sheikhs' authority in the spheres of administration and justice, so now did the Syndicate see their potential in the administration of the Scheme. They were seen as channels of communication between syndicate inspectors and tenants, and also as authority figures able to supervise the completion of agricultural duties on tenancies. Sheikhs became so central to the practical administration of both the Scheme and government, that in 1932, Crawford, as Commissioner of the Gezira Area wrote a plea on behalf of the overworked sheikh. In addition to sheikhs' administrative responsibilities such as the collection of tax, the maintenance of law and order, and the licensing of businesses, Crawford identified twenty-nine further duties related to ensuring his individual and the communities tenancies were maintained efficiently. Among other things, sheikhs were required to drive the villagers to run their hoshas properly, keep tenants from resigning,

---

[38] NRO 1Civsec 57/6/26, BNP Monthly Diaries June 1938.
[39] NRO 2BNP 42/2/10, BNP Annual Report 1927.

ensure canals were baled, find labourers and maintain good relationships between them and the tenants.[40]

The initial attempt to keep administration and economics separate had collapsed leaving the government uncertain what role sheikhs should play in wider forms of devolution. Clarke, saw it as a sign of the dominance of the Syndicate within the Gezira region, which threatened the authority of the government.[41] Others were more positive, seeing this use of sheikhs in terms of an extension of the official policy of devolution. The use of sheikhs within the agricultural administration was believed to increase their prestige within the native courts, and give communities, through their sheikhs, greater powers and freedoms. The intensive use and supervision of sheikhs was also believed to rebound beneficially to the government. Reginald Davies as Director of Intelligence stated that the influence of the Syndicate within the Gezira Scheme "had done more to demonstrate which were the efficient Omdas and Sheikhs and which the inefficient than had the preceding quarter of a century of administration."[42] The Syndicate itself was ambivalent, officially stating that block inspectors must deal directly with individual tenants, yet making wide use of sheikhs in practice.[43]

For the government, courts and formal judicial powers were a way of strengthening the position of existing leaders, who were seen as the "repositories, administrators and judges of 'customary law'".[44] The correlation between existing government-sponsored sheikhs and membership of native courts was thus strong. Where possible, court presidents were sheikhs of khut. Omdas, who were themselves presidents of village courts, made up the membership of sheikhs' courts and as with administrative positions, wealth was a significant factor in gaining court membership. For instance Mohammed Musaad, Sheikh of Khut and president of the Shenabla, or Nail Court, was "a man of

---

[40] NRO BNP 1/41/307, W.F. Crawford, Commissioner Gezira Area to W.P.D. Clarke, Governor BNP, 14 July 1932.
[41] NRO BNP 1/41/307, Clarke, Governor BNP to Poyntz-Wright, Manager of Sudan Plantations Syndicate, 10 February 1934.
[42] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, R. Davies, Director of Intelligence to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 26 October 1927.
[43] NRO BNP 1/41/307, Clarke, Governor BNP 'Note on discussion with Poyntz-Wright', 1 March 1934.
[44] Thomas Spear "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention", p. 13.

96

considerable wealth, influence and force of character."[45] The resulting institutions were little more than official and formalised versions of previous power structures. These appointments were made on the tenuous basis of tradition; and perceived legitimacy rather than ability formed the criteria for presidency. Thus Sheikh Abdullahi Shaa el Din of the Kawahla Court "though very keen, is not very trustworthy and is often unduly influenced by petty jealousies and quarrels with the more influential families in the Khut," and Mohammed el Tom of the Arakiin Court was "rather weak in character".[46] In contrast, for the two courts in the southern part of the Scheme for which there were no existing sheikhs of khut, the British authorities made a restricted choice from the local omdas, in which ability became a more important factor. Of these, Omda Fahal Ibrahim of court number five was "a man of very enlightened and progressive ideas", while Omda Hamid El Fiki Babikr of court number six was "perhaps the best Omda in Makwar district."[47]

The government's fixed conceptions of tradition continued to influence the forms of devolved formal authority. In effect, courts and thus the official avenues of authority, were controlled by the same few families identified by the government as important at the start of the Condominium. Close family relationships among members of courts formed interlocking networks of power, and although courts had an increasingly wide membership, and included village sheikhs, this was not always reflected in any real distribution of power. For instance, Omar Mohammed El Daw became Sheikh of Khawalda Khut in 1919 after the death of his father, and on the creation of the Khawalda Court in 1928, became its president. Two of Omar's brothers were omdas and thus members of the court, and a third brother, a village sheikh acted as clerk to the court.[48]

Religious leaders remained officially outside these structures, although men like Abdel Bagi Hamed el Nil and Sheikh Sa'id Ahmed el Ghorashi were members of families that

---

[45] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50 Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 9 June 28.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] RHA MSS PERHAM 543/3 Blue Nile Province devolution file. NRO 1Civsec 1/16/51, Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 26 February 1930.

controlled the courts. This policy of excluding direct religious interference upon courts is aptly demonstrated by the reaction to a petition requesting consideration of membership on a village court from Sherif Mohammed El Amin, the son of the religious leader Sherif Yusef el Hindi. In presenting the petition, Bardsley wrote "personally I believe that Sherif el Amin who is educated, experienced and who bears excellent manners, would be a very good candidate."[49] The Civil Secretary agreed that these qualifications would make el Amin a "useful member of a court", but the request was turned down on the grounds that "we want to keep our 'native administrations' in all their manifestations well clear of the influence of the leading holy men, which does and should find outlets in more general ways."[50] Not only does this example clearly demonstrate that there was a distinctive anti-religious element to British policies of devolution, it also shows that the devolved structures were far from being traditional bodies, with El Amin's education noted as a strong element of his application. Tradition within the Gezira was far more about the continuity of power among an identified elite rather than specific and static characteristics, and the elite were encouraged to gain new 'modern' skills, while retaining the positive aspects of old-fashioned ways.

As bureaucratic structures, record keeping had become a central element of native courts, and clerks had become vital to their performance. Literate and educated, clerks were frequently members of president's families, and symbolised the attempts of Gezira families to adapt to the changing needs of the modern world and thus retain their positions of authority. In striking contrast to views held about the effendi class, these home-grown rural clerks were viewed as bringing together the best of tradition and modern civilisation. The clerk of the Halawin Court was described in positive terms as "a bottle-nosed fiki and more suitable than the bumptious effendi type", while the clerk of court ten "was of the ideal type – young enough to be intelligent, retiring enough to be nothing more than a clerk and dressed as a native."[51]

---

[49] NRO 1Civsec 1/50/133, extracts of minutes from District Commissioners meeting, 18 April 1929.
[50] Ibid.
[51] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/51, report on courts by Redfern, Deputy Governor of Blue Nile Province, 30 March 1929.

The benefits of adaptation to the new structures of governance enshrined in courts were great. Believing that "Sheikhs cannot be expected to exercise authority if they are reduced to the financial level of everybody in their village", incentives in the form of good land and salaries were offered to court members.[52] In 1930, the salaries in the Khawalda Court were £E.75 for a court president, £E.50 for members and £E.24 for clerks, giving controlling families such as the El Daw's a substantial income.[53] In the same year, the average tenant made a loss through their work on the cotton, and in 1931, average tenancy cotton profits were only £E.12, demonstrating the value of administrative salaries.[54] Henderson further suggests that the common practice of court presidents appointing a clerk from their own family allowed for bookkeeping methods that were financially beneficial to the president and his supporters.[55] The powers and opportunities offered by these positions were welcomed by the elite in the Gezira, and applications for membership were numerous.

Although based upon a policy of devolution, the formalisation of court structures with the allocation of specific positions and powers to named individuals in effect centralised judicial authority within Gezira communities. Not only did the recognition of courts narrow the field of judicial authority onto sheikhs of khut and omdas, but within this delineated sphere, it was the president whose individual importance became accentuated. Taking advantage of the government's notion of customary power as a centralised phenomenon, and its desire for visible, understandable bureaucratic structures, sheikhs were able to consolidate their powers, and gained control of a machinery that gave them the right to fine, imprison, or use corporal punishment on offenders. The resulting inequalities in power, as Mann and Roberts have suggested, provided this nominated elite with the "statutory authority to define and enforce rights, obligations, and relationships."[56]

---

[52] NRO 2BNP 42/1/1, BNP Annual Report 1929.
[53] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/51, Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 26 February 1930.
[54] Gaitskell, *Gezira*, p. 270.
[55] Henderson, *Set Under Authority*, p. 52.
[56] Mann and Roberts, *Law in Colonial Africa*, p. 22.

Courts became an arena of contestation for power and wealth within communities, as illustrated by the continuing internecine struggles within Halowin politics. Dafalla Mohammed Imam, the son of Mohammed Imam who had led the Halawin in the nineteenth century, felt himself to the rightful leader of the Halawin, but had been debarred from that position owing to the rebellion of his brother Abdel Gader against the government in 1908. His ambitions for power centred on the acquisition of court presidency, and the court was an important vehicle through which Dafalla asserted his claims. Hillard, the DC of North Gezira wrote in 1936 of "an atmosphere of strain about the Halowin [sic] Court... the will for settlements seems absent" and the leading rival figures were having "slanging matches in public".[57] Dafalla was able to use the public space of the court to undermine the existing leadership and present himself as a suitable alternative. Hillard again reported that "Dafalla is once again taking a leading part in the conduct of the Halowin Court and has on two recent occasions and in my hearing severely criticised the manner in which the court handled certain cases at sittings from which he was absent."[58]

In their dual position as executors of legal codes and the custodians of custom, the administrative elite were in a position to interpret the Government's centralised understanding of custom to their advantage. As court presidents, sheikhs were able to claim the right to control community facilities. Animal pounds were just one of the new structures that were created to deal with the conditions of the Scheme. As the Scheme turned previously open land into intensive areas of agricultural production, the problem of animal trespass became increasingly acute. The solution was to grant powers to courts allowing them to impound such animals and charge daily rates for their upkeep and in effect, the court president controlled the pound. In 1929, ninety animal pounds existed throughout the Scheme in the control of sheikhs and omdas, and formed the basis

---

[57] NRO BNP 1/30/222, Hillard, DC North Gezira, "Halowin Politics", 14 August 1936.
[58] Ibid.

of a large number of complaints by animal owners who could find that their animals were found 'straying' on a frequent basis.[59]

Extensions of the *Merkaz*

Despite the devolutionary rhetoric of expanding the powers of native authorities, one result of the increasing formalisation was in creating official limits to the powers of native leaders. As Nadia Khalaf has stated:

> Throughout the supposed period of Indirect Rule the British District
> Commissioner remained the effective administrator and rarely assumed
> the role of 'advisor', acting in the background, as Lugard had envisaged
> for the British staff attached to native administrations.[60]

Schedules of offences within the jurisdiction of native courts were fixed, and it was decided that the courts should not have jurisdiction over any case arising out of the sale of crops cultivated on the Scheme, or concerning the borrowing of monies upon the security of such crops.[61] Through such negative legislation, the British authorities actually placed limitations on the authority of local leaders, already constrained by the centralisation of authority into the figure of the sheikh of khut. The ability to appeal against judgements made in native courts, further constrained the powers of court presidents and members. The bureaucratisation of judicial authority extended the power of the *merkaz* into the community in ever more pervasive ways. Courts were inspected, and a DC could "of his own initiative intervene to quash or revise the finding or sentence of a native Court or may transfer the case to his own Court."[62] A hierarchy of

---

[59] NRO 2BNP 42/1/1, BNP Annual Report, 1929.
[60] Nadia Khalaf, "British Policy Regarding the Administration of the Northern Sudan, 1899-1951", (Ph.D thesis, Duke University, 1965), p. 137.
[61] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 9 June 1928.
[62] The Powers of Sheikhs Ordinance 1928, Sudan Government Gazette, No. 505, 1 July 1928.

courts had been created, controlled by the *merkaz*, at the bottom of which were the native courts.

The government's need for specific structures to correlate with specific powers, fixed and pigeon-holed court procedure. The limitations of this categorisation were apparent in the transformation of a Gezira town bench to a native court. As a court, the body had wider powers, but these were powers as detailed by the Native Courts Ordinance rather than the penal code. On transformation, the court attempted to sentence offenders under penal ordinances as they had been accustomed to doing. When told that they could no longer do this, the court protested that such judgements were custom, having had those powers for the previous twenty years.[63] Not only does this case demonstrate the very real limitations that formalisation imposed on native authorities, it also demonstrates the uncertain and highly prejudicial nature of the term customary. The government had created a conundrum. By leaving the definitions of custom completely open, and relying upon the ability of courts to change and adapt to modern circumstances when it suited the government, they were open to challenge about what was customary. Even though this challenge failed, the logic of the government's policy was shown to be seriously flawed.

However, it was not just that the use of courts was restricted, the extension of native court powers were just as important in the development of an inflexible, procedure driven apparatus. Through their positions as magistrates, and through the ultimate control of the *merkaz* over native court settlements, sheikhs, with their formal powers had become extensions of the *merkaz*. This is seen most clearly in the argument arising over the issue of what role native courts should have in trying offences against ordinances relating to agricultural work. The bailing of water from field irrigation channels at the end of the irrigation season was a desperately unpopular task involving hard, uncomfortable work for which there was no immediate recompense. However, due to the potential of these areas of stagnant water becoming breeding grounds for mosquitoes, bailing was required under the Public Health Ordinance. Bailing also

---

[63] Henderson, *Set Under Authority*, p. 52.

allowed the clearing of silt and general maintenance of channels so essential to the continuing efficiency of cotton cultivation. It was therefore of great interest to both the government and the Syndicate for bailing to be conducted thoroughly. With only two government offices within the Gezira, DC's were highly limited in their ability to try the high number of cases that occurred. Conversely, the block inspectors, numerously scattered throughout the region had no judicial powers. One solution was to use native courts to try this agricultural offence. Seen as flexible institutions, native courts were quickly seen as the most efficient institutions for making judgements on the spot, despite the fact bailing cases had no background in custom and were not listed in the schedule of offences to be tried by native courts.[64]

In response to this unofficial use of courts, Clarke in 1933, informed the management of the Sudan Plantations Syndicate that as native courts were not permitted to try offences against ordinances, they should no longer be permitted to try bailing offences.[65] This order reflected Clarke's concern over the independence of the courts. Clarke worried that the members of courts, economically tied to the Syndicate, were not "yet independent enough to give an impartial decision on cases of this nature raised before them by the Syndicate Inspectors in their area."[66] His fear was based upon his belief that

> the court nearly always rules out any defence and accepts the written
> complaint of the Syndicate Inspector as incontrovertible, or if it gets
> the Syndicate Inspector to appear before the court, which is in itself
> undesirable, it is still more loathe not to take his word... The
> difficulty is that at present an offender is tried by his fellow-tenants
> who are most unlikely to risk antagonising a Syndicate inspector

---

[64] NRO 1Civsec 1/17/53, Poyntz-Wright, Manager of Sudan Plantations Syndicate to Clarke, Governor BNP 20 November 1933. "The Native Courts Ordinance 1932", in Cecil Bennet (ed.,) *Laws of the Sudan, vol. 10* (London, 1956).

[65] NRO 1Civsec 1/17/53, Clarke, Governor BNP to Poyntz-Wright, Manager of Sudan Plantations Syndicate 19 November 1933.

[66] NRO 1Civsec 1/17/53, Clarke, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 21 November 1933.

under whose jurisdiction (minus judicial powers) they themselves may fall.[67]

Central government, although sympathetic with this view, feared a potential decrease in prestige to native courts arising from the diminishing of current and accepted powers, and ruled against Clarke.[68] The benefit of native courts to the smooth running of the Scheme was a further reason behind the government's support of native court powers. The distance of *merkaz* courts from many agricultural blocks was estimated to draw out these frequent cases into sojourns of two to four days and it was concluded that "on the assumption that tenants as a body find life irksome as tenants, to transfer this class of cases to *merkaz* courts might hasten an exodus."[69] Having decided to use native courts, the solution for the government was to create the Gezira Irrigation Bailing Regulation 1934, which formally enabled native courts to try bailing offences with powers of punishment of £.E.10 fine or one-month imprisonment.[70] For the sake of agricultural efficiency, native courts were given powers in line with the *merkaz*. By the 1930s, native courts within the Gezira were not solely about custom, rather they were mechanisms which could allow both government and people to engage with the processes of modernisation brought by the Scheme. Offences and procedures were increasingly codified and fixed and new concepts of criminality transferred from the *merkaz* to native courts.

Defending 'Custom'

Bailing cases became a large part of the work of native courts, and in January 1939, 56 "delinquents" were fined in a single block.[71] However, the varied fines and significantly

---

[67] Ibid.

[68] NRO 1Civsec 1/17/53, MacMichael, Civil Secretary to Clarke, Governor BNP 5 December 1933.

[69] NRO 1Civsec 1/17/53, minute on bailing cases, December 1933.

[70] NRO 1Civsec 1/17/53, Clarke, Governor BNP, "Order; Bailing of Dowrans", 31 December 1933.

[71] NRO 1Civsec 57/10/39, BNP Monthly Diaries, January 1939.

varied numbers of cases across the Scheme suggests that some courts took this offence more seriously than others. While the Arakiin Court fined offenders an average of 40PT, the Khawalda Court gave average fines of 70PT, demonstrating the independence of each court.[72] Some native authorities were willing to punish this crime heavily, either because they believed that it was a serious offence or because of the personal benefits that they believed such cooperation with the Syndicate would bring; others sided with the many tenants who saw the task as irksome and unnecessary and defended their rights not to bail by not bringing people to account.

Court presidents and members further defended their autonomy by adapting the structures that they were given to suit prevailing attitudes and needs. The annual report of 1929 noted this trend in relation to village courts with considerable satisfaction. Although the Village and Native Courts Ordinances provided for the nomination of specific individuals as court members, in practice court membership was flexible. Court presidents appointed individuals to sit on the court depending on the situation and with little regard to official lists:

> These worthies often do, in fact, happen to coincide with the 'members' who are on my register, but not always ... In fact, the Omda, in trying a case in any given village, merely took good care that he got the best information he could and by natural devolution he has, entirely through the application of traditional native custom, abolished the artificial barriers erected by the Ordinance. A rather comic position has been reached where the native had accepted with avidity the principle of a Government policy, but has carried it out, in method of application, more successfully than he could have done if the strict letter of the law had been followed.[73]

The government made no attempt to codify custom within northern Sudan and thus courts retained a flexibility belied by their formal and legislative façade. This flexibility

---

[72] NRO 1Civsec 57/6/26, BNP Monthly Diaries, February 1938.
[73] NRO 2BNP 42/1/1, BNP Annual Report 1929.

105

was seen as a great advantage by the colonial administration. It was in the meeting of the two systems, the codified law of Europe and the flexibility of African custom that native courts developed, creating a system that was flexible yet familiar with the procedures of codified law. In Disney's words: "it was in this way that these more advanced laws began to be grafted on to the sturdy stock of 'native custom'".[74] The flexibility of courts allowed them to relate the 'modern' conditions of the Scheme to the needs of Gezira communities, and in their gatekeeper role courts effectively balanced the requirements of the government, the Syndicate and the population. By adapting to new situations, courts were able to demonstrate their continuing validity, and thus retain a certain independence from the *merkaz*.

For the government and the Gezira population alike, the courts were viewed as a huge success. They combined the acceptability and subtlety of the local judgement based upon custom, with the efficiency of readily available personnel. The 1937 Monthly Diaries reported:

> A mixed court held at Goz el Reheid between members of the
> Managil and Tabat administrations successfully resolved various
> charges of theft, insult and hurt into one large Arabian peace under
> which some money changed hands. This end of a stupid fight
> between members of the two administrations was regarded as
> eminently superior to anything that could have come out of the heads
> of the district commissioners of the southern and northern Gezira.[75]

Having created these courts, and finding them indispensable for the daily administration of local justice, the government inevitably had a vested interest in maintaining their authority. Therefore, the appeals process, which worked as the major check to the independence of native courts, in practice often backed up decisions made by the courts. A.V. Elliot heard only one appeal from a native court decision in his three months of working as the DC at Kamlin – in itself suggesting the independence and public acceptance of the courts. The case concerned the appeal by a man against a one month

---

[74] Disney, "English Law in the Sudan", p. 122.
[75] NRO 1Civsec 57/4/18, BNP Monthly Diaries, September 1937.

sentence for having stolen a sheep from his father. In response Elliot added another month to this sentence and thus reinforced the independent decision of the court.[76]

Despite this autonomy, native courts were open to inspection by government officials and to challenge from the communities they served. The dangers of centralising judicial powers were to some extent diluted by the existence of rival candidates within the community "lurking in the background waiting for the chance to report an irregularity."[77] Furthermore, petitions, long established as a means to challenge structures of authority, were now directed against the new focus of authority invested within courts. In October of 1930 a letter was received by the secretary of native affairs from twenty sheikhs of Kamlin district petitioning that the newly appointed president be made to stand down.[78] Similarly in 1934 an anonymous petitioner wrote to the government "on behalf of the Halawiyin [sic]" to state that "the Native Courts are working for the benefit of their own members and not in the interest of the Government."[79] The letter outlined various abuses carried out by one member of the court, Ahmed el Amin Eheimer, who "has sent away all the native butchers... and has given the monopoly to a certain 'Zingi' who is bribing him."[80] Although the Kamlin petition was put down to a rival's attempts to increase his own influence, and was dismissed, these petitions clearly demonstrate the belief by the population that they had the right to hold the courts to account, and that the government was a suitable authority through which to enforce that accountability.

---

[76] NRO BNP 1/27/204, A.V Elliot, DC Kamlin, "Handing Over Notes", Kamilin District Report, 4 August 1931.
[77] Henderson, *Set Under Authority*, p. 52.
[78] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/52, sheikhs of Kamlin West to secretary of native affairs, 15 October 1930.
[79] NRO 1Civsec 1/17/53, translation of anonymous letter, May 1934.
[80] Ibid.

The Threat from the Syndicate

The greatest danger facing native courts' autonomy came from the influence of block inspectors. The government constantly worried that the Syndicate's emphasis on agricultural efficiency would undermine the government's attempts to strengthen community led settlements. These fears were expressed by C.G. Davies when he wrote:

> One must realise that the management of the Scheme as a cotton
> growing enterprise is entirely in their [the Syndicate's] hands and
> that by controlling the money bags they virtually control the lives of
> the tenants and most of those who gain a living through the
> Scheme.[81]

Particular worry was expressed at accounts of tenants taking their disputes directly to block inspectors to be settled, rather than to sheikhs, thus undermining all attempts to bolster community centred authority structures.[82] As part of a profit seeking business, inspectors had all the pressures to drive for efficiency, with none of the government's administrative concerns. An inspector could evict a tenant if he "neglects or is careless in the cultivation of his crops or neglects to carry out the reasonable orders of the Syndicate's officials."[83] However, Syndicate inspectors had no judicial authority over tenants for 'lesser offences'.

Inspectors were thus driven to use their influence in other means, and in 1930, a query was brought before the DC of Hassaheissa which caused great consternation among government officials. An omda had recently received a letter from a block inspector ordering him to fine a list of people the inspector had caught stealing grass from tenancies, until which time the inspector would keep the donkeys of the 'offenders'. The omda wondered what an appropriate response would be. Kingdon as DC was duly horrified at this misuse of an inspector's authority and wrote to the Governor "The block

---

[81] NRO BNP 1/28/208, C.G. Davies, DC Gezira, "Handing Over Notes", October 1936.
[82] NRO BNP 1/1/1, Richardson, ADC Hassaheissa, to Huddleston, Governor BNP, 11 February 1927.
[83] 'Standard Conditions of Tenancy', Gaitskell, *Gezira*, appendix 1.

inspector has no authority to tell the omda to fine anyone, even the DC can only refer a case to the Omda's court for their decision and judgement."[84] He continued:

> I am not suggesting that this type of letter is common but I do think
> there is a danger of some of the Syndicate officials coming to regard
> the native courts as mere machines for giving judgments which they
> think desirable. It is very difficult for a native court to disregard an
> Englishman's instructions and had the above instructions been
> carried out a definite injustice would have been done.[85]

Syndicate inspectors also frequently bypassed all official structures to impose their own summary justice on tenants perceived to be working inefficiently, yet not breaking any laws. A range of complaints were made against Syndicate inspectors ranging from setting fire to a tenant's dura because he was working "in esh [dura] to the detriment of cotton, the cultivation of which latter was being neglected", to assault for not carrying out an inspector's orders correctly.[86] Although excuses were readily made for such behaviour, and nearly all cases were swept under the carpet with financial compensation quietly given, the government was deeply unhappy with such independent judicial actions. In one particular case, Mr Morgan, a block inspector "exasperated by the continual failure of certain pickers to carry out his instructions, took the law into his own hands and burnt one of their huts in order to impress on them that they must either obey his orders or leave his area".[87] In reference to this case, the DC Gezira summed up government attitude when he caustically remarked that "the failure to pick cotton or carry out correctly some agricultural operation is not an offence under the laws of the Sudan. Burning a hut most certainly is."[88]

---

[84] NRO BNP 1/1/2, J.D. Kingdon, DC Hassaheissa, to Bardsley, Governor BNP, 14 October 1930.
[85] Ibid.
[86] NRO BNP 1/40/305, Complaint by Nur El Din El Zein, tenant of Ghobshan block against Mr Steed, for setting fire to his durra 22 November 1930 and complaint by Mohammed Ahmed Mohammed Imam Halawi, of Mehereiba block, against Mr. Peterkin, December 1930.
[87] NRO BNP 1/41/306, C.G. Davies, DC Gezira to Poyntz-Wright, Manager Sudan Plantations Syndicate, 7 March 1934.
[88] Ibid.

Just how common such instances were it is difficult to calculate, as most native authorities and courts avoided confrontation with block inspectors. Having sent the letter to the DC of Hassaheissa, the omda begged that the matter not be taken up, as "he was very nervous of incurring the wrath of the inspector", whom he called the 'rais el beled', or 'lord of the land'.[89] The personal advantages of good relations with the Syndicate, namely increased numbers of tenancies and access to the best land when annually redistributed, were valuable resources that community leaders were unwilling to jeopardise. However, courts were on occasions willing to confront the Syndicate over definitions of criminality, and in the 1940s became the vehicle by which certain offences were contended. For tenants, cotton stalks represented a cheap, easily collectable fuel; however, the hoarding of cotton stalks was seen as an offence by the Syndicate because they feared that it would spread cotton diseases. In 1949 the Syndicate encouraged the government to search Gezira villages for evidence of hoarding, and forty 'offenders' were handed to native courts. Unwilling to heavily penalise this action, courts only fined the accused 20PT each; a response that angered the Syndicate. The government again acquiesced to the demands of the Syndicate and instructed courts that the offence was to be treated as a serious one in the future.[90]

By this date though, interest in specifically judicial matters was on the wane. During the 1930s, Native Administrations were developed, in which judicial authority was only one element of wider administrative powers. Declining government interest in courts for and of themselves suggests not only the increasing concerns of administrative devolution, but also the huge success of courts as institutions, which allowed them to continue functioning almost unremarked upon in the background of more radical changes. For the government, native courts relieved the *merkaz* of significant amounts of routine business, especially in connection with the Scheme, and at the same time built up the authority of a selected elite. Similarly, the Syndicate found native courts a convenient institution for ensuring the efficient operation of the Scheme, even if they also found other ways to enforce their will. Labour migrants found courts the most efficient means

---

[89] NRO BNP 1/1/2, Kingdon, DC Hassaheissa to Bardsley, Governor BNP, 14 October 1930.
[90] 2Civsec 30/8/19, Monthly Diaries, July 1949.

of mediating their wage disputes with tenants, and Gezira communities embraced native courts as a point of mediation with the government.

The success of courts as 'modern' institutions despite the rhetoric of tradition, suggests that modernity and tradition were far from the polar opposites so frequently suggested by the government. The ease with which people adapted to court procedures suggests that they were based on ideas and skills firmly rooted in the social backgrounds of Gezira communities, and it was this ability to work within an institutional context that empowered communities. For although the native court was an institution created and ultimately controlled by the government, (and in many ways was simply an extension of the *merkaz*), it was also susceptible to influences and control from within the community. As much as courts brought the government into the community, it also took the community into the structures of government. There were great benefits for the individuals involved in staffing the courts and their work was rewarded by government and Syndicate through salaries, increased numbers of tenancies and control over community resources. Thus although native courts may have been subsumed by the needs of the Scheme, and limited by incorporation into *merkaz*-controlled formal codes, the general trend was an extension of powers controlled by individuals at the community level, that was frequently backed up by the government in the appeal process.

Communities did at times complain about the personnel of courts, but there was no protest against the structures of courts themselves. For while courts offered a channel of communication with (and a degree of control over) external communities and authorities, they also created considerable space free from external controls. Defining courts as the formal point of mediation effectively limited the intrusion of 'outsiders'. Thus the centralisation of powers onto the 'sheikh', so evident within the formal court structure did not necessarily transfer into other aspects of community life. Informal mechanisms continued to operate below the level of courts, including the mediation of most disputes occurring purely within the community. Disputing parties continued to choose mediating authorities from a range of possible alternatives including government sheikhs, other notables and holy men. Even when relating with external authorities,

informal mechanisms might be preferred, and the fiki Hag Abdalla Dafalla of Bortobeil village gained a significant income through the selling of charms that would protect the wearer "against any action against him from either the Syndicate or the government."[91] The continuing importance of this informal sector meant that although government sheikhs tended to increase in importance, colonial policy in the Gezira rarely resulted in the creation of 'decentralised despots'. Instead, native courts within communities were selectively used by communities in mediating with external parties; both the government and an increasing migrant labour population.

---

[91] NRO BNP 1/25/188, Tayeb Eff. Sunni, clerk of Crawford, to Crawford, Commissioner Gezira Area, 31 May 1930.

5

FROM COURTS TO COUNCILS

In his study of colonial administrative policy Robert Pearce has identified a "remarkable transformation that took place in British policy towards the empire in tropical Africa between 1938 and 1948."[1] In highlighting these dates, Pearce emphasises the political changes that found administrators promoting a set of universal modern values and institutions instead of traditional culture. The Colonial Development and Welfare Acts of 1940 and 1945 illustrated a change of political direction, bringing the idea of duty and interventionist development to the fore of colonial administration.[2] By the end of the 1940s, a universal form of local government had become a tool by which colonial populations might be trained in the art of self-governance.[3]

It is not to be doubted that these changes occurred in the minds of colonial administrators. What should be questioned is the assumption that this political change of direction had any significant effect in practice. Within the Gezira, policies that aimed to transform a tribally organised culture into a modern bureaucratic society were far from transforming for communities that were already bridging the urban/rural divide. Instead the period highlighted by Pearce represented the culmination of a continuous process of increasing government control, which had been gradually ongoing from the start of the Condominium. Within the Gezira Scheme, this process of increasing government control was accentuated even further.

---

[1] Robert Pearce *The Turning Point in Africa: British Colonial Policy, 1938-48* (London, 1982), p. 1.
[2] Ibid. pp. 19-20.
[3] Ibid. pp. 132 -159.

Responding to the unique 'sophistication' of the Scheme, the needs of agricultural efficiency, and attempting to establish a bulwark against Syndicate controls, the government presided over an accelerated program of devolution, which only introduced ever closer government controls.

The other caution to add to Pearce's thesis is that this political transformation cannot be contained within his strict dates. Pearce follows the general historiographical trend in seeing the interwar years in Africa as an unmitigated period of "stagnation and frustrations".[4] In northern Sudan too, the early 1930s has been frequently considered only as the high point of indirect rule.[5] However, it was the emergence of ideas during this time that paved the way to the ideas of local government and development that became fully fledged from the late 1930s onwards. The 1930s was a period of ideological experimentation in which the conservative forms of tradition, taken for granted in the full expression of indirect rule, were now questioned. Tradition remained an important concept and ideal for some time, but its form as highlighted by administrators was increasingly expressed as a model of community democracy rather than autocratic leadership.[6] This was an important stage on the road to the imposition of universal 'modern' values. The 1930s was also a period in which educated Africans, actively sidelined since the early 1920s, were once again incorporated into the administration, and the reliance upon 'tribal' leaders lessened. Overall, colonial populations were seen increasingly in terms of active participants, and were incorporated into the processes of local governance as citizens rather than merely subjects. The effect of the agricultural dominance of devolution within the Gezira Scheme was that tenants were incorporated into the structures of governance, and seen as citizens more easily than were other Gezira inhabitants.

---

[4] Ibid. p. 17.

[5] Khalaf, "British Policy"; Voll, "The Introduction of Native Administration".

[6] Alvin Magid, "British Rule and Indigenous Organization in Nigeria: A Case-study in Normative-Institutional Change", *Journal of African History*, 9, 2 (1968) pp. 299-313, at p. 313.

The Reinvention of Tradition

Throughout the 1920s, and particularly under the Governor-Generalship of John Maffey, government policy focused upon increasing the power of tribal leaders through judicial institutions. Native courts were institutions through which the government promoted 'traditional' leaders, sanctioning and bolstering their 'inherent' and 'customary' judicial powers.[7] The language used in this period consistently referenced tribes and tribal leaders as the traditional basis of community authority, and a valuable protection against the 'infection' of modernity.[8] This image of tradition focused upon the qualities of leadership in the individual, with one person representing the interests of his community. Within the Gezira, courts were seen as valuable defence against the "spoon-feeding methods of the Syndicate"[9]

By the early 1930s, courts were flourishing institutions conveniently placed within communities that might otherwise be distant from the *merkaz*. In the context of a severe process of retrenchment among government officials, it did not take long for a busy district headquarters to start using these existing bodies for additional non-judicial forms of administration. Thus in 1930, the presidents of Gezira courts were organising the relapsing fever quarantine and delousing stations set up to monitor labour migrants, and the courts in the Hassaheissa and Rufa'a districts had become the body to which the assessed taxes and licence fees were paid.[10] By 1933, the presidents of the native courts were being given the control over treasury chests and were collecting revenue from court fines, from herd and land taxes and from market rates. They were expected to spend this money on salaries for native court members, for market sheikhs and for ghaffirs.[11] This financial devolution theoretically aimed at increasing independence for native authorities; serving as "a slight drag" on the trend towards increased Syndicate

---

[7] The Powers of Sheikhs Ordinance 1928, Sudan Government Gazette, No 505, 1 July 1928.
[8] NRO BNP 1/1/1, John Maffey, Governor General "Minute by His Excellency the Governor-General", 1 January 1927.
[9] NRO 1Civsec 1/17/53, Clarke, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 21 March 1933.
[10] NRO 1/16/52, Extract from BNP Monthly Diary August 1930; NRO 1/17/53, Clarke, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 24 May 1933.
[11] NRO 1Civsec 1/17/53, J.D. Kingdon, Acting Governor BNP to H.E. Fass, Financial Secretary, 23 February 1933.

power within the Scheme.[12] However, as Khalaf notes; "What a native budget really meant was for the native authority to collect taxes or receive money and to spend it in a way determined by the Government."[13] In using native courts as native administrations, the government effectively extended their centralised administrative powers beyond the *merkaz*.

Within the Gezira, the benefit of devolving greater powers was openly recognised by the government. Courts proved to be of great benefit in reducing the workload of DCs, and on this basis the Governor proposed an increase in the salaries given to Gezira court members:

> Their justification is the mass of papers continually poured upon these N[ative] A[dministration] units by Civil Courts, Shari'a Courts, Land Registries, the Rents Office and Syndicate Inspectors – to say nothing of the Merakiz... The thought that the Gezira area now contains no fewer than three groups of merkaz buildings once filled by pension-earning staff and now deserted by them, and that this relief to the Central Government chest has been achieved during a period in which the irrigated area with all it implies has continued its expansion must surely give him food for sympathetic reflection.[14]

Native courts had themselves been supervised by government authorities; now transformed into native administrations, they were ever more the agents of government.

This transformation of native courts into native administrations occurred within a context of changing notions of tradition. The model of indirect rule so potent in the 1920s which sought to promote individuals on a basis of autocratic leadership was by the 1930s seen to be flawed. With the problem of holding to account those leaders the government was so keen to promote, the potential corruption and inefficiency of institutions controlled by individuals was becoming apparent. As Daly has succinctly stated, a "system dependent upon tribal autocracy was lost without

---

[12] NRO 1Civsec 1/17/53, Clarke, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 21 March 1933.
[13] Khalaf, "British Policy", p. 122.
[14] NRO 1/17/54, R.C. Mayall, Governor BNP, "Budget proposal for 1938", 28 September 1937.

autocrats, and lost as well when they behaved autocratically."[15] Throughout the 1930s the ideas of what tradition meant in African societies was re-evaluated. Tradition may have still been the buzz-word in government circles, but this was a very different vision of tradition from that previously expressed.

Margery Perham, so influential within British colonial policy argued throughout the 1930s that Indirect Rule had been misapplied in its support of autocratic leaders and that "conciliar democracy" was in fact the essence of traditional structures within African communities.[16] As tradition had formerly been used to support the government's belief that individual leaders were central to maintaining devolved authority, so in the 1930s was it used to promote community democracy; "it being universally recognized that the power of a 'meglis' is an especial feature of an Arab community."[17] As the 'traditional' power of leaders and tribes had been institutionalised in the form of courts, so councils became the institutional vehicle of 'traditional' community expression from the late 1930s. Tradition was still an important element of government policy, but the conciliar image of tradition allowed the government to break from the past veneration of tribes, and to apply a territorial bias to devolutionary policy.

Within Sudan, worry was being expressed at the direction of policy as articulated within the often extreme forms of indirect rule as applied in parts of Sudan. As Governor of Kordofan, Douglas Newbold commented on the dangers of current policy; "At present there is a dreadful rift opening between the clerks and the sheikhs, and no one is making any effort to bridge it."[18] As a solution he called for a rapid "alignment of effendia and 'sheikhs' and the extension of Native Administration so as to include intelligentsia and 'technicians'."[19] The change of Governorship in 1934 from John Maffey to Stewart Symes set the scene for the pursuit of this policy. Supported by forward-thinking administrators, most notably Civil Secretaries Angus

---

[15] Martin Daly, *Imperial Sudan: The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium 1934-1956* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 33.

[16] Margery Perham "Problems of indirect rule", *East Africa*, (1934) p. 622, cited in Magid, "British Rule and Indigenous Organization in Nigeria", p. 305.

[17] BNP 1/40/301, A.R.C. Bolton, DC South Gezira to Young, Governor BNP 30 December 1935.

[18] Sir Douglas Newbold to Frank Cotterell, 29 October 1933 in K.D.D. Henderson (ed.,) *The Making of the Modern Sudan: the Life and Letters of Sir Douglas Newbold* (Westport, Conn., 1974), p. 53.

[19] Ibid.

Gillan and (from 1940) Douglas Newbold, Symes oversaw a distinct change in administrative policy. The imposition of a 'one size fits all' tribal policy, so carefully promoted by Maffey, was viewed as outdated and impracticable. Instead Symes introduced a two-pronged approach to future devolved administration, by which increasing powers were given simultaneously to both 'tribal leaders' and educated Sudanese. Challenging the rural-centred policy of previous administrations, Symes brought urban centres and educated Sudanese to the fore of government policy. Using the rather overwrought expression "functional dilution in sophisticated areas", Symes identified differing administrative needs within a roughly geographical model, in terms of a scale of established 'progress'. For this purpose, he openly contrasted

> [U]rban communities, to whom newspapers and lately the radio
> bring the news of the world, with country men whose secular
> existence has stayed almost undisturbed by the advent of the
> motor transport and the distant passage of an aeroplane, and
> whose metropolis is the hamlet where a local district headquarters
> is sited.[20]

Fertile Soil

If the 1930s was a period of political reorientation at the level of central government, then the Gezira has been seen as an anomaly. It has become a historiographical truism that the conditions of the Gezira were inappropriate for devolution. With its centralised and intrusive style of management, the Scheme has been cited as the antithesis of devolved government. Daly has suggested that the levelling effect of the tenancy system together with the "disturbingly 'direct'" administration of the Syndicate stifled indigenous authority, while the government's dependence upon the Scheme "argued powerfully against free-wheeling experiments in Indirect Rule."[21] However, this attitude relies far more upon assumption than it does upon reality. The

---

[20] Symes, "Note on Administrative Purposes", p. 2.

very existence of the Syndicate actually provided the conditions in which devolution flourished and occurred at a faster rate within the Gezira than in any other rural region of Sudan. Rather than proving to be incompatible, the Scheme became an arena of 'devolutionary' experimentation.

The 'modern' conditions of the Scheme offered the government a unique opportunity for experimenting in forms of governance. It was an area that was believed to have already undergone dramatic change, both long term detribalisation and the imposition of the Scheme, whose canals

> drove artificial boundaries, rendered necessary by irrigation requirements, through territorial units of khuts, omodias and even villages. Then followed the syndicate organization of blocks, which also, could take no thought for either tribal or territorial considerations.[22]

Believing that community structures beyond the village unit needed rebuilding in a radically different landscape, and with little 'tribal' political identity remaining, there were no fears of experiments disrupting a delicate balance of indigenous tradition.

The conditions were right, and there were other pressing factors. The Scheme was seen to undermine all previous attempts to bolster Sudanese authority not only through its territorial modifications, but through its direct style of management, in which the only official channel of agricultural mediation was between each individual tenant and his block inspector. With over one hundred block inspectors living within the Scheme at any one time the Syndicate was a highly visible and intrusive presence. Following direct orders and constantly supervised, the government feared that tenants were becoming mere cogs in a revenue-generating machine. The opposition to this direct form of management inspired the government to experiment in devolving authority. Highly outnumbered by Syndicate staff, and seeing its own position and administrative aims as being threatened, the government saw devolution as a necessary way of bolstering community independence.

---

[21] Daly, *Imperial Sudan*, p. 33. See also Victoria Bernal "Colonial Moral Economy".
[22] NRO BNP 1/1/2, Bardsley, Governor BNP, to MacMichael, Civil Secretary 6 June 1930.

The existence of the Syndicate thus did not preclude, but rather encouraged a high rate of institutional devolution. As Huddleston had realised in 1927, "administrative devolution on a small scale fits in, to my mind, extremely well with the conditions brought about by Syndicate development".[23] In the changing political climate of the 1930s and no longer hidebound by the need to find 'tribal' forms of tradition, the decentralisation of power within the Gezira increased rapidly. However, devolution within the Gezira not only occurred at an accelerated rate, but also developed in a distinctive manner that responded primarily to the agricultural and administrative needs of the Scheme.

As early as 1931, government officials had started to discuss the potential of devolving agricultural managerial responsibilities from block inspectors to Sudanese personnel. It was hoped that by extending the principles of devolution to economic production, Syndicate controls could be moderated and a class of self-sufficient farmers (rather than cotton labourers) could be created.[24] In the early 1930s, various Schemes were put forward in which the management of an area of tenancies would be overseen by chosen local tenants. For instance J.A. Reid suggested cooperative economic management within existing agricultural 'numbers' – the irrigation unit of nine hoshas or tenancies – organised on the basis of one tenant chosen by the others to act as manager or *mulahiz*.[25] However, these ideas not only challenged the government's focus upon large tribal units, but also coincided with the world depression, which together with a series of diseased crops brought the Scheme to its knees. Under these conditions, survival and efficiency were all, and agricultural devolution was indefinitely postponed.

However, if the depression of the early 1930s delayed the implementation of devolution within the Gezira Scheme, it also made it an ever more important priority after the depression. The financial crisis brought about a new sympathetic attitude towards tenants as the victims of circumstance. Not only was the Scheme itself viewed as intrusive and highly controlling, but it was proved that it was not

---

[23] NRO 1Civsec 1/16/50, Huddleston to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 11 March 1927.
[24] NRO BNP 1/40/301, Clarke, Governor BNP to Walley, Assistant Director Agriculture and Forests, 14 March 1933.
[25] NRO BNP 1/40/301, Reid, "Proposed method of cultivating cotton in the Gezira Scheme on a co-operative basis", 20 February 1931.

inevitably a profitable venture that provided material compensation for its cultural and economic impact. Although with no other significant source of national revenue, the government was forced to back the Scheme, it did so with growing reluctance and sympathy for the tenants working under factory like conditions for the financial benefit of the nation rather than themselves. Government officials within the Gezira became increasingly uneasy about supporting the Scheme, as province governor Clarke stated:

> It seems to me wrong that the Sudan Government or the British Government or any British official should be compelled to enforce on say 80,000 people (tenants and their families) a system of which the best that can be said is that we hope they will submit to it without causing serious trouble. [26]

The depression drew attention to the economic fallibility of the Scheme while at the same time highlighting the controlling conditions under which tenants worked. Seen as fundamentally flawed by the government, the depression forced a re-evaluation of how the Scheme should be run, and what its objectives were. The immediate problem of retaining tenants demonstrated that the conditions of the Scheme were only accepted when rewarded with financial profit. Without profits, tenants began to abandon their tenancies on a large scale, and by 1934, the government was only able to maintain tenant numbers through the "providential failure of the rains outside the Scheme".[27] The government had already been uneasy about the imposition of social change within the Scheme and this unease deepened further once guaranteed material compensation was undermined. Even once the economic situation began to ease, the evaluation of the Scheme by local government officers was largely negative. C.G. Davies, the Commissioner of the Gezira Area summed up his fears stating:

> I cannot honestly believe that any of the old time cultivators really enjoy the Scheme... I do not think that the ordinary working advances strike them as either generous or an adequate return for the amount of work and time they must spend on their howashas [tenancies]. There is more cash now, but the present

---

[26] NRO 2BNP 50/7/28, Clarke, Governor BNP to Angus Gillan, Civil Secretary, 31 December 1933.
[27] NRO BNP 1/40/301, Hillard, DC North Gezira to Young, Governor BNP, 15 December 1935.

generation of cultivator cannot forget in ten years his old freedom.
He used to work for his two or three months in the year; he had
enough food for his needs and enough money for ordinary small
luxuries and he was his own master. The standard of living
nowadays is higher but he has to work more than twice as hard
and twice as long to achieve it, and he is always working to a
programme arranged by someone else.[28]

These feelings were only intensified by the fact that the government had no effective
control over the management of the Scheme. The tensions arising between the
Syndicate's focus upon agricultural efficiency, and the government's prioritisation of
effective administration were significant. The government was financially
committed to the continuing success of the Gezira Scheme, and they were also
committed to working with the Syndicate as Scheme managers until at least 1939.[29]
Unable to make structural changes to the Scheme, the government attempted to find
other forms of compensation for those living under the controlling conditions of the
Scheme. This unofficial compensation gradually became associated with an
accelerated rate of modern development, by which existing economic developments
would be balanced by corresponding rates of social and political development. At
the heart of these proposals was a desire to create an informed tenant body with
increased control over their economic involvement within the Scheme. By engaging
with tenants as economic actors, the government attempted to treat tenants more as
the partners in the Scheme that they officially were, rather than as a labouring
workforce. As A.R. Bolton stated:

> If a tenant were told more about marketing, etc., and about the
> purport of complicated processes which are vexatious to him
> because their aim is obscure there might be more goodwill and
> co-operation.[30]

---

[28] NRO BNP, 1/40/301, C.G. Davies, DC Gezira Area to Young, Governor BNP, 22 December 1935.

[29] In 1939 the government had the right to review the concession agreement. Gaitskell, *Gezira*, p. 204.

[30] NRO BNP, 1/40/301, Minutes of a meeting held "to discuss the possibilities of admitting the Native Inhabitants of the Gezira to a greater and more direct share in the Gezira Scheme as at present constituted." 16 November 1935.

Experimentation in Management

The government set about experimenting with ways in which tenants might be given greater control over the management of their own tenancies, but faced continued opposition from the Syndicate who jealously guarded their right to manage the Scheme. It was not until a meeting in 1935, that W.P. Archdale, the Assistant Manager of the Syndicate, "suddenly 'blew up' and said that of course the SPS [Sudan Plantations Syndicate] used sheikhs and anyone else who was of any value".[31] From this surprise admission followed the grudging concession that an unofficial experiment might be made with seven *wakil*, or agricultural sheikhs, who were to undertake the supervision of an area of tenancies around a village.[32] The *wakil* sheikh experiment attempted to place a nominated tenant as intermediary between the block inspector and the other tenants within a village. As village sheikhs acted to mediate between their village and the government, so *wakil* sheikhs were intended to mediate between village tenants and the Syndicate management. With 450 villages existing within the Scheme, seven agricultural sheikhs did not bring about a dramatic change in policy, but it was an important concession. The question remained who these *wakil* sheikhs might be, fuelling a debate that forced the government to evaluate the direction of development.

In this first experiment, the Syndicate was given the right to nominate the *wakil* sheikh. The government recognised these appointments, but privately raised doubts that in the context of the Syndicate's priority of efficiency, its control over the direction of agricultural devolution would further undermine the position of the "natural leaders" cultivated by the government and thus by implication, the government itself. Robert Mayall, the new province governor feared that it was a policy, which instead of stemming Syndicate control, could help to increase it. He wrote of the new agricultural sheikhs:

> [I]f they are merely good tenants... relying entirely for their

---

[31] NRO BNP, 1/40/301, C.G. Davies, DC Gezira Area, "Note on Wakil Sheikhs", 31 December 1936.
[32] Ibid., The role of a *wakil* sheikh was "to go round his *murur* daily, [and] to keep the cultivators up to the mark", NRO BNP, 1/40/301, Peter Acland, DC Gezira "Note on Wakil Sheikhs", 2 February 1937.

authority on the block inspector, I don't think we have done much
good. In fact we have merely given the Syndicate an extra *ghaffir*
paid by the government.[33]

As a solution he proposed that wherever possible, the position of agricultural sheikh should be held by the existing administrative sheikh in order to reinforce the existing order.

This desire to amalgamate positions of administrative and agricultural authority stemmed from a belief that consolidating the power of 'traditional' leaders was the most positive way in which Gezira communities might be strengthened, against the 'threat' of Syndicate authority. However, growing support for the separation of roles emerged among provincial government staff. This was in part a practical consideration, as the roles of agricultural manager, administrator and cultivator were considered too great for all but the most 'able' of sheikhs. But it was also reflective of a more fundamental shift of opinion, which was most succinctly stated by Peter Acland:

I do not think we should look only to the sheikhly families to
provide wakils. A new aristocracy of bigger and better cultivators
is slowly arising and I feel that they should have their chance as
well.[34]

Understanding that the "tempo of life in the Gezira is increasing and will go on increasing", the value of tradition, so painfully cultivated was now openly questioned.[35] In a region that was experiencing rapid economic development, it was an individual's skills rather than a traditional background that began at least theoretically to be recognised.

In the short term, a pragmatic solution was found by encouraging the Syndicate to nominate men who were suitably skilled in agricultural affairs, but came from the family of the administrative sheikh. The Syndicate was generally happy to oblige. It

---

[33] NRO BNP, 1/40/301, Mayall, Governor BNP to Acland, DC Gezira 31 December 1936. A ghaffir within the Syndicate was generally a local man employed to regulate the flow of water in the irrigation channels.
[34] NRO BNP, 1/40/301, Acland, DC Gezira "Note on Wakil Sheikhs", 2 February 1937.
[35] NRO BNP, 1/40/301, Hillard, DC North Gezira to Acland, DC Gezira 14 February 1937.

too found the established respect for sheikhly families a useful basis for a *wakil* sheikh's authority. As Acland noted:

> In five out of the 7 cases the wakil is of the leading family in his village; one is the sheikh, 2 are brothers of the sheikh, 1 is son of the late Omda of the area, 1 is first cousin of the sheikh.[36]

Thus agricultural devolution generally consolidated existing patterns of authority. However, if five of the seven *wakils* were from 'leading families', then presumably two were not. In a climate in which specific skills were starting to be valued over and above established position, there were limited opportunities available to those from outside the existing status quo.

However, a *wakil* sheikh not from a sheikhly background was disadvantaged. The mediatory position of an established village sheikh was generally accepted and could be extended to agricultural mediation and management. When a non-sheikhly tenant was appointed as *wakil* sheikh, he frequently lacked legitimacy within the village and thus the influence to work effectively. For instance it was reported of Ahmed Abdullahi Fadlalla of Wad Reiya village in Nueila block that "unfortunately the tenants did not respond kindly to his jurisdiction, and in a very short period matters became chaotic".[37] Paid a (nominal) salary for his work as an agricultural mediator/supervisor, it was an easy, and frequently correct, assumption to see the *wakil* sheikh as merely an adjunct to the block inspector. Supervisory powers may have been devolved, but they were not decentralised, and the block inspector generally delegated a specific range of tasks. As with the delegation of administrative functions to courts, this extension of agricultural supervision acted to bring the power of the block inspector ever more firmly into the community.

Whereas courts were highly valued for their ability to act as mediatory institutions between community and government, the individual *wakil* sheikh did not bring the same benefits to tenants or to the community. The fact that the block inspector generally used the *wakil* sheikh as an agricultural foreman meant that there was little possibility of a community expressing their views to agricultural management

---

[36] NRO BNP, 1/40/301, Acland, DC Gezira "Note on Wakil Sheikhs", 2 February 1937.
[37] NRO BNP, 1/40/301, C.G. Davies, "Wakil Sheikh report on Ahmed Abdullahi Fadlalla", 9 June 1938.

through the *wakil* sheikh. In addition, the relationships that a village had with the government and had with the Syndicate were quite different. The government was a generally distant authority, rarely if ever experienced by an individual, and thus official channels of community mediation were a highly important means of communication. In contrast, agricultural management was intensive, and the block inspector a close and constant presence. With each tenant already having a personal relationship with his block inspector, the existence of a *wakil* sheikh acted to distance a tenant from the Syndicate rather than forge closer links. The power of the Syndicate was at the same time more deeply entrenched, and less accessible.

Agricultural work being the personal livelihood of a tenant, it was viewed as an individual rather than communal responsibility. The feelings towards the position of *wakil* sheikh were thus largely negative. From the perspective of tenants the imposition of a non-elected individual between the tenant and his inspector was frequently resented, and the Group Inspector, Centre Group reported that "a notable Radma tenant told Mr MacLean [the block inspector] he wanted orders direct from him and not from Yusif [the *wakil* and village sheikh]."[38] In contrast with highly sought after administrative and judicial positions, the position of *wakil* sheikh was not greatly popular. Existing administrative sheikhs accustomed to using their influence in the practice of mediation, found the transition to direct supervision and management frequently unpalatable. The drive necessary to get agricultural standards to meet Syndicate expectations too easily conflicted with the maintenance of community harmony and brought resentment rather than prestige. As MacLean, the block inspector of Radma block reported of the same *wakil* sheikh;

> I am quite sure Yusif does not want this job nor would a salary if attached to it attract him. He is only doing what he does do because he is willing to oblige... but this job is not at all to his liking and he would be more than grateful if we let him off the job altogether.[39]

---

[38] NRO BNP, 1/40/301, Group Inspector Centre Group, "Wakil Sheikh report on Yusif Hag el Zein", 18 November 1936.

[39] NRO BNP, 1/40/301, MacLean, Block Inspector Radma block, "Wakil Sheikh report on Yusif Hag el Zein", 15 July 1937.

Reliant upon reports written by Syndicate inspectors, the image left in the record is one of frustration with *wakil* sheikhs. They were accused of failing to show initiative, lacking drive, failing to insist upon suitable standards of work, and not demonstrating responsibility.[40] However, turning these reports around and it can be seen that what were reported as instances of failure by the Syndicate might in fact indicate considerable success within tenant communities. Accepting that most tenants preferred to spend time on their food crops rather than the cotton crop, the lack of drive by *wakil* sheikhs fitted with the aims of most tenants. Indeed *wakil* sheikhs although an agent of the block inspector rather than the village, frequently acted to defend tenant interests. Thus it was reported of Ismail Mohammed Ahmed that he "never reports that someone's watering or picking is bad", while a consistent complaint was that tenants' labouring costs were overestimated by *wakil* sheikhs in order to ensure a continuation of advance payments from the Syndicate.[41]

Wakil sheikhs were gradually accepted by block inspectors, however, the government remained sceptical about the value of agricultural devolution controlled by the Syndicate.[42] In separate experiments beginning in 1937, the government attempted to create entire model villages within the blocks of Fawar and Gondal. As with *wakil* sheikhs, the government saw these experiments as an attempt to wrest control from the Syndicate. But in creating entirely new villages, these experiments went considerably further. By offering services, and building viable village communities, ideas of social development were central to these village-based experiments. Each new village was given specific services including a shop, a well, latrines, a fuel plot, and animal *zaribas* [enclosures], and each tenant was given land within the immediate vicinity of the village.[43] If the *wakil* sheikh experiments had been explicitly about devolving agricultural responsibilities, then Fawar and Gondal used this as a starting point for a much more adventurous scheme in which economic and social development were linked. A notable result of this attempt was that development and tenant status were implicitly connected. Tenants were the only inhabitants within these model villages, and it was that group that were explicitly

---

[40] NRO BNP, 1/40/301, Wakil Sheikh Reports.
[41] NRO BNP, 1/40/301, H.N. Crossley, Block Inspector A'Galil block, 20 April 1937, and Group Inspector Southern Group, "Wakil Sheikh report on Hamed Ahmed Abu Naib", 16 November 1936.
[42] NRO BNP, 1/40/301, Sanders, DC South Gezira, to Hillard, DC Gezira, 3 January 1938.
[43] RHA, MSS PERHAM 128, "Notes on the Gezira", n.d.

targeted. The overall aim of the experiments was "to produce a class of peasant proprietors in village units under the supervision and control of their own headmen for all agricultural and administrative purposes".[44] However, for the first time, private accumulation was not only acknowledged as a primary aim of tenants, but was actively encouraged as a motivating principle; "the enterprising tenant must have room to increase his cultivation, should be allowed to buy land from less successful tenant".[45]

Individual headmen were again the focus of government notice, however although referencing the autocratic view of tradition, the actual experimentation in devolution was far from traditional, with entirely new sheikhs appointed and new skills instilled. As Perham noted; "Sheikhs must be *trained* to be real leaders, this requires careful selection, and real co-operation on the part of the block inspector".[46] However, these experiments in nominating leaders were not always successful, as demonstrated by the difficulties the government had in finding a suitable sheikh for the village of Mansi in Fawar block. On the 5 May 1937, the government appointed the sheikhs for the eight experimental villages. In Mansi, they chose "a well-born and well connected Halawi" for whom there were high hopes, but less than three months later it was reported that he "forestalled dismissal by resigning."[47] In mid-July Sheikh Awad Bashir was appointed in his place, but lasted even less time. On the 31 July, the block inspector reported that 25 of the villagers were "indulging" in a sit-down strike until Bashir was removed.[48] Their complaints included the allegations that the sheikh had been rude to them, had 'stolen' their labourers, and "was generally a menace and a nuisance."[49] Once again, the sheikh was persuaded to resign, and Fadil Osman took his place. Formerly unknown to the government, this was a candidate "whom his fellow-tenants wish to try out".[50] Having found the previous government-appointed sheikhs unsuitable, the tenants settled in the Fawar villages proved themselves willing to grasp the reins of power and acted in concert to gain a united end. Although it is difficult to say that the Mansi tenants were acting to

---

[44] NRO 1Civsec 57/24/93, BNP Annual Report 1937.
[45] RHA, MSS PERHAM 128, "Notes on the Gezira", n.d.
[46] Ibid. [emphasis added].
[47] NRO 1Civsec 57/4/18, BNP Monthly Diaries 1937, August.
[48] NRO 1Civsec 57/6/26, BNP Monthly Diaries 1938, July.
[49] NRO 1Civsec 57/6/26, BNP Monthly Diaries 1938, August.
[50] Ibid.

protect their economic interests, the complaint about labour being 'stolen' suggests that the defence of common economic interests were at least one aim of this action.

Introducing Local Government

Agricultural-led and thus tenant-oriented devolution had outpaced developments in administrative devolution throughout the 1930s. it was not until 1937 that the passing of local government legislation redressed this balance. The model of governance put forward by Symes and his Civil Secretaries at the end of the 1930s was ambitious and 'modern' in scope, reflecting the drive to pass greater powers to "larger and more independent organs of provincial self-government [which] enabled them to exercise much greater authority and financial powers."[51] This was a significant change of direction, in part responding to the increasing demands for participation within the political processes by educated Sudanese excluded by the language of tradition. As such it looked forward rather than back, to a 'rational' form of administration. As Newbold retrospectively stated, it followed

> the lines of modern local government, i.e. so as to rest more on
> popular consent, and be acceptable to educated Arabs, and to be
> trained and equipped to deal with the new social and economic
> problems, e.g. sanitation, soil erosion, [and] town planning.[52]

The local government ordinances of 1937 demonstrated a change in this direction. These were 'local government' as opposed to 'tribal government' ordinances, demonstrating that territorial units had become the focus of government policy rather than tribal units. The institutions to which powers were devolved were no longer 'native authorities' but had become 'local authorities', similarly 'native courts' had become 'local courts'[53] As Newbold reported:

---

[51] Symes, "Note on Administrative Purposes", p. 2.
[52] Newbold, lecture entitled "Recent Political Development in the Sudan," given October 1944, in Henderson [ed.] *The Making of the Modern Sudan*, p. 532.
[53] The Local Government (Rural Areas) Ordinance 1937, in *Sudan Gazette*, no. 625, 15 October 1937, pp. 59-66.

> 'Local Government' is a more intelligible term, and arouses no
> passions…it will absorb some nationalist ambitions and under the
> ample folds of its respectable cloak the sons of sheikhs and sons
> of effendia can lie down happily together.[54]

This was a vision of unity and universality; of two worlds meeting in a new setting. It also a marked the move away from a world that was seen as staid and potentially corrupt, and towards a very different one in which 'modernity' and 'development' were the goals.

In terms of stated policy, the legislation marked an official move away from autocratic tribal leadership and towards councils as the source of legitimate authority within communities. However, the results were far less transforming than the government's rhetoric suggested. Within the Gezira, where territory had been unofficially recognised as the basic principle of social organisation throughout the Condominium, the new emphasis upon the 'local' was less than radical. In many ways the legislation gave only a statuary basis to the executive powers which had been in fact exercised by the native authorities during the preceding period.[55] However, what it did do was to place native authorities ever more firmly under the direction of the *merkaz*.

The legislation itself was divided into three parts, providing different powers for local authorities within municipalities, townships and rural areas. These regional distinctions had been broadly made under the judicial legislation, but now became explicit. The map of Sudan was carved into distinct regions, using colour to define different forms of governance. Rural areas were painted blue, townships pink and municipalities red. This was an attempt to incorporate the differing needs of communities within Sudan ranging from the nomadic to the urban, into a limited and uni-directional spectrum. An example of colonial categorisation through which the government might 'know' its subject, the matching of set governance needs to geographical absolutes created its own limitations. In particular, the 'sophisticated' Gezira, with its population that was in close touch with the urban centres of Wad

---

[54] Newbold "Note on Relations between Educated and Tribal Elements in the Sudan", February 1939, in Henderson, *The Making of the Modern Sudan*, p. 509.
[55] Khalaf, "British Policy" p. 117.

Medani and Khartoum, and intimately connected with the world economy and political opinion, was problematically placed in the same 'rural' category as nomadic communities.[56]

As with agricultural devolution, the government was unsure of what form administrative devolution should take, and so a similar period of experimentation occurred. In February 1937, Mayall created an informal advisory body on which sat all thirteen sheikhs of khut in the Gezira. The sheikhs were used as a channel of communication between the government and the Gezira population, predominantly disseminating information from the government. The 'traditional' figures of sheikhs of khut were seen as ably representing the population. They were the obvious leaders having been promoted since the start of the Condominium, and not only had close relationships with government officials, but were the existing figures of authority as the heads of courts and native administrations. What distinguished this attempt at mediation from previous purely administrative uses of sheikhs, was the idea that this was potentially a two-way channel of communication, and that the population had a role in directing policy. Furthermore, this was the first time that the sheikhs were brought together to discuss Gezira-wide concerns in a communal, council-like atmosphere.[57] The Gezira Scheme was seen as a region with its own particular needs, and became an administrative unit separate from other parts of the province in which it lay.

Matters including the future policy of *wakil* sheikhs, the pay of sheikhs and omdas, and the most suitable days in the week for the sitting of courts were discussed. In participating in this new administrative body, sheikhs of khut gained a new province-wide importance. They also gained individual benefits from a good salary, and in 1938, the province reports stated that six out the seven sheikhs of khut possessed cars.[58] The existing control of sheikhs of khut over native administration was confirmed. Despite the language of universal local government, what was created was a centralised body that duplicated existing hierarchies of authority. However, as much as individual sheikhs of khut benefited, this was primarily about the growth of

---

[56] The Local government (Rural Areas) Ordinance 1937.
[57] NRO 1Civsec 57/4/18, BNP Monthly Diaries 1937, March.
[58] NRO 1Civsec 57/6/26, BNP Monthly Diaries 1938, April.

state power. Sheikhs of khut were essentially reduced to spokesmen of the government and although this was described as a major piece of devolution associating Gezira inhabitants with Government policy, it was more closely controlled by the government than any previous body had been. Mayall as province Governor acted as the chairman of the advisory body and the Gezira DC's also attended, thus maintaining close government control over discussion.[59]

This experimental advisory body became the Gezira Local Authority in 1939. No longer purely advisory, the Local Authority had by virtue of the Local Government (Rural Areas) Ordinance, the powers to "make local orders enforceable by law".[60] The provincial report stated that the creation of the Local Authority "marked the biggest step forward in the delegation of powers so far taken in this area". Indeed the 'independence' of the Gezira Local Authority was officially cultivated by the provision of a budget, the powers to make orders over a (designated) range of issues and the means to appoint and dismiss an executive body of omdas, sheikhs "and other similar subordinate authorities", to whom powers would be delegated.[61] However, this was in fact more about the delegating of the functions of governance rather than full powers.[62] The Local Authority essentially remained a tool of the *merkaz*, existing "to carry out any lawful order of the Governor or any magistrate", and all members were appointed by the province Governor, who retained the power to cancel any such appointment.[63]

No longer was there was an automatic right of membership, and only four of the thirteen Gezira sheikhs of khut were appointed alongside the Deputy Governor and the DC's of North and South Gezira. This move caused a significant amount of resistance and jealousy among the sheikhs of khut who feared that their powerbase was being undermined. These fears were to some extent allayed when told that each member of the Local Authority "should only serve for one year and then be replaced in rotation by the other sheikhs of khut."[64] In making this decision, the government

---

[59] NRO 1Civsec 57/4/18, BNP Monthly Diaries 1937, March.
[60] NRO 2BNP 42/1/2, BNP Annual Report 1939.
[61] The Local Government (Rural Areas) Ordinance 1937 (section seven).
[62] NRO 2BNP 42/1/2, BNP Annual Report 1939.
[63] The Local Government (Rural Areas) Ordinance 1937 (section six).
[64] NRO BNP 1/38/293, Acland, Gezira Commissioner, "Handing over notes", May 1940.

made a distinct statement about the bureaucratic rather than traditional functions of this body. However, the fact that the choice of Local Authority membership was made from within the existing body of the sheikhs of khut demonstrates that this "formally constituted body of notables", was nothing other than a more centralised, and increasingly government-controlled version of existing power structures.

Theoretically, the Ordinances made an important distinction between the institutions of local authorities and local courts.[65] Courts were seen as distinct bodies dealing purely with judicial processes, while local authorities existed to "maintain order and further good government".[66] In practice the Gezira Local Authority was a body imposed on top of existing native authorities, which continued to combine their existing judicial and administrative authority within the same body. The sheikh of khut remained the unelected head of this double unit, and he worked with the same appointed body of omdas and sheikhs that formed the court membership. The government attempted to distinguish between the judicial and the executive functions of native administrations through the provision of an extra administrative clerk in addition to the existing court clerk each administration employed. The fact that each of these 'khut clerks' underwent training in the *merkaz* before being sent out to the native authority only illustrates the increasing intrusion of government authority within local administration.[67]

Agricultural Dominance

However, although the Local Government Ordinances were an important government-directed development within the Gezira, agricultural patterns rather than central theories remained the dominating force upon the development of local government and other forms of devolution. For reasons of both agricultural efficiency (as the Syndicate became increasingly reliant upon agricultural devolution) and the government's desire to wrest control from the Syndicate, it was the Scheme

---

[65] The Local Government (Rural Areas) Ordinance 1937 (section three).
[66] Ibid., (section six).
[67] NRO 1Civsec 57/4/18 BNP Monthly Diaries 1937, November.

that directed both the rate and the form of administrative devolution. Earlier attempts to strengthen 'native' authority by keeping agricultural and government administration separated had failed. In failing to coordinate agricultural and administrative boundaries, there were no devolved local authorities to check or take over Syndicate authority, and native authorities were in effect weakened by *omodias* being split across several agricultural blocks.[68] Although the agricultural layout had existed only from the mid-1920s, it had become the dominant spatial influence upon the region. With canals acting as physical obstacles to an omda's jurisdiction and the constant presence of one or more block inspectors, an omda's authority was severely weakened. As Bardsley noted:

> Old paths and communications between village and village, and
> the villagers with their omda came to an abrupt end, and it is not
> unusual for an omda to have to travel three times the distance he
> had to formerly to get to a given village.[69]

In an attempt to bolster the power of government-nominated local authorities, the government from 1936 began to coordinate administrative and agricultural boundaries. As Mayall stated:

> The irrigation unit of the Main Canal, the majors and the minors
> are permanent. Thousands of pounds of capital are sunk in
> them... I suggest therefore that we must work in the future to
> units based on the canals which are there for all time.[70]

In giving priority to the pattern of agricultural organisation and superimposing the new agricultural boundaries onto administrative units, the dominance of the Scheme within the Gezira was accepted. It was further consolidated through the organisation of the salary structure for local government personnel within the Gezira. From the late 1920s, salaries were paid as a compensation for the lack of *ushur* available within the Scheme, and reflected pre-Scheme conditions.[71] In 1937, the opportunity was taken to rationalise and grade all native authority salaries in line with the new

---

[68] RHA MSS PERHAM 565/3, "Survey of Devolution".
[69] NRO BNP 1/1/2, Bardsley, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 6 March 1930.
[70] RHA MSS PERHAM 565/3, "Survey of Devolution".
[71] *Ushur* was a crop tax levied throughout northern Sudan, of which 10% was retained by the sheikh in recompense for his administrative role. Tenancies were exempt from paying this tax, and therefore, sheikhs within the Scheme lost the majority of this revenue.

conditions and responsibilities of Gezira sheikhs. These new responsibilities were directly associated with the agricultural administration of the Scheme with the grades of village sheikhs' salaries relating solely to the number of tenants within a sheikh's village.[72]

The dominance of the Scheme upon administration was complete. The Scheme was not only a monumental physical presence with its canals, fields and British block inspectors, it also dominated the Gezira in terms of its effect upon the rate and the form of devolution. However, the Gezira also followed national trends in local governance. Having moved away from the autocratic policy of indirect rule, the 'tradition' of the meglis was re-branded. Establishing bureaucratic councils, the government relied upon existing forms of consensual authority to meet the needs of 'modern' society. Although often portrayed as dramatic changes in policy, the result of the government's political transformation was all too frequently slight. What changes that did occur were not so much in the structures of authority, but rather in the degree of governmental penetration into Sudanese communities, as devolutionary policies actually saw the government gaining greater access to community governance. Also following the national trend, these early stages of formal implementation of local government favoured the established elite. However, novel within the Gezira Scheme, and reflecting the dominance of the Scheme in the area was the increasing focus of devolution upon one particular section of the community. With tenants the most visible section of the community in a region focused upon the Scheme, they became the primary recipients of devolutionary developments at the expense of non-tenants. This was to become a trend that was to continue as the rate of devolution increased further throughout the 1940s.

---

[72] NRO 1Civsec 1/17/54, Budget proposals for 1938, 28 September 1937.

6

EXPERIMENTING WITH
MODERNITY

By the early 1940s, the village had been identified as the most important social and political unit within the Gezira. As a government report stated:

> The village group provides an association of people who, in spite of
> their mixed origin, are bound together by the close bonds of common
> interests, sharing the same lands, markets and water supplies, and the
> same religious sects and traditions. In other words each village is in
> fact a small republic where social institutions of value can be
> maintained and social cohesion encouraged.[1]

The experiments within Gondal and Fawar were deemed to be successful, but in the government's mind had not gone far enough. The 1940s saw an increase in the rate of devolution within the Gezira Scheme, and although agricultural issues and agricultural units remained the dominating factors, local government was increasingly incorporated into the pattern of agricultural devolution. The result was an accelerated rate of local government within the Gezira Scheme that was unique within the Sudan. However, this was a form of local government that was particularly controlled by centralised authorities, with the government co-opting the existing large numbers of block inspectors to manage village and block level devolution. As well as being uniquely

---

[1] NRO 2BNP 50/2/7, anon., "Village Councils" 194-?.

supervised, it was also a form of devolution that favoured tenants over and above non-tenants. Based on agricultural units, tenants were automatically the preferred candidates for local council membership, and thus tenants consolidated their existing economic dominance by controlling local government structures. Tenants embraced the opportunities that councils offered, using them as important mediatory institutions to gain access to government resources and to consolidate their position within their own communities.

Designing a Future

In 1939 the government extended the Syndicate's concession until 1950. However, the climate of government had changed, and new expectations of the Syndicate's role now existed. Mayall outlined the attitude of the government when he stated:

> The ideal object of government, if she is to be faithful to her
> principles of trusteeship should be, before the concession period is
> ended, administratively and agriculturally to have trained up a class
> of small peasant proprietors, who can, when the control period is
> ended, make the best use of the irrigation system.[2]

By tying the continuation of the Syndicate's concessionary agreement to these aims, the Syndicate was co-opted into promoting and largely managing future devolutionary developments. With Gaitskell, who was personally enthusiastic about social development directing Syndicate management, the task was made considerably easier.[3]

The future direction of devolution was outlined in a document called 'Schedule 'X'' in 1940, which set forth the government's ideas on the future organisation of the Scheme. Moving away from an emphasis upon agricultural efficiency, an ideology of holistic 'development' pervaded this document. Agriculturally the cultivation of food and

---

[2] Mayall,Governor BNP, "Memorandum" 15 February 1939, cited in Gaitskell, *Gezira*, p. 205.
[3] Gaitskell, *Gezira* p. 206.

fodder crops together with animal husbandry was promoted as being equally important as the cotton cash crop, while agricultural education was also prioritised.[4] 'Schedule 'X'' directly integrated these agricultural measures with administrative devolution. As with Gondal and Fawar, 'Schedule 'X'' promoted the "development of an orderly organisation of village communities controlled by headmen"; both the existing village sheikh and an additional agricultural sheikh.[5] The notable difference in the new policy was that the agricultural sheikh would be elected by village tenants, and that these headmen would be supported and controlled by village councils, with ultimate control emanating from the sheikh of khut.[6]

However, this policy, while introducing measures of community control was careful not to undermine the existing status quo. As Mayall stated; "agents for the civic control of the farmers already exist in the person of the village sheikhs, and there is no intention of removing them or curtailing their sphere of influence."[7] Indeed, the cooperation of the "local hierarchy of Sheikh of Khut, Omda and village Sheikh" was carefully cultivated, making it "abundantly clear to them that the devolution agents and councils are based on the village organisation and therefore not independent of their sphere of authority".[8] And while agricultural sheikhs "should be the choice of the village and regard themselves as agents of the village", they were rarely divorced from the existing hierarchy, being in some cases the village sheikh himself, and in others one of his relatives.[9]

Despite consolidating the position of the existing administrative elite, village councils marked a significant change in the way that the government viewed the power structure within a village. The council drew on the 'tradition' of the meglis, and given official sanction became an institution recognised and validated by the government. Although 'tradition' was still central to the government's idea of legitimate authority, ideas about

[4] NRO 2BNP 50/2/7, 'Schedule 'X'', March 1940.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid. and NRO 1Civsec 57/12/44, BNP Monthly Diaries, March 1940.
[7] NRO 2BNP 50/2/7, Mayall, Governor BNP "Explanatory note on Schedule 'X'", 6 March 1940.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

what constituted 'tradition', and the conception of legitimate representation were changing. The introduction of village councils was proposed as a way to integrate the leadership of the village sheikh with the "strong democratic sense" of Arab communities.[10] The village sheikh remained a vital figure as the head of the village council, but he was no longer deemed to be automatically representative of his village. By working with a council, the sheikh would no longer be the "local autocrat substituting our British inspector", but would act as "President of the local cooperative".[11] The village council thus existed to give an official consensual legitimacy to the actions of the village sheikh. The agricultural sheikh was directly accountable to the village council, "preventing him becoming a petty bureaucrat and to remind him constantly that he is the agent of the village", and in this way village members were officially empowered.[12] Not only did the village council exist to deal with all agricultural issues within the village, including fining and evicting 'failing' tenants, and recommending new tenants, but it also acted on administrative issues such as sanitary offences.[13] As with the transition of native courts into native authorities, village councils soon became convenient institutions through which to channel local government.

However, although increasingly important institutions, village councils were not open to all villagers and the restriction of membership to tenants or ex-tenants effectively marginalised all non-tenants.[14] This was in part a reflection of the dominance of agricultural interests in these devolutionary experiments. However, it also symbolised the creation of a new badge of elite status. As with other government policies, including the restriction of exhibit entries in province agricultural shows to tenants, and the creation of a Tenants' Welfare Fund, tenants were given privileges that were denied to non-tenants.[15] In this context a tenancy began to be seen as something more than simply an economic venture; it also proved an entrance into a world of social and political

---

[10] SAD 418/6/12-35, Gaitskell, "A Proposal for the Future Development of the Gezira Scheme", 193[8].
[11] Ibid.
[12] NRO 2BNP 50/2/7, Mayall, Governor BNP, "Explanatory note on Schedule 'X'", 6 March 1940.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] NRO 1Civsec 57/6/26, BNP Monthly Diaries, December 1938. Gaitskell, *Gezira*, pp. 169-170.

power. Those without access to tenancies were historically the economically marginal, and thus the wealth and cultural differences existing in the pre-Scheme Gezira were institutionalised further, on the basis of tenant 'ownership'.

To prove that it would not harm the Syndicate's cotton growing interests, it was decided that village councils would be first implemented throughout Hosh Block during 1940, and its value assessed before further extension. The village councils were effectively controlled by the block inspector, who as the 'man on the ground' undertook the role of supervising devolution. It was he that appointed the village councils, and supervised their duties, thus ironically, just as the government used a language of increased village control through devolution, so did they come under increasing control from centralised authorities.[16] The reaction of village communities to the establishment of village councils was mixed. Out of the thirteen villages in Hosh Block, eight enthusiastically established councils while the other five were less certain.[17] One year later, having observed the functioning of the established village councils these five villages also supported the establishment of village councils.[18] There is little information relating to these first village councils, however one comment within the records states that tenants used them as a forum to discuss the similarities of the new devolution Scheme in Hosh with the Abdel Magid Cotton Scheme on the White Nile, and in particular to question whether the similarities would extend to the higher cotton payments as received in Abdel Magid. Keenly aware of systems working elsewhere, tenants' interests were primarily focused upon the individual economic benefits of the Gezira Scheme.[19]

While the village council was overseen by the block inspector, time constraints meant that he was unable to closely monitor all councils in his block. The solution was to create an intermediary institution between the block inspector and the village council. The first block council was established in Hosh in February 1941. Intended as an advisory body, through which the block inspector might "issue agricultural propaganda",

---

[16] NRO 1Civsec 57/12/44, BNP Monthly Diaries, April 1940.
[17] Ibid.
[18] NRO 1Civsec 57/17/63, BNP Monthly Diaries, August 1942.
[19] NRO 1Civsec 57/12/44, BNP Monthly Diaries, April 1940.

one representative of each village council met once a month under the supervision and chairmanship of the block inspector.[20] Making a strong statement that this was not a 'traditional' body, and to avoid jealousies, the block council was chosen arbitrarily by appointing the oldest member of each village council.[21] Members of this council sat for only two years before retiring, and altogether a dynamic structure was created incorporating many previously unknown tenants from across an entire block. With no 'traditional' precedent for communal organisation around the agricultural block unit, the creation of Hosh block council demonstrated an inventiveness by government, by which new social structures were created for particular contemporary circumstances.

The remit of the block council allowed for the discussion of "matters of general interest to the Block".[22] As Gaitskell noted:

> Just what these matters were was left undefined. Clearly they were
> mainly agricultural, but with the new social purpose they soon began
> to embrace everything that was not obviously the known province of
> some existing department of government or local government.[23]

Although with no legislative powers or backing, the government once again found a functioning community body irresistible, and soon used it for aspects of block administration. Thus the block council was used as a court of appeal for decisions made by village councils, and – "to avoid the impression that the agricultural Wakil is a servant of the administrative native administration on the one hand, or of the Syndicate on the other" – it was also used as a channel through which agricultural sheikhs were paid.[24] This veneer of independence was false. With the block inspector in the permanent position of Chairman, the block council was the most closely monitored body within the Gezira.

---

[20] NRO 2BNP 42/1/4, BNP Annual Report 1941.
[21] NRO 1Civsec 57/14/54, BNP Monthly Diaries, February 1941.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Gaitskell, *Gezira* p. 210.
[24] NRO 2BNP 42/1/4, BNP Annual Report 1941 and NRO 1Civsec 57/14/54, BNP Monthly Diaries, February 1941.

With the Hosh experiment deemed a success, plans were made in June 1941, to extend councils into Fawar block and selected villages in Hassaheisa district.[25] The support for this form of village and block devolution within Gezira communities meant that the selection of these new councils "presented no difficulty whatsoever and the whole proceedings went off remarkably smoothly."[26] Even with restricted powers, the benefit of having a recognised community forum was understood throughout many villages. Villages with 'legitimate', or village-controlled samads did have more power to control patterns of work, and could thus defend tenant interests in ways that *wakil* sheikhs directly controlled by the block inspector could not. Furthermore, with government backing for councils, villages found that a council proved a way of gaining the direct attention and resources of the government, when previously they had been reliant upon the much larger Khut representing their interests. Like courts, councils were important mediatory institutions; through them, communities could access government-controlled resources including schools and clinics. In addition, the public face of councils channelled centralised authority in one direction, effectively limiting the ability of government and Syndicate to access other areas of community life.

By 1943 there were 35 village councils working with their own agricultural samads, covering 10% of the Scheme.[27] However, as the Second World War continued, the development of councils was put on hold. With large numbers of British staff recalled for service, there was greater need to devolve powers but not the time to cultivate community-based devolution. The solution was to appoint approximately 350 'war-time samads' to supervise village cultivation. Without village councils, war-time samads were accountable only to the block inspector, and, like the early experiments did not extend any power throughout the community. The differences were also apparent in the personnel chosen as samads. With the Syndicate and the government increasingly coinciding in their opinion on the need for skill-based and consensual local authority, the samad working in conjunction with a village council in "the real devolution Scheme"

---

[25] NRO 1Civsec 57/14/54, BNP Monthly Diaries, June 1941.
[26] NRO 1Civsec 57/14/54, BNP Monthly Diaries, September 1941.
[27] GBA (Gezira Board Archive) 700-9 Gaitskell to Williams, Assistant Director of Education, 28 March 1943.

preferably had youth and energy, with the council acting as the validating authority behind him.[28] However, without a council's authority, the existing power and influence of the samad became the primary consideration. The men chosen by the government and Syndicate as war-time samads were thus "mostly older men whose money and family ties had already put them in a position of some authority with their villages", and over half of them were village sheikhs.[29] Tellingly, Gaitskell noted "they are not at all the types we would have chosen at our leisure".[30]

Weeding out Inefficiency

The appointment of war-time samads was seen as a backward step for both the Syndicate and the government. With the Syndicate short-staffed and unable to drive forward village devolution, the government decided to concentrate upon reforming the existing "stagnant" local government as a way to translate the "economic advantages of the Scheme... into social progress".[31] In 1942 George Bredin as Governor of the province, wrote a report in which he stated:

> Even the most generous critic would confess that our present local
> personnel is inadequate to cope with the peculiar conditions created
> by the Gezira cotton Scheme. Many of our Sheikhs and Omdas,
> worthy men through they are, belong to a previous generation which
> cannot adjust itself to present conditions. In our attempts to bolster
> up old institutions we have created a series of oligarchies which are
> not efficient because they are based on the hereditary system and
> suffer from the disease of nepotism, and because Sheikhs are allowed

---

[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Gaitskell, *Gezira*, p. 214.

to continue in office when it is evident that they are incapable of carrying out their duties.[32]

Sheikhs and omdas might have been wealthy and influential, but the majority of them were also illiterate and aging, qualities that were no longer sought in the field of modern, forward-looking local government.

Throughout 1942, the Gezira District Commissioners drew up a list of local administration personnel deemed incapable of carrying the growing burden of administration. In line with the management style of the Syndicate, the government began to focus upon efficiency within a bureaucratic administration, and looked for particular skills, including literacy, energy, ability to work with figures and skills of group management. Pressured resignations "weeded out" inefficient members of local government, and "a number of ultra conservative and illiterate local authorities were kindly, but firmly put upon the shelf".[33] Although the move away from existing figures of authority was broadly national, it was particularly acute within the Gezira, where the government reacted to the accelerated economic developments of the Scheme. For some, like Sheikh el Amin Musaad, sheikh of the Halawin Khut from 1917, this pressure to resign was bitterly fought.[34] However, like the omdas El Imam Ahmed Dakin of Tekalat Gubara, and Mohammed Ghanawa of Talbab, most were content to retire from their duties, especially as the "younger and more progressive individuals" that they were replaced with, were "in most cases a son or younger relative".[35] Thus this reorganisation tended to replicate the existing structure of authority as being vested within sheikhly families.

Also in 1942, once the danger of Italian invasion had passed, the 1937 local government legislation was used to establish khut councils throughout the Gezira under individual

---

[32] G.R.F Bredin, quoted in Gaitskell, *Gezira*, p. 215.

[33] RHA MSS Perham 565/3, Bredin, Governor BNP to Perham, 1948.

[34] El Amin Musaad did not voluntarily resign and asked for one more year of office which was refused by the government. This reluctance to leave his post is perhaps explained by the fact that the government did not believe he had any suitable relatives, and wished to replace him with an omda from a rival Halawin faction. NRO BNP 1/30/222, A. Paul, DC North Gezira to Bredin, Governor BNP, 16 December 1943.

[35] RHA MSS Perham 565/3, Bredin, Governor BNP to Perham, 1948, and NRO 1 Civsec 57/17/63, BNP Monthly Diaries, June 1942.

warrants. Based upon the existing native authority unit of the khut, and with the existing sheikh of khut acting as president, khut councils were advisory bodies only, acting as an institutional mediator between the khut and the government:

> Its duty was to receive and convey government orders, and to make
> propaganda in connection with public health, grazing, collection of
> crops and distribution of rationed commodities etc,.[36]

By using the existing structure of the khut unit, the government hoped to retain the confidence of the existing political and administrative elite while at the same time making the changes deemed necessary for developments in modern governance. Like village councils, khut councils were viewed as a means of acting against the potential autocracy of the 'sheikh', and gaining legitimacy through "providing a better means for maintaining contact with representative opinion".[37] However, with the sheikh of khut nominating the members of the khut council, the increased representation of khut councils frequently only confirmed the power a sheikh of khut had, and tended to replicate the existing administrative power base of omdas and sheikhs.[38] However, the process of change to larger council bodies, together with the new focus upon skills did provide some new opportunities for those from a non-traditional background. As well as sheikhs and omdas, the membership of khut councils was reported as including "such outstanding persons as merchants, farmers, schoolmasters [and] health representatives".[39]

Khut councils discussed a wide range of administrative issues, ranging from sugar rationing, regulation of animal pounds and village gardens, and were soon initiating proposals including public health campaigns.[40] However, at the same time as celebrating the active role of khut councils, the government was also complaining about their 'inertia' and 'apathy', noting in particular that councils were failing to appreciate

---

[36] SAD 517/10/18-50, Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan, "Report on the Future of the Gezira Scheme", 1946, p. 38.
[37] NRO 1Civsec 57/17/63, BNP Monthly Diaries, May 1942.
[38] Ibid.
[39] SAD 517/10/18-50, Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan, "Report on the Future of the Gezira Scheme", p. 38.
[40] NRO 1Civsec 57/17/63, BNP Monthly Diaries, October, November 1942.

the seriousness of the labour crisis in 1942.[41] This seeming contradiction suggests that councils had a particular idea of what role they should play. Sugar rationing, animal pounds and village gardens were all resources that brought significant benefits to communities in general and to council members in particular. The control of labour not only failed to bring significant benefits to council members – who tending to be the wealthy, were able to personally secure sufficient labour through paying high wages – but also threatened unwelcome government attention into the economic life of the tenant. The managerial or landlord mentality of tenants was predicated upon private accumulation and independent economic action within a tenancy. The external control of labour threatened the very aspirations of tenants, and was thus avoided by local government councils.

Able to bring resources and attention to both the community in general and to council members particularly, councils were seen as a positive resource and factions who failed to gain representation vociferously complained.[42] At the most extreme, council interests were the personal economic interests of the council members, and the government reported that "the Halawin Council shows regrettable signs of lapsing into a poor Omdas Benevolent Society."[43] These actions went against the specific ideas of the role of local government held by central authorities, in which local authorities acted for the best interests of the general population. The government, unhappy with such self-serving authorities took strong actions against offending local authorities. Within the Khawalda Khut it was found that "many of the tenants in this area have become the victims of money lenders, and that the local authorities had made no attempt to eradicate this evil".[44] Having failed to act 'appropriately', the government took the "opportunity" to reorganise the structure of the khut, reducing the number of omodias in the khut from six to two.

---

[41] NRO 1Civsec 57/17/63, BNP Monthly Diaries, December 1942.
[42] NRO 1Civsec 57/17/63, BNP Monthly Diaries, September 1942.
[43] NRO 1Civsec 57/17/63, BNP Monthly Diaries, December 1942.
[44] NRO 1Civsec 57/17/63, BNP Monthly Diaries, September 1942.

Rationalising Governance – The Creation of Gisms

Primarily seen as a transitional stage within the development of local government, the khut council was viewed as an unwieldy unit of government. It was too large to foster communal spirit and too small to be vested with a budget and financial responsibilities, and the administrative functions of the khut council were soon transferred onto newly created gism councils.[45] The khut was retained, but became a purely judicial unit, with the sheikh of khut "regarded as a 'stipendiary' magistrate", and president of the local court.[46] The separation of judicial and administrative authority, which had been theoretically made within the khut, now became a reality.[47] For the government, the creation of the gism unit marked a break with all tribal conceptions of power. While it was a territorial unit, the khut had always been partly conceived in tribal terms with each khut named after the tribe of its sheikh, and the sheikh of khut being a permanent (and approximately hereditary) position. With the gism, the government began a process that self-consciously broke from these 'tribal' forms, creating a modern administrative bureaucracy.

However, the past remained an important way in which the government legitimised its administrative developments. The terminology of gism was taken from a territorial unit of administration used during the Turko-Egyptian period in riverain areas of Sudan. Larger than a khut, the gism had no tribal connotations, and for this reason had not been appropriated by the government at an earlier date. In the 1940s however, it was seized upon by the government as a way in which a bureaucratic territorial structure could be referenced in terms of tradition and heritage. Through the amalgamation of khuts, five gisms were created throughout the Gezira Scheme. The single Halawin Khut was simply transformed into a gism unit on the basis of its "peculiar tenacity with which that community clings to tribal tradition and their unwillingness to amalgamate with

---

[45] RHA MSS Perham 565/3, Bredin, Governor BNP to Perham, 1948.
[46] Ibid.
[47] SAD 517/10/18-50, Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan, "Report on the Future of the Gezira Scheme", p. 38.

neighbouring units".[48] By the end of 1943, after one and a half years of active reorganisation, the number of units of local government had been reduced from nine to five and within South Gezira District, the twenty-eight omodias were reduced to eighteen. The omdas that remained were literate, and all omodia boundaries coincided with the agricultural block boundaries, with only one omda per block.[49]

The fact that gism councils were not tribally based (other than the Halawin Council which was an anomaly that the government was able to contain) was a central aspect to their creation:

> [T]he effect of reorganising the local government on a territorial as opposed to the old tribal basis has, it is hoped, broken down the last strongholds of feudalism. Today Khawalda, Arakiin and Gaaliin sit together on the same courts and councils and all are determined to stand up for the rights and privileges of those sections of the community which they represent.[50]

The non-tribal council was seen to be rational in a way that the former were inherently not. It was heralded as a grand transformation from a parochial inward and backward looking body, to one that was objective and distinctly modern. This understanding ignored all past experience of the Gezira as a territorially defined region, in which peaceful, cooperative multi-tribal villages had been acknowledged as the norm throughout the condominium. By believing their own propaganda of Indirect Rule, in which tribal autocrats had ruled throughout Sudan, British officials considered they were transforming the Gezira from a feudal and tribal society into a modern 'state'. In fact the historical lack of active tribalism within the Gezira meant that the transformation was less dramatic than it has been perceived.

Gisms, headed by a sheikh of gism continued to reference the past through the use of historical terminology. However, the territorial terminology of the gism reflected the

---

[48] RHA MSS Perham 565/3, Bredin, Governor BNP to Perham, 1948.
[49] NRO 1Civsec 57/18/67, BNP Monthly Diaries, November 1943.
[50] Ibid.

government's desire to move away from tribal definitions of local authority. Freed from the tribal model of authority, the government was able to demonstrate considerable creativity in forming structures of governance suitable for contemporary needs. This non-traditional model of authority also allowed the government to mould the structure to particular needs as occurred throughout the Scheme. Thus within the Halawin, the post remained permanently within the hands of the existing sheikh of khut, whereas in order to avoid jealousy between the two sheikhs of khut within Hosh Gism it was decided that each sheikh would act as sheikh of gism on alternate years.[51]

The government's emphasis on democracy and modernisation as distinct from past tradition was clearly made within a memo to the advisory council in which the government distanced itself from earlier policies that had supported tribal leaders. In an only thinly veiled threat, the latter were told that they would only be supported so long as they evolved in line with modern forms of governance, and would be replaced if they could not:

> Tribal leaders have expressed a certain amount of apprehension lest
> the establishment of Local Government Councils should mean an end
> of their own authority. They need have no such anxiety... their
> future usefulness will only be limited by their capacity to modernise
> their outlook, and to adapt their traditional methods of exercising
> authority to the requirements of progress.[52]

By moving away from believing in the inherent value of tribal tradition, the rhetoric of the Sudan government instead embraced a range of skills that potentially came from any background. However, this potential was limited, and as much as this was a threat, it was also a demonstration of the government's commitment to the established holders of authority. This was not about replacing the elite, rather it recognised the potential of established leaders (or their sons) to transform themselves and respond to 'modern'

---

[51] NRO 2BNP 1/1/1, H.M.A Sharfi, Executive Officer, Hosh Rural Council, to DC South Gezira, 20 December 1951.
[52] Sudan Government, *Aspects of Local Government*, 194-?, p. 2.

conditions, yet retain the values of a rural conservative background, still favoured by government.

Although gism councils did not mark the dramatic change from tribal to modern society that the government perceived, they did bring about considerable changes to the way in which the population related to the state. In a series of indirect elections, each omodia nominated four members to the khut council, in effect meaning that every two to three villages combined to nominate a member, and these newly elected khut councils then elected members of the new gism councils. Although highly restrictive, this provision of community control over the form of the institutions of community governance offered an embryonic form of citizenship. The first elections resulted in a strong degree of continuity, and "on the whole membership remains much as before", however, despite the continuity of personnel, the creation of gism councils were seen as something distinctive by many observers.[53] The Advisory Council of Northern Sudan embraced the creation of the gism council on the basis that "it helps the country to get rid of the old and hereditary tribalism, and paves the way for those who possess strong character and qualifications".[54] In particular, the Advisory Council viewed the gism council as a liberating influence for communities, through which they might "frame the general instructions governing the rights of individuals and their duties"[55] However, once again, government control was clearly evident, with the gism council chaired by the district commissioner.

---

[53] NRO 1Civsec 57/20/75, BNP Monthly Diaries, June 1944.
[54] SAD 517/10/18-50, Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan, "Report on the Future of the Gezira Scheme", p. 38.
[55] Ibid.

Directing Social Policy

With Gaitskell at the helm, social and political development was on the agenda of the Syndicate. However, the Syndicate was still a private company answerable to its shareholders. In 1943, the government realised that "the alignment of the government's social and the Syndicate's commercial interests was going to be a matter of great difficulty", and in 1944 the decision was taken to terminate the concessions in 1950, and to manage the Scheme as a nationalised enterprise.[56] The late 1940s was thus a period concerned with deciding what form the future of the Gezira Scheme would take. The joint Syndicate and Government directives of 1945 and 1947 were an important statement about how this future was viewed. Explicit within the directives was the central role of social development, and the village council was seen as the central agent of this development. This proposed development responded to the needs of the unique 'sophisticated' nature of the Gezira Scheme, so unlike any other rural area in Sudan. As deputy Governor D. Hawkesworth stated; "There is a need to accelerate the development of local government inside the irrigated area if it is not to lag behind similar developments in the towns."[57] Aware of the close social and economic ties between Gezira inhabitants and urban areas, the region was deemed to have similar 'sophisticated' needs as urban areas. Not just a matter of efficiency, social development was also seen to compensate for the structural and economic changes imposed upon the region, to which government officials were still sympathetic. In a climate of growing criticism levelled at the Scheme from urban Sudanese commentators and fear of unrest within the Scheme, both social development and greater tenant involvement within the management of the Scheme was considered essential.[58]

The village became an increasingly important unit of local government, and village councils were extended throughout the Scheme with war-time samads replaced by

---

[56] Henderson (ed.,) *The Making of the Modern Sudan*, pp. 517-8.
[57] NRO 2BNP 1/2/9, D. Hawkesworth, Deputy Governor BNP, "Developments in Local Government in the Gezira", 11 April 1946.
[58] Henderson (ed.,) *The Making of the Modern Sudan*, p. 516.

samads accountable to councils. The belief in the positive value of the village grew at the same time as did disillusionment with larger units of local government. A number of cases of fraud and maladministration occurred in the early 1940s, with the Province monthly diaries of 1943 stating "not a few of the existing omdas, and even those holding higher positions, have shown themselves self seeking and untrustworthy in the distribution of cloth, sugar, etc., and in other matters which have been delegated to them".[59] Other high profile cases included that of the Sheikh of Khut Abdulla Mohammed Tom who used money out of the local school fund, temporarily entrusted to his care, to pay off personal debts.[60] Such cases led government officials to despair that "At present, outside that unit, [the village] the quality which enables a people to govern themselves – that is to say, the instinct of men to put the public interests before their own – appears to be sadly lacking."[61] Villages were viewed as the most productive unit through which to introduce material benefits and at the same time instil a notion of 'good citizenship' and 'corporate responsibility'.[62]

The government and Syndicate directives placed the agricultural field staff at the forefront of developing local government at the village and block level. No longer dealing with solely agricultural duties, the high numbers of block inspectors having a direct relationship with local government meant that the Gezira became the most intensively governed region within the Sudan. Although having no statuary authority, the government relied upon field staff to act as "the manager of his block, and the agency responsible for the village councils of his area".[63] The directives described the block inspector as someone who "through his intimate knowledge is in an unrivalled position to advise the administration and to encourage the people along the path of progress through the village council."[64] As 'manager' of the block, the block inspector appointed members to village councils, thus maintaining a high degree of control and

[59] NRO 1Civsec 57/18/67, BNP Monthly Diaries, May 1943.
[60] NRO 1Civsec 57/20/75, BNP Monthly Diaries, September 1944.
[61] Ibid.
[62] NRO 2BNP 1/2/9, Hawkesworth, Deputy Governor BNP, "Recommendations for the Coordination of the Policy of Devolution in the Gezira", 6 January 1947.
[63] Ibid.
[64] RHA MSS PERHAM 565/8 "A directive on the policy of devolution in the Gezira issued jointly by Governor Blue Nile Province and manager Sudan Plantations Syndicate", 3 May 1947.

authority over the councils. The central role of the block inspector also reflected the importance of agriculture as an economic drive to social and political development, and Hawkesworth stated:

> It is recognised that village councils in the Gezira will for many years
> have to be subject to direct bureaucratic control, particularly in the
> field of agriculture, which is our effective point of attack in our
> efforts to raise the standards of living among the people.[65]

Despite this control, the responses of village councils were often quite different. The Katfia-Safia council within the Halawin Gism was a body which used the opportunities provided by the government as a means to gain personal enrichment. Membership on councils offered individuals a position within the elite of a community and provided associated advantages, and in 1944, it was reported that the "poorer tenants were left this season to shift for themselves, while Council members monopolised the plough bulls and offered shamelessly high wages for labour."[66] Elsewhere, councils were used as a forum for community action aimed at gaining a higher standard of living for the community as a whole. Within Tayiba block, each village undertook community oaths to undertake certain measures for the general good of the community. These measures included setting limits for the price of labour and limiting the amount of 'Mahr' to be paid at marriages to prevent competitive notions of social status from bankrupting families. Any person who broke any oath rendered himself liable to pay a fine into the village funds.[67] Within Tayiba Village Council itself, a saving scheme for children was established, in which tenants agreed to pay their children full rates for cotton picking and place the money within post office saving schemes. Over three hundred such savings accounts were opened with the village council acting as guardians of the accounts.[68] There were thus differences in the way in which communities used their council structures, however it should be noted that both the Halawin and the Tayiba councils

---

[65] NRO 2BNP 1/2/9, Hawkesworth, Deputy Governor BNP, "Recommendations for the Coordination of the Policy of Devolution in the Gezira", 6 January 1947.
[66] NRO 1Civsec 57/20/75, BNP Monthly Diaries, December 1944.
[67] NRO 1Civsec 57/22/84, BNP Monthly Diaries, March 1945.
[68] Ibid.

used them actively, viewing them as a useful forum through which to engage with both the government and the village community.

Although communities might have been happy to use councils in different ways, the government was quick to distinguish between positive and negative use of councils, and while it condemned the Katfia-Safia council, it applauded the role of Tayiba councils. Tayiba proved the perfect example of village-based progressive action for the benefit of its citizens, albeit mainly those citizens who were tenants. The activities of the councils were advertised, and gained significant favourable attention from other villages. The government reported in 1945 that:

> Villagers inside the Scheme continued to press for the setting up of
> village councils. The marked success of the village council system in
> Tayiba Block has done much to open the eyes of the people to the
> advantages and possibilities of the system.[69]

The advantages seen by other villages were not the innate advantages of community action, as no village needed a government-sponsored village council to organise itself. The advantages came with the degree of mediatory contact with central authorities that a village council brought. Councils brought favourable attention from the government and Syndicate, and provided specific advantages. Thus the Tayiba block inspector arranged for all village council members to visit the cotton ginneries at Meringan so that they could see what happened to their cotton after it was picked, and the request for a school by Tayiba village council was quickly approved.[70]

By 1947, sixty per cent of the Gezira Scheme was covered by village councils. The transformation of gism councils into rural district councils in the same year marked another change in government theory, and a further step away from 'tradition' and towards 'modernity'. Even the territorial conception of history and tradition of gisms was now rejected in favour of a universal, 'modern' institution. The self-governing credentials of rural districts were consciously promoted, with each council given an

---

[69] NRO 1Civsec 57/22/84, BNP Monthly Diaries, June 1945.
[70] NRO 1Civsec 57/22/84, BNP Monthly Diaries, February 1945.

independent budget and considerable financial responsibilities.[71] More radical yet, rural district councils in the Gezira were elected bodies, and the position of sheikh of gism who acted as chairman of the council was transformed into a temporary three-year position.[72] On the understanding that "the permanent appointment of a 'Nazir el Gism' was antithetic to the new organisation of rural district councils," ideas of tribe were relegated to the past, and a future of democratic accountability embraced.[73]

Clearly these distinctions were often academic, and the language of tribe and of modern administration frequently overlapped as in the following description of the Sheikh of Gism of Hosh Council:

> [O]ver and above his duties of *tribal Nazir* [he] was ipso facto a sort
> of *executive official* arranging collection of all Council revenue and
> payment out to the Omdas, Ghaffirs, Schoolmasters etc, their
> monthly pays.[74]

But again the radical nature of the introduction of rural district councils was in fact limited. Based on the existing gism unit, rural district councils continued to be known by the name of gism, and the sheikh, although now on a temporary 'contract' was generally the existing sheikh of gism, and was never appointed from outside the wider body of shiekhs of khut. Moreover the process of electing rural district council members failed to make the council significantly more accountable or representative. By making the block council the electoral college (whose members had themselves been elected by village councils) the result was a wealthy tenant bias, and the maintenance of the status quo by which the administrative elite remained dominant.[75]

This is not to say that it was an entirely static situation, for rural district councils specifically excluded omdas and other local government employees responsible for

---

[71] RHA MSS PERHAM 565/3 ITEM 1, "Survey of Devolution", Bredin, Governor BNP to Perham, March 1948.
[72] Ibid.
[73] NRO 1Civsec 57/22/84, BNP Monthly Diaries, January 1945.
[74] NRO 2BNP 1/1/1, Sharfi, Executive Officer, Hosh Rural Council, to John Phillips, DC South Gezira, 20 December 1951, emphasis added.
[75] RHA MSS PERHAM 565/3 ITEM 1, "Survey of Devolution", Bredin, Governor BNP to Perham, March 1948.

155

executing the decisions made within rural district councils from sitting on those councils. This attempt to separate the legislative from the executive had a significant impact on the membership of gism councils, with the 1947 elections bringing in a large number of "new men who have as yet little experience in local government though many of them have ability."[76] Only four out of 23 members in the new Centre Council were members of the former council, and this represented the general trend of all new councils.[77] Village sheikhs as unpaid members of local government were allowed to become members, and the biggest change was from omda to village sheikh dominance of the council, with over half of new members also being village sheikhs. The significance of these changes were however largely mitigated by the fact that it consistently remained a tenant controlled institution, with all but one of the twenty-two elected council members in both the Centre and Southern Rural District Councils being tenants.[78]

Embracing the structures of conciliar local government, tenants within the Gezira Scheme demonstrated themselves to be modern citizens, comfortable at working with institutional means of governance. The region itself was described as 'advanced' and favourably compared with other neighbouring regions such as Managil district bordering the Gezira Scheme, where "the whole council system is viewed with considerable distrust by local Omdas who are still the only obvious leaders and mouth-pieces of public opinion."[79] The council structures within the Gezira Scheme should not be seen as inclusive institutions. Based primarily upon agricultural units and largely organised by block inspectors, Gezira councils were tenant controlled bodies, and as such were viewed as an important means to advance tenant interests. Familiar with forms of centralised authority through their experience of Scheme management, Gezira inhabitants were able to see the advantages of greater tenant-controlled mediation with those structures. Furthermore, the Scheme had proved (other than during the depression years of the early 1930s) an economic asset for most tenants, and the financial benefits had been reinforced by other government policies that favoured tenants. Tenants thus

---

[76] NRO 2BNP 1/2/9, Innes, DC South Gezira to Bredin, Governor BNP, 3 August 1947.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] NRO 2Civsec 30/7/18, BNP Monthly Diaries, December 1947.

held a generally favourable attitude to government, and welcomed greater interaction as a way to gain government-controlled resources and to consolidate their dominant position within the region.

7

CELEBRATING MODERNITY

In 1950, the management of the Scheme passed from the hands of the Sudan Plantations Syndicate and the Kassala Cotton Company, to the government, who created the Gezira Board to run the Scheme. This process of nationalisation was of course hugely significant at the level of the national economy, however, in terms of the way in which tenants experienced agricultural management there was little overt distinction. Gaitskell, the manager of the Syndicate throughout most of the 1940s, remained as head of the Gezira Board for the first two years of nationalisation, and most field staff also remained.[1] The most significant difference brought by the Gezira Board was the central role played by social development, whereby a percentage of the Scheme's profits were directly ploughed back into social projects within the Scheme.[2] However, identifying the beneficiaries of these developments raised uncomfortable questions. As D. Hawkesworth asked:

> If a percentage of the profits from the Scheme is made available for
> amenities such as Recreation, Welfare, Public Health, Forestry,
> Education, etc, are these amenities to be shared by all persons living
> in the Gezira or are they to be considered primarily as the perquisite
> of the tenants only?[3]

---

[1] Gaitskell, *Gezira*, p. 297.
[2] Ibid., pp. 297-302.
[3] NRO 2BNP 50/2/7, D. Hawkesworth "A Note of the relation between the new Gezira Board and the Local Government Unit of the Gezira area", 12 March 1949.

The reply he received consolidated the dominant and favoured position of tenants within the Scheme more than ever before:

> It is not the duty of the future Gezira management to administer general services for the population within the agricultural boundaries. Its duty is to promote the welfare of the workers, mainly tenants; the welfare of the general population and the concomitant services remain the duty of the government.[4]

As Hawkesworth pointed out, this judgement was morally questionable, for although the Gezira Scheme directly produced much of the national revenue, tenants were already materially better off than most other rural Sudanese populations, who through taxes had also contributed to the development of the Scheme.   Instead, the justification for increased social progress lay partly in fears that a failure to do so would be dangerous:

> The unassailable argument for a heightened rate of social progress in the Gezira lies in the fact that material welfare and economic security have outpaced their human background.   If this background is not made to conform with the material foreground the resultant strains will wreck the Scheme. This is the humane argument from the lowest motive. The higher motives are self-evident.[5]

As Jay O'Brien states; "the decision was made quite explicitly to create an improved position of privilege for the Gezira tenants", in order to meet rising expectations.[6] However, this view was predicated on the idea that tenants were the producers of the wealth that came from the Gezira Scheme. The forgotten population of non-tenants who conducted the majority of the labour on tenancies contributed directly to national wealth, and yet failed to be rewarded with improved social services.   Tenants through their control over tenancies dominated not only the institutions of governance, but also the government's vision of who existed within the Scheme.

---

[4] Ibid., reply by member of the Gezira Board.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Jay O'Brien "The Social Reproduction of Tenant Cultivators" p. 225.

Universal Values

With social development at the fore of Gezira Board policy, there were new fears that too much imposed development would undermine and "swamp" the authority of existing structures of local government and a rapid expansion of local government authorities was deemed necessary.[7] The needs of the Gezira only reflected the general desire to improve and rationalise local government throughout Sudan. For this purpose, A.H. Marshall, the city treasurer for Coventry, was commissioned in 1949 to write a report surveying the structures of local government throughout Sudan and proposing future developments. The choice of Marshall, a man with experience and knowledge of British local government, yet with little understanding of the conditions of Sudan, strikingly illustrates the move towards formal bureaucratic and universally applicable modern structures. His report, which had an enormous impact throughout Sudan, again emphasised the "old tradition of group cohesion and of government by consultation", as the ideal base for "effective local government" and modern democratic procedures.[8] Deploring the way in which tribal hierarchies were still important throughout much of Sudan, he wanted to establish fully independent and corporate local authority bodies, separate from both judicial native authorities and from the centralised *merkaz*.[9] These all-purpose authorities would gradually take over central government duties within the locality, creating a strong elected power base at the local level to insulate society against the convulsions of developing party politics.[10]

The 1951 Local Government Ordinance was a direct step towards the implementation of Marshall's recommendations. It provided for warranted councils that had powers over a wide range of services, maintained an independent budget, and as corporate bodies were

---

[7] RHA MSS PERHAM 543/5, extract from BNP Annual Report 1949.
[8] A.H. Marshall, *Report on Local Government in the Sudan* (Khartoum, 1949), pp. 4-5.
[9] Ibid., 14-15.
[10] Ibid., p. 14.

able to enter into contracts, raise loans, hold land and rent buildings.[11] Within the Gezira, the existing rural district councils were retained, but supervised by a director of local government they were transformed into ever more bureaucratic formal structures. In 1952 regulations for council procedure were issued, outlining rules on matters including the regularity of meetings, the declaration of members' interests and the required conduct of members during the meetings. Agendas and minutes were now essential, and members had to follow strict guidelines when proposing subjects or questions.[12]

Rural district councils were given their own council buildings and independent budgets, and were staffed with elected members. Increasingly they were taking over many of the duties of the district commissioners, including the appointment of omdas and sheikhs within their jurisdiction. Everything pointed towards the growth of power and independence of local authorities. However, although the powers of councils were undoubtedly growing, this came without a corresponding increase in autonomy. Although the district commissioner might have been less directly involved, having given up the chairmanship of the council to the sheikh of gism, the *merkaz* retained a tight control over councils through the figure of the executive officer. With the increasing array of powers and duties held by the local authority, the executive officer of the council existed to put into practice the decisions of the authority, and to carry out the day to day administration of services. He was a Sudanese official, generally seconded from the *merkaz*, with the experience of administration enabling him to organise the business of the authority.

Although the government was convinced of the need for an experienced *merkaz* official to enable the efficient running of local authorities, they were also aware of the tension he presented with the ideal of local autonomy. As the district commissioner Balfour Paul wrote in 1950; "between the Scylla of keeping him [the executive officer] an impotent

---

[11] NRO 2BNP 50/3/9, Gaitskell "Directive on relations between Sudan Gezira Board, field and social development staff and local government in the Gezira", 12 December 1950.
[12] Sudan Survey Department, *Local Government Regulations for Council Procedure* (Khartoum, 1952), p. 9.

servant of his council and the Charybdis of letting him grow into a sub-district commissioner, will lie a channel difficult to navigate."[13] The difficulties in such navigation were brought to the fore within the Halawin Rural Council, which did not get along with the government nominated executive officer, Abdel Moneim Eff. Mohammed Hilmi. Taking into account the officer's background as a war-time Sudan Defence Force officer and subsequently a stores and ordinance clerk, the government starkly defined this conflict as between "a muwallad townee" and the "rustic and Mahdist Halawin".[14] However, although reflecting some continuing differences between urban and rural populations, it was also representative of the resentment towards central intervention by a self-reliant body, used to a largely independent jurisdiction within their own territory. Although the development of local government was partly intended to increase the independence of local communities, the permanent role of the executive officer on Rural Councils frequently brought central government to rural life in a more obtrusive manner than the supposedly direct rule of a District Commissioner in a *merkaz* office many miles away ever did. The close relationship between local government councils and the *merkaz* meant that there was a great danger of seeing them as "nothing more nor less than extensions of the *Merkaz*".[15] Perham certainly took this view when she described local authorities as "really agents of central government, administering regulations on behalf of central government and in collaboration with the staff of the companies".[16]

In 1951, the position of the sheikh of gism was reviewed, as it was found that the increasing role of executive and clerical staff within the council had left the duties and responsibilities of a sheikh of gism "very vague and practically very difficult to define."[17] The best definition that H. Sharfi, the Hosh Council executive officer managed was to describe the sheikh of gism as a "public relations head of the area", and he argued that within the Hosh Gism this role was very poorly done. In light of this

---

[13] NRO 2BNP 1/1/1, Balfour Paul, ADC Hassaheissa to George Sandars, Governor BNP, 8 October 1950.
[14] NRO 2BNP 1/1/1, Balfour Paul to Sanders, 25 October 1950.
[15] NRO 2BNP 1/1/1, Balfour Paul to Sanders, 8 October 1950.
[16] MSS PERHAM 128, "Notes on the Gezira", n.d.
[17] NRO 2BNP 1/1/1, Sharfi, Executive Officer, Hosh Rural Council to Phillips, DC South Gezira, 20 December 1951.

information, Sharfi suggested that the position of Sheikh of Hosh Gism should be abolished, along with its large salary of £E.629, and that only the unpaid position of chairman remain.[18] The Governor of Blue Nile Province, William Luce, agreed, suggesting that the post of sheikh of gism "which was anyway only temporary, has now outlived its usefulness with the growth of conciliar government."[19] He also felt that the combination of the paid role of sheikh of gism, together with chairmanship of the council, as had generally occurred, created a wrong impression, as "the man in the street thinks that they receive their salary as chairman."[20] The theoretical transition from tribal to modern forms of local authority was complete.

To solve this discrepancy, the Sheikhs of Hosh and Medina Gisms were abolished on completion of the holders' present term of office, a situation that the then Sheikh of Medina Gism, Sayyid Ahmed Yusef Algam accepted as a positive move, removing the stigma of "salaried chairman".[21] The positions of Sheikh of Gism for Kamlin and Messellemia Gisms had already lapsed, which left the Halawin Gism as the only area with a sheikh of gism. However, it was decided, that for this area, "which is the most tribal and the most backward in the Gezira and where the Council has made the least progress in public esteem, it is not yet possible to dispense with the post of Nazir el Gism".[22] Thus the government made a direct statement linking tribal structures to 'backwardness' and modern government to progress. While the Gezira had been seen negatively in the past for its lack of tribal cohesion, it was now seen as a beacon of progress, sophistication was applauded, and the formerly favoured Halawin fell from grace.

Councils were ever reminded that the *merkaz* remained the superior authority and the government's impatience with councils that did not conform to expectations of efficiency and procedure was at times demonstrated forcefully. By increasing or reducing the powers of councils or individuals, the government rewarded suitable

---

[18] Ibid.
[19] NRO 2BNP 1/1/1, William Luce, Governor BNP to J.W. Robertson, Civil Secretary, 3 February 1952.
[20] Ibid.
[21] NRO 2BNP 1/1/1, Phillips, DC South Gezira to Luce, Governor BNP, 24 December 1951.

behaviour and punished deviation from the local government ideal. Words like success and failure were distributed on the grounds of established governmental values. The building of schools, the planting of trees and the establishment of savings or 'Better living societies' were all deemed as elements of success while any hint of the elite looking after themselves or allowing villages to remain 'unsanitary' was condemned. Thus the councillors in Northern Rural District Council were praised for their interest in local politics, having "clearly studied the [Marshall] report with care", and for their work in establishing schools and using the profits from animal pounds.[23] In contrast, other councils failing to meet government standards of public service had their powers reduced. That this was an explicit form of punishment was made clear in the case of the suspension of Mohammed Musaad, chairman of the Hassaheissa Rural Council. Irregularities in the gism accounts together with his "stupid behaviour over the vice chairmanship of the Gism Council" led to his suspension from the chairmanship for six months. It was said that "being an MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] had gone to his head, and it is hoped that this punishment will teach him a salutary lesson."[24] Such reduction of powers brought with it a corresponding increase in government power, as demonstrated within Abu Usher, when the village council was suspended in 1951 and was replaced by the lower level council of elders due to continued friction between parties in the village. Along with this degraded status, the community also lost the right to nominate a representative to the block council and to have a agricultural sheikh. Instead the district commissioner and field inspector made the nomination, while the latter regained direct control of all agricultural management.[25] Direct interference remained a powerful threat for all councils, who jealously guarded the powers that councils brought.

---

[22] NRO 2BNP 1/1/1, Luce, Governor BNP to Robertson, Civil Secretary, 3 February 1952.

[23] NRO 2Civsec 30/8/19, BNP Monthly Diaries, September 1949.

[24] NRO 2BNP 1/1/1, H.G Balfour Paul, ADC Hassaheissa to Sandars, Governor BNP 7 February 1950.

[25] NRO 2BNP 50/3/9, Acting Manager, Sudan Gezira Board to Block Inspector Um Degarsi, 11 July 1951.

Forming Councils

Central to these developments in local government were the ideas of electoral representation and citizenship. Seen as essential qualities of a modern state, bringing legitimacy and accountability, citizenship was gained through the active participation of the population in the structures of governance, either through holding a position in those structures, or through voting for others. Once achieved, citizenship provided an individual the attendant rights, protections and duties of state membership.[26] It was now no longer appropriate for the government to appoint members of councils, and at all levels councils were elected by their peers.

Communities within the Gezira embraced the opportunities offered by electoral representation. The benefit of popularly legitimised, rather than government appointed position was high, theoretically quashing opposition to legitimate authority. However, as much as this legitimacy was sought to uphold the position of established holders of government positions, it also provided space for that authority to be legitimately challenged. Factional politics, ever in existence within communities, only grew within a climate that encouraged choice. Wider influences of national politics and 'tribe' became a means of identifying and distinguishing between factions. In reporting on the gism elections in South Gezira in 1947, DC Innes noted that the rivalry between the Ashigga and Umma political parties had been evident in several of the blocks surrounding Wad Medani, with some of the members standing on a central party platform. However, this influence was seen to be limited to those areas with urban influence, while further away from Wad Medani, it was said that "tribal rivalries played a larger part".[27] Similar factional splits were responsible for the sophisticated voting techniques seen in the Medina Gism council elections of 1950, in which there were "two last-minute tactical

---

[26] Sudan Government, *Aspects of local government*, 194-?.
[27] NRO 2BNP 1/2/9, Innes, DC South Gezira to Bredin, Governor BNP, 3 August 1947.

withdrawals of nominations to save splitting the vote."[28]

The popularity of elections among voters and candidates resulted in a strong defence of voting rights. When in 1953 the electoral role was admitted to be inaccurate, a "terrific bombardment of petitions and telegrams" to executive officers and the District Commissioner resulted.[29] However, although the government admitted its mistake, such administrative errors were only one element of the limitations in the 'democratic' procedure which was heavily constrained by the legislation controlling the franchise. Limiting voting rights to persons that were male, over the age of 25 and who fulfilled specific property and residence qualifications meant that voting, and thus full citizenship was a limited privilege.[30] There are no statistics which show the percentage of the population that this provided with the vote. However, it appears to have consolidated the dominant position of tenants, who automatically qualified within the property qualification. As Gaitskell commented "the chief men in [local government] were, of course also tenants."[31] In contrast many labourers, and all women, already marginalised economically were further officially excluded from the affairs of local government; neither permitted to sit on councils, nor to have a say on who did.

On occasions, the opportunity to bring changes at elections was used by Gezira communities, and during the 1953 gism council elections in Messellemia, all seats were contested.[32] However, most elections resulted in substantial continuity and unchanged personnel. In the Hosh Gism elections during 1950, only one previous member was not returned, while in Hassaheissa in 1953, four out of the seven retiring councillors were returned unopposed.[33] That the voting public supported the status quo of long-established families is not to be surprised. Experience and established relationships with British officials were the credentials needed for effective mediation between

---

[28] NRO 2Civsec 30/8/19, BNP Monthly Diaries, June 1950.
[29] NRO 2Civsec 30/1/3, BNP Monthly Diaries, March 1953.
[30] Marshall, *Report on Local Government in the Sudan*, p. 8.
[31] Gaitskell, *Gezira*, p. 227.
[32] NRO 2Civsec 30/1/3, BNP Monthly Diaries, May 1953.
[33] NRO 2Civsec 30/8/19, BNP Monthly Diaries, June 1950, and NRO 2Civsec 30/1/3, BNP Monthly Diaries, May 1953.

communities and the state, allowing communities to gain access to state resources, yet maintain social space away from central interference. Having built up a power base over time, such families were frequently at the centre of all local affairs, political, social and religious, and were thus at the centre of the cultural map of village and district life. To make any significant changes to such an established power base would have involved a degree of social radicalism that did not exist within the Gezira, despite the economic changes brought by the Scheme.

Despite the threat from the government that they would no longer automatically support those they saw as traditional leaders, the most obvious conclusion from looking at the personnel of local government structures in the Gezira, is that there was a large degree of continuity. The same families that had participated in former manifestations of administrative leadership, within courts and native administrations, continued to hold positions and power within the structures of local government and councils. What the government wanted was stability and political moderation, with a new face of open engagement. In the best cases, the established families with whom the government had existing relationships were able to adapt to this new inclusive style of governance. However, others failed to become more open, and such cases were reported negatively, such as the leading family of Shukkaba Shaadeen village. Described as a "feudal" power, the Shaadeen family did "their best to prevent anybody else becoming known to the authorities", and their influence was described as hanging over the village "like a shroud".[34] In contrast, the same inspector noted the separate village of Wad el Nur "fortunately lacks a grand and decent family".[35]

In this environment in which modern skills were celebrated, Sayed Ahmed Yusif Algam was considered by government authorities to be the archetypal new man. Having built up his wealth through taking on additional tenancies while others resigned during the depression years, he was appointed to the post of chairman of a local government council despite the fact he "lacked the social background of a traditional tribal

---

[34] NRO 2BNP 54/5/14, Block Inspector Seed Farm block, "Report on councils", 1 August 1951.
[35] Ibid.

authority."[36] He moved on to become a member of the Tenants' Representative Body, a member of the Advisory Council of Northern Sudan, the chief spokesman for the Gezira within the Legislative Assembly and a member of the first parliament. Wealth and personality were the keys to Yusif Algam's rise to power, and his was one of the most remarkable stories within the Gezira, suggesting the power of wealth in a society that was increasingly economically oriented. With his modern outlook, active and efficient nature and influence over others, Yusif Algam was quickly promoted by government. However, the real key to his success was his ability to combine those qualities of modernity desired by the government, with traditional values. Yusif Algam set himself up as a landed sheikh within the Gezira, embracing the outward trappings of 'tradition', and as such became the ideal sophisticated rural citizen.[37]

Changes were also occurring within the membership of block councils. Although omdas remained the presidents of these councils, the elections for village representatives began to result in personnel other than village sheikhs within block councils. In 1950 the elections within Dolga block

> produced some amazing results and a great deal of dead wood was
> cut off the council. In several cases bad Sheikhs were not elected
> ipso-facto to the block council and in one instance a very young and
> go ahead non-tenant was elected.[38]

"How the mighty are fallen" was how the field inspector of Tebub block reported the fact that only two out the five village council presidents were elected to the block council.[39] However, the changes were rarely ideologically significant, and if village sheikhs were not appointed then it tended to be a member of the sheikhs family that was.[40] Moreover, with only one non-tenant elected to a block council, the general rule of tenant-domination of council institutions was proved.

---

[36] Gaitskell, *Gezira* p. 303.
[37] NRO 2BNP 1/1/1, Phillips, DC South Gezira to Luce, Governor BNP, 24 December 1951.
[38] NRO 2BNP 50/3/9, G.B. Tame, Block Inspector, Dolga block, "Report on Block Council", 17 June 1950.
[39] NRO 2BNP 50/3/9, J. Steed, Block Inspector Tebub block, "Report on Village Councils" 21 June 1950.
[40] Ibid.

Thus although there was limited opportunity for new men, the vast majority still came from the standard channels of wealthy established families. For instance, Sheikh Hassan Abdel Galil was born into the wealthy Abdel Galil family, landowners of the large village of the same name, and from which the block took its name. His father was an omda at the beginning of the Condominium, and he himself took over that position in the 1930s. As an omda Sheikh Hassan was chairman of the local village court, and member of the larger sheikh's court. He became active in the block councils when they were established in the 1940s, and by 1952 he was chairman of the rural district council.[41] Although it is difficult to ascertain, it is probable that the shift described by field staff in terms of "youth coming to the helm" only reflected a generational rather than a more fundamental social change in membership.[42] Members remained wealthy and influential individuals, and importantly, both to government and to Gezira communities who wished to use these structures, were willing to work through government institutions and had the required skills that combined a modern education with an intimate understanding of Gezira rural life.

Although rural district councils as the working units of local government administration had received due attention and review through the Marshall report, the smaller units of village and block councils were still subject to an ill-defined status. Needing a specific Gezira study to coordinate the activities of the unique village and block councils with the other forms of local government, a commission was appointed to "review the work of Omodia and Village Councils in the Gezira and its coordination with activities of Local Government Authorities and of the Sudan Gezira Board". Sitting on fourteen meetings between March and June 1950, the commission included central government officials, agricultural field staff, and members of each local government authority or district council.[43]

---

[41] SAD 428/3/108-147, G.M. Culwick, Letters, series 2, 1 November 1952. Also see NRO 2BNP 25/3/7, El Gezira, 13 March 1951.

[42] NRO 2BNP 54/5/14, H.B. Collett, Block Inspector, A'Galil block, "General Report", 22 June 1954.

[43] Gezira Board Archive, Barakat, SPS files, General no. 7. "Commission to review the work on Omodia and Village Councils", 1950.

The commission concluded that "the past policy of encouraging local self management and initiative in the agricultural and social fields by the use of village and Omodia councils was right".[44] However, it also highlighted many concerns and emphasised the need for regularisation of councils "to conform with a more formalised system of local government."[45] Undefined powers, lack of revenue and ineffectual ties with existing local government authorities were all cited as reasons for the failure of village councils to fulfil the objects required of them. However, despite these evident faults, the Commission was strongly in favour of increased delegation to village councils as the front line of community development throughout the Gezira. Opposed to this decision were the majority of field inspectors, who believed that the omodia or block councils were far more efficient than village councils, stating that "they had had more attention from the block inspector, and so worked better."[46] The Commission caustically concluded that "there were other considerations at stake, i.e. the development of responsibility and self-management at the lowest level."[47] The value of block councils was also accepted, however, it was decided that as increasing their jurisdiction would create conflict with the autonomy of village councils, they should continue in their solely mediating and advisory role.

Following these recommendations, village councils increasingly became agents of local government, directly under the jurisdiction of gism or rural district councils. By November 1950, Kamlin Rural District Council delegated the responsibility for maintaining village schools and halls to village councils, with the normal upkeep grant transferred to village councils.[48] Furthermore, the government ordered that the greatest part of the assessed value of animal pounds in a village should be retained by the village council in cases where one existed, but otherwise the full value should go to the gism chest. The object of this system was two-fold; encouraging the establishment of village

---

[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] NRO 2Civsec 30/8/19, BNP Monthly Diaries, November 1950.

councils where they did not yet exist, and making apparent the authority of gism councils over the sources of local revenue.[49]

Mediation in a Modern World

In the context of continuing government influence, councils and local government authorities, while valued by communities, were viewed as government institutions, and were treated accordingly. Viewed as a link with government rather than independent community agencies, they were only used for a small range of processes, directly related to government, in particular gaining access to some of the resources offered in the Gezira Board's social development programs. By participating in a system that the government was actively encouraging, communities gained government support and specific benefits. Some of these benefits were financial, such as the animal pound funds, some were social such as the possibility of gaining schools or clinics, and others were less tangible such as increasing the influence of communities. Villages responded to the call for councils, and Hemsely, the field inspector of Istrahna block reported that "every village, large and small is keen to start a council."[50] Even those communities that had been formerly divided were able to recognise the potential of these advantages, and it was reported in 1950, that after years of factional wrangling the opposing parties within Baseer village had "at last decided to bury the hatchet and petitioned the block council at the last meeting to help them form a council in the coming season."[51]

However, there were clear distinctions between those government projects that were welcomed by councils and those that were not. Village halls, schools and training farms were all embraced, while the attempt to expand recreation facilities and improve

---

[49] NRO 2BNP 50/3/9, Balfour Paul, ADC Hassaheissa to Sanders, Governor BNP, 16 February 1950.
[50] NRO 2BNP 50/3/9, F.H.C. Hemsely, Block Inspector Istrahna block, "Report on Village Councils", 16 June 1950.
[51] NRO 2BNP 50/3/9, G.B. Tame, Block Inspector Dolga Block "Report on Village Councils", 17 June 1950.

sanitation, were largely rejected. A clear distinction was thus made between the legitimate and illegitimate concerns for councils and local government.[52] As a frustrated Gaitskell stated:

> Broadly speaking, the people were uninterested in the more educative elements in our proposals and in the local build-up on which we set great store, but supporters of items which affected their own finances.[53]

As gatekeepers between communities and the central state, councils acted as much to keep out unwelcome state interference as to provide a channel for that interference. Councils expressly limited themselves to the spheres of governmental and agricultural administration, and were not seen as suitable structures to air general community tensions, to mediate in internal community disputes, or express deep-seated discontent. All those needs were met through other structures and means.

However, in acting on 'legitimate' issues, councils responded enthusiastically, and attempted to gain greater independence from the state. The existence of block council machinery provided the opportunity for the Istrahna block council to request that it should be fully responsible for preventing animal damage to cotton, and that the police should not be involved. It justified such independence saying that they were in a much better position than the police to know what animals were trespassing.[54] As well as practical benefits, this responsibility brought with it considerable rewards of extended influence and prestige throughout the area. The government wishing to encourage 'positive', community oriented behaviour stated, "In the past cooperation by Local Authorities has not been good and the Istarahna suggestion is obviously one in the right direction."[55] The message was clear, cooperation with the government policy of establishing councils and the trappings of community democracy brought significant rewards.

---

[52] SAD 725/3/26-50, South Gezira District Annual Report, 1950-51.
[53] Gaitskell, *Gezira*, p. 300.
[54] NRO 2Civsec 30/7/18, BNP Monthly Diaries, January 1946.
[55] Ibid.

By the nature of their control over issues including business licences and the distribution of tenancies, councils were powerful bodies that became a focus of local politics. Positions on councils were popular, bringing as they did prestige, influence and opportunities. The field inspector of Wad Sulfab block outlined the attitude of people to councils when he stated that "in most villages people are very keen to have the honour of being council members without making much consideration for the responsibilities imposed on them by such positions."[56] Membership was also seen as a valuable way for small factions to gain an official voice and for established leaders to be challenged. During one such incident, the sheikh of Hag Abdulla Khut, Fahal Ibrahim was suspended from his position as sheikh of khut pending investigation into petitions against him. This suspension provided fertile ground for an eruption of local politics in which an "intensive propaganda campaign" was waged by both his supporters among whom were the majority of Hag Abdulla merchants, and his opponents, including both the omda of Hag Abdulla and the sheikh of gism.[57] Similarly, the opportunity to elect the sheikh of the Centre Rural District Council led to "a good deal of legitimate jockeying for position and support among persons who fancied themselves for the post", although in the end, only two candidates including the retiring sheikh of gism were nominated.[58]

As institutions dominated by tenants, councils were important bodies for the facilitation of discussion on matters of tenant concern. As such they proved to be of significant value in coordinating a Gezira-wide policy against 'Westerners'. West Africans and Western Sudanese formed a major part of the immigrant labouring force on which all tenants depended to help with the weeding and picking of the cotton crop. Although dependent, Gezira tenants increasingly came to resent Westerners for their labour monopoly which was carefully managed by Western sheikhs, and for their control of tenancies within the Scheme. Many Westerners took the opportunity of the 1930s

---

[56] NRO 2BNP 54/5/14, D. Tarbet, Block Inspector Wad Sulfab Block, "Report on Councils" 1951.
[57] 2Civsec 30/7/18, BNP Monthly Diaries, October 1947.
[58] 2Civsec 30/7/18, BNP Monthly Diaries, December 1947.

depression to become tenants by taking over the hoshas vacated by existing Gezira tenants. With profits rising steadily from the late 1930s, these Western tenants became increasingly resented. Councils, along with newspapers were the major vents for these frustrations. In March 1945, the two Gezira councils of South Gezira unanimously passed a resolution recommending that all Westerners who had more than three previous convictions for crimes of theft and violence should be repatriated.[59] By April 1949, rural district councils were expressing concern that Westerners might obtain political representation in the forthcoming gism elections.[60] Although the democratic processes of local government had been seized with avidity when seen as an opportunity to advance their own powers, the attempt by Westerners to do the same was met with strong opposition. At a higher level, elected Gezira representatives were able to use their influence for the benefit of tenants during the discussion on the Gezira Scheme Bill in the Legislative Assembly; as a result the bill was considerably altered to meet the wishes of Gezira tenants.[61]

Councils quickly become part of the local apparatus of community governance to be defended. In 1953, Sheikh Mohammed Abdulla el Wali wrote to the newspaper *El Gezira*, complaining about what he described as the increasing tendency of the Gezira Board to issue disciplinary action against tenants without consultation with village councils:

> It was the practice during the last years of the Syndicate that no
> punishment was inflicted upon a tenant before he was brought before
> his village council and given the chance to defend himself. But this
> practice is being abandoned nowadays.[62]

Despite a denial from the Gezira Board, it was admitted that while consultation did take place, the Board retained control over the ultimate decision. Sheikh el Wali immediately struck back not only defending what were considered council prerogatives, but calling

---

[59] NRO 1Civsec 57/22/84, BNP Monthly Diaries, March 1945.
[60] NRO 2Civsec 30/8/19, BNP Monthly Diaries, April 1949.
[61] Sudan government, *The Executive Council and Legislative Assembly: How it works? How it can Develop? Is it Democratic?* (Khartoum, 1950), p. 5.
[62] NRO 2BNP 25/3/7, *El Gezira*, 15 July 1953.

for an extension of council powers, for as he succinctly stated "what is the use of the consultation that can be ignored?"[63]

However, while councils might strain at the bonds of central control, the government had a distinct preference for those bodies that it had greatest control over. In contrast with the block council that was directly chaired by field inspectors, the village councils within a block were more distantly supervised and the attitude held towards them frequently negative. G.B.Tame, block inspector of Dolga block wrote directly to the Commission reviewing block and village councils in 1950, expressing his conviction "that undue encouragement of village councils and their direct access to Gism Councils might lead to the establishment of many little 'Tammany Halls'." He went on to state:

> I cannot express too strongly my firm conviction that block councils should be used as a media for extracting, discussing, filtering and forwarding both observations, views and information to the Gism council. In many cases village councils are a collection of opportunists. For want of a better term block councils might be considered as a local brains trust.[64]

The Commission itself recognised that "the Omodia council is at present and probably always will be, a more alive and capable body than the village council. This is because it has the benefit of the personal interest and inspiration of the block inspector."[65]

Part of the problem was perceived to be a lack of definition of village council duties, and field inspectors complained of

> the plain fact that nobody has any clear conception of what is required of village councils... The old authoritative system vested in sheikhs, omdas, Nazirs etc,. has been broken down or discredited and nothing but an ill defined paper administration set up in their stead.[66]

---

[63] NRO 2BNP 25/3/7, *El Gezira*, 1 September 1953.

[64] NRO 2BNP 50/3/9, Tame, Block Inspector Dolga Block to Commission of review of block and village councils, 12 April 1950.

[65] NRO 2BNP 50/3/9, Gaitskell "Directive on relations between Sudan Gezira Board, field and social development staff and local government in the Gezira", 12 December 1950.

[66] NRO 2BNP 54/5/14, Block Inspector Feteis Block, "Report on Councils" 30 June 1951.

Although this was a highly exaggerated view of events, this lack of definition was held responsible for the 'apathetic' mind set of many councils. As the field inspector of Nueila Block outlined, "Most councils having applied for a village Hall, School, fruit garden etc and finding that they have to wait their turn are wondering what else there is to do"[67] For the field inspector of Feteis Block, the problem went deeper, suggesting that "Intricate conciliar systems with their still more intricate voting and nomination arrangements only serve to confuse the local inhabitants, break down old loyalties, and exacerbate family and tribal feelings."[68] The village, once seen as the only honest political unit, was easily demonised once it started flexing its muscles.

Block inspectors turned to block councils as the primary vehicles through which to work through. With "the cream of the villages in them", and themselves as chairmen, block councils were seen as enthusiastic, knowledgeable and active bodies.[69] However, although willing, their lack of statutory executive powers placed tight limitations upon these councils, against which they strained. Tensions rose over the inability of block councils to effect decisions made, such as case in which Kumor Block Council had requested permission to build a flour mill in 1947, and was still waiting for the response in 1951.[70] In attempting to cope with the frustrations arising from their limited power and in determination to achieve practical results, there were attempts to use block councils as an executive instrument in local government affairs. Dolga Block Council in particular "at times due to overkeeness [sic] dealt with matters which were really the Gism Council's job".[71] The council was told that such contestation of the gism council's authority was not permissible and that the gism council was the only council with 'sulta' in the area.[72] To which rebuke the block council replied that it "had dealt with village councils and local affairs for some years past in a quicker and more efficient

[67] NRO 2BNP 54/5/14, Block Inspector Nueila Block, "Report on Councils" 30 June 1950.

[68] NRO 2BNP 54/5/14, Block Inspector Feteis Block, "Report on Councils" 30 January 1951.

[69] Gezira Board Archive, Barakat, SPS files, General no. 7. "Commission to review the work on Omodia and Village Councils", 1950.

[70] NRO 2BNP 54/5/14, D. Martin, Block Inspector Kumor block, "Report on Councils" 1951.

[71] NRO 2BNP 50/3/9, Tame, Block Inspector Dolga Block "Report on Dolga Block council", 17 June 1950.

[72] NRO 2BNP 50/3/9, Dolga Block Council meeting, 17 January 1950.

manner than the Khut or Gism councils had yet done."[73] The spectre of custom was once again raised. However, this was a different world from that of the 1920s, in which rules and legislation not 'traditional' authority reigned supreme, and Dolga Block Council was forced to abide by the authority of the gism and to make changes through recommendations to and electoral representation upon the higher council.

This degree of central control meant that councils failed to be political bodies, and could not oppose the government in any meaningful manner. Using councils to engage with the issue of Westerners worked because the government was itself ambivalent on the immigration issue, and shared generalised preconceptions about the West African workforce.[74] However, as 'extensions of the *merkaz*', councils were not able to challenge the government's management of the Scheme, and in particular were not able to channel the increasing tensions that were a reaction to the economic control of firstly the Syndicate and later the Gezira Board. Thus despite the potential of council infrastructure to mediate and ease tensions, councils played no part in the 1946 tenant strike, either in organisation or in mediation. Attempts to use councils for more radical means notably failed. El Amin Mohammed el Amin, the founder of the Tenants' Union in 1953, had previously been a member of Hasaheissa Rural District Council, but found council structures unsuited for his direct challenges to the practices of the Syndicate and Gezira Board.[75] Similarly, a "very extreme left party, led by Mousa Ahmed el Treifi, of 1946 Tenants' Strike notoriety on the other" attempted to engage with public resentment towards agricultural policy within Medina Village Council, but faced consistent government opposition and failed to effectively mediate with the government on this issue.[76] Other bodies would have to be found for such oppositional challenges.

---

[73] NRO 2BNP 50/3/9, Tame, Block Inspector Dolga Block "Report on Dolga block council", 17 June 1950.
[74] Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers*, p. 68.
[75] The memoirs of Yusef Mustafa, former secretary of the Tenants' Union. (Private unpublished manuscript, translated by Deina Idris).
[76] NRO 2BNP 54/5/14, W.C. Jamieson, Block Inspector Medina, "Report on Councils", 30 January 1951

Continuity within Change

Across the Gezira Scheme, a gradual transformation had occurred. From a situation in which unelected native administrations acted informally to administer aspects of local government, there developed elected corporate bodies fully responsible for all aspects of local government. On a superficial level the creation of council structures, with their associated democracy, bureaucracy and legislation were significant changes. However, while these changes introduced new bureaucratic methods of working and communication, there was no radical departure from the past. The strong strands of continuity in local structures of authority suggest that the abrupt changes in central policy noted by, among others Khalaf – who identifies significant political results from the change from policies of 'indirect rule' to that of 'local government' – had less local impact than imagined, and the changes made were easily absorbed into and by existing authorities.[77] For instance the political move away from tribal policies was largely insignificant in an area in which tribal hierarchies had been exaggerated. Government administrative policies throughout the Condominium relied upon maintaining stability, and thus frequently only formalised rather than changed the largely non-tribal social and economic village-based hierarchy that had previously existed. The continuing autocracy that existed within some councils demonstrated that leaders could apply the outward appearance of community politics in order to benefit from the new structures of power and maintain the status quo. Sheikh Gorashi of Sheikh Gorashi Village Council in Tayiba Block manipulated council infrastructure and government attitudes to councils in just this manner. As the block inspector reported:

> All matters are subordinated to the ruling of the Holy Sheikh Taib
> Sheikh Gorashi as might be expected. However, it is an achievement
> and a sign of the times that such a thing as a village council has even

---

[77] Khalaf, "British Policy", Chapter five.

been allowed to function even though it is rather more of a debating society than a village council.[78]

Councils rarely transformed communities, but were instead an accurate reflection of past community relationships. Where consensual and community based apparatus had existed in an informal manner prior to the development of local government machinery, it continued to do so. Indeed, by highlighting the importance of councils, it is easy to ignore the degree to which 'council business' had always been managed by communities. The building of wells and schools, basic administration, public health measures and all other features of 'local government' had been done conducted locally throughout the condominium, sometimes by individuals, sometimes by informal community councils. In 1937, before village councils had been considered, the village of Wali in the Halawin Khut forwarded a request for government assistance after their well had fallen in. The petition stated that although they were prepared to pay all expenses, that as tenants they had no time to do the work themselves.[79] The government agreed to this request, and the work was carried out. The whole process suggests that community discussion, agreement, interaction with government and a successful outcome could be undertaken without the machinery of village councils. Neither were communities' slaves to council structures once they were in place, and older forms of community representation or action could frequently be turned to. Thus the village of Rof, described as a united community that entered into the fields of social development enthusiastically, felt hampered by the slowness of local government machinery, and so raised LE.300 themselves to build a village hall and social club.[80]

At the same time as reinforcing the dominant position of families willing to undergo a superficial transformation, the effect of creating councils within the Gezira was to reinforce and formalise the dominant position of the Scheme within the region. The reorganisation of administrative boundaries to correlate with agricultural boundaries,

---

[78] NRO 2BNP 50/3/9, Tame, Block Inspector Dolga Block "Report on village councils in Dolga Block", 17 June 1950.
[79] NRO 1Civsec 57/4/18, BNP Monthly Diaries, October 1937.
[80] NRO 2BNP 54/5/14, Block Inspector, Remeitab block, "General Report", 30 June 1950.

and the use of field inspectors as local council chairmen and supervisors meant that the cotton Scheme became the controlling feature of government-sanctioned authority in the region. This agricultural focus resulted in the political as well as social and economic dominance of tenants, who effectively formed a tenant-based citizenry. However, despite the language of devolution, bureaucratic council structures tended to increase the presence of the government within Gezira communities. With increased regulation and with *merkaz*-trained executive officers, councils became increasingly accountable to not only their electorate, but also to the government. Familiar with the centralised authority of the agricultural management, local government councils were accepted with avidity by communities, but they were used selectively. Seen as a valuable channel of mediation with the government, councils were notably used to access government-controlled resources, and could be also be used to effectively limit government interference within the community. Councils also had their limitations, and in particular were unable to channel any opposition to the centralised management of the Scheme. The late 1940s and early 1950s was thus a period in which tenants themselves experimented with institutions through which they attempted to gain increasing control over the management of the Scheme.

8

TENANT ASPIRATIONS

The centrality of the Scheme within the Gezira region has led commentators to concentrate on its economic impact. The economically defining nature of the term 'tenant' means that tenants have not only been the focus of attention, but have often been viewed as a homogenous group, both by Condominium officials and subsequent historians. In particular, potential lines of conflict between tenants and the dominant partners of Syndicate and government, and between tenants and the additional wage-earning labour force have been highlighted, and the degree to which tenants were exploited or exploitative has remained a central question. Salih Abdalla al-Arifi has described the Gezira tenant as "only a supervisor for agricultural operations", choosing to manage the agricultural production of his tenancy through the labour of others.[1] This conception of a 'landlord' mentality traces the aspiration of tenants to hire labour to a heritage of unequal access to resources whereby economic elites were able to pass the burden of physical labour to others through the economic systems of slavery, wage employment or subletting arrangements. As McLoughlin has stated:

> As incomes have risen it has become increasingly possible to finance
> those social activities, those aspects of ostentation and conspicuous
> consumption which the (pre-Scheme and) present culture considers
> intrinsic to self-esteem and social advancement. The most desired

---

[1] Salih Abdalla al-Arifi, "Landlordism among small farmers the case of the Gezira Tenant in the Sudan", *Sudan Journal of Economic and Social Studies*, 1, 2, (1975), pp. 10-14 at p. 13.

ingredient in this ambition pattern, now as in the past, is relief from manual agricultural labour.[2]

In contrast, Barnett, Bernal and Founou-Tchuigoua have emphasised the controlling and exploitative nature of the Scheme structure, in which tenants gained an income that was not dissimilar to a wage.[3] The Scheme was indeed highly controlled, and the lack of choice relating to farming methods together with close supervision by the field inspectors lent itself to images of factory production. This idea was already current during the Condominium, and in 1948, G. Bacon, the inspector of agriculture within Blue Nile Province suggested that the government "must cease to think of him [the tenant] as a rustic satisfied in watching the crops grow, and must regard him as a factory worker and plan his diversions accordingly."[4] However this view emphasises the controlling and alien nature of the Scheme at the expense of the independence that many tenants were able to demonstrate as the employers of the largest regional agricultural workforce in Sudan. More importantly, this view contradicts the self-image of tenants, who did not see themselves as employees, and who valued tenancies for the economic independence and enhanced 'landlord' status they brought.[5]

A balance is brought to this debate, if while accepting that all tenants shared the aspiration of acting as landlords or managers of their tenancy, it is recognised that not all tenants were able to achieve this outcome. By identifying three main economic groups of tenants, O'Brien demonstrates the fact that the Scheme, despite original intentions of creating a single 'peasant-cultivator class', actually replicated pre-existing wealth inequalities.[6] Thus large land-holding tenants were able to access several tenancies, had the capital and background to invest in non-agricultural economic concerns and were

---

[2] Peter McLoughlin, "Economic Development and the Heritage of Slavery in the Sudan Republic", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 32, 4, (1962), pp. 355-391, at p. 378.

[3] Barnett, *Illusion of Development*, pp. 179-180; Bernal, "Colonial Moral Economy"; Founou-Tchuigoua, "De-facto Wage Earners in the Gezira", *African Development*, 3, 1, (1978), pp. 25-50.

[4] NRO 2BNP 50/2/7, G.H. Bacon, Inspector of Agriculture BNP, "Future of the Gezira Scheme", 25 February 1948.

[5] McLoughlin, "Economic Development".

[6] O'Brien, "Social Reproduction", pp. 234-236.

able to hire labour and even managers to run a tenancy.[7] At the other end of the scale were the tenants without access to external resources, who relied heavily upon their own labour to manage agricultural production.[8] As the numbers of half-tenancies rapidly increased from the late 1940s, the ability for all tenants to achieve the established cultural aspirations of wealth and landlordism became increasingly difficult.[9]

O'Brien's work is important in understanding the differences of experience throughout the Gezira Scheme. However, all these works fail to go beyond the descriptive nature of the economic role of tenants in agricultural production. Just as important was the way in which tenants responded 'politically' to the new conditions of the Scheme. Using bureaucratic institutions to engage with the Syndicate and the government, tenants rejected the symbols of tradition so commonly used by other rural groups. Tenant institutions were used to articulate the aspirations of all tenants, which increasingly became couched in a language of 'rights', and were crucial in forming a tenant interest group centred on a common idea of a tenant citizenry. The differences between tenants were notably played out in the conflicts between the established Tenants' Association and the emerging and more radical Tenants' Union. However, behind this conflict lay almost identical aspirations based upon the 'right' to continued individual accumulation, and the ability to act as 'landlord' that such accumulation represented. Tenants also used the range of tenant dominated bureaucratic institutions of governance already existing within the Gezira, to push forward the idea of an elite tenant citizenry, which was articulated against the non-tenant population in general through an economic elitism, and against the non-Arab population in particular, in a movement that brought Sudanese nationalistic attitudes into the specific Gezira Scheme context.

---

[7] Ibid., pp. 234-235.
[8] Ibid., p. 236.

Achieving Tenant Aspirations

Despite the simplistic portrayal of the region by early Condominium writers, the Gezira in common with most northern riverain Sudan had long been a highly sophisticated area with flourishing trade and agricultural production. It was also a heavily differentiated society, with a hierarchy reflecting unequal access to economic resources. The Gezira elite were closely associated with monetary wealth, and this wealth was demonstrated in the ownership of land and *rentier* lifestyle. As McCloughlin has stated:

> Riverain landowners, and commercial, religious, and political leaders have supported over a long period a class structure based on various forms of slave, serf, and bound tenantry workers. Agriculture as such is honourable, but to perform farm labour is not. Traditionally, to own land was a prerequisite to independence, integrity, and social citizenship. To perform menial labour on it precluded all three.[10]

If as Vaughan suggests, chiefs (or sheikhs) 'embodied local aspirations and communal ideals' then the wealth of a community leader in the Gezira region of Sudan represented the ideal and aspiration of wealth accumulation of Gezira communities.[11] Control of labour was a central requirement of this cultural ideal, for as McCloughlin expanded; "the number of workers he [the landowner] can hire, is *per se*, an indication of his importance".[12] This control was managed throughout the nineteenth century through the ownership of slaves, the use of managerial *wakils* and the "exploitation" of "free peasants by using a precolonial system known as *shayl* (credit) to extend their influence over a community of indebted cultivators".[13]

---

[9] Geraldine Culwick, "A Study of the Human Factor in the Gezira Scheme", (Barakat, 1975) pp. 46-48.

[10] McLoughlin, "Economic Development", p. 358.

[11] Olufemi Vaughan, *Nigerian Chiefs: Traditional Power in Modern Politics, 1890s-1990s*, (Rochester, NY., 2000), p. 15.

[12] McLoughlin, "Economic Development", p. 380.

[13] Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers*, p. 19; Awad, "The Evolution of Landownership in the Sudan", p. 220; Spaulding, "Slavery, Land Tenure and Social Class", pp. 8-13; O'Brien, "The Formation of the Agricultural Labour Force in Sudan", *Review of African Political Economy*, 26, (1983), pp. 15-34, at p. 17.

This historical aversion to manual labour remained a strong motivation during the Condominium. Hiring of labour was a common practice among those who owned land, but finding labourers was frequently difficult, especially in times of good rains, when grain was plentiful and there was "no particular inducement to work".[14] Labour had no intrinsic value in and of itself, and was thus to be avoided save to gain essential commodities. This attitude towards manual labour was heavily criticised by British officials, who saw it as a moral failing. Province Governor Dickenson fairly celebrated the arrival of a year of bad rains in 1905, which drove people to "forget the supposed indignity, of personal work", despite the fact that "in many cases they [*saqias*] had to be abandoned, owing to the damage caused by locusts, and to the inability of the people to feed themselves until they could reap a crop".[15] The point was in Dickenson's eyes, not that the attempt failed, "but the endeavour to work them was made, which is an encouraging feature of the situation."[16] However, manual labour remained associated with low status, and attempts to erode the landowning elites control over labour were deeply resented. The Annual General Reports noted such discontent in relation to the expected clamp-down on slavery within Sudan:

> It is no longer possible to ignore the fact that there is a strong feeling of discontent among the Arabs directed at the loss of their Sudanese servants. This undoubtedly hits them very hard, as, apart from domestic discomfort, it greatly reduces the area which they can bring under cultivation... Any feeling which may exist against the government, where it is not inspired by mere religious fanaticism is due to this cause more than to any other.[17]

Historically only a small percentage of the population had been in the position to hire labour and accumulate individual wealth, but it was that small elite that defined the cultural values and aspirations of the wider population. Generally unachievable, the majority of the population sought to replicate those values to the greatest extent possible,

---

[14] *SGR* 1905, p. 25.
[15] Ibid., p. 25.
[16] Ibid. p. 25.
[17] *SGR* 1908, pp. 487-8.

185

through limiting their work time when good crop yields allowed. To this end, Gezira farmers adopted a flexible economy in which river and rainland agriculture, animal husbandry and trade allowed families to spread their interests.[18] Thus in years of good rains, the less intensive work of rain-land agriculture was preferred to that of the highly labour-intensive river bank *saqia* cultivation.[19] Inhabitants, familiar with economic risk assessment evaluated the economic benefits of government-sponsored ventures, such as loans for *saqia* irrigation infrastructure, according to calculations regarding the relative balance between labour time and cost, and overall profit.[20]

These were not inherently conservative calculations demonstrating a distrust of new opportunities, for as Berry has argued, African farmers generally demonstrated "eagerness to improve their access to market opportunities."[21] However, change had to prove beneficial to farmers' financial or lifestyle interests, and it was the absence of guaranteed benefits that meant that Gezira farmers were unwilling to grow the Egyptian cotton promoted by the British on their non-irrigated rainlands. Considerable local interest had been demonstrated in the early cotton experiments, but despite enthusiasm for the finished product with its longer staple, the yields were too unpredictable for it to become a regular crop. As the government acknowledged, the unwillingness to grow long-staple cotton was quite reasonable:

> As it can at present only be grown on sakia [sic] land, and as it is a crop that occupies the ground for at least eight months in the year, provides nothing in the way of forage for cattle, and brings in an insignificant return at the rates offered by the large cotton brokers, the native naturally does not see the advantage of growing it.[22]

In the face of these economic disadvantages, Gezira tenants continually demonstrated a preference for the short-staple Egyptian varieties that grew more successfully in the dry climate.

---

[18] John Randell, "El Gedid – A Blue Nile Gezira Village", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 39, (1958) pp. 25-39, at p. 30.

[19] *SGR* 1904, p. 46.

[20] Ibid., p. 46.

[21] Berry, *No Condition is Permanent*, p. 44.

[22] *SGR* 1904, p. 52 and *SGR* 1906, p. 591.

If these early attempts to encourage high quality rainland cotton by the general population failed, then they were not the last. The potential of the fertile Gezira region had been recognised from the first years of the Condominium, with experiments conducted in general vegetable crops, as well as the cash crops of sugar cane and groundnuts.[23] However, it was the engineering possibilities of large-scale irrigation, together with the powerful backing of the cotton lobby that came together to cement the future of the Gezira Scheme as a centre of cotton production.[24] From 1911, a concerted policy of encouraging cotton growing under irrigated conditions began. In marking this new era of cotton specialisation, the generalist government experimental farm at Kamlin, was closed, and a new experimental farm run by the Sudan Plantations Syndicate was opened at Tayiba, focusing solely on growing irrigated cotton.

Using pump irrigation, the Tayiba station started growing cotton on 3,000 feddans in 1911. The Syndicate used paid labour to farm most of this area, but experiments were also made with tenant farming on nearly 600 feddans.[25] Tenancies were rented out annually for five piastres per feddan, under a tenancy agreement taken directly from the existing Syndicate's concern at Zeidab in Northern Province, giving each tenant the full profit return from the crops grown. It was hoped that local cultivators would take up these tenancies, but none did so, showing caution towards the new enterprise. Instead tenants were brought to Tayiba from Zeidab, while the local inhabitants "preferred to wait and see the result of the first year's working before taking a share in the concern themselves."[26] After viewing the high profits of 1911, Gezira inhabitants were convinced of the economic benefits brought by tenancies, and 1912 saw a rush of applications. With only nineteen tenancies available locally, the competition was fierce

---

[23] *SGR* 1904, p. 52 and SGR 1908, p. 494.
[24] Gaitskell, *Gezira,* chapter 2.
[25] *SGR* 1911.
[26] Ibid., p. 39.

and applicants came "depositing their money, and sometimes their women's jewellery, on application, as proof of their anxiety to become tenants."[27]

Challenging Big Business

A combination of poor rainland harvests and evidence of high profits and yields within the pilot Scheme convinced many local farmers of the benefits of becoming Scheme tenants. The profits gained from the sale of cotton allowed existing tenants to hire labour and act as managers of the plots they rented.[28] Viewed as a route to the fulfilment of existing aspirations, the experimental tenancies were embraced as a method of enhancing an individual's position. However, this acceptance of the tenancy system was predicated upon a careful analysis of costs and benefits which had proved to work in the tenants favour, and did not reflect the power of the government to coerce inhabitants into a new economic relationship. The economic motivations of tenants were demonstrated forcibly in 1913, when tenants refused to accept changes in the tenancy agreement. A third of the way through the 1913 season, the Syndicate announced a new profit-sharing arrangement, which provided the tenant with a 40% share of the overall cotton profits instead of the previous annual rent paying agreement. With estimates predicting a 70% decrease in tenants' profits through this arrangement, many tenants refused to accept the new profit sharing system.[29] In demonstrating their discontent, the tenants turned to the government, and presented a petition to Dickenson, the Governor of the province. Signed by over fifty tenants, the petition signalled the tenants' rejection of the new conditions, which failed to allow tenants to realise the aspirations they had been led to believe were possible. As Dickenson stated:

> [T]he very large majority have expressed a wish to give up their
> holdings, and ask for compensation for their out-of-pocket expenses and

---

[27] *SGR* 1912, p. 45.
[28] Ibid., p. 45.
[29] SAD 109/11/61, Wingate Papers, "The refusal of Tayiba tenants to accept the terms of the new conditions" 1913.

188

profitless labour on which they have been engaged for the last four or
five months, during which time they might have been working on their
own sakias or preparing or sowing their rain-land.[30]

The petition aroused sympathy from provincial government personnel, already
aggrieved that agricultural development was no longer under the control of the
government. Dickenson was able to persuade the Syndicate to offer compensation to
those tenants who wished to leave their tenancies and afraid of losing confidence and
faith among Sudanese population the Syndicate agreed.[31] However, the inability of the
government to make independent political decisions was already clearly apparent.
Committed to a policy of major investment in irrigated cotton, the government was
reliant on the Syndicate to bring both capital and management expertise into the
Scheme, and was also circumscribed by the necessity of making the Gezira Scheme a
profitable venture. Under these conditions it was essential to transform the tenancy
agreement to one more favourable to the Syndicate and government, and thus the
government could offer no more than compensation and platitudes of good will. Despite
being the primary recourse for tenants wishing to engage with the alien structure of the
Tayiba pilot station, the government was in no position to deliver the conditions that
tenants really wanted. This limited success in petitioning the government was to set the
tone for the future relationship between government and tenants.

This incident caused a good deal of anxiety at the time, raising the spectre of a strong
tenant body with an ability to upset central plans. With the future of the Tayiba
experiment in some doubt, it was the famine of 1914 that secured its viability. The
Annual Report for 1914 concluded; "never in the history of the present government has
the financial position of the Province been so bad as during the last year."[32] After a
succession of increasingly bad harvests the existing systems of managing risk were

---

[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] *SGR* 1914, p. 51.

severely stretched. Under these conditions, the guaranteed irrigated dura crop that was part of the Tayiba tenancies became a major attraction for tenants, and the tenancy experiment once again thrived on economic terms dictated by the government and the Syndicate.

Agricultural experimentation continued while the infrastructure for the main Scheme was being built. The Barakat pump Scheme, irrigating 2,000 feddans was opened in 1914, in 1921, 19,500 feddans was irrigated at Hag Abdulla and another 30,000 feddans in 1923-4 from pumps at Wad el Nau.[33] The imposition of the Scheme over the Gezira plain was thus a gradual process, with a fifth of the total irrigated area experiencing pump irrigation on the same terms as the full-scale Gezira Scheme, before the opening of the Sennar Dam. However although gradual, the changes brought by the Scheme were undoubtedly large and the support of the population could never be taken for granted. Acquiescence though was crucial, for the Syndicate relied upon tenants for the cultivation of the cotton crop. The inherent difficulties of convincing the population en-masse to give up the rights to their land in return for a set rent payment of ten piastres per feddan, and in addition to work on tenancies according to an imposed tenancy agreement were compounded by continued propaganda against the Scheme.

The intelligence reports closely identified this propaganda with the Egyptian nationalist attempts to raise anti-British sentiment within Sudan. Beginning in 1919, and continuing unabated until the Scheme opened in 1925, a series of pamphlets were distributed throughout Sudan, which as well as being generally anti-British, highlighted the Gezira Scheme as a particular example of foreign exploitation and oppression. Described as a government plot to hand the nation's wealth to British capitalists at the expense of the Sudanese population, the latter were urged to boycott the Scheme.[34] In addition to genuine fears about what the Scheme would mean to the population, this propaganda created a degree of unrest, and in the early 1920s it was feared that a boycott

---

[33] Gaitskell, *Gezira*, pp. 72, 90.
[34] National Archive, Sudan Intelligence Reports WO/106/6226, November 1919, no.304; March 1920, no.308; May 1921, no.322; October 1923, no.351; August 1924, no.361; April 1925, no.369.

was likely.[35] Aware of "a good deal of criticism of the Scheme among the people", a belated information campaign was established by the Government.[36] Tours were made to villages within the proposed Scheme area by government officials, who provided information on the future structure of the Scheme. Eric Hussey, asked to participate on such a tour, described the primary concern of prospective tenants as being a fear of losing a food supply. Once personally reassured that a dura crop was part of the tenancy rotation "full co-operation was willingly promised and given".[37]

Embracing the Scheme

In promoting the Scheme, the government was eager to gain the support of local administrative leaders, hoping that their support would be a positive influence on the rest of the population. Government staff devoted large amounts of time to courting influential figures within the Gezira population at tea parties and other gatherings, and, despite the egalitarian language surrounding the Scheme, aimed to give such leaders a vested interest in the success of the Gezira Scheme.[38] In particular, large landowners and those considered influential were given more than the standard one tenancy, and were allowed to nominate cultivators for several others, thus giving them practical control over extended areas. By shoring up the economic position of influential figures, the Scheme consolidated existing inequalities and guaranteed a position of influence for the existing elite.

This pragmatic approach of co-opting the elite, extended to national figures of influence; namely the three religious leaders; Sayed Ali Mirghani, Yusef el Hindi, and Sayed Abdel Rahman el Mahdi. As policy makers stated in 1923, "It is obviously desirable

---

[35] Eric Hussey *Tropical Africa 1908-1944: Memoirs of a Period* (London, 1959), p. 30.
[36] NRO 1Civsec 57/33/126, L.F. Nalder DC Khartoum Province to R. Wedd, Advocate General, 24 September 1924.
[37] Hussey *Tropical Africa* p. 30-31.
[38] SAD 531/2, Robertson, ADC Rufa'a to his mother, 23 January 1923.

that the several leaders in question should have a personal interest in the success of the Scheme."[39] The only difficulty was in finding land of good enough quality to ensure that these religious leaders could in no way fail, and might thus be tied to the government in desiring the continued success and stability of the Scheme.[40] The courting of the administrative elite was a success. In response to the negative propaganda against the Scheme, a petition was signed by the omdas, notables and merchants of Kamlin district, pledging their support:

> In conclusion, we desire to associate ourselves with the noble Sir Sayed Ali-el-Mirghani, El Sayed Abd-el-Rahman-el-Mahdi, El Sherif Ali-el-Hindi and the other members of the Sudanese delegation, in all representations they have made on behalf of the Sudanese nation and in favour of the Makwar dam.[41]

The landowning and administrative elite might have gained particular benefits from complying with the new economic order, but the general advantages of the Scheme were not lost on the rest of the population. That an outside agency was willing to plough large amounts of capital into land currently productive only in years of good rains appeared a good offer to those without capital themselves. Particularly in the northern areas of the Scheme, where annual rainfall was very low, the Scheme brought huge areas of previously marginal land under cultivation, and for those with little or no land of their own, the Scheme offered immediate access to the standard 40 feddan tenancy, with both the increased status and profit potential that tenant farming offered. The success of the experimental areas also seemed to prove the infallibility of the Scheme in providing guaranteed profits, offering the real possibility that all tenants might live a lifestyle previously reserved for the landowning elite.

Several aspects of continuity also contributed to the acceptance of the Scheme, and although undoubtedly creating a novel, highly structured economic environment, the

---

[39] NRO BNP 1/39/297, H. Fraser, Director of Lands to Huddleston, Governor BNP, 12 April 1923.
[40] NRO BNP 1/39/297, Huddleston, Governor BNP, to Fraser, Director of Lands, 10 June 1923.
[41] Terje Tvedt, *The River Nile in the Age of the British: Political Ecology and the Quest for Economic Power* (London, 2004) p. 109.

Scheme also included some elements familiar to the population. Georges Brausch in examining some of these trends describes the Gezira as an adaptable and externally oriented society in the centre of trade routes and in touch with urban centres and modern ideas.[42] A long history of private land ownership and complex pre-Scheme relations between landlords, sharecroppers, tenants, and smallholders, together with multiple forms of profit-sharing accounting, gave precedent for the profit-sharing organisation of the Scheme. Moreover, the close and binding relationship between moneylenders and tenants frequently resulted in interference and supervision from the moneylender in the farming techniques of his debtor, to guarantee his investment was sound.[43] Such a background of supervised farming helped ease local farmers into the new structures of the Scheme. However, these factors also bring into relief the changes of both scale and inflexibility that the Scheme brought. Although predicated on economic patterns roughly familiar to prospective tenants, the Scheme fixed the social and economic boundaries in ways that was completely new. Choice was profoundly limited, both in terms of participating within the Scheme (unless willing to move from the area) and in the terms and conditions of work and profit-sharing, which were all set by the two undisguised dominant partners in the triumvirate partnership between government, Syndicate and tenants.

This lack of tenant choice was to become increasingly contentious as the material wealth promised by the Scheme failed to be consistently delivered. However, in the first years of the Scheme enthusiasm was high, and J. Robertson, wrote that "the people all seem most contented", while those outside the Scheme complained that they were not included.[44] This positive outlook of tenants, belying all government fears, continued through the 1920s as crop yields and cotton prices remained high. In 1928, as the Scheme continued to expand it was reported that "The Scheme is as popular and prosperous as ever and there are three times the numbers of applicants for the new tenancies available."[45]

---

[42] G. Brausch, "Change and Continuity".
[43] Ibid., and M. Willmington, "Aspects of Moneylending".
[44] SAD 531/2, Robertson, ADC Rufa'a to his mother, 27 February 1923.
[45] NRO BNP 1/27/201, BNP Annual Report, 1928.

The most controversial outcome of the Scheme's immediate success and popularity was the almost universal move by tenants to employ labour to work on a tenancy rather than do the work themselves. This trend was viewed with disfavour by the government and Syndicate, who ignoring all past habits of labour employment and slave use within the Gezira area, had placed at the core of the Scheme's 'ideals' the notion of self-sufficient tenant proprietors working their own land in family units. Gaitskell summed up the thinking behind the Scheme when he stated:

> The original intention for the country was the building up of an industrious cultivator type of peasantry. The unit of labour was to be a man and his family working with him. The standard Syndicate loans were based on this assumption and were only intended to cover the cost of outside assistance in seasons when this was imperative. They were never intended to cover the whole cost of cultivation.[46]

When tenants persistently refused to play the role of obedient labourers laid out for them, the authorities were quick to condemn; "So far from creating an industrious cultivator class we are gradually establishing a collection of idle rich".[47] Judged against the Western European work ethic that colonial officials brought with them, Gezira tenants were viewed as lazy and self-serving, although as Keletso Atkins has demonstrated, laziness is a cultural construct that does not take into consideration distinctive indigenous versions of a work ethic.[48]

However, it was the ability to hire labour that ensured the Scheme's popularity. As Gaitskell observed in 1928; "The coveted position of a tenant is of one who can hire other people to do his work."[49] The opportunity of becoming the managers or de-facto landlords of a tenancy and employing others to do the agricultural labour allowed tenants to emulate the landowning elites, and thus coincided with the long-term aspirations of the Gezira population. This aspiration was so strong that tenants were

---

[46] Sad 418/3/3-9, Gaitskell, to Poyntz-Wright, Manager Sudan Plantations Syndicate, 14 March 1928.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Atkins, *The Moon is Dead!*, p. 119.
[49] SAD 418/3/3-9, Gaitskell to Poyntz-Wright, Manager Sudan Plantations Syndicate, 14 March 1928.

willing to go into debt in order to finance the employment of labour. The belief that the Scheme was a guarantee of continued profits created an economic confidence that encouraged a lifestyle of debt in a search for the money needed to employ labour. With the aim of achieving the 'landlord' lifestyle seemingly within reach, the province annual report of 1929 recorded that most tenants were in debt:

> I should say that at the present time the tenant who is not in debt to some merchant or other provides the exception to the rule. At the moment the Arab tenant will not do any work at all as long as he has the money, or can borrow the money, to pay somebody else to do it.[50]

Despite the dangers attached to such a policy, the 'landlord' aspiration was strong enough for many tenants to take economic risks, suggesting that the popularity of the Scheme among tenants was closely related to the ability to hire labour and divorce themselves from the role of labourer.

It was therefore through passing the burden of work to others, and maintaining a personal distance from manual labour, that tenants accepted the conditions under which tenancies were worked. Looking back to the first years of the Scheme, Reginald Davies, Secretary for Economic Development, reported that:

> No one – and to be quite honest, I think, the sheikhs least of all – gave a thought to restriction of liberty or loss of other amenities. The plenitude of money covered everything and influenced even those old timers who really valued their land and had made quite a good thing out of their normal rain cultivation and their herds... All were able to hire 'wakils' and sufficient labour to do the work and stand the buffeting – with a very comfortable margin of profit left over.[51]

Tenant aspirations focused on the profit needed to allow them to work as landlords rather than as labourers. By rejecting the role of labourer, and aspiring instead to a rentier status, tenants used the Scheme in a rather different manner to that proposed by

---

[50] NRO 2BNP 42/1/1, BNP Annual Report, 1929.
[51] NRO BNP 1/40/301, Reginald Davies, Secretary for Economic Development to Acland, DC Gezira, 31 December 1936.

the government and Syndicate. These differences, already marked in the first years of the Condominium, were to become an increasing focus of political tension in the 1940s.

The End of the Honeymoon

The enthusiasm of the 1920s ended dramatically in 1930 as a diseased cotton crop coincided with the world depression to see profits plummet.[52] After receiving an average of £E.55 cotton profit per tenancy in 1929, three out of the four seasons from 1930-1933 saw tenants bearing a financial loss on their cotton sales.[53] It was not until 1945, that profits returned to the 1929 level.[54] Tenants faced further pressures, as measures to reduce crop diseases resulted in greater work for tenants. The change from a three to a four-course rotation meant that a tenant's crops, always planted in 'numbers' containing the same crop, were increasingly geographically dispersed. On top of the extra travelling time, an order demanding that cotton plants be pulled out of the ground after harvesting was unpopular, demanding greater time and effort from tenants for the same net profit.[55] The result was that tenants were less able to hire labour, at the same time as needing more of it. With both the local and national economy relying almost entirely upon cotton production, the failings of the fixed and inflexible approach taken by the controlling partners had become clear. But despite this, no efforts were made to broaden crop production.

Within these limitations there were several types of survival strategy employed by tenants throughout the depression. Central to most tenants' survival techniques was recourse to debt, a strategy that had long existed within the Gezira area, but which escalated throughout the 1930s as tenants were forced to borrow money to finance

---

[52] Gaitskell, *Gezira*, p. 141.
[53] Ibid., p. 270.
[54] Ibid., p. 270.
[55] NRO BNP 1/38/293 Acland, Gezira Commissioner, "Handing over notes", 1940.

cultivations that were running at a loss.[56] Tenants also looked beyond the boundaries of the Scheme for means of income generation. 'Multioccupationality' was a feature of many African economies, and O'Brien has identified its importance within Gezira tenants' economic strategies.[57] Depending on a tenant's access to capital there were various approaches to working outside the tenancy. Those with financial capital sought to invest in additional business and trading ventures, with small shops and transport enterprises being most common. For instance, Yusif Hag el Zein, the *wakil* sheikh of Radma village, owned a lorry by which he conducted trade with urban centres and offered a transport service, and in addition lent money to many of the tenants in the region.[58] Others had access to either river or rain land outside of the Scheme that could be farmed and had animals that could be taken to grass lands.[59] For those whose only capital was their own labour, profit might be made by selling their labour within an urban context, while employing cheaper labour to work their tenancy.[60]

The ultimate response to the unprofitable nature of tenancies was for tenants to abandon them. As early as 1929, a large number of tenants resigned in Ghobshan block in the south of the Scheme when profits were declared.[61] This response was to increase over the following years and became so widespread that by the end of the 1934 season, there was a shortage of 2,000 tenants across the Scheme. This situation reflected not only the unpopularity of unprofitable cotton farming, but also the decreasing benefits supplied by the dura crop for although recognised as the main inducement for tenants, in 1929 it was concluded that "durra takes more out of soil value than can be justified by any durra cultivation which is surplus to the domestic needs of the tenant", and the feddanage of durra was reduced.[62] With increasing numbers of tenants unable to hire labour and few willing or able to conduct the intensive year-round labour needed for cotton cultivation

---

[56] NRO BNP 1/28/208, C.G. Davies, DC Gezira, "Handing over notes", October 1936.
[57] O'Brien, "The Social Reproduction of Tenant Cultivators", p. 228.
[58] NRO BNP 1/40/301, Group Inspector, Centre Group, "Report on Report on Yusif Hag el Zein", 18 November 1936.
[59] Interview with Khalid Dafalla Mohammed Fadl, Hosh village, 31 January 2003.
[60] Tony Barnett and Abbas Abdelkarim, *Sudan: The Gezira Scheme and Agricultural Transition* (London, 1991) p. 33.
[61] NRO 2BNP 42/1/1, BNP Annual Report, 1929.
[62] Ibid.

themselves, river and rain cultivation proved an attractive alternative.[63] Although by resigning, a farmer faced the danger of losing his rights to any future profits in the Scheme, many saw no hope of a financial revival.

However, "the providential failure of the rains outside the Scheme" reversed this situation reinforcing the benefits of any kind of grain crop, even if cotton profits were still very low.[64] Competition for tenancies was again at a height, and at the end of 1935, each 'takshifa' or allocation of tenancies within new extensions was "besieged by hundreds clamouring for howashas".[65] Some of these applicants were those who had previously resigned, many, but not all of whom were given a new tenancy. Tenancies during the 1930s were thus used as one weapon in the Gezira population's economic arsenal, in a manner similar to the pre-Scheme uses of rain and river farming. When cotton profits or poor rains were predicted, tenancies were taken up enthusiastically. When they were not and the ability to attain the aspirations of landlordism was threatened, the value of tenancies became marginal, and the risks of non-irrigated farming often became preferable to the potential debt and hard work of tenant farming. Options were kept open when possible by utilising other methods of income earning to spread a tenant's interests. Those who could, kept a tenancy while focusing their energies on other more profitable resources, while others left, and attempted to regain a tenancy when economically viable.

For those intent on maintaining a tenancy throughout the depression years, there were other survival strategies. Capital, in the form of land was frequently sold. In part this was considered a safe venture as the use of land was not directly related to its ownership. By selling his land, a tenant lost its rental earnings, but did not lose his position as tenant, the right to which was predicated upon keeping to the terms of the tenancy agreement. However, the frequent sales of land were viewed by the government as contrary to the creation of a stable peasant proletariat. Despite government concerns,

---

[63] SAD 641/5, John Longe, ADC Hassaheissa, "Handing Over Notes, North Gezira", 1934.
[64] NRO BNP 1/40/301, Hillard, DC North Gezira, to Young, Governor BNP, 15 December 1935.
[65] NRO BNP 1/40/301, Bolton, DC Gezira, to Young, Governor BNP, 22 December 1935.

land sales reached astonishing figures, with nearly 35,000 feddans transferring hands in 1936, and slightly over that amount sold in 1937, the first years for which figures are available.[66] The analysis of land sales showed that "poverty" and the need to hire essential picking labour were the overriding reasons for the sales, being the professed motivations for 248 out of the 349 sales in North Gezira during May 1938.[67]

If there were many that suffered from the depression, succumbing to large debts, and alienating themselves from the land, there were also those who benefited. During the 1930s, opportunities for enrichment abounded for those with capital and the willingness to risk that the depression would only be temporary. Among the latter, Yusif Algam gained the wealth that was to propel him to political standing by taking up tenancies in the early 1930s that no one else was willing to farm. Others with access to capital, either through substantial land holdings that brought in an annual rent, or other interests and investments, found that money lending was highly profitable. The majority of the land that poorer tenants were forced to sell was bought by richer tenants, who thus gained access to the rental value of that land.[68] Despite the egalitarian ideals at the heart of the government's vision of the Scheme, the wealth gap, based upon existing economic inequalities grew substantially. By the 1940s these economic divisions were clearly visible to government staff, who noted of the Halawin area:

> Wealth is very unevenly divided and is inclined to accumulate
> gradually in the hands of a few hundred well to do people belonging
> to the upper hierarchy. Especially this is true of land, and every year
> sees the growth of a landless class, who if they are not tenants 'pro
> tem' are being reduced from the status of small holders to that of
> hired labourers.[69]

Despite the Scheme's egalitarian philosophy and its distinction from other colonial cotton Schemes that relied upon directly co-opting elites to manage cotton production,

---

[66] NRO 1Civsec 57/24/93, BNP Annual Report 1937.
[67] NRO 1Civsec 57/6/26, BNP Monthly Diaries, May 1938.
[68] NRO BNP 1/38/293, Acland, Gezira Commissioner, "Handing over notes", May 1940.
[69] NRO BNP 1/30/222, anon. "Administrative Note on the Halawin", 14 November 1944. This theme of a developing underclass has been explored by Barnett and Abdelkarim, Sudan: The Gezira Scheme, p. 44.

the Gezira Scheme did favour the wealthier members of society, and overtly disadvantaged the poorest by reducing their economic options to that of agricultural labourer.

Rising Discontent

The depressed conditions of the 1930s raised grievances that had been suppressed during times of plenty. This rising discontent found an outlet partly in passive protest, but complaints were also taken directly to the Syndicate and government. Informal criticisms of the Scheme were frequently made to government officials expressing concerns about the "comparative inaccessibility of the accounts, and the supposed pocketing of their profits by the government and the SPS, when the tenant had next to none".[70] This expression of a lack of tenant trust in the alien agencies of Syndicate and government was to become a recurring theme in the relationship between tenants and the other partners. In December 1933, the first "definite petition against Gezira Scheme conditions" reached the government from the village of Hillet el Mekheirif.[71] The 23 tenants complained "that owing to the reduction in the advances made to tenants by the Syndicate, and the fact that their durra crop this year was an almost total loss, they would find some difficulty in providing adequately for themselves and their families until the end of this season."[72]

Based upon the established village unit and using established forms of mediation with the government, the Mekheirif petition also demonstrated the united action of certain village members through their common relationship to the means of production. The complaints focused on the lack of profit brought by a tenancy, which "might cover the bare cost of the essential durra alone, but would not run to the purchase of clothes or

[70] NRO BNP 1/1/2, Minute on a digression at DC's meeting, on subject of "Native Opinion on the Gezira Scheme", 30 September 1930.
[71] NRO 2BNP 50/7/28, Note by C.G Davies, Gezira commissioner, n.d.
[72] Ibid.

sugar or anything else that made life worth living."[73]   Clarke drew attention to this economic focus of tenants:

> I must emphasise that all tenants' complaints are voiced against their
> financial position. The first five years of excessive profits and the
> last four years of excessive stringency have blinded the people to the
> political and social defects of the Gezira Scheme which, to my mind,
> are of equal, if not greater, permanent importance.[74]

Clarke was correct in his assessment of tenants' complaints, but his own focus on social conditions blinded him to the real concerns of tenants. It was not that tenants' were unaware of the social defects of the Scheme. It was rather that they did not see them as a problem. Aiming to be the employers of labour, the difficult working conditions were ideally passed on to others and thus the focus of tenants remained on economic profit from a tenancy in order to finance the employment of labour. Tenants accepted and promulgated a system of social inequity in order that they might be at the apex of society, and thus the social conditions of the Gezira Scheme actually fitted with tenant ambitions. Aspiring to be landlords and managers rather than labourers, grievances focused primarily upon the absence of profit during the 1930s, which worked to prevent the full realisation of landlord aspirations.

The Syndicate management insisted that the Mekheirif petition and other complaints overstated true grievances, and did not represent the general opinion that those within the Gezira were better off than those outside.[75] Gillan and Fass, as Civil and Financial secretaries respectively, outlined official government opinion as being that the Scheme had brought an overall prosperity; that they were not responsible for world cotton prices, and that the durra crop in normal years was a good safeguard from famine.[76] With the central government having no revenue alternatives, it was reliant upon the Scheme, and its continuing financial viability. Similarly, the Syndicate was driven by a need to satisfy stakeholders and produce a profit. Under these conditions, the attempts by

---

[73] NRO 2BNP 50/7/28, Note by C.G Davies, Gezira commissioner, n.d.
[74] NRO 2BNP 50/7/28, Clarke, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 31 December 1933.
[75] Ibid.

Sudanese to realise their grievances through official channels failed. However, tenant grievances did worry local officials on two accounts. Firstly, the propensity for tenants to withdraw from tenancies threatened the very existence of the Scheme, upon which the government was reliant for national revenue. Secondly, there was a real fear of social unrest arising from unresolved grievances. Discussing the potential impact of the Mekheirif petition, Clarke concluded:

> There is probably little risk of serious trouble at the moment but what
> I would say is that the Gezira at the moment seems to present
> extremely fertile soil for a political agitator or religious fanatic.[77]

While such grievances and protest were kept on the scale of the individual or village, the government did not unduly worry. However, this intensely localised response to the Scheme was challenged by a series of articles published in *el Nil*, the leading Mahdist national newspaper in May 1937.

Written anonymously, the articles presented tenants as oppressed by the two stronger partners in the Scheme and highlighted the economic and social inequities within the Scheme. They also propagated what were considered to be tenant concerns to the tenant body itself. Manipulating the power of print journalism, the articles portrayed an 'imagined community' of tenants to an as then disparate readership, and offered a tenant identity based on a common experience.[78] The articles described the tenants as a unified whole, being oppressed by the other partners, and it was stated that "the tenant suffers a very miserable living... because of the unfair agreement made between him, the Syndicate and the government, which stands as a bar to his happiness."[79] The Tenants' Reserve Fund was highlighted as an example of this oppression, not only because tenants were kept ignorant of its details, but because this fund was kept on a communal basis. This collectivisation was described as "a loss of rights to the poor tenant who gets

---

[76] NRO 2BNP 50/7/28 Notes from a meeting of Clarke, Governor BNP, Gillan, Civil Secretary and Fass, Financial Secretary, 12 January 1934.

[77] NRO 2BNP 50/7/28, Clarke, Governor BNP to MacMichael, Civil Secretary, 31 December 1933.

[78] The power of media to construct community identity has been explored by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

[79] GBA 700-2, *El Nil*, 23 May 1937.

no benefit at all from his work".[80] Other articles focused on the lack of transparency in accounting and the abuses of power conducted by Syndicate inspectors. These were all concerns that tenants had themselves raised independently in a localised manner, but for the first time they were expressed as being of interest to the entire tenant body throughout the Gezira. Predicting the rise of an anti-government and anti-Syndicate tenant-based movement, the author wrote:

> I believe one day will come when the Syndicate will find itself confronted by a different type of tenant, much different from that tenant who suffered humiliation for so long. It will find itself face to face with a tenant who will ask for full account of his crop, who objects to the storing of cotton, rejects the idea of profits and appreciations and who understands that he is not supposed to consider the Syndicate as a form of government inside the government.[81]

These were prophetic words, but they came nearly ten years too early.

Despite government worries that the articles could spark agitation throughout the Gezira there was little overt reaction to the articles and the imagined community did not immediately appear in practice.[82] In part, this reflected the lack of united common interest between tenants that could not be overcome by a few articles. Older identities based upon villages, lineages and religious tariqas, worked with the existing economic distinctions and superimposed agricultural divisions to maintain a localised and disparate tenant focus. Moreover, the wider nationalistic motivations of the writer were not lost on tenants. It was clear by the fact that there were two articles complaining about the lack of educated Sudanese within the Syndicate bureaucracy, that the author was not only concerned in fighting the tenants' corner. By appealing to tenants and to employees of the Syndicate on the basis of a common oppression, the articles attempted to gain a support base for developing nationalistic politics. However, if there was little sympathy between tenants at this date, there was even less between tenants and other

---

[80] Ibid., 25 May 1937.
[81] Ibid., 24 May 1937.
[82] NRO 1Civsec 50/14/59, Mayall, Governor BNP, to Gillan, Civil Secretary, 10 April 1938.

workers, with tenants as a self-identified rural 'landed' elite of employers, distancing themselves from an urban workforce of employees. The articles predictably failed to draw these groups any closer. Instead, by focusing on issues such as Syndicate clerks, and social conditions – which never loomed large in tenant complaints at any date – the articles misjudged the true concerns of tenants. Indeed, in response to the articles, a number of tenants actively defended the Scheme, and under the heading 'A retraction: The Gezira Scheme - expert tenants praise it', an "old and respected tenant" contradicted many of the descriptions of oppression within the articles.[83]

A few years earlier, and it is possible that individual tenant grievances may have coalesced under the prompting of a wider identity. However, in 1937, the Scheme was entering a period of increasing prosperity that once again provided tenants with the means to achieve their basic aspirations and made the control of a tenancy a worthwhile prospect. For the first time during the 1930s the demand for tenancies exceeded supply, despite the opening of new extensions.[84] Also in that year the cotton profits led to "a very perceptible easing of the debt position."[85] In 1939, it was reported that "a general air of prosperity and contentment prevails throughout the irrigated area," and this air of stability remained throughout the Second World War.[86]

Contentment was thus directly related to profit margins, which in turn was directly related to the ability to hire labour. Tenants embraced the Scheme because it fitted with the established 'ambition pattern' of the Gezira region. It was seen as a way to increase a tenant's independence, and was not seen as the controlling machine that it has since been described. The opportunities offered by the Gezira Scheme allowed tenants to aspire to be the managers of labour, and ultimately to be absentee landlords, delegating management to an appointed *wakil*. Control over labour was central to this enthusiasm and subsequent tenant identity, because the hiring of labour symbolised a tenant's freedom from manual labour, and provided him with increased social status. The

---

[83] GBA 700-2, *El Nil*, 23 September 1937.
[84] NRO 1 Civsec 57/24/93, BNP Annual Report, 1937.
[85] Ibid.
[86] NRO 1 Civsec 57/10/39, BNP Monthly Diaries, July 1939.

complaints about the Scheme were therefore directly concerned with access to the wealth needed to hire labour. The social inequities of the Scheme thus played no part in the reaction of tenants to the Scheme, other than reinforcing their position as a labour-employing elite.

9

TENANT CITIZEN – WORKER SUBJECT

If tenants accepted the conditions of the scheme, then they did so on the understanding that it would benefit them in allowing them to achieve their aspirations of accumulating individual wealth and becoming the managers rather than the workers of land. The Gezira Scheme allowed tenants to become the employers of labour, and thus to distinguish themselves from the non-tenant labouring population. With the ability to hire labour an underlying reason for the success of the Scheme, the distinction between tenant and labour became a prime articulation of tenant identity. Tenants saw themselves as the primary citizens in society. In contrast, labourers were the subjects within an essentially unequal society. Not working in the fields was not just a matter of individual pride for tenants, but also part of a wider self-image, providing tenants with social status and rights unavailable to workers. At once despising those who worked upon the land, and resentful of their own reliance upon labour, particular antagonism was directed towards those who demonstrated united strength. The feelings towards labour in general were thus intensified and took a distinctive turn towards the Western or Takari population. Taking the cue from wider national antagonism towards those immigrants from west of Sudan's borders, the anti-Western sentiment in the Gezira combined with wider feelings about maintaining the dominant status of tenants, to

reinforce an elite tenant status based upon economic dominance and an ethnic Arab identity.

Organising Labour

Wealth had always been an important provider of status within the Gezira, and although not always consistent, tenancies generally brought in wealth. Even if this was only in the form of cash advances paid by the Syndicate for the purpose of continuing production, this cash, which was controlled by tenants, provided them with status by giving them the means to hire labour and purchase material goods.[1] By the 1940s the wealth brought in by a tenancy was once again significant. In 1947, a standard tenancy made an average net profit of £E.96, and profit margins increased steadily, reaching an astonishing peak in 1951, whereupon a single tenancy made an average profit of £E.800 from cotton.[2] With labouring rates failing to match the increase in profits, and with the high cotton profits coinciding with a series of failed harvests outside of the irrigated areas, the gulf between tenant and labourer increased exponentially. Tenants therefore had the double advantage of high cotton profits and "the only dura in the district" which they refused to sell "at anything less than high prices".[3] This situation created a stark contrast between tenants who were "perplexed about what to do with their money", and non-tenants in the vicinity of the scheme suffering under near famine conditions.[4]

The dominance of tenants extended beyond the economic return of tenancies. As early as 1927 it was recognised that the administrative and wealthy elite were closely tied to the Scheme with "nearly every sheikh… a tenant".[5] With the administrative elite almost

---

[1] Considered a source of profit, advances were acknowledged as being a primary motivation for maintaining tenancies throughout the depression years; NRO 2BNP 50/7/28, Note by C.G. Davies, Gezira Commissioner, 1933.

[2] Gaitskell, *Gezira*, pp. 270, 317.

[3] NRO 2Civsec 30/8/19, BNP Monthly Diaries, November and December 1949.

[4] NRO 2Civsec 30/8/19, BNP Monthly Diaries, November 1949 and NRO 2Civsec 30/8/19, BNP Monthly Diaries, January 1950.

[5] NRO BNP 1/1/1, A.S. Redfern, Gezira Commissioner to Huddleston, Governor BNP, 11 February 1927.

universally holding tenancies, tenants controlled institutional liaison with government, as well as having access to other economic and social capital. Thus Ahmed Hamad el Nil, sheikh of Manaseer village, owned one thousand feddans of land, controlled four tenancies, ran a shop, was the president of the village council, and a member of the local court, the Tenants Representative Body, and the Gezira Local Committee.[6] Similarly, Sheikh Hassan Abdel Galil, controlled two tenancies, and in addition was the chair of the Rural District Council, owned a shop, and gained significant local social standing through teaching at a religious school.[7] With virtually all dominant positions held by those with vested interests in tenancies, tenant interests extended into all government related institutions, and the social and political as well as economic dominance of tenants was secured.

Tenant dominance was furthered by the government's focus upon tenants, and their blindness towards non-tenants. The unique ideology of the Gezira scheme required a unique relationship between government and tenant population that was founded upon a notion of exclusivity, compensation and ultimately elevated status. The novel organisation of the scheme focused all attention on the tenant as producer. As the important third partner of the unique Scheme, tenants were not only highly visible, but with the government being reliant upon the output of each tenancy for their own revenue, they held a powerful position. Tenants became 'the people of the Gezira', and gained rights and privileges denied to other inhabitants of the area. In contrast, non-tenants were barely visible other than being part of the wider 'labour problem', and with labour management outside of the government's direct control, labourers did not feature highly in government interactions. The absence of non-tenants within the British understanding of the Gezira was reflected in a tendency to use the terminology of tenant and local inhabitant interchangeably. For instance during the opening ceremony of the Sennar Dam in 1925, there was much discussion about the benefits the scheme would bring to the 'natives' of the Gezira – by which it was meant tenants. As Archer wrote:

---

[6] NRO 2BNP 25/3/7, *El Gezira*, 6 December 1951.
[7] Ibid., 15 March 1951.

> To the local native, the Gezira Scheme spells not only an assured
> livelihood, but comparative affluence... His rights in land are
> safeguarded, his income is multiplied many times over.[8]

The privileging of tenants as 'the people/citizens' of the Gezira became overt in the government's policy towards agricultural shows within the Gezira. By confining exhibit entries to tenants only, a clear statement was made about the unique and privileged status that tenants had within the Gezira area. No longer simply confusing tenants with all Gezira inhabitants, tenants were now marked out as distinct from non-tenants and as the true citizens of the region, while non-tenants were alienated from this position and denied the same rights.

The relative degree of this social and institutional tenant dominance is highlighted when a comparison of tenant and non-tenant numbers are made. In 1935, a survey of ten villages concluded that forty percent of adult males did not hold tenancies.[9] Culwick in 1952 surveyed a further three villages, in which only forty five percent of men were classified as tenants.[10] These statistics demonstrate the existence of a large population, indeed perhaps a majority of non-tenants within the Gezira region, that had little or no institutional representation. Culwick also shows that with some exceptions, these non-tenants tended to be poorer and unskilled, with the majority selling their labour for wages. The rising gap in wealth between tenants and non-tenants, together with the conflation of elite socio-political interests with articulated tenant interests created a tenant identity. Based on common tenant interests, formulated around a shared relationship to the means of production, tenants set themselves apart from non-tenants. This elevated status of tenants was recognised and sought after by non-tenants. Of the 293 men without tenancies in the ten villages surveyed in 1935, only eleven percent proclaimed that they had no interest in gaining a tenancy.[11] Most desired a tenancy if not directly for its potential profit, then for its ability to enhance status, for it was openly

---

[8] Sir G. Archer, Governor General "Benefits of the Sennar Dam and the Gezira Irrigation Scheme", *African World*, Special Sudan number, January 1926, p. 3.
[9] NRO BNP 1/40/301, Bolton, DC South Gezira to Young, Governor BNP, 30 December 1935.
[10] Culwick, "A Study of the Human Factor", p. 49.
[11] NRO BNP 1/40/301, Bolton, DC South Gezira to Young, Governor BNP, 30 December 1935.

recognised that being a tenant was "infinitely better than being a resident labourer."[12] This desirability of tenancies worked to maintain the exclusive status of tenants.

This gap between tenant and labourer was accentuated by economic conditions in the late Condominium period, but was also deliberately supported by tenants. With the personal accumulation of wealth and status acting as primary motivations, tenants sought to separate themselves from labourers and other manual workers, and to attain as much individual wealth as possible. To this end, tenants demonstrated considerable lack of interest in the government's vision of the "national good", consistently rejecting requests to curb tenant spending in order to prevent dangerously high rates of inflation.[13] Tenants with seemingly ever increasing levels of profits saw little reason not to spend their own money on status-enhancing personal consumption, and such an individual outlook was further reflected in the unwillingness to spend any money arising from the Scheme on general social services within the Gezira.[14] Overall, tenants held no wider sympathy for 'workers', and strikes such as the general strike of March 1952, were regarded with "a blend of apathy and disapproval" by tenants.[15]

Labour relations were a central element in the articulation of this economic and social dominance, particularly as the control of labour was one of the few areas of economic life in which tenants were independent from government and management controls. Despite the high degree of control by the Syndicate over the agricultural standards on a tenancy, neither the Syndicate nor the government made any attempt to regulate how that work was done. With the Scheme originally established around the idea of family labour, the Syndicate had no relationship with non-tenant labourers. However, as family labour soon demonstrated itself to be insufficient and as tenants demonstrated their preference for hiring others to perform manual labour, networks of labour organisation were developed by tenants. So effective were these unofficial forms of recruitment, that although plans were made to create a labour office in the Gezira, it was concluded that

---

[12] BNP 1/40/301, Hillard, DC North Gezira to Young, Governor BNP, 15 December 1935.
[13] NRO BNP 1/43/316, sixth meeting TRB, 20 July 1948.
[14] NRO Newspaper Archive, el Amin Mohammed el Amin, *El Nil*, 21 October 1953.
[15] NRO 2Civsec 30/1/3, BNP Monthly Diaries, March 1952.

as "the tenants themselves had a widespread organisation for getting labour in, that to try to superimpose a government organisation would only lead to confusion."[16]

The vast majority of labour was hired temporarily on a wage basis from a variety of labour pools. Permanent settled communities of non-tenant indigenous villagers and West Africans provided year round labour, which was supplemented in the peak cotton-picking season by migrant Westerners and family parties from neighbouring White Nile and Blue Nile regions.[17] In attracting the latter, communities established relationships with village outside of the Scheme to ensure inward seasonal migration. Many villages had someone who acted as a labour 'expert', who cultivated contacts with villages outside of the scheme and arranged for the transport of these labourers.[18] For example, it was reported that "certain village sheikhs in Messellemia group are paying up to £E.5 in advance to agents at Managil who hope to produce picking labour in abundance in January."[19] In addition to wages, these relationships with Sudanese villages were predicated upon a series of economic inducements and ties. Tenants might offer attractive advances, pay for transport costs, provide housing and bonuses and in addition bind pickers to themselves through additional loans and the resulting debt.[20]

Ethnic Marginalisation

The direct relationship between tenants and labourers allowed tenants to place themselves in the superior position of managers and to identify and to marginalise others as workers and labourers. This distinction between tenants and labourers was a powerful element of tenant identity; however notions of cultural and ethnic dominance, based on an Arab identity were also central to power relationships within the Gezira Scheme. Because of the dominant position of tenants within the Gezira, and because of

[16] NRO BNP 1/38/293, Acland, Gezira Commissioner, Handing Over Notes, May 1940.
[17] Culwick, "Study of the Human Factor", p. 164.
[18] O'Brien, "The Formation of the Agricultural Labour Force in Sudan", p. 21.
[19] NRO 1Civsec 57/4/18, BNP Monthly Diaries 1937, November.
[20] Culwick, "Study of the Human Factor", p. 167-172.

their heavy reliance upon West African labour, the articulation of this Arab dominance was frequently played out within the agricultural sphere, but reflected a wider nationalist movement.[21] The combination of economic and ethnic tensions symbolised by Western labourers in the Gezira created a situation by which they were actively marginalised on the grounds of both class and ethnicity. As Bruce Berman states; "ethnicity has been the fundamental context and idiom of class formation and struggle in Africa."[22] Tenants not only saw Westerners as labourers – a position that tenants themselves had rejected as beneath them – there were strong overtones of seeing Westerners as racially and culturally inferior.

The importance of Arab descent in central northern Sudan has been succinctly outlined by Neil McHugh in his account of the development of genealogical mythologies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[23] McHugh states that the term Arab is "expressive of a single language, a single charter myth or historical ideology".[24] In this context, the term 'Arab' was a powerful identity; at once unifying and excluding sections of society. With Arab descent prior to the nineteenth century equated with Islamic identity; claiming descent from an Arabian ancestor gave an individual full citizenship rights.[25] The alienated 'other', defined by their non-Arab identity became economically vulnerable, historically forming the vast majority of agricultural and domestic slaves.[26] 'Arabness', closely linked with economic dominance, was thus a pre-existing social identity within the Gezira region that was easily reactivated in response to a new influx of Western migration. Inherently distrusted and alienated, even as they became key figures in the Scheme's economy, Hassoun writes of the prevailing "haughty and contemptuous attitude towards all negroid peoples, chiefly stigmatized by lack of command of Arabic, and by black colour" within the Gezira.[27] Seen as having the

---

[21] Abd al-Rahim Tayyib, *Imperialism and Nationalism in the Sudan.*
[22] Bruce Berman, "Ethnicity, Patronage and the African State: The Politics of Uncivil Nationalism", *African Affairs*, 97, 388, (1998) 305-341, at p. 331.
[23] McHugh, *Holymen*, pp. 9-10.
[24] Ibid., p. 2.
[25] Ibid., p. 2.
[26] Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers*, pp. xii-xiii.
[27] Isam Ahmed Hassoun, "'Western' Migration and Settlement in the Gezira", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 37, (1952) pp. 60-112, at p. 72.

characteristics of slave or ex-slave populations, West Africans were treated as culturally, economically and socially inferior. This was an attitude summed up in the Gezira proverb "the British had taken away the slaves, but God had provided the Fellata".[28]

The terminology used by tenants in referring to labourers is important in understanding attitudes to labour. Albeit, all labourers were viewed as being socially inferior to tenants and other non-labourers, non-Arab labourers were yet further down the social ladder. Labourers were described as either "Arabs", meaning they were from the Blue and White Nile Provinces, and part of the same 'ethnic' identity as tenants themselves, or they were "Fellata", encompassing all migrants from west of Kordofan province including Nigeria, French Equatoria and Darfur. The fact that the term Fellata began life as a generic descriptive term, but had became a term of abuse by the late Condominium period is indicative of increasing tenant antagonism towards Western labourers, seen as a threat to tenant status. In post Condominium Sudan, many of those (particularly from northern Nigeria) known by the pejorative term 'Fellata', began to use the neutral term 'Takari' as a form of self-description for groups facing similar economic and social prejudice.[29] Unwilling to ascribe such a degree of identity formation to the Condominium, my use of the term 'Westerner' attempts to avoid the derogatory connotations associated with the term Fellata, while maintaining its generic overtones that symbolised tenant attitude to non-Arab labour.

Labour Communities

There has been a long history of West African migration into and through Sudan, and the "Western Invasion" of the twentieth century arose out of earlier migration and pilgrimage patterns. J.S Birks describes pilgrimage routes operating across northern Africa before 1600, while Duffield suggests that West African settlements existed within

---

[28] Daly, *Imperial Sudan*, p. 191.
[29] Duffield, *Maiurno*, p. 46.

Sudan's present day boundaries from the end of the seventeenth century.[30] However, what had been "sporadic movements" up until the end of the nineteenth century, became large scale migration in the twentieth.[31] With colonialism in many West African states leading to political, social and economic upheaval, emigration rates increased. Following the pilgrimage route to Mecca that traversed Sudan, many Westerners took advantage of Sudan's social stability and economic opportunities on a permanent or semi-permanent basis.[32] Government attitudes towards this Western population were ambivalent. The Westerner symbolised both "a constant source of trouble", and a "solution to the problem of increasing the population of the Gezira which the proposed development of this tract of country by irrigation works necessitates."[33]

It was the necessity of gaining labour, firstly for the construction of the canal infrastructure, and then for cotton cultivation that swung the balance in the Westerners' favour. With sparsely populated areas of the Gezira struggling to find tenants for all tenancies, there were large areas that had little non-tenant population to work as labourers at the peak weeding and picking seasons. Thus the blocks of Galil and Sadalla; where "most of the inhabitants are tenants and there is next to no local labour" struggled greatly during the 1937 picking season.[34] In addition to these peak periods, the desire of tenants to hire labour rather than do the manual work of a tenancy meant that labour was constantly needed. The government deplored this situation, describing Nueila Block as "a notorious sink of iniquity [in which] tenants unable to hire, are with difficulty persuaded to harvest their crops."[35] However, despite not liking tenants' reliance on hired labour, British officials involved in the scheme soon accepted the situation, and external sources of labour were indirectly encouraged. Thus as early as 1926, Willis was able to override his concerns about wandering Westerners in his

---

[30] J.S. Birks, *Across the Savannas to Mecca: The Overland Pilgrimage Route from West Africa* (London, 1978) p. 9, Mark Duffield, *Maiurno*, p. 16, See also Hassoun, "'Western' Migration", p. 98.
[31] C. Bawa Yamba, *Permanent Pilgrims: The Role of Pilgrimage in the lives of West African Muslims in Sudan* (London, 1995) p. 4.
[32] Hassoun, "'Western' Migration", pp. 61-67.
[33] NRO BNP 1/31/224, C.A. Willis, Assistant Director of Intelligence to R.M. Feilden, Civil Secretary, 26 March 1919, and E. Hussey, Inspector Sennar, "Report on the Fellata Question", January 1917.
[34] NRO 1Civsec 57/4/18 BNP Monthly Diaries, February 1937.
[35] NRO 1Civsec 57/17/63 BNP Monthly Diaries, November 1942.

recognition of the need for labour on the cotton fields of the Gezira, Kassala and Tokar when he stated "it would be injudicious as well as impracticable to interfere with the free flow of labour to and from these centres."[36]

With the government reliant upon the scheme for national revenue, efficiency within the scheme was essential. Acknowledging the need for large numbers of labourers, Westerners were directly encouraged, with a policy that settled westerners in labour villages in areas in which local labour was short:

> They are usually given an area of irrigated dhurra [sic] for themselves
> outside the ordinary rotation. A few of the inhabitants may have
> tenancies, and not only do the permanent inhabitants form a labour
> reserve, but the villages act as a point of attraction for other westerners
> when there is a particular demand for labour.[37]

As early as the 1933-4 season there were eight thousand Westerners living permanently in specifically Western settlements across the Scheme, plus others living within Arab villages, for whom there are no statistics.[38] These figures rose significantly during peak picking and weeding seasons. In 1940 there were an estimated 62,000 migrant Western labourers within the scheme, out of a total Scheme population of 380,000.[39]

However, Arab labour from the White Nile and from the eastern bank of the Blue Nile remained the dominant source of seasonal labour.[40] The great advantage of this labour supply was that it was settled in its own villages with its own agricultural economy, whose slack season coincided with the busiest period of the agricultural year in the Gezira – the picking of the cotton between December and April. Arab labourers came into the scheme with their families and left immediately after picking, and were seen as quiet and orderly. However, the Arab labourer also had certain disadvantages. Being dependent on wage labour only at periods when rain crops failed, Arab labour was

---

[36] SAD 212/3, C.A. Willis, Director of Intelligence, "Report on Pilgrimage and Slavery", 1926, p. 13.

[37] NRO BNP 1/38/293, Acland, Gezira Commissioner, "Handing Over Notes", May 1940.

[38] NRO BNP 1/43/318, Clarke, Governor BNP to N. Macleod, Senior Medical Officer, Wad Medani, 19 May 1933.

[39] NRO BNP 1/38/293, Acland, Gezira Commissioner, "Handing Over Notes", May 1940.

[40] The highest recorded percentage of Western labour was 49% in 1940. NRO BNP 1/38/293, Acland, Gezira Commissioner, "Handing Over Notes", May 1940.

notoriously unreliable. There were frequent labour shortages in years of good rains, such as in 1937, when "south of Rufa'a the crops were excellent and people are picking only for luxuries".[41] A further disadvantage of Arab labour was their tendency to travel with their animals, for which the tenants had to provide fodder, and suffered the risk of crop damage. However, it was in the comparison with the labouring abilities of the Westerner that Arab labourer really suffered, and a marked change in favour of Western labour occurred in the early years of the scheme:

> When the westerner first came here, three years ago, he was decidedly unpopular with the Arab cultivator, owing to his tendencies to drunkenness and brawls. Whether he has improved in his habits recently, I do not know, and in fact I rather doubt it, but there is no question that the cultivator now prefers Western labour. One tenant mentioned that he would sooner have one Borgu than five Arabs. The reason for this preference is that the westerner, as a rule, works harder. Few Arabs work after 10am, while the westerner will work up until 2pm or 3pm.[42]

Such stereotypes were based on significant differences between labouring communities, based partly on the differing economic motivations of the labouring communities. The monetary wage-paying economy of the Gezira Scheme created the right incentives for the migrant Westerner. Without land, money was a Westerner's primary form of capital, and he was dependent upon gaining a wage to finance all his living costs. Viewing manual labour as a temporary engagement Westerners worked hard because, in a predominantly piece-work economy, that was the best means of gaining the capital needed to invest in non-labouring occupations. In a community in which "no stigma was attached to hard agricultural labour and a high value was placed on maintaining local autonomy", Westerners worked intensively to maximise wage income.[43] In contrast, seasonal Arab labourers only supplemented their income through wage labour, and were not entirely reliant upon gaining wages. With the same cultural attitudes

---

[41] NRO 1Civsec 57/4/18, BNP Monthly Diaries, February 1937.
[42] NRO 2BNP 42/1/1, BNP Annual Report 1929.
[43] O'Brien, "The Political Economy of Semi-Proletarianisation" p. 138.

towards manual labour as tenants, Arab families came as cotton pickers in order to supplement their subsistence agricultural economies. As O'Brien has argued, they "did not seek to maximise income from their available time and energy for work, but adjusted the duration and intensity of the working day to the conflicting requirements of their standards of dignity and desirable levels of consumption."[44] In a simplified statement, Crawford summed up the prevailing attitude when he stated; "the Westerner works because he wants money, the Arab works only when he is hungry".[45]

Not only did the Westerner work longer hours, but he was considered more efficient per hour, and better suited to some demanding tasks than Arabs.[46] In particular the West African hoe, the *kadanka* was more effective than the indigenous tool, the *malod*.[47] Not only more able, the Westerner showed greater labour flexibility and was available at weeding season, when Arabs were working on their own lands. Western settlers were therefore encouraged by many villages as a means of securing permanent access to labour, offering sufficient year-round labour, and acting as a point of attraction for other Western migrants. The pattern of recruiting and settling Western labour was as O'Brien has stated generally "haphazard", and tended to grow from informal personal relationships.[48] Such was the case of the unnamed Western settlement studied by Culwick and her assistant Ali Suliman which had been founded in 1937 by three brothers who had been travelling to Mecca with their father. When their father died while crossing Sudan, the brothers arrived in the Gezira as migrant labourers. After a year spent working in a village where relatives were based, two of the brothers found work in the current village. They decided to stay, and formed stable work relations with the tenants of the village. They created a new settlement alongside the village, with the eldest brother as sheikh, which then grew as other migrants from the brothers' home district were directed to this new settlement.[49]

---

[44] Ibid., See also Culwick, "Study of the Human Factor", p. 168.

[45] Crawford, quoted in Hassoun, "'Western' Migration", p. 87.

[46] Culwick, "A Study of the Human Factor", pp. 173-4.

[47] Hassoun, "'Western' Migration", p. 87.

[48] O'Brien, "The Political Economy of Semi-Proletarianisation", p. 128.

[49] Culwick, "A Study of the Human Factor", appendix III, "A Nigerian Village in the Gezira" Nur.Eff, Ali Suliman, p.2.

With Western settlements built upon tribal, geographical and kinship ties, they were close, homogenous communities with "clear hierarchical structures, based around the sheikh".[50] One of the central roles of the Western sheikh was in acting as labour broker in the economic liaisons between Arab tenants and Western labourers. Suliman described the scene in the village at sunset as tenants arrived to make the following days labour arrangements; "The Hausa, I noticed, never gave their final word without consulting the Sheikh."[51] In contrast with the individual actions of each tenant brokering his own daily labour, the centralised action of the Western community gave them considerable economic strength. In addition to this economic role, the sheikh acted as a religious figurehead. In Yamba's thesis of permanent pilgrimage, a strong case is made for a unique pilgrim identity among many Westerners within the Gezira.[52] Despite the fact that many never reached the destination of Mecca, but instead settled permanently within the Gezira, there remained the self perception of being upon a religious journey. It was important therefore that the journey reflected the religiosity of the pilgrim, frequently measured in terms of the religious authority of the sheikh of the settlement to which the pilgrim/migrant attached himself. Unsurprisingly this religious authority was closely linked to a sheikh's economic abilities. The more able to gain favourable economic terms in wages or sharecropping opportunities, the more grace or 'baraka' the sheikh was perceived to have, the more followers he was able to attract to his village and the more powerful a position he was able to command.[53]

With distinct cultures and languages, there were significant barriers to full integration of Westerners within the Gezira, which their association with manual labour only further entrenched. Thus although Western settlements were organised around existing Gezira villages, they remained quite separate communities. Culwick's description of Western communities as 'shadows' of Arab villages relays some of their distinctiveness and the marginal status in which they existed: "Villages A and B had well defined Fellata

---

[50] Yamba, *Permanent Pilgrims*. pp. 71, 73.
[51] Culwick, "A Study of the Human Factor", appendix III, "A Nigerian Village in the Gezira" Nur.Eff, Ali Suliman, p. 5.
[52] Yamba, *Permanent Pilgrims*.
[53] Ibid., p. 73.

appendages, C had only two or three Fellata families *clinging* to its outskirts."[54] The settlement of Suliman's investigations was typical in being "not more than 100 yards away and economically closely related to it, [the Arab village] but socially living in a world or its own."[55] Tukls were still constructed from grass, unlike the brick favoured in Arab villages, and generally Western settlements lacked the services expected in Arab villages such as wells, and instead depended on canals for their water.[56]

The Power of the Westerner

Despite their social alienation, the constant need and desire for labour within the Scheme generated a degree of power for Western communities. In effect, a Western community attached to a Gezira village had a monopoly over local labour. The knowledge of this monopoly was aptly portrayed by Suliman, who described the labourers in the Western settlement as "mov[ing] proudly with their hoes dangling from their shoulders, realising the urgent need for them."[57] As early as 1929, the province annual report complained that "one of their [Westerners] defects is that in areas of shortage of labour they are apt to make labour rings and go on strike."[58] The power of collective Western labour grew and their ability to set high rates of pay became increasingly resented by tenants. However, such monopolies were hard to break. The tenants within Suliman's village had indeed attempted to attract other casual labourers at a lower rate of pay, but had failed to undermine the collective position of the settled Western villagers. In defence of their monopoly the Western villagers sabotaged the work done by the new labourers, and at the same time, when talking to the latter, exaggerated their own pay, so that the casual labourers felt cheated and disappeared, leaving the tenants "once more at the

---

[54] GBA 400-21, Culwick, "Interim Report on Social Research in the Gezira", 10 July 1953, emphasis added.
[55] Culwick, "A Study of the Human Factor", p. 31.
[56] Ibid., appendix III, "A Nigerian Village in the Gezira" Nur.Eff, Ali Suliman, p. 2.
[57] Ibid., p. 1.
[58] NRO 2BNP 42/1/1, BNP Annual Report 1929.

mercy of the Hausa".[59] Of course, such hard bargaining could only occur in times of labour shortage, however, the evidence points to an almost permanent labour crisis. In his handing-over notes, Acland wrote; "since I have been in Medani, except for the 1940 season, some anxiety has been shown by the companies at the beginning of the season that labour might be short, and was late coming in."[60]

As labourers, Westerners were distrusted, alienated and resented by tenants:

> Politically resentful of its presence, economically still more resentful of the tenancies it [the Westerner] has acquired, they yet suffer great agitation at any suggestion that they might have to do without its [the Western community] services.[61]

In particular, the practice of *tulba* – whereby Syndicate inspectors dissatisfied by the work done on a tenancy might directly recruit labour (most commonly Westerners) to complete the job – at top-level wages which were then charged to the tenant – was greatly begrudged.[62] In addition, Arab non-tenants resented the willingness of Westerners to work for lower wages, which brought down all labour costs.[63] However, it was when Westerners became a significant percentage of tenants that resentment really grew.

During the depression era of the early 1930s, when tenants resigned, it was only by offering vacant tenancies to Westerners that the Syndicate was able to keep the Scheme operating at full capacity. Westerners were highly popular as tenants among Syndicate staff during the depression and by July 1931, in just the one block of Kab el Jidad, there were 136 Western tenants, representing a trend of 'Westernisation' across the Scheme.[64] Westerners were more willing to work on their own tenancies, and to the high standards that the Syndicate set, and so were frequently put forward as preferential tenants,

---

[59] Culwick, "A Study of the Human Factor", appendix III, "A Nigerian Village in the Gezira" Nur.Eff, Ali Suliman, p. 5.

[60] NRO BNP 1/38/293, Acland, Gezira Commissioner, "Handing Over Notes", May 1940.

[61] Culwick, "A Study of the Human Factor", p.11.

[62] O'Brien, "The Political Economy of Semi-Proletarianisation", p. 130.

[63] Hassoun, "'Western' Migration", p. 88.

[64] NRO BNP 1/43/318, Crawford, Commissioner of the Gezira area to Clarke, Governor BNP 6 February 1932.

replacing Arab tenants evicted for poor work.[65] Whether posted as primary or preferential tenants, by 1937, over four thousand, or 19% of tenants were registered under the title of 'Western'.[66] Popular with the Syndicate, the encroachment of the Western tenant was resented by Gezira inhabitants, who saw the Scheme as rightfully theirs. In discussing a northern extension of the scheme, Longe wrote:

> After the first year of cultivation many local people were ejected as
>
> failures and westerners were brought in to take their place, and there for
>
> the most part they remain to the natural chagrin of the natives, who feel
>
> that though they have failed once they deserve another chance.[67]

Local objections were rife, but the government fully supported this use of Westerners and stated that they were willing to use their effective control over tenant controlled local government institutions to see "that no objections or hindrances are put in the way by the local native authorities."[68]

As tenants, Westerners also had certain advantages including preferential calls on fellow Western labour, which worked actively against the interests of other Gezira tenants. Western settlements built on ties of kinship or tribal affiliation created bonds of obligation that Western tenants were able to benefit from. In most Western settlements the sheikh was a tenant, but numbers of up to eight tenants in a Western village were common.[69] The existence of Western tenants in these numbers created labour problems for Arab tenants. During the labour crisis of 1937, the government reported "there is one large Fellata settlement of about 200 persons in Galil Block but as the Fellata have nine tenancies of their own they naturally pick their own cotton first."[70] The lack of stigma attached to labour was a further advantage for Westerners, allowing them to significantly cut down the labour costs upon their own tenancy. As opposed to most Gezira tenants, who, when their landlord aspirations were not being met felt 'pushed' from their tenancies, the Western labourer saw the tenancy as an opportunity. The same

---

[65] SAD 641/5, Longe, ADC Hassaheissa, "Handing Over Notes, North Gezira" 1934.
[66] NRO 1Civsec 57/24/93, BNP Annual Report 1937.
[67] SAD 641/5 Longe, ADC Hassaheissa, "Handing Over Notes, North Gezira" 1934.
[68] NRO BNP 1/43/318, Crawford, Commissioner of the Gezira area to Clarke, Governor BNP, 6 February 1932.
[69] Hassoun, "'Western' Migration", p. 97.
[70] NRO 1Civsec 57/4/18, BNP Monthly Diaries February 1937.

attitude allowed Westerners to abandon their tenancies when more profitable labouring opportunities occurred. In 1937 a number of 'desertions' were reported, in which Western tenants were attracted away by reports of big money in Eritrea.[71]

This business sense allowed Westerners as both tenants and labourers to make considerable profits.[72] At periods in the depression, when tenants were making a loss, labourers were still profiting from their daily wages. As tenants too, Westerners had significant financial advantage through means of the cultural acceptability of personal labour. As G. Brausch has stated, "Often the material standing of the Fellata tenant is higher than that of the Arab tenants, who persists in thinking of himself as a landowner who must maintain a certain sophisticated standard of life."[73] This ability to retain higher profits then allowed a number of Westerners to invest in other business occupations; in particular, the transport business, and the financing of canteens.[74] Other examples of Westerners in the Gezira turning away from the traditional role of labourer into positions of greater authority can be found in their increasing employment as Syndicate ghaffirs, farm managers or temporary tenants.[75] Westerners also attempted to gain significant administrative and 'political' power within the region, with "large numbers of western candidates" standing for council elections.[76]

The image of Westerners as victims of colonial capitalist methods of production thus needs to be reassessed. During much of the Condominium, Western communities while marginalised and stigmatised by the dominant tenant-Arab community, were also able to use their cultural and economic position to significant profitable effect. With a strong collective identity and organised in hierarchical settlements under a dominant sheikh, Westerners were able to organise, compete for and often monopolise the labour market. As tenants they were able to gain preferential usage of this labour supply, and profits

---

[71] NRO 1Civsec 57/4/18, BNP Monthly Diaries May 1937.
[72] Culwick, "A Study of the Human Factor", appendix III, "A Nigerian Village in the Gezira" Nur.Eff, Ali Suliman.
[73] Brausch, "Change and Continuity", p. 353.
[74] Hassoun, "'Western' Migration", p. 103.
[75] Yamba, *Permanent Pilgrims*, p. 73 and SAD 641/5, Longe, ADC Hassaheissa, "Handing Over Notes, North Gezira" 1934.
[76] NRO 2Civsec 30/8/19, BNP Monthly Diaries June 1950.

were ploughed into new economic ventures outside the Scheme. However, these extensions of interest were as much indicative of burgeoning divisions within Western communities, as they were representative of new forms of power. Although some Westerners – in particular those that had founded villages and received tenancies in the early 1930s – did achieve significant benefits from their participation in the Gezira Scheme, there were many others who did not. Later arrivals found opportunities more limited, and were mostly co-opted into schemes that benefited the small emerging Western elite. This may be seen as the beginning of the economic gulf within the Western community that Duffield describes in the post-colonial setting, which gave the long-established Westerner a "politico-economic advantage" over the newcomer.[77]

The Anti-Western Movement

However, tenants were not inclined to make such distinctions. Feeling themselves at the mercy of organised pools of Western labour, resenting the loss of tenancies and fearing an increase in Western influence at the level of local government, tenant antipathy towards Westerners gradually coalesced into an articulate movement against Westerners within the Gezira. As ideas of Sudanese nationalism and tenant interests became increasingly sophisticated, Western communities found themselves under attack on both economic and ethnic grounds. In part these attacks were physical, and the frustrations felt by both Arab and Western communities at times erupted into violence.[78] However, the greater danger to the position of Westerners came from pressure from Arab dominated institutions. As early as 1942, Congress submitted a memo to the government, requesting among other matters, a law defining Sudanese nationality, by which Western migrants and their descendents might be distinguished from the rest of the Sudanese population and thus denied citizenship.[79] Taking more direct action against Westerners, the Rural District Council of South Gezira district in 1945

---

[77] Duffield, "Change among West African Settlers", pp. 50-51.
[78] See for example NRO 2Civsec 30/7/18, BNP Monthly Diaries September 1948.
[79] Daly, *Imperial Sudan*, pp. 157-8.

"unanimously passed a resolution recommending that all Westerners who have more than three previous convictions for crimes of theft and violence should be repatriated."[80]

Soon more extreme voices were heard, advocating total Sudanese self-reliance and describing foreign labour as an evil to be avoided. In 1946, the Special Committee for the Future of the Gezira Scheme put forward its vision of an Arab-controlled Scheme, concluding that; "*Provided a reasonable attempt is made to tap and organise Sudanese labour, no foreign labour will be needed for picking in the Gezira irrigated area*".[81] Instead, Western labour was called to be replaced by Sudanese workers, thus keeping the financial benefits of the scheme among Sudanese nationals. Reasons for the anti-Western sentiment as provided by the committee's report included Westerners non-assimilation, the disease allegedly brought by foreign labour and their being a menace to public security.[82] The report also blamed foreign labour for driving down the living standards of Arabs and for discouraging Sudanese women from working in the fields due to the inappropriateness of women working alongside strangers. Although renowned as hard workers, Westerners were also frequently regarded "as being stupid, pugnacious and ridden with disease."[83]

Hassoun suggests that such anti-Western sentiments were widely held within the Gezira and that "almost the entire bulk of the Gezira natives... thought they could but benefit greatly and prosper if the Westerners were to be rooted out from the Scheme."[84] Claims made against Westerners included those of Mirghani Eff. Dafalla, a clerk in a block office, who in 1947 described Westerners as "impos[ing] their rates on the tenants and rob[bing] them willingly of their money...they are sly and liable of doing unlawful things."[85] Based upon eternal fears of 'the stranger', Anti-Western sentiment was felt broadly throughout the Arab population in central Sudan and in 1948, the government bowed to nationalist pressure and passed the Sudanese nationality law. With the law

---

[80] NRO 1Civsec 57/22/84, BNP Monthly Diaries March 1945.

[81] SAD 517/10, "Report of the Special Committee of the Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan, appointed in 1944 to report on the future of the Gezira after 1950", italics in original.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Duffield, *Maiurno*, p. 2.

[84] Hassoun, "'Western' Migration", p. 82.

[85] Sudan Gezira Board Archive (SGB) 700-2, *El Shabab*, Issue 16, 10 August 1947.

defining as Sudanese only those who were born (or were descendents of those born) in Sudan prior to the establishment of the Condominium, all first generation migrants, and the majority of those descended from migrants were effectively denied citizenship.

In the Gezira, this wider anti-immigrant stance was consistently judged in terms of the economic role of Westerners within the Scheme. Holding valuable tenancies and forming labour monopolies, Westerners were seen as a threat to the aspirations of the indigenous Gezira population. Despite having previously encouraged the use of Westerners, the government and the Syndicate used the occasion of the passing of the nationality law to ease growing tensions between Arabs and Westerners in the Scheme. By imposing restrictions on the ownership of tenancies by newly defined non-Sudanese nationals the government reaffirmed the dominant position of Arab tenants in the Gezira Scheme. As Gaitskell wrote:

> Now that locals are urgently asking for hoshas again, we have
> decided that a westerner cannot pass down his tenancy to a son or
> relative, but that when he dies, or is evicted due to inefficiency, he
> will be replaced by a local.[86]

The ethnic dominance of Arab tenant-citizens was in this way enforced. Concerned primarily with their own status, Arab tenants were able to protect their own economic interests by engaging with a wider national antipathy to foreigners. Richard Rathbone describes a similar development of an ethnically defined citizenship in Akyem Abuakwa, Ghana, where in response to the perceived economic threat of 'foreign' cocoa farmers, the basis of citizenship changed from control over land, to definitions of ethnicity. [87] With control over Gezira tenancies effectively defined by ethnicity, the association of tenancies with an Arab ethnic identity was complete.

However, ethnic dominance was only one element of tenant identity, which focused primarily upon the difference between labouring and tenant populations – of which the Westerner was only the most visible element. As tenancies became increasingly

---

[86] SGB 700-2, *El Rai el Aam*, 2 July 1948. See also, Hassoun, "'Western' Migration", p. 100.
[87] Richard Rathbone, "Defining Akyemfo: the Construction of Citizenship in Akyem Abuakwa, Ghana, 1700-1900", *Africa*, 66, (1996), pp. 506-525.

profitable throughout the 1940s, they also became more desirable. Tenants were able to fulfil Gezira-wide aspirations of wealth accumulation and retirement from manual labour, and in doing so distanced themselves from the majority of non-tenants who struggled in an economic climate of rising inflation. In the search for rising status, tenants needed to define themselves in relation to a population that was of comparably lower status. Labourers and Westerners provided the perfect foil to tenant elitism, fitting into an existing economic and ethnic model of Arab landowning dominance.

With tenant identity revolving around their ethnic and economic distinctiveness, tenants claimed a privileged status for all tenants and reinforced northern Sudanese conceptions of an ideal socio-economic system based on "elite and non-elite, of upper and lower classes".[88] By linking the idea of tenant identity with citizenship, tenants distinguished themselves from non-tenants, and implied their superiority. When Hassan Abdel Galil wrote to "defend the Gezira *citizen* as law-abiding, moral and religious, and as working hard for the benefit of the country as a whole," he was writing specifically about the Gezira tenant.[89] When Babikr Izeirig spoke of the "duty of *citizens*", he was talking specifically about the duties of tenants.[90] With franchise requirements in operation, many non-tenants lacked the rights of full citizenship, automatically gained by tenants. In this way, predicated upon economic interests, and tenant identity, non-tenants were in effect marginalised. This dominance was not purely articulated in terms of tenant status, but it was ultimately firmly entwined. Tenancies became directly associated with a superior status, and true citizenship, a status that was reinforced by the association of franchise rights with tenancy status, and tenant control of regional institutions.

---

[88] McLoughlin, "The Heritage of Slavery" p. 387.
[89] NRO 2BNP 25/3/7, *El Gezira Digest*, 16 December, 1951, emphasis added.
[90] NRO Newspaper Archive, *El Nil*, 8 December, 1953, emphasis added.

10

ESTABLISHING A
TENANT-CITIZENSHIP

The Scheme had since its inception been viewed as a route to enhanced social and economic status, but it was not until the late 1940s, that a pan-Gezira tenant identity was actively articulated. It was during the last decade of the Condominium that tenants became increasingly aware of their combined aspirations based around individual accumulation. Despite the economic and social distinctions within the tenant body, a common self-image of tenants as an elite *rentier* class meant that tenants united in order to defend this common aspiration. Through organised social protest and institutional bodies, tenants defended their 'right' to continued accumulation. This economic focus, and the fact that tenants used means of engaging with the government that were not unlike other labour movements, has led various commentators to draw links between tenant and labour organisations. In particular, Tim Niblock took at face value the contacts between tenants' organisations and workers' unions, as portraying "the unity of struggle between peasants and workers".[1] However, tenants had a fundamentally different self-identity from that of other Sudanese 'workers', and these parallels are not helpful in understanding the distinctiveness of tenant motivations. Instead of opposing the government, tenants put considerable effort into working alongside the government. Direct engagement with government authority was embraced, as tenants aimed to achieve a state of government by and for the tenant body, in which tenants-citizens

---

[1] Niblock, *Class and Power*, p. 124.

retained their social and economic elite status. But despite these common aspirations, the differing ability of tenants to achieve those aspirations (enhanced by the relative depression of 1952-3 that particularly hit smaller tenancies), divided tenant opinion as to the best method of achieving tenant aspirations and ultimately weakened the institutional base of tenant

Striking Interests

The Scheme remained economically and socially stable until the summer of 1946, when a six week strike by tenants threatened the very existence of the Scheme, and marked a turning point in tenant relations with the government and Syndicate. At the end of June 1946, tenants on local government councils reacted angrily to a rumour that the Tenants' Reserve Fund was to be spent on regional social amenities.[2] The Reserve Fund had been established in 1932, after the devastating failure of the cotton crop, and was made up of a portion of each tenant's annual profit pooled as a communal investment to safeguard against future years of low profits.[3] Upset by the idea of the communal use of individual profits to provide community amenities for all – including those non-tenants who had not contributed to the Reserve Fund – tenant consternation spread. The government attempted to nullify tenant anger by informing councils that the money was actually being taken from the Tenants' Welfare Fund, which was a different fund made up of repaid tenant debts from the season of 1930-31, and given back by the government as an endowment trust fund in 1940 specifically for social development in the Gezira.[4]

Appeased in this respect, attention then shifted to the control of the Reserve Fund. Having previously played no active part in the management of the Scheme, tenants were astonished to learn that the Reserve Fund actually contained 1.3 million pounds.

---

[2] GBA, 100-6, Robertson, Civil Secretary, "Note on the present Situation in the Gezira", 1 August 1946.
[3] Gaitskell, *Gezira*, chapter 12.
[4] Gaitskell, *Gezira*, pp. 169-170, and GBA, 100-6, Robertson, Civil Secretary "Note on the present situation in the Gezira", 1 August 1946.

Demands were immediately made for its distribution, on the basis that it was money that belonged to the tenants, as part of their annual profits, and was not the government's or the Syndicate's to retain. In the face of government prevarication, unrest grew, and by mid-July, a strike – in which tenants refused to sow cotton – had spread across 75% of the Scheme.[5] Grievances felt at the contrast between the amount of money within the fund and the financial hardships that tenants had undergone during the 1930s, coalesced into a tenant-wide movement that ended only when the government agreed to make individual payments from the Reserve Fund.[6]

However, if the grievances were genuine and widely felt, organisation was needed to turn them into a Gezira-wide, long-term strike. Seized upon by pro-Arab nationalist political leaders, this organisation was provided by the Ashigga party, and the Ashigga dominated Graduates Congress. Established in 1938 to give expression to educated opinion, Congress was by the mid-1940s, split upon sectarian lines between the Umma and Ashigga parties, with the latter using the Congress as a vehicle for propagating opposition to the colonial government.[7] Using Congress as a political base, the Ashigga party led an underground campaign of propaganda and intimidation to fuel and maintain the strike and it was noted that during the strike, "nearly every merchant's shop in the Gezira villages was an agency for Ashigga propaganda."[8] By organising intimidation gangs and pamphlet distributions, Congress involved themselves in tenant concerns and attempted to gain a support base among the tenant population.[9] The tenant leaders of the strike were thus predominantly Ashigga supporters and the political-religious bias of the Ashigga party meant that tenants from across the social and economic spectrum worked together to defend the right of all tenants to retain control over their individual profits. Established mediators played a central part in the organisation of the strike, thus Fahal Ibrahim, Sheikh of Hag Abdullah Khut who was a member of the Ashigga party, was accused of playing a double game in which he urged tenants to strike while seeming to

---

[5] GBA, 100-6, Civil Secretary, "Note on the Present Situation in the Gezira", 1 August 1946.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Daly, *Imperial Sudan*, pp. 163-168.
[8] NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, A.P. Cullen, Governor BNP to A. Beaton, acting Civil Secretary, 21 December 1953.
[9] Niblock, *Class and Power*, p. 123.

support the government.[10] Forces of mediation outside of the established administrative channels were also actively used, with the holy man and rich tenant of the village of Shadley in Hag Abdullah block visiting Khartoum in order to protest on the behalf of all tenants.[11] Ashigga supporters among the rank and file of tenants also proved to be influential in maintaining the strike, including the "unpleasant tough looking young types" who informed the Syndicate inspector Thewlis Johnson that "if they had said they wouldn't work no-one was to!"[12]

It is this role of the Ashigga party in helping to organise a tenant strike that has led Anthony Cheeseboro to conclude that there existed "a growing sense of common interest among the various sections of the northern Sudanese population", which led to "joint political action between the tenants and the effendiyia".[13] However such an opinion is a simplistic analysis of a single event, and overlooks the great political and motivational differences between the urban political and the tenant movements. Indeed, Congress support of the strike, although largely responsible for its effectiveness, threatened to create a rupture within the tenant body. It was only through effective intimidation tactics that the strike was maintained so effectively, and officials estimated that up to 80 per cent of tenants wished to return to work.[14] In particular, the Halawin, renowned for their "excitable temper", but also for their allegiance to the Ashigga's political opposition – Sayyid Rahman el Mahdi and the Umma party – did not participate in the strike.[15]

However, despite these signs of disunity, the strike clearly unsettled the government and Syndicate, and caught them utterly unprepared. There were fears within the government that "if once they gave way it was the end of the Gezira Scheme and as such the end of the largest part of the revenue of the Sudan."[16] To this end government negotiations were reluctant, and in desiring a show of strength, the government aimed to

---

[10] SAD, 751/8, Winifred Johnson, Diary entry, 12 July 1946.
[11] SAD, 751/8, Johnson, Diary entry, 23 July 1946.
[12] SAD, 751/8, Johnson, Diary entry, 24 July 1946.
[13] Cheeseboro, "Administration and Change", p. 48.
[14] SAD, 751/8, Johnson, Diary entry, 28 July 1946.
[15] GBA, 100-6, Robertson, Civil Secretary "Note on the present situation in the Gezira", 1 August 1946.
[16] SAD, 751/8, Johnson, Diary entry, 9 July 1946.

give away as little as possible.[17] Beneath this show however, the fears were very real. Riots were expected, yet the police inspector of Wad Medani admitted that he did not have the men or equipment to handle such a situation.[18] It was these fears of social disruption, together with the necessity of the Gezira Scheme to bring in national revenue, and the consequent desperation to get the cotton crop sowed, that underscored the government's decision to hastily establish the Gezira Special Committee – a committee of the Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan – to investigate conditions throughout the Scheme. By agreeing to the Committee's recommendations of distributing £400,000 of the Reserve Fund to tenants before the end of the year, the government hoped to be seen as following a moderate, pro-tenant and Sudanese-backed solution.[19]

Many tenants received the news of this agreement with relief, and cotton sowing quickly began.[20] However, the real impact of the strike was to be long term. Stripped of its political backing, the strike may be seen as a single-issue protest by tenants demanding access to reserve fund holdings. At no point did tenants request anything other than the immediate distribution of the fund, and once that goal was achieved, the strike ended. Despite the eventual alienation of many non-Ashigga supporters, the financial grievances motivating the strike appear to have been common to all tenants. What the strike did was illustrate the universality of tenant ambitions to accumulate individual wealth and achieve *rentier* status. In addition it demonstrated the power of united tenant action in defending these aspirations, and the willingness of tenants to align themselves temporarily with wider a political agenda in pursuit of their own interests. This was to be a knowledge that was to fuel later manifestations of tenant attempts to control the management of the Scheme.

[17] GBA, 100-6 "Tenants Strike" 1946.
[18] SAD, 751/8, Johnson, Diary entry, 26 July 1946.
[19] GBA, 100-6, Robertson, Civil Secretary "Note on the present situation in the Gezira", 1 August 1946.
[20] GBA, 100-6, J.W. Cummins, Financial department to Gaitskell, 15 August 1946.

Developing Institutions

A direct outcome of the strike was the creation of the Tenants' Representative Body (TRB) in 1947, born from the government's belated understanding of the need for greater communication with tenants. Although only holding an advisory position, the TRB was in a strong bargaining position vis-à-vis the government after the strike, and as Niblock has suggested, it "played, with some effectiveness, the role which had been allotted to it: defending the tenants' immediate interests and constituted a channel of communications between the board and the tenants."[21] As Gary Bains has demonstrated within the context of South Africa, advisory bodies, despite lacking electoral legitimacy, and being limited in directing policy, were still embraced by indigenous organisations for the opportunities they provided in allowing communities to further their aims.[22] The government was forced to capitulate to several demands made by the body, and despite the concerns of the government, the TRB successfully managed to gain access to the reserve fund on subsequent occasions.[23] However, despite this success in accessing the reserve fund, the TRB remained an organisation essentially alien to most tenants, and was closely controlled by government. Meetings were held in the Governor's office, the deputy Governor acted as chairman, and there were just 40 members, (each representing 350-1300 tenants) with no intermediate bodies through which representatives might communicate with the tenant body.[24]

It has been suggested that the supervision by British block inspectors of the indirect elections to the TRB created a "pliable leadership".[25] Certainly most representatives were from the existing administrative elite, recreating a body that the government was familiar and comfortable working with. Thus the omda, Yusef Abdulla Sha', in addition

---

[21] Niblock, *Class and Power*, p. 123.

[22] Gary Bains "The Contradictions of Community Politics: the African petty bourgeoisie and the New Brighton Advisory Body, c.1937-1952", *Journal of African History*, 35, 1, (1994) pp. 79-97, at p. 97.

[23] Despite the "great reservations" of Bredin as Governor of Blue Nile Province, £E.300,000 from the Reserve Fund was paid to tenants in April 1948. NRO BNP 1/43/316, 5th meeting TRB, 12 April 1948.

[24] NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, C.W. Beer, Chairman TRB, "Note on the second draft of the suggested constitution of the Gezira Tenants' Association," 14 December 1951.

[25] Niblock, *Class and Power*, p. 124.

to his roles on village, block, and rural district councils, also became a tenant representative.[26] Most representatives were wealthy, and many had sideline commercial undertakings; for example Sheikh Ahmed Babikir Izeirig, a leading member of the TRB and later president of the Tenants' Association, in addition to managing his tenancy was involved in commerce and owned a coffee-shop in Khartoum.[27] With a 'safe' and non-radical institution in existence, the government initially saw the TRB as a body through which information might be presented to tenants, in the belief that once tenants understood the reasons behind government actions, criticism would disappear. Representatives were encouraged to debate issues of little overall importance such as the dates on which the payment of profits and appreciations might be made. In contrast, they were not consulted on what those payments might be, or upon other issues central to tenant concerns such as the marketing of cotton or the core relationship between tenants and management.[28]

Despite these limitations, the TRB was an institution that formed an umbrella for formerly disparate tenants, under which the existing aspirations of tenants were able to coalesce. The development of a tenant institution forcibly demonstrated that each tenant held the same relationship to the means of production, framing the interests of the individual tenant as being the universal concerns of every tenant. From the very beginning of its existence, economic concerns were the focus of representatives' work, and the grievances over the Reserve Fund formed the central issue of early meetings. The core disagreement was over the communal nature of the Reserve Fund. Tenants were opposed to the idea that an individual's profit went directly into a communal fund, and supported any tenant in need, regardless of the amount that tenant had himself put into the fund. Tenants instead aimed at a system of individual accounting, but were constantly refuted by a government that believed in the necessity of general tenant security.[29] While the government saw a single tenant body, tenants themselves saw a

---

[26] NRO 2BNP 25/3/7, *El Gezira Digest*, 31 March 1951.

[27] Niblock, *Class and Power*, pp. 123, 313.

[28] NRO BNP 1/43/316, Second meeting of the TRB, 15 July 1947, and sixth meeting of the TRB, 20 July 1948.

[29] NRO BNP 1/14/316, Meetings of the TRB, 8 May 1947, 15 July 1947, 14 January 1948. The government and Syndicate belief in the necessity of communal security had been previously outlined by

collection of individuals all with the aim of securing their aspiration of personal accumulation.

Crucial for the institutional representation of a tenant identity was the decision by the TRB to be politically neutral. Aware of their own interests, their independent strength, and the divisive effects of national politics upon the tenant body, early attempts by Ashigga members to push the Representative Body in the direction of national political concerns failed.[30] This decision paved the way for the development of a strong economic interest group that could represent all tenants, and not be way-laid by political machinations inimical to tenant economic interests. This is not to say that tenants did not continue to have political affiliations, and did not use them to further their own interests – particularly in the sphere of local government – but that it was the common economic aspiration of all tenants that formed the basis of the TRB.

The development of institutional maturity was also an important outcome of the representative body. Mimicking the developments in local government, the TRB became increasingly confident about presenting tenant interests in an institutional manner, becoming an essential channel of mediation. In the first years of the body, representatives were willing to accept government leadership on all matters other than that of the Reserve Fund. Even in 1949, the government suggestion that the tenants appoint their own secretary received an unfavourable reaction, with members stating "all the information required by them was in Government hands and the Government staff could conduct TRB affairs more satisfactorily".[31] However, from this hesitant conservatism grew a confident body, and from making tentative or unrealistic suggestions, representatives became competent debaters, becoming active partners in the Scheme. By the 1950s the TRB had consolidated the notion of specifically tenant interests, and established the idea of tenant involvement within management. The economic concerns of tenants – while still the primary focus – had become more

---

Gaitskell; SAD 418/3/31-35, Gaitskell, "Distribution of Profits and Expenses in the Gezira Scheme", 20 November 1937.

[30] Niblock, *Class and Power*, p. 123.

[31] NRO BNP 1/43/316, Ninth meeting of the TRB, 4 May 1949.

sophisticated, and tenants were requesting not only access to the Reserve Fund, but also wider involvement in the aspects of management such as cotton grading and storing, that directly impacted on individual tenant profits.[32]

In contrast to the rebuffed government attempts of 1949 to increase the autonomy of the TRB, the move to create an independent Tenants' Association in 1952, was greeted with enthusiasm by tenants and their representatives.[33] In the context of the national move to self-governance, it was imperative that the TRB was reorganised to be more independent and in greater contact with all tenants.[34] With its own financial structure and offices, the creation of the Tenants' Association was part of the government's wider policy of training Sudanese in the values of modern democracy. In addition it was a tactical move linking the government with tenant interests before a more radical force did. Instead of each block nominating one representative, the new Tenants' Association was based on a more complex hierarchy intended to put each tenant into closer touch with the Association. Each of the forty-four blocks had a block committee of up to forty members. From each block committee, three members were nominated onto one of five group committees, which in turn nominated six members to sit on the High Council of the Tenants' Association. Hoping that most issues would have been thoroughly debated within the lower committees and much business already completed, the High Council was intended to be much more of a formal business committee than the previous TRB.[35] However, while the government wished to increase representation and accountability of the tenants' institution in the aim of creating a fairer and more equitable society, tenants used the institutional machinery available to them in the cause of inequality and the right to accumulation for some.

Like the TRB, the creation of the Tenants' Association was led by the government and it remained intimately connected with the existing agricultural units of Scheme management. However, membership of the new Tenants' Association was voluntary.

---

[32] NRO BNP 1/43/317, Nineteenth meeting of the TRB, 24 October 1951.
[33] NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, Beer, Chairman TRB, "Note on the second draft of the suggested constitution of the Gezira Tenants' Association", 14 December 1951.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

Unlike the TRB which automatically represented all tenants, the Tenants' Association was made up of those tenants who actively joined it. This was a move seen to be necessary in a climate of choice – in which imposed institutions were open to attack – but potentially dangerous, for it was recognised that such a body "may be more readily challenged by tenants who disagree with decisions reached".[36] Nonetheless tenant enthusiasm for the Tenants' Association was immediately forthcoming, with only 14 out of 823 *samadias* not putting forward a representative in 1952.[37] Such popularity ensured the validity of a tenant representative body, and established the Tenants' Association as an institution accountable to a tenant body that was literate in electoral techniques.

However, despite such enthusiasm for a new body, the Tenants' Association was not a radical departure from the TRB, with most members of the former body retaking their seats within the Tenants' Association.[38] The Association also demonstrated a willingness to bow to the government's advice, despite its stated independence. In the summer of 1952, the Association agreed to follow the government's advice to postpone the balance of payments in order to try to control rising inflation. The pro-government local newspaper *El Gezira*, gave full support to the Association and its defensive actions, describing representatives as "wise" and willing to "shoulder its responsibilities".[39] However, this action went against the immediate financial interests of tenants, and the degree to which the Tenants' Association was willing to back the decisions of the government opened them up to criticism from more radical sections of the tenant body.

---

[36] NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, Gaitskell to Luce, Governor BNP, 26 March 1952.
[37] NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, Beer, Chairman TRB to Musaad, Tenant advisor, 5 April 1952.
[38] Niblock, *Class and Power*, p. 124.
[39] NRO 2BNP 25/3/7, *El Gezira Digest*, 1 June 1952.

The Development of Tenant Radicalism

As early as February 1952, there had been attempts by the labour movement to influence the tenant body and make it part of the wider workers' movement. In an open letter urging tenants to establish a powerful tenants' union through which tenants could secure their 'rights', the Sudan Workers Trades Union Federation (SWTUF) attempted to open tenants' eyes to the injustice and exploitation that they faced:

> Cultivators and especially those who grow cotton are the most important source of wealth of the British capitalists. For this reason, the imperialists exerted much effort to separate them from the rest of their comrades who used to struggle against imperialist exploitation. At present the workers know only very little about the cultivators daily life, but they are aware that they are living in hell. Cultivators toil all the year round and yet find themselves heavily indebted and burdened with fines. They deliver their crops but do not know the price with which they were sold. It is true that Gezira tenants have certain organisations such as village councils and block councils, but the workers refused to join similar councils in the past as they had been well aware of the dangers which these councils might bring to their movement. The workers have struggled until they succeeded in forming their own councils.[40]

Having to make a choice between attempting to secure the support of either tenants or of agricultural labourers, the SWTUF chose the tenants as the strongest potential allies, with the most weight to bring about changes. Accepting the self-image of tenants as the most important group within the region, the labour movement, like the government before them, ignored the dispersed and unorganised agricultural labour working throughout the Gezira Scheme. However, in focusing upon tenants, the labour

---

[40] NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, "The Sudan Trade Union Federation appeals to the cultivators", extract from *Sawt el Sudan*, 28 February 1952. For further information on the development of workers' movements throughout Condominium Sudan, see Saad ed din Fawzi, *The Labour Movement in the Sudan, 1946-1955* (Oxford, 1957), and Ahmad Alawad Sikainga *City of Steel and Fire – A Social History of Atbara, Sudan's Railway Town, 1906-1984* (Oxford, 2002).

movement failed to understand the real aspirations of tenants as being solely focused upon individual accumulation, assuming tenant activism to be reflective of anti-government sentiment.

Predictably there was little response to this invitation. Tenants with their employer self-image, saw their status and their interests as quite distinct from (and above) those of workers. However, the development of workers' movements and anti-colonial politics did have an influence within the Gezira, and the anti-government rhetoric did gradually permeate into the language of tenant groups wishing to oppose the Tenants' Association. For although all tenants might have shared the same aspirations, they did not all share the same ability to attain those aspirations, and the Tenants' Association became viewed by some as a barrier for the universal economic progress of tenants. This in part reflected a new economic reality within the Gezira, as the economic differences always in existence throughout the Scheme were accentuated by the increasing numbers of half tenancies given to tenants. With the Scheme once again profitable and popular, demand once again exceeded supply and what has been termed a "crisis of tenant reproduction" emerged as tenants were unable to pass tenancies to all heirs.[41] The Syndicate attempted to solve this problem by making the half-tenancy a viable unit, and by 1952, forty per cent of all tenancies were half tenancies.[42] However, although giving more people the status of tenant, the half-tenancy was not able to provide the same standard of living that people had come to expect from a full tenancy. Culwick found that per feddan, more people relied upon the profits of a half tenancy than upon a full tenancy, thus the profits were spread more thinly.[43] Overall, those tenants with just a half tenancy were relatively poorer than those with access to a standard tenancy or more.[44]

With those holding half tenancies being less likely to have access to other sources of income, a group of tenants emerged who found it difficult to achieve their aspirations, and saw the entrenched interests of the Tenants' Association and the government as

---

[41] O'Brien, "Social Reproduction", pp. 223-4.

[42] GBA 400-21, G.M. Culwick, "Interim Report on Social Research in the Gezira", July 1953.

[43] Culwick, "A Study of the Human Factor", pp. 46-48.

[44] Ibid., pp. 46-48.

standing in their way. Yusef Mustafa and el Amin Mohammed el Amin were just such half-tenancy holders at the centre of one discontented group of tenants. Introduced to each other by Sheikh Mohammed Ahmed Abu Agla, who was politically active in the nationalistic movement, Mustafa and el Amin established a "friendship and religious brotherhood" within the Sammania tradition.[45] Attracting young educated tenants to their membership, they would discuss "tenants' problems" after religious lessons.[46] When in June of 1953 the communist party approached this group, the mutual benefits were obvious. With the money and organisational experience of the communist party behind them El Amin Mohammed El Amin and his followers soon rose to prominence, and the communist party had a route to the elusive support of Gezira tenants.[47]

In close contact with urban ideas and politics, the communist party appealed particularly to those groups that were marginalised.[48] Within the Gezira Scheme, it was those tenants unable to attain the universal financial and lifestyle aspirations of tenants who were attracted by the communist party rhetoric, establishing a movement that arose from a communist party background but aimed to achieve particular tenant interests. In June 1952, it was reported that the "painting of communist slogans on walls has spread to Wad Medani and Hassaheissa".[49] The politics of communism might well have appealed, especially to the young and economically marginal, of which there were increasing numbers in the Gezira Scheme. However, as with the strike, so in the 1950s was it found that the involvement of a political party in the tenant movement proved to be divisive and inimical to universal tenant interests.

Taking advantage of the voluntary nature of tenant membership within the Tenants' Association, which provided space for competing representative bodies, el Amin's group prepared the ground for opposing the Association. Throughout the summer of 1953, pamphlets and small meetings organised by El Amin and his supporters criticised the

---

[45] The memoirs of Yusef Mustafa, former secretary of the Tenants' Union.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] For more information on the establishment of the communist party in Sudan, see Mohammed Nuri el-Amin, "The Sudanese Communist Movement, The First Five Years", *Middle East Studies*, vol.32, 3, (1996) 22-40, vol.32, 4, (1996) 251-263, vol.33, 1, (1997) 128-151.
[49] NRO 2Civsec 30/1/3, BNP Monthly Diaries 1952, June.

Tenants' Association as stooges of the government. By September, large groups of tenants were articulating their unease with Gezira Board management, by organising petitions and refusing to accept the second payment of the annual profit – deemed insufficient – and instead demanding a larger payment from the reserve fund.[50] Employing a rhetoric of exploitation as a means of encouraging discontented tenant support, the Tenants' Union was born. It was not that tenants had suddenly changed their self-identity from tenant-elite to oppressed victim, rather that despite the rhetoric, it was felt that the interests of the tenant-elite might be best served by the Tenants' Union. In addition to portraying tenants as the victims of colonial oppression, the Tenants' Union also pledged to hold the government to account and increase the profits gained by tenants. It was the failure of the Tenants' Association to fulfil these tenant aspirations that attracted tenants to an alternative body that promised to do so.

An Institutional Duel

Babikr Izeirig, chairman of the Tenants' Association publicly defended the Association against the allegations of the Tenants' Union in the national press. A series of articles followed in *El Nil*, with both bodies demonstrating to tenants and government, their claims to be the legitimate representatives of tenants. The Association made its claims on the basis of experience and wisdom, while the Union focused on the degree of informal public support it had. In addition to the claims of legitimacy, both bodies made claims and counter claims about their ability to hold the government to account. While the Association was derided by the Union as being government agents preventing "serious work on the part of the poor, wronged, innocent tenants to get back their

---

[50] NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, Izeirig, Chairman Tenants' Association to Financial Controller Gezira Board 12 September 1953.

rights"[51], El Amin and the Union were described as "communists [who] want to waste the tenants' money so that they can drive them from their homes". [52]

On the 6-7th November 1953, the Union took advantage of increasing instability and unease with the Tenants' Association to publicly present themselves as a fully-fledged viable institution at a specially mediated 'Tenants' Conference'. Attended by over one thousand individually invited tenants, the Union demonstrated its ability to manipulate the power of display to great effect, gaining the attention of tenants and the government alike. The Union used the conference to elect a new tenant body committee and to demand that the Tenants' Association hand over all assets and accept the authority of the Union.[53] As the *Gezira Digest* reported; "The movement may be sound, or unsound, wise, or unwise, but it has surely won the support of a big mass of the tenants."[54] On the 29th November, demonstrations took place at all Gezira Board offices, at which petitions were handed to block inspectors demanding recognition of the new committee and on the 1st December up to 8,000 people marched to Barakat and Wad Medani with petitions supporting the Union.[55] The government refused to acknowledge its authority, but with the confidence of the Union at a height the Union declared "we have used all the peaceful methods possible to support and aid the Tenants' Union, and we now have no other choice but to walk on the other path".[56] In mid-December, the Union threatened the heart of the Scheme when El Amin organised a ten-day boycott of the Gezira Board, and the government realised that they had reached crisis point.

Taking the offer of an informal committee of notables from Wad Medani to mediate between the two bodies, the government attempted to regain control of the situation. This committee concluded that the Tenants' Association no longer had the full support

---

[51] NRO Newpaper Archive, El Amin Mohammed El Amin, "An answer to Izeirig's notice" reprinted in *El Nil*, 21 October 1953.
[52] NRO Newpaper Archive, Sheikh Babikr Izeirig, "To the tenants of the Gezira Scheme" *El Nil*, 8 December 1953.
[53] NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, Cullen, Governor BNP, "Note on the Gezira tenants' affairs", December 1953
[54] GBA, *El Gezira Digest*, 1 November 1953.
[55] NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, Cullen, Governor BNP, "Note on the Gezira tenants' affairs", December 1953.
[56] NRO Newpaper Archive, el Amin Mohammed el Amin "Notice from the executive council of the Tenants' Union", *el Nil*, 15 December 1953.

of the tenant body, and that stability would only arise by holding new elections, allowing tenants to create a new representative body.[57] This was a decision fully endorsed by the government who wished to have an effective representative body to work with. The opposition to elections by both the Union and the Association suggests that neither were convinced of a favourable electoral result. However, the campaign by the Union had been deeply influential. After an election campaign in which the accusations and allegations continued, a representative body composed of a majority of members from the Tenants' Union was created in March 1954.[58]

In looking back from August 1954, the regional newspaper *El Gezira* concluded:

It is undoubtedly true that the Gezira Scheme has experienced a state

of instability during the last ten months – a state which the Scheme

and its tenants had not undergone throughout the previous 30 years.[59]

The bitter election campaign demonstrated the central importance of a tenant institution to the tenant body. Fought on a platform of economic concerns, tenants attempted to mould the experience of governance to their own personal economic advantage. In part, this focus on tenant representative bodies was a reaction to the failure of councils to engage with financial matters relating to the Scheme. As 'extensions of the *merkaz*', councils were not able to challenge the government's management of the Scheme, and in particular were not able to channel the increasing tensions that were a reaction to the economic control of firstly the Syndicate and later the Gezira Board. Attempts to express tenant concerns through councils generally failed. El Amin Mohammed El Amin, in his former guise as a member of Hassaheissa Rural District Council, criticised the practices of the Syndicate and the Gezira Board, particularly their interference with the Tenants' Representative Body.[60] However, this criticism had little or no impact, and El Amin remained a marginal figure until the Union established him as a popular leader of tenants. A tenant-controlled institution thus provided a focal point for tenant

---

[57] NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, Cullen, Governor BNP, to Beaton, acting Civil Secretary, 21 December 1953.
[58] GBA, *El Gezira*, 15 March 1954.
[59] GBA, SPS file 'general', *El Gezira*, 15 August 1954.
[60] The memoirs of Yusef Mustafa, former secretary of the Tenants' Union.

aspirations, and a lever with which to control the unique tenant experience of governance, in a way in which local government councils could and did not.

The development of tenant institutions charts changing tenant perceptions of themselves and their position within society, and also their united power and their desire to control the government. The TRB was very much a government institution, but it did provide the environment for the development of a consciousness of united tenant interests based around individual accumulation, and provided a practice ground for the future tenant relationship with government. The creation of the Tenants' Association marked a significant step towards an independent tenant body, and attempted to push forward tenant interests in the face of government opposition. However, it was the Union, campaigning on a promise to control the government and bend them to tenant interests – an electoral platform that clearly resonated with tenants – that marked the culmination of tenant consciousness about their interests. The development of a powerful independent tenant interest group was a clear attempt by tenants to reorganise and control their experience of governance and improve their financial interests.

The increasing intensity of both nationalist politics and workers' movements were highly influential to these developments. Radical language and ideologies were easily accessible and offered a ready-made template of exploitation and rights that could easily be imprinted upon the Gezira Scheme by anyone with those with grievances, no matter how inappropriately. In 1953 grievances abounded, as tenants, accustomed to a rising standard of living, felt the effects of a relative economic downturn. With profit levels from cotton sales rising throughout the 1940s, an astonishing peak was reached in 1951, whereupon a single tenancy made an average of £E.800 from cotton, a dramatic increase from £E.49 in 1946, and even more so from the debts of the early 1930s.[61] Such high profits had the consequences of creating a tenant spending-spree, and during the season of 1951-2, conspicuous spending and liberal borrowing were frequent expressions of tenant identity. Flying became a common form of transport to Mecca, and taxis

---

[61] Gaitskell, *Gezira*, pp. 270, 317.

abounded within the Scheme.[62] The result of such an uncontrolled influx of money was rampant inflation, and when profits fell, which they did in 1952 to £E.300, and again in 1953 to £E.200, tenants found themselves faced with spiralling inflation and rising debt.[63]

Having attained their aspirations in these two spectacular seasons, tenants desired to maintain the lifestyle they had now experienced. With aspirations increasingly couched as rights, this situation of exaggerated financial misery was a crucial pre-condition for tenant demands for increased control over the central government structures affecting their financial lives. As Culwick stated:

> The sudden and temporary flood of money had done much to establish more strongly than ever their ideal of themselves as managing, not working, a tenancy and it correspondingly intensified their disgruntlement as the prospect of attainment receded.[64]

Sheikh el Wali, a prominent contributor to the El Gezira newspaper, succinctly outlined the impact of what he described as a financial crisis of bankruptcy; "this has undoubtedly affected them [tenants] psychologically... they are now ready to tax any of their representatives with carelessness and neglect of duty."[65] When the depression of the 1930s hit the Scheme, tenants had been unorganised. In 1953 there was an established tenant consciousness, a framework of tenant institutions, and an inherent confidence among tenants, that allowed tenants to articulate their discontent. The grievances concerning the failure of aspirations may have been similar to those of the 1930s, however, the methods of articulating those grievances had become formalised and bureaucratised.

The pressures upon the Tenants' Association, from an increasingly discontented and financially strained tenant body, and an increasingly assertive opposition movement were fierce. The Association responded by increasing its own assertiveness and drawing

---

[62] Gaitskell, *Gezira*, pp. 317-318.
[63] Ibid., p. 318.
[64] Culwick, "Study of the Human Factor", p. 162.
[65] GBA, *El Gezira*, Sheikh el Wali "Gezira tenants' financial crisis", 1 November 1953.

attention to its own demands for improving the financial position of tenants, and at the same time distancing itself from the emerging Union. The differences between the two bodies claiming control of the representative body are easily seen; the Union used a language borrowed from the workers' movements, of exploitation and oppression, while the Association used a paternalistic language of co-existing rights and duties, holding themselves up as independent community leaders looking after tenant interests.[66] These different approaches attracted different members and supporters, and the growth of the Union emphasised differences within the tenant body. The Association, with its representatives largely from the established and wealthy administrative elite appealed to those benefiting from the status quo, while the Union generally attracted those economically more marginal, those with half-tenancies and the young who were open to influence from urban and workers' movements, and whose aspirations, albeit the same as more wealthy tenants were not being met. These differences were summed up by Thomas Mynors, deputy Governor, who described the members of the Tenants' Union on a demonstration, as "rather young and scruffily dressed as compared with the older and better dressed Tenants' Association body".[67]

Articulating 'Rights'

However, these differences can be overstated, and should not hide the overriding similarities between the bodies. Though these differences might point to different visions of future tenant control of the Scheme's governance, crucially both bodies shared the aspirations of individual accumulation and of an elite tenant citizenry, in which tenants gained increasing control over their own financial concerns. This was a shared vision of governance by and for tenants. Despite the emergence of two opposing factions, the events of 1953 primarily represented a search by tenants to find the best

---

[66] NRO Newspaper Archive, *El Nil*, el Amin Mohammed el Amin, 21 October 1953; *El Nil*, Sheikh Abu el Hassan el Mahmoud, 4 November 1953.

[67] NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, Thomas Mynors, Deputy Governor BNP, "Gezira Tenants' Organisations", December 1953.

representatives to further an existing conception of tenant interests. Thus the core of the dispute was the debate over the *ability* of the representatives to control the governance of the Scheme. As the Association frequently pointed out, the demands made by the Union were not new, but were exactly the same as those that the Association had been working towards since its inception.[68] It was the perceived inability of the Tenants' Association to fulfil these demands, and demonstrate full control over the structures of governance that gave rise to the opportunity to replace the Association. The coherence of these demands despite the differences in rhetoric is striking, suggesting the existence of an unquestioned moral economy existing around a series of tenants' rights.

Tenants broadly accepted the Scheme's structure, and the changes that it had brought but they did so on the understanding that in return, it would provide them with increasing financial returns and a rising standard of living. The central role of government was also embraced on the premise that government existed to serve the interests of tenants. Tenant aspirations remained focused on individual financial benefits, and a tenant body had to represent these interests. The concept of individual rights, so frequently upheld as a virtue to be encouraged and protected by the British in Africa, was appropriated by tenants as a central focus of tenant identity and unity. The language of specifically tenant rights became a commonly used rhetorical tool beginning in the 1946 strike when "angry crowds of tenants several hundreds strong besieged the Mudiria clamouring for 'their rights'".[69] By 1953, the word was littered through the newspaper articles, with the Association arguing that they were "doing a brilliant job as a supervisor of tenant's rights", and the Union declaring that they would help the "poor wronged innocent [tenants] get back their rights."[70] These 'rights' were articulated within fourteen demands, used by both the Association and the Union, which focused on a tenant moral economy of individual financial accumulation. Eleven of the demands were directly related to an increased financial return for each individual tenant, two were about general standard of living in communities as a whole, and one was about reasserting the

---

[68] NRO Newspaper Archive, *El Nil*, Ahmed Babikr Izeirig, "Note to the Sudanese people and specifically the farmers of the Gezira", 17 October 1953.
[69] NRO 2Civsec 30/7/18, BNP Monthly Diaries, June, 1946.
[70] NRO Newspaper Archive, *El Nil*, Sheikh Abu Al Hassan Abd Almahmoud, 4 May 1953; *El Nil*, El Amin Mohammed El Amin, 21 October 1953.

fundamental relationship between tenants and the structures of governance in order to more easily obtain the other 13 demands.[71]

A clear distrust of an alien government to look after the best interests of tenants was articulated through the demands for legal advisors, and participation on management boards. However, despite this distrust, it was also accepted that the most productive way of influencing and ultimately controlling the government was by becoming part of the structures of governance. By participating within the legitimate spheres of governance, tenants could provide themselves with a platform from which to hold the government to account. Therefore, the Union, despite its attack upon the Association, only attempted to undermine its right to hold the position of representative body, and did not attack the idea of there being such a body. Instead, both bodies drew on the new debates about governance being developed at local and national levels of Sudanese society, and adopted a language of legitimacy and accountability.

By following the model of existing bureaucratic institutions (but adapted to further specific tenant interests) tenant institutions eschewed notions of traditional authority, commonly used in other areas of Africa as a way of making statements of power. Neither a language nor the symbols of traditional authority were co-opted by tenants as a way of demonstrating their unity and their power base. Seeing themselves as at the forefront of a modern society, modernity was embraced within the rhetoric and structures of tenant organisation in the pursuit of a culturally consistent aim of individual accumulation and *rentiership*. Fulfilling British ideas about the lack of tradition and traditional authority within the Gezira, and responding to the imposition of a 'modern' capitalist, export oriented economy, tenants chose to defend their economic interests in ways that mirrored the modern structure imposed upon them. Citizenship was a central idea in this self-representation of tenants. With the Gezira Scheme providing the majority of the nation's revenue, tenants saw themselves as invaluable and among the most important citizens of the nation.

---

[71] NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, Cullen, Governor BNP, "Note on the Gezira tenants' affairs", December 1953. See appendix for the full list of tenant demands.

It was therefore on the ability to hold government to account on issues pertaining to the common demands of tenants, that the claimants to the representative body were judged, and not their political or ideological affiliations – a matter perceived to be the jurisdiction of national politics. It was on this ability that both the Union and Association made their claims and counterclaims. The Association presented itself as a trustworthy body with knowledge of and an established working relationship with the government.[72] The Union claimed that the Association had failed to deliver, and that they, with their powerful backing and determination to deliver tenants' rights were the most appropriate body to successfully achieve the aims of tenants.[73] With tenants looking for the 'best' institution for increasing tenant power vis-à-vis the government, the Union gained the majority of tenants' votes in the election held at the beginning of March 1954.[74] Frustrated with the Association for not delivering quickly enough, tenants decided to give the Union the opportunity to show themselves more able to secure the financial aspirations of all Gezira tenants.

However, once in power, the Union too failed to deliver, and despite the wish of tenants to create a body that could control the government, the government remained strong. The fundamental differences between a tenant body that prioritised their own financial needs and a government-management that desired to maintain efficiency and national revenue were never going to be easy to negotiate. The aggressive demands, language and tactics used by the Union; including frequent visits to Khartoum in order to make complaints about the "stubbornness" of the Gezira Board, demands to annul all evictions, and the threat of a further strike at sowing time until all demands were met, only fuelled the tensions with government.[75] On the other side, the government having acted as the guardians of Africans' individual rights found it difficult when Africans appropriated these same ideas for their own purposes.

---

[72] NRO Newspaper Archive, *El Nil*, Sheikh Abu el Hassan el Mahmoud, "To the tenants of the Gezira Scheme" 4 November 1953.

[73] NRO Newspaper Archive, *El Nil*, "Press release by the organisers of the preparatory council for the tenants' conference", 21 October 1953.

[74] GBA *El Gezira*, 15 March 1954.

[75] NRO Newspaper Archive, *El Nil*, "Notice from the Gezira Board", 28 July 1954.

It was tenant dissatisfaction with the conduct of the Union that brought about its downfall. By June of 1954, just a few months into the Union's leadership, support was beginning to wane. Meetings arranged by the Union were poorly attended, accusations of intimidation tactics increased, and the knowledge that El Amin refuted the need for a vote of confidence was greeted with dismay.[76] Having wanted a strong body to effectively mediate with government and achieve the demands of tenants, it was soon realised that the ideology and rhetoric of the Union was ultimately inimical to tenant interests. In 1954, the Union attempted to make constitutional changes that included opening membership to non-tenants in order to consolidate its strength.[77] This along with a more general failure to secure the demands of tenants proved to be the major downfall of the Union, as the economic and ethnic dominance of tenants was seen to be undermined by this proposal. With a more thorough awareness of tenant motivations and aspirations, Mekki Abbas, then managing director of the Gezira Board was able to shake off the threat of a strike in 1955 by offering each tenant £E20, with promise of a further £E10, to all tenants undertaking a promise not to strike. Aware of the primacy of financial issues, the government successfully undermined the authority of the Union by providing tenants with just that which the Union had been unable to negotiate. Humiliated and defeated, the Tenants' Union was forced aside in the 1956 elections, and saw the personnel of the weakened Tenants' Association return to power until 1963 when El Amin re-emerged to take the Union into the Numeiri years.[78]

The strike of 1946 was the first expression of a united tenant identity based around common economic demands, and proved the value of Gezira-wide organisation. Leading directly to the creation of a tenant institution, tenants embraced the institutional model as a way of continuing to organise and represent tenants and their interests. Despite the rivalry of the Tenants' Association and the Tenants' Union from 1953, this institutional framework was at no time challenged. Instead, it was the ability to be

---

[76] NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, Khartoum 'centroff' to Mynors, Governor BNP, 22 June 1954, and GBA, El Gezira, 15 July 54.
[77] Gaitskell, Gezira, p. 307.
[78] Barnett, The Gezira Scheme, p. 140.

'modern' and be part of 'modern' government that was a central claim of both the Union's and the Association's claims for legitimacy. Tenants, seeing themselves as members of an elite citizenship desired to be part of the government, and claimed control over their own experience of government. This was a very particular tenant identity, based on a self-perception of being an economic and cultural elite with the 'right' to control and access the profits of the Gezira Scheme. Although tenants did maintain links with urban centres, this was an identity that excluded all non-tenants, whether labourer or 'effendia'.

Although use had been made of other, more direct methods of holding the government to account (most notably strike action), the development of bureaucratic accountable structures throughout national and local government cultures provided an impetus for using similar machinery in the attempt to wrest control over the tenant experience of governance within the Gezira Scheme. Behind the rivalry between the Tenants' Association and the Tenants' Union, which reflected the existence of unequal control over resources within the tenant body, lay a consensus of opinion on the need to develop a parallel bureaucratic structure that benefited tenants' interests. Despite the varieties in social and economic status among tenants, the common interests of all tenants based on financial aspirations were behind both the Union's and the Association's claims. Based on a perceived notion of tenants' 'rights' – particularly the right to accumulate individual profit – seen to be abused by an unaccountable alien government, a tenants' representative body was valued for its ability to bring the government to account and achieve a set of 'demands', crystallised within both bodies' rhetoric. Although the conflict between the Union and the Association, as articulated within the series of newspaper articles revealed the differences between both bodies, they appealed to the support of tenants on very similar terms. The fact that the tenant body was willing to support the institution perceived as most able to hold the government to account, despite the use of inappropriate rhetoric, further suggests that they did not view ideology as important to the function of the representative body. Rather the legitimacy of the body was judged on its ability to meet the demands of tenant aspirations.

The campaigns of the Association and Union did have their successes. Tenants not only gained immediate financial benefits through payments out of the Reserve Fund, but also saw a more fundamental shift in their relationship with government, as demands for representation on marketing boards, the opening of world markets and a special status for Gezira tenants within the Sudan were met. However, the government was uncompromising on issues affecting the overall efficiency of the Scheme, and on occasions forcibly demonstrated its overarching power. After some years of threatening the government's hold over the governing structures of the Gezira Scheme, the power of tenant institutions rapidly declined as competition and public campaigning split the electorate and created a spiral of ever increasing and unrealised claims. As the Condominium ended, the government was able to reassert its own position in the climate of internal tenant conflict. Despite the support of the tenants for a representative institution able to bring the government to account, both the Association and the Union set themselves up to fail by basing their legitimacy on demands that were ultimately impossible to fulfil. In part a response to the divergent interests within the tenant body, the one demand that gained the united support of tenants – that of continued individual accumulation – was always going to be unsupportable, and, being based on international economic conditions, was ultimately uncontrollable by any government or interest group.

CONCLUSION

To be a tenant or not to be a tenant is a matter of great practical
moment, to be a land-owner or not to be a land-owner under the
conditions created by the Scheme to day is of secondary importance
economically.[1]

Making landowning largely irrelevant, the Gezira Scheme effectively broadened the
basis of elite status. However, this study shows that crucially, this wider tenant elite
retained the same values and aspirations of pre-existing landowners and the Scheme was
successful because it was easily moulded to fit with the existing values of Gezira
communities. Individualistic and financially driven, new tenants saw in the Scheme's
structure the potential to achieve the lifestyle previously reserved for a small landowning
elite. In particular, the high profits associated with tenancies allowed a tenant to employ
labourers and act as landlord at the apex of a hierarchical society in the same way that
landowners once had.

In contrast with this continuity of social values, the government's imagination of Gezira
society and values was uncertain and changing. Failing to understand the hierarchical
complexity of the society over which they ruled, British officials used the opportunity
provided by the creation of the Gezira Scheme to superimpose their own version of an
ideal peasant-proprietor society. Highly reliant upon a work ethic that valued personal

---

[1] Culwick, *A Study of the Human Factor*, p. 56

manual labour, the British imagination of the Gezira Scheme failed to correlate with the highly competitive and status-driven aspirations of Gezira communities. Instead, the new tenant elite was able to manipulate the government's flawed imagination to pursue their own existing aspirations, using the very structures imposed by the government to reach quite distinctive ends. The Scheme was embraced by the Gezira population, but they did so not on the terms hoped by the government, but purely on the basis of the financial capital associated with tenancies which was used to attain a lifestyle free from manual labour. It was for this financial capital that tenants were attracted to the Scheme, and it was in defence of this capital that tenants fought for perceived rights.

In 1913, several dozen tenants petitioned the government to prevent changes in the experimental Scheme structure that were going to reduce tenants' financial earnings. Forty years later several thousand tenants petitioned the government to meet a series of demands regarding the financial position of tenants. Despite the enormous change in the scale of tenant campaigning, the issues at the heart of the relationship between tenants and the Gezira Scheme remained unchanged throughout the Condominium period. Although neither campaign was particularly successful, both attempts to assert tenant-led policies demonstrate the centrality of financial profits to tenants' acceptance of the Scheme, and their willingness to engage with the state in defending their financial position. However, whereas in the earlier period tenants simply presented a petition to the province Governor, by the 1950s, tenant campaigning involved institutions, meetings, marches, the use of placards, as well as visits and petitions to representatives of provincial and central government. In part this change represented the change of scale of the tenant body. However, more than anything else, it represented a new-found confidence of the tenant body to use the very forms of governance promoted by the government in an attempt to meet their own distinctive demands.

These later attempts by tenants to mould their own experience of governance to suit their united interests reflected the experience tenants had gained of using mediating institutions throughout the Condominium. Government devolution policies, while in fact highly centralising, had from the 1920s introduced formal bureaucratic judicial and

administrative institutions into local communities, providing them with essential experience of 'modern' governance. Within the Gezira, these policies of devolution were directly influenced by the Gezira Scheme. It was because of the needs of agricultural organisation that devolution was introduced at a faster rate within the Gezira region, and institutions of local governance remained tightly wedded to agricultural requirements. This close relationship of state-sanctioned institutions and the Gezira Scheme meant that tenants became the main focus of the state and the main beneficiaries of devolution policies. Not only had the Scheme offered the financial opportunities for a broad swathe of the Gezira population to become economically dominant, but this economic dominance was directly translated into social and political dominance through tenant control of local government institutions. As tenant status became equated with automatic and elevated citizenship, so the new institutions of government were embraced as a way of achieving common tenant aspirations. This was governance for and by tenants reflecting the unique relationship that tenants had with the state. As the self-appointed apex of a hierarchy, tenants defined themselves in relation to non-tenants. In particular, tenants defined themselves ethnically as Arab in reaction to the perceived economic threat of non-Arab Westerners.

However, while tenants saw their participation within the Gezira Scheme as a means to enhance their economic and social status and were eager to define their aspirations as rights, these aspirations all too often proved to be unobtainable. The profits of the early 1950s soon proved to be unsustainable and the following decline, together with the steady increase of half tenancies meant that by no means all tenants could attain the standard of living and status of pre-Scheme elites. The few exceptions such as Yusef Algam who used his first tenancy as a stepping stone to move from relative obscurity to gain a leading position within the Gezira tended to prove the general rule that social, economic and political power was retained within the same few families. Those with existing capital were at a distinct advantage within the Scheme and it was on this basis that there occurred a split in the tenant body; a split that was premised upon the differing abilities of tenants to attain the same aspirations.

In political as well as economic spheres, existing figures of authority tended to remain dominant throughout this period. The effect of government policies of centralisation was to create an administrative elite that gained a significant degree of power, but never became the sole agents of authority that they were often imagined to be by the government. Throughout the Condominium, Gezira communities proved remarkably able to adapt the new forms of central governance to suit their own purposes. This was a society that was highly experienced in mediating with a central state through identified gatekeepers. Thus the government's attempt to centralise authority in the figures of administrative experts, while more thorough than previous regimes, was far from being a new phenomena. At no point was the concept of centralised administrative authority undermined, for although individuals and lineages might compete for control over centralised positions, the benefits that this mediation brought to the community were understood. In part providing communities with resources and useful channels of communication, the devolution of local government also worked to contain the state. For although the state became increasingly controlling, it also became focussed upon just one part of a community, creating space elsewhere for communities to act without state controls. In this way, while courts and councils were quickly appropriated to deal with issues related to the Gezira Scheme, they were never used to discuss inter-community affairs. It must be assumed that those disputes and concerns were settled within authority structures that continued to exist alongside government-controlled institutions. As much as the government took a pick and mix approach to the forms of authority they chose to officially support, so communities took the same approach to the ways in which they used those official structures.

The Gezira region found the changes brought by the Condominium government far easier to adapt to than the government did. Throughout most of the Condominium period, the government struggled with the notion of modernity, and the Gezira Scheme was viewed as a necessary aberration to a traditional ideal. It was not until the final years of the Condominium that the Scheme was celebrated for symbolising the perfect symbiosis of modern governance and rural values. In contrast, the population of the Gezira demonstrated self confidence and consistency, always willing to use modern

structures to attain their existing cultural values. Thus it was that the changes that occurred within government thinking were more dramatic than any that occurred upon the ground. Gezira society remained fluid and adaptable while at the same time retaining its core values. Such a conclusion flies in the face of perceived wisdom that has seen the physical structures of the Scheme, with its intense supervision as altering the very fabric of society. However, the Scheme was not a totalising institution and nor were tenants an exploited community or victims of colonial financial policy, although they may well be described as exploiters of a wider labour force. Rather, the weakness of the government, symbolised by their lack of effective knowledge of the Gezira community must be stressed. For while as Sara Berry argues, colonial states set the context for struggles over access to resources, "governments' actions neither determined nor controlled their outcomes."[2] Instead, tenants became the primary actors within the Scheme's structure. It was they that after weighing up the evidence decided to involve themselves in the Scheme, and it was they that took an active and positive role in controlling their own experience of the Scheme by embracing the government and the Scheme itself. With the government reliant upon tenant organisation of labour, the tenant body was in a strong position to dictate the terms of the Scheme's organisation. Powerful, and with a strong self-identity based upon economic position and ethnic background, the tenant body can be seen as one distinctive part of the wider formation of a northern riverain Sudanese Arab elite that became consolidated throughout the Condominium.[3]

The Gezira Scheme was (and is) undeniably a spectacular economic undertaking, which had the potential to revolutionise not only the physical landscape, but existing social and economic patterns. The fact that it did not, and that pre-existing cultural values and community authority structures remained in place, is a reflection of the fact that there was considerable ability for the Scheme to be moulded to fit those established values and cultural aspirations. The Gezira region had of course changed significantly under Condominium rule. It had become an important part of the world economy, and was

---

[2] S. Berry, *No Condition is Permanent*, p. 101
[3] See for example, Sharkey, *Living With Colonialism*, pp. 21-26.

spatially, politically, and administratively dominated by the Scheme. However, these changes were of degree rather than of type. For centuries the Gezira had been engaged in the wider economy and in multiple forms of economic enterprise, including profit-sharing farming schemes, thus leading to continuities that have often been overlooked. In fact the greatest changes that occurred were located within the rhetoric of the government rather than in the social structures of Gezira society. Moreover, the Scheme failed to impact directly on the lives of tenants in the ways that have often been presupposed. By employing labour, tenants were able to express a cultural ideal and at the same time shield themselves from the excesses of the state. Distancing themselves from manual labour and engaging in disparate trading and commercial concerns, tenants acted in pursuit of long-established ideals of status and behaviour.

APPENDIX

The Fourteen Tenant demands

1. Execution of the principle of partnership between the tenants, the Sudan Gezira Board and government

2. Increasing the tenants' share of profits from the sale of cotton

3. Participation by the tenants in the 'cotton sales committee'

4. Appointment of an advisor to the tenants on legal and economic affairs

5. Appointment of cotton classifiers on behalf of the tenants

6. Opening of world markets to Gezira cotton

7. Abolition of restriction of (Nile) water and extension of the scheme

8. Guaranteed water for lubia

9. Development of fruit and vegetable gardens in all villages

10. Development of social services and alternative husbandry schemes

11. Compensation to tenants for disease damage to cotton

12. Reduction in tenants' financial obligations

13. Cancellation of 'Income tax' on tenants

14. Payment of instalments from the reserve fund

NRO 2BNP 50/8/31, A.P. Cullen, "Note on the Gezira tenants' affairs", December 1953.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archival Materials

Sudan Government Archives, Khartoum, National Records Office (NRO)

The National Record Office provided the bulk of archival source material used for this thesis. File titles as listed:

1Civsec

116/50	BNP Devolution 1.
1/16/51	BNP Devolution 2.
1/16/52	BNP Devolution 3.
1/17/53	BNP Devolution 4.
1/17/54	BNP Devolution 5.
1/50/133	Discussion on Village Courts, 1925-29.
2/13/57	Discussion on the proposed social organisation of the Gezira Scheme.
16/5/20	Retrenchment and administrative changes 1930-33.
50/2/10	Policy on mamurs, 1924.
57/4/18	BNP Monthly Diary 1937.
57/6/26	BNP Monthly Diary 1938.
57/10/39	BNP Monthly Diary 1939.
57/13/44	BNP Monthly Diary 1940.
57/14/54	BNP Monthly Diary 1941.
57/17/63	BNP Monthly Diary 1942.
57/18/67	BNP Monthly Diary 1943.
57/20/75	BNP Monthly Diary 1944.

57/22/84   BNP Monthly Diary 1945.

57/24/93   BNP Annual Report 1937.

57/25/109   BNP Annual Report 1938.

57/34/122   BNP Handbook Vol I, c.1920, history of pre-scheme Gezira.

57/34/123   BNP Handbook Vol II, c.1920, history of pre-scheme Gezira.

57/34/126   Letters Re: establishment of scheme, early 1920s.

66/2/18   Arakiin Tribe, notes by Henderson, 1930.

66/13/127   Complaints, by or against Sheikhs.

2 Civsec

30/1/3   BNP Monthly Diary 1952 & 53.

30/7/18   BNP Monthly Diary 1946, 47 & 48.

30/8/19   BNP Monthly Diary 1949, 50 & 51.

1 BNP

1/1/1   Devolution, 1927-29.

1/1/2   Discussion on Devolution 1930.

1/2/11   The role of educated classes in native administration.

1/18/112   Discussion among BNP DCs 1929-30.

1/24/172   Office organisation - ways to increase efficiency.

1/25/188   Feki Beshir Mohammed Khidr, 1930, his influence in Bortobeil.

1/25/189   Feki Abdel Bagi el Gorashi, 1912-1916.

1/26/197   Religion.

1/27/199   Sammania tariqa, 1936.

1/27/201   BNP Annual Report 1928.

1/27/204   Handing Over Notes; Kamlin 1931, Wad Medani 1933.

1/28/208   Handing Over Notes, C.G. Davies, as DC Gezira, 1936.

1/28/211   Slavery – General, 1924-27.

1/30/222   Halawin affairs.

1/30/223   BNP Tribal policy 1923-4.

1/31/224   Control of 'Fellata' 1917-19.

1/31/241   Halawin troubles 1919.

1/31/242   Note on Khawalda, Crawford, 1930.

1/32/250   Tribal dispute in Heweiwa village, by Acland, 1937.

1/33/252   Dismissal of Sheikhs 1923-27.

1/36/280   Administration of Abdel Magid, 1938.

1/38/293   Gezira Handing Over Notes, Acland 1940.

1/39/297   Gezira land for the three religious leaders, 1923.

1/40/301   Gezira - General, 1930-40.

1/41/305   Complaints against Syndicate staff, vol I, 1930.

1/41/306   Complaints against Syndicate staff, vol II, 1932-34.

1/41/307   Discussion re; the duties of sheikhs, 1932-34.

1/41/309   Agricultural administration, 1931-33.

1/42/316   TRB Minutes, 1947-1951, vol I.

1/42/317   TRB Minutes, 1951-52, vol II.

1/43/318   Development of new villages, 1932-34.

1/54/397   Labour disputes 1921-4.

2 BNP

1/1/1   Local government in the Gezira, 1950-52.

1/2/9   Local government in the Gezira, 1946-47.

9/2/15   Abu Usher Native Officials Club, 1939-52.

9/5/42   General Reports on Co-operative Societies, 1951.

25/3/7   *El Gezira Digest* 1951-54.

42/1/1   BNP Annual Report 1929.

42/1/2   BNP Annual Report 1939.

42/1/4   BNP Annual Report 1941.

42/2/7   BNP Annual Report 1951- 52.

42/2/10   BNP Annual Report 1927.

50/2/7   The Future of the Gezira Scheme - discussion 1940-49.

50/3/9   Block and village councils 1950-51.

50/6/23   Tenant evictions.

50/6/25   Syndicate ghaffirs, 1933-4.

50/7/28   Economic position of tenants, 1933-38.

50/8/31   Tenants' Representative Body, Tenants' Association and Tenants'
              Union, 1951-1954.

54/1/5   Local government, short piece by Robertson.

54/5/14   Reports on village councils, 1951-2.

Intel

2/28/230   Religious fanatics 1910-12.

9/1/13   Mahdists in BNP, 1915-1927.

NRO Newspaper Archive

El Nil 1953-54.

Gezira Board Archive (GBA), Gezira Board headquarters, Barakat, Sudan

100-6   Tenants strike 1946.

400-21   Culwick - interim report, 1952.

700-2   General - Staff Newsletters Barakat, 1941-51.

700-2   Sudanese Newspaper Reports 1937-47.

700-9   Education, and Syndicate relations with Westerners, 1943.

SPS - General   *El Gezira Digest* 1953-55.

SPS - General 7   Report of Commission for Block and Village Councils 1950.

Sudan Archive Durham (SAD), University of Durham

Below is a list of British officials whose papers were used. For specific reference and full citation see notes.

P.B.E. Acland

A.R.C. Bolton

G.R.F. Bredin

W.F. Crawford

G.M. Culwick

A. Gaitskell

K.D.D. Henderson

W. Johnson

J. Longe

W.H.T. Luce

R.C. Mayall

T.H.B. Mynors

J.W. Robertson

R.F. Wingate

National Archive, Kew, London

Sudan Intelligence Reports Files

WO 106/228-234

WO 106/6224-6225

Rhodes House Archive, (RHA) Oxford

MSS PERHAM

50   Diary, 1937-1938.

53   Diary, 1948-1949.

128   Notes on the Gezira Scheme, 1937-1942.

132   Notes on the BNP and the Gezira Scheme, 1937.

543   Province Papers, BNP.

565   Official Papers, Gezira Scheme.

Books and articles

Adam, F.H. "Agrarian Relations in Sudanese Agriculture: A Historical Review",
  Sudan Journal of Development Research, 1, 2, (1977), 33-44.

al-Arifi, S.A. "Landlordism among small farmers the case of the Gezira Tenant in the
  Sudan", *Sudan Journal of Economic and Social Studies*, 1, 2, (1975), 10-14

Ali, A.I.M, "Contempory British Views on the Khalifa's Rule", *Sudan Notes and
  Records*, 51, (1970), 31-46.

Ali, T. and J. O'Brien, "Labor, Community, and Protest in Sudanese Agriculture", in
  J. Barker (ed.,) *The Politics of Agriculture in Tropical Africa* (London: Sage
  Publications, 1984).

Amery, H.F.S. *Aid to Arabic* (Khartoum: El Sudan Printing Press, 1911).

Antoun, R. "Civil Society, Tribal Process, and Change in Jordan: An
  Anthropological View", *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 32, (2000), 441-
  463.

Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities; Reflections on the Origin and Spread of
  Nationalism* (London, Verso, 1991).

Arkell, A.J. "More About Fung Origins", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 27, (1946) 87-
  98.

Asad, T. "Two European Images of Non-European Rule", in T. Asad (ed.,)
  Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter (London : Ithaca Press, 1973).

Atkins, K. *The Moon is Dead! Give us our Money! - The Cultural Origins of an
  African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900* (London: James Currey,
  1993).

Awad, M.H. "The Evolution of Landownership in Sudan", *Middle East Journal*, 25,
  2, (1971), 212-228.

Baer, G. *Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of
  Chicago Press, 1969).

Bains, G. "The Contradictions of Community Politics: the African petty bourgeoisie
  and the New Brighton Advisory Body, c.1937-1952", *Journal of African
  History*, 35, 1, (1994) 79-97.

Baker, S. *Ismailïa: a Narrative of the Expedition to Central Africa for the Suppression of the Slave Trade, Organized by Ismail, Khedive of Egypt* (London: Macmillan, 1874).

Balamoan, G.A. *Migration Policies in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan 1884-1956* (Cambridge, Mass.: University of Harvard Press, 1976).

Barnett, A. *The Gezira Scheme: An Illusion of Development* (London: Cass, 1977).

————— . and A. Abdelkarim, *Sudan: The Gezira Scheme and Agricultural Transition* (London: Frank Cass, 1991).

Bedri, B. *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri* (eds., Y. Bedri and P. Hogg, London: Ithaca Press 1980).

Bennet, C.H.A. (ed.,) *Laws of the Sudan, vol. 1-10* (London: Haycock P., 1956).

Berman, B. "Ethnicity, Patronage and the African State: The Politics of Uncivil Nationalism", *African Affairs,* 97, 388, (1998) 305-341.

Bernal, V. *Cultivating Workers: Peasants and Capitalism in a Sudanese Village* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

————— . "Colonial Moral Economy and the Discipline of Development: The Gezira Scheme and 'Modern' Sudan", *Journal of Society for Cultural Anthropology,* 12, 4, (1997) 447-479.

Berry, S. *No Condition is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison, Wis., University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

Beshir, M.O. Revolution and Nationalism in the Sudan (London: Collings, 1974).

Birks, J.S. *Across the Savannas to Mecca: The Overland Pilgrimage Route from West Africa* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1978).

Bjørkelo, A. *Prelude to the Mahdiyya: Peasants and Traders in the Shendi Region 1821-1885,* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Black, J. "Tyranny as a Strategy for Survival in an 'Egalitarian' Society: Luri Facts versus an Anthropological Mystique" *Man,* 7, (1972) 614-34.

Brausch, G. "Change and Continuity in the Gezira Region of the Sudan", *International Social Science Journal,* 16, 3, (1964).

————— ., P. Crooke and J. Shaw, *Bashaqra area settlements, 1963: a case study in village development in the Gezira scheme* (Khartoum: University of Khartoum, 1964).

British Cotton Growing Association, *Memorandum on the Development of Cotton Growing in the Sudan* (British Cotton Growing Association series no. 43, November 1910).

Bruce, J. *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (Edinburgh: printed by J. Ruthven; for G.G.J. and J. Robinson, London, 1790).

Burton, G.S.M. *Sudan Arabic Notebook* (London: McCorquodale and Co., 1934)

Cell, J.W. "Colonial Rule", in J.M. Brown and W.R. Louis (eds.,) *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Vol. IV, The Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Chanock, M. *Law, Custom and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 1998).

Chataway, J.P.D. "Notes on the History of the Fung", *Sudan Notes and* Records, 13, (1930), 247-258.

————— . "Fung Origins", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 17, (1934), 111-117.

Churchill, W.S. *The River War: An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan*, (London: Longmans, Green, 1900).

Clough, M. *Fighting Two Sides: Kenyan Chiefs and Politicians, 1918-1940* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1990).

Cooper, F. "Work, Class and Empire: An African Historian's Retrospective on E.P. Thompson" *Social History*, 20, (1995) 235-241.

Crawford, O.G.S. *The Fung Kingdom of Sennar: with a Geographical Account of the Middle Nile Region* (Gloucester: Bellows, 1951).

Cromer, Evelyn Baring, Earl of, *Modern Egypt* (London: Macmillan, 1911).

Culwick, G.M. "A Study of the Human Factor in the Gezira Scheme" (Barakat: Sudan Gezira Board and Sudan Rural Television Project, 1975).

Daly, M. *British Administration and the Northern Sudan, 1917-1924: The Governor-Generalship of Sir Lee Stack in the Sudan* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Arcaeologisch Instituut, 1980).

————— . *Empire on the Nile: The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan 1898-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

————— . *Imperial Sudan: The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium 1934-1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

————— . *The Sirdar: Sir Reginald Wingate and the British Empire in the Middle East* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1997).

Daniel, N. *Islam, Europe and Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966).

Disney, A.W.M. "English Law in the Sudan, 1899-1958", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 40, (1959) 121-123.

Dresch, P. "The Position of Shaykhs among the Northern Tribes of Yemen", *Man*, 19:1 (1984), 31-49.

Duffield, M. *Maiurno: Capitalism and Rural Life in Sudan* (London: Ithaca P., 1981).

————— . "Change among West African Settlers in Northern Sudan", *Review of African Political Economy*, 26, (1983), 45-59.

Duncan, J.S.R. *The Sudan: A Record of Achievement* (Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons Ltd., 1952).

El Amin, M.N. "The Sudanese Communist Movement, The First Five Years", *Middle East Studies*, vol.32, 3, (1996) 22-40, vol.32, 4, (1996) 251-263, vol.33, 1, (1997) 128-151.

El Nur, M.I. "The Role of the Native Courts in the Administration of Justice in the Sudan", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 41 (1960), 78-87.

El Sayed, B. "Towns in the Sudan in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 52, (1971) 63-70.

Fawzi, S.E.D. *The Labour Movement in the Sudan, 1946-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

Fernea, R. *Shaykh and Effendi: Changing Patterns of Authority among the El Shabana of Southern Iraq* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970).

Forbes, A. *Chinese Gordon : a Succinct Record of his Life* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1884).

Founou-Tchuigoua, B. "De-facto Wage Earners in the Gezira", *African Development*, 3, 1, (1978), 25-50.

Gaitskell, A. *Gezira, A Story of Development in the Sudan* (London: Faber, 1959).

Garstin, W. *Report Upon the Basin of the Upper Nile with Proposals for the Improvement of that River* (Cairo: National Printing Dept., 1904).

Gleichen, A. *Handbook of the Sudan,* (London: Harrison and Sons Ltd., 1898).

————— . (ed.,), *Compendium of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (London, Harrison and Sons Ltd., 1905).

Gordon, C. *General Gordon's Khartoum Journal* (ed., Lord Elton, London: Kimber, 1961).

Gordon, H.W. *Events in the Life of Charles George Gordon from its Beginning to its End* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1886).

Graham, G. *Last words with Gordon* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1887).

Guttman, E. "The Reception of the Common Law in the Sudan", *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 6 (1957).

Hassoun, I.A. "'Western' Migration and Settlement in the Gezira", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 37, (1952) 60-112.

Hawley, D. *Sandtracks in the Sudan* (Norwich: Michael Russell, 1995).

Henderson, K.D.D (ed.,) *The Making of the Modern Sudan: the Life and Letters of Sir Douglas Newbold* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood P., 1974).

————— . *Set Under Authority: Being a Portrait of the Life of the British District Officer in the Sudan under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, 1898-1955* (Somerset: Castle Cary Press, 1987).

Hill, R. *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

Holt, P.M. *The Mahdist state in the Sudan, 1881-1898: a Study of its Origins, Development and Overthrow* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

Hoskins, G.A. *Travels in Ethiopia, above the second cataract of the Nile* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longman, 1835).

Hussey, E.R.J. *Tropical Africa 1908-1944* (London: St. Catherine Press, 1959).

Ibrahim, A.A. "Breaking the Pen of Harold MacMichael: The Ja'aliyyin Identity Revisited", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 21, (1988) 217-231.

Iliffe, J. *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Isaacman, Allen and R. Roberts, (eds.,) *Cotton, Colonialism and Social History in Sub-Saharan Africa* (London: Currey, 1995).

Jackson, H.C. *Tooth of Fire: Being Some Account of the Ancient Kingdom of Sennar 1912* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1912).

————— . "The Khawalda Tribe", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1, (1918) 167-74.

————— . "Two Gezira Families", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 3, (1920) 94-109.

————— . *Sudan Days and Ways* (London: Macmillan, 1954).

————— . *Behind the Modern Sudan* (London: Macmillan, 1955).

Johnson, D. "Judicial Regulation and Administrative control: Customary Law and the Nuer, 1898-1954", *Journal of African History,* 27, (1986) 59-78.

————— . *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003).

Kapteijns, L. "The Historiography of the Northern Sudan from 1500 to the Establishment of British Colonial Rule: a Critical Overview", *International Journal of African Historical Studies,* 22, (1989) 251-266.

Kapteijns, L. and J. Spaulding, "History, Ethnicity and Agriculture in the Sudan", in G.M. Craig (ed.,) *The Agriculture of the Sudan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

————— . "The Orientalist Paradigm in the Historiography of the Late Precolonial Sudan", in J. O'Brien and W. Roseberry, (eds.,) *Golden Ages, Dark Ages: Imagining the Past in Anthropolgy and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

Karrar, A.S. *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1992).

Kirk-Green, A.H.M. "Thin White Line: the Size of the Colonial Service in Africa", *African Affairs,* 79, 314, (1980), 25-44.

Larson, B. "Tunisian Kin Ties Reconsidered", *American Anthropologist,* 10, (1983) 551-570.

Lentz, C. "'Tribalism' and Ethnicity in Africa; a review of four decades of Anglophone Research", *Cahiers des Sciences Humaines,* 31 (1995), 303-28.

Lindholm, C. *The Islamic Middle East: Tradition and Change* (Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2002).

Lovejoy, P. *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991).

MacGaffey, W. "Concepts of Race in the Historiography of Northeast Africa" *The Journal of African History,* 7, (1966) 1-17.

MacMichael, H. *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan: and Some Account of the People who Preceded them and of the Tribes Inhabiting Dárf̄ur* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1922).

————— . *The Sudan* (London: Benn, 1954).

Magid, A. "British Rule and Indigenous Organization in Nigeria: A Case-study in Normative-Institutional Change", *Journal of African History,* 9, 2 (1968) 299-313.

Mamdani, M. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1996).

Mann, K. and R. Roberts (eds.,) *Law in Colonial Africa* (London: Currey, 1991).

Marshall, A.H. *Report on Local Government in the Sudan,* (Khartoum: McCorquodale, 1949).

Matthew, J.G. "Land Customs and Tenure in Singa District", *Sudan Notes and Records,* 4, (1921) 1-19.

McLoughlin, P.F.M. "Economic Development and the Heritage of Slavery in the Sudan Republic", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute,* 32, 4, (1962), 355-391.

McHugh, N. *Holymen of the Blue Nile: The making of an Arab-Islamic Community in the Nilotic Sudan, 1500-1850* (Eveston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press 1994).

Mitchell, T. *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988).

————— . *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

Moore, S. *Social Facts and Fabrications: "Customary" Law on Kilimanjaro, 1880-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Mustafa, Z. *The Common Law in the Sudan: an Account of the 'Justice, Equity, and Good Conscience' Provision* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

Nalder, L.F. "Fung Origins", *Sudan Notes and Records,* 14, (1931), 61-66.

————— . "Tales from the Fung Province" *Sudan Notes and Records,* 14, (1931) 67-104.

Niblock, T. *Class and power in Sudan: the Dynamics of Sudanese politics, 1898-1985,* (Albany: SUNY P., 1987).

Nur, S. "Land Tenure during the Time of the Fung", *Kush,* 4, (1956) 48-53.

O'Brien, J. "The Formation of the Agricultural Labour Force in Sudan", *Review of African Political Economy,* 26, (1983), 15-34.

————— . "The Political Economy of Semi-Proletarianisation under Colonialism: Sudan 1925-50", in B. Munslow and M.H. Finch (eds.,) *Proletarianisation in the Third World: Studies in the Creation of a Labour Force Under Dependent Capitalism* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 121-147.

————— . "The Social Reproduction of Tenant Cultivators and Class Formation in the Gezira Scheme, Sudan", *Research in Economic Anthropology*, 6, (1984), 217-241.

————— . "Toward a Reconstitution of Ethnicity: Capitalist Expansion and Cultural Dynamics in Sudan", *American Anthropologist*, 88, 4, (1986) 398-907.

————— . "The Calculus of Profit and Labour-Time in Sudanese Peasant Agriculture", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 14, 4, (1987) 454-468.

Ohrwalder, J. *Ten years' Captivity in the Mahdi's camp, 1882-1892* (ed., F.R. Wingate, London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1892).

Peacock, H. St. G. *A Report of the Land Settlement of the Gezira (Mesellemia District)* (London: Darling & Son, 1913).

Pearce, R.D. *The Turning Point in Africa: British Colonial Policy, 1938-48* (London: Cass, 1982).

Penvenne, J.M. *African Workers and Colonial Racism: Mozambican Strategies and Struggles in Lourenco Marques, 1877-1962* (London: Currey, 1995).

Petherick, J. *Travels in Central Africa, and Explorations of the Western Nile Tributaries* (Farnborough: Gregg International, 1968).

Poncet, C.J. *A Voyage to Aethiopia, Made in the Years 1698, 1699, and 1700* (London: printed for W. Lewis, 1709).

Randell, J.R. "El Gedid – A Blue Nile Gezira Village", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 39, (1958) 25-39.

Ranger, T. "The invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa", in E.J. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.,) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983), 211-62.

Rathbone, R. "Defining Akyemfo: the Construction of Citizenship in Akyem Abuakwa, Ghana, 1700-1900", *Africa*, 66, (1996), 506-525.

Reid, D.M. "Cromer and the Classics: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Greco-Roman Past in Modern Egypt", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 32, 1, (1996) 1-29.

Reid, J.A. "Some Notes on the Tribes of the White Nile Province", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 13, (1930) 149-210.

————— . (ed.,) *Notes on the Tribes and Prominent Families in the Blue Nile Province,* Sudan government memoranda, new administrative series: No. 3. (Khartoum: McCorquodale 1935).

Robertson, J. *Transition in Africa: From Direct Rule to Independence* (London, C. Hurst and Co., 1975).

Russell, H. *The Ruin of the Soudan; Cause, Effect and Remedy: a resumé of events, 1883-1891* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1892).

Said, E.W. *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

Sanderson, G.N. "The Modern Sudan, 1820-1956: The Present Position of Historical Studies", *Journal of African History*, 4, (1963) 435-461.

Salzman, P.C. "Ideology and Change in Middle Eastern Tribal Societies" *Man*, 13 (1978) 618-637.

Scott, J.C. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

Shadle, B. "Changing Traditions to meet Current Altering Conditions: Customary Law, African Courts and the Rejection of Codification in Kenya, 1930-60", *Journal of African History*, 40, (1999) 411-431.

Sharkey, H. *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Sikainga, A.A. *Slaves into Workers: Emancipation and Labor in Colonial Sudan* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996).

————— . *City of Steel and Fire – A Social History of Atbara, Sudan's Railway Town, 1906-1984* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002).

Slatin, R. *Fire and Sword in the Sudan: a Personal Narrative of Fighting and Serving the Dervishes, 1879-1895* (trans., F.R. Wingate, London: Arnold, 1896).

Spaulding, J. "The Government of Sinnar", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 6, (1973) 19-35.

————— . "The Evolution of the Islamic Judiciary in Sinnar", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 10, (1977), 408-426.

————— . "Farmers, Herdsmen and the State in Rainland Sennar", *Journal of African History*, 20 (1979) 329-347.

————— . "Slavery, Land Tenure and Social Class in the Northern Turkish Sudan", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 15, (1982), 1-20.

————— . *The Heroic Age in Sinnar* (Lansing: Michegan State University, 1985).

Spaulding, J and R.S. O'Fahey, *Kingdoms of the Sudan* (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1974).

Spear, T. "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa", *Journal of African History*, 44, (2003), 3-27.

Speke, J.H. *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1863).

Sudan Gezira Board, *The Sudan Gezira Board British Staff Register: incorporating the defunct Sudan Plantations Syndicate and Kassala Cotton Company*, (Khartoum: McCorquodale, 1953).

Sudan Government, *The Sudan Code of Criminal Procedure 1899* (Cairo: National Printing Office, 1899).

————— . *The Sudan Gazette* (Omdurman: Sudan Official Printing Press, 1899-1956).

————— . *The Sudan Civil Justice Ordinance 1900*, (Cairo, National Printing Office, 1900).

————— . *Reports on the Finances, Administration, and Condition of the Sudan* (SGR) (London: HMSO, 1902-1952).

————— . *Notes on the Gezira Irrigation Project* (London: McCorquodale, 1926).

————— . *Memorandum – General Administrative Policy* (Khartoum: McCorquodale and Co., second edition, 1926).

————— . *Guide to District Commissioners when Carrying out Merkaz Inspections* (Khartoum: McCorquodale and Co., 1933).

————— . *The First Report of the Sudan Administrative Conference* (Khartoum: McCorquodale and Co., 1947).

————— . *The Executive Council and Legislative Assembly: How it Works? How it can Develop? Is it Democratic?* (Khartoum: McCorquodale and Co., 1950).

————— . *Local Government Regulations for Council Procedure*, (Khartoum: Sudan Survey Department, 1952).

Sudan Survey Department, *Local Government Regulations for Council Procedure* (Khartoum: McCorquodale and Co., 1952).

Sunseri, T. "Peasants and the Struggle for Labor in Cotton Regimes of the Rufiji Basin, Tanzania, 1885-1918", in A. Isaacman and R. Richards, (eds.,) *Cotton, Colonialism and Social History in Sub-Saharan Africa* (London: James Currey 1995), 180-200.

Symes, S. *Note on Administrative Purposes in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (Khartoum: 1938).

Tame, G.B. "Legends of the Halawin of Blue Nile Province", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 17, (1934) 201-216.

Tayyib, M.A.R. *Imperialism and Nationalism in the Sudan: A Study in Constitutional and Political Development 1899-1956* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

Tvedt, T. *The River Nile in the Age of the British: Political Ecology and the Quest for Economic Power* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004).

Vaughan, O. *Nigerian Chiefs: Traditional Power in Modern Politics, 1890s-1990s* (Rochester, NY.: University of Rochester Press, 2000).

Voll, S. "The Introduction of Native Administration in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan" *Al-Abhath*, 24, (1971) 111-123.

Warburg, G. *The Sudan Under Wingate: Administration in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1899-1916* (London: Cass, 1971).

————— . "Popular Islam and Tribal Leadership in the Socio-Political Structure of North Sudan", in Menahem Milson (ed.,) *Society and Political Structure in the Arab World* (New York, 1973).

————— . "Some Social and Economic Aspects of Turko-Egyptian Rule in the Sudan", *Belletin dört ayda bir çikar*, 53, (1989), 769-795.

————— . *Historical Discord in the Nile Valley* (Evaston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1992).

Weinbaum, M.G. "Structure and Performance of Mediating Elites", In I. William Zartman, (ed.,) *Elites in the Middle East* (New York, Praeger, 1980).

Weinthal, L., and J. Finlay, (eds.,) "Special Sudan Number Commemorating the Official Opening of the Sennar Dam", *African World,* (1926).

Wilmington, M.V. "Aspects of Moneylending in Northern Sudan", *Middle East Journal*, 9, 2, (1955).

Wingate, F.R. *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan : Being an Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahdiism, and of Subsequent Events in the Sudan to the Present Time* (London, Macmillan and Co., 1891).

————— . *The Sudan Past and Present* (Woolwich: Royal Artillery Institution, 1892).

Woodward, P. *Condominium and Sudanese Nationalism* (London: Rex Collings, 1979).

————— . *Sudan: The Unstable State, 1898-1989* (Boulder, Colorado: Rienner,

1990).

——— . *The Horn of Africa; Politics and International Relations* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003).

Yamba, C.B. *Permanent Pilgrims: The Role of Pilgrimage in the lives of West African Muslims in Sudan* (London: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

Unpublished sources

Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan, "Report on the Future of the Gezira Scheme" (1946).

Mustafa, Y. "Memoirs" (Private unpublished papers).

Unpublished Theses

Al-Ani, K.S, "The Gezira Scheme in the Sudan", (Ph.D thesis, Columbia University, 1959).

Cheeseboro, A.Q. "Administration and Change in the Gezira Scheme and the Sudan, 1938-1970" (Ph.D thesis, Michigan State University, 1993).

Grabler, S. "From Concessionaire to Shaykh: The Shaping of Colonial Economic Policy in Sudan, 1898-1930" (Ph.D thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1986).

Khalaf, N. "British Policy Regarding the Administration of the Northern Sudan, 1899-1951" (Ph.D thesis, Duke University, 1965).

LeBaron, J.E. "The Impact of Structural Economic Change on Political Movements in Sudan, 1900-1953" (Ph.D thesis, Princeton University, 1980).