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A History of the Sudan from the Coming of Islam to the Present Day

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First published in 1961, Holt's *Modern History of the Sudan* deservedly established itself as the standard introduction to the subject. Holt revised the work in 1963; since 1979 he has collaborated with Martin Daly on further - slightly retitled - editions, of which this is the most recent. The collected prefatory notes of these various editions, all reproduced here, provide in themselves a sombre reminder of the continuing political turmoil of the years since the early 1960s, and this new edition offers a summary of events up to 1998 which will be welcomed as a guide to the multiple twists - as well as the tragic continuities - of the history of the Sudan.

The new edition has the same strengths and weaknesses as its predecessors. Holt and Daly are scholars of remarkable, and in many ways complementary, knowledge and abilities. Daly's unrivalled knowledge of the archival sources on the period of British rule has supplemented the mastery of Arabic sources, and firsthand familiarity with northern Sudan in the late-colonial period, which were the strengths of Holt's original work; their collaboration provides a concise and readable summary of around 1400 years of history. They begin their story with the initial Muslim contacts - and conflicts - with the Christian Nubian states, and follow the disintegration of those states and the establishment of a variety of Muslim, and largely Arab, communities in what is now the north of the Sudan; and then trace the dramatic changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, during which the Sudan was subject to Turco-Egyptian imperialism and saw a war of resistance against that imperialism in which General Gordon died (supplying late-Victorian Britain with one of its most famous colonial martyrs). The subsequent conquest of the whole of the country by the British, in a nominal alliance with Egypt, led to the unique arrangement of 'Condominium' rule over a territory which, crucially, extended over an area which stretched farther south and west than effective Turco-Egyptian rule ever had, into territories which were neither Muslim nor Arabized.

Holt and Daly show how British control over this vast territory was constantly complicated by the larger imperial issue of relationships with Egypt, and Sudan's independence at the end of 1955 - coming before that of any other of Britain's African possessions - was driven by these complex politics, which soon swept away vague British schemes for separating off the southern portions of the Condominium. Thus was created an independent state embracing north and south, in which political power lay largely in the hands of Muslim northerners; the latter section of the book devotes considerable space to the political conflict over the unequal distribution of power and resources between north and south, which has fuelled a protracted and appallingly destructive war which has run - with an interlude from around 1972 to 1983 - since the early 1960s, compounding the manifold problems of the post-colonial state in the Sudan. This book is especially damning about the abuses and incompetence of Gaafar Nimeiri's lengthy rule; that it has rather less to say about the current regime (which has continued to prosecute a bloody war in the south in the name of Islam and the state, and has reduced many societies in northern Sudan to ever-greater poverty) is presumably because sources are so scanty.

To summarise this remarkable and diverse history is a considerable achievement; inevitably the task of summary requires decisions about what to include, and about the perspective of the work. The weakness of this work arguably lies in those decisions, and while Holt's original 1961 work has been much revised over the years, the structure and assumptions of that first edition still permeate the book. It is not simply that some of his original prose reads a little quaintly now (is it really enough to explain Baqqara involvement in the Mahdi's revolt by describing them as 'fickle' and 'light-hearted'; or to designate certain political factions as 'moderate'?). More importantly, the tone of the original work has been maintained in two crucial ways: this is, overwhelmingly, a political history of local elites and foreign rulers, in which Sudanese societies (especially those in the south) apparently only come into historical existence through their subordination. And it is a history which emphasises the uniqueness of the Sudan, and refuses to draw on any of the comparative or theoretical insights on colonialism, and the post-colonial situation, across the rest of the African continent.

When Holt wrote the first edition, the academic study of African history in the UK had only recently begun, and comparative insights were hard to come by. But there has been a great deal of good historical work done on Africa in recent years, and it seems decidedly obtuse that the discussion of nineteenth-century societies should not draw on this work, or that the discussion here of the colonial policy of Indirect Rule - a policy whose ironies and contradictions Daly has explored in splendid and often impassioned detail -should make no reference at all to the wider importance of this in British imperial thought at the time. While it may be true that - as this book argues - many members of the Sudan Political Service interacted little with the administrators of other territories, it is also true that there were crossovers of personnel and ideas, with a number of administrators and technical officials serving in other African territories before coming to the Sudan: Symes and Tothill are obvious examples. Similarly, the discussion of the post-colonial state here would surely have benefited from a brief dip into the very extensive literature on the 'neopatrimonial' politics

of late twentieth-century Africa.

This book reads then, very much as the history of the Sudanese state, understood as a unique phenomenon. That means that there is an implicit teleology here about the story of the Sudan, derived from Holt's first edition, which is evident in the choice of the 'coming of Islam' as the starting point. This is a narrative in which conquest is called pacification (curiously, since Daly has elsewhere written with exceptional detail and clarity on the violence of this process), and in which coming to history is identified with subordination to a state whose forms and political orientation were northern, riverain and Islamic. The south, as the text says, was a place of a 'bewildering variety' of tribes; presumably the implication is that only the imposition of state control from the north could reduce such societies to comprehensible order. The comment that the distinction between north and south was and is being 'modified by the processes of history' is surely of central importance: the assumption is that historical inevitability is making the south more like the north (and, presumably, is making the marginal parts of the north more like the riverain political centre). On the last page of the book - a page appropriately sombre in tone - the authors return explicitly to the theme of the 'spread of a northern riverain culture' to 'peripheral peoples' whose ability to 'withstand the onslaught is seriously in question'. This theme is indeed an important one; but is it really safe to present the history of all the societies living in what is now the Sudan solely as the narrative of this process, and so to present their experience as unique and their fate as inevitable?

The author is pleased to accept the review and will not be responding further.

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