

THREE EMPIRES ON THE NILE

•Fergus Nicoll

When those states that are acquired are used to living by their own laws and freedom, there are three methods of holding on to them: the first is to destroy them; the second is to go there in person to live; the third is to allow them to live with their own laws, forcing them to pay a tribute and creating therein a government made up of a few people who will keep the state friendly toward you.

The Prince, Niccolò Machiavelli

In the turbulent decades of the late nineteenth century, the people of the central Nile Valley were ruled by a succession of regimes who had little in common beyond an absolute and unswerving belief in their divine right to rule: In the name of Egypt, of true Islam or of the British Queen. Even when the Sudanese themselves won autonomy, throwing off sixty years of Ottoman/Egyptian political and cultural hegemony, they received nothing better by way of basic rights or freedoms from their own leaders. The personal styles of Sudan's rulers in this era – the Khedive of Egypt, the Mahdi and his heir and finally Lord Kitchener – were as different as their motives, which varied from European-style expansionism to a ruthlessly authoritarian and absolutist ideological puritanism, from the brute force of a secular clan-based autocracy to geopolitical pragmatism. Philanthropy, reform and the search for knowledge served only

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to cloak imperialist designs. Some aspects of imperial methodology were shared by the two powers of occupation, Egypt and Britain, most notably the application of new military and transport technologies in guaranteeing security, civil administration and trade, not just on the Nile itself but along the Red Sea coast and the main trade routes with the west and south. Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi, by contrast, a man of cloistered upbringing and blinkered Weltanschauung, took the position that modernity itself was the enemy, in both spiritual and material terms.

In its initial occupation of 1820-1, Egypt profited from a century of slow fragmentation of the Funj Sultanate's indigenous authority. Yet even when the central territories between Dongola and Sennar were seized and held by Ottoman military administrators, large swathes of the western savannah and the southern swamps and forests remained outside the new frontier. These small autonomous territories were either sultanates with strong ethnic identities and structures or fortified settlements run by slave-traders (local and European) and merchant barons from the northern clans. It was not until the reign of Khedive Ismail in Cairo (January 1863-June 1879) that these territories were formally annexed in a four-year surge of expansion, though in places such claims were nominal, amounting not so much to contiguous provinces as loose chains of isolated military posts.

Ismail Ibrahim inherited the Ottoman governorate (vilayet) of Egypt, as well as its Sudanese dominions, from his uncle Muhammad Said. His aspirations for his country conformed to those of his grandfather, Muhammad Ali, who sought *de facto* independence from Constantinople and the establishment of Egypt as a political, military and economic power in its own right. Educated in Vienna and Paris, Ismail desired not just to

shake off the stigma of the colonised but further to emphasise Egypt's position on the Mediterranean basin and redefine his nation as European (though free of European interference). By doubling Cairo's annual tribute to the Constantinople treasury, Ismail bought from Sultan Abdülaziz not just the quasi-regal title of Khedive but a change in the rule of succession to direct male primogeniture – all as a prelude to what he hoped would be the consolidation of full self-government with a modern, institutionalised native Egyptian bureaucracy. 'I march with civilisation,' he told the French Consul in Cairo, 'while Turkey stands still.' The free nation of Egypt would be part of Europe rather than the Near East – in Africa but certainly not African.

As for Egyptian control in Sudan, the key motives for the initial occupation still obtained – especially slavery, which was central to the Egypt-Sudan relationship throughout the nineteenth century. In the early years of Ismail's rule, commercial slave raids continued apace, in the constant attempt to maximise 'the procurement of negroes' for Egypt's army ranks as well as domestic and export markets. Ruinous taxes were extracted, with the heavy-handed assistance of local militias (the *Shaigía*), religious communities (the *Khatmía*) and trading clans (the *Danágla* and *Jaaliyín*) – all of whom gained land, money and influence from collaboration. One motive for the original invasion, gold, had proven largely elusive, with the once fabled mines at Fazughli and the ancient workings in the desert between the Second Cataract and the Red Sea long since exhausted. In these early years of nationalism, Egyptians were encouraged to think of Sudan as intrinsic to the territorial and historical integrity of their homeland (*watan*), though that position was fundamentally contradicted by a widespread perception among the Cairo elite that a posting among the

'uncivilised peoples' of the south amounted to exile and disgrace. But, consequent to his drive for autonomy from Constantinople, Sudan became, under Ismail, an Egyptian possession rather than an Ottoman possession. The colonised became the colonisers.

Ismail's own vision of a Greater Egypt followed a very contemporary European model of expansionism. On these terms, the government in Khartoum not only contributed to the central treasury (in theory though rarely in practice) but gave a springboard to further territorial gains in the south. Despite having to abandon early aspirations of supplanting Ottoman rule in the vilayets of Syria and the Hejaz, Ismail dreamed of opening Central Africa to trade, paddle steamers plying the great equatorial lakes under his banner. Like the Europeans, he couched his imperial ambitions in the language of 'science, commerce and progress', despatching explorers into the interior under the auspices of his Khedivial Geographical Society to chart his conquests and gloss them with a veneer of scientific respectability.

The occupation and administration of the Sudan Colony was achieved through three essential technological innovations: the steamer fleet, the telegraph system and superior weaponry. Ismail sent two consignments of powered riverboats to Sudan, to supplement the four vessels deployed by his uncle Said. Nine steamers were sent in 1869 for Sir Samuel Baker's southern expeditions; eight years later, a further four vessels were despatched in pieces, for re-assembly at the Khartoum dockyard, when Colonel Charles Gordon was Governor-General. The electric telegraph, though vulnerable to interruption in time of war, was essential in unifying the scattered outposts of empire. By the late 1870s, wires linked Cairo to Khartoum, via Dongola

and Berber, with additional branches stretching to Suakin and Massawa on the Red Sea, into Kordofan and up both Blue and White Niles. The science of weaponry was also rigorously applied, with the resonant blast of European and American guns: Krupps, Nordenfeldts and Remingtons.

To buttress his own officers and administrators in Khartoum (among whom a gradual trend to incompetence was reversed with the appointment of able governors such as Jafar Mazhar and Ismail Ayúb) the Khedive bought in European personnel as well as technology. Italians, Prussians, Britons and Americans served and often died in Egyptian uniform. Gordon, the best known of these hired hands, had little respect for the moral purity of his employers or their style of imperial rule. He dismissed the Khedive as '*an Arab* with a varnish of education on him' and the Egyptians as a 'servile race', for whom 'untruthfulness is the rule everywhere'. According to Gordon, an expatriate in khedivial service should start work with the assumption that he 'is not liked, that he is not trusted, that even with the ruler he is a necessary evil.' His own motives for taking service, not once but three times, as an agent of such an empire were never precisely defined, beyond a general belief that man must 'benefit his fellow-creatures, and lead (not drive) them to raise themselves in the scale of civilisation'. The campaign against the slavers of the southern territories certainly focused his ambitions, though it also prompted his disillusionment and physical exhaustion and eluded any conclusive success.

It is hard to separate Ismail's own activities, ostensibly against the slave trade, from his territorial ambitions. In the khedivial decree authorising Baker to take gun and steamer into Equatoria he set out a list of priorities, foremost among them the charge 'to submit to our authority the countries situated to the

south of Gondokoro'. After that came the suppression of the slave trade, the introduction of a system of regular commerce and, last but probably not least, the order 'to open to navigation the great lakes of the Equator and to establish a chain of military stations and commercial depots throughout Central Africa'. But Ismail's signature of the 1877 Anglo-Egyptian Slave Trade Convention, under heavy British pressure, had serious repercussions in his southern possessions, where slaving continued to be lucrative for imperial officers and Sudanese merchants alike. Enforcement of the treaty deprived many of the regime's most zealous allies of their main motive for collaboration. It was all the more repugnant to local traders that this blow to their livelihoods was inspired by Europe and implemented by Christian European officials such as Gordon, Romolo Gessi and Baker – all hand-picked by Ismail to add credibility to his declared campaign against the trade. In his first Sudan appointment, as General Governor of Equatoria, Gordon found himself pitted against powerful tribal leaders, as well as the large and influential Danágla diaspora, whose resentment had been stoked by Baker's heavy-handed tactics. Faced with armed recalcitrance in the south and less than wholesale support in Khartoum itself, neither Baker nor Gordon made lasting progress in eradicating the trade. 'The supposed conquests and suppression of slavery were proved a chimera,' wrote Gessi – but Ismail got the additional territory he sought.

The mercurial Gordon was capable of moments of clarity and insight in his analysis of Egypt's presence in Sudan, sympathising with the plight of those oppressively ruled. He was also susceptible to delusions and blinding errors, not least in his analysis of the motives behind the Mahdi's successful uprising (August 1881-January 1885), which ejected Egypt's occupying

forces. 'I am convinced,' Gordon told the *Pall Mall Gazette* before his last mission, 'that it is an entire mistake to regard the Mahdi as in any sense a religious leader: he personifies popular discontent. I strongly suspect that he is a mere puppet ... and that he has assumed a religious title to give colour to his defence of the popular rights.' While it was valid to say that Muhammad Ahmad gave a voice to widespread dissent, this critique of Muhammad Ahmad's motives demonstrated the contemporary European's lack of understanding of Islam in general and complete ignorance of Mahdism in particular.

There were many ethnic, commercial and religious grievances that enabled the Mahdi to gather such a vast following in his rising against the 'Turks'. Many Sudanese were outraged by the campaign against the slave trade, a trade sanctioned by the Koran; many more had had their livelihoods destroyed by oppressive taxes. In a territory where Islam was flavoured by African and other mystical elements, traditional religious personalities and their followers resented the authority given to the orthodox, Cairo-sponsored religious and judicial figures (*ulamá*) in Khartoum. But, while he succeeded in building a remarkable coalition of the disaffected, Muhammad Ahmad's own motivation was always primarily a reassertion of the true faith. He sought to restate core Islamic principles of the Koran and the Hadíth, as well as the community values preached in the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, before the schism in the faith and the division of the Sharía, before the descent to the perceived moral laxity of the colonial elite.

When Ismail Pasha came to the throne of Egypt in 1863, Muhammad Ahmad was a 19-year-old disciple living a sheltered life in a Sufi boarding school. Over the next 20 years, as an increasingly celebrated preacher based at Jazíra Aba on the

White Nile, his sermons and letters acquired increasingly political overtones. Yet his call (*da'wa*) failed to trouble the Khartoum authorities, who missed or disregarded the coagulation of dissent around the sheikh of Aba Island. Neither his origins as the son of a boat-builder nor his academic life seemed to permit him even to aspire to authority on a national scale but the overthrow of the 66-year-old occupation was achieved in a remarkably short time. Immediately the Mahdi's ideal state was realised (in fledgling form at Jebel Gadír then more fully after the seizure of Obeid), it became clear that there was nothing benign about it. Individual liberties counted for nothing; all that was required was absolute conformity to a set of rigid and ancient rules. Like his predecessors, he used tribal militias as his enforcers, the Baggára replacing the Shaigi 'bashi-bazouks'. Having spent decades in detailed study of the theological and juridical complexities of Islam, he resolved to eradicate them, along with the Sufi brotherhoods that had fostered his own upbringing, as unacceptable abstractions from Islam's pure seventh century core. He read all the books on Muslim science and then burnt them. He was forced to compromise on his fundamental anti-modernism, bowing to the practicalities of using both telegraph and firearms during the uprising. Subsequently both he and his successor, the Khalífa Abdulláhi al-Taíshi, were compelled to assimilate man and machinery from the old order in assembling something like a functioning bureaucracy.

The Mahdi is often portrayed as a 'Sudanese revolutionary', a phrase that falls far short of his own aspirations. He aimed for nothing less than a reshaped global community of Islam, in which nationhood counted for little. In terms of 'empire', the Mahdi envisioned a tide of Islam, correct by his own

interpretation, sweeping into Egypt and far beyond, as far west as Morocco and the Sokoto sultanate in the west, over the Red Sea into the Hejaz and north into the heartland of the Ottoman Empire. His own authority as Successor of God's Prophet (*khalīfat rasūl Allah*) would eclipse that of both Khedive and Sultan. 'Shortly, God willing,' he wrote, a month before his untimely death, 'I shall come with the Party of God to Egypt, for the affair of the Sudan is finished.' Propaganda letters were circulated in Egypt and the Khedive was chastised for succumbing to 'the intrigues of the unbelievers', the enemies of Allah who would be expelled from the lands of the Muslims. Influential Islamists in Cairo were aware that a move on Egypt would have a strong chance of success: 'It has never happened,' wrote Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, 'that the flames of revolution did not hurry along the tracks of their natural path'. Had Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi succeeded in launching that planned invasion, it would have precisely reversed what Europeans and most Egyptians thought of as the 'natural path'. The Mahdi's reputation might today be that of a pan-Islamic champion than a national or even nationalist leader. But after his premature death, just four months after the capture of the imperial capital at Khartoum and the death of Gordon, the Khalīfa Abdullāhi inherited control and the religious values underpinning the new administration dwindled in significance.

By the mid-1890s, the danger posed by a successful hard-line Islamic republic on Egypt's southern border was as apparent to the Egyptians as it was to their new colonial masters, the British. Ismail's policies of opening to the west, trying to cut his way out of the tight embrace of the Ottoman Empire, had sown the seeds of his own downfall and brought his country under another army of occupation. European bankers and businessmen

had already penetrated Egypt during the reign of Said, with the construction of the Suez Canal, but Ismail's policies of westernisation and modernisation – giving his people bridges, roads, canals, railways and street lighting – far exceeded his budget. Ismail was obliged first to sell his stock in the canal, then to place his country's finances under the control of a debt commission that represented European bondholders, turning Cairo (in the words of Egypt's *British* Finance Minister) into 'the theatre of a somewhat determined conflict between English and French pretensions'. In what was for him a terminal irony, Ismail's attempts to achieve genuine Egyptian independence culminated in his own dismissal by the Sultan, his replacement by his son Tawfīq and the military occupation of Egypt by Britain. London's motives for occupation were more reactive than ideological: Averting financial instability in Egypt; averting a spread of militant Islam into Britain's own Indian possessions; ensuring the stability of the canal, so crucial to the maritime route to India; and (with an eye to French interests in the region) determining that 'no great Power shall be more powerful there than England'.

Involvement in Sudan was predicated by involvement in Egypt and was equally determined by unplanned events. Britain was initially a reluctant occupier, seeing little of value in Sudan beyond the ports of Suakin and Massawa on its Red Sea coastline. In 1884, with the Mahdi's armies encircling Khartoum and the Relief Expedition belatedly mounting its bid to extract Gordon, the British government had aspired to no more aggressive a solution than the establishment of a pro-Egyptian indigenous government, funded by Cairo. For Egypt, therefore, the humiliation of its own second colonisation was compounded by the indignity of being forced to renounce all claims to

sovereignty over its only colony *and* having to pay for a rump Sudan administration. By the mid-1890s, however, full British involvement became inevitable as the mandarins in London and Cairo moved to pre-empt rival imperial ambitions in the 'scramble for Africa'.

Three rival European powers were already eyeing the Sudan territories in the hands of the Khalífa Abdulláhi, whose autocratic rule had re-created all the pre-Mahdí tribal divisions and whose regime had been made more vulnerable by years of drought and epidemics of smallpox. The French were moving in the west, threatening to claim territory as far north as Fashoda on the White Nile, the site of an Egyptian garrison destroyed by the Mahdi. The French diplomatic position was that a non-military expedition would put Paris in a position to 'intervene usefully in settling the question of the Egyptian Sudan' – in other words, to make sure that at least Britain didn't get its hands on the territory. King Leopold of the Belgians also hoped to expand his African estates far beyond the Congo basin and was scheming to lease the entire southern Sudan as far north as Khartoum. And to the east, the Italians were engaged in a bitter three-way confrontation with the Abyssinian kingdom and the Khalífa's forces. Italian dominance in the Horn of Africa suited London's strategic purposes and it was an Italian request for help, as Sudanese fighters gathered to take the Italian-held town of Kassala, which irrevocably precipitated Britain's commitment in Sudan.

In describing their motives for the invasion, British politicians in London and Cairo were diplomatically nimble. They portrayed it to the Khedive (who only learned of the plan *after* the army had received its marching orders) as the restoration of his lost dominions. To the French, the invasion

was described as an Egyptian initiative to avert the Islamic threat on the southern border; and to the Sultan in Constantinople, still nominally the Khedive's overlord and prompted by the French to protest, as internal Egyptian business permissible under existing imperial sanctions. The British people, among whom anxiety was offset by a desire to 'avenge Gordon', were informed that it was the reacquisition of a geographically integral part of Egypt; Winston Churchill later reaffirmed the old Egyptian ideas of territorial unity, likening the Nile to a palm tree, with its roots in Sudan and its foliage in the Egyptian delta.

For the likes of General Sir Herbert Kitchener, Sirdar of the Egyptian Army and charged with the command of the invasion force, motivation was rather simpler. He was the archetypal servant and soldier of Empire. Hardened in Sudan's northern deserts during the failed 1884-5 Relief Expedition, he acquired fluent Arabic to liaise effectively with the northern tribes as an intelligence officer. Kitchener was married to the army, ambitious and obsessive about administrative efficiency; a man who never troubled to court popularity among superiors or junior officers. Like many fellow officers in Cairo, he itched to have a second chance against the Mahdists who had killed both Gordon, Kitchener's hero, and Gordon's confidant and intelligence adviser, Colonel Donald Hammill-Stewart, Kitchener's close friend. What he hoped would be the 'consequent extinction' of Mahdism would serve as an additional benefit of victory.

Months before Kitchener's final crushing victory over the Khalifa's vast but outgunned armies among the Karari hills north of Omdurman, thought had been given to the administration of Sudan and the resolution formed 'to fly the British and Egyptian flags side by side'. This hypothetical joint sovereignty reflected a political ambivalence about long-term involvement but was

never allowed to prejudice the way Sudan was actually administered, with the British having the 'predominant voice' and the Egyptians paying. The newly ennobled Lord Kitchener of Khartoum remained in Gordon's former residence, a building-site within a larger building-site, as the first Governor-General of this novel entity - though just the latest viceroy in a succession stretching back in an almost unbroken line to the pharaonic era. During the 56-year Condominium, Britain profited from its inheritance of some elements of modernity, dating in broadest terms back to the Egyptian invasion but more specifically to Ismail's drive to develop an efficient imperial infrastructure. The British did it all more systematically and fairly, replacing the Khalifa's secular despotism with what Kitchener called 'an era of justice and kindly treatment'. But an occupation it remained.

Legacies of all three nineteenth-century regimes remain visible in today's Sudan. National boundaries, from Darfur to the Red Sea and from the Second Cataract to the equatorial lakes, remain roughly as defined by its Ottoman/Egyptian rulers. The administration and civil service has remained highly centralised, often administered from the elegant bureaucratic buildings of the British colonial era. Mahdism was never extinguished; the Mahdi's son and great-grandson have ensured its viability as a political and commercial force that long outlived the British. Clan rivalries dating back to the earliest days of Ottoman/Egyptian occupation have been perpetuated both in political form and in the ethnic make-up of the national army. And religion continues to exert a potent force in Khartoum's political hierarchy, though its strictures are less the puritanical edicts of the Mahdist era than the ruthless and very worldly controls of modern political Islam.

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