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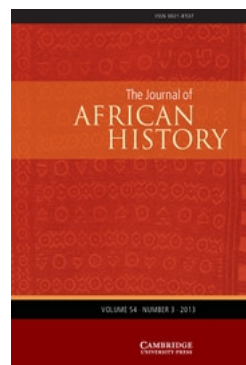
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SOUTH SUDANESE ARABIC AND THE NEGOTIATION OF THE LOCAL STATE, c. 1840–2011*

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Abstract

This article explores the history of the creole South Sudanese Arabic language from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. It analyses the historical evidence of language use in the light of insights drawn from linguistic studies of creolisation to argue that South Sudanese Arabic became an innovative and necessary means of communication among multiple actors within new fields of interaction. The article argues that these fields of interaction were both the product and the arena of local state formation. Rather than marking the boundary of the state, the spread of this creole language indicates the enlarging arenas of participation in the local state. The development and use of South Sudanese Arabic as an unofficial lingua franca of local government, trade, and urbanisation demonstrates that communication and negotiation among local actors has been central to the long-term processes of state formation in South Sudan.

Key Words

South Sudan, Arabic, linguistics, state formation.

There are three languages which are of value to the people. The first is vernacular, the second Arabic, the third English. The vernacular is the foundation of the people's life; it guards their customs and their tribal beliefs. Arabic will be the language of commerce and of Local Government; it must be understood by all those who wish to take part in these spheres of activity. The English language is the gateway to scientific knowledge; without this it is not possible to reach higher education.¹

This statement in 1950 to the Bahr el Ghazal Province Council by its British chairman and province governor reveals a considerable change in the policy of the Sudan government. Before 1947, the British administration of the southern provinces had officially sought to exclude Arabic from local government, and to restrict the entry of Arabic-speaking northern Sudanese. This 'Southern Policy', which was suddenly reversed from 1947, has provoked much subsequent criticism from scholars and Sudanese nationalists.²

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1 South Sudan National Archives, Juba (SSNA) Equatoria Province (EP) 1.C.2, speech by Governor T. R. H. Owen, Bahr el Ghazal Province Council meeting, Wau, 25–6 Jan. 1950.

2 See, for example, M. 'Abd al-Rahim, *Imperialism and Nationalism in the Sudan: A Study in Constitutional and Political Development, 1899–1956* (Oxford, 1969).

Post-independence rulers would seek to remedy its perceived effects and to forcibly generate national unity through the imposition of Arabic language policies in the south. But the story of Arabic in southern Sudan is more complicated than this narrative of colonial exclusion followed by hastily attempted national integration. What Governor Owen did not reveal was that the Arabic already being used in commerce and local government was not generally the Arabic of northern Sudan, but the creole Arabic of southern Sudan. This language is often known as ‘Juba Arabic’, but this article instead adopts the term ‘South Sudanese Arabic’ to encompass its regional and temporal variations across South Sudan.³ It originated as a pidgin language among southern slaves, soldiers, and servants in nineteenth-century trading camps and Turco-Egyptian government stations, drawing its vocabulary primarily from the Egyptian and Sudanese colloquial Arabic of the traders and military officers. But it developed entirely new structures, recognised by linguists as a process of creolisation. This distinct language would survive both the British attempts to suppress its use, and the subsequent efforts to promote Sudanese Arabic in the south.

The military origins of this language and its subsequent use amongst soldiers, police, and other agents of state coercion have given it ambiguous moral and political connotations among South Sudanese. Yet its relationship to state power has never been straightforward, as the British efforts to suppress its use before 1947 indicate. While studies of other pidgins and creoles in Africa have often emphasised their origins in the need for communication *between* colonisers and colonised, some scholars point out that these languages have always been more important for communication *among* Africans.⁴ This is particularly evident in the case of South Sudanese Arabic, due to its official disapprobation. Its survival as an unofficial lingua franca of local government, trade, and urban interaction demonstrates that while these ‘spheres of activity’ (as Owen termed them) were produced by and associated with the state, they were never entirely controlled by it.

In exploring the history of South Sudanese Arabic, this article draws on two key arguments from linguistic studies of creolisation, elaborated below. Firstly, scholars have moved away from defining creolisation as the point when a pidgin language – that is, a simplified contact language with restricted vocabulary created from a mixture of languages – becomes nativised as a first language, to defining it as the point when a pidgin language becomes *necessary* for communication in particular contexts, and hence develops as a main language of interaction. Secondly, linguistic studies of South Sudanese Arabic have argued that its creolisation entailed innovative restructuring, creating a new language rather than representing an attempt to speak a dominant or superstrate Arabic dialect.

The article applies these insights to the historical evidence, to argue that the creolisation of South Sudanese Arabic was driven primarily by the need for communication *among* local actors, including the state officials who were drawn into using this lingua franca.

3 There are, for example, distinctive varieties of South Sudanese Arabic associated with the other provincial capitals of Wau and Malakal. C. Miller, ‘Do they speak the same language? Language use in Juba local courts’, in E. Ditters and H. Motzki (eds.), *Approaches to Arabic Linguistics: Presented to Kees Versteegh on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday* (Leiden, 2007), 607–38; C. Miller, ‘Southern Sudanese Arabic and the churches’, *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique*, 3–4 (2010), 383–4; J. Owens, ‘Arabic-based pidgins and creoles’, in S. G. Thomason (ed.), *Contact Languages: A Wider Perspective* (Amsterdam, 1997), 133–5.

4 N. G. Faraclas, *Nigerian Pidgin* (London, 1996), 3.

This also demonstrates the wider relevance of language history to the study of state formation. Scholars analysing African states have increasingly focused on the importance of local-level negotiation of the state among multiple actors who deploy particular discursive ‘repertoires’ or ‘genres’, including ‘popular modes of communication’.⁵ Yet such studies rarely focus on the linguistic media of this negotiation, even when using creolisation as a metaphor for the resulting forms of governance and political culture.⁶ This article begins by exploring the value of a fuller and more precise analysis of linguistic creolisation as both metaphor and means of negotiating the local state. It then traces the history of South Sudanese Arabic from its origins as a military pidgin in the nineteenth century, through its development as a language of local government, trade, and urbanisation, to its current uncertain and ambiguous status as an unofficial national lingua franca of South Sudan. The article suggests that this enduring ambiguity represents the tensions, opportunities and exclusions that have characterised the local state.

CREOLISATION: LANGUAGES AND METAPHORS OF THE LOCAL STATE

Linguists have debated the definition of South Sudanese Arabic: is it a pidgin, a creole, or a ‘post-creole’ Arabic dialect?⁷ This set of categories was once seen to form a standard linguistic trajectory. The first stage of transition from pidgin to creole was traditionally defined by the nativisation and expansion of a pidgin into a mother tongue, a process that has been restricted to a small urban minority in southern Sudan. The situation here has also been complicated by regional variation in South Sudanese Arabic, and by the presence of Sudanese colloquial Arabic, whose influence was assumed by the 1980s to be leading to a ‘decreolisation’ of South Sudanese Arabic. This has not occurred: many South Sudanese can speak Sudanese colloquial Arabic, and use simplified dialects of it as well as, or instead of, the creole South Sudanese Arabic, but this has not eradicated the creole.⁸ New varieties have also emerged since the 1980s, such as the slang spoken by urban youth, combining elements of vernacular language with South Sudanese Arabic.⁹

5 T. Haggmann and D. Péclard, ‘Negotiating statehood: dynamics of power and domination in Africa’, *Development and Change*, 41:4 (2010), 539–62; J.-F. Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity* (Chicago, 2005), 110.

6 See, for example, A. Gupta, ‘Blurred boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state’, *American Ethnologist*, 22:2 (1995), 393. Peter Pels refers briefly to the medium of Swahili, in P. Pels, ‘Creolisation in secret: the birth of nationalism in late colonial Uluguru, Tanzania’, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 72:1 (2002), 1–28.

7 C. Miller, ‘The relevance of Arabic-based pidgins-creoles for Arabic linguistics’, in G. Mansur and M. Doss (eds.), *Al-Lugha* (Cairo, 2002), (<http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/15/04/27/PDF/lugha-CREOLE.pdf>), 27; M. Tosco, ‘A pidgin verbal system: the case of Juba Arabic’, *Anthropological Linguistics*, 37:4 (1995), 423; K. Versteegh, ‘Leveling in the Sudan: from Arabic creole to Arabic dialect’, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 99:1 (1993), 65–80; I. Smith and T. M. Ama, *Juba Arabic–English Dictionary* (Kampala, 2005), iv–v.

8 Miller, ‘Do they’, 608.

9 C. Miller, ‘Un parler “argotique” à Juba, sud Soudan’, in D. Caubet, J. Billiez, and T. Bulot (eds.), *Parlers Jeunes, Ici et Là-Bas: Pratiques et Représentations* (Paris, 2004), 69–90; S. Nakao, ‘Revising the substratal/adstratal influence on Arabic creoles’, in O. Hieda (ed.), *Challenges in Nilotic Linguistics and More, Phonology, Morphology and Syntax, Studies in Nilotic Linguistics*, vol. 5 (Tokyo, 2012), 131; in contrast,

Increasingly, however, linguists have abandoned the model of a clear trajectory from pidgin to creole to dialect, and have argued instead for a spectrum or continuum of language varieties; some adopt the hyphenated term ‘pidgin-creole’ to encompass these.¹⁰ Summing up new directions in pidgin-creole linguistics in 1991, Christine Jourdan argued that Solomons Pijin was spoken both as a limited pidgin in rural areas, and as a creole in the city, where it was ‘the main language of urban social interaction’, regardless of whether it was a first or second language.¹¹ Jourdan therefore defined the creole not as a mother-tongue but as a ‘main language’ in specific contexts – contexts that, as Peter Pels puts it, made the creole ‘*necessary* for successful communication’.¹²

This article pursues the idea that creolisation is the process whereby South Sudanese Arabic became *necessary* in particular contexts. It also draws on another important insight from the linguistic studies: creole languages are distinguished from other ‘mixed languages’ by their distinctively innovative structures, revealing that their speakers were not simply aiming to speak a target superstrate language; instead the priority was immediate ease of communication. South Sudanese Arabic was a new language, distinguished by morphological restructuring such as the adoption of verbal prefixes to denote tense, rendering it largely unintelligible with Arabic dialects.¹³ The creolisation of South Sudanese Arabic did not result simply from a compulsion or desire to speak the language of central state power.

Taking these linguistic lessons together, this article argues that they demonstrate why linguistic creolisation is such an apt metaphor – as well as medium – for wider processes. Much historical and political discourse within and about South Sudan has perpetuated a set of stark dichotomies between state and society, modernity and tradition, and between urban and rural societies and economies. Such binaries have been increasingly questioned in wider scholarship, and yet spatial metaphors of ‘spheres’ and ‘boundaries’ have remained hard to avoid.¹⁴ Studies of African chiefs, for example, analyse their role as ‘gatekeepers’, ‘brokers’, and cultural ‘interpreters’, mediating *between* state and society.¹⁵ Accounts of legal pluralism often employ the term ‘hybrid’, the origins of which imply ‘that original pure and homogeneous elements entered into a combination’.¹⁶ Creolisation on

see L. Swigart, ‘Cultural creolisation and language use in post-colonial Africa: the case of Sénégal’, *Africa*, 64:2 (1994), 175–89.

10 Miller, ‘Do they’, 621 and 608; Tosco, ‘A pidgin’, 451.

11 C. Jourdan, ‘Pidgins and creoles: the blurring of categories’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 20:1 (1991), 194–6.

12 Jourdan, ‘Pidgins’, 196; Pels, ‘Creolisation’, 8. See also Miller, ‘The relevance’; C. Githiora, ‘Sheng: peer language, Swahili dialect or emerging creole?’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 15:2 (2002), 166.

13 J. Owens, ‘Creole Arabic: the orphan of all orphans’, *Anthropological Linguistics*, 43:3 (2001), 357.

14 Gupta, ‘Blurred’; J. Alexander, *The Unsettled Land: State-Making and the Politics of Land in Zimbabwe, 1893–2003* (Oxford, 2006), 9; Haggmann and Péclard, ‘Negotiating’, 549–51; C. Lund, ‘Twilight institutions: an introduction’, *Development and Change*, 37:4 (2006), 678–9.

15 D. I. Ray and E. A. B. Van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, ‘The new relevance of traditional authorities to Africa’s future’, *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law (JLPUL)*, 37–8 (1996), 1–38; and D. G. Hatt, ‘Establishing tradition: the development of chiefly authority in the western High Atlas mountains of Morocco, 1890–1990’, *JLPUL* 37–8 (1996), 123–53.

16 D.-C. Martin, ‘A creolising South Africa? mixing, hybridity, and creolisation: (re)imagining the South African experience’, *International Social Science Journal*, 58:187 (2006), 169. Justin Willis is similarly critical of the

the other hand is not the straightforward amalgamation of two languages; rather, it is the emergence of something new that, as Justin Willis puts it, is ‘more than simply a blend of its constituent parts’.¹⁷ Creoles emerge precisely ‘in order that people sharing *no* language may communicate’.¹⁸

Similarly the history of local state formation should not be understood as a binary conversation between colonisers and colonised, state and non-state, nor as the hybrid combination of two distinct strands: one urban, cosmopolitan, and governmental; the other rural, mono-ethnic, and traditional. The spread of South Sudanese Arabic far beyond its military origins suggests that we should think instead in terms of broader ‘fields of interaction’, or ‘negotiation arenas’, in which the boundaries between state and non-state actors have been blurred.¹⁹ Through the interaction and negotiation *among* these multiple actors, the novel idea and institutions of the local state would emerge.

THE ORIGINS OF SOUTH SUDANESE ARABIC: NEGOTIATING THE VIOLENCE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Pidgin and creole languages are generally associated with the unequal power relations of colonialism and the dominance of ‘superstrate’ European languages over the ‘substrate’ languages of the colonised. Indeed the wider adoption by non-linguists of the term ‘creolisation’ for imprecise or positive notions of cultural intermingling and globalisation has been criticised for ignoring the political origins and racial connotations of the term.²⁰ Colonial domination is very much to the forefront of one historical account of an African creole language, namely Johannes Fabian’s study of Shaba Swahili in eastern Congo, where the need for ‘communication with the colonized’ led to colonial attempts to standardise and control this *lingua franca*.²¹ South Sudanese Arabic was never officially recognised by the colonial state, let alone standardised. But it originated in an earlier context of domination and subordination: in the southward expansion of the ivory and slave trade and of Turco-Egyptian imperialism in the nineteenth century, and in the military slavery on which this expansion relied.²²

term ‘hybridity’: J. Willis, ‘Hukm: the creolization of authority in Condominium Sudan’, *The Journal of African History*, 46:1 (2005), 30.

17 Willis, ‘*Hukm*’, 31.

18 Swigart, ‘Cultural’, 178.

19 J. Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power: The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo, 1880–1938* (Cambridge, 1986), 9; Hagmann and Péclard, ‘Negotiating’, 550–1 and 557. See also Alexander, *The Unsettled*, 4; C. Vaughan, ‘Negotiating the state at its margins: colonial authority in Condominium Darfur, 1916–1956’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Durham University, 2011); Gupta, ‘Blurred’, 384.

20 For an early application of the term to global cultures, see U. Hannerz, ‘The world in creolisation’, *Africa*, 57:4 (1987), 546–59. For critical discussion, see M. Sheller, ‘Creolization in discourses of global culture’, in S. Ahmed (ed.), *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (Oxford, 2003), 273–94; C. Stewart, ‘Syncretism and its synonyms: reflections on cultural mixture’, *Diacritics*, 29:3 (1999), 40–62; Martin, ‘A creolising’.

21 Fabian, *Language*, 3.

22 See D. H. Johnson, ‘The structure of a legacy: military slavery in northeast Africa’, *Ethnohistory*, 36:1 (1989), 72–88; D. H. Johnson, ‘Recruitment and entrapment in private slave armies: the structure of the zara’ib in the southern Sudan’, in Elizabeth Savage (ed.), *The Human Commodity: Perspectives on the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (London, 1992), 162–73.

From 1820, the Turco-Egyptian conquest of Sudan pushed the frontier of slave-raiding further south, but vegetation blockages on the Nile prevented the extension of riverain trade until 1840–1, when an expedition sent by the Governor of Egypt, Mohammed ‘Ali, reached the Gondokoro area (near modern-day Juba). Over subsequent decades, multinational traders, with their private armies of northern Sudanese mercenaries and southern slave-soldiers, established fortified stations known as *zara’ib* across the Bahr el Ghazal and Equatorial regions, from which they traded and raided the surrounding populations for ivory, supplies, and slaves. From 1869, these territories were annexed to the government and the Egyptian army took over or established its own stations, from which a similar system of raiding largely continued.²³

In the *zara’ib*, Sudanese or Egyptian colloquial Arabic speakers formed a small minority in relation to the expanding population of soldiers, slaves, and servants captured or recruited within the south, among whom a military pidgin Arabic would develop into early varieties of South Sudanese Arabic.²⁴ Clearly these were contexts of inequality, in which Arabic and Ottoman Turkish were the superstrate languages of imperial power. Yet Jonathan Owens argues that the linguistic structures of South Sudanese Arabic are distinct from either Arabic or the vernaculars, reflecting innovative restructuring by its nineteenth-century speakers. It is difficult to tell from the nineteenth-century sources precisely what kind of Arabic was being used in and around the *zara’ib*, but the fragmentary references to ‘vehicular’, ‘indigenised’, or ‘slang’ Arabic spoken by soldiers and other southerners indicate that it was not the Arabic of northern Sudan or Egypt. Its distinctive structures would also be preserved in the language of the southern soldiers who later moved into Uganda and became known as ‘Nubi’, and whose creole Arabic began to be recorded in the early twentieth century.²⁵

These commercial and imperial forces had recognised the need for negotiation from the outset, and used southern slave-soldiers as interpreters, known by the Turkish term ‘drago-man’. The 1840–1 expedition brought two Dinka interpreters from Khartoum, whose influence was immense: ‘even the expressions of the natives cannot be depended upon, for our black soldiers can translate just what pleases them’.²⁶ Local interpreters subsequently emerged along the Nile; by the 1860s, ‘many of the natives in the vicinity of Gondokoro [had] learnt a little Arabic from the traders’, albeit ‘with a peculiar accent’.²⁷

23 For detailed histories of this period, see R. Gray, *A History of the Southern Sudan, 1839–1889* (Oxford, 1961); J. O. Udal, *The Nile in Darkness* (Norwich, 2005 [orig. pub. 1998]).

24 Nakao, ‘Revising’, 128–9.

25 Owens, ‘Arabic-based’, 140–1 and 146; Owens, ‘Creole’, 364; C. Miller, *Le Juba Arabic: Une lingua franca du Soudan Méridional: Remarque sur le fonctionnement du verbe* (Paris, 1983), 105–18; Miller, ‘The relevance’, 20; U. A. Mahmud, *Arabic in the Southern Sudan: History and Spread of a Pidgin-Creole* (Khartoum, 1983), 43–4.

26 F. Werne, *Expedition to Discover the Sources of the White Nile, in the Years 1840, 1841, Volume II* (London, 1849), 133, 46, and 56.

27 S. W. Baker, *The Albert N’yanza: Great Basin of the Nile, and Explorations of the Nile Sources* (London, 1867 [orig. pub. 1866]), 105 and 177–8; E. Pedemonte, ‘A report on the voyage of 1849–1850’, in E. Toniolo and R. L. Hill (eds.), *The Opening of the Nile Basin: Writings by Members of the Catholic Mission to Central Africa on the Geography and Ethnography of the Sudan, 1842–1881* (New York, 1975), 62.

In 2008, an elderly Bari politician located the origins of South Sudanese Arabic in the Gondokoro area:

The Baris began to learn the language of the traders, Arabic. Intelligent Baris who learned a bit of Arabic also became translators. There was this mixing up of trade and soldiers coming to the village. The Arabic language in Juba has a lot of Bari words in it. It is more or less half Arabic and half Bari.²⁸

Owens acknowledges that ‘Bari substratal influence is observable’ in South Sudanese Arabic though the major source of its vocabulary is Arabic; recent research by Shuichiro Nakao suggests the substratal influence of other vernacular languages too, reflecting the extent of local interaction around the stations.²⁹

According to the historian Richard Gray, ‘the Turks became dependent on these riverain Bari to act as middlemen in the search for and purchase of further supplies’.³⁰ The relatively peaceful early relations along the Nile deteriorated, however, as the traders established a network of *zara’ib* across the Bahr el Ghazal region to the west, accompanied by increasing raiding, enslavement, and local warfare. Yet even in this violent context, the need to negotiate local alliances was recognised by the trading forces, who taught young slaves Arabic so that they might become ‘interpreters and commercial agents’.³¹ Local people also saw the value in having their own interpreters: one Zande chief sent a boy with a trading agent to learn Arabic ‘so that he might hereafter be useful to his tribe as interpreter’.³² The violent depredations of raiding parties were only ameliorated by entering into relations and alliances with the *zara’ib*, and a common means of communication was therefore vital to securing protection for local people. Oral histories often trace the origins of chiefship to the bravery of the interlocutors who first negotiated relations with the trading forces so that people settled in the vicinity of the camps.³³

Linguistic knowledge and skills of interlocution did not simply produce alliances between traders and local groups, but in the process also produced new forms of power and authority. In the 1870s, Zande spearmen trained in the *zara’ib* were reportedly becoming ‘chiefs’, having ‘learnt to speak Arabic fluently’.³⁴ By this time the Turco-Egyptian government was establishing its own network of stations or taking over the trading *zara’ib*; the ‘Arab-speaking Baris’ retained a privileged position in the stations on the Nile as ‘interpreters, translators and inspectors’.³⁵ The role of interpreters was increasingly being formalised as a nascent government chiefship, though strikingly they retained their title

28 Interview with elderly Bari man, retired engineer, Juba, 26 Aug. 2008.

29 Owens, ‘Arabic-based’, 163; Nakao, ‘Revising’.

30 Gray, *A History*, 35.

31 *Ibid.* 45.

32 J. Petherick and K. H. Petherick, *Travels in Central Africa, and Explorations of the Western Nile Tributaries* (London, 1869), 141.

33 C. Leonardi, *Dealing with Government in South Sudan: Histories of Chiefship, Community and State* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2013), 34; Johnson, ‘Recruitment’, 170.

34 G. A. Schweinfurth, *The Heart of Africa: Three Years’ Travels and Adventures in the Unexplored Regions of Central Africa, from 1868 to 1871, Volume I*, trans. E. E. Frewer (New York, 1874), 226, 465, and 473.

35 W. Junker, *Travels in Africa, During the Years 1875–1878*, trans. A. H. Keane (London, 1890), 236; C. T. Wilson and R. W. Felkin, *Uganda and the Egyptian Soudan, Volume II* (London, 1882), 99.

of ‘dragoman’. One or two dragomans were said to be placed in every village near the stations:

These men were originally slaves of the old slave-dealers. They all speak Arabic and were trained first as gun-boys, and now are employed as a kind of native police. Each native village is required to support one or more of these men, who are responsible for the peace of the place, and also superintend the payment of the grain tax to the government. Some twenty or thirty of them live near a fort and when porters are wanted, or natives required for work at the station, they are commissioned to collect the requisite number.³⁶

According to Robert Felkin, writing in the 1880s, the dragomans were ‘freed slaves, who are employed as police-soldiers, and *negotiate with the natives*’.³⁷

From the outset then, knowledge and use of the emerging South Sudanese Arabic was associated with military force; the local ‘negotiations’ by interpreters were obviously skewed by the threat of violence to which their privileged linguistic knowledge gave them access. But if anything, this gave people the incentive to acquire some of this linguistic knowledge for themselves, and hence South Sudanese Arabic spread beyond the station inhabitants and individual interpreters. General Gordon witnessed a whole village, many of whose inhabitants were Arabic-speaking, moving into the vicinity of a station, and predicted that ‘Arabic must be the language of these countries’.³⁸ Concentric circles of settlement and interaction developed around the *zara’ib* and government stations, creating arenas in which both language and negotiation were shaped by localised needs and tensions.³⁹ Relatively peaceful relations might be achieved around some stations, but these could also break down when communication failed.

In the Rumbek area of Bahr el Ghazal, for example, some of the earliest *zara’ib* had been established from the 1850s with the aid of Dinka interpreters and allies; in 1860, ‘chiefs’ from the Cic and Agar Dinka came to greet the new European owner of the Ronga *zariba*, and to invoke ‘the trader’s alliance’ to fight their enemies, as Gray puts it.⁴⁰ Rumbek later became the province headquarters for the Egyptian government; Gaetano Casati described the ‘friendly relations’ and ‘truce’ that developed here between the Agar Dinka and a particular governor, whom they called ‘our man’.⁴¹ After this governor left, however, relations around the station deteriorated. In 1881, a ‘deputation of Agar chiefs’ trekked all the way to the government headquarters at Lado on the Nile, to complain to Emin Pasha about the abduction of their children by the station forces, prompting Emin’s visit to Rumbek.⁴² In 1883, an Agar war leader, Wol Athiang, led a successful attack on the station and

36 Wilson and Felkin, *Uganda*, II, 104, and 107–9; S. W. Baker, *Ismailia: A Narrative of the Expedition to Central Africa for the Suppression of the Slave Trade, Organized by Ismail, Khedive of Egypt, Volume II* (London, 1874), 48.

37 R. W. Felkin, editor’s note, in E. Pasha, *Emin Pasha in Central Africa, Being a Collection of His Letters and Journals*, ed. G. Schweinfurth, F. Ratzel, R. W. Felkin, G. Hartlaub, trans. R. W. Felkin (London, 1888), 409, emphasis added; Gray, *A History*, 100–1, 114, and 142–3.

38 Gordon to Augusta, 22 Oct. 1875, 23 Feb. 1876, cited in Gray, *A History*, 113.

39 Johnson, ‘Recruitment’, 170.

40 Gray, *A History*, 48.

41 G. Casati, *Ten Years in Equatoria* (pop. ed., London, 1898), 52–4.

42 Gray, *A History*, 149–50.

the garrison was subsequently withdrawn.⁴³ Yet even Wol Athiang had previously engaged in closer relations with the Rumbek station; his sister was married to, or owned by, an Egyptian officer.⁴⁴ This example demonstrates the importance of local alliances and negotiation to the operation of the trading *zara'ib* and government garrisons; and it reveals how local interlocutors were prepared to approach the state forces directly to negotiate alliances and to ameliorate the depredations of raiding parties.

Egyptian government rule collapsed in the 1880s in the face of the Mahdist uprising in Sudan, and the last governor of Equatoria, Emin Pasha, was famously forced to withdraw southwards and eventually be 'rescued' by Henry Stanley. But the southern Sudanese soldiers remained in Equatoria or what would become northern Uganda; some joined the Mahdist forces in Equatoria, while others were recruited into Frederick Lugard's forces in Uganda in the 1890s.⁴⁵ The latter settled in Uganda or Kenya and became known as Nubi or Nubian, retaining their creole Arabic language, Kinubi. The early origins of this creolisation are evident in the structural and lexical similarity of South Sudanese Arabic and Kinubi, despite their limited contact after the 1880s.⁴⁶

In the wake of the subsequent Anglo-Egyptian reconquest of Sudan in 1898, many of the old Egyptian stations were taken over by the British officers of the new Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of the Sudan, or by their compatriots in the colonial government of Uganda, which administered part of eastern Equatoria from Gondokoro until 1914. Some of the southern soldiers from the old Egyptian garrisons returned to the stations along the Nile; Kinubi was the principal language used in the Ugandan headquarters at Gondokoro, and it was also widely spoken on the west bank in the Belgian Lado Enclave.⁴⁷ The Sudan government relied on southern soldiers and interpreters from the Egyptian or Mahdist armies, such as Rihan Effendi Abdulla, 'ex-slave native of Gogrial', who accompanied the Bahr el Ghazal 'reoccupation' force in 1901; or the interpreter at Mongalla, El Amin Rabeh, a Bari soldier who had fought in the Mahdist army.⁴⁸ When the Sudan government took over the Lado Enclave in 1910, they again turned to soldiers who were originally from the Enclave to be the most 'useful and reliable' interpreters and guides.⁴⁹ Communities of retired soldiers and their descendants formed the nuclei of the small urban administrative centres, particularly along the Nile, living in the *malakiya*

43 D. H. Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism in the Upper Nile: an examination of local experiences of the Mahdiyya in the southern Sudan', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 20:1 (1993), 48.

44 *Ibid.*; P. J. Lane and D. H. Johnson, 'The archaeology and history of slavery in South Sudan in the nineteenth century', in A. C. S. Peacock (ed.), *The Frontiers of the Ottoman World* (Oxford, 2009), 523.

45 See also M. Leopold, *Inside West Nile: Violence, History and Representation on an African Frontier* (Oxford, 2005).

46 Miller, 'The relevance', 22; Owens, 'Arabic-based', 155–9.

47 Church Missionary Society Archive, Birmingham (CMS) Accession 409, F1, Rev. F. B. Hadow, Journal for June 1906; The National Archives, London (TNA) Foreign Office (FO) 2/164, E. J. Tickell to his mother, 'at entrance of River Kaya into Nile, 5 miles north of Kiri', 17–21 Nov. 1898.

48 National Records Office, Khartoum (NRO) Bahr el Ghazal Province (BGP) 1/7/38, 'Tonj', entry in the Eastern District Notebook, 31 Dec. 1933; TNA War Office (WO) 106/231, 'Report by El Bimbashi Jennings Bramly on his tour of inspection to the Berri Hill and to the inland Baris, October 1908', *Sudan Intelligence Report (SIR)* 172, Nov. 1908, App. A, 7–10.

49 NRO Mongalla Province (MP) 1/8/51, A. Cameron, 'Notes on the Lado Enclave and points in connection with its transfer from the Belgians', 28 Nov. 1907.

(‘civilian’) ‘native’ quarters and speaking South Sudanese Arabic as their first language.⁵⁰ Other people would be drawn into these *Malakiyan* communities through military or police service, or marriage, adopting Islam and South Sudanese Arabic.⁵¹

Though never explicitly sanctioned or acknowledged by the colonial government, South Sudanese Arabic was thus given a privileged place in local administration from the outset, as well as retaining its association with the coercive forces of the state. As in the nineteenth century, language and interpreting were often central to the selection of local chiefs; some of those recognised as chief had been soldiers or employees of previous governments, and many spoke at least some Arabic.⁵² The Uganda government recognised as Bari chiefs men who had been interpreters and allies of the Mahdist forces.⁵³ Even in the predominantly Dinka-speaking districts like Rumbek, some early chiefs were Arabic-speaking former police or army conscripts; a later British official in northern Bahr el Ghazal admitted that many chiefs ‘had a knowledge of Arabic as their only qualification’.⁵⁴ The early reports did not specify what kind of Arabic this was, but later reports referred to the early chiefs having gained their positions through their knowledge of ‘bastard Arabic’, as the British termed it.⁵⁵ By the 1920s, British officers would acknowledge the prevalence of a distinctive South Sudanese Arabic in the government stations. Multiethnic settlements were forming around the recognised chiefs and around the government posts, contributing to the need for a lingua franca among these people seeking protection and opportunity in the emerging local state.⁵⁶

The first two decades of colonial rule thus consolidated rather than disrupted the patterns that had developed over the nineteenth century, in which knowledge of Arabic was converted into new positions of power and intermediation. But these intermediaries had not simply sought to acquire the Arabic or English of imperial rulers; nor was there an existing lingua franca like Swahili in eastern Africa for them to adopt. Instead, varieties of a *new* language had emerged out of the particular circumstances of the military stations and their local relations, produced by the need for communication on the ground more than by the imposition of a superstrate colonial language. This would become even

50 Miller, ‘The relevance’, 25–6; W. James, ‘Sudan: majorities, minorities and language interactions’, in A. Simpson (ed.), *Language and National Identity in Africa* (Oxford, 2008), 73.

51 Johnson, ‘Structure’, 80–4; CMS Acc. 111, F1/4, A. Shaw, ‘Trek No. 2’, c. 1911.

52 NRO MP 1/8/51, R.C. R. Owen, ‘Notes on Enclave’, 1910; TNA WO 106/6224, R.C. R. Owen, ‘Report on Tour of inspection in Moru and Niambara districts’, June 1911, *SIR* 205, Aug. 1911, App. B, 9–12; D. H. Johnson, ‘Judicial regulation and administrative control: customary law and the Nuer, 1898–1954’, *The Journal of African History*, 27:1 (1986), 70.

53 TNA FO 2/201, Lt. Col. Martyr, ‘Report on the Nile District of the Uganda Protectorate’, 15 Apr. 1899; S. Simonse, *Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centralism, and the Scapegoat King in Southeastern Sudan* (Leiden, 1992), 103–4.

54 NRO BGP 1/5/28, District Commissioner Aweil to Governor Equatoria, 19 Jan. 1938; SSNA Torit District (TD) 67, C. W. Beer, A/DC Rumbek, ‘Note in [sic] Chief Rok Rec (Bakhit Reihan) Senior Chief of the Aliam Toc section of the Agar Dinka, Tumbek [sic] District’, 1937.

55 NRO Civil Secretary (Civsec) 57/13/53, Equatoria Province Monthly Diary, Dec. 1941.

56 TNA WO 106/231, A. L. Hadow, Maridi Intelligence Report, *SIR* 173, Dec 1908, App. C.II, 11; NRO Upper Nile Province (UNP) 1/4/22, Governor Ingleson to Civil Secretary, ‘Report on Bahr el Ghazal Province’, 14 May 1935; NRO BGP 1/7/38, ‘Tonj’, entry in the Eastern District Notebook, 31 Dec. 1933.

more evident in the mid-colonial period, when the government did seek to replace this creole language with English.

'BAD ARABIC'? EXPRESSING THE CONTRADICTIONS OF COLONIALISM, c. 1920–50

In the 1920s, British colonial administrators in southern Sudan increasingly reported the ubiquity of what they described as a 'pidgin' Arabic in the government stations, army, and police, and noted its wider spread with some alarm. The local state had retained its coercive character as the colonial government sought to enforce taxation and labour demands through an increasingly formalised system of chiefs with their own police and courts. Yet the effects of this state coercion were complex, opening up related arenas of economic activity and social and political interaction which were never entirely controlled by the state. To the dislike of colonial officials, the district headquarters were gradually turning into small towns, as some people discerned opportunity as well as threat in the new arenas of offices, markets, and courts.⁵⁷ The need for communication in these arenas would consolidate South Sudanese Arabic as a lingua franca, so that even British officials were drawn into using it as a language of local government and commerce.

This pragmatic government use of South Sudanese Arabic was increasingly at odds with official policy, however. Unlike the deliberate cultivation or tolerance of Swahili and its standardisation as an intermediary lingua franca by colonial governments in the Congo, Tanganyika or Kenya, the Sudan government sought to suppress South Sudanese Arabic altogether.⁵⁸ The Condominium government feared the spread of subversive, nationalist activity into Sudan after the instability and eventual independence of Egypt in 1922, a fear exacerbated by urban and military unrest in northern Sudan in 1924. Rural Sudanese were therefore to be governed by traditional authorities and insulated from the 'septic germs' of such unrest.⁵⁹ The 'Southern Policy', articulated in 1930 as the desired creation of 'self-contained racial or tribal units', has been seen as a deliberate attempt to separate northern and southern Sudan.⁶⁰ But it was also part of this broader colonial campaign against the perceived effects of education, religious fervour, urbanisation, and migration: effects which were assumed to have the most disruptive potential among hitherto illiterate, non-Muslim southerners.⁶¹ Northern Sudanese traders still operated under license in the southern provinces, but the administration sought to separate such townspeople from the rural 'tribes'. Yet the colonial government also required literate junior employees: in turning to the Christian mission societies to produce these, it entered into a long-term struggle over the nature and purpose of schooling; a Christian education

57 See also J. Giblin, 'History, imagination and remapping space in a small urban centre: Makambako, Iringa Region, Tanzania', in A. Burton (ed.), *The Urban Experience in Eastern Africa, c. 1750–2000* (Nairobi, 2002), 195–6.

58 Fabian, *Language*; A. A. Mazrui and A. M. Mazrui, *Swahili State and Society: The Political Economy of an African Language* (Nairobi, 1995).

59 NRO Civsec 1/39/104, minute by J. Maffey, 1 Jan. 1927.

60 H. MacMichael, 'Memorandum on Southern Policy', in Civil Secretary to Southern Governors, 25 Jan. 1930, appended in 'Abd al-Rahim, *Imperialism*, 244–9.

61 See also James, 'Sudan', 70.

was also seen by many administrators as dangerous, if it detached pupils from the supposedly restraining ties of family and traditional community.⁶² Meanwhile, however, colonial labour, taxation, and agricultural policies were having even greater transformative effect on local economy and society, by generating labour migration, market production, and monetisation.⁶³

These contradictions and tensions between the conservative visions of traditional rural society and the far-reaching effects of colonial economic and administrative policies were epitomised by discussion of language policy in the southern provinces from the 1920s.⁶⁴ In attempting to insulate southerners from subversive influences, the government sought to exclude Arabic of any kind, and instead to make English and the vernaculars the languages of administration and education in the south.⁶⁵ But there were already warnings of the ubiquity of ‘a debased form of Arabic’.⁶⁶ In 1927, even Governor-General John Maffey, the leading proponent of the conservative ‘Native Administration’ policies, encountered this reality while on a tour of the south:

I have now fully appreciated the difficulties of ever making English the lingua franca of the south. Things have gone much further than I had expected. Wherever I penetrated, whether to the top of the Imatong [mountains] or to the Belgian Congo border, I found Arabic in ready use by the local spokesman of the people... Indeed we shall have to consider whether Arabic, after all, in spite of its risks, must not be our instrument.⁶⁷

A few months later, the education secretary, Matthew, issued a memorandum explicitly identifying a ‘language problem’ in southern Sudan. He argued that ‘Southern Arabic’ was ‘totally unfit to be used for educational purposes’, since it was ‘only a clumsy instrument’. He went on to raise a central concern of the government: that this ‘pidgin’ might start to be written in Arabic script, which risked encouraging Islamicisation and Arabicisation. One solution would be to write it in Roman script, but other British officials argued that teaching ‘bastard Arabic’ using English characters was not ‘education in the true meaning of the term’.⁶⁸

Such debates rumbled on through the 1930s among British officials across all three southern provinces. In 1936, the Resident Inspector of Southern Education declared that the attempt to introduce English ‘as the language of communication’ had been largely a ‘failure’:

Arabic is in fact the lingua franca. It is regarded not so much as the language of Islam but as the language of Government... It is bad Arabic ungrammatical [sic], incapable of exact statement, but

62 See L. P. Sanderson, ‘Education in the southern Sudan: the impact of government-missionary-southern Sudanese relationships upon the development of education during the Condominium period, 1898–1956’, *African Affairs*, 79:315 (1980), 157–69.

63 Leonardi, *Dealing*, 61–86.

64 Mahmud, *Arabic*, 15 and 47–52.

65 A. N. Tucker, ‘The linguistic situation in the Southern Sudan’, *Africa*, 7:1 (1934), 28–39.

66 NRO Civsec 17/1/2, S. Hillelson, ‘Report on Education in Mongalla Province’, 22 Apr. 1922.

67 NRO Civsec 17/1/2, extract from note by Governor-General Maffey when on tour in the south, 12 June 1927.

68 NRO UNP 1/15/131, Matthew, Secretary for Education, ‘Memorandum on the Language Problem of Southern Sudan’, 30 Oct. 1927; NRO UNP 1/4/22, Ingleson, Governor Bahr el Ghazal, to Civil Secretary, 14 May 1935.

it serves the purpose of the natives in their dealings with each other, has a certain prestige and will suffice to get him in touch with Government officials. He learns sufficient for his needs and no more, but there are very few places in which no one knows any Arabic ... The market place is a greater factor in the spreading of Arabic than the Government Official and these two are the main factors; but a third is the increasing necessity of some lingua franca between tribes...⁶⁹

This latter point was reiterated by the district commissioner (DC) of Yei, who declared bluntly that the question of a lingua franca had already been solved: 'Arabic is the language of intercommunication and commerce in the Southern Sudan.'⁷⁰ A number of other officials expressed a similar recognition or resignation at the limited capacity of government to control the use of 'bastard Arabic': 'One cannot dictate to the native what shall become his lingua franca, he will choose what is most useful to him.' Even in a district like Zeraf, where the entire population spoke Nuer, the DC reported that Arabic was spreading as 'the language of both trade and wage-earning'. The Upper Nile Province governor added that an 'almost unrecognisable' Arabic had 'already got a strong hold, especially among the Dinka in this province', and that efforts might better be concentrated on 'teaching the police to talk understandable Arabic'.⁷¹

Many officials remained opposed to the teaching or writing of this 'Southern Arabic' or 'Mongaltese', however.⁷² In 1942, one British officer (and later DC), Captain Lyth of the Equatorial Corps, announced that he was translating certain Christian texts into 'Mongaltese pidgin Arabic', to be printed for use in military services, and for sale in Juba. Lyth had the temerity, and prescience, to question the government's language policy:

Mongaltese is the only language – if it may be dignified by such a name – universally known and used throughout the Equatorial Corps, by both black and white alike (as well as in all the market-places in your Province.) Because of this, its users have had to find means to express every shade of meaning which they require in conversation, and this they succeed in doing, if sometimes in a somewhat roundabout way, very satisfactorily ... It is interesting in passing, is it not, to notice in books dealing with the period of Emin Pasha's governorship, that an almost identical form of pidgin Arabic was then in use in the Equatorial Province ... The policy of the Sudan Government would therefore appear to be almost as optimistic – though no doubt as wholly commendable – as that of the Uganda Government in attempting to eradicate the pidgin form of Swahili in favour of English.⁷³

Lyth was forbidden to use or sell the booklet. But even while expressing his disapproval of any written form of Southern Arabic, the education inspector, Hickson, did admit that 'in fact people do write Mongaltese (the local tailor does so when sending me my bill)'.⁷⁴

69 SSNA Upper Nile Province (UNP) 17.A.2-II, Note by Resident Inspector of Southern Education, 18 Mar. 1936.

70 SSNA UNP 17.A.2-II, Note by Major Logan Gray, District Commissioner, Yei River District, 22 June 1936.

71 SSNA UNP 17.A.2-II, Note by Resident Inspector of Southern Education, 11 Oct. 1936, A/DC Zeraf District to Governor Upper Nile, 15 May 1937, Governor Upper Nile to Education Secretary, 30 June 1937.

72 SSNA UNP 17.A.2-II, DC Bor to Governor Upper Nile, 18 Feb. 1937.

73 NRO Equatoria Province (EP) 2/14/57, El Bimbashi RE Lyth, Equatorial Corps, Sudan Defence Force, Torit, to Equatoria Province Governor Parr, 17 May 1942 and 31 Mar. 1942.

74 NRO EP 2/14/57, Hickson, Resident Inspector of Education, Lalyo, to Governor Parr, 20 Apr. 1942, Cave, Comd. Southern Sub-Area, to Lyth, 3 July 1942. On the oscillating colonial policy towards Kiswahili in Uganda, see Mazrui and Mazrui, *Swahili*, 45–58.

Some of the early chiefs' court records in Mongalla Province were also being kept in 'Arabic in English characters', though increasingly the government would insist on English or vernacular record-keeping.⁷⁵

British administrators thus remained well aware of the widespread use of South Sudanese Arabic, including in their own communication with traders, chiefs, soldiers, and servants, unless they had learned the vernacular – which was more difficult in linguistically plural districts, and became less common as officials served shorter periods in one district.⁷⁶ Most colonial officers in the Sudan Political Service had studied Arabic. But they too were contributing to the distinctive South Sudanese Arabic by employing their own simplified version, sometimes known as 'Bimbashi' Arabic (the lowest rank held by British military officers was that of Bimbashi, or major). As the British linguist Tucker put it:

Any remnant of grammar left is more English than Semitic, the British official finding it much easier to string Arabic words together in an English sentence-order than to attempt a Northern construction which would quite probably be unfamiliar to his hearers.⁷⁷

Unlike the attempts to master and control Swahili in Belgian Congo, the official disapproval of Arabic meant that the creole language was developing without any formal government rules or grammars.⁷⁸

In the courts, South Sudanese Arabic often functioned as an intermediary language, which was (just about) comprehensible to British DCs, and into which the vernaculars were translated by police officers or court interpreters.⁷⁹ As in other colonial contexts, this clearly gave interpreters and chiefs considerable power to control interactions with colonial officials.⁸⁰ As one DC revealed in 1948: in rural areas, 'chiefs are apt to take advantage of their unsophisticated subjects who speak no Arabic and are all too rarely in contact with a district commissioner'.⁸¹ It might be assumed then that South Sudanese Arabic acted as a 'boundary marker' to elite status, enabling chiefs, police and interpreters to act as powerful gatekeepers to the colonial state.⁸²

Yet as we have seen, languages tend to defy rather than to demarcate boundaries.⁸³ While South Sudanese Arabic retained its association with state coercion, this only encouraged its wider spread, as Tucker acknowledged:

With the opening of roads and the protection given to travellers, it has spread throughout the Southern Sudan, its pronunciation varying from tribe to tribe. It also had – and still has in some

75 NRO Civsec 1/13/42, Governor Mongalla to Governor Upper Nile, 7 Sept. 1932.

76 H. C. Jackson, *Behind the Modern Sudan* (London, 1955), 113.

77 Tucker, 'The linguistic', 28.

78 Fabian, *Language*.

79 Jackson, *Behind*, 113; Rhodes House Library, Oxford MSS Perham 549/5 ff. 1–2, DC Tracey, 'A Case of Poison', Yei, 31 Dec. 1939, 31.

80 See B. N. Lawrence, E. L. Osborn, and R. L. Roberts (eds.), *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison, WI, 2006).

81 SSNA EP 66.D.8, DC Juba to Governor Equatoria, 30 Jan. 1948.

82 The latter point is argued by R. Kevlihan, 'Beyond creole nationalism? language policies, education and the challenge of state building in post-conflict southern Sudan', *Ethnopolitics*, 6:4 (2007), 514.

83 See also James, 'Sudan'.

areas—a great prestige as being the language best calculated to win favour with the police ... Ultimately, of course, it was a useful language to know, should one's case come before the District Commissioner, since it enabled the plaintiff to evade the court interpreter, who was not always to be trusted to translate fairly unless well bribed.⁸⁴

While literacy in English did remain restricted, spoken South Sudanese Arabic could be more easily acquired, especially through interaction in the small towns and markets. Again this demonstrates the blurring of boundaries, as the colonial government sought—but largely failed—to prevent such interaction or to keep people out of the towns. Even in the predominantly Dinka-speaking districts of Rumbek and Yirrol, administrators reported recurring struggles to evict 'rural' people from the town and to combat the influence of 'detrilled' and 'Arabic speaking' townspeople, including women beer sellers, schoolboys and young men, chiefs, and the families of government employees.⁸⁵ Officials reiterated that South Sudanese Arabic had taken hold as a result of the *necessity* of and *demand* for 'a common means of communication', not just between government and people, but to enable 'intercourse at Government centres between people speaking different languages'.⁸⁶ As we have seen, linguists increasingly define creolisation as the development of a main and *necessary* language in just such contexts.

Even though urbanisation and the spread of South Sudanese Arabic were actively discouraged by the government, these processes—and the wider process of commoditisation that the government did encourage—were contributing to state formation by producing new kinds of local political competition and new disputes, which people turned to institutions associated with the state to resolve. The earliest formal chiefs' courts established in the 1920s and 1930s were reported to be copying all the militaristic and authoritarian styles of state policing and government offices. But over time they became key arenas in which to negotiate rights and relations, leading colonial officials to comment on the litigious nature of southern Sudanese societies. By 1947, officials in Rumbek were concerned that the appeal court sessions held in the town were attracting two to three thousand people a day, and encouraging 'all and sundry' to come to town.⁸⁷

As the courts became ever more crowded arenas, so their use of South Sudanese Arabic expanded beyond any original use merely as an intermediary language. By the 1940s, one DC described 'Mongaltese Arabic' as the nearest thing to a lingua franca in the courts.⁸⁸ Its use produced an enduring vocabulary that spread beyond the courts and into the vernaculars: Arabic words like '*garama*' (court fine) and '*sijin*' (prison) were reportedly replacing

84 Tucker, 'The linguistic', 28.

85 SSNA EP 57.D.10, Rumbek District Monthly Reports, Jan.-Mar. 1937 and Feb. 1940; NRO BGP 1/5/28, District Commissioner (DC) Yirrol to Governor Upper Nile, 'Report on Yirrol District', 15 Apr. 1934. See also T. F. G. Carless, 'Malakal Town', in D. H. Johnson (ed.), *The Upper Nile Province Handbook: A Report on Peoples and Government in the Southern Sudan, 1931*, comp. by C. A. Willis (Oxford, 1995), 312–20.

86 NRO UNP 1/15/131, Secretary for Education, Matthew, 'Memorandum on the Language Problem of Southern Sudan', 30 Oct. 1927. See also Mazrui and Mazrui, *Swahili*, 63.

87 SSNA EP 1.G.2, Lakes District handing-over notes, 1947.

88 NRO Dakhliya 112/14/95, Keen, 'The tribes of Meridi Sub-district', 1946.

vernacular terms in the Bari language by the early 1930s.⁸⁹ The process of linguistic creolisation was ongoing as South Sudanese Arabic became ever more necessary. At the same time a kind of legal and judicial creolisation was occurring in the chiefs' courts, as they became the site for the negotiation of new rights and regulations. The laws and procedures of these local courts were a product not simply of the hybridisation of colonial with indigenous justice, but of the ongoing, local negotiation and contestation of legal rights and duties among multiple actors with varying degrees of incorporation or relationship to the state. Like the creole language in which some of this negotiation took place, this local justice was thus not a combination of two distinct strands, but a novel, creative production emerging from debates over individual and collective rights in the context of the new colonial economy.⁹⁰

South Sudanese Arabic embodied the contradictions of colonialism: neither the idealised rural vernacular, nor the formal grammar and script of colonial government. Yet it did not simply hang 'uncertainly between languages and worlds' like the Arabic words adopted into government discourse in northern Sudan; rather, it took on a life of its own.⁹¹ South Sudanese Arabic was expanding and undergoing a genuine linguistic creolisation – becoming a main and necessary language in particular contexts – which was beyond the power of the colonial state to prevent or control, even though those very contexts were the product and site of state formation. Revealingly, when the first province councils were established in the late 1940s, 'Mongaltese Arabic' was the main language used among the chiefs and other members of the Equatoria Province Council.⁹² But from the 1950s, the sudden attempt to integrate north and south through the medium of Arabic would generate new political tensions around the meaning and use of language in southern Sudan.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE SOUTH? DISPARITIES IN THE MEANING AND USE OF SOUTH SUDANESE ARABIC AFTER 1956

Catherine Miller emphasises the frequent disparity between the 'symbolic importance' of a language and its actual role in socioeconomic – and, I would add, political – life, a disparity which is often particularly acute in the case of creole languages.⁹³ The disparity between the meaning and use of South Sudanese Arabic is paralleled by a set of discursive dichotomies that have been constructed in southern (now South) Sudan since Sudan's independence in 1956 – between state and society, town and countryside, money and non-money economies – which belie long-term processes of local state-making, urbanisation,

89 Much to the irritation of one Catholic missionary: L. M. Spagnolo, *Bari Grammar* (Verona, 1933), 15–16; Owens, 'Arabic-based', 168n15.

90 Leonardi, *Dealing*, 87–106; Johnson, 'Judicial'.

91 Willis, 'Hukm', 50.

92 NRO Dakhliya 57/1/1, Governor H. A. Nicholson, 'Equatoria Province handing-over notes', 16 Mar. 1949.

93 C. Miller, 'Language, identities and ideologies: a new era for Sudan?', proceedings of the 7th International Sudan Studies Conference, Bergen (2006), (<http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/15/04/38/PDF/millerBergen.pdf>); Swigart, 'Cultural', 180; C. M. Fyle, 'Official and unofficial attitudes and policy towards Krio as the main lingua franca in Sierra Leone', in R. Fardon and G. Furniss (eds.), *African Languages, Development and the State* (London, 1994), 44–54; S. Obeng, 'An analysis of the linguistic situation in Ghana', *African Languages and Cultures*, 10:1 (1997), 65–6.

and commoditisation. Southern political leaders have promoted English as a government language in opposition to the Sudanese Arabic of Khartoum, reflecting both a heritage of Christian missionary education and the increasing links of southern Sudan to neighbouring Anglophone countries. Meanwhile, the vernacular languages have remained associated with rurally rooted, ethnic cultures and traditions and seen as the authentic vehicles of southern identities. South Sudanese Arabic has had an uneasy or unacknowledged position in such political discourse, associated variously with state coercion and the military, with northern Sudanese Arabic, or with urbanisation and the erosion of ethnic culture. Processes of urbanisation, militarisation, and local state formation since the 1950s have continued to generate moral concern and debate among southerners. But the numbers of people participating in these processes have only multiplied, ensuring the increasing necessity of an alternative to either the vernaculars or the oscillating government languages of English and Sudanese Arabic, by which southerners might communicate among themselves in local arenas of the state. Such everyday communication has been more important for negotiating state and nation than the politicised discourses about language reveal.

From the later 1950s, the newly-independent Sudan government promoted Arabic language and Islamic education in the south with increasing forcefulness, a campaign which was revived again from the 1980s, and particularly under the National Islamic Front government in the 1990s.⁹⁴ The southern political opposition therefore associated Sudanese Arabic with northern domination, and instead promoted English; while they could speak South Sudanese Arabic, they did not endorse it as a vehicle of southern identity.⁹⁵ During the peace of 1972–83 and again since 2005, English was recognised as the official language of Southern Sudan and, since 2011, as the national language of the new South Sudanese state.⁹⁶ Unlike Swahili in East Africa, South Sudanese Arabic has not been formally recognised as an official political language of national integration.⁹⁷ But while the political leaders might prefer to promote English for ideological reasons, during both periods of civil war they were forced – like the colonial government had been – to accept South Sudanese Arabic as a military lingua franca for pragmatic reasons, as ‘the only common language which could be relatively easily acquired’ by the ordinary southerners recruited into the rebel forces.⁹⁸

This recent history has generated continuing ambiguity towards South Sudanese Arabic: its military and coercive associations have been retained, and some southerners also associate it with Sudanese Arabic and hence with government policies of Arabicisation and Islamicisation. For those who took refuge in Uganda or Kenya during the civil wars

94 Kevlihan, ‘Beyond’, 526.

95 J. Howell, ‘Political leadership and organisation in the southern Sudan’, (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Reading, 1978), 58.

96 Kevlihan, ‘Beyond’.

97 Mazrui and Mazrui, *Swahili*.

98 Abdon Agaw Jok Nhial, ‘Ki-Nubi and Juba Arabic: a comparative study’, in S. H. A. Hurreiz and H. Bell (eds.), *Directions in Sudanese Linguistics and Folklore* (Khartoum, 1975), 92; N. Gbongasuk, ‘Simple Arabic: a key for communication and development in Southern Sudan; Part One: a profile of Simple Arabic’, *Juba Post (Juba)*, 2–9 Nov 2007, 2; T. Calderbank, ‘Fi fiyl fi oda de (there is an elephant in the room): an introduction to Juba Arabic’, in H. McIlwraith (ed.), *Multilingual Education in Africa: Lessons from the Juba Language-in-Education Conference* (London, 2013), 218; James, ‘Sudan’, 73.

and studied in English, Arabic of any form has carried the stigma of northern Sudanese oppression, whereas English became seen as ‘a medium of communication with other Africans’ as well as among southern Sudanese.⁹⁹ When such refugees returned to South Sudan from 2005 onwards, however, they found themselves criticised for not knowing any South Sudanese Arabic, and referred to as ‘uncivilised’ or *baladi* (rural/provincial).¹⁰⁰ The association of South Sudanese Arabic—here subsumed in the category of ‘Simple Arabic’—with the towns was noted by a newspaper contributor from Juba in 2007:

When I was growing up in this town in the mid 1960s and 1970s I thought Simple Arabic was the language of the people of Southern Sudan. But before long, I discovered it was not. Some of my relatives who visited our family from countryside or village could not speak or understand the simplest version of Simple Arabic. We use to call those relatives Ahaale, meaning villagers or uncivilised.¹⁰¹

According to an early 1970s study by Abdon Agaw, a Bor Dinka linguist, ‘[t]he continuous intermingling of people in different towns in the southern region’ had encouraged the spread of South Sudanese Arabic.¹⁰² He also recognised that it was becoming a first language among children in the bigger towns.¹⁰³ By the early twenty-first century, many urban families—even mono-ethnic ones—were speaking South Sudanese Arabic in the home, and their children were learning it as a first language. This has raised considerable concern about the threat to the vernacular languages. Even—or perhaps especially—in Juba, the town most associated historically with South Sudanese Arabic, many political leaders and other commentators have been bemoaning its spread in recent years: ‘[t]he problem is the encroachment of Arabic deep into the [rural] areas, and people forgetting the Bari language’.¹⁰⁴ Just as Governor Owen had asserted in 1950, the vernacular languages have continued to be seen by many South Sudanese as vital cultural repositories and mediums of expression.¹⁰⁵ In contrast, South Sudanese Arabic has retained associations with the moral ills of town life; much scholarship on Sudan also emphasises the moral dichotomies between urban government and the vernacular cultures of the rural areas.¹⁰⁶

99 K. H. Perry, ‘Sharing stories, linking lives: literacy practices among Sudanese refugees’, in V. Purcell-Gates (ed.), *Cultural Practices of Literacy: Case Studies of Language, Literacy, Social Practice and Power* (Mahwah, NJ, 2007), 78–9; Kevlihan, ‘Beyond’, 532–4.

100 S. Pantuliano, M. Buchanan-Smith, P. Murphy, and I. Mosel, *The Long Road Home: Opportunities and Obstacles to the Reintegration of IDPs and Refugees Returning to Southern Sudan and the Three Areas. Report of Phase II: Conflict, Urbanisation and Land* (London, 2008), 13–14.

101 Gbongasuk, ‘Simple’.

102 Abdon Agaw, ‘Ki-Nubi’, 91–2.

103 G. Bureng Vincent, ‘Juba Arabic from a Bari perspective’, in I. R. Dihoff (ed.), *Current Approaches to African Linguistics*, Volume I (Dordrecht, 1983), 72.

104 Interview with Bari university professor, Juba, 29 Aug. 2008; V. Ismail Wani, ‘Southern culture should not be forgotten’, *Juba Post* (Juba), 27–31 July 2007, 11.

105 Abdon Agaw, ‘Ki-Nubi’, 89. See also W. James, *War and Survival in Sudan’s Frontierlands: Voices from the Blue Nile* (Oxford, 2007), 244–5.

106 S. Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State* (Berkeley, CA, 1996); A. N. M. Mawson, ‘The triumph of life: political dispute and religious ceremonial among the Agar Dinka of the Southern Sudan’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1989).

But the debates and uncertainties over the moral and political meaning of South Sudanese Arabic belie the reality of its spreading use and the porosity of ‘the rural-urban imaginary dividing line’.¹⁰⁷ Studies in the 1970s and 1980s revealed extensive urban-rural linkages, and social and economic interaction, which transcended and incorporated the town boundaries.¹⁰⁸ Women played an important role in this interaction, being responsible for carrying produce to markets and for alcohol production and sale in towns and market-places; interethnic marriages also encouraged the use of South Sudanese Arabic within households. Even in predominantly Dinka-speaking areas of Bahr el Ghazal, this language was becoming a valuable – indeed necessary – investment among local entrepreneurs like cattle traders.¹⁰⁹

South Sudanese Arabic has therefore also become ever more necessary for negotiating the local state. The Dinka cattle traders’ knowledge of Arabic, for example, enabled them to facilitate communication among local officials, townspeople, and villagers, and often to go on to hold positions as chiefs or court members.¹¹⁰ Such individuals have transcended any clear dichotomy between state and non-state actors. Successful traders and businesspeople, teachers, church leaders, chiefs, elders, government employees, and other members of local elites have moved in and out of formal state institutions and appropriated state practices and regulatory orders – such as the formation of ‘committees’ with ‘chairmen’ – into local and familial settings like marriage negotiations or funeral gatherings. The creation of local government councils and committees from the 1970s opened further opportunities for government employment and political participation, even if their autonomy and effectiveness remained limited.¹¹¹

Alongside these councils and committees, chiefs’ courts have remained vital sites for the local negotiation of rights and laws, through which the idea of the state has been produced and reproduced. These courts represent a creolised judicial order, drawing on formal state laws and procedures but producing distinct judicial practices that do not correspond to official state regulations or to customary practices – particularly in their simultaneous awards of compensation and punitive fines or imprisonment.¹¹²

South Sudanese Arabic was the most common language spoken in the chiefs’ courts in Juba in the early 1980s, as it still is nowadays. Even in Bari chiefs’ courts, litigants and chiefs have come to speak more in South Sudanese Arabic than in Bari. Miller recorded a distinctively ‘formal’ type of South Sudanese Arabic employed by litigants and chiefs in 1980s Juba, including some old Ottoman Turkish terms as part of an established

107 A. G. M. Ahmed and M. A. Rahman, ‘Small urban centres: vanguards of exploitation: two cases from Sudan’, *Africa*, 49:3 (1979), 270.

108 R. L. Hill, *Migration to Juba: A Case Study* (Juba, 1981), 131; G. O. Huby, ‘Big men and old men – and women: social organization and urban adaptation of the Bari, Southern Sudan’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Trondheim, 1981); Mawson, ‘The triumph’, 90–1; M. Mangor Ring, ‘Dinka stock trading and shifts in rights in cattle’, in P. T. W. Baxter and R. Hogg (eds.), *Property, Poverty and People: Changing Rights in Property and Problems of Pastoral Development* (Manchester, 1987), 192–205.

109 Mangor Ring, ‘Dinka’, 202–3.

110 *Ibid.*

111 Leonard, *Dealing*, 150–2 and 158–63.

112 *Ibid.* 199–216; C. Leonard, L. N. Moro, M. Santschi, and D. H. Isser, *Local Justice in Southern Sudan* (Washington, DC, 2010), 17–38.

‘court vocabulary’. Even a *Malakiyan* court judge who could speak Sudanese Arabic adapted his speech to that of the local litigants and ‘never tried to assert his Authority through the exclusive use of a high linguistic norm’.¹¹³ These town court chiefs were not demonstrating their status through knowledge of the Sudanese Arabic of high office; rather they were using and recognising the distinctive linguistic medium of South Sudanese Arabic, which facilitated the most effective communication among litigants and court members. More recently, the chiefs’ courts have increasingly been located in the towns and heard cases from multiple language groups. As one MP asserted in 2008, it was vital for chiefs to know South Sudanese Arabic ‘because they hear cases from all the people and simple Arabic is spoken’.¹¹⁴ As in the colonial period, the use of South Sudanese Arabic in such courts privileges those with linguistic knowledge and experience of town and government ways. But this category has continued to expand and includes squatters, hawkers, brewers, and prostitutes, as well as government officers, chiefs, and police. By the 2000s, young townswomen in Juba and Yei were using South Sudanese Arabic to argue their cases vociferously in the chiefs’ courts, along with a wide range of other litigants. Whether or not this was a conscious decision, it was guaranteed to ensure the widest possible comprehension of their narratives by the chiefs, court officials, police, and (often vocal) multiethnic audiences.

As South Sudanese Arabic has become ever more widely spoken, government officials and political actors have also found it necessary to use this language in local state arenas, as recognised in the 1970s:

Now in Juba ... politicians and leaders of popular organizations find it more expedient to speak Juba Arabic than to speak fluent English in addressing a public rally. By so doing, they stand better chances of putting their message across and of winning response from the audience.¹¹⁵

Despite the promotion of English as the official government language over the next decade, such use of South Sudanese Arabic had only increased by 1983: ‘As well as being used informally for the normal purposes of social interaction it is now also used over the radio, in big gatherings such as political meetings, and by public officials who wish to communicate with the population.’¹¹⁶

Through such interaction, ideas of state and nation were also being produced: in the 1980s, one Bari chief explicitly promoted the use of ‘our Southern Arabic’ in his court and criticised a young man for talking like a northerner.¹¹⁷ From this time, some scholars predicted that South Sudanese Arabic would be absorbed as merely a dialect of the dominant Sudanese Arabic, but Miller argues that such a process has been hindered by ‘a tendency to condemn speakers whose speech goes too much in the direction of the Arabic of the north’.¹¹⁸ Indeed she argues for the increasing ‘legitimization’ of South Sudanese Arabic as

113 Miller, ‘Do they’, 612.

114 Interview with male Bari MP, Juba, 28 Aug. 2008.

115 Abdon Agaw, ‘Ki-Nubi’, 92. See also Fyle, ‘Official’, 47.

116 Bureng Vincent, ‘Juba’, 72. W. James, ‘The multiple voices of Sudanese airspace’, in R. Fardon and G. Furniss (eds.), *African Broadcast Cultures: Radio in Transition* (Oxford, 2000), 200; Miller, ‘Southern’, 387.

117 Miller, ‘Do they’, 619–20.

118 Versteegh, ‘Leveling’, 76; Tosco, ‘A pidgin’, 453–4.

‘the language of the South’. Both among the displaced around Khartoum and in the South itself, South Sudanese Arabic came to be widely used in cultural and artistic productions. It has also long been used in Christian services, broadcasts, and publications by the churches, thus further eroding any lingering associations with Islam. It was prominent on Radio SPLA, and used for speeches by SPLA leader John Garang.¹¹⁹ The idea of South Sudanese Arabic as a unifying lingua franca for the emerging new state of South Sudan was epitomised in its use for the South Sudan Theatre Company’s production of Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, which was performed in London in 2012. Its translator, Joseph Abuk, located the creole language in the contradictions of colonialism and ironies of Southern Policy: ‘Juba Arabic grew up because the African people in the south were not allowed by the British to speak Arabic.’¹²⁰ Out of the exclusionary practices of the colonial and postcolonial Sudanese state, a creole language thus emerged to negotiate the tensions, threats, and opportunities represented by the state, contributing in the end to the idea of a distinctively South Sudanese state.

CONCLUSION

[In 2013] Juba Arabic is on the radio and in the government ministries. It is the language of the market place and the church hall. Most of all it’s the language of the youth, full of humour and ‘street cred’ ... In the Konyokonyo marketplace, traders and hawkers from a vast range of linguistic backgrounds use Juba Arabic to do their business. Women from the villages bring their own words and experiment with language to sell their wares and cement crucial relationships. All are using Juba Arabic to varying degrees ... It is essential to survival. A whole range of people in the city who barely glimpse English in the distance, need to learn Juba Arabic to make a living here. All the civil servants use Juba Arabic. Enter any government department and the language you hear is Juba Arabic. English hovers around officially and you may well conduct your meetings in it, but when you emerge from the minister’s office the staff are speaking Juba Arabic.¹²¹

The varied uses of South Sudanese Arabic identified in this report are indicative of the multiple actors and arenas that have played a part in constituting the local state and in blurring its boundaries over the past century or more. Some scholars have focused on linguistic knowledge as a means of monopolising and restricting communication with the colonial state, producing powerful intermediary gatekeepers.¹²² But the history of South Sudanese Arabic demonstrates instead that linguistic creolisation opened up, rather than closed down, the opportunities to negotiate the state at the local level, and that language use has defied and blurred any state-society boundary.

119 C. Miller, ‘Juba Arabic as a way of expressing a Southern Sudanese identity in Khartoum’, in A. Youssi et al. (eds.), *Contemporary Arabic Dialects: Proceedings of the 4th Aida International Conference, Marrakech, 2002* (Rabat, 2003), 114–22, (<http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/15/03/99/PDF/Aida4.pdf>); Miller, ‘The relevance’, 27; Miller, ‘Southern’, 387; James, ‘The multiple’, 204; Calderbank, ‘Fi fiyl’.

120 R. Wynne-Jones, ‘Cymbeline: from war-ravaged South Sudan to the Globe Theatre’, *The Independent* (UK), 2 May 2012, (<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/cymbeline-from-war-ravaged-south-sudan-to-the-globe-theatre-7704215.html>).

121 Calderbank, ‘Fi fiyl’, 219–20.

122 See, for example, the studies in Lawrence, Osborn, and Roberts, *Intermediaries*.

The speakers of this language, from government ministers to urban youth or rural women traders, have not been speaking a poor imitation of an elite language; they have been speaking a distinct creole language which emerged out of the imperative to communicate within the new arenas opened up by the establishment of the state. Linguistic studies have defined creolisation as the process by which a pidgin language becomes necessary – essential for survival, indeed in particular contexts. This article has argued that the contexts in which South Sudanese Arabic became necessary have also been the principal arenas of local state formation: arenas in which a wide range of individuals pursued rights and resources, and in the process turned to state institutions and regulatory orders like courts, markets, and local government councils. Attempts to inhibit the use of South Sudanese Arabic or to impose other official languages have failed to prevent its spread: a stubborn sign that a great deal of power and agency in everyday life has come to be located neither in the elite languages of high office nor in the idealised cultural and moral values of the vernaculars, but in the quotidian struggles, disputes and discussions that take place just outside the minister’s office – and in the markets, streets, bars, tea-places, courts, police stations, army barracks, and local government offices, in which this *lingua franca* is so often spoken.

Linguistic studies of South Sudanese Arabic have also emphasised its original innovative structures; creolisation is not simply a mixture of two distinct languages, but the creation of a new language. Again this article has suggested that this is useful device for thinking about local state formation, not as the hybridisation of two kinds of political culture (state and non-state, or modern and traditional) but as the product of multiple negotiations and innovations, and of the need to find a common language of governance. What is perhaps most striking is how both the state and the creole language emerged out of multiple local negotiations to exhibit broadly common features. This no doubt reflects the unbounded nature of local arenas and fields of interaction, and the travel of ideas, discourses, and languages. But some linguists have also speculated that the common features among creole languages more widely suggest universal ‘parallel tendencies of linguistic development in parallel social situations’.¹²³ Strikingly of course, these have invariably been situations that arose in ‘the context of the state’.¹²⁴ Studying the history of creolisation perhaps then also offers a way to address the central problematic raised by Gupta: ‘the relationship between the translocality of “the state” and the necessarily localized offices, institutions and practices in which it is instantiated’.¹²⁵ The history of South Sudanese Arabic reveals the processes through which multiple versions of the local state emerged out of the imperative to communicate and negotiate, even in highly militarised and unequal contexts. These processes of local state formation produced locally distinctive articulations of governance. Yet each of these contexts was structured by similar tensions and needs, generating broadly common strategies and institutions – and a developing common language – for dealing with the threats, constraints and opportunities presented by the state.

123 S. H. Hurreiz and H. Bell, ‘Colloquial Arabic: introduction’, in Hurreiz and Bell (eds.), *Directions*, 80–1.

124 J. Jackson, ‘Is there a way to talk about making culture without making enemies?’, *Dialectical Anthropology*, 14:2 (1989), 134.

125 Gupta, ‘Blurred’, 375–6.