Reinventing the Wheel? Local Government and Neo-Traditional Authority in Late-Colonial Northern Sudan*

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> I know all about councils—talking themselves white in the face
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> And deciding on what suits nobody and doing it all over the place.

This quotation from a piece in a 1950s issue of *Punch*, entitled "Frustrated Export to New Britain," is a cynical comment on the establishment of elected local councils in Britain's imperial territories after World War II.[1] It amused the director of local government in Sudan sufficiently for him to keep it among his personal papers. But the image of "talking themselves white in the face" hints at how the introduction of "Local Government" in the British Empire was part of a wider project of postwar imperial policy to make "other" political cultures look less "other" and more like the metropole itself. Imperial subjects sitting on councils were now ordering their business in line with metropolitan models of ritualized council meetings, thus partially entering what was still a privileged sphere of whiteness. In doing so, they were imagined by the colonial state to become statesmen of the future, authentically local, yet simultaneously modern leaders of their communities, able to speak both the language of their people and the language of the bureaucratic state. But they were also hoped to form a bulwark against the spread of nationalism among local communities. Local government was thus envisaged as both a disciplinary training ground for future political independence as well as a means of stalling movement towards that very eventuality.

The "second colonial occupation" of post World War II British-ruled Africa, and the resistance it provoked, has received much attention from historians.[2] Nevertheless, among the compelling narratives leading up to decolonization, shifts in the structures of local government have been accorded less study than they deserve.[3] Reform of local

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[1] P. Hubbard, "Frustrated Export to New Britain," Sudan Archive, Durham, UK [hereafter SAD] 798/2/16.

[2] J. Iliffe, *A History of Modern Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 436.

[3] Ibid., 481–84; B. Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination* (London: James Currey, 1990), 309–12, and F.G. Burke, *Local Government and Politics in Uganda*

administration might at first sight fit easily into narratives of late-imperial modernization projects, and moves towards self-government. As "modern" institutions of local government, councils were intended to facilitate development, not to hold it back as "traditional" authorities might. John Cell writes in a standard history of the British Empire that "once the British began to think seriously about the possibility of African self-government, Indirect Rule was discarded."[4] Killingray and Rathbone argue that after World War II "the educated elite was enlisted as a partner of the colonial state; traditional rulers and the systems of authority slowly assembled in the inter-war years were abandoned and gradually wound down."[5] But to what extent is this an accurate portrait of postwar local administration? Mamdani takes a far more skeptical view:

> elected representatives rubbed shoulders with appointed traditional leaders in ethnically defined district councils. Meanwhile on the ground administration remained a chiefly affair. The point of the reform, after all, was to weld together a coalition of traditional leaders and middle strata through a process of concession and conciliation short of doing away with ground-level despotism.[6]

In this view, then, local government was a cosmetic change, intended to buy time for colonial government to make more effective bargains with an ever more demanding educated elite, while real local power remained in the hands of the established allies of the state, so-called "traditional" notables or chiefs. Eckert also argues specifically of late colonial Tanganyika that "local government" was really "indirect rule with a representative outlook."[7]

Anglo-Egyptian Condominium Sudan (in practice a British-ruled territory) was very much a participant in the move towards conciliar forms of local government after 1942. Government rhetoric presented local councils as a "laboratory for self-government."[8] Councils were to be defined territorially, not ethnically, bringing together rival groups under a single administrative unit, in order to encourage a broader political outlook that would benefit a future independent Sudanese nation-state. They were elected bodies, intended to inculcate a culture of local electoral democracy. But narratives of a new agenda in the late colonial period and of "progress" or "evolution" towards a more "modern"

(Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1964). See A. Eckert, "Useful Instruments of Participation? Local Government and Cooperatives in Tanzania, 1940s to 1970s," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 40, 1 (2007), 97–118.

[4] J. Cell, "Colonial Rule," in J.M. Brown and W.R. Louis, eds., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Vol. 4: *The Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 250.

[5] D. Killingray and R. Rathbone, "Introduction," in D. Killingray and R. Rathbone, eds., *Africa and the Second World War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), 6. See also J. Lewis, *Empire State-Building: War and Welfare in Kenya 1925–1952* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), 84.

[6] M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 104.

[7] Eckert, "Local Government," 102.

[8] D. Newbold, "Notes for a Lecture to the Arab Centre at Jerusalem," October 1944, in K.D.D. Henderson, *The Making of the Modern Sudan* (London: Faber, 1953), 531.

system of government can be challenged, as Mamdani's view suggests. While Daly claims that local government in Sudan represented a "major theoretical reorientation," Gaafar Bakheit argues that it was simply a front to make traditional authority more acceptable in a period of supposed "modernization."[9] Indeed, by requiring traditional leaders to perform local governance in new ways, in the form of British-style meetings, motions, and debates, councils demonstrated the capacity of these men to perform new roles as leaders of colonially ordered modernity. While municipal and town councils opened up opportunities to the emergent educated elite, bringing about some genuine change in urban political culture, rural councils served to perpetuate the dominance of the neo-traditional elite. However, the chiefs of the postwar period often had a very different background to the rural notables of the earlier years of colonial rule.

One result of colonial education policies that overtly favored the sons of chiefs was that the cultural gulf between the urban, educated *effendia* and the younger generation of "traditional" leaders, though sometimes still deeply felt, was also often more imagined than real. Chiefs, or *nazirs* as they were called in Northern Sudan, were being transformed by their own strategies of governance or by the facts of their upbringing into colonially educated leaders of change and "modernity," a shift that Bakheit's analysis does not really take into account.[10] The historical importance of "Local Government" is to some extent in its facilitation and legitimization of such transformations, and in bringing educated elites of both town and country together in the grind of local administration.

There has been a certain amount of nostalgia within Sudan for the councils of the late colonial period as examples of genuine decentralization within Sudan's administrative structures, mainly among an urban educated elite and official class who benefited from the opportunities that local government reform afforded.[11] And colonial councils do appear to have been relatively representative, in comparison to the ever-increasing "politicization" of local administration by central government appointees in recent times. But this article argues that councils (much as was the case for Native Administration) were never apolitical and never genuinely decentralized. Nationalist politics dominated the business of municipal and town councils in particular: local government was rarely simply concerned with local issues. Most importantly, councils were part of a growing centralization of power in the hands of the late colonial state. Eckert argues of Tanzania that, despite the rhetoric of decentralization, local government there was principally a support to the bureaucratic authoritarianism of central government.[12] In Sudan, the role of the District

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[9] M.W. Daly, *Imperial Sudan: The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, 1934–56* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 37; Gaafar Mohammed Ali Bakheit, "The Condominium and Indirect Rule," in J. Howell, ed., *Local Government and Politics in the Sudan* (Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1974), 31.

[10] For chiefs as agents of modernization, see S. Shankar, "Medical Missonaries and Modernizing Emirs in Colonial Hausaland: Leprosy Control and Native Authority in the 1930s," *Journal of African History* 48, 1 (2007), 45–68.

[11] M. Norris, "Sudan: Administrative versus Political Priorities," in P. Mawhood, ed., *Local Government in The Third World* (Chichester, UK: Wiley, 1983), 71; author's discussion with Mohamed el-Hassan Mohamed Abdu, retired schoolteacher, Khartoum, 27 October 2008.

[12] Eckert, "Local Government," 97.

Commissioner [DC] remained essential in the business of council, and, more importantly, new central departments were established to monitor the performance of local councils. Late colonial councils were, then, not an interruption in the march of the centralizing Sudanese state, but a step along that very path. They were also a way by which the dysfunctional relationship between Sudan's riverine core and its various peripheries was re-inscribed into political culture, as technocrats who had experienced privileged access to higher education in Khartoum (something that the sons of rural notables much more rarely experienced), further dominated local administration.[13] As will be demonstrated in the final section of this article, this trend towards centralized control very much continued into the postcolonial era. Nonetheless, the surprising survival of neo-traditional authority at the local level provided some capacity for local elites to negotiate their relationship with the centralizing state.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the pace of reform varied between the various regions of Sudan. "Southern Policy," the mandate for neglect that had tried to prevent cultural contact between northern and southern Sudan, was officially abandoned in 1947, and rapid integration of the north and south became official policy. But Marshall's local government report of 1949 adopted an explicitly gradualist line towards the development of local councils in the south. Councils established there were often indistinguishable from the meetings of chiefs' courts, and lacked independent budgets.[14] Lawrence Buchanan, director of the Local Government Branch of the Sudan Government, described the establishment of "practicable prototypes' of councils in Southern Sudan by 1953, but no more than this."[15] By 1960 over sixty councils across Sudan "had achieved corporate status, those below that level being mainly in the South."[16] There was therefore a real difference in the nature of local government reform between northern (including the western provinces of Kordofan and even Darfur) and southern Sudan. However, the comparatively rapid pace of change in the north should not obscure the ways in which councils there also often re-legitimized the authority of chiefs. This article focuses primarily on local government in northern Sudan in order to achieve a better understanding of the complex relationship between rhetoric and reality.

The End of "Native Administration"?

"Native Administration" was a policy intended to rule Sudan "on a shoestring" (to borrow Sara Berry's phrase), by means of the devolution of powers from government officials to

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[13] For the clearest statement of the "core-periphery" thesis, see D. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003).

[14] C. Leonardi, "Knowing Authority: Colonial Governance and Local Community in Equatoria Province, Sudan, 1900–1956" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Durham, UK, 2005), 65–74, 151–52.

[15] Lawrence Buchanan, "Local Government in the Southern Sudan," *Southern Sudan Review* [This document is a copy of a journal article, but unfortunately no details of volume number] (November–December 1953), SAD 797/3/51.

[16] Norris, "Sudan," 55.

"traditional" leaders.[17] Such men were viewed as the "natural" leaders of their own tribes, which corresponded with official imaginaries of primordialist ethnicities. In northern Sudan recognizable authorities were much easier to locate than in the south, although here too the emergence of government chiefs was more an evolutionary process developing from the history of earlier contacts with "foreigners" rather than outright invention.[18] Legislation from the early 1920s onwards provided for the devolution of judicial and administrative powers to rural notables, and an increasingly complex web of "Native Courts" were set up across Sudan, with powers to pass judgement in a wide range of criminal and civil cases. Particularly in northern Sudan these courts might concentrate great power in the hands of individual leaders favored by the colonial administration,.[19] The powers these men wielded were then far from traditional: rather authority was restructured within communities in thoroughly novel fashion. Sub-chiefs, or *omdas*, as they were known in Northern Sudan, were also often influential members of "Native Courts" and were a critical part of the local administrative machinery.

But Native Administration itself was never a simple matter of governing single tribes through hereditary leaders. In practice, the establishment of Native Administrations often meant the amalgamation of smaller ethnic groups under a larger, locally dominant group for reasons of administrative convenience: colonial policy thereby created new relationships of local inter-group domination. The Kababish Confederation saw the amalgamation of nine ethnic groups under the leadership of Sheikh Ali El Tom, one of the most favored leaders of the Condominium era.[20] Local Government's amalgamations of peoples were not always novel departures from earlier policy (the Kababish Rural District Council mirrored the composition of the Kababish Confederation), and administrative convenience remained the driving force behind such groupings, as it always had been.

Additionally, Native Administration was not simply an unrepresentative and unaccountable system as compared to a democratic local government. While administrative officials retained control over the appointment of *nazirs, shartais* (another title for a senior "traditional" leader), and *omdas*, rural populations could by force of protest make an oppressive leader's position untenable. Officials often consulted local elites when appointing chiefs and sub-chiefs in order to lessen the risk of such damaging local crises.[21] This might extend to the nomination of *omdas*, or even *shartais*, by the

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[17] S. Berry, "Hegemony on a Shoestring: Indirect Rule and Access to Resources in Africa," *Africa* 62, 3 (1992), 327–55.

[18] Leonardi, "Knowing," especially 77–120.

[19] J. Willis, "Hukm: The Creolization of Authority in Condominium Sudan," *Journal of African History* 46, 1 (2005), 29–50.

[20] T. Asad, *The Kababish Arabs* (London: Hurst, 1970), 219.

[21] For two examples among many, see G.D. Lampen memoirs, SAD 734/8–9; Boustead, DC Zalingei District to Perham, 29 April 1938, Rhodes House, Oxford, MSS Perham 536/3. For the inherent instability of Indirect Rule, see Sara Berry, *No Condition is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), and *Chiefs Know Their Boundaries* (Oxford: James Currey, 2001).

agawid (elders) or *sheikhs* of the communities they would govern: something like an electoral practice, and sometimes termed as such by officials.[22] Finally, Native Administration was a system of government created principally to govern rural Sudan: there had been some recognition that urban areas required their own forms of representative institutions in the guise of advisory municipal councils in Khartoum, Omdurman, and Port Sudan from 1921.[23] But "traditional" authority often also retained importance in urban settings. One example of many is the El Fasher town court, headed by the family that had acted as chief ministers to Ali Dinar, the last Sultan of the independent state of Darfur, in the years immediately before British occupation.[24]

In sum, then, "Native Administration" was not a clear-cut case of governing by "traditional," "decentralized despots" with no room for local political rivalries to be expressed or accountability from below to be enforced: nor was it simply a system with legitimacy only in the countryside, lacking any relevance in urban settings. But "Local Government" as a policy did nonetheless have its origins in the growing sense that changes in Sudanese political culture, with the growth of an educated and increasingly politically-conscious urban elite, required changes in forms of administration.

Stewart Symes, governor general of Sudan, was ahead of his counterparts in other imperial territories when he started to talk in 1935 about "functional dilution in sophisticated areas"—this was three years before Lord Hailey's *An African Survey* was published.[25] The 1937 legislation that grew out of this thinking made allowances for different forms of government in Rural Areas, Townships and Municipalities. Municipalities and Townships were to gain partially elected councils for the purposes of administration: rural areas could have councils, but membership of these was to be nominated rather than elected.[26] However, officials recognized the need to create a system in which what they imagined to be "traditional" and "modern" elites could in some way be brought together. The rhetoric of "Local Government" was to be applied to all forms of local administration, urban and rural; "Native Administration," in rhetorical terms as least, was out. It was hoped that greater involvement in local administration might deflect the ambitions of the educated elite away from nationalist activism. Newbold, Civil Secretary of Sudan in the late 1930s hoped that "under the ample folds of (Local Government's) respectable cloak, the sons of *sheikhs* and the sons of *effendia* could lie down together."[27] From the inception of local councils, then, they were never intended to marginalize the

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[22] Guy Moore, DC Northern Darfur District, "Note on Dar Artag unrest," 27 March 1936, National Records Office, Khartoum (NRO), Darfur 1/31/164.

[23] Lawrence Buchanan, Head of Local Government, Lecture to the School of Administration, Khartoum, 1941, SAD 797/9/12.

[24] Charles Dupuis, Governor of Darfur, to Civil Secretary, 20 June 1928, NRO CIVSEC (1)/1/20/61. For the relevance of chieftaincy in a West African urban setting, see R. Watson, *"Civil Disorder Is the Disease of Ibadan": Chieftaincy and Civic Culture in a Yoruba City* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003).

[25] M. Daly, *Imperial Sudan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 36.

[26] Norris, "Sudan," 54.

[27] Newbold note, February 1939, in Henderson, *Making,* 509.

chieftaincy elite, but rather to recognize, legitimate and encourage the increasing ties between rural and urban, "traditional" and "modern" Sudan.

It is therefore hardly a surprise that rural councils in particular continued to be dominated by a very similar elite to that of the Native Administration era. Rural councils in their early years were made up of a mixture of elected and appointed members, and *nazirs* and *omdas* were usually appointed by provincial governors. Gedaref Rural District Council in 1944 consisted of seven tribal leaders, two government officials and three merchants.[28] And elections in rural areas were not based on universal suffrage: rather, Native Courts themselves might elect council members or they might be chosen at a separate meeting of chiefs and elders.[29] This was sometimes hardly different from the ways that *shartais* or *omdas* had previously been selected and approved by the DC under "Native Administration." Rivalries between "big men" also sometimes continued to dominate council business. The DC of Southern Darfur reported that Local Government was "the name given to the umbrella covering tribalism," remarking that "to obtain approval for a new school is regarded by one tribal leader as a personal triumph over another who failed."[30] Darfur's governor observed that, "(tribal) boundaries are more interesting matters to discuss than district development."[31]

However, the dominance of the "traditional" elite was not entirely unchallenged. In 1949, Arthur Marshall, city treasurer of Coventry City Council, was commissioned to produce a report making recommendations on local government policy to the Sudan Government. He recommended that paid executive servants of the council should not also be the decision-making members of the council, thus targeting *omdas* and *sheikhs*, who were both paid by the council. These men should still have a key role in the judicial sphere, as well as in tax collection and the maintenance of public order: but the vagaries of "amateurish" tribal leaders administering local developmental projects should be done away with.[32] Subsequently, the 1951 Local Government Ordinance banned any employees of the council from membership of the council, either via election or via appointment.[33] This provoked some resistance: at Seleim in 1952 "the family of a candidate whose nomination paper had been rejected, arrived at the polling station, over a hundred strong to stop the elections."[34] However, despite legislative restrictions, *omdas* in practice often remained important members of councils, mainly via direct appointment by provincial

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[28] Report by the Governor General on the Finances, Administration and Condition of the Sudan (hereafter RGG), 1944, 187.

[29] Western and Northern Darfur Districts Annual Reports 1947, NRO 2.D.Fasher A 47/7/26.

[30] Southern Darfur District Annual Report 1949, NRO Darfur 47/6/29.

[31] Lampen, Governor Darfur to DCs Darfur, "Note on Local Government," 28 October 1948, NRO Darfur 6/7/18.

[32] A.H. Marshall, Report on local government in the Sudan (Khartoum: McCorquodale, 1949), SAD, 44–47.

[33] Legislative Supplement to the Sudan Government Gazette [hereafter LS] (1951), SAD 41.

[34] *Sudan Monthly Record* [SMR hereafter] (May–June 1952), SAD, 3.

governors, on the recommendations of DCs.[35] Moreover, the importance of the *nazir* sitting on the council as an appointed member remained unquestioned, by Marshall or anyone else.[36] The governor of Darfur wrote of the necessity of keeping *nazirs* on councils but out of the hurly-burly of electioneering, revealing the ambivalence of provincial administrators towards centrally imposed "modernization":

> in the turbulence of Darfur tribal politics it is very doubtful whether chiefs would or should submit themselves to election for councils. A defeat may shake their whole position in their tribe and the enormous prestige accruing to the hereditary or semi-hereditary office may be lost according to the whim of an electorate.[37]

It was not just in membership patterns that "Native Administration" continued to hang over local government: neither was the principle of "territoriality" over "tribe" altogether successfully imposed. In the direct elections for Merowe and Dongola Rural District Councils in 1952, electoral wards usually matched the map of *omodias*. There were complaints about the election from wards containing two *omodias* but electing only one representative; the election in one ward was boycotted for this reason.[38] Electors wanted to have a representative from their own *omodia*, not from that of their neighbors. Additionally, electoral colleges for indirect elections were made up of representatives from electoral wards that were themselves based on *sheikhships*.[39] Thus the units of Native Administration continued to define the boundaries of local political communities, even if prominent figures in the administration were barred from standing for election. Due to the under-staffing and poor financing of the councils, they also usually depended on "Native Administration" machinery to carry out much of the day-to-day district administration and revenue collection.[40]

None of this comes as much of a surprise: Marshall had been very explicit in 1949 in stating there was "no question of abolishing or disrupting the tribal hierarchy or Native Administration."[41] Rather, councils were meant to be superimposed upon existing forms of local administration, with the resulting overlap never quite clearly delimited—an "anomaly which must nonetheless remain for a long time."[42] In 1956, the year of Sudan's

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[35] See, for instance, Tibbs, "Administration in Dar Messeria," in Michael and Anne Tibbs, *A Sudan Sunset* (Lynchmere, West Sussex: Michael and Anne Tibbs, 1999), 290.

[36] Marshall, Report on local government, 46.

[37] Lampen, Governor Darfur to Darfur DCs, Note on Local Govt, 28 October 1948, NRO Darfur 6/7/18.

[38] *SMR* (May–June 1952), SAD, 3.

[39] LS (1951), SAD, 67.

[40] RGG (1948), SAD, 160.

[41] Marshall, Report on local government, 40; also RGG (1948), 160, Lampen to Robertson 29.3.49, SAD 731/3/47.

[42] *Comments of the Sudan Government on the Marshall report*, quoted in L.M. Buchanan, "Local Government in the Sudan during the Condominium 1899–1956," in D. Lavin, ed., *The Condominium Remembered*, Vol. 1: *The Making of the Sudanese State* (Durham, UK: Center for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Durham University, 1991), 9.

independence, Buchanan admitted frankly that "the initiative and leadership in the affairs of rural councils inevitably comes from the tribal authorities ... without their support and experience councils would be spineless."[43]

Yet chiefs were not simply "traditional" rulers, and nor were late colonial chiefs necessarily similar to their older predecessors. Many chiefs of the late colonial years had reached maturity in the years of colonial rule and had been educated in the colonial system, at least at the elementary level of the government *kuttab*, or sometimes to intermediate level. In Darfur, for example, education had been so narrowly restricted to the sons of chiefs that the younger generation of chiefs *were* the educated elite of the region, as familiar with provincial towns and urban centers of state power as they were with the rural lives of their subjects.[44] *Nazir* Ali El Ghaali of the Habbania is an interesting case in point: in 1945 the DC of Southern Darfur remarked with odium that "his building of a four-roomed red brick house, his interest in wireless, newspaper, books, his manners towards his elders are all out of place in a young *nazir* of a Baggara tribe and he has not the sense to realize the gap they make between him and his followers."[45] A factional dispute within the Habbania almost cost Ali his position, but in the end he was supported by officials as "a modern young man who keeps abreast of events" with "a quick brain." In short he represented the "modern" tendencies that colonial government was trying to encourage in the late colonial years. Ibrahim Musa, *nazir* of the neighboring Rizeigat ruled his tribe for over thirty years, and in Ali's presence was said to become "conscious of his own lack of education and irritated by Ali's obvious intelligence."[46] Generational tension thus existed within the chieftaincy elite: these men were not simply an "old generation" opposed to modernity. And the descriptions of Ali's habits seem to resonate with the same ambivalent mixture of distaste and appreciation that characterized colonial attitudes towards Sudan's *effendia* class.

"Traditional" leaders, young or old, used council membership as an opportunity to display their mastery of the new forms of administrative procedure, particularly in the theatre of council meetings. Indeed, officials perceived council procedure as one way of better ordering and disciplining unruly tribal leaders, and adherence to it (particularly following the rules of debate) was well thought of. One report noted a perceived improvement in inter-tribal relations in Northern Darfur when its District Council was created: "the procedure of council discussions and the value of orderly debate was previously unknown to the majority of its members."[47] Colonial officials were sometimes dismissive of the capacity of councils to conduct their business efficiently: the Rufa'a District Council was described as "a pretty dead collection of old stiffs with little idea

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[43] L.M. Buchanan, address to Makerere College in Uganda, 1956, SAD 797/9/113.

[44] For the extremely restricted access to education in Darfur, see M. Daly, *Darfur's Sorrow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 133–37.

[45] DC Southern Darfur District (SDD) to Governor Darfur, 5 April 1945, NRO 2.D Fasher 54/3/14.

[46] Sherman, DC SDD, Report on Habbania-Rizeigat boundary dispute, 3 January 1949, NRO 2.D Fasher 54/3/14.

[47] Annual Report Northern Darfur District 1945, NRO Darfur 5/2/10.

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except that government should do this or that for them."[48] Yet amidst such dismissiveness lie suggestions that chiefs were fully capable of performing the roles expected in council. One DC wrote that "It fills me with awe to see the Nazir of the Shukria rise and quietly oppose a motion put forward by his arch enemy the Nazir of Dar Bakr and then address the chair at length instead of waving his hands in the air and screaming."[49] The mastery of procedure, and "good speech" gave "traditional" leaders credibility in "modern" institutions. Of course, "good speech" was already highly regarded in Sudanese cultures: now it was enframed within the colonial rules of the council chamber.

Councils were also thought of as training grounds for local leaders to acquire greater qualities of "statesmanship," partially in preparation for the challenges of independence. Amalgamations of different "tribes" in council provided particular opportunities for chiefs to demonstrate such a capacity with regard to managing inter-tribal relations, and thus re-legitimize their position. A prime example was the Messeria District Council in South Kordofan. In 1953, after much negotiation between Chief Deng Majok and *Nazir* Babu Nimr, the Dinka entered the jurisdiction of the Messeria Council.[50] The use of an image of the elephant as the badge of the council, associated with Messeria hunting and thus tribal identity, together with the very name of the council, would have done little to aid such negotiations, which centered on allaying Ngok fears of being dominated by the Messeria.[51] But the strong personal relations between the Dinka and Messeria chiefs at this time are now often referred back to as an example of how to manage the complex relationship between the two groups, who use the same land for grazing.[52] Moreover joint membership of a council was less of an unequal arrangement than earlier colonial amalgamations, which had usually directly subordinated one group to another. Now negotiation and consensus were the watchwords, and chiefs who adapted to this culture reinforced their own legitimacy in the eyes of the state: as DC of Messeria District, Michael Tibbs clearly held both Babu Nimr and Deng Majok in high regard.[53]

"Statesmanship" might also be demonstrated in other contexts. A.J. Arthur, writing of Shendi District Council in 1952 stated that "councillors have not only shown eloquence in debate but also demonstrated their realization of their duties and responsibilities." He was referring to the fact that they "had not shirked the unpopular task of increasing revenue to meet the ever rising tide of expenditure", approving an increase in taxation on pump schemes (of which the entire financial committee of the council were themselves owners).[54] The council had "matured" and the *nazir* of the Gaaliyeen was singled out for his "statesmanship."[55] If "statesmanship" could be learned by chiefs in a local arena, then

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[48] W. Luce, Blue Nile province papers, 1948, SAD 828/2.

[49] E. Balfour, DC Gedaref District, letter to his mother, 17 October 1945, SAD 606/8/4.

[50] Tibbs, *Sudan Sunset*, 127.

[51] Ibid., 58.

[52] For instance, see http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article31981/.

[53] See Tibbs, *Sunset*.

[54] A.J. Arthur, DC Shendi (1951–1954), memoirs, SAD 726/7/23.

[55] A.J. Arthur, letter to his parents, 4 April 1952, SAD 726/6/70.

perhaps they would have a greater chance of championing and protecting local interests against what many officials feared would be a fiercely centralizing independent Sudanese state.

Linking Town and Country

Chiefs were adapting to the new structures and practices of local government, often armed with experience of colonial education. However, discussion has so far been focused on rural district councils: in the case of municipal or town councils one might expect to find a very different kind of local political culture. It is certainly true that the councils of Sudan's major urban centers could be led by the new educated elite: Ibrahim Effendi Ahmed of the Gordon Memorial College chaired the Khartoum Municipal Council in 1946, and in the same year a doctor of the Sudan Medical Service served as Vice Chairman of Omdurman Municipal Council.[56]

Perhaps even more significantly, the direct elections for local government seats held in towns (in contrast to the indirect elections for rural councils) produced an often lively culture of urban electoral politics. In 1949, Wad Medani saw an 80 percent turnout for its council elections, and Wadi Halfa experienced similar levels of voting in 1951 when "advice to electors was painted on walls over the town."[57] Moreover urban electoral campaigns were often dominated by national politics and provided a new theater for the expression of nationalist agendas, and for rival parties to strive for local dominance. Wad Medani's elections were said to be conducted on "purely party lines" (including a "few scuffles between political agents"); and by 1951, Shendi Town Council was dominated by Ashigga party members (pro-union with Egypt, and linked to the Khatmiyya sect of Ismail al-Azhari, soon to become first prime minister of Sudan).[58] This was all a matter of some frustration for officials who hoped that local government would be immune from nationalism, and that councils would in some way act as a buffer between local communities and national politics, and indeed between communities and the state more generally.[59] Officials complained in 1948 that

> elections to the Khatmiyya ward of the Kassala Town Council were a fiasco in that opposition was withdrawn in the face of powerful sectarian propaganda for the Khatmiyya candidates. A public enquiry into the conduct of the elections confirmed the first reports of strong sectarian pressure on the electors, but there was no proof of illegal activities, and the two successful candidates have been appointed to the Council.[60]

In this case the state's hands were tied: indeed, allegations of uncontrolled electoral fraud were not unusual. In El Obeid in 1952 "some voters emerged from the polling booth

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[56] *SMR* (January–February 1946), SAD, 5.

[57] Marshall, Report on local government, 8; *SMR*, May–June 1951, SAD, 3.

[58] SMR (June–August 1946), SAD, 5; A.J. Arthur, Memoirs, SAD 726/7/28.

[59] Marshall, Report on local government, 14, and Buchanan, "Lecture to Khartoum Cultural Centre," 26 November 1952, SAD 797/9/42.

[60] SMR (February–April, 1948), SAD, 5.

with their voting papers still in their pockets, and were able to dispose of them profitably to an Ashigga party agent outside, who would cast them later in the day for his own candidate."[61]

However, nationalist politics was not all consuming even in urban centers: lively elections could be fought on non-party political grounds. The experience of El Fasher in 1953 demonstrated just this, even in the same year as the first national election:

> the people seem to have had the good sense to separate local issues from national politics and there has been a good deal of clean canvassing in the wards in El Fasher town. In the country areas, however, with the exception of one division, there has been a commentable absence of candidates and the *shartai's* representative seems to have won the seat without a fight.[62]

But the politicization of Local Government was not simply confined to urban councils. While local government elections in the countryside were generally much less well attended and less vigorously contested, nationalist politics was often very much present in the running of district councils. In the example of Gedaref mentioned above, the amalgamation in council of the Shukria and the Fur of Dar Bakr collapsed after six years of functioning under the weight of political tensions: each *nazir* supported rival political parties, the Ashigga and the Umma (who were anti union with Egypt), respectively.[63] The two *nazirs* were also members of the Governor-General's Advisory Council, an institution with little power, but membership of which mattered a great deal to the prestige of the individual members. Balfour, DC at the time, dryly described a "little rivalry between them."[64] Local and national politics were increasingly intertwined, not just in urban councils but also in the Rural District Councils.

Local and national elites were thus perfectly capable of turning reforms that were partially intended to slow down the progress of nationalism into opportunities to pursue or promote that very political agenda, in both urban and rural settings. The factionalism inherent in nationalism was also translated into the workings of councils. The genie was out of the bottle, and conciliar talking-shops could not put it back in. And supposedly "traditional" rural elites, remote from the centers of state power, were often very much concerned with "modern" nationalist politics: they were not simply cut off from the opportunities that national politics provided to further reinvent and broaden the basis of their authority and capacity for patronage. As Jocelyn Alexander puts it when discussing chiefs and nationalism in Zimbabwe, chiefs demonstrated a clear ability to "draw on national ... ideas and to ground them in local concerns and traditions."[65]

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[61] SMR, May–June 1952, SAD, 3.

[62] Darfur Province Monthly Diary (DPMD), June 1953, NRO 2.D.Fasher 47/14/49.

[63] RGG 1949, SAD, 185.

[64] E. Balfour, DC Gedaref, letter to his mother, 8 March 1946, SAD 606/8/26.

[65] J. Alexander, *The Unsettled Land: State-Making and the Politics of Land in Zimbabwe 1893–2003* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006), 8.

Moving beyond the importance of nationalist politics in urban and rural councils, the idea of a bifurcated administration, separating urban and rural political cultures and institutions, cannot be straightforwardly applied to local government in provincial Northern Sudan.[66] Amalgamations of urban and rural councils were often executed by officials, reflecting the reality that town and country were linked by economic and social ties, and were never hermetically sealed from one another, despite the prejudices of "sophisticated" town councilors that they would be dominated by "illiterate tribal people" if councils were amalgamated.[67] The governor of Darfur wrote of that province in 1948 that "towns are simply the markets and headquarters of the countryside."[68] That said, concerns of urban marginalization within larger district councils were real enough that officials suggested that amalgamation should be "relegated from being a question of principle to being a practical question of expediency to be decided on the spot."[69] In fact reasons of financial viability often dictated official decisions to amalgamate councils, rather than any intention to create more integrated local political communities. But it was unusual to find examples of such amalgamations actually falling apart once they were established.[70]

Of course the sorts of towns that were amalgamated with larger district councils were usually smaller provincial centers, not comparable to the Khartoum-Omdurman nexus. Nonetheless, such amalgamations reflected the ways in which townspeople, even in more heavily industrialized towns, often held on to ethnic identities brought from their rural origins with great tenacity. Electors in Atbara, Sudan's railway town, agreed on nominees to the Municipal Council on the basis of ethnicity, with the result that there were very few contested seats.[71] The identification of provincial towns with the surrounding countryside was often clear in other ways too. In Northern Darfur, when Kuttum Town Council opened its new buildings in 1954, 2,700 mounted horsemen paraded at the ceremonial opening, reminiscent of the tribal gatherings so frequently arranged by officials in western Sudan.[72] As argued above, chiefs themselves often straddled the world of the town and the country, especially in the riverine core of Sudan. One of the earliest members of Omdurman Municipal Council was Sheikh Ahmed Hassan Abdel Moneim, holder of the

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[66] See Mamdani, *Citizen*, for the "bifurcated state," 18.

[67] Osman Hag el Zaki, "Local Government Elections: A Case Study of the Eastern Area Council, Gezira Province," in Al-Agab Ahmed al-Teraifi, *Decentralization in Sudan* (Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1987), 197.

[68] Lampen, Governor Darfur to Darfur Dcs, Note on Local Government, 28 October 1948, NRO Darfur 6/7/18.

[69] *SMR* (May–June 1950), 2, (August–September 1954), 2 SAD; Luce papers on Blue Nile Province, SAD 828/2; the quotation is from *Sudan Government Comments on Dr Marshall's Report on Local Government* (SAD), 5.

[70] For example, see *SMR*, SAD (September–October 1954), 2, for the survival of urban-rural councils.

[71] *SMR* (July–August 1951) SAD, 2.

[72] *SMR* (December 1954), SAD, 3.

King's Medal for Native Chiefs, but also a prosperous city merchant.[73] Such examples also existed in more remote parts of Sudan. The Sultan of Dar Masalit in Darfur governed from his seat of authority in Geneina, a border town that saw major economic and demographic growth throughout the colonial period, but where neo-traditional authority remained vitally important for urban administration.[74] So where councils governed both towns and rural areas, they often brought commercial, educated, and "traditional" elites together, thus acknowledging that there was no clear boundary between these groups.

Pointing out these links between urban and rural political cultures does not mean that distinctions between the two were non-existent. Such contrasts were particularly felt between educated civil servants and "traditional" elites, and hinted at how the gulf between Sudan's riverine core, and its various peripheries would become further entrenched after independence. Officials believed that opposition by the Elementary School Teachers Union (a Khartoum-based body) to council control of elementary education was due to a "fear of subordination to tribal leaders (whom they disliked and despised)."[75] Many educated Sudanese were of course not of chiefly background, particularly those who had experienced higher education.[76] British officials noted that many graduates of what had become University College, Khartoum were unwilling to become Executive Officers [EO] for District Councils as they felt it "derogates from their personal *sheraf* (honour) to take instructions from ignorant and unlettered councillors."[77]

South Darfur District Council in 1949 indeed had just three literate members out of a total of sixteen.[78] And EOs often had troubled relationships with chiefs sitting in council, particularly where they took over some of the functions of the *nazir*, for instance in supervising the collection of taxation by *omdas*.[79] This was further complicated where the EO depended on the tribal hierarchy to implement council decisions: "inside the council chamber the tribal chiefs are the masters of the Executive Officer; outside they are his subordinates."[80] But equally, such tensions also involved Executive Officers in close working relationships with chiefs, and it was not unknown for the relatives of chiefs

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[73] *SMR* (August–September 1949), SAD, 1.

[74] DPMD March 1945, NRO CIVSEC (1)57/22/86.

[75] Local Government Branch Report 1951/2, SAD 777/7/10.

[76] Heather Sharkey's work reveals the very limited extent to which Gordon College drew in the sons of "traditional" notables. See H.J. Sharkey, "Colonialism and the Culture of Nationalism in the Northern Sudan" (Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 1998), esp. 76. Also see *The Gordon Memorial College at Khartoum: Report and Accounts* (Khartoum, 1944).

[77] R. McComas, "A Suggestion for Temporarily Modifying the Present Local Government Policy in the Sudan," 1954, SAD 798/1/4.

[78] Southern Darfur District Annual Report 1949, NRO Darfur 47/6/29.

[79] Tibbs, DC Dar Messeria to Governor Kordofan, 18 April 1954, in Tibbs, *Sunset*, 278.

[80] Galobawi Mohamed Salih, quoted in Howell, *Local Government*, 89.

themselves to take on such executive roles, once again demonstrating that "traditional" families were often very much part of the educated elite.[81]

The Persistence of Central Control

The rhetoric of colonial government and rose-hued memories of the late colonial period have conspired to suggest that local government in 1940s and 1950s Sudan was a more genuinely devolved system of local governance than earlier or later systems. But in fact the establishment of local councils went hand in hand with efforts to increase control of local administration by central government. And the district commissioner often maintained a key role in the business of local government, supervising the operation of the councils.

In the early years of conciliar local government the DC acted as chairman of the council in almost every case, ordering the business of council.[82] The DC/chairman also often acted simultaneously as the EO of the council.[83] Marshall pushed for a reassessment of the DC's role in 1949: he wanted the DC to be the "midwife" of local government, with the "delicate task of gradually transforming into representative, efficient and progressive bodies those local authorities which are now relying too much upon the structure of native administration."[84] Eventually the DC should disappear. However, the Sudan Government envisaged the DC continuing to enjoy ultimate control for "many years to come," and predictably DCs themselves were "by no means unanimously behind what some considered a trendy "urban" concept, weakening their own position and that of traditional tribal leaders."[85]

As chair of the Gedaref Rural District Council in the years leading up to the Marshall Report, Elliott Balfour expressed some dissatisfaction with his changing role: "I found it difficult to make such a quick change from what was still almost Direct Rule to "moving an amendment" in my somewhat colloquial Arabic."[86] In letters to his mother, Balfour complained that chairing meetings left him feeling "rather limp" (a Gedaref sheikh once described Balfour as "pitiful").[87] Interestingly though Balfour also described the council as

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[81] M. Tibbs, DC Dar Messeria, Handing Over Notes, 1954, in Tibbs, *Sunset*, 274; M. Kevane and L. Gray, "Local Politics in the Time of Turabi's Revolution: Gender, Class and Ethnicity in Western Sudan," *Africa* 65, 2 (1995), 275.

[82] Sudan Administration Conference 1946: Report of Sub-Committee 'B' on Local Government (SAD) 23.

[83] Marshall, Report local government, 49.

[84] Ibid., 107.

[85] *Sudan Government Comments*, 14; T.H.B. Mynors, Assistant. Director, Local Government Branch, Civil Secretary's Office (1950-1953), memoirs, SAD 777/8/9.

[86] E. Balfour, "The District Commissioner's Tale," in D. Hawley, ed., *Sudan Canterbury Tales* (Wilby, UK: Michael Russell, 1999), 72.

[87] Balfour to his mother, 10 May 1946, SAD 606/8/40; D. Hawley, *Sandtracks in the Sudan* (Norwich, UK: Michael Russell, 1995), 48.

a great way of passing the buck. Chaps can no longer come and worry the DC at all times and hours because the answer is "The Council does not approve" or "That must be raised to the council." And the great thing is that the DC is only chairman and has no right to hear appeals, they must go to the Governor.[88]

While this suggests a somewhat diminished role for the DC, Balfour's correspondence also reveals him preparing council budgets, and threatening "obstructive" chiefs with cancellation of their proposed pay rises in order to bring them "to heel."[89] The DC, even if personally weak, retained a key directive role over council business, and thus had important influence over local politics and administration.

Following the Marshall Report, the DC's role was gradually phased out in some areas. In August 1951 the *merkaz* (district headquarters) at El Obeid was closed; the same happened in Dongola in February 1952 and the abolition of Khartoum District Office was approved in March the same year.[90] Elsewhere the DC may not have vanished, but he sometimes did hand over chairmanship of "his" council.[91] However, closure of the *merkaz* was far from the norm. Michael Tibbs, the DC of Messeria District, remained as chairman of the council until his departure in 1954 and recommended that his Sudanese successor continue in this role, opposing the idea that the chairman should be elected by the council.[92] Tibbs described his first attendance at the Messeria District Council meeting:

> (the EO) complimented me on looking so smart but said I should remove my ADC's stripes, it was very important that as Chairman I did not look like a DC, the Members might feel intimidated. So I had to go back and later appeared in shirt and tie.[93]

The change in costume seems to exemplify the often-cosmetic nature of the changes in local administration, and surely fooled no one: everyone knew who the *mufettish* (inspector) was. Moreover, initiative for particular local government projects still often came from DCs. A.J. Arthur was able to push a scheme for the re-planning of Shendi town through the Shendi town council in his last year as council chairman, utilizing social connections in the Surveys and Land departments that only an administrative "insider" could possess.[94]

On a day-to-day level, staff shortages, particularly of well-trained EOs, often meant that the DC and his staff were still executing much of the council's administrative grind, in conjunction with native authorities: councils simply did not have the resources to

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[88] Balfour to his mother, 17 October 1945, SAD 606/8/4.

[89] Balfour to his mother, 11 August 1949, SAD 606/8/66, and 21 October 1949, SAD 606/8/72.

[90] *SMR* August–September 1951, 2; *SMR* January–February 1952, 6; *SMR* March–April 1952, 4 (SAD).

[91] Local Government Branch Report 1951/2, SAD 777/7/7; *SMR* May–June 1952, 4.

[92] M. Tibbs, "Handing Over Notes Messeria District," 1954, in Tibbs, *Sudan Sunset*, 274.

[93] Tibbs, *Sudan Sunset*, 82.

[94] A.J. Arthur, letters to his parents, 23 May 1952, and 30 May 1952, SAD 726/6/78 and 726/6/79.

function as genuinely decentralized centers of authority.[95] By 1953 twenty-five of forty senior EOs to councils were still seconded, often only part-time, from the *merkaz*, and were supervised by the DC: often they were in fact the ADC or the *ma'mur*.[96] This of course led to confusion of functions between the council and the *merkaz*.[97] The slow rate at which many councils gained their own buildings accentuated this confusion, as many councils had to use *merkaz* offices until they obtained their own. Marshall had been very keen to clear up this confusion, stressing the need for separate council buildings, bemoaning the lack of time spent by EOs with their councils, and pointing out the lack of separate uniform for council staff. But the problem persisted, some councils lacking any sort of EO whatsoever.[98] Special training courses were provided in Khartoum University and from 1954 in the Juba Training Center, but graduates were slowly produced, only sixteen a year from Khartoum.[99] Councils were thus often dependent on both the *merkaz* and Native Administration to execute its decisions.

Significant as the DC and his *merkaz* were to the running of the councils, the days had long gone when the DC was almost the sole representative of government in his district. In the postwar period initiative in central government policy and in local projects came increasingly from the technical departments, and councils and their chairmen had to respond to proposals from outsiders to their district.[100] Tibbs's memoir mentions the visit of a Soil Conservation Engineer to one of the Messiria Council meetings and he comments with some dryness:

> The technical people like him and the Agricultural Inspectors were very much inclined to whiz round the District without one's knowledge and then send in a report on what they thought should be done. If I had known they were coming, we could have shown them where their particular wares were needed, after all it was our Council which had to pay for the wells or *haffirs* (small reservoirs) and we had to maintain them afterwards and provide a *ghaffir* (guard). So I am asking them in turn to Council meetings as part of their education.[101]

Indeed it seems clear that alongside the talk of devolution of responsibility and preparation for self-government, councils were intended in large part to do the work of overstretched central government departments and were in a sense functioning as an additional arm of the technocratic/developmentalist state: Marshall's report had indeed

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[95] K.D.D. Henderson, *Set under Authority* (Somerset, UK: Castle Cary Press, 1987), 132; Luce, Blue Nile Province papers, SAD 828/2/93.

[96] Buchanan, "Local Government since 1947," SAD 797/9/46.

[97] RGG (1949), SAD, 152.

[98] Luce, district reports from Blue Nile Province, SAD 828/2/51 and 828/2/93.

[99] Buchanan, "Local Government during Condominium," in Lavin, *Condominium Remembered*, 8, and quoted on 27.

[100] Tibbs to Governor of Kordofan, 18 April 1954, in Tibbs, *Sudan Sunset*, 281, gives a clear picture of the demands placed on councils by the proposals of central departments.

[101] Tibbs, *Sudan Sunset*, 192.

been quite frank about this intention.[102] The establishment of the Local Government Branch of the Civil Secretary's Office in 1949 marked the further tightening of central power around local administration.[103] By 1952 the Branch was becoming ever more complex in its functions; it was handling the relations of central departments with councils, and helping councils deal with issues arising from labor relations and local politics in urban areas in particular.[104] Many of the local orders made by councils were made using standard templates created by the Local Government Branch.[105] Indeed, council regulations were one means by which the colonial state attempted to project its authority ever deeper into the lives of its subjects. Buchanan's comic poetry collection mentions the regulation of the "Ru Ndogo" dance by the Wau Rural District Council, which passed a resolution that female dancers should be covered by leaves "aft and fore."[106] Another piece is amused by the broad range of fines enforceable under Municipal Council Regulations, for "squatting in a thoroughfare" or "planting lettuce after rain."[107]

Most importantly of all, the Local Government branch employed Local Government Inspectors for each province, men with wide experience of administration as DCs, to supervise the work of councils, and sometimes taking over that role from the DC. The disappearance of the DC, where it occurred, was then often followed by his reappearance in new (or not so new) costume. By 1953, two of the seven provincial Inspectors were Sudanese ex-DCs; the rest were still British.[108] Executive Officers, when they did gain their own uniforms in the 1950s, often bearing the same province badges as the uniforms of DC's, also inherited an *esprit de corps* very similar in character to that of the Sudan Political Service, suggesting the survival of a colonial culture of "bureaucratic authoritarianism."[109] In short, it appears that in these later years of colonial rule, despite the devolutionary rhetoric of the Sudan Government, central government was maintaining and indeed acquiring even greater control over local administration. But this centralization did not displace neo-traditional authority: in fact chiefs continued to play a key part in the execution and negotiation of central government directives. This pattern very much persisted into the period after 1956.

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[102] Marshall, Report local government, 4.

[103] Buchanan, "Local Government during the Condominium," 7. But by 1953 scrutiny of budgets was passing more to provincial governors.

[104] Buchanan, "The Human Factor in British Colonialism," SAD 797/8/42.

[105] Model local orders, SAD 797/3/33–99.

[106] Buchanan, "Ru Ndogo," SAD 798/2/12.

[107] Buchanan, "Threnody and Lament on the Local Government (Municipality) Regulations," SAD 798/2/12.

[108] *SMR* November–December 1953 (SAD), 5.

[109] Justin Willis suggested this point. See J. Willis, "Tribal Gatherings: Performing Government in Condominium Sudan," *Past and Present*, forthcoming). Also see Eckert, "Local Government," 108–109.

Postcolonial Transformations and Survivals

Ironically, British administrators in the last days of Condominium Government feared the end of local autonomy and the tightly centralized government that they believed Sudanese self-government would bring,[110] as if they had not created an over-powerful central state themselves. The implication of course was that central control was fine in responsible British hands, but the same power in Sudanese hands would lead to difficulties. McComas, Local Government Inspector of Kordofan Province, wrote in 1954 that the chances of Local Government's survival in its current form were "slender," and spoke of a "natural antipathy between Sudanese administrators and tribal hierarchies," suggesting that urbane educated administrators would increasingly marginalize councils that they perceived to be dominated by tribal leaders. [111] Buchanan predicted the DC would play a leading role in local government "for a generation or so."[112] McComas also suggested that a feeling existed "among all classes, that councils were little more than talking shops where (and this is true) a lot of dirty linen is washed." Moreover, "democracy ... has no roots in the hearts of the people. Personal authority, based on status, is almost the only political theory to be understood here."[113] Although based on embittered colonial prejudice, these views to some extent predicted the tug of war that ensued after independence between "traditional" authorities and the national bureaucratic elite over the exercise of local authority, and what would be the very limited relevance of electoral representation at the local level.

However, the machinery of local government set up by the Condominium Government did not vanish overnight. In some ways the postcolonial state moved faster than its predecessor had ever dreamed of in abolishing the office of DC by 1960 and closing the *merkaz* right across Sudan, in an apparent step towards a more decentralized system of local government. This decision in essence reflected the progressive marginalization of the DC by central government departments, resident magistrates, and indeed by local government inspectors: the DC was a colonial relic and the Abboud government (1958–1964) found no reason to keep the office alive.[114] The number of councils continued to grow despite personnel and cash shortages; at the end of the 1950s there were over sixty warranted councils in existence, and twenty-five other councils were established. However despite the disappearance of the DC, central control over councils was in reality further tightened under the guidance of local government inspectors who were also now recognized as the warranted Local Authorities for their areas. Councils were further reduced in autonomy by the establishment of Provincial Authorities in 1961. These Authorities were dominated by executive officials representing the interests of central

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[110] Buchanan, "Local Government since 1947," SAD 797/9/47.

[111] McComas memo, "A Suggestion for Temporarily Modifying the present Local Government Policy in the Sudan," 1954, SAD 798/1/4.

[112] Buchanan "Circular on Local Government," 11 January 1954, SAD 798/1.

[113] McComas memo, "A Suggestion for Temporarily Modifying the present Local Government Policy in the Sudan," 1954, SAD 798/1/4.

[114] C.A.G. Wallis, "Local Administration in the Sudan," *Journal of African Administration* 13, 1 (1961), 163.

government and exercised considerable control over local administration.[115] Additionally, councils became entirely appointed bodies: the notion of electoral representation was thrown out.[116]

From 1971, under the Nimeiri regime (1969–1985), Province Councils took over the provision of local services, and local councils, while increasing vastly in number to over 4000 across the country and once more becoming elected bodies, became increasingly dominated by representatives of the regime. Only SSU (Sudan Socialist Union) members could be nominated for council election.[117] Local government officers, retaining a dominant role in the day-to-day running of the councils, now also had the explicitly defined role of "promotion and consolidation of the political aims and ideology of the socialist regime" as the inseparability of politics and administration was deemed vital to the success of the "revolution." Provincial commissioners also became ever more powerful at the expense of often inexperienced, sometimes illiterate local councillors, close to the SSU but often commanding little respect from the communities they supposedly represented.[118] District councils had in any case lost their corporate status and budget making rights.[119]

From this outline, the history of postcolonial local government in Sudan, as elsewhere in Africa, appears to be one of ever-greater domination by central control.[120] Nimeiri's establishment of a far greater number of councils at the local level, but with less independent authority, displays much continuity with the British period: more talk about local autonomy, and the apparent creation of locally representative institutions, while creating ever more centralized oversight of local administration. The establishment of councils in the late colonial period then looks ever more like a step in a sustained process of the removal of authority from the local level. "Decentralized despotism" seems less

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[115] Galobawi Mohamed Salih and J. Howell, "Local Government After Independence," in Howell, *Local Government*, 33–44.

[116] Al-Agab Ahmed Al-Teraifi and Mahdi Sheikh Idris, "Decentralization: Origins and Development," in al-Teraifi, *Decentralization*, 51.

[117] Mahdi Sheikh Idris, "Local Government at Work" in al-Teraifi, *Decentralization*, 68; Norris, "Sudan," 62.

[118] Al-Agab Ahmed Al-Teraifi, "Introduction," in al-Teraifi, *Decentralization*, 8, and G. Glentworth and Mahdi Sheikh Idris, "Relations between Administrative and Technical Officers and Councils," in G. Glentworth and M.S. Idris, eds., *Local Government and Development in the Sudan: The Experience of Southern Darfur Province*, Vol. 2 (Khartoum: Academy of Administrative and Professional Sciences, 1976), 38.

[119] G. Glentworth and Mahdi Sheikh Idris, "Inter-Council Relations within the Province," in *Local Government: Southern Darfur*, 17.

[120] The above based on Howell, *Local Government*. For broader comparative context in Africa, see W. Tordoff, "Decentralization: Comparative Experience in Commonwealth Africa," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 32, 4 (1994), 555–80.

relevant than "centralized despotism," as Mamdani himself acknowledges when discussing the "radical" variant of the postcolonial state.[121]

Nonetheless, councils also played a different part in the continuing interactions between the local or national, and the rural and the urban. In the late colonial period the bureaucratic state and nationalist politics were both pushing Sudan towards an ever more centralized system that valued scientific, technical, and bureaucratic knowledge above the "tradition" that British policies of Indirect Rule had been trying to understand (or invent) and then preserve. However, the establishment of councils allowed the representatives of "tradition" to adapt their practices of governance to this new environment. In their use of the bureaucratic procedure of council meetings (framing motions, debating in chambers), chiefs demonstrated their mastery of the new language of governance, and demonstrated (again) their ability to adapt to modernity. They could not simply be dismissed as irrelevant to the new projects of the central state—they had reformed their role as arbiters between the state and its subjects, now often functioning in amalgamated political communities and forming allegiances with their counterparts in other groups to deal with the demands of the *hakuma* (government). Throughout the 1960s it was widely recognized that councils continued to be dominated by "traditional" authority.[122] Early attempts to abolish Native Administration in the late 1960s ran up against a lack of political will in the face of significant opposition from both local government officials and chiefs themselves.[123]

Native Administration was formally abolished in 1971 after Nimeiri took power, with the ascendancy of the idea that "traditional authority" acted as a bar on "progress," and chiefs were theoretically barred from membership of the People's Councils. But once again, significant continuities remained beneath apparent change. Traditional leaders often continued to play a key role in the assessment and collection of tax, and the families of these leaders, now often well established in SSU organizations and commerce, remained key local political figures.[124] Powerful local families were able to arrange election victories for candidates drawn from their own ranks, and *nazirs* and *omdas* sometimes re-emerged as powerful figures in local councils alongside the nominees of the party machinery.[125] A report on Southern Darfur rejected the suggestion that council membership should be made dependent on literacy, commenting that, "Literacy, status and influence do not always go together."[126] In the Ahadi Village Council's election in 1977 the SSU's local secretary waived his authority to approve of nominated candidates under local pressure: a greater political pluralism sometimes existed at grass-roots level than was

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[121] Mamdani, *Citizen*, 25.

[122] Al-Teraifi and Idris, "Decentralization," 54.

[123] Gaafar Mohamed Ali Bakheit, "The Politics of Native Administration," in Howell, *Local Government*, 45–64.

[124] Glenworth and Idris, "Inter-Council Relations," 27.

[125] Ibid., 28, and J. Howell, "Councils and Councillors, 1969–72," in Howell, *Local Government*, 89–106.

[126] Glenworth and Idris, "Inter-Council Relations," 41.

intended by the center.[127] And while the "People's Councils" were meant to be territorial units rather than tribally defined, often councils that amalgamated rival ethnic groups collapsed under the weight of these rivalries, as we similarly observed in some cases from the late colonial period.[128] Clearly the notion that councils were bodies that should represent particular ethnic groups had not vanished in all quarters. A study of voting patterns in the Eastern Area Council of the Gezira in 1981 revealed that no two candidates from the same ethnicity competed for the same seat in order to avoid splitting the vote, and that successful candidates always came from the most numerous local ethnic group.[129]

The state thus simply lacked the capacity to enforce its desire to do away altogether with Native Administration, or indeed the "tribalism" that was perceived to lie behind these structures. Neo-traditional authority has never vanished in post-independence Sudan, although it has at times been marginalized from formal state structures. Indeed, when the NIF came to power in 1989 it set about re-establishing Native Administration, recognizing the potential rub-off effect of re-establishing what it perceived to be popularly legitimate institutions.[130] And, of course, the survival of "traditional" authority is not just a Sudanese phenomenon: it reflects a broader experience across sub-Saharan Africa.[131]

Conclusion

To some extent the Condominium Government in the 1940s and 1950s intended to bequeath a local system of authority that would be resilient against growing central control. Buchanan hoped that the councils and their associated tribal hierarchies "should be able to provide an effective shield from hasty judgement and inadvertent oppression by government agencies."[132] However, councils were also intended, in a contradictory manner, to make the dealings of those same government agencies with local communities somewhat less complicated, and to enable top-down developmentalist projects to be effectively implemented. In essence these contradictory expectations between "preservation" and "modernization" were the same as had been held in the period of "Native Administration." And "traditional" leaders, in the late colonial period and afterwards, continued to act as key interlocutors between state and society from within councils themselves, both limiting and enabling the power of state authority at the local

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[127] S. Harir, *Old Timers and New-Comers, Politics and Ethnicity in a Sudanese Community* (Bergen: University of Bergen, 1983), 62–64.

[128] El-Tayeb El Khizaina Abdel Rahman, "Decision-Making in White Nile Province," in Al-Teraifi, *Decentralization* , 126–27.

[129] Osman Hag el Zaki, "Elections," in Al-Teraifi, *Decentralisation*, 214–16.

[130] Kevane and Gray, "Local Politics," 275.

[131] See for instance, E.A.B. van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal and R. van Dijk, eds., *African Chieftaincy in a New Socio-Political Landscape* (Leiden: African Studies Center, Leiden, 1999); B. Oomen, *Chiefs in South Africa: Law, Power and Culture in the Post-Apartheid Era* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006).

[132] Buchanan, "Circular on Local Government," 11 January 1954, SAD 798/1; see also Marshall, *Report on Local Government*, 5, 14; Buchanan lecture to Khartoum Cultural Center, 26 November 1952, SAD 797/9/42.

level, as they had throughout the colonial period. As the state turned against them, their firmly established position in local administration, acting as councilors as well as chiefs, enabled them to at least partially weather the storms of the 1960s and 70s.

The survival of neo-traditional authority also suggests an interesting locally centered narrative of continuity in counterpoint to the idea of larger cycles of "possibility and constraint" at the national level. Local government reforms of the 1950s and 70s obscured important continuities beneath rhetoric of change and progress.[133] Moreover, successive regimes exaggerated their capacity to determine the outcomes of their reforms. The British hoped that "Local Government" would keep nationalism at bay; the Nimeiri regime expected that the institution of "People's Councils" would do away with supposedly reactionary tribal chiefs. Neither government understood the capacity of "traditional" leaders to draw on wider national political discourses to reinforce their own position. The Nimeiri regime also failed to understand the extent to which neo-traditional authority was irremovably enmeshed in both local and national networks of patronage and accumulation. Chieftains were both entrenched and adaptable in ways that neither regime fully grasped.

Mamdani's view that colonial "decentralized despotism" gave way to "centralized despotism" in the "radical" postcolonial states (of which Nimeiri's Sudan must surely be one) is then not fully satisfactory in the Sudanese case.[134] Firstly, "late colonialism's" Local Government reforms had already significantly intensified central control of local administration: this was not simply an innovation of the "radical" postcolonial state. But more significantly, Mamdani's argument does not leave room to account for the survival of chieftaincy even when under assault from the "radical" postcolonial state.

As recent research has demonstrated, there is no necessary contradiction in the eyes of African citizens between electoral democracy and "traditional" authority.[135] This in itself suggests how successful "traditional" leaders have been in drawing on what might seem to be opposing discursive fields of "tradition" and "modernity" to create a language of authority, which continuously re-synthesizes both discourses. Their unique mastery of this language has made it impossible to remove them from the political landscape. "Local Government" in late colonial Sudan was, then, both one stage in a sustained process of state centralization as well as a means by which chiefs re-invented their authority in negotiation with that very process of centralization. As such it provides further evidence to suggest that the "characterisation of the state as technocratic and alien and rural society as bounded and traditional," while suggesting a significant truth about a dysfunctional core-periphery relationship in the Sudanese case, also obscures the dynamic nature of what Steven Feierman calls "unbounded local society," and the constant interactions between

[133] F. Cooper, "Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective," *Journal of African History* 49, 2 (2008), 167–96.

[134] Mamdani, *Citizen*, 102–108.

[135] C. Logan, "Selected Chiefs, Elected Councilors and Hybrid Democrats: Popular Perspectives on the Co-Existence of Democracy and Traditional Authority," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47, 1 (2009), 101–28.

what appear contradictory, but which are in fact mutually constituent, discourses of authority.[136] Councils were theaters where the imagined boundaries between "state" and "non-state," and "modernity," and "tradition" were contested, and often dissolved.

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[136] Alexander, *Land*, 9; S. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals* (London: University of Wisconsin Press 1990), 35.