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VIOLENCE, AUTHORITY, AND THE STATE IN THE NUBA MOUNTAINS OF CONDOMINIUM SUDAN*

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ABSTRACT. *While British colonial rhetoric consistently identified tradition as the basis of legitimate authority, colonial practice actually produced far-reaching changes in the nature of government in Britain's African possessions. New institutions, and new holders of power, emerged in African societies in response to the particular needs of colonial administration. This article explores this transformation in one part of Condominium Sudan, which was effectively a British possession but which has often been excluded from historical discussions of the impact of colonialism because of its unique status. The Nuba Mountains have recently gained notoriety as a particularly bloody theatre of Sudan's long post-colonial civil war; while some have sought to explain this as the result of British policies which encouraged racial antagonism, the article suggests that here, as elsewhere in Africa, the real legacy of colonial rule was the creation of new kinds of local government which sat uneasily with enduring local ideas of spiritual power and proper authority.*

I have watched an old generation give place to a new in India and I have seen how easily vague political unrest swept over backward peoples simply because we had allowed the old forms to crumble away. Yet the native states in India remain safe and secure in the hands of hereditary rulers.¹

Even before Lugard established 'Indirect Rule' as the creed of colonial administration, officials in Britain's African possessions had tended to conservatism in political matters. The governor of British East Africa had warned in 1910 that abandonment of established authority would leave the tiny minority of white administrators alone to face the 'rabble'; planning the administration of Sudan, the man who was to become governor-general insisted in 1898 that '[i]t is a matter of great importance that the inhabitants should realize that their local traditions and former system of patriarchal government will be duly respected'.² Across

* I should like to thank colleagues in the seminars at Humboldt University, the African Studies Centre at Cambridge University, and at the School of Oriental and African Studies for their comments; and also the anonymous referees of the *Historical Journal*. The article also benefited from a Durham-Humboldt exchange programme, funded by the British Council and DAAD, ref. ARC 1160.

¹ Minute by J. Maffey, governor-general of the Sudan, 1 Jan. 1927, Sudan Archive, Durham (SAD) 723/5/36-9.

² G. Mungeam, *British rule in Kenya, 1895–1912: the establishment of administration in the East Africa Protectorate* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 214, 226–67; Wingate, 'Notes on civil administration in the Sudan', n.d. 1897/8, SAD 266/1/43-8.

the continent, the overriding imperative to maintain empire on the cheap dictated a heavy reliance on African agents of administration; and the lesson of India inclined Britons to prefer 'traditional' rulers as their agents, and to shun the unsavoury figure known in East Africa as the 'man in trousers' and in Sudan as 'the *effendi*'. The enthusiasm for traditional authority – and the consequent invention of tradition – was to reach a peak after the First World War, when reliance on a sort of effective indirect rule became commonplace even where the ideology of 'IR' was not proclaimed.³ Even in the years of the 'second colonial occupation', after 1945, when empire reconstrued itself as an exercise in development and representative government, administrators privately (and not so privately) doubted the wisdom of such innovations in 'nose-counting'.⁴

But the innate anti-modernism of administrators ('Catonism', as Berman has called it) had unintended consequences; as Iliffe has argued, indirect rule was 'conservative in origin but radical in effect'.⁵ Colonial administration was 'prefectural', functioning rather like a military chain of command and requiring obedience, above all else. Administrators needed – and offered power to – those who were willing to defy propriety and challenge norms when the district commissioner needed labour, or tax.⁶ Consequently, multiple new kinds of authority emerged behind the occasionally frantic insistence on an authenticity derived from tradition. Mamdani has characterized all these as 'decentralized despotism', a spurious traditional power freed from long-established social constraints; less sweepingly judgemental accounts have none the less argued that these forms were innovative, and closely associated with the accumulative ambitions of local 'chiefs'; and that they had profound political consequences.⁷

Studies of this reshaping of African authority under the guise of colonial conservatism have largely neglected Africa's largest political unit: Sudan. This is symptomatic, for Sudan is an awkward child, historiographically as well as historically. The fecundity of the Nile has drawn Sudan into straddling the desert boundary which elsewhere so neatly divides North Africa from the rest of the continent; when Africa was partitioned, this was neither colony nor protectorate,

³ The classic statement on invention is T. Ranger, 'The invention of tradition in colonial Africa', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds., *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 211–62, which draws heavily on J. Iliffe, *A modern history of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, 1979). J. Cell, 'Colonial rule', in Judith Brown and Wm Roger Louis, eds., *Oxford history of the British empire*, IV (Oxford, 1999), pp. 232–54.

⁴ C. Dundas, *African crossroads* (London, 1955), p. 39.

⁵ B. Berman, 'Bureaucracy and incumbent violence: colonial administration and the origins of the "Mau Mau" emergency', in B. Berman and J. Lonsdale, *Unhappy valley: conflict in Kenya and Africa* (London, Nairobi, and Athens, OH, 1992), pp. 227–64, at p. 234; Iliffe, *A modern history of Tanganyika*, p. 318.

⁶ Cell, 'Colonial rule', p. 242; Berman, 'Bureaucracy and incumbent violence', p. 231; Ranger, 'The invention of tradition in colonial Africa', pp. 247–59.

⁷ M. Mamdani, *Citizen and subject* (Princeton, 1996), pp. 37–61; B. Berman, 'Structure and process in the bureaucratic states of colonial Africa', in Berman and Lonsdale, *Unhappy valley*, pp. 140–76, at p. 152; J. Iliffe, *Africans: history of a continent* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 200–2.

but rather a Condominium of Britain and Egypt.⁸ The bitterness of Sudan's post-independence civil war has heightened the sense of distinction, for here historical debate endlessly returns to a simple question: did administration under the Condominium entrench ethnic and racial divides, and so doom the Sudan to conflict?⁹

In tracing the emergence of new forms of local authority in one small corner of the Condominium Sudan, this article will seek to undermine this sense of distinctiveness, and to reframe this recurring question. The concerns, and the intellectual milieu, of the Britons who dominated the administration of the Condominium were actually strikingly similar to those of colonial officials elsewhere in Africa: they perceived the same problems, pursued similar policies – and created similar contradictions and ironies.¹⁰ And the question is not straightforwardly that of whether the British sowed the seeds of racial strife. It is rather: why did the forms of local authority developed under the Condominium prove so unstable, and so ill-fitted to the demands of the post-colonial state?

I

In 1934 Arthur Vicars-Miles, a veteran British administrator, set down some helpful notes for officials newly posted to the Nuba Mountains of Sudan's Kordofan province.

It is easy for the newcomer to forget that only ten years ago many of the most enthusiastic pro-Government Meks [chiefs] regarded the Government with the utmost suspicion, if not as their actual enemy. I have heard new arrivals say that they cannot understand why there were constant patrols; but I hope that this note will make them realise that the administrators of the past were for the most part as peace-loving as themselves, but they had to place the problem of public security first. In any new country you must establish law and order before you can develop either culture or trade, and in doing so some eggs, as the saying goes, have to be broken.¹¹

The governmental omelette had been made with a particularly firm hand in the Nuba Mountains: 'patrols' in the Nuba Mountains caused extensive death and destruction.¹² Leaving aside this circumlocutory elision of colonial violence,

⁸ The genesis and terms of the Condominium are best explained in M. Daly, *Empire on the Nile: the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1898–1934* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 11–18.

⁹ For opposing sides in this debate, see Mudaththir Abd al Rahim, *Imperialism and nationalism in the Sudan: a study in constitutional and political development, 1899–1956* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 7–9, 227; D. Wai, 'Pax Britannica and the Southern Sudan: the view from the theatre', *African Affairs*, 79 (1980), pp. 375–96.

¹⁰ M. Daly, *Imperial Sudan: the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, 1934–1956* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 26, suggests that the Sudan was structurally excluded from participating in many 'colonial' debates in the 1930s, even though its administrators faced many of the same policy issues as their fellows in the colonial service.

¹¹ Vicars-Miles, 'Notes on Nuba administration', p. 1, SAD 631/10/1-64.

¹² I have so far identified twenty-seven patrols in the Nuba Mountains which involved more than one company of soldiers: Tegali, 1903; Daier, 1904; Kitra, 1904; Shat-el-Safia, 1905; Nyima, 1908 and 1917; Burham, 1908; Katla, 1909, 1910, and 1925; Tagoi, 1910; Tira Lumman, 1910; Kimla, 1911; Krongo

Vicars-Miles's comments were problematic in another way. There *had* been a decline in large-scale violence in the mountains: in 1918, a report said of one part of the Nuba Mountains that 'administrative officials visiting ... carry their life in their hands',¹³ while in the 1930s British administrators toured peacefully, escorted by only three policemen – two of whom were needed to carry the co-dominion's flags.¹⁴ But the decline was much more gradual than Vicars-Miles suggested: the real peak of 'patrol' violence had been between 1905 and 1912, with a brief resurgence in 1917–19; and the last major patrol came in 1945, years after the 'Notes on Nuba Administration' were written.¹⁵

Vicars-Miles's story of a recent rapprochement between *meks* and government was intended as narrative of political legitimation through tradition: decades of fruitless reliance on deculturated upstarts improperly appointed as *meks* had caused chronic violence, but by 1930 the government had begun co-operating with those who held 'traditional' authority within a distinctive 'Nuba culture'.¹⁶ Recent scholarship on the Nuba Mountains has offered two contrasting interpretations of this process. One sees this 'Nuba renaissance' as a particularly iniquitous example of the divisive racialization of politics and administration which characterized Condominium policy, and undid the best efforts of the post-colonial state at nation-building; the other suggests that this period entrenched a centralized and authoritarian local form of the state which, maintained by the post-colonial state, provoked the long, appalling, war which has killed and displaced tens of thousands of people in the Nuba Mountains in the last two decades.¹⁷ Focusing on one particular area of the mountains – the Nyima hills, in the north-western corner of Nuba – this article will argue rather that the development of colonial administration here fitted clearly into a wider pattern, evident elsewhere in the Sudan and across British Africa. As an initial phase of large-scale violence slipped into a routine of localized coercion, administrators believed that they had established an accommodation with tradition which would be stable and enduring. In practice, they were co-operating with their chosen African agents in creating novel kinds of

Bakheit, 1911; Heiban, 1911; Tira el Akhdar, 1912, 1913, 1915, and 1922; Tendilla, 1913; Mandal, 1914; Miri, 1915; Koalib/Lira, 1919; Tuleishi, 1926, 1945; Julud, 1926; Lafofa, 1929. See also Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, pp. 129–33.

¹³ Sudan Intelligence Report (SIR) No. 293, Dec. 1918, Public Record Office (PRO) FO 371/3724. There had been a similar comment in *Reports on the finances, administration and condition of the Sudan (GGR)*, 1909, p. 748. ¹⁴ Bell to 'Mother and Dad', 12 Mar. 1934, SAD 697/11/55-9.

¹⁵ Owen to Father, 12–13 Jan. 1945, SAD 414/15/81.

¹⁶ Vicars-Miles, 'Notes on Nuba administration', p. 41, SAD 631/10/1-64.

¹⁷ Kamal Osman Salih, 'British policy and the accentuation of inter-ethnic divisions: the case of the Nuba Mountains region of Sudan, 1920–1940', *African Affairs*, 89 (1990), pp. 417–36; Ahmed Abdel Rahim Nasr, 'British policy towards Islam in the Nuba Mountains, 1920–1940', *Sudan Notes and Records (SNR)*, 52 (1971), pp. 23–33; M. Saavedra, 'Ethnicity, resources and the colonial state: politics in the Nuba Mountains, 1950s to 1990s', in E. Stiansen and M. Kevane, *Kordofan invaded: peripheral incorporation and social transformation in Islamic Africa* (Leiden, 1998), pp. 223–53. Compare with African Rights, *Facing genocide: the Nuba of Sudan* (London, 1995).

power, and remaking authority, in ways which drew eclectically on multiple forms of authority, local and colonial.

II

Nyima is a little cluster of eight hills in the north-western corner of the wider scatter of peaks – ‘jebels’, in the Anglo-Arabic of the Condominium – which make up the Nuba Mountains; its populace have come to be known as the Nyimang.¹⁸ These hills were the target of two major ‘patrols’. In 1908, eleven companies of infantry and Camel Corps attacked several of the hills, in an attempt to force the return of captives and livestock which Nyima raiders had taken from other hill communities or from Arabic-speaking nomads in the surrounding plains.¹⁹ Over a week, 100 cattle and 500 sheep and goats were seized or destroyed and around forty men from the Nyima area killed; standing crops were burned and houses destroyed.²⁰ At the end of this ‘Nyima patrol’ the governor of Kordofan confidently foresaw ‘no more serious trouble in the Western hills’;²¹ but in 1917 an attempt to enforce the payment of tribute and the surrender of young men wanted for raiding ended in the death of a British officer in a confused skirmish.²² An even larger patrol – ‘Patrol No. 32’, by official designation – resulted. It involved more than 3,000 soldiers, with artillery and maxim guns.²³ By late January 1918 more than 500 men from the hills had been killed; the *mek* of Nyima and a ritual specialist allied to him had surrendered and been publicly hanged for rebellion; over 1,000 cattle had been seized, crops and houses destroyed; and a further 500 young men had been conscripted into the army and marched away.²⁴

III

In the first two decades of the Condominium, one phrase recurred constantly in discussions of policy towards the Nuba Mountains. The populace must be ‘shown the power of the Government’; and disobedience could only be a sign that the people ‘have no idea of the power of the Government’.²⁵ Behind this phrase lay an

¹⁸ S. Nadel, *The Nuba: an anthropological study of the hill tribes in Kordofan* (London, 1947), p. 362; R. Stevenson, *The Nuba people of Kordofan province* (Khartoum, 1984), pp. 82–4: in fact the people of the hills refer to Nyima as ‘seven hills’, but there is an eighth, a ‘half-hill’ called Shirowa or Sultan.

¹⁹ *London Gazette*, 27 Sept. 1910: copy in SAD 701/25/330.

²⁰ Lloyd to civil sec., 5 Nov. 1908; and Lempriere, OC Nyima Patrol to adjutant general, 3 Nov. 1908, SAD 701/25/251-4.

²¹ Lloyd, governor to civil sec., 23 Nov. 1908, SAD 701/25/284-91.

²² SIR No. 274, Apr. 1917, PRO FO 371/3199.

²³ L. Smith, ‘Report on Patrol No. 32’, SAD 643/13/1-47.

²⁴ SIR No. 283, Feb. 1918, PRO FO 371/3199.

²⁵ Cromer’s introduction to *GGR*, 1905, pp. 51–2; *GGR*, 1908, p. 182; Lloyd, governor to civil sec., 23 Nov. 1908, SAD 701/25/284-91; SIR No. 270, Jan. 1917, PRO WO 106/6225; SIR No. 294, Jan. 1919, PRO WO 33/997; Kordofan province annual report, 1904, SAD 701/25/159-63.

uncomfortable awareness, as acute here as it was in most colonial states in Africa in the early twentieth century, that the ‘power of the Government’ really was quite limited, and that only occasionally could administrators deploy sufficient coercive resources to impose their will.²⁶ While the Condominium had an unusually large colonial army in this period – around 13,000–14,000 men – this was still rather few to hold down 2 million square kilometres of territory.²⁷ Administrators – many of them seconded army officers, in the first decades of the Condominium – knew that the populace of the Nuba Mountains possessed thousands of rifles, and they shrank from exposing ‘the small military and police forces available for the purpose’ to casualties from snipers concealed in rocks and caves.²⁸ And so at times they avoided confrontation: ‘The Government took what it could get without fighting’, recalled one, in retrospect.²⁹ But almost all shared the belief that this enforced cautiousness courted disaster, for they were wont to read every local lapse of authority as the prelude to insurrection, every unsolved cattle theft as the first sign of an uprising.³⁰ In the Sudan, recent history fuelled the fear that unpunished insubordination would lead rapidly to revolt: the belief that the Mahdist revolt had grown from a local jacquerie which might easily have been suppressed had been instilled in all officials.³¹ ‘[T]hose who flout Government must be punished’, insisted Wingate, governor-general from 1900 to 1916,³² and in urging the importance of an immediate and violent response to signs of recalcitrance in the Nuba Mountains, he darkly noted: ‘that sort of disaffection spreads like wildfire’.³³ Warned of the adverse comment which ‘patrols’ might attract in London, Wingate put on record some pious remarks about his reluctance to use force; but reminded subordinates that ‘Government authority and prestige must be maintained, and if there is no way out of it, of course we must have a punitive mission and show that we mean to be masters.’³⁴ And, taking advantage of Sudan’s unusual status and the consequent lack of supervision from London, he ensured a routine suppression of information on potentially gory details and discouraged press enquiries.³⁵

²⁶ *GGR*, 1905, p. 15; Berman, ‘Bureaucracy and incumbent violence’, p. 33.

²⁷ By comparison, the King’s African Rifles (stationed in Uganda, British East Africa, and Nyasaland) had 104 British officers and 4,579 African other ranks at its creation in 1902; reductions, particularly in 1911, saw its strength fall to 73 British officers and 2,325 other ranks by 1914: H. Moyse-Bartlett, *The King’s African Rifles: a study in the military history of East and Central Africa* (Aldershot, 1956), pp. 129, 262. See also Iliffe, *A modern history of Tanganyika*, pp. 240–1.

²⁸ SIR No. 212, Mar. 1912, PRO WO 106/6224.

²⁹ J. A. Gillan, *Some aspects of Nuba administration* (Khartoum, 1931), p. 40.

³⁰ London Gazette, 27 Sept. 1910, SAD 701/25/330.

³¹ Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, pp. 119, 124, 128.

³² Wingate to Asser, 27 Oct. 1910, SAD 298/1/63.

³³ *GGR*, 1904, p. 12; *GGR*, 1908, p. 43; Wingate to Kitchener, 19 Feb. 1914, SAD 157/2/35-8.

³⁴ Cromer to Wingate, 21 Feb. 1905, SAD 276/2/31-4; Wingate to Asser, 12 Sept. 1910, SAD 297/3/34-9.

³⁵ Wingate to Asser, 2 Aug. 1908, SAD 283/3/12-22; Wingate to Rees, 24 Oct. 1908, SAD 284/1/49; Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, p. 150.

The racial categories which informed British understandings of the Sudan played a particular role in driving violence.³⁶ ‘Arabs’, the British believed, were prone to manipulation by religious leaders such as the Mahdi, but the prompt suppression of such leaders would demonstrate to all who heard of it the omnipotence of the government. The people of the Nuba Mountains, however, were ‘blacks’ not Arabs, and ‘it is notorious that blacks place little credence in what they hear, but are only convinced by seeing or feeling’.³⁷

A wild and ignorant population such as that of southern Kordofan can only be impressed with a sense of their comparative insignificance by a display of power and they should be afforded a tangible sign of the power of the Government to enforce its administration when necessary ... For this reason I consider an increase in the garrison of Southern Kordofan necessary, and patrols in sufficient force to overawe the native mind.³⁸

This view of racial difference was an enduring one; forty years later another administrator explained in a private letter that he would never consider launching a ‘patrol’ against Arabs, but that ‘Nuba are quite different, dull-witted, without sensibility, primitive, obstinate and only half-acquainted with Arabic, you can’t manage them like Arabs ... things can’t be done without the use – or show – of force.’³⁹

British colonial violence, like that of the French, also grew partly from individual ambition.⁴⁰ In the early years of the Condominium British officers in the Sudan were technically officers of the Egyptian army, on secondment from their British regiments in search of adventure and decorations.⁴¹ There was a long waiting list for service in the Egyptian army, which many sought to jump through personal appeal to Wingate.⁴² Once there, they longed for the ‘fun’ of action: officers wrote privately to Wingate, pleading that their units should be allowed to join patrols; a patrol to the Nuba Mountains in 1910 was ‘inundated with volunteers’.⁴³ Those who had already secured their medals mocked their juniors, and deprecated the financial cost of violence. But despite concern that ‘bloodthirsty medal-hunters’ launched unnecessary patrols, Wingate awarded Egyptian army promotions and medals to those involved, and he used his personal contacts to seek British army recognition of their service, to the point where complaints were raised by those serving elsewhere in the empire: ‘The honors and rewards bestowed on the Army

³⁶ For a useful summary of this categorization, see H. Sharkey, ‘Colonialism and the culture of nationalism in the northern Sudan, 1898–1956’ (PhD thesis, Princeton, 1998), p. 39.

³⁷ Lloyd, ‘Report on Kordofan province, 1908’, p. 55, SAD 283/9/40-68.

³⁸ Kordofan province annual report, 1905, SAD 701/25/164-9.

³⁹ Owen to Father, 20 Nov. 1944, SAD 414/15/74-5.

⁴⁰ T. Weiskel, *French colonial rule and the Baule peoples: resistance and collaboration, 1889–1911* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 232–4.

⁴¹ Butler to Father, 10 June 1910, SAD 304/8/12-14.

⁴² Lewin to Wingate, 23 Aug. 1908, SAD 283/5/67-8; Wingate to Murray, 7 July 1908, SAD 283/1/15.

⁴³ Lewin to Wingate, 10 July 1908, SAD 283/1/53-5; Asser to Wingate, 27 Oct. 1908, SAD 284/1/53; Lewin to Wingate, 10 July 1908, SAD 283/1/53-5; Butler to Father, 15 Oct. 1910, SAD 304/8/30-3; Asser to Wingate, 12 Oct. 1910, SAD 298/1/35-9.

in Egypt have caused heart burnings in India and elsewhere.⁴⁴ During the First World War British officers – presumably motivated by a powerful blend of guilt and jealousy – were particularly desirous of a ‘a chance at being shot at’. Wider demands on resources limited patrols for most of the war, but the period from late 1917 to 1919 saw a flurry of patrols, as soldiers experimented with new techniques of warfare. Even the governor-general could play a part, coming to visit the troops on the front line in imitation of the visits of George V to cheer up the Tommies.⁴⁵

Overall, then, throughout the early decades of the Condominium, and whenever coercive resources could be found, local British administrators – inspectors, up to 1920, and district commissioners (DCs) thereafter – sought to make their availability as apparent as possible. It was this which drove the lurching, unpredictable violence of the early colonial state. A touring inspector, or provincial governor, with a column of soldiers and police, would summon local *meks* and their people to a meeting with the evident aim of intimidating them.⁴⁶ Those who had offered direct defiance to government – and who refused to come along to these displays of government power⁴⁷ – would be ‘visited’ by a patrol, and administrators sought to make the impact of these patrols as dramatic as possible, through simple destruction: ‘Finding no opposition we only burned the houses and killed all the animals’ wrote Savile, the governor, in passing comment on the daily work of a patrol.⁴⁸ Thus was the ‘power of the Government’ manifested: ‘Only the crudest actions will impress crude brains’, observed one officer, in retrospective justification of the public display of the severed heads of the *mek* of Nyima and his principal ally.⁴⁹

IV

British officials saw the people of the Nuba Mountains – ‘the Nuba’ – as an embattled remnant populace, hemmed in by the Arabicized nomads of the surrounding plains.⁵⁰ In the first decades of Anglo-Egyptian rule, they believed that the Condominium had brought relief from such raids, and that the people of

⁴⁴ Ward, War Office to under secretary of state, Foreign Office, 3 Mar. 1902, PRO FO 78/5239; Asser to Wingate, 12 Oct. 1910, SAD 298/1/35-9; Slatin to Wingate, 10 Dec. 1911, SAD 301/6/59-61. For medal-seeking, see for example ‘Special Army Order’ of 20 Mar. 1909, SAD 701/25/317; Wingate to General Wynne, 28 Sept. 1908, 283/9/35-6; Wingate to Asser, 23 Aug. 1908, SAD 283/5/50-5. Also Balfour, ‘Fiki Ali’, SAD 303/8/6-39. Wingate was not always successful. Lloyd, instigator of the 1908 patrol, never received the medal he had hoped for: Lloyd to Wingate, 23 Sept. 1908, SAD 283/9/14-15; Wingate to Lloyd, 30 Nov. 1910, SAD 701/25/333.

⁴⁵ See for example Wingate to Drake, 11 Aug. 1915, SAD 196/2/93; Wingate to Cromer, 21 June 1915, SAD 195/4/197-8; SIR No. 281, Dec. 1917, PRO FO 371/3199; Smith, ‘Report on Patrol No. 32’, pp. 5, 9, and 14, SAD 643/13/1-42; SIR No. 282, Jan. 1918, PRO FO 371/3199.

⁴⁶ Savile, ‘Travels in Kordofan and Darfur’, 19 Jan. 1910, SAD 427/1/1-150.

⁴⁷ Kordofan province annual report, 1904, SAD 701/25/159-63.

⁴⁸ Savile, ‘Travels in Kordofan and Darfur’, 1 Feb. 1910, SAD 427/7/1-150.

⁴⁹ Extract from Lamb, ‘Operations against the Nuba Gebels’, SAD 795/8/183-7. The display of the heads was not mentioned in any official report at the time.

⁵⁰ Lloyd, ‘Report on Kordofan province, 1908, pp. 30-1, 54-5, SAD 283/9/40-68; *GGR*, 1908, p. 7.

the mountains, ungratefully, had responded by increasing their own raids: communities on different hills raided one another; and any or all of them might raid the plains people. Slaves and cattle were the prime objects of such raids: the slaves being kept for work; or as wives; or being traded on to other communities in exchange for cattle and rifles.⁵¹ Officials were not sure whether 'the Nuba' – who spoke a variety of languages, many of them unrelated and not incomprehensible – were a 'tribe' or a 'race'.⁵² But they were sure that these 'Negro aborigines' were an ancient, remnant populace, where kings were helpless before priests: 'One has only to remember how Agag was slaughtered by Samuel after being spared by Saul.'⁵³ In seeking to identify local rulers who could end such raiding – the men to whom the power of the government should be shown – officials decided that authority rested on the powers of 'Arro', or spirit, in each mountain and that it was the representative of this spirit (a figure for whom the British used the catch-all term 'kujur', widely used across the Sudan for non-Islamic ritual figures whom the British believed to be a dangerous threat to authority) who wielded real power.⁵⁴ Even where there was a secular figure of authority as well, 'public life is ultimately in the hands of the rainmaker'.⁵⁵ The implication for administrators was clear enough: it was the *kujurs* who had to be shown the power of government, for all lived in fear of them.

In the 1920s officials began to present *kujurs* rather differently. From being the 'natural enemies of Government', who could only be overawed, and whose influence must ultimately be reduced by the administration, they became potentially desirable allies, and by the 1930s, Vicars-Miles could confidently insist that *kujurs* were neither 'witch doctors' nor 'despots'.⁵⁶ The patrols had been the result not of the deliberate resistance of these men, but of their reluctance to come

⁵¹ J. W. Sagar, 'Notes on the history, religion and customs of the Nubas', pp. 140–2, *SNR*, 5 (1922), pp. 137–56; Kordofan province annual reports, 1904 and 1905, SAD 701/25/159-69.

⁵² C. Seligman, *Pagan tribes of the Nilotic Sudan* (London 1932); Sagar, 'Notes on the history', pp. 137–9; D. Hawkesworth, 'The Nuba proper of southern Kordofan', *SNR*, 15 (1932), 159–99. More recent scholarship has emphasized diversity, and sought (not always successfully!) to avoid 'the Nuba' as a term: Stevenson, *The Nuba people*. Linguistic heterogeneity of the populace has long been acknowledged: Seligman, *Pagan tribes*, p. 370.

⁵³ Seligman, *Pagan tribes*, p. 366: the section on the Nuba Mountains was based on work in 1910–11; Lloyd, 'Report on Kordofan province, 1908', p. 57, SAD 283/9/40-68. For those who wish to pursue the reference, it is to 1 Samuel 15.

⁵⁴ Sagar 'Notes on the history', pp. 144–6; S. Nadel, 'A shaman cult in the Nuba Mountains', p. 85n, *SNR*, 24 (1941), pp. 85–112, denounces the inappropriateness of the term *kujur* for the Nuba Mountains. For the British use of the term *kujur* to identify what they saw as illegitimate and threatening ritual power, see D. Johnson, *Nuer prophets: a history of prophecy from the Upper Nile in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 6, 24–5.

⁵⁵ Seligman, *Pagan tribes*, pp. 375 and 379; Sagar, 'Notes on the history', p. 156.

⁵⁶ Compare Lloyd, 'Report on Kordofan province, 1908', p. 56, SAD 283/9/40-68; Sagar, 'Notes on the history'; and Gillan, *Some aspects*, pp. 13–14. Vicars-Miles, 'Notes on Nuba administration', pp. 29–30, SAD 631/10/1-64. There are obvious comparisons to be drawn with British policy among the Nuer of Sudan, where a similar rehabilitation of *kujurs* was interrupted by the antipathetic attitude of one particular provincial governor: D. H. Johnson, 'Editor's introduction', p. 17, in C. A. Willis, *The Upper Nile province handbook: a report on peoples and government in the southern Sudan, 1931* (Oxford, 1995).

forward: 'the real headman, hiding in his cave, did not know the Government's policy'. But by the time Vicars-Miles wrote they had been 'won over'; and their authority, based on the 'rigorous observance of ancient traditions', was being used in support of the government.⁵⁷

This official rehabilitation of the *kujurs* accorded well with the enthusiasm for 'indirect rule' and tradition which gripped British administrators in the Sudan in the 1920s, as a result both of the wider colonial vogue for Lugard's theories and of the more local impact of the revolts and unrest in Egypt and Khartoum from 1919 to 1924. This was, as Ranger has noted of British Africa widely, a period in which administrators had 'come to dislike the consequences of the changes which had taken place'; rueing the carelessness which had permitted political innovation, they set themselves ever more firmly against it.⁵⁸ The arrival of a new governor-general in 1927, with an extravagant rhetoric of traditional authority as a hygienic barrier against the 'germs' of political discontent, gave additional impetus.⁵⁹ The rhetoric was taken up with enthusiasm by Angus Gillan, a long-serving administrator who was deputy governor and then governor of the province. Other changes created a need for a new policy: the Egyptian military presence in Sudan ended in 1924, and by 1926 the new 'Sudan Defence Force' was a modest 8,000 strong and the influence of the army in administration had greatly declined.⁶⁰

Gillan had already concluded that the problem in the Nuba Mountains generally was that many recognized *meks* were 'powerless' and that the real need was for the 'regeneration of tribal authority': simply showing *meks* the power of the government, was not enough – they had to be made part of that power.⁶¹ This, in Gillan's eyes, was the only alternative to endless, and ultimately unaffordable, patrols: 'Nuba wars have cost the Government much in money and something in lives. A prosperous and contented Nuba civilisation will not only cost less but will be a direct asset to the country.'⁶²

The new aim of policy was defined as a 'Nuba renaissance', and its proponents argued in vivid language for a cultural and racial separation between Nuba and Arab: 'I should like to lay stress on the undesirability of an Arab–Nuba blend ... The result is always an undisciplined, drunken, half-caste Arab who has no background and no tradition to keep him up to the mark.'⁶³ The romance of nakedness encouraged colonial imaginings of Nuba essentialism: 'So wild and attractive', murmured one official's wife; while an assistant district commissioner

⁵⁷ Vicars-Miles, 'Notes on Nuba administration', pp. 41–2, SAD 631/10/1-64.

⁵⁸ Ranger, 'The invention of tradition', p. 247.

⁵⁹ *GGR*, 1921, pp. 4–6; Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, pp. 360–79; 'Devolution in native administration', memorandum with civil sec. to governor, 25 Jan. 1927, SAD 723/5/34-9.

⁶⁰ Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, p. 322.

⁶¹ Gillan, ag. governor to civil sec., 24 May 1925, SAD 723/5/10; 'Devolution in native administration', 8 Mar. 1927, SAD 723/6/15-22. ⁶² Gillan, *Some aspects of Nuba administration*, pp. 56–7.

⁶³ Vicars-Miles, 'Notes on Nuba administration', p. 33, SAD 631/10/1-64.

(ADC) pertly noted that ‘our female visitors [were] delighted with the nakedness of the people’.⁶⁴

But the practicalities of administration subverted the commitment to idealized tradition. Vehement though this rhetoric of essentialism and purity was on the dangers of the ‘miserable, decadent, semi-arabised Nuba’,⁶⁵ British officials simply could not impose ‘purity’ and also maintain administration: the chronic financial problems of the early 1930s forced the administration to concentrate on revenue and the promotion of trade, and the governor who succeeded Gillan announced that ‘we cannot deny progress to the Nuba’. The mountains had been declared a ‘closed district’ in 1924, but the administration had conceded that Arab residents of Kordofan could not be excluded as ‘outsiders’.⁶⁶ The district administration anyway lacked the means to police exclusion, and numerous Muslim religious specialists, petty traders and artisans entered the hills – including, by 1933, an estimated 1,000 West African migrants, working and trading on their slow journey to Mecca.⁶⁷ Florid pronouncements on protecting the Nuba gave way to concern over markets, and from 1934 a conference on trade and development became a major annual ritual of the provincial administration.⁶⁸ Christian missionaries, who had been encouraged to undertake educational work in the mountains as a counter to the influence of Muslim clerks, were appalled by the official decision to use Arabic, in Arabic script, as the basis of education. By 1942 they were denouncing the administration for promoting ‘Arabic culture’.⁶⁹ Even attitudes to nudity were ambivalent: ‘Surely such people must be very close to the apes’, commented the same ADC who had noted its thrilling effect on visitors.⁷⁰

The racial separation of the ‘Nuba renaissance’ was, then, a brief phase: so brief that it seems unlikely to have had the drastic consequences that have been argued of it.⁷¹ The real significance of the policy was rather that, in encouraging a shift away from reliance on large-scale ‘patrol’ violence, it made space for the

⁶⁴ Bell to Mother and Father, 24 Feb. 1934, SAD 697/11/48-50.

⁶⁵ Gillan, *Some aspects of Nuba administration*, p. 12.

⁶⁶ K. Henderson, *The making of the modern Sudan: the life and letters of Sir Douglas Newbold, KBE* (Westport, CT, 1974 (first publ. 1953)), pp. 59, 66–7, 495; ‘Language teaching in Nuba schools’: memo of meeting of 7 Dec. 1935, in Church Missionary Society (CMS) archives, Nuba Mountains, sub-files 3–6; Gillan, dep. governor NMP to civil sec., 25 Feb. 1927, SAD 723/5/46-7; Ibrahim, *The dilemma of British rule*, p. 43. There were, apparently, continued efforts to remove Arabs settled on certain mountains: Owen to Father, 12 Nov. 1939, SAD 414/10/6-8.

⁶⁷ Sudan Monthly Report, No. 58, Oct.–Nov. 1933, SAD SudA + PK1543. For the presence and licensing of traders in various parts of the Nuba Mountains, see Bell, diary, 9 Mar. 1934, 22 Aug. 1934, 25 Sept. 1934, SAD 698/7/23, 78 and 90; also Nadel, *The Nuba*, p. 74, who recorded a number of government-approved ‘markets’ with Arab shops. Newbold, governor to Bertram, CMS, 3 Aug. 1935, CMS Nuba Mountains, sub-files 3–6.

⁶⁸ Foley to ‘Darling Mummy’, 22 Feb. 1934, SAD 784/8/14-16; Owen to Mother, 26 Feb. 1940, SAD 414/11/25-8.

⁶⁹ Ibrahim, *Dilemma of British rule*, pp. 75, 77–8, sees the language decision as the definitive abandonment of the ‘Nuba renaissance’; Martin to Hooper, 26 Mar. 1942, CMS Nuba Mountains, sub-files 3–6.

⁷⁰ Bell to Mother and Father, 20 Oct. 1934, SAD 697/12/56-7.

⁷¹ Kamal Osman Salih, ‘British policy and the accentuation of inter-ethnic divisions’.

emergence of a new focus of authority: a system of formally recognized courts, very similar to those being established elsewhere in the Sudan at the same time.⁷² The significance of this can only be understood in the context of a complex competition for authority within the communities of the Nuba Mountains, which can be exemplified in the Nyima hills.

V

Ethnographic work since the 1940s has amply demonstrated that the notion of a single Nuba identity and culture is unsafe. As Baumann has suggested, the main thing shared by the populace of the mountains in the early twentieth century was that they were all – in diverse ways – culturally very different from the Arabic-speaking plains people.⁷³ In seeking to reach behind the vision of the all-powerful *kujur* (which was presumably the result of extrapolating observations made in the area around the administrative centre of Dilling)⁷⁴ Nadel's detailed ethnographic research in the 1930s, and the writings of Anglican missionaries (who spent much longer in the area than did Nadel), offer valuable material, and suggest that authority was contested, and appeared in many forms.

Within homesteads in Nyima, married men claimed authority over the labour and reproductive power of wives and daughters, and the labour of sons; and they claimed control of livestock and, to a large degree, of the crops. Women had some authority over crops, and a degree of authority over the labour of their daughters. Potentially challenging these claims were those of patrilineal clanship, which gave a degree of authority to more distant kin. There was a degree of competition between married men, who resented the claims of affines, or lineage elders, on the resources of their households; accumulation was difficult in the face of a constant expectation of redistributive generosity. There also existed wider claims to authority, going beyond kinship or affinal ties, in which ideas of power bestowed by a Divinity, or by spirits was central.⁷⁵ Generational tensions played some part, notably through the Nyima age-grade organization for young men. This evidently changed considerably in the early decades of the twentieth century: confusions in Nadel's account, and disagreements between his observations and those of the missionaries presumably reflect the difficulties – for Nyimang, and for academic observers – of trying to reconstruct a system which (as will be suggested) had been shattered by the events of 1917–18.⁷⁶

⁷² See for example D. Johnson, 'Judicial regulation and administrative control: customary law and the Nuer, 1898–1954', *Journal of African History*, 27 (1986), pp. 59–78.

⁷³ See for example Stevenson, *The Nuba people*, pp. 6–15; G. Baumann, *National integration and local integrity: the Miri of the Nuba Mountains in the Sudan* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 9, 31–58.

⁷⁴ According to Nadel there really *was* a 'Great Kujur' in Dilling, though nowhere else: *The Nuba*, pp. 420–1, 441.

⁷⁵ R. Stevenson, 'The Nyamang of the southern Kordofan hills', 1940, pp. 4–5, 7, SAD 795/8/161–82. Stevenson, *The Nuba people*, pp. 89, 97, 113–16; Nadel, *The Nuba*, pp. 46–53, 65–8, 379–93.

⁷⁶ Nadel's account is inconsistent in its explanation of when exactly circumcision took place: compare Nadel, *The Nuba*, pp. 406–7 with 409; there are a number of major differences with Stevenson's account,

These sources agree, however, that there were multiple notions of wider ritual power. This was patrilineally inherited in the case of the rain-maker (who claimed rain-making power for the whole of Nyima) and obtained through non-inherited and unpredictable possession in the case of 'hill-spirits' and some human spirits.⁷⁷ The powers given by such spirits might be specific to a certain disease, but usually they involved an ability to affect the health and fertility of wider groups – either a 'hill', or even a wider population across the hills. Performance of particular rituals for fertility or against disease offered a public opportunity for the manifestation of a claim to such power. But it was the events associated with the movement of men through the age-grade system which had apparently become, certainly by the early twentieth century, spectacles in which spirit-priests of all kinds – who may themselves in some cases have been quite young men – sought to claim power, and assert authority, over a constituency of young men rising through the grades: circumcision itself was said to have been introduced to Nyima by a spirit-priest. Nadel's largely retrospective account of the age-grades emphasized the role of spirit-priests and/or the rain-maker in a series of events – the 'water holes' ceremony, circumcision, the 'beating of the bulls', the 'beer drinking'. Only at the end of the cycle were young men released from obligation to these leaders.⁷⁸ It was at this point that they would be expected to have married, and to establish their own home – whether through their own endeavours to accumulate, or through the assistance of their father or some other patron.

Raiding could play a major part in such accumulation: some spirit-priests served as prophets who advised young men on the conduct of raids against other communities, and had a claim on the spoils – livestock and people – from any raid they organized. Retrospective accounts suggested a system which defined the influence of the various spirit-priests in a 'hierarchy of allegiances', but there are clear signs of competition, between different spirit-priests, and between these figures and rain-makers. Accumulation in the mountains was, Nadel suggested, limited by its own aims; the conspicuous consumption of wealth in displays of generosity was the ideal, and this constantly redistributed wealth. But these leaders pursued more persistent trajectories of accumulation, in which generosity with cattle or grain attracted young men whose service in raiding brought in new wealth, and allowed further human investment through the purchase of slaves.⁷⁹

Such accumulation fitted easily into the combination of trading and raiding which characterized relations between the mountain communities and the people

for example as to whether the *kwei kanyar* (*kokanyar*, in Nadel's version) are initiates or initiands, and more importantly on the timing and role of the 'beating of the bulls' and the 'beer-drinking' events: Stevenson, 'The Nyamang', pp. 13–17, SAD 795/8/161-82.

⁷⁷ Nadel, *The Nuba*, pp. 443–5; Stevenson, 'The Nyamang', p. 3, SAD 795/8/161-82; Stevenson, *The Nuba people*, pp. 113–16.

⁷⁸ Hawkesworth, 'The Nuba proper', pp. 173–4; Nadel, *The Nuba*, pp. 406–12; Stevenson, *The Nuba people*, pp. 100–3.

⁷⁹ Nadel, *The Nuba*, pp. 65–7, 163, 346, 393, 408, 412–13, 452; Stevenson, *The Nuba people*, p. 99; Sagar, 'Notes on the history', p. 156.

of the surrounding plains. There was here much of the sort of interaction across ethnic boundaries (and these were ethnic as much as racial boundaries – the ‘Arabs’ of the plains included many relatively recently Arabicized and incorporated individuals) which has been so well described for the Rift Valley of East Africa.⁸⁰ The populace of the mountains produced grain, honey, tamarind, and slaves for trade; they sought cattle – as a store of wealth, and as brideprice – and salt from the plains, and they sought also to obtain firearms, for hunting and for raiding. There was a high degree of tension and violence across this boundary, which increased at certain times – from 1886 to 1887, and again from 1896 to 1898 – but which always accompanied trade; the presence in the Nuba Mountains of thousands of rifles, largely booty captured by the Mahdists from the crumbling Turco-Egyptian state, provides evidence of that.⁸¹

In some cases trade may have provided a route to accumulation without raiding.⁸² But more widely, the linkage between organizing violence and organizing trade was a direct one; and here as elsewhere in Africa those who played both roles became ‘gatekeepers’, who marked their privileged access to the world beyond the mountains through dress – ‘until quite recent times, any stranger who appeared wearing a *tagia* [cap] was regarded as a “sultan”’.⁸³ In the 1880s a missionary described a local ‘khojur’ in Dilling, neighbouring Nyima, and his enthusiasm for seeking external alliance:

Kakum was at that time a man of about fifty years of age of commanding appearance, and greatly respected by the blacks. He used to wear wide white trousers and a gallabieh, and on his head a nicely embroidered cap with a large tassel which our sisters had made for him. He had passed his youth in Alexandria as a soldier, and acquitted himself admirably as the Khojur, not of Delen only, but also of the neighbouring hills. Numbers of people used to come and seek his blessing and advice, and when our Bishop Comboni visited El Obeid he was there to beg him to send missionaries to teach his people and make men of them.⁸⁴

When the British appeared – initially, as distributors of weapons which were to be used against the remnants of the Mahdists – it was these men who offered themselves as *mek*s, seeing in this the possibility for access to new resources.⁸⁵ ‘Mek Kujur is the chief of them all, and seems an intelligent man and loyal to the government’, reported one of the first British officers to visit Jebel Ghulfan

⁸⁰ T. Spear, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1–18, in T. Spear and R. Waller, eds., *Being Maasai: ethnicity and identity in East Africa* (London, Dar es Salaam, Nairobi, and Athens, OH, 1993).

⁸¹ Stevenson, *The Nuba people*, pp. 31–56, offers a survey of sources on the Nuba Mountains before the Mahdiyya; see also *ibid.*, pp. 57–60; Sagar, ‘Notes on the history’; Ahmed Uthman Muhammad Ibrahim, *The dilemma of British rule in the Nuba Mountains* (Khartoum, 1985), p. 48.

⁸² Nadel, *The Nuba*, pp. 310–11.

⁸³ Hawkesworth, ‘The Nuba proper’, p. 170. ‘Gatekeepers’ is a term borrowed from J. Lonsdale, ‘The conquest state of Kenya, 1895–1905’, in Berman and Lonsdale, *Unhappy valley*, pp. 13–44; see also J. Glassman, *Feasts and riot: revelry, rebellion and popular consciousness on the Swahili coast* (Portsmouth, NH, and London, 1995), pp. 47–54.

⁸⁴ J. Ohrwalder, *Ten years’ captivity in the Mahdi’s camp, 1882–1892* (London, 1892), p. 24.

⁸⁵ Report by Kaimakam Butler, App. A2, SIR No. 83, June 1901, PRO FO 78/5167; Seligman, *Pagan tribes*, p. 376; Hawkesworth, ‘The Nuba proper’.

(another hill neighbouring the Nyima range) unconsciously summarizing this individual's multiple claims to authority: ritual leader, organizer of trade and violence, and intermediary with the world beyond the mountains. Maintaining the markers of their distinction, British officials gave men like 'Mek Kujur' cloth to wear.⁸⁶

Once recognized as *meks*, these individuals found that the basis of their authority was inadequate to the British expectations that they would pay tribute and end raids on other communities; and complaints by administrators recurred constantly to the failure of *meks* to stop raiding by young men.⁸⁷ The trajectory of violence in Nyima exemplifies the dilemma of the *meks*. Agabna was the son of Arowga, one of the hereditary line of *shirra*, or rain-makers, in the area. Arowga – or perhaps some competing accumulator – had already ensured that the people of Nyima had a reputation as raiders by 1902. In 1906 an officer leading a patrol of two companies had decided not to try conclusions with the people of Nyima; and had met Arowga and decided that despite Arowga's claim to authority over the whole of Nyima, he had no influence beyond his hill; it was shortly after this that Agabna claimed the same authority, and was given a gun – the symptomatic gift of recognition from a coercive state.⁸⁸ Agabna was then implicated in various raids, though reports reaching the British suggested that he had less influence in organizing these than a *kujur* called Dargol. Another *kujur*, Kilkun, captured in the 1908 patrol, offered a description of the genesis of one of these raids. It was planned by Irshin, another of Arowga's sons; he had invited Kilkun to take part, as Kilkun's spirit was believed to offer good guidance. When Kilkun joined in sixteen men from his hill, Kurmetti, followed him; this in itself was a success for Kilkun, who was in competition with another *kujur*, Firoun, on the same hill.⁸⁹ Some two dozen men had also joined the raid from other hills. Agabna initially shunned involvement, but changed his mind when he saw that all the 'fighting men' from his hill were going to take part. Kilkun and his followers shared seven cattle captured in the raid – out of a total booty of ten cattle and three people. These were particularly useful to Kilkun since he had recently been taken hostage while 'visiting' another hill, and had had to pay nine cattle to secure his freedom.⁹⁰ The picture that emerges here is of rival

⁸⁶ Appendix, SIR No. 83, June 1901, PRO FO 78/5167; Wheatley, diary, 14 Feb. 1912, SAD 703/3/1-65; Savile, 'Travels in Kordofan and Darfur', 27 Jan. 1910, SAD 427/7/1-150.

⁸⁷ 'Draft Kordofan annual report, 1908', SAD 701/25/191; Wheatley, diary, 10 Feb. 1912, SAD 703/3/1-65; see also 'Operational order No. 2' with Smith, 'Report on Patrol No. 32', SAD 643/13/1-47.

⁸⁸ For the *shirra*, rain-maker, see Stevenson, *The Nuba people*, p. 117, and Nadel, *The Nuba*, pp. 452-3; extract from a report by Major O'Connell, quoted in *GGR*, 1902, p. 50; Kordofan annual report, 1906, SAD 701/25/170-9; Lloyd, 'Notes on jebel Nyima', SAD 701/25/235-9.

⁸⁹ Lloyd to civil sec., 10 Nov. 1908, SAD 701/25/251-2; 'Statement of kujur Kilkun', 18 Nov. 1908, SAD 701/25/303-4. Feroun was photographed in 1900 (SAD A35/42), and he appeared on a list of *kujurs* in 1908: Lloyd, 'Notes on jebel Nyima', SAD 701/25/235-9.

⁹⁰ For Agabna's claim to the *mekship*, see Lloyd, 'Notes on jebel Nyima', SAD 701/25/235-9; for the spoils of the raid, see the extract from the report of the inspector, Kordofan, in *GGR*, 1907, p. 6; 'Statement of kujur Kilkun', 18 Nov. 1908, SAD 701/25/303-4. Kilkun was the *kujur* who was hanged with Agabna in 1918.

claimants to authority, each possessed of some ritual role and with a handful of followers, who relied on raids and the loot from these to sustain their followings of young men: even those who occasionally co-operated in raids still competed for followers. Most of the many claimants to authority across the Nuba Mountains operated on a similarly small scale: a report in 1908 listed more than 300 *meks* and *kujurs*, most of whom claimed a score or two of 'rifles'.⁹¹

For a little while, some *meks* were able to continue their role as dual organizers of violence and organizers of trade. They supplied grain to British administrators, and they were always ready to provide 'friendlies' in support of British patrols against other mountain communities, for which officers were appropriately grateful (while deprecating the tendency of the 'friendlies' to 'loot a pig and belt home at once').⁹² But to prevent petty raids by their young men, or even worse, to hand over raiders for punishment outside the community, would destroy the *meks*' influence, and they readily reported their conflicts with young men on this: 'young men ... objected to the arrangement made with the Governor, to apprehend thieves and send them in to Government'.⁹³ Confronted with accusations of harbouring thieves and murderers, *meks* sometimes challenged British officials to demonstrate their own ability to assert authority against younger men who 'in the most obstinate manner possible, refused to comply with the Government demands'. 'They complained they were unable to restrain their young men and asked me to speak to them.'⁹⁴ The encounters between *meks* and touring administrators, which provided the principle public space for the enactment of the relationships of colonial authority in the period up to the mid-1920s, reflected the tensions of the relationship. When in 1914 British officials tried to persuade Mek Nimr of Jebel Mandal to accede to their demands, 'many of the young Nubas gathered round' and negotiations foundered.⁹⁵ At such meetings, *meks* and administrators each paraded their armed followings, as the back drop to a process of negotiation in which administrators sought to extract tribute and the surrender of fugitives, and *meks* sought to confirm their role as intermediaries but avoid being forced into disciplining their followings. Agabna was eventually unable to sustain this balancing act.

Agabna was seized in advance of the 1908 patrol and led around, bound, with the troops; the real aim of the patrol was Dargol. When it proved impossible to capture Dargol or force his surrender, the patrol contented itself with destroying crops and houses. This was apparently sufficient to undermine Dargol's reputation; in the wake of the raid the people of Sultan – the followers of Arowga, or Agabna, or his brother Irshin – evidently expected to regain their local pre-eminence. Agabna was subsequently implicated in more raids, and was arrested and briefly sent to Omdurman. Allowed to return to the provincial capital, El Obeid, he escaped and

⁹¹ Lloyd, 'Report on Kordofan province, 1908', SAD 283/9/40-68.

⁹² Lloyd to civil sec., 14 Nov. 1908, SAD 701/25/267-8; SIR No. 307, Feb. 1920, PRO WO 33/997; Lloyd to civil sec., 23 Nov. 1908, SAD 701/25/284-91.

⁹³ SIR No. 215, June 1912, PRO WO 106/6225.

⁹⁴ SIR No. 236, Mar. 1914, PRO WO 106/6225; Wheatley, diary, 10 Feb. 1912, SAD 703/3/1-65.

⁹⁵ SIR No. 236, Mar. 1914, PRO WO 106/6225.

made his way back to Nyima, where he organized raids with such success that he accumulated dozens of slaves and a following of men with rifles, fifty of whom also had horses.⁹⁶ It was his refusal to end raiding, or to surrender men wanted for raiding, that led to Patrol No. 32. Agabna's final surrender followed the intervention of another local *kujur*, Nimr, who persuaded some of Agabna's followers to desert, and so convinced Agabna that resistance was futile; his reward was a 'robe of honour' and £E100.⁹⁷

Unsurprisingly, Agabna's judicial murder, and this further demonstration of 'the power of the Government', did not in itself make *meks* any more able to fulfil the demands of administrators – though it revealed clearly enough the penalties for failing to do so. There were no further large-scale patrols in Nyima (though there were in neighbouring hills, where men wanted for raids continued to find refuge);⁹⁸ but the real transformation in authority did not come until the early 1930s, when a process began which was to turn one of several *meks* recognized in Nyima into the 'paramount' for the whole Nyima range, with a new focus of authority.

VI

The introduction of courts in the Nuba Mountains followed wider policy in the Condominium.⁹⁹ Lesser headmen, designated *sheikhs*, were given minor courts able to issue fines; courts of *meks* sitting 'in council' with *sheikhs* and selected older men had the authority to judge more important cases; and wider courts composed of several *meks* sitting together could hear cases from several communities. This would remove the district administration from involvement in all but the most serious cases.¹⁰⁰

Gillan, architect of the 'Nuba renaissance', insisted that this court system would revive 'tribal authority', but his courts were entirely remote from former local practice (or, as he would put it, 'authentic Nuba culture'), which was as polycentric in the settlement of disputes as in everything else. Household, lineage, and community had been involved in dispute resolution; some individuals with possessory

⁹⁶ Lloyd to civil sec., 10 Nov. 1908, SAD 701/25/251-2; Lloyd to Wingate, 5 Nov. 1908, SAD 701/25/247-8; report by Mr Sagar, 20 Nov. 1908, SAD 701/25/295-301; SIR No. 270, Jan. 1917, PRO WO 106/6225; Nadel, *The Nuba*, p. 393; Stevenson, *The Nuba people*, pp. 115–16, describes possessory spirits in Nyima; see also Nadel, 'A shaman cult'; Savile, 'Travels in Kordofan and Darfur', 19 Jan. 1910, SAD 427/7/1-150; SIR, No. 303, Apr. 1917, PRO WO 106/6225. Ibrahim, *The dilemma of British rule*, p. 20, attributes Agabna's imprisonment to the kidnapping of a woman.

⁹⁷ Smith, 'Report on Patrol No. 32', p. 18, SAD 643/13/1-42; Ibrahim, *The dilemma of British rule*, p. 22; Nadel, *The Nuba*, p. 453.

⁹⁸ SIR No. 296, Mar. 1919, PRO WO 33/997; SIR No. 309, Apr. 1920, PRO WO 33/997; Gillan to civil sec., 24 May 1925, SAD 723/5/10.

⁹⁹ Gillan to all DCs, Nuba Mountains province, 17 July 1926, SAD 723/4/19-47; for discussion of the same processes among the Nuer, see Johnson, 'Judicial regulation and administrative control'.

¹⁰⁰ Ibrahim, *The dilemma of British rule*, pp. 36–7; Gillan, 'Devolution and native administration in Nuba Mountains province', 8 Mar. 1927, SAD 723/6/15-22.

spirits had acted, in effect, to judge cases brought to them; disputes with other communities had been settled either by violence or sometimes by the mediation of a gatekeeper.¹⁰¹ Though officials were ingenious in their arguments as to the 'traditional' nature of the conciliar courts they created, these actually represented a drastic change, both in their assertion of a unique right to judge within the community and in their ability to span more than community, so that thefts or raids committed by the young men of one hill against the people of another could now be heard in these courts, in front of the assembled *meks* of several hills.¹⁰² The courts relied on, and provided a framework for, a distinct cross-community stratum of *meks*, *sheikhs* and the older men who sat 'in council', with a shared interest in upholding the law and order underwritten by the government. Across the Nuba Mountains, a determined policy of court amalgamation and federation steadily reduced the number of *meks* during the 1930s, and further bound those who remained together in co-operation.¹⁰³

In Nyima, a combined court was created in 1931, under Mek Amina Derdimma (whose name is also recorded as Dardimi and Dardimalla), the son of one of several men who had formerly competed for authority as *kujurs* on Salara hill. He combined his *mekship* with a steady building up of his own household resources, and he had eight wives in 1939, and more than fifteen in 1947. The jurisdiction of his court expanded geographically with the creation of the 'Nyamang Confederation' in 1939, so that he became in effect the 'Paramount' *mek* of Nyima. It also grew socially, moving steadily into more and more aspects of domestic accumulation: inheritance, adultery, bridewealth, theft, and compensation.¹⁰⁴ This was partly because of the growing demands of the state (so that Amina found himself involved in disputes over which parent should decide whether a girl could go to school), but presumably also reflected the desire of men like himself to find affirmation of their claims on the property and bodies of others.¹⁰⁵ Courts here, as elsewhere in Africa, provided a focus for an authority based on accommodation between male household heads and colonial administrators.¹⁰⁶ A change in the tax

¹⁰¹ Gillan, 'Devolution and native administration in Nuba Mountains province', 8 Mar. 1927, SAD 723/6/15-22; Nadel, *The Nuba*, pp. 127, 246-7, 250, 459; Stevenson, 'The Nyamang of the southern Kordofan hills', p. 21, SAD 795/8/161-82.

¹⁰² Gillan, *Some aspects*, pp. 15-18; Hawkesworth, 'The Nuba proper', p. 195.

¹⁰³ Bell, diary, 13 July 1934, SAD 698/7/61; Bell to 'Mother and Dad', 14 Dec. 1934 and 15 Mar. 1935, SAD 697/13/8-10 and 45-6.

¹⁰⁴ Ibrahim, *The dilemma of British rule*, p. 22; Nadel, *The Nuba*, pp. 113, 127-8, 255, 315, 402, 453, 472; Rachel Hassan, Journal, Tour B, 19 Nov. 1947, SAD G//S 1121; Stevenson, 'The Nyamang of the southern Kordofan hills', SAD 795/8/161-82; Bell, diary, 18 Dec. 1934, SAD 698/7/131; Bell to 'Mother and Dad', 14 Nov. 1934, SAD 697/12/69-71; Owen to Father, 3 Sept. 1940, SAD 414/11/82-4; Owen to Mother, 7 Dec. 1941, SAD 414/12/64-5; by 1933, the (incomplete) official statistics suggested that Nuba courts handled 1,200 criminal and 500 civil cases in a year: *GGR*, 1933, p. 128.

¹⁰⁵ Rachel Hassan, Journal, Tour B, 18 July 1948, SAD G//S 1121; 'Salara local administration', 31 Jan. 1939, SAD 795/8/122-4; 'Native administration in Kordofan', 11 Nov. 1938, SAD 795/8/117-26; Rachel Hassan, Journal, Tour C, 8 Oct. 1950 SAD G//S 1121. Amina was in the 1930s seeking the support of the government anthropologist to further expand the jurisdiction of his court: Nadel, *The Nuba*, p. 491.

¹⁰⁶ Iliffe, *Africans*, pp. 198-9.

system, introduced steadily throughout the hills from the late 1920s, complemented the creation of courts. A poll tax replaced the former collective tribute, and now individual men could be held responsible for tax default and fined by the court, with the result that their property could be seized and sold to wealthier neighbours. By 1942, the court was clearly established in the mountains as the locus of authority; in one case, rivals for a *mek*ship fought for physical control of the court-house itself.¹⁰⁷

The courts – and the *mek*s and men who sat in them – had a new coercive force to uphold their decision: the ‘chiefs’ police’. It is not clear how many of these there were: Gillan’s initial plans were for a force of only a few dozen, but he also insisted that these police should be employed and paid directly by the *mek*s and *sheikhs*, and that ‘nor does it matter much to us, for instance, in the case of a Sheikh who is allocated two police at 75 PT [piastres] if he actually appoints three at 50 PT’; in 1933 one *mek* was able to supply an escort of half a dozen men from his ‘bodyguard’.¹⁰⁸ The physical trappings of the post – a uniform in some hills, metal badges in others, the key to the ‘lock-up’ in which the *mek* detained the defiant – marked their authority as derived from association with the government.¹⁰⁹

As a spectacle, the court stressed order, deference to age, and the association of a stratum of elder men with external forms and markers of authority. Photographs show *mek*s, *sheikhs*, and advisers in the white gowns and turbans of Arabicized riverain culture. Nadel described an ‘impressive court-house’ elsewhere in the mountains, with its dais and benches and guard of police, and he wrote of Amina’s Nyima court at greater length.¹¹⁰

Chiefs and elders sit around the walls of the court-house, the presiding chiefs on chairs, the rest on angarebs [rope and wood beds] or on mats on the floor. Litigants and witnesses are made to wait outside till they are summoned into the presence of the court. They are led in by tribal police, having left their weapons, sticks and sandals at the door ... they must stand at a respectful distance from the chiefs. The discussion is calm and dignified.¹¹¹

Dress and behaviour around Amina’s court and office at Salara evoked not Nuba essentialism but the routine culture of petty authority typical of the wider colonial state in northern Sudan: a European visitor in 1945 found here no ‘picturesque’ nudity, but rather ‘a sort of Government office, a very small room and a larger one with a dais in it’; those around were ‘ordinary men dressed in the long white cotton clothes that the Sudanese usually wear’. It was a dress code which may also hint at the presence around Amina – who prided himself on his knowledge of Islam – of

¹⁰⁷ Bell to ‘Mother and Dad’, 12 Mar. 1934, SAD 697/11/55-9; Owen to Mother, 26–7 Sept. 1942, SAD 414/13/45-6.

¹⁰⁸ Gillan, ‘Devolution and native administration in Nuba Mountains province’, 29 Feb. 1928, SAD 723/6/24-41. The *mek* of Otoro, in the eastern part of the mountains, had four police in 1933, at 50 PT: Henderson, *Making of the modern Sudan*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁹ Bell to ‘Mother and Dad’, 2 Oct. 1933, SAD 697/10/55-6; photograph at SAD A74/139; Rachel Hassan, Journal, Tour C, 22 Aug. 1950, SAD G//S 1121.

¹¹⁰ Nadel, *The Nuba*, pp. 312, 403n.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 472.

the growing body of itinerant Muslim traders and holy men who tended to attach themselves to *meks*, across the mountains.¹¹²

Three factors encouraged – indeed, made possible – the success of this transformation from the spectacular violence of the patrol to the ordinary routine of the court. One was the widespread experience of military service among a generation of men; another was the availability of new paths to accumulation, which changed former patterns of generational conflict and co-operation; the third was the effective collapse of the public events through which ritual authority had been made.

In Nyima, this last factor was of especial importance. The 1917–18 patrol, and the removal of young men, had irreversibly changed the public spectacle of age-grade events. The initiation which should have taken place in 1918 never happened; there were over the next two decades a series of delayed and disjointed rituals, but the very confusion in descriptions of these in the 1930s suggests how far practice, and memory, had become uncertain. Spirit-priests and rain-makers sought to revive these rituals under their control; young men, many of whom were now circumcized individually before setting off to find work outside Nyima, were pressured to take part in such rituals on their return. But the ceremonies became more and more erratic and infrequent – and were increasingly disapproved of by *meks*.¹¹³ Other ritual events in which spirit-priests were involved – cyclical agricultural rites, and special ceremonies for health – continued, but in these the spirit-priests faced more directly the competition of lineage spirits, and of offerings by individual household heads.¹¹⁴

The court usurped the role of the age-grade rituals as public events in which authority was made. It was the seizure of young men for military service which had disrupted the former cycle of public age rituals; and it was this seizure too which was to produce a generation of men who were willing and able to seize on the routine of the court as a new public event of authority. From the beginning, forcible recruitment – a policy which had evident links with previous practices of military slavery, under Turco-Egyptian rule – had been seen by the British as a desirable spin-off of patrols against the Nuba Mountains. Policy was to replace Egyptian soldiers with Sudanese, but few were willing to volunteer, and forcible recruitment could fill the gap.¹¹⁵ The 500 young men taken by Patrol No. 32 were an unusually large haul; but there was otherwise nothing exceptional about this,

¹¹² Beasley, Journal, Apr. 1945, SAD 204/10/2-5; Beasley to 'Sheila', 24 June 1945, SAD 657/6/20-36; Trimmingham, 'The Nuba and Islamic penetration', n.d. 1942, CMS Nuba Mountains, sub-files 3-6; for Amina and Islam, see Nadel, *The Nuba*, p. 485.

¹¹³ Stevenson, 'The Nyamang of the southern Kordofan hills', SAD 795/8/161-82, pp. 12-17; cf. Nadel, *The Nuba*, pp. 406-12; Stevenson, *The Nuba*, pp. 100-1, 103. A rather similar disruption of age rituals elsewhere in the Nuba Mountains – though as a result of Mahdist raids, not Condominium patrols – is described in J. Faris, 'South-eastern Nuba age organization', in I. Cunison and W. James, eds., *Essays in Sudan ethnography* (London, 1972), pp. 1-30, at pp. 2-6, 24.

¹¹⁴ Stevenson, *The Nuba*, pp. 93, 97.

¹¹⁵ ? to Wingate, 9 July 1903, SAD 273/7/12-13; Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, pp. 113-14; D. Johnson, 'The structure of a legacy: military slavery in northeast Africa', *Ethnohistory*, 36 (1989), pp. 72-88; *GGR*, 1907, pp. 142, 149; Wingate to Asser, 2 Aug. 1908, SAD 283/3/12-22.

and forced enlistment continued into the early 1920s, explicitly intended as part of the policy of 'pacification'. The total population of Nyima at the time was probably less than 30,000; for 500 to be taken off in a single year suggests a very substantial impact, and many of these ex-soldiers were to return to the hills after a few years.¹¹⁶ In 1935 missionaries of the Church Missionary Society, arriving in Nyima for the first time, were very conscious of the impact of these returning soldiers: 'they were our standby and friends and links with the people, they knew the kind of Arabic we knew ... and understood something of English ways'. When the governor came to visit the mission's new church, the behaviour of the followers of one *sheikh* revealed their training: 'The men were standing in two files outside the Church with Konia [the *sheikh*] in front. As the Governor approached he received a sharp military and unrehearsed salute.'¹¹⁷

The creation of such a group had been foreseen – indeed desired – by some of the enthusiasts of forced recruitment, for whom this was one more way of displaying the 'power of the Government': 'young men come back ... smart well-dressed soldiers who know and have seen the power of the Government at Khartoum etc. and can tell their pals to behave'.¹¹⁸ The peak of the 'Nuba renaissance' had seen an attempt to *stop* any enlistment in the army (or at least to restrict this to a special Nuba unit), lest service undermine traditional authority; but even at that time Amina, an Arabic-speaking ex-soldier fond of wearing white robes and white plimsolls, could become principal *mek* of Nyima.¹¹⁹ By the early 1940s some British administrators insisted that military service, not tradition, produced the kind of *meks* that were needed: '[A] bit of army or police work seems to put some discipline and glimmering of sense into Nuba and sends them back to their jebels as better citizens and possible leaders.'¹²⁰

Ex-soldiers thus became increasingly common as *meks* and *sheikhs* across the Nuba Mountains in the 1930s, selected in a process which had developed into a kind of semi-rigged and restricted ballot, conducted in public meetings overseen by the district commissioner at which a crowd of men would express their preferences from a limited list drawn up the DC in consultation with favoured men.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Gillan, 'Report on the Tira el Akhdar patrol', 8 Nov. 1922, SAD 723/4/13-18; R. Davies, *The camel's back: service in the rural Sudan* (London, 1957), p. 30. At the end of the 1930s the population was estimated at 37,000 by Nadel, *The Nuba*, p. 362; Newbold had put it, more modestly, at 26,000: 'Native administration in Kordofan', 11 Nov. 1938, SAD 795/8/117-20. The 1955-6 census showed a population of 38,819: Stevenson, *The Nuba people*, p. 84. *GGR*, 1925, p. 68.

¹¹⁷ Note by Elfrida Whidborne, n.d., written on SAD 813/8/27; Nuba Mountains Fellowship Pamphlet No. 8, June 1937, SAD 813/8/40.

¹¹⁸ Butler to Father, 17 Dec. 1910, SAD 304/8/1-56. See also Balfour to Wingate, 20 Aug. 1915, SAD 196/2/199-200.

¹¹⁹ Gillan, *Some aspects of Nuba administration*, p. 31; Nadel, *The Nuba*, p. 485; Nuba Mission Pamphlet No. 3, June 1935, SAD 813/8/21-6.

¹²⁰ Owen to Father, 14 Jan. 1942, SAD 414/13/23-4. Owen to Father, 26 Nov. 1943, SAD 414/14/58-9.

¹²¹ 'Eastern Jebels, monthly diary', Oct. 1934, SAD 695/8/6-8. For ex-soldier *meks* elsewhere, see Owen to Father, 20-1 Sept. 1940, SAD 414/11/88-91; Owen, 'A visit to the Nuba Mountains', SAD 769/11/1-19; Owen to Father, 19 Aug. 1941, SAD 414/12/43-5; Phillips, 'Notes on Kadugli sub-district, Dec. 1947', SAD 627/4/1-45.

Stevenson said simply of Nyima that ‘Many of the meks (chiefs) have seen service in the army’,¹²² available records do not show how many, but it is evident that, however many *meks* had been in the army, the real significance of military service lay in creating a wider body of men familiar with the ‘power of the Government’, who had a new perception of the possible role of this power as a means of furthering their own ambitions. It was the influence of these men which the missionaries repeatedly noted in Nyima in the 1930s: ‘We feel like royalty when we enter a village. The Sheikh is immediately informed and cigarettes, water, eggs and milk arrive and the floor is swept ... Gau [ex-soldier and *sheikh*] and the Nuba police look after us like their own children.’¹²³ The perception of shared interests among these men allowed the courts to work, as a DC explained of Amina’s court (in a language far removed from that of tradition): ‘The strength of Amina lies in his capacity to act as a chairman of a meeting.’¹²⁴

The possibility of migrant labour had presented a new challenge for heads of households: how to control the impact of a new access to wealth. Young men had now a route to accumulation for themselves that lay beyond both the *kujurs* and their own fathers: instead of raiding, or herding cattle and cultivating, they could go to work for wages far from the mountains, as voluntarily enlisted police or soldiers, as cotton pickers, or in the growing urban economy. By 1950, migrancy rates among Nyimang young men were running from 15 to 35 per cent.¹²⁵ At the same time, official encouragement of cotton cultivation, and the growth of a cash market for simsim, grain, and a variety of lesser items, from chickens to onions, provided new opportunities for those who could control land and the labour of younger men and women.¹²⁶ Cotton production grew extraordinarily in the 1930s; production of grain for the market also grew, and more consistently.¹²⁷ Labour resources, as Nadel observed, were the key determinant which decided whether a household could plant cotton.¹²⁸ The early 1930s saw vigorous debate across the Nuba Mountains over wage labour and household labour: ‘our sons ... now think not of farm work but of money’, lamented older men (though they too were thinking of money).¹²⁹ British observers regarded this debate as an attempt to maintain tradition in the face of commerce; but the repeated complaints of married men that their sons refused to cultivate for them and preferred to work

¹²² Stevenson, ‘The Nyamang of the southern Kordofan hills’, SAD 795/8/161-82, 2.

¹²³ Letter from Elfrida Whidborne, Feb. 1935, SAD 813/8/17.

¹²⁴ Broadbent, ‘Salara local administration’, 31 Jan. 1939, SAD 795/8/122-4.

¹²⁵ Nadel, *The Nuba*, pp. 40, 77; Stevenson, *The Nuba people*, p. 85.

¹²⁶ *GGR*, 1933, p. 123. For official encouragement of cotton, see Bell, diary, 1 Dec. 1934, SAD 698/7/122; Nuba Mission Pamphlet No. 3, June 1935, SAD 813/8/21-6.

¹²⁷ *GGR*, 1913, p. 211; *GGR*, 1927, pp. 45, 113; *GGR*, 1942-4, pp. 164, 167. Daly, *Imperial Sudan*, p. 96, records the remarkable increase in cotton growing in the area during the 1930s: much of this crop was produced by Arabs employing Nuba casual labour, but an increasing proportion – 7 per cent in 1936, but 19 per cent in 1938 – was by people officially identified as ‘Nuba’ (*GGR*, 1936, p. 113; *GGR*, 1938, p. 113).

¹²⁸ Nadel, *The Nuba*, p. 56.

¹²⁹ Noted in Governor-General Huddleston’s forward to Nadel, *The Nuba*, p. xiv.

for wages might better be seen as part of an attempt to establish wholly new principles for the control of wholly new opportunities for accumulation.¹³⁰ By the 1930s, the principal dynamic of authority in Nyima was no longer competition between older men for followings of young raiders; it was competition between old and young over the control of household resources, and the access these offered to the accumulative opportunities of the money economy.

As the courts became more important as the public spaces in which authority was manifested, administrators' tours lost their previous spectacular, and violent, air; instead, as a DC elsewhere in the mountains noted, '[m]ost of our time has been spent sitting in Resthouses interviewing "kings" and sheikhs, hearing complaints and inspecting native courts'. In the course of these new, lower-key, tours officials lent their support to *meks* and *sheikhs* by arresting 'young men' who defied the judgement of the courts – and the occasional *sheikh* who tried to revert to a former pattern by organizing a cattle raid.¹³¹ In the absence of any attempt to mobilize young men as a group for violence, such arrests required only minimal force, for in each case there would only be one or two miscreants: and so the ADC, touring the courts, routinely found himself with a retinue of chained prisoners, gathered here and there from different hills.¹³²

In place of the militarized 'tour' there was an annual 'Gathering' in each sub-district, to which all *meks* and *sheikhs* would be summoned. The same ADC regarded these by the 1930s as an opportunity to show off his mastery of a picturesque and once-turbulent populace: 'we want [the governor-general] to realise how fierce our "parishioners" are, and we shall do our best to make them well drunk beforehand!' Banking, one presumes, on the thrilling effects of all that nakedness, he also treated the event as the opportunity for an attempt (unsuccessful, it turned out) to seduce the governor-general's daughter. When an accidentally discharged rifle killed a participant at the gathering, the case was referred to a court for settlement.¹³³ All this was very far from the tense theatres of violence in which *meks* and officials had met only two decades earlier.

VII

The transition was gradual, and it was not total: the British did not succeed in creating a 'decentralized despotism' in Nyima. Clearly, not all had equal access to the new instruments of authority, and conflicts continued between elder men, as well as between young and old. The right to control resources and to accumulate was still contested; and ideas of well-being in particular still offered multiple

¹³⁰ Hawkesworth, 'The Nuba proper', p. 199; Nuba Mission Pamphlet No. 5, Apr. 1936, SAD 813/8/29-34.

¹³¹ Bell to 'Mother and Dad', 2 Dec. 1933, 14 Jan., 12 Mar. 1934 and 22 Aug. 1934, SAD 697/11/15-16, SAD 697/11/32-34 and 55-59; SAD 697/12/27-28.

¹³² Bell to 'Mother and Dad', 1 Nov. 1933 and 27 Nov. 1934, SAD 697/12/62-65 and SAD 697/12/75-6.

¹³³ Bell to 'Mother and Dad', 2 Dec. 1934, 17 Jan., 8 Feb. and 20 Feb. 1936, SAD 697/15/8-9, SAD 697/15/20 and /27-8.

potential foci for authority. Many *meks* and *sheikhs* in the 1930s and 1940s combined position within the court system with other kinds of authority, such as intermediacy with spirits: in Nyima in the late 1930s four out of five *meks* and five out of thirteen *sheikhs* had relationships with spirits, possessory or hereditary; Sheikh Konia, who sought alliance with the mission and whose subjects saluted the governor, had also a possessory spirit.¹³⁴ Clothes could mark alternative roles. A coloured robe was one widely recognized mark of a relationship with a possessory spirit; in the 1920s it had been common practice to give (rather ill-fitting) gowns to those *meks* insufficiently distinguished to receive a ‘robe of honour’, and by the 1930s white gowns became standard attire for *meks* and *sheikhs*, when meeting British officials as well as when sitting in court.¹³⁵ So it was that in 1941 a district commissioner encountered a sort of ideological quick-change artist:

I found [the *mek*] in a sort of night gown, and he bolted like a rabbit into its burrow and emerged after a little with three layers of rather heavy clothes, the outer robe of which would have put Joseph to shame ... on my suggestion however that it might be more salubrious to be lighter clad he did another bolt into his hut and reappeared starko.¹³⁶

Amina, though all descriptions of him refer to his white robes, could be just as eclectic in other ways. Nadel noted that he had in the late 1930s acquired a new possessory spirit, modestly named ‘The Whole of the World’, whose arrival had been associated with dreams of cars, telegraph poles, district commissioners, and other ‘emblems of Western civilisation’; Amina graciously concurred with Nadel’s suggestion that perhaps this was a British spirit.¹³⁷ Events in Nyima revealed just how much Amina – like other *meks* – was involved in lengthy and complex trials of strength with possessors of various forms of ritualized power over well-being.¹³⁸

In July 1952, after a prolonged dry spell, Mek Amina summoned a meeting at his court-house, the focal point of his authority. A mission worker described the meeting from her particular standpoint

Mek Amina stood up and harangued the people saying that it was because the people would not leave their old ways of believing in kujurs and refused to walk in the new ways of Christianity or Islam that the rain would not come. Many old men stood up in turn and told how so and so had the rain and then how someone else went and fetched it from him and there was a lot of talk and the old kujur Tibri had to explain why he had failed utterly to bring the rain. Then Mek Amina sent them all outside to decide if they wanted to walk in their old ways or the new ways and there was a lot more talk. When they finally came back they said they wanted to walk in their old ways!! So Mek Amina gave his speech all over again and there was bedlam. Everyone talking and shouting at once.¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Nadel, *The Nuba*, pp. 470–1; Nuba Mountains Prayer Fellowship Pamphlet No. 9, Feb. 1938, SAD 813/8/41-6.

¹³⁵ Nadel, ‘A shaman cult’; for gowns, see the photograph SAD 837/7/6.

¹³⁶ Owen to Father, 28 Oct. 1941, SAD 414/12/56-7.

¹³⁷ Nadel, *The Nuba*, p. 443.

¹³⁸ Ibrahim, *The dilemma of British rule*, p. 22; for prophets, unrecognized as *meks*, donning rags of army uniform to meet British officials, see Hawkesworth, ‘The Nuba proper’, p. 172.

¹³⁹ Rachel Hassan, Journal, Tour D, 23 July 1952, SAD G//S.

Amina's dramatic challenge can only be understood in terms of his prolonged struggle with those who – like him – possessed ritual power, but had unlike him been excluded from the court. Kujur Tibri, the son of one Abishet who had contended for power in the early twentieth century, was one of these; even more important were the family of Agabna, who had continued to claim powers of rain-making, and aspired still to be the 'tribal patriarchs'.¹⁴⁰ Agabna's unexpected reappearance in 1937 – as a possessory spirit, who seized one of his brothers – apparently prompted Amina's possession by the 'Whole of the World' spirit, and Amina had drawn on Islam, mission, and spirits as sources of authority, as well as on his intermediacy with the state: he was always willing to turn up for public events at the mission when the DC or governor visited, and hoped to learn English from the missionaries.¹⁴¹ He also seems to have taken a certain delight in putting missionaries on the spot with difficult scriptural questions.¹⁴² In the wake of what was in effect a public expression of commitment to a continued eclecticism in authority, Amina reaffirmed the multiple nature of his own claims: 'You will be interested to hear that Amina after telling his people they must leave their old ways; he himself has been kujuring ... Yesterday hundreds of women were working in his fields so he will bring rain.'¹⁴³ Amina's long balancing act, however, ended in failure – though not so bloodily as Agabna's had done. In 1954, as the Condominium drew to an end, he was finally removed from office, through a combination of popular discontent and official displeasure. He was replaced by the *mek* of Niti, another Nyima hill – who was also a *kujur*.¹⁴⁴

VIII

Colonial administrators produced two successive narratives of their engagement with the Nuba Mountains. The first was of the importance of violence in showing the authority of government and teaching 'truculent mountaineers' the futility of resistance: 'the various expeditions which have taken place there have at last convinced the inhabitants that it is useless to fight against the Government authority'.¹⁴⁵ The second was of the strength of tradition and cultural renaissance: 'The policy of trying to make the Nuba more self-governing helped to foster his ancient traditions.'¹⁴⁶ But the effective administration which developed behind

¹⁴⁰ Stevenson, 'The Nyamang of the southern Kordofan hills', p. 22, SAD 795/8/161-82. Also see Rachel Hassan Journal, Tour B, 19 Nov. 1947 and 21 Jan. 1948, SAD G//S 1121; Hawkesworth, 'The Nuba proper', p. 165.

¹⁴¹ Whidborne to Mother, 11 Mar. (1935 or 1936), SAD 796/3/13-15; 'Nuba Mountains station: report on the general work of the station', 10 Jan. 1936, SAD 803/9/1-4; Nuba Mission Pamphlet No. 9, Feb. 1938, SAD 813/8/41-6. For Agabna's reappearance, see Nadel, *The Nuba*, p. 444.

¹⁴² Rachel Hassan, Journal, Tour B, 19 Feb. 1947, SAD G//S 1121.

¹⁴³ Rachel Hassan, Journal, Tour D, 27 July 1952, SAD G//S 1121.

¹⁴⁴ Stevenson, *The Nuba people*, p. 88; Nadel, *The Nuba*, p. 412.

¹⁴⁵ Wingate to General Hamilton, 20 Mar. 1912, SAD 180/3/79-80; Wingate to Kitchener, 20 Mar. 1912, SAD 180/3/69-72.

¹⁴⁶ Vicars-Miles, 'Notes on Nuba administration', p. 28, SAD 631/10/1-64.

these narratives reflected neither the overwhelming ‘power of the Government’ nor the triumph of refurbished tradition. An awareness of the paucity of coercive resources which underlay the ‘power of the Government’, and an intense enthusiasm for using such resources as overtly as possible when they were available drove a semi-theatrical colonial violence up to 1920, and inspired occasional recourse to large-scale violence thereafter. But from 1920, a new direction to policy increasingly located authority in a different kind of drama: the performance of the court. In its structures, in its public displays and badges of status the administration which developed relied upon an accommodation between elder men who sought to accumulate and a state which was willing to underwrite that accumulation – if necessary with violence. Two linked conclusions might be drawn from the analysis of Nyima politics suggested here. The first is that Condominium Sudan saw many of the same policies, and processes, as other parts of Africa under British rule: here as elsewhere the rhetoric of tradition concealed a reality of violence and innovation. The second is that this innovation was not all-embracing, nor did it simply obliterate former ideas of power and authority. The colonial institutions of local administration – in Nyima, and elsewhere – owed much of their form to centralized state violence, rather than essentialism, and their culture reflected the forms and models of routine and discipline which characterized the wider state. This culture of authority was to be carried over into the structure of the post-colonial Sudan; but so too was the spiritual eclecticism of the populace of Nyima. The authority of the state, and of the local leaders on whom it relied, rested on an accommodation which was always uncertain, and prone to collapse.