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**Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf**

**Ina Beasley:  
Her Perspectives on Women's Prospects  
in British Sudan**

# Sir William Luce Memorial Fund



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He was Governor of Aden from 1956 to 1960. From 1961 until 1966 and again from 1970 to 1972 he was intimately connected with the Gulf area, first as Political Resident, based in Bahrain and then recalled from retirement - as the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary's Personal Representative for Gulf Affairs.

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**INA BEASLEY:  
HER PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S PROSPECTS  
IN BRITISH SUDAN**

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*by*

**Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf**

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**Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf** is a Sudanese anthropologist and a Senior Research Associate at the Pembroke Centre for Teaching and Research on Women, Brown University. She holds academic degrees from the University of Connecticut and Cairo University School of Economics and Political Sciences. She held postdoctoral fellowships from The Royal Anthropological Institute and Durham University Anthropology Department in England, Brown University, The Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the Kennedy School of Government, and the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School. Abusharaf's primary fields of interest are security, human rights protection and the cultural strategies adopted by displaced women to cope with the trauma of violence and dislocation. She is currently writing a book on the relationship between Arabization, Islamization, and the gendered nature of the forced migration and the displacement experience of Southern Sudanese women in Khartoum, Sudan. Abusharaf's research has received support from the Royal Anthropological Institute, The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, Andrew-Mellon MIT Center for International Studies, The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Program, and RAINBO (Research, Action, Information on the Bodily Integrity of Women) among others. Dr. Abusharaf is the author of *Wanderings* (Cornell University Press, 2002) and the editor of *Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) as well as the editor of the Ahfad Journal international issues on gender.

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**INA BEASLEY**

**INA BEASLEY:  
Her Perspectives on Women's Prospects in British Sudan**

*Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf*

**INTRODUCING DR. INA M. BEASLEY**

The activities and perspectives of Dr. Ina M. Beasley,<sup>1</sup> who worked in the British Sudan from 1939 to 1949, reveal a powerful and inspiring narrative of gendered histories of social, economic, and civil rights and entitlements in that country. Hers is a compelling story of a true humanist.<sup>2</sup> Ina Beasley understood the specificities of Sudanese society, not only its differences from Europe but also its myriad internal variations, and by so doing she developed innovative approaches to disentangling the complex dilemmas that beleaguered women's daily lives. From Beasley's perspective, answers to social problems can only be located when thinking more broadly about culture and politics, a task which required the advancement of women's rights in a non-parochial way that did not grasp at short-sighted solutions. She summed up this persuasive idea when she wrote: 'The most important conviction, which we both held unshakably [referring to her colleague, Mrs. Clark], was that life for Sudanese women could have small measure of fulfilment without an education to match the level of their menfolk. Whatever the pattern might have been in the past, the conditions of modern life were making this necessary. We therefore believed in schools'.<sup>3</sup> Beasley, who was born in England in 1898 and died there in 1994, was uniquely positioned for the posts she occupied as Superintendent of Girls' Education in Omdurman (1939–1942) and then Controller of Girls' Education in Khartoum, where she served until her retirement from the Sudan Service in 1949.

A vital aspect of her humanism as an educator was her culturally informed encouragement of women to question authoritarianism, male dominance, and the multiple injustices inflicted upon them in the name of tradition. However, the road to the expression of these rights was paved with complexity and even impenetrability.

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<sup>1</sup> Her career as an educator included lectureships at the University of Rangoon in Burma and posts at the University of Nottingham and Maria Grey College in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the universal definition of what humane is, I describe Beasley as a humanist because of her belief in human beings' capacities and agency and her interest in grasping local concepts of personhood and cultural identities. It is relevant to note the important work *Bonds of Silk: The human factor in the British administration of the Sudan* (1989), in which Francis Deng and Martin Daly have provided a useful tool for grasping the colonial experience, delineating specific ideas about the nature of British rule and challenging widely held perceptions of both the rulers and the ruled. This work is neither a defence of colonial regimes nor a legitimisation of their exploitative nature as a system of domination. Rather, it carefully maps out the perceptions that formed in the powerful and intense human interactions among British colonial officials and Sudanese people. The material on which this ethnography was built provides yet another way of understanding the complexity of colonialism, a term that was resisted by many who joined the political service in the Sudan. Here, limitations of time and space prevent a length consideration of whether the Sudan was indeed a colony or a mere dependency. It is worthy of note, however, that a unique arrangement unfolded with the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium Agreement for joint governance of the Sudan. A different set of relationships and contexts for interaction developed, making the experience of Sudan 'very different from any developed in the usual colonial "empire"' (a statement by a former British political service officer, quoted in Deng and Daly, (1989), p. 86).

<sup>3</sup> Ina M. Beasley, *Before the Wind Changed* (Oxford: Oxford Academic Press, 1992), p. 6.

She recognised: ‘Encouraging education, however, means playing with the cards dealt to you. One of these was to demonstrate that girls’ schools could carry on behind high walls and custom not much infringed. Respectability was a firm ideal, even if it rang hollow at times, and could be used as an aid rather than a hindrance. Gradually the girls would find their own way out when they were ready’.<sup>4</sup> Upon her arrival, Beasley was undoubtedly daunted by the idea of walls, whose metaphoric significance had attracted her attention in her commentary on women’s existential realities. She recalled her initial impressions: ‘The harsh ugliness of the landscape distressed me and it needed a great deal of patience to accept an attitude which could so callously shut the women behind high walls’.<sup>5</sup> For Beasley, supporting women and children was not about the elimination of victimisation and suffering per se. To her, the essential question was this: How does one go about creating conditions of possibility for a holistic social movement in which physical and mental wellbeing becomes the highest priority? Beasley made a serious effort to find answers in the situation before her, rather than imposing preconceived ideas: ‘We cannot know where people find the most satisfactory ways of life. It is always difficult to explain to people how much better off they are living among manifest discomfort than under conditions which they have not experienced. The obvious answer to such preaching is that it may be true but that those who have not tried would like to find out for themselves’.<sup>6</sup> Although her work was bound by the limits of her own time and place, her perspectives were and continue to be of consequence to Sudanese women’s past, present, and future forms of social mobilisation.

After settling down in Omdurman and passing her Arabic exam in 1941, Beasley embarked on the ambitious and thorny undertaking of understanding the communities with which she came into contact. Her writings as well as her work in education indicate that she grasped in impressive detail the most intimate worries and public concerns of the Sudanese women whom she sought to serve. She succeeded in marshalling support for creating a public culture in which discussions of traditions that affected women were carried out openly and candidly, breaking deeply ingrained taboos about women’s reproductive rights and social rights vis-à-vis the Sudanese body politic. In this respect, Beasley was remarkably progressive in her thinking about women and their bodies, as well as in her attitudes toward cultural difference. She did not believe in importing cultural models or imposing borrowed power. The vision she articulated so powerfully in her writings was inspired by the versatility and agency of Sudanese women, rather than the passivity and helplessness that was commonly attributed to them by foreign observers. She was of the opinion that ‘any new schemes which were launched at the time could probably be worked out unobtrusively and judged on their own merits.’ She was cognisant of the value of experiential learning: ‘The cost of such experiment would certainly be fairly heavy but there is small doubt that regarded in terms of human values, the gain would be incalculable’.<sup>7</sup> A brilliant leader and organiser, Beasley constantly conveyed her trust in women and their determination to alter social differentials, which she observed and articulated wherever she found herself, in rural villages as well as cities. In these diverse localities, her promotion of education was ultimately a defence of women’s social rights for access to opportunity and citizenship. From her point of view, educational gains could only augment their capacity to act on their own behalf and speak truth to power.

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<sup>4</sup> Ina M. Beasley, *Before the Wind Changed* (Oxford: Oxford Academic Press, 1992), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ina Beasley, ‘What is Rural Education?’ (7 October, 1946) Sudan Archive Durham (SAD) 657/1/86-90.

<sup>7</sup> Ina Beasley, Official Papers, ‘Note on Girls’ Education: Further Developments’, SAD 657/1/63-66.

Ina M. Beasley's experience in the Sudan raises significant challenges to some postcolonial feminist premises. There is no doubt that she stressed equality and rights for women and children, but her arguments for the advancement of these entitlements were not particularly made in ways that privileged European values and norms.

The most encouraging feature is in recognising the possibilities which are in the girls themselves, and feeling that it is they who may eventually overcome the many obstacles to development which have been placed in their way. The disheartening results in some districts are balanced by the embarrassing success in others. Perhaps if the work goes on quietly in the same unostentatious spirit at the end of the next twenty years there may be a proportionately greater tale to tell.<sup>8</sup>

Postcolonial feminists' perspectives have highlighted the varying contexts of women's experiences in colonial situations. Yet the prevailing viewpoints in this field emphasise the gendered histories of colonial subjugation, the refusal to address gender, racial, class inequalities, and the representation of women as victims with no agency of their own. I. M. Beasley herself would find little argument with these important critiques of colonialism, but she was one of the first to recognise agency when she saw it.

Today is an occasion for multiple commemorations. This year, as Sudanese women celebrate the centennial anniversary of girls' education in the country, we acknowledge our debt to Ina Beasley, recognising a life devoted to improving our lives in a society rife with hardship and discriminatory practices.<sup>9</sup> An exceptional figure who consistently resisted compartmentalisation, she succeeded in triangulating education, reproductive health, and women's empowerment with impressive skill and creativity.

This lecture also celebrates the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sudan Archive at the Palace Green Library, Durham University. This special collection has proved to be of unsurpassed quality in both its rich and wide-ranging content and its well-organised form. This archive has not only advanced our knowledge of Sudanese political history but also served as an indispensable resource for cross-cultural understanding, given its detailed chronicles of the making of contemporary Sudan.

In celebration, this essay presents a woman whose ideas not only constitute a challenge to conventional approaches to the relationship between colonialism and feminism but also enable us to understand the intricacies and diversities of colonial experiences and the multiple roles played by individuals who wielded some level of authority in a colonised society. Since this essay is a tribute to Ina Beasley, it reproduces substantial excerpts from her papers on the subjects that engaged her most deeply during her Sudan service. Her writings and correspondence with others shed new light on the social history of human rights during the Condominium, which matters both to scholars and to concerned citizens. The essay begins with a brief discussion of Sudanese politics at the time of her arrival and then examines her work as educator who managed to craft several influential programs to empower women and girls. The rest of the paper focuses on her reproductive health advocacy as exemplified in the campaign against the ritualised genital surgeries known as female circumcision. Beasley's activities and approaches demonstrate exceptional

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<sup>8</sup> Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 658/4/10.

<sup>9</sup> As a youngster, I was one of hundreds of thousands of the beneficiaries of Beasley's work, attending elementary and intermediate schools in the Girls' Training College (Tamrin Elementary School and Shati Intermediate School, respectively) that Beasley had helped to advance throughout her time in the Sudan Service.

knowledge of Sudanese political, social and cultural contexts. She advocated and adopted extraordinarily sensitive, yet effective strategies for change as she worked collaboratively with Sudanese and British men and women who agitated to end this contested ritual. Her ardent support for addressing this practice as a public health and human rights issue was a great leap forward in the promotion of children's rights, a subject that was consistently glossed over and dismissed as a non-issue. Her recommendation of involving a Sudanese man in an important meeting based on his advocacy of child rights is a case in point. She wrote on 24 January, 1946, to the Director of Education: 'We might ask for advice from Ibrahim Eff. Ahmed. I mention his name because at a meeting à propos of something else, I once heard him say, "We must think of children first",—a point sometimes forgotten in the discussion of religious, social, and psychological trends'.<sup>10</sup> In addition to tracing histories of agitation for social rights, the essay contributes to our understanding of the relationships and interactions between British and Sudanese women, as the ties that bound them in circles of activism were sculpted to a great extent by shared philosophies of empowerment and transformation.

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<sup>10</sup> Letter from Ina Beasley to the Director of Education on 24 January, 1946, reporting on the propaganda on female circumcision, SAD 657/4/83.

## CONTEXTS

Ina Beasley arrived in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in 1939 when she was forty-one and the single parent of a young daughter who remained in Britain. In her diary,<sup>11</sup> she reflected on the reasons why she had joined Sudan Service:

In the world of the 1930s, now merely a quaint background in fashions and the sphere of entertainment, service overseas was an accepted career in the professions and regarded as a commitment for one's working life. There was nothing remarkable, therefore, in my joining the Sudan Government with the prospect of ten years' service at least and an early retirement. I should perhaps add here as sufficient explanation of my reason for doing so, that I had weathered a crisis in my personal affairs and needed a secure appointment. I had been overseas before and thought I should like the opportunities offered. Also, another feature of the thirties often forgotten, employment was not easy to find even with adequate qualifications in the summer of 1939. The Sudan was not so far from England as Burma which I had just left, and although the salary was not high, annual leave was allowed on account of the difficult climate. This, I planned would give me the chance to spend summer holidays with my daughter at boarding school in England. That was why I was on the Nile steamer in October 1939 but the rest of my private history can be omitted as of no relevance to the far more exciting tale of girls' education in the Sudan.

Beasley arrived in an uncommon setting that was fraught with paradoxes. Fundamental questions regarding the political identity of the country — even whether it was a colony or a dependency—were being raised by Sudanese nationalists. According to Lia Paradis, the distinctiveness of the Sudan's experience lies in the fact that 'it was nominally independent and was dealt with by Britain's Foreign Office rather than Colonial Office'.<sup>12</sup> The number of the British officials who constituted the Sudan's Political Service<sup>13</sup> was noticeably small, which led to a strong reliance on Native Administration for the management of the vast territory.<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding, British officials were confident of the object of government. As K. D. D. Henderson put it in *Set under Authority*, the welfare and contentment of ordinary citizens figured prominently in British discourses on governance, as did preparing Sudanese for self-rule. In Henderson's memoir of his work as a District Officer, he reflected on the priorities of the Condominium government. Education was regarded as 'indispensable for the proper provision of all services and for the entire machinery of a modern state'.<sup>15</sup> Other priorities included public health and

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<sup>11</sup> See Ina M. Beasley, *Before the Wind Changed* (Oxford: Oxford Academic Press, 1992), pp. 1-2. These diaries were edited by Janet Starkey who met Beasley when she was in her nineties. Starkey recalled that Beasley's mind was sharp; she humbly reflected on her achievement in the Sudan as her duty to do the best that she could. Personal communication with Janet Starkey, (Durham, 12 May, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> See Lia Paradis, 'Change of Masters: The Sudan British Pensioners' Association and the Negotiation of Post-colonial Identities' *Journal of Colonialism & Colonial History*, 7:21 (2006) 1-36 (p. 3). Accessed on the web at <http://muse.jhu.journals>.

<sup>13</sup> For details see H. A. MacMichael, *Sudan Political Service 1899-1956* (Oxford: Oxonian Press); J. S. R. Duncan, *The Sudan: A Record of Achievement* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons Ltd, 1952); and Sir Harold MacMichael, *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (London: Earnest Benn Limited, 1954).

<sup>14</sup> See M. Daly and F. Deng, *Bonds of Silk* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1989) on the subject of native administration.

<sup>15</sup> K. D. D. Henderson, *Set Under Authority: A Portrait of the Life of the British District Officer in the Sudan under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium 1898-1955* (Somerset, U.K.: Castle Cary Press, 1987), p. 206. This portrait records the history of military administration, civil service hierarchy, public health efforts, and his life as an administrator in the Nuba Mountains.

medical care, veterinary care (crucial to cattle-owning communities); and adjudicating on public security, settling civil disputes, and consolidating the rule of law.<sup>16</sup> Most important in this context, though, is the overlap between education, and health in women's knowledge about their bodies.

Very little is known about British women in the Sudan, a gap that Martin Daly and Jane Hogan made abundantly clear in their *Images of Empire: Photographic Sources for the British in the Sudan*.<sup>17</sup> With the exception of Rosemary Kenrick's *Sudan Tales: Recollections of Some Sudan Political Service Wives 1926–56*,<sup>18</sup> a memoir that describes British wives' frustrations with the heat, their isolation, their struggle to learn a new language, their triumphs and friendships, few sources document their experiences. It is imperative to realise at the outset that the contributions of British women who accompanied their husbands to the region are not to be belittled. Ina Beasley herself, though a professional who worked independently, appreciated the constructive roles they played in Sudanese communities. For example, in her diaries about her visit to El Fasher, Darfur, Beasley commended the wife of the District Commissioner: 'She was an outstanding example of the unofficial work generously given by the wives of British officials and of the greatest value. Schools always prospered, when there was a British woman to take an interest in what was going on. In these distant stations the teachers found unfailing support by having someone to whom they could pour out grievances and worries, which were often too small and immediate for officialdom'.<sup>19</sup>

When Beasley arrived, both fields of education and health were underdeveloped in spite of ongoing attempts to expand and improve these services.<sup>20</sup> Girls' education was typically of the most basic kind, commonly provided by a *khalwa*, or religious school, in which Quranic studies were taught.<sup>21</sup> Secular education was entirely absent, but the situation had started to change with the ground-breaking efforts of Sheikh Babiker Bedri to promote girls' education and train teachers. Beasley's contributions in the fields of education and health made a world of difference for Sudanese women and children, whose hearts and minds she won by recognising the prejudices that enveloped their lives and the constraints that circumscribed their activities. Beasley's focused on how to use her position to enable women to acquire the tools they needed to improve their personal lives, expand the scope of their work, and enable them to contribute more fully to society's welfare. Prior to, during, and after her service in Sudan, Ina Beasley vigorously promoted the vital human interests she espoused, especially the intersection of health, hygiene, and education. In matters of the body, Beasley believed, knowledge is power. She was never daunted by the prevalent limitations and present difficulties these undertakings encountered. Beasley

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<sup>16</sup> K. D. D. Henderson, *Set Under Authority: A Portrait of the Life of the British District Officer in the Sudan under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium 1898–1955* (Somerset, U.K.: Castle Cary Press, 1987), p. 206.

<sup>17</sup> M. W. Daly and Jane R. Hogan, *Images of Empire: Photographic Sources for the British in the Sudan*, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Rosemary Kenrick, *Sudan Tales: Recollections of Some Sudan Political Service Wives 1926–56*, (Cambridge: Oleander Press, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> See Ina M. Beasley, *Before the Wind Changed* (Oxford: Oxford Academic Press, 1992), p. 129.

<sup>20</sup> See articles by Dr. A. Cruickshank on the development of midwifery services and Dr. Ali Bedri on the creation and development of the modern medical and health services in the Sudan in D Lavin (ed.) *The Condominium Remembered: Proceedings of the Durham Sudan Historical Records Conference 1982, Volume 2: the transformation of the old order in the Sudan* (Durham University, 1982), pp. 129–41 [Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies Occasional Paper, No. 44].

<sup>21</sup> See *Sudan: A Country Study*, ed. by Helen Chapin Metz, (Library of Congress: Federal Research Division, 1996), p. 115.

expressed special interest in documenting every aspect of her life and work in her personal papers and correspondence with her mother, Mrs. A. B. Girdwood, and her sister, Mrs. Sheila Connelly. She kept fascinating diaries of her treks to different parts of the country, describing in vivid detail her encounters with local people and religions, cultural practices, birds and animals, rivers and lost luggage. She was as undaunted by these arduous travels as she was by the obstacles she faced in her work. She was proud to take part in the struggle to end troubles that have surrounded women's lives with infringements of the most fundamental entitlements.

Beasley's decade of work was truly life-altering for many Sudanese girls, for she stressed formal education as a means for redressing discrimination and social injustices. Her official papers on the topic were influential at the time, and as historical documents they record the development of education and offer commanding narratives for understanding how women managed to transform themselves.



**Sheikh Babiker Bedri with pupils and teachers**

## CROSS-CULTURAL CONTACTS

During the first weeks following her arrival, Beasley resided in a house she shared with Mrs. Sylvia Clark of the Girls' Training College near the Mahdi Tomb in a historic area of Omdurman. Detailed descriptions of the school visits which she embarked on shortly after taking up residence in the town are recorded in her memoirs. She evidently subscribed to the notion of reciprocity and stressed the commonality of the human condition: 'Always there was the friendliness of a welcome from the mistresses and the contacts with other people in a village, which made me not just a visitor but part of the life all around'.<sup>22</sup> She held deep convictions of the worth, capabilities, and dignity of the Sudanese with whom she worked, and was not so shocked by the prevalence of seclusion, polygamy, infibulation, and other practices that surrounded the lives of local women. She was exceptionally keen on forming strong relationships with Sudanese at both the official and unofficial levels, with people from all ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliations, residential situations, and occupations. Beasley's extensive travels yielded considerable knowledge of the diversity of female experience, a fact that helped her articulate questions of sameness and difference in an informed way. She commented with an amazing sense of humour on her observations of diversity: 'In the West, the Baggara nomads wandered with their women unveiled and ready of speech but the "Fuzzies" in the East even when travelling generally hid their women in crazy looking erections on their camels'.<sup>23</sup> Other detailed observations on gender politics were recorded during her journeys to places as far-flung as Berber, Bakht-er-Ruda, Kordofan, Kosti, Ruffaa and Hillaleia, Dongola Reach, Shendi, Tangassi, Butn-el-Hujar, Bara, Darfur, Nuba Mountains, Halfa and Halfa Degheim, Dilling, Salara, and Southern Sudan.

An appetite for travel and conversation and an inclination towards reciprocity and mutual respect paved the way for Ina Beasley's profound knowledge of the sociocultural environment within which her projects of education were mapped out. This ability to accommodate difference within the notion of common humanity, is extremely important, for Beasley was able to overcome the initial shock she experienced when first told about social customs that she saw as discriminatory and could not reconcile with Sudanese kindness and generosity. Ina Beasley's responses to her encounters with female circumcision were a world apart from those of other British officials, who saw these practices as insuperable obstacles to creating close social ties with the Sudanese. Their physical and emotional revulsion was clearly articulated in the responses that former members of Sudan's political service revealed in interviews with Francis Deng and Martin Daly, published in *Bonds of Silk: The Human Factor in the British Administration in the Sudan*,<sup>24</sup> when they asked how close to the Sudanese the British felt. Although responses varied markedly, some interviews' respondents have attempted to interpret the lack of close relations by identifying gendered social practices as 'inhibiting'. Two statements by Buchanan<sup>25</sup> illustrate the repugnance that many people displayed: 'What seemed to me to exclude an easy social relationship with the Sudanese was the banishment of their women to the background or behind the walls. I accepted this, of course, although I considered it

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<sup>22</sup> See Ina M. Beasley, *Before the Wind Changed* (Oxford: Oxford Academic Press, 1992), p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> M. Daly and F. Deng, *Bonds of Silk* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1989), p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Laurence Medlicott Buchanan, born in 1906, was educated at St. Edwards and Christ Church, Oxford, majoring in Class IV Classical Honour Moderations and Class II in Jurisprudence. His service included assignments with the Beja in Eastern Sudan and Kordofan in the Civil Secretary's office. He also occupied the post of Director of Local Government. See also A. H.M. Kirk-Greene, *The Sudan Political Service: A Profile in the Sociology of Imperialism*, (Boston: Boston University Studies Center, 1982).

both backward and degrading'. Concretising this broad generalisation, Buchanan pointed to female circumcision as a case in point: 'The barbaric practice of female circumcision was always an insurmountable barrier to full social relations between British and Sudanese families throughout my whole service of twenty years (1929–1954) in the Sudan'.<sup>26</sup>

Ina M. Beasley was painfully aware of culture and its role in moulding personal and public opinion. However, her views and feelings about discrimination and the marginalisation of women were always expressed with abundant frankness and honesty. For example, she recalled a visit to a sub-inspector's home in Um Ruaba: 'I knew it was not the custom for wives to eat in front of their husbands and that in this particular case doubtless the wife would have felt embarrassed, but I could never get used to a situation in which the husband so flagrantly pushed his woman on one side. His wife was very shy in front of him, although, I think she could have talked more, if we had been left longer on our own'. On another occasion during her visit to Merowe, she commented on male privilege especially during the fasting month of Ramadan. She wrote: 'Fasting no doubt is a very salutary exercise but judging by the effect on the girls, we thought that the feeding at night to make up for the day's abstention tended to upset the digestion unduly. Unexpected problems also needed decision. Was an injection to be considered an intake of fluid? How ill did a girl have to be before she would allow herself to claim exemption? Few, if any, of the schoolmistresses ever went to the extreme length of refusing to swallow their saliva, a practice which was adopted by men claiming strict religious principles, but which appeared to this infidel exhibitionist as well as unhygienic'.<sup>27</sup> Keen observations on gender discrimination abound throughout her work.



**Northern Sudanese Teacher Ushering Pupils**

<sup>26</sup> M. Daly and F. Deng, *Bonds of Silk* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1989), p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> Ina M. Beasley, *Before the Wind Changed* (Oxford: Oxford Academic Press 1992), p. 59.

## THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION FOR ITS OWN SAKE

Beasley's official and personal papers on the subject of education provide critical insights on cultural life in Sudanese communities and constitute what can be regarded as one of the pioneering studies in the anthropology of education. Given the extensiveness and density of these sources, it is impossible to offer an exhaustive narrative that covers her wide-ranging and rich experiences. Her papers provide minutely detailed information on the progress of education in the Sudan, the development, expansion, and improvement of girls' education, statistics on pupils' achievements, assessments of staffing needs for Sudanese and British mistresses, proposals relating to education in remote villages and provinces, lists of inspections carried out throughout the country, participant observations of schools, and theoretical papers on girls' education. Conditions in schools and classrooms, morale, teachers' attitudes, literacy levels, and the situations of pupils were all thoroughly explored.

From the outset, Beasley outlined educational programmes for girls that incorporated literacy, domestic, and vocational subjects. Addressing the Extra-Departmental Conference on Girls' Education in the Northern Sudan in 1943,<sup>28</sup> she remarked:

There is no plan either now or in the future merely to educate women for professional life. Always in the forefront of our plans is the crying need for a better background of home conditions as a foundation for any general development. Without sounder bodily health and more hygienic ways of living no advance is possible for either men or women. We believe that this foundation can be laid in the schools. It is hard and heavy labour and probably only after generations will any measurable results be apparent. But these results will be in geometric progression and we continue to hope.<sup>29</sup>

In the initial phases of her work, elementary schooling was treated as the logical starting place; later on, she emphasised the training of Sudanese teachers. Beasley's orientation toward inclusiveness and practicality countered what some worried was a potential drawback of British educational plans: promoting a class of ladylike, domesticated girls who were utterly unable to respond to the challenges of daily life. She explained: 'What we most emphatically do not want at any level of our schooling is to create a stratum of little ladies, very pretty to look at, but afraid of soiling their hands or getting down to a little hard or dirty work'.<sup>30</sup> Advocating the expansion of education to isolated areas stamped by grinding poverty, Beasley challenged class differentiation as a factor militating against equal opportunity. When addressing the comparative increase of girls' education, she always stressed that 'there is something more in it than the snobbish satisfaction of the wealthy few'. Given her firm conviction that education is a social right, Ina Beasley divided her time and attention equally among Sudanese provinces, not excluding remote and inaccessible areas that are still described as 'marginalised areas', such as the Nuba Mountains, the Blue Nile, and Abyei. When visiting schools in these places, she demanded the highest academic standards and the optimum participation of mistresses and districts commissioners to attain them.

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<sup>28</sup> Minutes of Extra-Departmental Conference on Girls' Education in the Northern Sudan held in the Education Department. Monday 8 November, 1943. Notes on the agenda included references to the number of girls' schools, which had reached sixty three in Khartoum, Blue Nile, Kassala, Darfur, Kordofan, and the Northern Province, SAD 657/1/82.

<sup>29</sup> Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 658/4/2.

<sup>30</sup> Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 658/4/4-5.

During the years that followed her retirement from the Sudan Service, Beasley wrote eloquently about education as a key for women in developing countries (1968). Her belief in girls' right to education reflected her commitments to gender justice and to social justice more broadly effected through sustained efforts. Beasley's activities were informed by her conviction that access to knowledge and bodily inviolability were basic rights, which she saw as fundamental to altering structures of power and hierarchy. 'I have been asked to speak to you tonight on the education of girls in the Sudan. It is rather a large subject for quarter of an hour but I will try to explain something of what we are doing at present and our hopes for the future. Some of them, I am afraid, are rather tremulous hopes, but we cling to them,' she said in a radio broadcast in Omdurman (1942 or the beginning of 1943).

In numerous reports, Beasley outlined her vision and addressed wide-ranging issues pertaining to the official language of instruction, religious teaching, the efficacy of government-sponsored versus missionary schools, and overall conditions in schools around the country. The inauguration of schools in Dilling and Heiban in the Nuba Mountains was a direct outcome of her recommendations. When she participated in a local radio broadcast in 1943, Beasley was happy to report that during the previous twenty years, sixty two elementary schools *kutabbs* had been established. She emphasised the need for more schools, especially in districts where difficulties militated against girls' attendance. Long distances and barriers, parents reluctance to have girls educated at all; competing demands on girls' time such as household chores and care for younger children, represented some of these difficulties.

Beasley was not reluctant to break new ground and to challenge ideas that shielded discrimination and maintained marginality.

We lay much stress on this domestic education and any subsequent remarks in no way minimise the predominant position that it holds in our plans and the tremendous importance we attach to it. But the turning out of better wives and mothers is not enough for an educational ideal. It presupposes training for one particular type of person. A most pernicious aim. The sort of thing we justly condemn in Nazi ideology. We need to envisage a scheme of education which fosters a well-balanced individual. I stress deliberately the word individual. A woman who can develop along the lines of her own individuality and who is capable of making a satisfactory life for herself, whether domestic or otherwise. The women of the country may then be able to cooperate in the solving of some of the serious social problems, which according to Sudanese men, is retarded only by the stupidity of women. Now there are no grounds at all for suggesting that Sudanese women are innately stupid. Many may probably atrophy through long years of confinement. Experience has shown, however, that girls in schools as pupils and staff respond readily to suitable intellectual stimulus. Also, that natural ability is sufficiently high in some to argue a definite gain from the encouragement of learning. I repeat that we have no desire to make bluestockings<sup>31</sup> but to promote fuller and richer lives for the woman themselves and for the community generally.<sup>32</sup>

Economic gain was a necessary but not sufficient motivation behind schooling, especially in its elementary form.

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<sup>31</sup> This term derives from early 20<sup>th</sup> century British critique of well-educated women.

<sup>32</sup> Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 658/4/3.

In one of the Omdurman Radio broadcasts she took part in (8 February, 1945), Beasley reiterated her desire to foster education at every level without stressing the stimulus of financial reward in the form of paid employment. She defended a type of education whose benefits exceed economic gains. In her view, mastering literacy and domestic subjects has emancipatory effects that help 'in the better ordering of one's life'.

Consequently it would be a pleasant thought to anticipate an increasing number of little girls all over the country, who spend at least four happy years in school. After that time they are able, we hope, to deal with simple matters dependent on their mastery of reading, writing and arithmetic. They should also be able to cook and sew and be generally sensible and orderly in their daily lives and work. Apart from these obviously utilitarian aims they should have so far profited from their instruction in school that their minds will be quicker and more responsive to new ideas and able to deal with the problems which they will meet in the common round.<sup>33</sup>

Elementary schooling would, she believed, be of more than utilitarian value to girls; it would give them the tools and mental outlook they needed to learn for themselves and devise solutions to the difficulties they encountered in adulthood. Instead of being seen as a drag on development, women could improve their own lives and their society at the same time.

As Controller of Girls' Education, Ina Beasley held high expectations of teaching staffs, both British and Sudanese. Her standards were evident in a case of a mistress who was stationed in Salara and did not meet these expectations. 'That little is known about girls' education by the general public is not, I think, a matter for disquiet nor does it betoken any lack of interest,' Beasley remarked about the situation. Corresponding with the Director of Education on 3 April, 1945, Beasley gave a full account of the problem as she saw it:

The quality of the school is fair and anything less would not be worth doing. Miss Hassan is an amiable and well-meaning person, anxious, I am sure to fulfil her duty as the society has represented it to her but she did not come out to Africa with this intention of going to the Nuba Mountains and I suspect she was happier in Medani. My criticisms are all based on the observation of one day's work. The first morning we arrived Miss Hassan was in bed with a large bandage round her throat, Miss Norton said she had tonsillitis. Fortunately she was quite well the next day and we saw both the morning and afternoon work. My personal opinion, based on this rather inadequate evidence, is that it is doubtful if she will stay the course. I do not think she will give up easily but her rather fantastic attitude—which she interprets as trust—and the lack of any vigorous personality to encourage her may result in being overwhelmed by the difficulties and limitations which occur so frequently in this country.

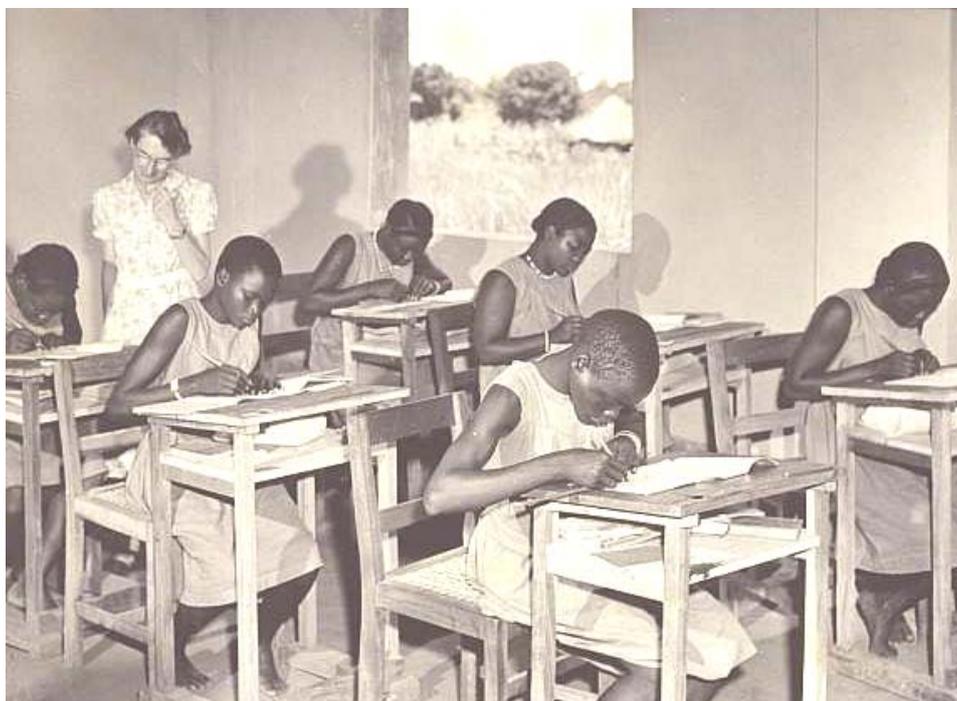
Without blaming this schoolmistress for her inefficiency, but instead expressing a clear understanding of the unsuitability of this post for Miss Hassan, who was British, she kept her eye on the inadequacy of the instruction she provided and prepared the authorities for a change of mistresses.

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<sup>33</sup> Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 658/4/4.

Beasley's recommendations for improvement by developing 'less nebulous plans' to advance girls' education in Salara were presented to the highest authority. In particular, she suggested developing a framework in which girls can flourish and their values be encouraged without biases towards either Christianity or Islam. Espousing a pluralistic outlook that was not universal in British circles, she affirms: 'There seems no reason why the Nubas should not be allowed an individual choice in religion and Christian and Moslem live and be educated side by side as in other countries'.<sup>34</sup>

Beasley's philosophy on girls' education was organised around several compelling ideas. First, she emphasised the significance of secular education for opening up opportunities and prospects for pupils by introducing them to subjects that would lead them to the path of self-actualisation. She regarded domestic subjects, writing, and arithmetic as intertwined and considered them complementary for women's long-term advancement and empowerment. Second, education, like any other tool for transforming selves and communities, must be rooted in local contexts, and therefore as a social right it must be negotiated within local struggles and home-grown critiques. The training of Sudanese schoolmistresses was critical to enacting processes of change at the individual as well as community levels. Their experiences not only offer food for thought, but stand as testimonies to how Sudanese women have historically engaged with the politics of tradition. Third, among the imponderable benefits of education are an increase in the value of informal public opinion more widely spread throughout the community and evolution toward a society more evenly balanced in all its paths.<sup>35</sup> In promoting social rights at a time when those rights were forcibly silenced, Beasley insisted that ensuring fair standards of treatment and equal opportunity is a right for human beings regardless of sexual difference.



**A Classroom in Southern Sudan**

<sup>34</sup> Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 657/3/2.

<sup>35</sup> See Ina Beasley, 'Education is the Key for Women', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, Vol. 375, No. 1, (1968) pp. 154-62.

## ON BODILY INTEGRITY AND FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

In the course of her long service in the Sudan, Beasley repeatedly encountered traditional cultural practices that defined womanhood by altering the body. She was well acquainted with veiling and seclusion in certain parts of the country, but she was far more concerned with female circumcision, or ritualised genital surgeries. The practice has passionate supporters whose justifications for and ideas about it have sustained the ritual for thousands of years. To followers, the set of complex practices collectively known as female circumcision is at the centre of significant cultural notions of the body, the self, and the community. These ideas seem to be at odds with personal autonomy and the right to bodily integrity as inscribed in human rights declarations and conventions.<sup>36</sup> This divergence was crystallised in the unyielding defence of the practice by Amin Effendi Babikir, who in a 1942 lecture on female circumcision at the Sudan Cultural Centre opined: ‘the abolition of Pharanoiac circumcision would tear up the whole fabric of society. That its curbing of sexual desire eliminates prostitution and results in protection against rape and that these protections are necessary especially in hot climates.’ In conflating female sexual desire with prostitution and rape, this statement not only discounted rape as a grave breach and prostitution as egregious form of forced sexual slavery but dismissed social reforms that the majority of Sudanese viewed as a matter of considerable urgency. Indeed, years before the Sudan Cultural Centre event took place, Dr. Abdel Rahman el Atabani, a noted opponent of the practice, made his views known when he wrote on 19 August, 1930, in an article in *El-Hadara*:

An unscientific operation of laceration and mutilation is performed by persons ignorant of what injuries may result from it, to the innocent girls of today or the mothers of tomorrow. We celebrate this joyously and singing and dancing. It would be more fitting if we observed it with mourning and grief. For is there anything of greater cruelty or ignorance than this custom which retards our progress while the whole world is advancing?<sup>37</sup>

Beasley was truly invigorated by this perspective. When it came to documenting various aspects of the campaign against the practice, Beasley was exceptionally attuned to detail. As an educator, she possessed remarkable writing and organisational talents that often surpassed those of the most expert of ethnographers.

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<sup>36</sup> The right to bodily integrity as a fundamental human right has come under considerable scrutiny for overly emphasising the individual and his/her autonomy at the expense of collective, group rights as defined by specific cultures and worldviews.

<sup>37</sup> See Lilian P. Sanderson, *Against the Mutilation of Women* (London: Ithaca Press, 1981), p. 77.

## الخفاض الفرعوني

سئل المستر ماكنيل وكيل وزارة الخارجية البريطانية في مجلس العموم يوم ٢٦ يناير عما اذا كان لديه معلومات في السنين الاخيرة عن التهادي او الاقلال من عادة الخفاض الفرعوني بالسودان . اجاب المستر ماكنيل بان ليس لديه معلومات مضبوطة عن ذلك ولكنه واثق من ان التشريع الذي اجيز في شهر فبراير من عام ١٩٤٦ ، وماتلي ذلك من دعاية كان لها اثرها في الحد من ممارسة هذه العادة الضارة ، بيد انه اخاف ان النجاح في التغلب على هذه العادة التقليدية المتأصلة لا بد وان يكون بطيئا

ومن ثم حدث نقاش تناول ناحية هامة في هذا الموضوع اثاره القاضي احمد افندي متولى العتباتى الذى كان بشرفه مجلس العموم في ذات اليوم . وعندما ادرك الناس ان الاستاذ احمد كان سودانيا ، تهافت عليه من كان بالشرفه وامطروه وابلا من الاسئلة في هذا الموضوع واستطاع ان يؤكد لهم ان العنصر المتخفف من السودانين يدرك بمسام الادراك مضار هذه العادة الوحشية ، وان المساعي الجبارة تبذل عن طريق الافراد والجماعات في سبيل القضاء عليها قضاء مبرما . ولكن استدرك قائلا ان مثل هذه العادة القديمة المتأصلة لا بد من وقت ليس بالقصير لاستئصال شأقتها

657/4/166

Arabic note on Infibulation  
Female Circumcision in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan

Beasley took notes on every aspect of the campaign, recording voices of both resistance and accommodation, which she then meticulously ordered, sorted by subject, and commented on in depth, attending to substance and form. Beasley read extensively on topics as diverse as public opinion outside the Sudan and details about practitioners such as priests, medicine men, trained male relatives, barbers, and professional jugglers who all performed a practice of great antiquity with detrimental effects on women's health.<sup>38</sup> She read descriptions of the final stages of labour in infibulated women, the origin of the practice, its rationalisations, and the indigenous forms of knowledge around it. Beasley was scrupulously fair.<sup>39</sup> When she came across certain views that contradicted her own, she mustered the integrity to acknowledge them as important and paid significant attention to their content and ramifications.<sup>40</sup> While opposing and accommodating ideas of female circumcision were crucial to Beasley's own understanding of the larger picture, she awarded greater significance to the ways in which cultural difference shaped ideas of the body. There was simply no consensus on this subject, and arguments that were often used to shield bodily integrity were also challenged by others in principle. Never lost in this interesting discourse were questions relating to gender dynamics and responsibility for the propagation of the ritual, a subject on which Beasley offered thoughtful perspectives:

It is interesting to note in passing that opinion seems to be rather divided as to where rests the greater responsibility. That many old women are hide-bound in their ideas is incontrovertible but as against the tales of the operation committed behind the father's back are tales of mothers who plead with their husbands against the performance of the operation but are over-ruled. These younger women . . . are emphatic that the fathers are as insistent as anyone else on the operation and laugh at the suggestion that the Sudanese men are more anxious to get rid of the custom than women.<sup>41</sup>

The complexity of decision-making processes as regards circumcision is a puzzle that boggles the minds of feminist activists to this day. Beasley, however, suggested moving forward beyond apportioning blame. She contends that one could easily doubt the commitment of the majority of men who 'don't like to be outdone, as Pharaonic circumcision is a test to their virility' and masculine prowess and in the process clarifies once and for all that the perpetuation of circumcision is not the fault of old women alone. Instead, Beasley worked hard to find routes within which men and women's interests could merge not solely for political expediency but also to make change sustainable. This matter is particularly relevant in situations where repeated waves of violence were visited upon the most vulnerable populations. These routes are straightforward: recognition of principles of inviolability, and the closely linked acceptance of the right to freedom from physical and mental harm.

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<sup>38</sup> These details were discussed in Allan Worsely, *Gynaecological Journal* (1938), SAD 657/4/43.

<sup>39</sup> It is clear that at times, women's justifications for and propagation of the ritual has frustrated activists. On occasion, Beasley, who was in the midst of advocacy at the time, appeared insensitive to cultural difference, as was clear in the case of the inspection of girls at the Training College Elementary school by Dr. Alice Muir Leach. However, this idea had been revisited as the campaign proceeded with the approval of Sudanese men and women.

<sup>40</sup> For example, she took note of a report by C. S. Elfrida Whidbourne, M.B., who described a Sunna operation on 17 June, 1946, under aseptic conditions with minimum distress to the child and no tears (31 August, 1946).

<sup>41</sup> Ina Beasley, 'Note on Female Circumcision', SAD 657/4/38.

In delineating the most important body of knowledge that Beasley had either used or contributed, enormous numbers of official and personal papers on female circumcision, I divided into three categories:

- i) Documentation of activism against and in defence of female circumcision that had occurred before her arrival in the Sudan.
  - ii) Records of Beasley's activities that bore upon the practice.
  - iii) Her correspondence with Sudanese and British people in relation to female circumcision.
- Beasley collected documentation and information about sporadic activism that took place before 1939, especially the Society for the Abolition of Female Circumcision. Numerous ethnological accounts, historical studies, and medical reports are included in this category. A germinal 1936 essay by D. R. MacDonald of the Sudan Branch of the British Medical Association provided social, historical, medical, and ethnographic contextualisation. Also significant was a detailed account of female circumcision in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan by E. D. Pridie, A. E. Lorenzen, Cruickshank, Hovell and M. MacDonald, with commentary by Major-General Sir Hubert Huddleston, Sheikh Ahmed El Taher, Sayed Ali El-Mairghani, and Sayed Abdel Rahman El Mahdi.
  - Beasley's papers documenting and analysing her own work in education and health are filled with accounts of the practice, encompassing everything from medical records to personal observations. One of the most thought-provoking was a discussion of the future of girls' education and what might happen to the old traditions if more women were educated. In addition to hundreds and thousands of interviews with Sudanese and British people in and outside of Sudan, she kept a record of all relevant correspondences on how to effect cooperation and shift public opinion on the subject that touched upon the heart of Sudanese notions of culture and nation, as well as of social reforms.
  - Beasley's correspondence with Sudanese opinion leaders and other interested individuals supporting international women's rights offers a comprehensive body of information and viewpoints on this controversial subject. She collected published and unpublished memoirs, newspaper clippings, and documents of debates that took place in the Anti-Slavery Society and the House of Commons on the questions of banning the practice after she had returned to Britain.

Beasley was meticulous in her documentation of the various views expressed on the subject of genital cutting. She devoted considerable attention to every activity big or small that either promoted or warned against infibulation. Beasley spared no effort in educating herself about the prevalent tensions within Sudanese communities around this practice. Beasley was committed to the notion of bodily inviolability, which she brought up repeatedly not as a Western cultural premise but as an Islamic principle that was respected in various juridical interpretations and theological exegeses. Her work on the practice has always informed readers about the intricate relationships, ideas, symbolism, and practical significance that adherents have attached to it. This knowledge was central to her activism, which she located within specific indigenous notions of the body, not norms that were culturally removed from local epistemologies. Her interpretations and understandings differ markedly from those of other European and American feminists who saw integrity

and culture as parallel worlds. Ina Beasley's ability to construct bridges between cultural groups was enabled by her intimate knowledge of the language, culture, and religion of the communities.

From Sudanese Muslims, Beasley learned about Islam's emphasis on 'creation of the *insan* the person in the best possible form', which is the foundation of an inalienable right to the protection of the body within Muslim cosmology. Although she became keenly aware of how the practice fortifies certain images about marriageability and honour, she was able to weigh these competing interpretations and concurred with those who stressed Islamic principles before Pharaonic teachings. This opinion was explicitly articulated in a fatwa that was issued by Abu Shama Abdel Mahmoud, the Great Mufi of the Sudan, on 2 December, 1939:

Dr. El-Sayed Abdel-Hadi has written a full statement, which appeared in *El Nil* of 25.7.1939, on the evils of female circumcision in the Sudan, explaining its social and pathological harmfulness, and its injurious effects on women throughout life. He blamed (quite rightly) the educated class and persons of position for tolerating the continuance of this barbarous practice... which has no origin and which has never been known in the Moslem world, or any other country. In this statement which needs no addition, he suggested to me that I should make clear the Sharia ruling on this question. My answer is that female circumcision is only desirable, i.e. not compulsory, and that it consists of cutting off part of the clitoris. More than that is forbidden in view of the Um Atiyah report; 'circumcise but do not go too far, for thus it is better for appearance and gives more pleasure to the husband'. This is the female circumcision that is desirable in Islam. Other forms such as that known among us as the Pharaonic are mutilations and mutilations are categorically forbidden.<sup>42</sup>

The preference for cliteridectomy, as expressed in this authoritative religious opinion, was couched as a gradual step toward the entire obliteration of the practice.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ina Beasley, Official Papers, 'Translation of fatwa', SAD 657/4/21. Issued for the Public Security Office, Khartoum.

<sup>43</sup> According to the Standing Committee on Female Circumcision, this form should also be abolished. The Society for the Abolition of Pharaonic Circumcision representative Ibrahim Ahmed, had noted that there was a difference in opinion among members of the Society on what the Sunna operation was. Lady Huddleston and Sayed Abdel Rahman favoured the so-called Egyptian form but the majority of the Society considered that the term Sunna meant what was allowed by the law. Sunna operations had also raised a serious discussion of medicalisation through sustained encouragement of midwives and also through the establishment of clinics that the Director of Medical Service was unwilling to support in principle. Non-medical members of the Committee thought that medicalisation would popularise milder forms of the practice and suggested that it would be helpful if some private body like the Society for the Abolition of Pharaonic Circumcision would consider the possibility of starting a clinic for this purpose. Also crucial to the popularisation of Sunna operations was the training, licensing, registration and remuneration of midwives. Last but not least, the use of anaesthetics was extremely significant, but received little support from the Director of Medical Services who argued that it was unnecessary in cliteridectomies pointing out that in such an operation speed is essential since injections will prolong the operation. He also warned against sepsis and tetanus in cases where injections are performed by untrained operators. Both the Director of Education and the Director of Medical Services were reluctant to breach a principle of theirs not to countenance the practice in any form. However, the spectre of Pharaonic circumcision loomed large. Suggestions were made as to the establishment of clinics neighbouring elementary schools by local government authorities in provinces where the practice is an established custom. Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 657/4/258-261.

Beasley recorded her own and others' thoughts on the harm of this practice and the good of Islam, stressing evidence showing that women in other countries are chaste as a matter of morality rather than through bodily pain. She writes in a piece titled *Nafisa fil el Madrasa*: 'Islam came to preach moral force. Making it clear that a girl should not be a plaything for men; should follow religion; respect her body, keep it clean from dirt as [if] it were a precious treasure and should endeavour to present it to her husband as a valuable prize which is sound mind and sound body'.<sup>44</sup> This viewpoint is not to be taken as Beasley's approval of women's subordination to husbands; rather, it was a way of illuminating the idea that marriageability and bodily integrity are not mutually exclusive. She stressed the futility of disregarding these deeply entrenched ideas:

Changing the climate of opinion is a slow and tedious process anywhere and especially so where distances are vast and communications poor. Nor should it be forgotten that in the heady atmosphere of politics, men newly arrived to power have expended so much energy in achieving personal ambitions that matters of compassion are lost in a welter of economic troubles and military rivalries. This is not to condone the continuance of suffering, on the contrary, but to underline how much care and diligence are needed in seeking the way to lead to success.<sup>45</sup>

She understood that advocacy on this issue required sensitivity to whatever might make them respond defensively, some of which had little to do with the matter at issue and some of which involved deeply inscribed and precious cultural prescriptions. The key, for her, was appealing to those principles within the culture that supported women's bodily integrity while avoiding a wholesale attack on Sudanese autonomy.

After Beasley had been in the Sudan for several years, her ideas, along with those of other key people, both British and Sudanese, began to shape the campaign to combat the practice in the Sudan and nearby territories.<sup>46</sup> It was suggested that 'By virtue of religious scruples the campaign must be conducted in a dignified yet forceful manner. Through means of posters,<sup>47</sup> handbills, by means of instructive wall-sets for display in schools, post

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<sup>44</sup> From Fawcett House Archives, *Nafissa fi el Madarasa* was written and circulated by Ina Beasley (Cairo, 1949).

<sup>45</sup> Ina Beasley, 'Female Circumcision' in *Women Speaking* (1976), p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> The members of the Standing Committee on Female Circumcision were:

Sir J. W. Robertson, Chair.

Dr. A.E. Lorenzen, Director, Sudan Medical Service.

C.W. Williams, Director of Education.

Dr. I. M. Beasley, Controller of Girls' Education.

J.G. Mavrogorato, Legal Secretary Representative.

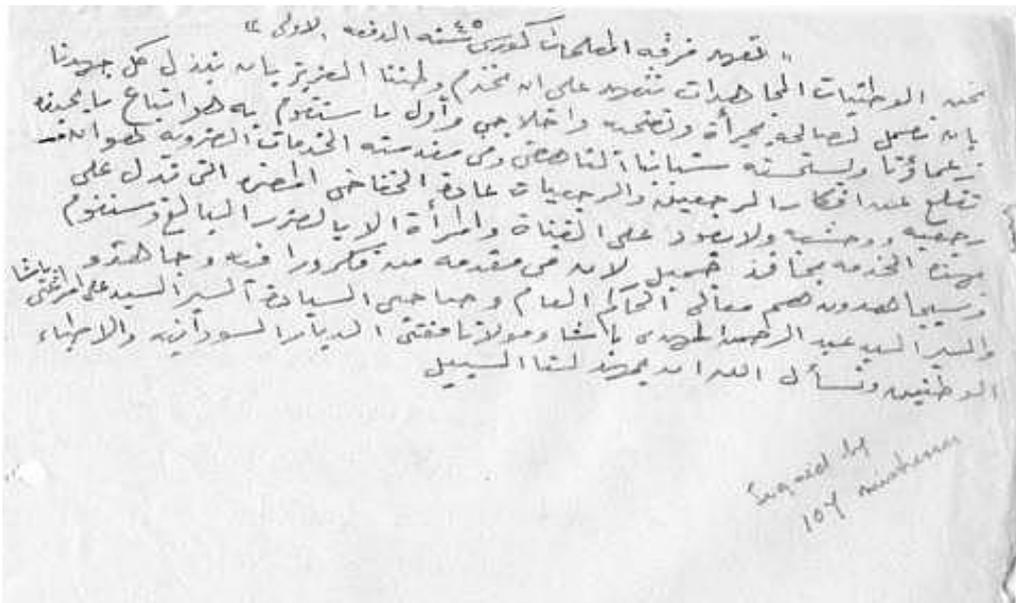
E. P. Pratt, Sudan Medical Service.

J.S. Owen, Civil Secretary.

Professor Mekki Shibeika and all other Sudanese members of the Society of Abolition of Pharaonic Circumcision.

<sup>47</sup> Posters were considered by Beasley and other members of the Standing Committee to be of utmost importance. Beasley's efforts characteristically were carried out with absolute precision. She sought the advice of public health experts in and out of the Sudan, especially those who were also using posters in their campaigns against Malaria, Diphtheria, venereal diseases and immunisation. In depth interviews were conducted by Beasley with officials from the Ministry of Information, The Ross Institute, The Central Council on Health Education, The Press Relations Officer to the Sudan Government, and the National Council on Health Hygiene. The interviews were helpful in the overall poster campaigns. Some were more useful than others. T.H. Maynard was instrumental in discussing how to incorporate fertility, women's health, female circumcision in the titles of posters. In the end, some titles such as Empty Cradle, The Unhappy family, Deformed Old Age and the Shadow on her Future were used. In addition to providing useful tips for employing posters in publicity, Beasley received advice about how one goes

offices and the like'.<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere, I have discussed 'nationalist passions' and how the appropriation of the practice by nationalists had turned the issue into a question of sovereignty rather than a tradition that militated against the health of children and adults.<sup>49</sup> In fact, the politicisation of the practice had intervened with efforts of the Society for the Abolition of Pharaonic circumcision during 1948. According to the Society's representative Ibrahim Eff. Ahmed 'Members of the Society felt that much harm would be done if Pharaonic circumcision become a political issue. It was to be noted that the leader of the Rufaa riot did not himself believe in the practice but he used it to make political capital'.<sup>50</sup>



**The Mistresses' Pledge**

about conducting a health campaign. To Dr. MacDonald of the Health Institute in Cape Town, accuracy pre-empted wrong reactions and opposition to the overall message adding: 'To be sure that the truth of any statement, whether written or pictorial, is unimpeachable especially in trying to play upon peoples' fears. If inaccuracy can be found in any particular, the whole is liable to be discredited'. Beasley was attentive to every warning and advice except for those of Dr. Sutherland of the National Council for Social Hygiene who downplayed the significance of posters and stressed that what was needed is an anthropological study of the sex life of the Sudanese male, and female. Beasley wrote down 'It may seem an ungrateful commentary after using up the time of a busy man, but the idea that nothing could be done until after some years of study seemed to be defeatist that I felt it a most depressing afternoon'. Posters were used widely and distributed to mothers with full clarifications by mistresses, broadsheets, programmes on Omdurman radio, Imams, Maa'zuns and midwives. Ina Beasley, Official Papers, 'Report to the Civil Secretary' (6 March, 1947), SAD 657/4/168-171.

<sup>48</sup> Ina Beasley, Official Papers, 'The Main Characteristics of the Campaign to Combat the Practice for the Sudan and Nearby Territories', SAD 657/4/68.

<sup>49</sup> See R. M. Abusharaf, 'We Have Supped So Deep in Horrors: Understanding Colonialist Emotionality and British Responses to Female Circumcision in Northern Sudan' *History and Anthropology*, Vol. 17, Issue 3 (September 2006), 209-22.

<sup>50</sup> Minutes of the 5<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee on female circumcision held in the office of the Deputy Civil Secretary on 19 March. Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 657/4/258.

## SOLIDARITIES, BROKERS, INTERLOCUTORS, AND LADY PROPAGANDISTS

Beasley's capable but markedly humble collaborations with people from different departments, both men and women, yielded some qualitative changes, not the least of which was the willingness of Sudanese to make their views on the contested practice public.<sup>51</sup> Sir James Robertson, Civil Secretary was right to argue that 'Progress was bound to be slow until more girls were educated and women's emancipation was greater'. Both Robertson and Beasley had agreed that the real progress had been obtained during the past few years in getting the subject ventilated. More progress was linked to Education.<sup>52</sup>

Since female circumcision was considered a major public health issue, it necessitated cooperation between Sudanese and British, as evidenced in the formation of the Standing Committee on Female Circumcision. This was a critical moment in the history of activism, as the strongest objections to the practice came from the Sudanese themselves. The committee reported progress on the campaign and later facilitated debates at the highest level of government.<sup>53</sup> For example, the committee noted that considerable progress had been made in the field of propaganda. Two Sudanese women who worked in the Education Department, Sitt Nafissa Awad Al Karim and Sitt Melk Dar,<sup>54</sup> had been on tour in the Blue Nile and Kordofan Provinces and by all accounts these tours had been very successful. The committee considered, however, that unless there was an effective follow up their effect might be ephemeral. The Director of Education said that he thought this method and approach to adults had a better chance of success than anything that he could do in the schools. The committee discussed other proposals in detail, including lessons on the subject for girls and for students at Gordon Memorial College and the distribution of pamphlets prepared by Sudan Medical Service to their staffs and midwives.

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<sup>51</sup> Lilian P. Sanderson, who also joined Sudan Service, provided important contextualisation of resistance in the Sudan in her book, *Against the Mutilation of Women*. She wrote: 'Of the attempts made to abolish excision and infibulation the most systematic was made by the Sudanese where there was teaching in both boys' and girls' schools against infibulation, ... where trained women were sent to some outlying villages and towns to teach against the practice, where political, religious, and legal leaders advised against infibulation, where doctors reported the medical results, and where the Government in 1946 passed legislation against excision and infibulation as it was practised in the Sudan'. Lilian P. Sanderson, *Against the Mutilation of Women*, (London: Ithaca Press, 1981), p. 70.

<sup>52</sup> Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 657/4/200.

<sup>53</sup> The Committee met regularly to ensure in the words of its chairman Sir James Robertson 'the work achieved by the members and particularly the efforts of Sir Hubert and Lady Huddleston in this direction should not falter'. SAD 657/4/202. Agenda for the Standing Committee included at each meeting details on propaganda, tours, reports from the Governors of Khartoum, Kordofan, Kassla, Northern Province, Upper Nile, Blue Nile, Equatoria and Bakht-er-Ruda.

<sup>54</sup> Ina Beasley's Official Papers include biographical information on Melked-Dar Mohamed (1922–1969), who was the headmistress of the girls' school in El-Obeid and later Inspectress in the Education Office there. Beasley described Melked-Dar in her private journal on 3 March, 1940: 'A striking personality much liked and respected by the mistresses in other parts. A bit above average in build. Good looking with strong features and a very deep voice, and a skin of a beautiful coppery colour'. Elsewhere, Ina Beasley continued to express her favourable views: 'strong personality, represented Sudanese women in various gatherings with various communities of Greek and Armenians, worked to end female circumcision when joined with members of the Midwifery School in the campaign, accompanied a British health visitor as an interpreter and provided inestimable help in her tour of villages'. Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 658/4/57-58.

Like the headmistresses, staff midwives Sitt Battoul Mohamed Isa and Sitt Haja Khadiga had embarked on two-month tours in the Northern Province to propagate, among other duties, propaganda against Pharaonic circumcision.<sup>55</sup> The activism of schoolmistresses is the subject to which I now turn.

Writing in *Women Speaking* in 1976, Beasley opened her essay by citing a pledge that one hundred and four Sudanese mistresses had helped craft and sign that they would ‘refrain from the habit of circumcision which denotes barbarism and brings evil to women and girls. We shall support the stand against it’.<sup>56</sup> To Ina Beasley, the schoolmistresses with whom she worked very closely were powerful anchors of internal social critique. She considered them creative, diligent, and invested in improving the situation of their countrywomen whose lives were marked by deprivation. Beasley appreciated the engagement of these schoolmistresses.<sup>57</sup>

For it is the silent revolutions which have the most lasting effect and spread their influence most widely. I may cite as an example of this a Sudanese mistress now teaching in a school in one of the larger villages here. She is one of the pioneers, one of the first ten girls who were brave enough to take the unheard of step in entering into professional life. This year she completes twenty years of competent work for an ideal in which she firmly believes but doubtless seldom discusses except in practical terms. Meanwhile opinion has changed and the idea of girls becoming teachers is now accepted without question. Names of women like this are not known to history but they are probably of much greater value in the betterment of the social order than many of a more ostentatious career (SAD 658/4/1-2).

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<sup>55</sup> Sitt Battoul’s tour in Darfur yielded some fascinating insights that reflected the wide-ranging opinions around ‘traditional Muslim practices’. For example, she reported on her conversation with the Sultan of the Massalit, who having ascertained that she came from the East said to her: ‘You women from the East, are fair of face but foul in your customs; the circumcision of women is a disgusting habit. If it happened here I’d put the women and their mothers in prison. Anyhow you in the East, profess to be good Moselms but you don’t follow the true Sunna in this matter’. Sitt Battoul recommended to the Standing Committee that propaganda should be directed at mosques. The resolution which followed considered her recommendation seriously, stressing collaborations with the Grand Qadi, Ulema, Imams, tribal authorities among others. Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 657/4/260.

<sup>56</sup> This pledge had inspired a group of mothers in Khartoum West to sign a similar statement expressing their commitment to protecting their daughters from the harms of the practice. This positive development was recorded in Beasley’s Progress Report on Female Circumcision on 9 March, 1949, SAD 657/4/219-221.

<sup>57</sup> From the minutes of the Standing Committee on Female Circumcision, 18 June, 1946. Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 657/4/113.



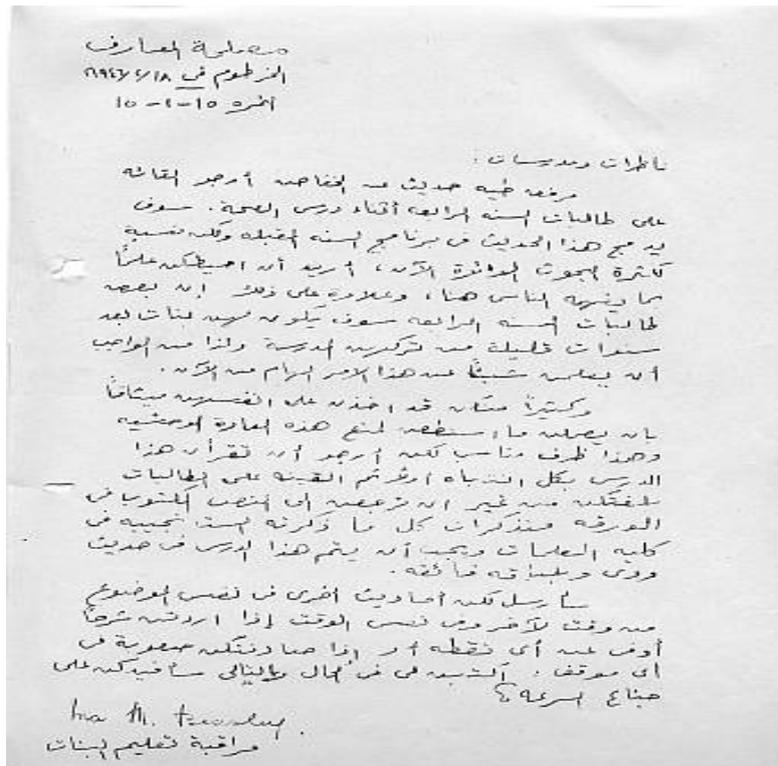
### **Melked- Dar Mohamed**

One of the remarkable efforts to open up dialogue was advanced by Nagiba Kronfoli, whom Beasley held in very high regard. To Nagiba, religious justifications are without foundation. ‘If God had wanted their bodies like that, he could have made them in that way to begin with’ was her readily available answer whenever these practices were represented as edicts of Islam. Attitudinal shifts started to manifest themselves as the pupils began to express their views without embarrassment or fear about topics that were considered taboo. Nagiba once told Beasley: ‘There was a tendency—among pupils—now seems that it is a pity that they have been circumcised. There is nothing that they can do to alter the opinion of the old people but that they themselves will do their best in the future’. Beasley praised these efforts, acknowledging the indefatigable work that schoolmistresses were undertaking despite the challenges that faced them. Neither Ina Beasley nor her Sudanese partners were naïve parrots. As Beasley notes:

A certain number of highly educated women both of the professional type and those without the need to earn their living can be a very real asset. If they have sensible and cultivated minds, they can reflect the value of their education in the formation of a body of public opinion, intelligently trained on to current affairs, and social topics of the moment. This may appear to be looking a long way ahead but education is a long process and such a hope as this is by no means far nor fantastic.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ina Beasley, Official Papers, 21 October, 1944, SAD 658/4/18.



**Ina Beasley's hand-written Arabic Note to Schoolmistresses**

The combined efforts of teachers, community leaders, distinguished politicians, and other members of the education and medical departments had positioned the subject of female circumcision front and centre in the Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan. Consideration of ways to mitigate the practice and legislation to end it were among the most significant deliberations the council undertook. This body represented a political assembly of British as well as Sudanese individuals and distinguished notables. Its structure was decided by a 1943 order that outlined certain posts such as President, Vice Presidents, tribal leaders, and pensioners of central government's departments. According to Mudathir Abdel Rahim, the Council included *nazirs*, *sultans*, *maks*, *wakil nazirs*, *shaikhs*, religious affairs leaders, civil servants, army officers, teachers, doctors, merchants, and bank managers. It is vital to take into account this complex mix of persons and backgrounds when we discuss the council's decision to 'lead the country in the direction of radical reform.' Abdel Rahim's *Imperialism and Nationalism in the Sudan*<sup>59</sup> and Ina Beasley's Official Papers show that, of all the debates held during the council's sessions, those pertaining to female circumcision had the highest priority. The council passed resolutions at its third session, the most notable of which was legislation banning infibulation and providing for the prosecution of individuals who disobeyed the law.<sup>60</sup> Beasley played an important role in this gathering, given her post as Controller of Education and her interest in children's rights.

<sup>59</sup> See Abdel Rahim, *Imperialism and Nationalism in the Sudan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).  
<sup>60</sup> The subject of prosecution was typically discussed in the Governors' reports to the Standing Committee. Of special interest was the case of Helbis Yousef, a Coptic circumciser who practised in the three towns of Khartoum, Khartoum North and Omdurman. Several memos pointed out the need of alerting her to the new law. In a meeting of the Standing Committee it was reported that it was agreed that

The council resolved:

- i) That the practice of Pharaonic Circumcision is cruel and barbarous (unanimous).
- ii) That the practice in its Pharaonic form is not supported by the religion of Islam but is a relic of pre-Islamic pagan, days (unanimous).
- iii) That they appeal to all Sudanese to abolish the custom of Pharaonic circumcision which is retrograde and harmful and which is hindering the progress of the country (unanimous).
- iv) That the Government should be asked to take strong propaganda measures through the Medical and the Education Departments to persuade the people of the evils of the custom and especially to increase the numbers of women with secondary education and the numbers of women doctors and midwives to explain the evil effects of the operation on women (unanimous).
- v) That the Government should prepare legislation making Pharaonic circumcision illegal and that the proposed legislation should be brought before the Council for consideration at an early date, but be not made law until they have considered it in draft (passed by eighteen votes to nine).

# Sudan ★ Star

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## DRASTIC LAWS TO KILL SUDAN CUSTOM

### Advisory Council Talks On Circumcision

Drastic laws to suppress the "barbarous custom" of pharaonic circumcision in the Sudan have been laid before the Northern Sudan Advisory Council.

The new law will impose a penalty of seven years imprisonment on any person performing it himself—or a woman who willingly submits to the operation in a public place. Any person failing to inform the authorities of any pharaonic circumcision which may come to his knowledge is liable to six months imprisonment or a fine of £10.

The Council, which at its last session condemned pharaonic circumcision in principle, decided the criminal law at the Police on Sunday under the chairmanship of the civil secretary (Mr. J.E. Robertson).

The Chairman introduced Dr. Lovesson, the newly appointed Director of the Medical Service, as the Extraordinary Member for the debate.

The Chairman then called attention to his letter to the Aga Khan on the subject of pharaonic circumcision and the formation of the Council that he had been very much struck by the reactions of people in the Sudan to the law of the subject.

The reactions had been largely those of surprise and shock that the Sudanese, advanced in other ways as they were, should tolerate such a custom.

The Chairman said: "The offence and its punishment"

### RUSSO-TURKISH TREATY PROBLEM

From SYLVAIN MANGEOT  
London, November 7.

The 20-year-old Turkish-Soviet Treaty of neutrality and non-aggression which was formally denounced by the Soviet Government on March 25 last, expires to-day. The fact that no agreement has been reached between the two powers to replace the Treaty gives rise to speculation about the next step in Soviet-Turkish relations and in particular the international status of the Dardanelles.

In June this year, the Soviet Ambassador in Ankara, M. Vassogradov, presented the Turkish Government



To-day on the 28th anniversary of the foundation of the U.S.S.R. great celebrations are taking place in Moscow. Above the Kremlin palace, the residence of Generalissimo Stalin, photographed from the Murovskiy bridge.

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### ARNO IS PRESSED

### Molotov Clears The Air,

### Sudan Star

repercussions were unlikely if Miss Helbis were prosecuted but the great difficulty was to get evidence. Judge Abu Ranat dealt extensively with the question of persecution and was informed that in Omdurman and Qetaina they had not led to disturbances such as occurred at Rufaa riots. Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 657/4/258-261.

One of the most influential responses to the Advisory Council agitation was a letter from his Excellency the Aga Khan, which he addressed to the Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan and to the Civil Secretary in Khartoum on 27 March, 1945:

I am convinced that the great majority of Moslem brothers in faith are not aware that according to all the principles of our holy faith Islam any pain caused except for curative reasons is a sin. All the more then it is necessary to avoid pain giving when the result according to medical science is injurious to health. The body according to Islam must be carefully cleaned and taken care of as the temple of the soul that prays to God. The Holy Prophet also said the way to paradise was under the feet of our mothers. Hence any custom however old that is injurious to women's health is doubly to be avoided. Now also it must be remembered my Moslem dear brothers in faith in the Sudan that a custom unknown to 280 million Moslems in other parts cannot be a good Moslem custom. The circumcision of women is unknown in India to 85 millions, in the Malay countries to 50 million Moslems, to 50 millions in Russia and China, to another 50 million in Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Balkan Moslems and to the cultivated Moslems of Egypt, Syria, etc. Hence I earnestly as a true Moslem brother appeal to my brothers in faith in the Sudan to take into serious consideration, the opinion of Moslem medical men and to make national effort to stop a pre-Islamic custom of pagan origin that is injuring the mothers under whose feet we are to go to Paradise.

Others offered authoritative and influential insights on the significance of respect for bodily integrity as a constitutive element of Islam that enshrines it as an inalienable right and positive duty to protect the body that Allah has created in the best possible form. Sudanese men and women concurred that the practice is a grave act of violence, especially in its most drastic form. They found in Ina Beasley a partner, not a figure of colonial authority. Like her, they questioned the acceptance of suffering as an inevitable fate and women's subordinate position as the natural order of things.

## **SPEECHES, LESSONS, AND LECTURES THAT INSPIRED BEASLEY**

Nowhere were stronger bonds of solidarity forged than in the domain of public health as it relates to female circumcision. Pledges, fatwas, and declarations that have recently come into vogue in the fight against female circumcision were part of the strategy for change in the Sudan during the 1940s. A 1945 tour made by Nafisa Awad Al-Karim, a seasoned campaigner, illuminates the many faces of resistance that Sudanese women had engaged in years before female circumcision became the subject of feminist scholarship and global activism. Beasley always acknowledged the remarkable difference that ‘lady propagandists’ were making in the lives of young children and women. Reaching the ultimate goal of eliminating the practice necessarily began by undermining the ‘unquestioning acceptance’ that had been responsible for its propagation over many centuries.

### **Sitt Nafisa Awad Al-Karim<sup>61</sup>**

Nafisa Awad Al-Karim’s 1945 tour was one of the notable efforts of Sudanese women that Ina Beasley addressed at every opportunity she was given.<sup>62</sup> Nafissa’s report on the tours that she undertook in various Sudanese towns and villages that year occupies a prominent place in Beasley’s journals and private collection. I translated this report in its entirety here because of its supreme importance. Beasley considered this schoolmistress an indispensable ally and partner in localising the abolitionist efforts to end what both women considered an act of ‘raw violence’.

On January 1946 I departed to El-Obeid. I arrived on Sunday evening on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January 1946. I delivered lectures to mothers in the two Girls’ schools in the town. I stayed for the whole week, during which I paid visits to the homes of opinion leaders and leading personalities in the town. The objective of my visit is to consolidate the propaganda against Pharaonic circumcision. These hosts managed to mobilise large numbers of women participants. For example, the wife of the mamur was asked to invite her neighbours and acquaintances to the lecture; the wife of the police chiefs and local shopkeepers were all asked to do the same. They obliged. The effort, though successful and well-received, requires our utmost patience and preparedness to counteract common beliefs, especially those voiced by women in particular. In a context where outdated practices are held onto with tenacity, abandonment of the practice seems impossible. It is equally difficult to fight the ignorant and force them to see right from wrong.

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<sup>61</sup> Beasley’s affection and respect for this mistress were clear in her diaries and in her official correspondences with activists. Acknowledging the brilliance of Sitt Nafissa’s opinions, Beasley had once told Sir James Robertson in a progress report, ‘Perhaps the most adequate summing up was by Sitt Nafissa: at least the women know now that it is wrong. Before they had never even been told’ (9 March, 1949) SAD 657/4/221.

<sup>62</sup> In her 1947 Annual Report on the consolidation of girls’ education, Beasley paid attention to the question of adult education when she remarked: ‘No new tours were initiated in the campaign against Pharaonic circumcision, but a cheerful picture was brought out by the Publications Bureau and headmistresses were advised to use it whenever an opportunity occurred of approaching mothers on the subject. A British health visitor was appointed by the Sudan Medical Service and seconded to the Education Department to work with Miss Richards at Um Gerr’. Ina Beasley, Official Papers, SAD 657/2/27.

Following this visit, I headed for Nahud, where I stayed for ten days. I found enormous encouragement, no less than the support I received in El-Obeid. Women and trained midwives have pledged to refrain from Pharaonic circumcision. The wife of the prison warden had done the same. In fact, when I was invited to her home, I saw the written pledge that stresses her willingness to give up a practice in favour of clitoridectomy [Sunna]. She promised to preach the messages she heard among kith and kin. Following my talk, I read her pledge to the attendees.

I returned to El-Obeid and stayed this time for four days, during which I visited Bara. It is understood widely that the people, and I mean the women of Bara and Berber, are the most adamant about changing their customs and traditions no matter how detrimental they may be. On arrival, I found a very strong and negative propaganda about me. There was a laughable distortion of my efforts, for some believed that I was a traditional birth attendant who arrived to perform group circumcision. I followed the same plan of visiting women both at home and in the school. My home visits seemed to reassure women of the naked lies about my mission. The visit was very successful in this regard. I visited women during happy occasions and sad, and in country and town. Rights were emphasised and wrongs were dispelled; things started to flow naturally from there. I invited all the women I visited at home to honour me by their presence at a public ceremony in the school. I reminded them of time and date. When the specific time arrived, women started to pour in from Bara, thankful for the efforts and bidding farewell to me. One of the fathers did a great deed when he decided to agree that his daughters undergo the mild Sunna circumcision. I remained in Bara for the whole week.

I headed to El-Rahad, another place where women were saturated with negative rumours about me and Mrs. Beavers, the principal of the school in El-Obeid. The women yet again believed that she was a government midwife who came to inspect. Upon completion of the meetings, these rumours ended. El-Rahad is a very small township with 8000 in population. My visits to the schools, homes, and to mayors such as Omda Kubur and Omda Amir, who had 200 people living with him, were extraordinary. I was told about a man who circumcises girls there just like any midwife. He was believed to have trained himself when he started to cut his own girls when they reached the age of 8 months old. The Government has recently found out about him and I am confident that he will receive the suitable punishment. Overall, I stayed in El-Rahad for three nights. I was extremely delighted about it. Then I left for Um Ruaba, which like El-Rahad is a small area. I spent four days, after which my arduous journey came to a close.

I say that my journey was arduous because the assignments were truly difficult. I visited the mamur, the local mayor, where I met with women from different backgrounds. Things went splendidly. I will never forget the remarkable efforts of headmistresses, wives, administrators, and leaders who opened their homes and paved the way for my tour, assisting me to move in and outside of their towns with great ease.

My sisters, headmistresses and teachers: I am sure that you agree with me that the Government's measure is a step towards social transformation. It is a great step, which in my opinion is no less significant than their prohibition of slavery which our forefathers have practised. I wish the Government every success in undertaking this enormous step so that it can help us ameliorate this great suffering that would have consumed the energies of generations to wipe out completely. Rooted traditions are formidable. Please assist as educated women to reach our noble goals. Let's start fighting it by starting with our own home lest that we become an exemplification of what one poet had warned against: 'la tnhin an khuluq wa t'atti mithlahu, arron aliak is faalat atheem— لا تنهين عن خلق وتأتي مثله عار عليك ولو فعلت عظيم

Don't preach against vice and engage in it yourself, for this will be a great shame on you'.

**Sir Sayed Abel Rahman El-Mahdi, Speech at the conclusion of his Annual Marriage Festival in Omdurman on 17 July, 1944**



**Sayed Abdel Rahman**

Our neglect so far of all questions concerning woman has condemned her to the life of backwardness and stagnation, the inevitable fate of anything that is not tended by the hand of reform and progress. This neglect of woman, the failure to reform her conditions and to educate her mind, had led to a far-reaching evil in our social life. The year of marriage is for every man the beginning of an era in which he should take up the question of reforming women's conditions in all its aspects. Pharaonic circumcision is a shame and a degradation to women apart from being contrary to authenticated Sunna (the practice prescribed by the Prophet). Moreover, it has been condemned by medicine as harmful to health both psychically and psychologically, and as particularly injurious in childbirth. Cheek marking and the tattooing of lips is a survival from barbarous times, and a characteristic of backward nations. The torture involved in their practice is such as must revolt any man. Moreover, God has cursed both the tattooer and the tattooed. Why then do we maintain pagan customs condemned by God and Islam? Especially when we are the descendants of a nation from whom other nations received the light of culture. Woman is worthy of all respect and appreciation. She is the complement of your manhood and the repository of your honour. Do not neglect or despise her. Make her feel the self-respect of which she is worthy. Educate her mind and guide her to the right path according to your religion and good custom.

## **Sir Sayed Ali El-Mirghani of the Khatmia Sect**



**Sayed Ali El-Mirghani**

Countries throughout the world have their own customs which in the view of science and reason are either good or bad. The latter tend to disappear gradually as the minds of those who are addicted to them receive enlightenment. The Sudan is no exception to the rule; it has good customs and bad ones, and to the latter belongs female circumcision which is practiced in parts of the country. The medical authorities have condemned this custom as harmful and it is deplored in spite of that fact that it is ingrained in certain people's habits. There is no doubt that it will, together with other bad customs, disappear through enlightenment and education.

### **Bushra Effendi Abdel Rahman, Speech on 7 March, 1946**

Bushra Effendi Abdel Rahman became master of the Girl's Intermediate School in Omdurman in 1929. His early support for anti-circumcision efforts was important to the national campaign.

Dear Mothers and Sisters,

The Sudan is now in a stage of stopping many savage traditions such as scars, tattoos and mourning over the dead. These bad traditions are not only painful, but are also likely forbidden by our great Prophet. Why do we make changes in the creation of God? If God the Almighty believed that these scars and tattoos were of any use, he would have created them in us. How long are we going to continue these habits and believe in these superstitions and insist on them and continue the absurdity of what went on in pre-Islamic days? Omer, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Khalif, relates the story of practices that were absurd. He once manufactured an idol made of dates that he might worship. Pressed by hunger, he started to eat his God beginning with one hand, then another, a leg and so on until the obedient servant consumed his God. Our Khalif Omer used to remember pre-Islamic habits with disgust and pain. Why do we not follow his example since we know that he is an ideal? Why do we not stop our bad habits, which are even worse than those of pre-Islamic ages, and look at them with disgust and pain?

Dear Ladies,

You have no doubt heard of the Advisory Council which is made of the leading personalities of the Sudan and which includes Sir Sayed Ali and Sir Sayed Abdel Rahman. You have also heard of the long discussions in the topic of female circumcision. It was famously agreed by all the members of the Council and by the two Sayeds that Pharaonic female circumcision should not be practiced in the Sudan any longer. They have unanimously agreed that it has nothing to do with religion, humanity, or health and that it is a savage practice that should be condemned. The Grand Mufti quoted Um Attia who said, 'As I was once sitting with the Prophet one of the midwives of Medina entered and asked "O Prophet of God, what is your opinion about female circumcision?" He said "Do not go deep". This means that our great Prophet condemned Pharaonic circumcision.' When shall we have midwives like those of the Medina who act according to the order of the Prophet? We hope we will have such midwives in the near future if the mothers obey religious teachings. But where shall we find wise mothers, who fear God and the Prophet? Where are mothers who revolt against traditions and break to pieces the idol of ignorance? Where are those wise brave mothers who pay no attention to old, out-of-date grandmothers and put at the top their loyalties to their daughters, their country, their religion and humanity? How painful it will be for me if my cry may have no response. How painful it will be if we continue to be slaves of traditions though our mothers have borne us free!

I think of the tortures which were practiced soon after the Advisory Council's decision with regards to circumcision. Thousands of innocent very little children were circumcised, with casualties in some cases. Who will defend the poor creatures? If she cannot be defended by the knowledge we learned, by our religion and conscience, then she shall be defended by our wise government. The Advisory Council has passed a law preventing the Pharaonic practice. They have enacted that it should be looked upon like a major crime and any person who practices it shall be liable to serve penal punishment. I hope that our people shall be wise enough as to differentiate between what is good and what is evil. It will be more honourable if they follow the right way of their own rather than by force. You will agree with me that it is a step forward in our social reform. I hope that the government will succeed in this step as it did in the prevention of slave trade. The government needs the help of all of us, especially the help of the educated women and girls to fulfil its well-appreciated reform. We should start our campaign in our homes and then proceed to persuade others. We also earnestly beg that our countrymen will support us and help us. Their attitude at present is not encouraging. Their excuse is that such matters are women's affairs and they should have no say in them, which is not a sound excuse. If they realise the harms and tortures of circumcision, I do not think they would continue to be shy of talking about this matter. I do consider every man who assumes neutrality in this matter as cowardly and lacking in manhood. If we cooperate, man and woman will be able to eradicate this social disease. Let us go forward hand in hand to our duty towards our dear country that we may build its future on a sound foundation.



Translation of Script on Circumcision Poster.

Which of the two men do you believe Pharaoh the enemy of God or Mohamed the Prophet of God ?

Pharaonic circumcision is due to Pharaoh but the sunna comes from Mohamed, the blessing and peace of God be on him, which form of circumcision is the better ?

The holy men of the Sudan, for example Sayed Ali Mirghani and Sayed Abd er Rahman el Mahdi have agreed that Pharaonic ~~is~~ circumcision should be abolished. Is your opinion different from that of the holy men ?

The Reverend Mufti and the religions men have given a legal opinion that this custom should be abolished. Do you understand more than they do ?

The doctors have advised that Pharaonic circumcision may cause sterility. Do you wish for sterility ?

Your religion forbids doing harm to the body. Will you disobey your religion ?



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Poster and Translation

## Translated lesson on circumcision for fourth-year elementary school pupils

The Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan discussed the subject of Pharaonic circumcision from a religious point of view. We find that Islam enjoins kindness and mercy and that Islam's ways are easy and not difficult. In the ignorant pre-Islamic days the Arabs used to bury their daughters alive. This is cruelty, for which Islam substituted mercy and kindness upon daughters. It forbade the burial of girls alive and accorded to women their human rights. Islam swept away many of the barbarous, cruel customs which were followed by the ignorant. So when people become educated and versed in the tenets of their faith, they shed ignorance and give up bad ways. Religion is light and knowledge of religion is also light. Even under the five rules of Islam, such as prayer and fasting, if the performance of these would cause harm to human beings, religion has enjoined that duty should be given up. For example, if fasting should cause injury to a man it is obligatory for him to break fast for the good of his body. The same applies to a prayer, which is the mainstay of Islam. How can we fare if people continue a practice that has nothing to do with religion? In addition to the fact that Pharaonic circumcision is religiously objectionable, it causes untold injuries. Yet in spite of this people cling to it. There is enough evil in Pharaonic circumcision that it is attributed to the Pharaoh, of whom Allah [God] has said: 'And with Thamound who hewed out the rocks in the valleys and with Pharaoh the impaler, who all committed excesses in the lands' (*Koran*, Sura 89, p. 54, Rod Well 29). Whether or not Pharaonic circumcision may be attributed to the Pharaoh, his name is enough indication of injury and excess.

There is another form of circumcision, which is the Sunna form. The Moslems had advanced and set an example to the world of progress and civilization, but only when they followed the tenets of their religion and marched in light of learning and knowledge as to the powers now, and when they set aside superstition and out-of-date customs. It is vital that girls who are avid for learning should know that circumcision in any form is not known by and is nonexistent in the great majority of Indians and Chinese, who have millions of Moslems amongst them who do not know circumcision at all. Pharaonic circumcision has nothing to do with Islam, and the people who first practiced it called it Pharaonic. If it had any good in it they would never have named it after the Pharaoh, as we said before. The general public called it 'purification' [tahara]. But chastity in soul and body of a girl is much better and of more lasting nature than preserving a girl's chastity in a bodily tormenting way which cannot last. True religion can alone develop the spirit and inculcate virtues. This is what true Islam preached so that a girl can preserve her chastity in a permanent, honourable, and sublime way. True learning strengthens the soul through religion and makes out of spirit a bulwark for the body against falling into evils and excesses.

It is most beneficial that the body should be left always to grow at its natural rate and way. Only if it is afflicted with serious malady should a surgical operation be performed. In the rare case that is found necessary to have recourse to a surgical operation, it should be performed in a hygienic way. Pharaonic circumcision is bad and very cruel, and it causes unnecessary injuries to the body in addition to causing great pain. In the majority of cases it is performed in a totally unhygienic way and it may lead to grave illnesses. One of its direct and immediate evils is the great mental shock which it causes to the poor girl and the great fear during the operation.

## LEARNING FROM THE EDUCATION OF INA BEASLEY

Beasley's work offers invaluable lessons. From her perspective, the struggle for social rights was highly influenced by local contingencies, a lesson that continues to cut against the grain of conventional approaches to human rights. As Beasley demonstrated, these rights were subject to negotiation regardless of what linguistic, religious, or cultural spaces and national territories one inhabits. Beasley's ideas continue to be of current relevance and importance. Although much ink has been spilled over female circumcision and the questions it raised in regard to cultural difference and divergent notions of freedom, autonomy, and the body, to Beasley these issues were common knowledge. The intricacies of gender politics and the symbolic significance of bodily cleanliness, virtue, honour, marriageability, and chastity are all ideas that she took into account when efforts to abolish the practice started to materialise. Unlike many feminists, Beasley learnt first-hand from the communities in question how best to translate bodily integrity in ways that they could relate to. Beasley's systematic engagement with Sudanese girls had augmented her ideas that solutions to their dilemmas were ultimately in their hands. Her philosophy exemplifies what feminists call today the 'politics of location'. Nearly seventy years ago, Beasley understood positionality and the specific ways in which time and place must figure in any discussion about social reforms. To Beasley, consolidating and maximising opportunities for girls and women were not tantamount to enforcing a foreign model, an idea which she rejected as unsustainable and far-fetched. Beasley was equally aware of differential power and gendered hierarchies within the administration itself and had ventured on many occasions to call male officials on their biases. Grasping these power inequalities at the state and societal levels was clear in the way that she formulated the emphasis on rights and drew attention to the heterogeneity of women's experiences in the Anglo-Egyptian state, which as an educator, humanist, and supporter of women she understood within the larger structures of dominance and authority in all their layered complexity. From supporting a young woman in Halfa who was forcibly impregnated by a cousin and feared for her life for defiling the family's honour to organising a mass movement of education and gender justice, Beasley's career was studded with productive partnerships she helped forge throughout the Sudan. Her confidence in women was absolute. She worked synergistically, unencumbered by the negativity towards women that many harboured at the time. Thinking of Sudanese women as cultural brokers, she found a common language for addressing seclusion in its broadest symbolic sense. The point was clear: advocating for a child's right to health, education, and welfare did not mean overstepping cultural marks, and individual and communitarian group rights should not be held to be competing, unbridgeable notions. Freedom from fear and physical suffering should be embraced by the group rather than dismissed as foreign innovation. Copying European formulations had little chance of success in Sudanese settings. Beasley's unique perspective represented a departure from individualism as understood in liberal traditions. To Beasley, defending and advancing girls' and women's rights should not be seen as an imposition of alien, Western ideas on a society that has its own understanding of culture and social regulation.

Articulating education as a key for the promotion of rights was an effective way of challenging hereditary forms of social power. Beasley contended: ‘We do not want it to become a spectacular movement based on indiscriminating imitation of foreign models. The children have undoubtedly benefited from being left to develop unobtrusively and probably in the long run, if this can continue, the gain will be the general good’.<sup>63</sup> Beasley’s efforts were informed by her beliefs in human potential and capacity for change, notwithstanding the formidable challenges and structures of power that undercut fairness and equitable treatment. Her emphasis on the integrity of the body as a fundamental human right across cultures and societies has paved the way to significant conversations and dialogues, pledges and declarations, among the numerous forms of intercultural exchanges in which Sudanese and British expressed their opinions openly. As a progressive social reformer, Beasley’s defence of a rights-based approach was systematically negotiated, critiqued, localised, and rendered relevant to Sudanese modes of knowing. Her balanced approach in excavating potentialities of transformation and protecting girls’ opportunities to improve their existence is the most significant legacy of Beasley’s extraordinary career.

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<sup>63</sup> Ina M Beasley, ‘Education of Girls in the Sudan’, Broadcast in Omdurman (late 1942 or early 1943), SAD G//S 715 658/4/1-58, pp. 1-19.