

The Sudanese and the British – Shared History

A talk by Peter Everington at the Greencoat Forum, London, September 11th 2007

Like any two peoples, the Sudanese and the British often find it hard to understand each other. One evening in Wad Medani, the cotton town, I was taking several photos of the sun setting over the Blue Nile in flood, a sight of awesome beauty. A boy nearby said to his father, “Al khawaja da yusawwir ash-shams lei?” – Why is that white foreigner taking photos of the sun? The father replied, “Alashan ma indum shams fi baladum” – Because they don’t have sun in their country.

Some people have asked, “Are you going to say something about Darfur?” I’ll say this for a start. In the First World War a decree went out from the Caliph in Istanbul that all the Islamic world should support Germany against Britain and France and their allies. The Sultan of Darfur in the west of Sudan, Ali Dinar, declared war on the British. The British marched on his capital El Fasher, the Sultan was killed, and Darfur was absorbed fully into the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of Sudan. The intelligence officer on that campaign was called Geoffrey Sarsfield-Hall. Later he became District Commissioner of North Darfur in Kutum. When he ended his service in Sudan he brought home with him a rifle made in 1885 with a silver decoration on its butt, inscribed with the name of Ali Dinar.

When Sarsfield-Hall died his daughter Carol, respecting his wishes, offered it back to the Sudan as a gesture of good will. There was a small ceremony in the Sudan Embassy in London when she handed the rifle to the Ambassador. The story appeared in the Arabic press in Khartoum with a picture.

I can testify to numerous acts of solidarity between the Sudanese and the British peoples. In January last year my wife and I were among a group of 21 British with long connections with Sudan who were invited to the country to mark Sudan’s fiftieth anniversary of Independence. Among our party were some men in their late 70’s and early 80’s, former District Commissioners, who were greeted with great affection by Sudanese they had first known up to sixty years ago. Then a South Sudanese I had known well in London invited me to Juba for the first anniversary of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between North and South,

In the post-war years hundreds of Sudanese came to study in British universities. Often they and their young wives were mothered by their British landladies in Leeds, Sheffield, Nottingham, Bristol and all over. Then it was common for the landladies to be invited out to Sudan as guests of the families.

After Independence there were many British and others from abroad who were on contract for a number of years till our posts were Sudanised. For instance the Head of English at Khartoum Boys Secondary School was an Irishman, and there was a Scotsman, a Welsh woman, and an Englishman (myself) as well as a Sudanese in the department. When the Five Nations Rugby Championship came round in Europe, the rest of us persuaded the Sudanese to support France. For those British who wanted a social life with the Sudanese, it was all there for us. In my first Christmas and New Year holiday in Sudan, I stayed with four families in three towns. Amid the serious issues facing the country, it was an adventure and a lot of fun, and for me it still is.

I want to pay tribute to Sudanese in Britain doing good work in the National Health Service and other areas today, and to a new generation of British living alongside the Sudanese in teaching, the

relief of suffering, and other constructive tasks in Sudan. In the context of our diverse UK society, it is significant that a group of British Muslims are part of the relief effort in Darfur.

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Sudan is ten times the size of UK, as big as Western Europe if you leave out Spain, Portugal and Finland. When the Sudan Ministry of Education first took me on, I was sent an air ticket to Khartoum, but wasn't told which part of the country I would be in. That's like a Sudanese arriving in Paris from Khartoum to teach Arabic in Europe, without knowing whether he'll be posted to Naples, Oslo, Vienna or London. In fact I was sent to Port Sudan Secondary School on the Red Sea coast, a 27-hour train journey from Khartoum within the North-East of the country.

The governance of a country of that size, and that diversity of race, belief and language, would be a major challenge for anyone. And if there have been wars between North and South Sudan, and now tragically in the West, these should be compared to the catastrophic wars within Western Europe in the last two hundred years.

This talk is about the interaction of peoples, Sudanese and British, rather than the performance of governments. I maintain there is a Divine purpose for the world in which we can all find our part; and that a change of motive in the individual can have a bearing on national governance. Our task is not just to remedy what has been wrong in and between our peoples, but to celebrate what has gone right and see how it can be multiplied. British and Sudanese can criticise each other, often with justice. The greater challenge is to draw the best out of each other.

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There is a strand of Muslim theology which says that a great messenger will prepare the world for the fulfilment of God's kingdom. After his death the Devil will make one last bid for the soul of humanity. Then Jesus Christ will come for the second time and it will be the Day of Judgement.

In the 1880's for millions of Sudanese that messenger was Mohammed Ahmed El Mahdi, 'the one guided [by God]'. In five years he raised a revolt against the corruption of the age, as he saw it, ending with the capture of Khartoum and the death of the British Governor-General Gordon, who was ruling on behalf of the Khedive of Egypt. The Mahdi died in 1885 but is revered to this day as the first liberator of Sudan.

For millions of British, General Gordon was a Christian hero and martyr, whose tragic death justified the invasion and re-conquest of Sudan. This fitted the imperial strategy of establishing British rule from Cairo to the Cape, countering the French strategy of an empire from West to East.

When the British invaded Sudan in 1898, it was obvious to many Sudanese Muslims that they represented the forces of the Devil, following the great messenger. In the next years there were a number of rebellions against British rule in the west of Sudan, led by individuals who claimed to be Jesus Christ in his second coming.

A cheerful retired judge called Mohammed Saleh Shangitti once told me the story of a District Commissioner, in those early years of British rule, walking round a town in the morning to make sure the market was clean and the streets orderly. Everyone stood up as he passed, except for one man who

remained lying in the shade of a tree, and spat loudly. “Ya zol, ta’rif ana min?” shouted the DC. Hey you, do you know who I am? “Aiwa” came the reply “Inta kafir”. Yes, you’re an unbeliever.

The person who was expected to lead a rebellion against the “unbelievers”, but didn’t, was the one surviving son of the Mahdi, called Abdel Rahman. Something happened in this young man’s mind around 1910 that led to a different relationship with the British.

It came to his notice that the individual British were setting about the tasks of government with an integrity and humanity that seemed very similar to the Muslim virtues. Alongside the indignity of foreign occupation, he came to see there was a moral and spiritual dimension in the West to which his people could safely relate. It was a new image of the British for him. As a patriot, he made the pragmatic choice of peaceful economic and educational development for Sudan’s path to Independence, rather than the road of renewed violence.

One result of this policy was that the Sudanese as a whole, in defiance of the decree from Istanbul, supported Britain in the First World War, and in the Second as well. If you go to the Allied War Cemetery at El Alamein in Egypt, you can count at least fifty Sudanese names, carved either on headstones or on a wall naming those who have no known grave. And El Alamein is only one of many Allied war cemeteries in Egypt. On Remembrance Sunday in London each November 11, it is just the Commonwealth High Commissioners from other countries who lay a wreath at the Cenotaph. I would like to see one day the Sudan Ambassador, if he so wishes, also laying a wreath in honour of the brave men of his country who gave their lives alongside the British in Eritrea, North Africa, and other places. That is still an important part of our shared history.

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Ahmed El Mahdi is the one from whom I heard about his father Abdel Rahman’s changed perception of the British. He is the eldest surviving grandson of the Mahdi, and I’ve learned a lot from him in the nearly fifty years we’ve known each other. I am glad his daughter Dr Zahera is with us this evening.

It must be quite a challenge having a family name that means “guided by God”. Here is one example of how Ahmed el Mahdi exercised that quality to my knowledge. It was during a period of military rule when the Mahdi family, their followers the Ansar, and their political party were in disfavour with the Government.

The Prophet’s birthday “Moulid” fell in January that year. Within the capital there were major celebrations in Khartoum, Khartoum North and Omdurman, those three towns grouped round the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile. Ahmed as Commander of the Ansar Youth had to visit all three, and he planned to visit Khartoum North first. Then he discerned an inner voice telling him to go to the Omdurman Moulid first. What he didn’t know was that a serious fight had just broken out between the police and the Mahdi followers in the open square in Omdurman.

I was in the Omdurman square myself till half an hour before the incident. It had been a wonderful open air occasion on a warm evening. Colourful lighting of great tents, with chairs and tables inside them for the different denominations to gather their followers. These were interspersed with stalls selling pink sugar figures for the children. Thousands of families milling around peacefully having a good time and, overshadowing all, the silver dome of the Mahdi’s Tomb.

Suddenly a posse of police arrived on horseback with a provocative show of force. Some of the Ansar rushed them, and the police shot at least one of them dead. The crowds panicked and fled from the square. The police retired to a ditch at the edge of the square and fired intermittently over the heads of the Ansar. These Mahdi followers went to their tent, broke up the furniture, and armed themselves with table legs and chair legs, ready to go and finish off the police.

It was at this moment that Ahmed El Mahdi arrived on the square and walked through the line of fire without any idea of what had been going on. His followers crowded round urging him to lead them into battle. But after hearing the story he told them, "What has happened is criminally wrong. We will complain to the Government tomorrow and see justice is done. Go to your homes now." They dispersed. That action stopped a potential civil war. If fifty Ansar had been killed in Omdurman, possibly fifty thousand Ansar from Darfur and Kordofan could have marched on the capital. The Government thanked him and apologised. I went to see Ahmed a day or two later and he told me the inside story. For me it was an education to observe how God's guidance, as perceived and obeyed by one person, can have an influence for good on how a nation goes.

Some years later I came to Omdurman with a group of British students, all from Christian backgrounds. Ahmed El Mahdi invited us to his home and gave us a warm welcome, and the story of the Moulid was told. He spoke of meeting Frank Buchman, the founder of Initiatives of Change, in his student days, and of the statesmanship he felt called to.

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I arrived to teach in Sudan in 1958, two and a half years after Independence, and less than two years after Britain's invasion of Egypt, the Suez War. There was hostility to some of Britain's actions and policies, but a respect for British people. There were stories of kindnesses. Khartoum Boys Secondary School, for instance, had once been British Army barracks. The sweepers and cooks in my day were elderly men who had worked for the British. I was told how a British Army captain had given £100 (at least £1000 in today's money) for one of these sweepers to go on pilgrimage to Mecca.

Muslims believe in the perfect humanity of Jesus as the only human being who lived without sin. I have noticed that when a Christian carries out some simple act of kindness, the comment from Sudanese Muslims is often "shuf al-insaniya kaif". "Look at the humanity of that". A Muslim friend of mine who works in an Arab country said to me, "We need the 'rahma', the compassion of the Christians." If you look at the areas of social breakdown in the UK, I say we need the compassion of the Muslims.

For me the exciting challenge in Britain is how Muslims and Christians – also Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and other people of humanitarian instinct – can practise their beliefs alongside each other in schools, offices, the market, in the context of what our society needs.

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Early on in Port Sudan Secondary School, aged 24, I had discipline problems. As a new teacher who made mistakes, I tried to bluff my way out, and lost authority. I was close to resigning. IofC suggests that, when you're faced with apparently difficult people, you write down 'absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love', and do a security check on your own character first. After a time of meditation along these lines at home one morning, I walked into my class and said sorry to the boys for my dishonesty; in future I would admit it if I didn't know the answer to a question. There was a

stunned silence, and no more discipline problems for the next eight years teaching. The story went round the town about this Englishman. The Sudanese young cotton classifiers in the hostel where I was living asked, “What made you apologise?” One of them made the same experiment. He put it into practice in his profession, and was the first Sudanese to become Chief Classifier of the Gezira Scheme. Omer El Jak was his name.

Sometimes the boys I was teaching would ask, “What is the difference between us and British boys?” My reply was, “Britain is a cold country, and when young men fall off their bicycles it is usually through going too fast. Here in this hot country Sudanese boys fall off by going too slowly. There is another difference. In Britain when the subject of absolute moral standards comes up, people often say ‘philosophically, there is no such thing as an absolute standard’. They mean ‘So I don’t need to try and live it’. In Sudan if you mention absolute moral standards Muslims say ‘That is in all our holy books, so of course we live it’. But they also fall off the bicycle sometimes.”

In the interfaith action we’re called to, we need a culture of honesty about where we fail. The Bible says, “Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another to be healed.” Christians can do that with Muslims, and vice versa. Amid our significant theological differences, we can still each call on the One God for the mercy we need. From that process comes the deeper friendship and cooperation.

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One failure of the British was in leaving Sudan at Independence in conflict between North and South. Up to now I have been talking of the Northern Sudan, predominantly Arab and Muslim. The other half of the story is the African South, following Christianity or African religions. South and North have been at war with each other for 31 out of Sudan’s 51 years of Independence. Mercifully two years ago the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed between North and South with the help of Kenya and other countries. It is a magnificent achievement. Obviously it is the North and South Sudanese people themselves who have to implement it and bring full reconciliation. Together they can then apply it to the Darfur situation.

The British owe it to Sudan to cultivate a robust non-partisan friendship with both Southerners and Northerners to help make the peace secure. I think of one British person in particular who has done this called Jim Baynard-Smith. I am glad he is with us today. Before Independence he did National Service with the British Army in Sudan, and ended up as ADC to the Governor General. While in Sudan he had an experience of change from what he saw was an arrogant attitude to the Sudanese. This led him, after his student years at Oxford, to a life of service and amazing friendships in Sudan and other independent countries of North-East Africa. Ahmed El Mahdi was a groomsman at his wedding. Equally he was a close friend of a well known South Sudanese politician called Buth Diu.

Buth Diu was a Nuer from Fangak in South Sudan. He grew up, like all South Sudanese of his day, with the tribal memory of the slave trade. The Arab hunt for slaves in East Africa had the same traumatic effect as the European slave trade in West Africa.

The bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire has been deservedly celebrated here. It has also thrown up an unease that lurks, a reminder of shameful things that once happened, but also the failure of many of us who are white to acknowledge the legacy of attitudes still with us. Too often there is covert racism and exclusion, creating disadvantage that some fail to admit or are blind to. Without such acknowledgement, and readiness to change, there is a question whether,

as the majority group in our country, we can achieve a genuine comradeship with Africans and those of African descent in the diaspora. I believe we can, and the more we work at it the more we will have to share with the rest of the world.

Buth Diu never went to school for a day in his life but got a lowly job with the British District Commissioner that included cleaning his shoes. He taught himself to speak English and to read and write and type. Then he became interpreter for the DC, an influential post, and later he founded a political party. He was Minister of Works in Sudan's first Government after Independence. A tall man with a great sense of humour, he was also publicly known for his alcohol problems and his rage at the Northern Sudanese.

The Prime Minister Abdullah Khalil sent him with a delegation to Caux, the Swiss Conference Centre of Initiatives of Change. There he was inspired by the presence of people of other African countries who had written and acted in a feature film called 'Freedom'. He caught their vision of what an Africa liberated from fear, hate and greed could do for the world. And he shared a room with another Englishman called David Hind, who to his amazement cleaned his shoes.

One day Buth Diu stood before the assembly of six hundred people in Caux and apologised to the Northern Sudanese for his hatred, and pledged himself to work for this new Africa. Back in Sudan he cut out the alcohol, and a new affection came into his family life. He entertained people from North and South in his Khartoum home, using the film 'Freedom' and other films, to inspire them with his new commitment to struggle for justice without personal hatred. I was his projectionist. I also introduced him to a young civil servant called Dr Mohammed El Murtada Mustafa. Murtada was a skilled arbitrator in the Ministry of Labour who had solved many industrial disputes by applying the concept of "not who is right but what is right". With Buth Diu he explored how this could be related to grievances between North and South.

Those were rough years for Sudan, with a military government in Khartoum, and civil war growing in intensity in the South. But Buth Diu and Murtada kept up their dialogue on national issues amid a widening circle of friends. They helped lay the groundwork within Sudan for the peace that was eventually signed by General Lagu with the National Government led by President Numeiri.

Buth Diu died soon after that 1972 Peace Accord. Murtada was given the job of writing Sudan's 5-year Plan after the Peace. Some of his Northern Sudanese friends said, "Why did you devote a special chapter to the South?" He replied, "We have the heritage of the slave trade in our history. We in the North need to make a special effort to consolidate the peace." Later he became Director of the Ministry of Labour, and afterwards ILO Regional Representative, first in Zimbabwe, then in Cairo. I nearly always stay with his family in Khartoum, as he usually does with my family when he comes to London.

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During the siege of Khartoum by the Mahdi in 1884-5, General Gordon struck a medal to encourage the defenders. Years later Geoffrey Sarsfield-Hall got hold of one of these medals, and it was the centrepiece of his Sudan collection at his home in Cumbria. January 1985 was the 100th anniversary of the death of Gordon in Khartoum, an event marked by the British press. Carol Sarsfield-Hall felt inspired to give that Gordon Medal to Ahmed El Mahdi. I was the courier who put it into his hands in Omdurman with a message from her that read:

“Today I thank God that Christian and Muslim alike we are called to fight side by side against the forces of evil in the world – which are but an enlargement of the forces of evil in our natures, selfishness, greed, ambition, fear, hatred – there are so many. God can unite us by speaking to our hearts, and helping us to go forward together to find his Plan. I give you this Gordon Medal in appreciation of the long association between Britain and Sudan, as a bridge between our two faiths, and as a token of how much we feel for you and your country these difficult days.”

Ahmed El Mahdi responded, “I am deeply moved to receive this gift and the sentiments of the letter. They are in accord with an interview I recently recorded for Radio Omdurman. I said that our destiny is to continue on the path of reconciliation with former enemies in Europe that my late father pioneered. In particular we Muslims must have a fraternal spirit with the Christians in our country and abroad.”

Stories from a shared history of two peoples may be useful for those working for a shared future, and on a larger canvas too. Last January in Australia I met young Sudanese from South and North who by honesty and a change of heart have fashioned tools of reconciliation to take back to their mother country. In this country we have benefited from visits by a Nigerian Imam and Pastor who, out of a drastic change in their own lives, have established an interfaith mediation centre of great value in Kaduna. A DVD of their work ‘The Imam and the Pastor’ is circulating in Britain and coming to the attention of the Sudanese. In UK there are also people from other countries of the Horn of Africa doing a quiet but heroic work to bring their peoples together.

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Once in Omdurman I took a taxi to the home of someone in a village. It was off the scheduled taxi run and when we got there I asked the driver how much to pay. His reply was “hasab damirak” – according to your conscience. Perhaps he hoped that my conscience would indicate a larger sum than he felt prudent to ask. No doubt he would have corrected me if my conscience had fallen short of his expectations. Looking back, I see it as a compliment across the cultural divide for him to believe I had a conscience that could be invoked. I still take “hasab damirak” as a sign that, amid our differences and failings and the dangers we face, the good Lord can guide the Sudanese and the British to what is right for a shared future.

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