

RECENT BOOKS

A SUDANESE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF TRIBES AND GENEALOGIES

Mawsū'at al-qabā'il wa'l-anṣāb fī 'l-Sūdān by °Awn al-Sharīf Qāsim, Khartoum: Maktabat Āfiruqrāf [Afro-Graph] 1996, 6 volumes.

The work under review is the latest important contribution of Professor °Awn al-Sharīf Qāsim, who is a prolific writer and one of the Sudan's leading experts on Arabic language and literature.¹ For a review of this work, a recent stimulating article by Heather Sharkey provides a suitable starting point, for in this she draws attention to the twentieth-century Sudanese Arabic biographical dictionaries as an historical source.² She examined the works and provides the most thorough survey of contemporary Sudanese Arabic biographical dictionaries to date. I cannot resist the temptation of following Sharkey's model and thus suggest ways in which °Awn's encyclopaedia adheres to or departs from earlier patterns of *ṭabaqāt* as well as from biographical dictionaries of the 'Who's Who' type.

°Awn's encyclopaedia consists of six volumes that embrace 2628 pages. In his twelve-page introduction, which is incorporated in the first volume, °Awn states his purpose and objectives of compiling such a work. He also mentions

- 1 Among his many books are, *Ḥalfāyat al-mulūk: Qāmūs al-lahja al-°ammiyya fī 'l-Sūdān* and *al-Mawsū'a al-islāmiyya*.
- 2 Heather Sharkey, 'Ṭabaqāt of the Twentieth-Century Sudan: Arabic Biographical Dictionaries as a Source for Colonial History, 1898-1956', *SAJHS*, 6, 1995, 17-34.

the scope or coverage, the criterion of inclusion, arrangement of the various entries and hints on how to use his encyclopaedia.

ʿAwn’s encyclopaedia has its own history. It had its origins in the mid-1980s when he was collecting material for two of his other contributions, namely, *Ḥalfāyat al-mulūk*, which is a sort of regional biographical dictionary of the Halfāya region north of Khartoum North, and *Qāmūs al-lahja al-ʿāmmiya fī ’l-Sūdān*, ‘A Dictionary of Sudanese Arabic’. Among those who appreciate the value of this indispensable source for Sudanese studies is R.S. O’Fahey, who followed its forms in writing Sudanese personal, tribal and place names.

Having revised and published these two works, ʿAwn’s ambitions grew and he began to plan for a project with a wide scope. His encyclopaedia appeared after more than ten years of active research and preparation.

There has been no shortage of studies on tribes, genealogies and noteworthy persons and places names in the Sudan. Much research has been done during the past decades. The results, however, are scattered and often inaccessible. As Sharkey points out, Richard Hill felt this problem a long time ago when he said in the preface to his second edition of his *Biographical dictionary of the Sudan*,

Little books are born in the Sudan by the dozen, without imprints without date, even without title page. They circulate for a brief season and die without trace.

Scope and coverage of the encyclopaedia

ʿAwn states in his introduction that his original intention was to mimic his first encyclopaedia in including the major ethnic groups, important place names and noteworthy individuals deceased before the present day. The author, however, felt that bringing together such material and bringing them up to date would make his work more useful. Thus his encyclopaedia covers all of the Sudan and spans

ancient and present times.

Sources

It is evident that ʿAwn has made good use of a wide range of published material in forms of books, articles and journals, newspapers and pamphlets. This is in addition to his exhaustive and thorough research of primary sources deposited in the National Records Office, Khartoum, or still in private holdings with some families and individuals in the Sudan. ʿAwn combines written sources with oral ones where information was obtained through meetings or conversations with informants.

For whom the encyclopaedia is intended

It is obvious from ʿAwn's introduction (I, 16-17) that he has attempted to present his encyclopaedia as a source and research tool. It is designed to meet the needs of scholars, researchers, students as well as general readers. Thus, ʿAwn tends to avoid numerous footnotes that usually put off the general reader.

Arrangement of the encyclopaedia

The author does not follow a thematic or subject classification or arrangement for the entries of the six volumes. He prefers to arrange his entries in Arabic alphabetical order, irrespective of their subject matter. Thus entries on tribes, noteworthy persons and important place names are arranged together.

Cross-references are used to lead the reader from names that are familiar to alternate names that may not be. Internal cross-references also appear frequently within entries, where they are identified by the Arabic letter *mīm* to denote 'see' or 'see also'.

Points of strength and weakness

ʿAwn's encyclopaedia embraces all entries given in previous biographical dictionaries in the Sudan, both in English

and Arabic. It supersedes them by additional and more up-to-date material obtained through the author's exhaustive archival research and personal communications. He also devotes several entries to groups and individuals previously neglected.

In a work of the present scale and complexity one must expect limitations and shortcomings. It is, however, somewhat disappointing that some of his entries are short and there is considerable unevenness in the quantity and quality of information. No-one is better aware than °Awn himself that it is the availability of data that determines the length of a particular entry. He also admits the inadequate research base for some of these entries on information available.

To follow Sharkey's model one may state that in some of his entries, °Awn has preserved certain features of the *ṭabaqāt* of earlier patterns. In some of his entries he relied on oral sources for information. Such entries may be criticised for their anecdotal nature. Curiously, the author, who is indeed an eminent scholar, is aware of this weakness. He admits in his introduction that he did not endeavour to verify or test the reliability and accuracy of information presented by some informants. Being aware that opinions on the reliability of information might differ very considerably, he preferred to include information as acquired. He justifies this on the grounds that they would stimulate future research that would no doubt change and refine some of what is written in the encyclopaedia. The author has already started preparations for a volume 7, which will be devoted to additions and corrections.

Overall, however, there is a very useful source of information, in which many potential groups of readers can each find many important elements.

°Alī Ṣāliḥ Karrār