

HOLYMEN ON THE NILE

Holy men of the Blue Nile: The Making of an Arab-Islamic Community in the Nilotic Sudan, 1500-1850 by Neil McHugh. Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1994. \$49.95

Neil McHugh's *Holy men of the Blue Nile* presents the story of Islamic leadership in the northern riverain Sudan and its role in the formation of an Arab-Islamic consciousness. It focuses temporally on the 1500-to-1850 period, and geographically on the lower Blue Nile basin, the heartland of the Funj sultanate. *Holy men of the Blue Nile* offers fresh historical interpretations for the processes of social, political, religious, and economic change that unfolded over the course of this 350-year timespan. It will appeal not only to historians of the Funj and Turco-Egyptian Sudan, but also, and more broadly, to those concerned with the issue of Sudanese identity formation over time.

Chapter One of McHugh's work belongs on a recommended reading list for students and scholars of Sudanese history. It provides a thoughtful historiographical overview of identity formation and social flux in the northern riverain Sudan from the collapse of the Nubian kingdoms to the nineteenth century. The subsequent chapters become considerably more technical as they explore the role and development of Islamic leadership in the Blue Nile region after 1500. (In many ways one can see in these chapters a dialogue carried out with the works of Jay Spaulding on Funj history, and notably with Spaulding's *The Heroic Age in Sinnar* of 1985.)

Two significant contemporary sources provide much of the author's evidence: namely, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt*, the famous biographical dictionary of Sudanese holymen compiled by Wad Dayf Allāh (d. 1804); and the Funj Chronicle, a body of untitled historical manuscripts written in the early nineteenth century. European travellers' accounts, as well as nineteenth- and early twentieth-century archival materials and Arabic treatises, add to the evidence. Supplementary data comes from interviews conducted with descendants of the holymen and their followers. Six

appendices discuss some of the sources and chronologies in detail.

The 'holymen' of McHugh's study represent a loose ensemble of Sudanese Islamic practitioners, including itinerant ascetics, Sufi shaykhs, legal experts, and the like. McHugh envisions the Blue Nile holymen as pivotal figures who thrived during a transitional epoch, in an economic periphery, and at a geographical frontier. In the early Funj period the Muslim holymen were few in number and limited in influence, were reliant upon the patronage of the ruling elites, and were important primarily for their intermediary role *vis-à-vis* Muslim merchants involved in long-distance trade. Muslim holymen and merchants alike gradually consolidated their position and increased their numbers. Their social influence grew even while the Funj state began its decline in the years after 1718.

As the sultanate's power steadily deteriorated in the eighteenth century, and as political chaos and lawlessness came to characterize the age, Muslim holymen stepped in to fill many of the functions previously performed by the Funj state. The tax-exempt communities (*khalwas*) controlled by lineages of prominent Sufi shaykhs became *loci* of economic and social stability. It was in this period of turmoil that Muslim holymen, more influential than ever before, began to remake society in accordance with Muslim conventions as understood in the Central Islamic lands. McHugh regards the era of Funj decline as a critical period for the articulation of an Arab-Islamic consciousness on the part of the Blue Nile holymen.

McHugh endorses the view of the Turco-Egyptian era as a *bona fide* colonial period that was characterized more by harshness, exploitation, and corruption than by benevolence. He believes that together the Turco-Egyptian era (1820-81) and the Condominium era (1898-1956) represented 'an unusually prolonged period of colonial subjugation' in Africa, interrupted for only thirteen years by the Mahdiyya (p. 1). He also modifies P.M. Holt's interpretation of status decline for Sudanese holymen, *vis-à-vis* 'ulamā' imported from abroad, in the years between 1820 and 1881. While it is true that Sudanese holymen did lose their status as the sole interpreters of the Islamic reli-

gious sciences, McHugh argues that they retained their popular prestige and indeed gained new economic opportunities as social intermediaries for the Turco-Egyptian regime. He also contends that the Turco-Egyptian regime hastened a process already underway, i.e., that of the northern riverain Sudan's absorption into the broader Arab-Islamic world.

By explaining the changing role and influence of Muslim holy men from 1500 to 1850, *Holy men of the Blue Nile* provides an answer to the question of how the northern riverain Sudan came to see itself as part of a larger Arab and Islamic world. However, the book is *not* able to provide an answer to the unwieldy question of how, or when, or even *if*, this Arab-Islamic identity came to be seen as a dichotomous half, posed against a non-Arab, non-Muslim south (see p. 1). Does its manifestation in the historical literature largely derive from a legacy of colonial historiography (for example from Harold MacMichael), as the author suggests in the opening chapter? Or is it the bitter fruit produced by the Turco-Egyptian regime, which through policies such as institutionalized slave raiding, 'sanctioned the Arab-Muslim elements in Sudanese society while radically depressing the status of non-Muslim (hence non-'Arab') elements' (p. 187)? The book does not suggest a third possibility: whether the holy men themselves contributed to the cleavage of the dichotomous divide in the process of creating their Arab-Islamic identity. The Blue Nile holy men were a lucky bunch; they alone of the Sudanese peoples possessed literacy (in Arabic) in the 1500-to-1850 period, and hence they alone recorded much of the history on which today's historians base their work. The power that they gained through literacy still bears down on Sudanese history. McHugh argues that when scholars like Yūsuf Faḍl Ḥasan speak of Arabization and Islamization as the twin processes gradually absorbing a southern periphery into a northern core, they show the influence of colonial historiography *à la* MacMichael. It would be closer to the truth, however, to say that such scholars betray the influences and limitations of the extant sources themselves. The hegemonic power commanded by the Muslim holy men through literacy inevitably means that interpreters of Sudanese history in the 1500-to-1850 period must grapple with

the historiographical legacy of the Muslim, Arabic-writing northern riverain Sudan, as indeed *Holy men of the Blue Nile* shows. Attempts to invert this power structure, such as by evaluating the cultural, political, and economic impact of the Nuer, Dinka, Shilluk, and others in their northward migrations during the same period (see p. 13), will be blocked by the barrier of literacy.

On the purely aesthetic level, *Holy men of the Blue Nile* will appeal to historian bibliophiles thanks to its unusually attractive format. Its appeal will also rest on solid academic ground. *Holy men of the Blue Nile* is a well-researched and thought-provoking study of the Islamic practitioners in the northern riverain Sudan who provided an element of continuity and stability in the face of political flux, while shaping an Arab-Islamic consciousness in the communities they served.

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