

SUDANESE (AND SOME OTHER) SOURCES
FOR ERITREAN HISTORY
A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE*

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Introduction

Apart from Italy, the former colonial power, and in the absence of a national archive in Ethiopia, who occupied Eritrea between 1956 and 1991, the Sudan is probably Eritrea's richest source both for archival material, governmental and otherwise, and for writings by Sudanese that contain material relevant to the study of Eritrea's past. The present survey is divided into two parts, a survey of topics and, secondly, a bibliography of items referred to in the first part. Most of the printed and much of the manuscript material (particularly emanating from the Khatmiyya and Majdhūbiyya *ṭarīqas*) will be found in the various collections in Bergen.

This is a vast subject, so I have, particularly in regard to the secondary literature, limited myself to more recent publications from Khartoum. For the earlier materials, a good starting point is *al-Fihris al-muṣannaf* (see further bibliography at end).

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The National Records Office in Khartoum

The National Records Office (NRO: *Dār al-wathā'iq al-qawmiyya*)¹ has its origin in the Condominium period (1898-1956), when the Civil Secretary's office inherited the papers and books relevant to the Sudan assembled by Egyptian Military Intelligence, set up by Kitchener and Wingate in Cairo as part of their preparations for the 'reconquest' of the Sudan.² After the conquest of the Sudan in 1896-99, there was added whatever Na'ūm Shuqayr, a key figure of Lebanese origin in Egyptian Military Intelligence, could find in Omdurman of the records of the Mahdist state (1885-98), following the battle of Karārī in September 1898. For most of the Condominium period these records remained in the Civil Secretary's library. Just before the independence of the Sudan (1 January 1956), the Sudan Government decided to establish a government archive. The books and journals were given to what later became the University of Khartoum, where they formed the basis of The Sudan Collection, while the files and papers formed the basis of the Central Records Office (CRO: *Dār al-wathā'iq al-markaziyya*). The first archivist was P.M. Holt, who was succeeded by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm,³ who upon his retirement in 1994 was succeeded by °Alī Ṣāliḥ Karrār, the present (2002) Secretary-General of the NRO.

A practical matter: as far as the present writer is aware, the NRO is open to all *bona fide* scholars who apply with an appropriate letter of recommendation from their home institution.

The archives of the NRO are huge, numbering upwards of 22 million items. These include Condominium govern-

1 P.O. Box 1914, Khartoum, The Sudan.

2 And whose papers are in the NRO under the general heading 'CAIR-INT'.

3 See further R.S. O'Fahey and Anders Bjørkelo, 'The Writings of Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm', *SAJHS*, 1, 1990, 11-18.

mental records, the records of the Mahdist state, literary manuscript collections, legal and commercial records of all categories.⁴ Virtually every category will contain material relevant to Eritrea.

On early times

One, somewhat obscure, work that is indispensable for the study of the medieval Red Sea coast is Vantini's *Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia* (Heidelberg 1975). 'Nubia' is here defined as including Eritrea and Ethiopia. In this work (825 pp.), Father Vantini provides translations of all the sources relevant to the area he found from Cosmas Indicopleustes (547 AD) down to *The Funj Chronicle* (c. 1870). Although one may quarrel over some of the translations, the work is crucial. In a footnote on p. 469 he translates a marginal note found in a manuscript of al-Nuwayrī (d. 1332), *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, recording events in Sawākin and 'Ḥabasha' from 1066/1655-6. An earlier compilation of sources that also contains much on the region is Enrico Cerulli, *I Etiopi in Palestina*, Rome 1943-47.

On the Beja

There is, of course, a very substantial literature on the Beja. Here I want to introduce the writings of an indefatigable self-taught chronicler of their history, customs, tribal and clan divisions. He was Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ b. Ḍirār °Alī of the Milḥitkināb clan. He was born in 1892 and was educated in Sawākin at both Qur'ānic and Government schools. He worked for many years in the Eastern Telegraph Company⁵

4 For a partial description of the literary collections, see Geoffrey Roper (ed.), *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts*, London 1994.

5 See further R.S. O'Fahey, 'Some recent Sudanese biographies, memoirs and histories (including music): A bibliographical note', *SAJHS*, 6, 1995, 148-9. A later employee of the Eastern Telegraph Company was Muḥammad Sa'īd Nāwad, one of the founders of the Eritrean Liberation Movement and author of the fundamental *Ḥarakat taḥrīr Iritriyā*, n.p., n.d.

in Port Sudan, but devoted his whole life to the study of the Beja, travelling all over the Eastern Sudan and Eritrea, at first with his father and later on his own, collecting genealogies, oral traditions, and similar. He himself says, 'I did not overlook any inhabited or known watering-place in the land of the Beja. I met the people and their shaykhs from °Aydhāb and Halā'ib in the north to Karōra in the south'.⁶ He died in 1972. Some of his writings have been published in recent years by his son, Dirār Ṣāliḥ Dirār (see list below). His most important work is undoubtedly his history of the Eastern Sudan. He is acknowledged as a crucial informant by A. Paul in the latter's history of the Beja.⁷

Sir Douglas Newbold, onetime governor of the Red Sea Province, who died in Khartoum as Civil Secretary in 1945 was apparently intending to write a history of the Beja.⁸ His papers, which were partly used by Paul, are deposited in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University.

I have listed in the bibliography some other items relevant to the Beja and Rashāyida.

The Funj period

There are two groups of sources, not of Sudanese origin, that will undoubtedly be relevant to Eritrea. The first were generated by the attempts in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries by Franciscan friars to penetrate to Ethiopia from their base at Akhmīm in Upper Egypt. These accounts were published by the late Fr. Gabriele Giamberardini, who established in Cairo a Centro Francese di studi Cristiani Orientali. The two most substantial items are the travel accounts of Giacomo d'Albano and Ildefonso da

6 Quoted by his son in the introductions to the various works of his father that he has published.

7 A. Paul, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, Cambridge 1954.

8 On Newbold, see K.D.D. Henderson, *The Making of the Modern Sudan* (London 1954), who has much to say on Newbold's views on Eritrea.

Palermo. The letters of the Apostolic Prefects are of importance, but many are in ecclesiastical Latin.

The late Professor Cingiz Orhonlu devoted part of his career to exploring Ottoman records on Africa. His major work (see bibliography) was an account of the Ottoman province known as *Habesh eyalati*, which was formally constituted as a province in 964/1557, comprizing Lower Nubia and much of the southern Red Sea coast as far as Zayla^c.⁹ The heart of the province were the ports of Sawākin¹⁰ and Maṣawwa^c. Orhonlu's book includes a considerable body of documentation in Ottoman Turkish printed in facsimile together with a modern Turkish version. Professor Orhonlu was planning to make his work more accessible to a non-Turkish-speaking audience, but sadly died before he could complete the work. A translation of the book into English would be highly desirable. Talhami's book (see bibliography) focuses on the period 1865-1885, when the province had been transferred to Egypt.

The Islamic connection

The dominant Sufi tradition among the Muslims of Eritrea derives ultimately from Aḥmad ibn Idrīs (d. 1837), a Moroccan mystic and teacher who was one of the most influential figures in nineteenth-century Islam.¹¹ In regard to Islam in Eritrea, Ibn Idrīs' importance lies in his student, Muḥammad °Uthmān al-Mīrghanī (1793-1852), who came from a prominent Hījāzī Sharifian family and who later founded the Khatmiyya *ṭarīqa*. Sometime early during Ibn Idrīs' years in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina (c. 1803-28), Muḥammad °Uthmān came to him as a student on the mystical path; they were to have a complicated and difficult relationship that has left its mark on Eritrean Islam. Some-

9 See *EI* (2), III, 11.

10 See Albrecht Hofheinz, 'Sawākin', *EI* (2), IX, 87-9.

11 On him, see O'Fahey, *Enigmatic Saint: Ahmad ibn Idris and the Idrisi Tradition*, London 1990.

time before 1229/1813-14, when Ibn Idrīs and al-Mīrghanī moved to Upper Egypt, the former is said to have sent the latter to Baqla in Eritrea. This is probably Baqla, otherwise Rora Baqla, a region southwest of Nakfa in northern Eritrea. Many of the local Muslims were initiated by him. The same Sudanese source implies that there was earlier link between the Mīrghanī family and Eritrea in that the grandfather of the man who subsequently became the Khatmiyya *khalīfa* at Maṣawwa^c had met Muḥammad ʿUthmān's grandfather, ʿAbd Allāh al-Maḥjūb al-Mīrghanī (d. 1207 or 1208/1792-94), who was a prominent scholar of his day.¹² The same source says that Muḥammad ʿUthmān incurred the hostility of the local ruler who allegedly attempted to poison him and the former hurriedly returned to Mecca.¹³ Whether or not Muḥammad ʿUthmān visited Eritrea, the Khatmiyya influence in the region was consolidated in the region when Muḥammad ʿUthmān's son by a Sudanese woman, Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Mīrghanī (d. 1286/1869) established a centre at the foot of Kasalā Mountain in the late 1840s.¹⁴ When the Khatmiyya centre was established at Keren is not certain, but a great-grandson of Muḥammad ʿUthmān, Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad Bakrī b. Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. after 1950?), settled in Keren after the death of his uncle, Hāshim al-Mīrghanī (d. 1319/1901), who had spent much of his life in Maṣawwa^c.¹⁵ An interesting later connection lies

12 On him, see *ALA*, I, 180-5.

13 See further O'Fahey, *Enigmatic Saint*, 147-8. The Sudanese source on which my account is based had not been published when I wrote this book. Subsequently it was edited and published by Dr Abū Salīm; see bibliography under Aḥmād b. Muḥammad al-Naṣayḥ.

14 See *ALA*, I, 204. An Italian colonial source discovered by Jonathan Miran gives a long and circumstantial account of Muḥammad ʿUthmān's travels in the eastern Sudan and Eritrea. This has yet to be compared with the Sudanese sources, particularly *al-Ibāna al-nūriyya*. When this is done, we should have a better understanding of Muḥammad ʿUthmān's involvement in the region.

15 *ALA*, I, 208-9.

in the early career of Eritrea's greatest Muslim scholar, Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār b. °Umar (1909-69), *muftī* of Eritrea from 1940 to his death, whose early education was fostered by the Mīrghanī family of Kasalā.¹⁶ A history of the Khatmiyya presence among the Muslims of Eritrea has yet to be written; there are Arabic sources in abundance.

As a footnote to this section, Albrecht Hofheinz has analysed a collection of Arabic manuscripts held in the archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that evidently was brought to Italy from Eritrea, although the manuscripts appear to be of Yemeni provenance.¹⁷

The nineteenth century

The nineteenth century was the great century for travellers in northeastern Africa. The imposition of Turco-Egyptian rule over most of the Sudan, however painful for the locals, opened up much of the country to European and American travellers. Much of this literature was reported in the journal *Petermanns Mitteilungen*. Gunnar Sørbo has made a list of some three hundred entries from the journal,¹⁸ while O'Fahey has listed some hundred entries from the *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie* of Paris.¹⁹

The Mahdiyya

The Sudanese historian, Muḥammad Sa°id al-Qaddāl, who comes from Kasalā, has written authoritatively on Sudanese/Ethiopian relations in the Mahdist period (see bibliography).

16 See Jonathan Miran, 'Grand mufti, érudit et nationaliste érythréen: note sur la vie et l'œuvre de cheikh Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār (1909-1969)', *Chroniques Yéménites*, 2001 (forthc.).

17 Hofheinz, 'A Yemeni Library in Eritrea: Arabic manuscripts in the Italian Foreign Ministry', *Der Islam*, lxxii, 1, 1995, 98-136.

18 Gunnar Sørbo, *Sudan Sources 1: Petermanns Mitteilungen*, Bergen 1973.

19 O'Fahey, 'Sudan Sources: Bulletin de la Société de Géographie', *Bulletin of Information, Fontes Historiae Africae*, 9/10, 12-24, 1985.

Together with M.I. Abū Salīm, he has also edited the 'official' Mahdist account of the Qallabāt campaign in 1888 that culminated in the battle of al-Matamma and the death of Yohannes IV, namely Ismā'īl b. 'Abd al-Qādir al-Kurdufānī, *al-Ṭirāz al-manqūsh bi-bushrā qatl Yuḥannā malik al-Ḥubūsh*.

Before discussing the non-literary materials, let me note a peculiarity of the Mahdist records. The Mahdist state was a messianic Muslim state that had inherited the bureaucratic apparatus of a modernizing colonial power, namely the Turco-Egyptian regime (1821-1882). Thus, it inherited clerks, account-books, paper and a printing-press, in addition to steamboats, telegraph lines, and so on. What is surprising is that it used them; both the Mahdi (d. 1885) and his successor, the Khalifa 'Abdallāhi (d. 1899), were surrounded by and made use of members of the old Turco-Egyptian administrative elite.²⁰ Thus a messianic Muslim state left behind a very substantial body of bureaucratic paper (a guess would be about 250,000 items).

All the writings of the Mahdi—administrative, legal and religious—have been edited in seven volumes by Dr Abū Salīm.²¹ Abū Salīm is currently engaged in editing, in a probable twenty volumes, the outgoing and incoming correspondence of the Khalifa. These will comprise about 8,000 pages.

But these writings concern the central administration of the Mahdist state. Much less research has been carried out on the thousands of legal and commercial documents in NRO. There survive, for example, nine volumes of the *sijill* or court-records of the court of Kasalā. To my knowledge, these have not been looked at.

20 See further, Anders Bjørkelo and Ahmed Abu Shouk, *The Public Treasury of the Muslims*, Leiden 1996.

21 Cf. bibliography, under Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī.

The Condominium

It is impossible to describe the range of material in the NRO from the Condominium period relevant to Eritrea. The only way to discover what is there is to go to Khartoum. One indication of the scale is *The Public Records of Kassala Province, Sudan (1898-1966)*. This catalogue of 475 pages, the result of a Franco-Sudanese co-operation project, lists 2,884 files, of which thirty deal specifically with Eritrea, but a perusal of the volume reveals hundreds of casual or indirect references. Given the close ties between the Kasalā region and Eritrea, this is hardly surprising.

The Contemporary Period

Given the close involvement since 1956 of successive Sudanese governments in the affairs of the ELM, ELF and EPLF, it seems to me to be impossible to write on the latter movements without access to Sudanese writings, which again are abundant. It is impossible to survey this material here, but I will end by noting that since the late 80s and throughout the 90s, there has been a very impressive outflow of memoirs, biographies, military and intelligence histories by Sudanese actors on the political scene (some are listed in my article of 1995, but much more has appeared since). Proximity will engender concern and interest; as between the Sudan and Eritrea this is an enduring fact as anyone who has had the pleasure of attending an Eritrean wedding reception in Asmara will discover; in listening to the music of Eritrea, one is inexorably drawn back to Khartoum.

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I have listed Arab names in their given order.

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- Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Ḍirār: the following lists the various relevant writings of Ḍirār:
- *Amīr al-sharq, 'Uthmān Diqna*. Khartoum: al-Dār al-Sūdāniyya li'l-kutub, n.d. (the author's name is given, incorrectly, as Muḥammad Sulaymān Ṣāliḥ Ḍirār).
 - *Hayāt Tajūj wa'l-mulḥaq*.
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