

Review of Heather Sharkey's Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2003)

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Heather Sharkey's Living with Colonialism is a welcome contribution to the history of colonial Sudan and the country's transition to independence. The book is organized around the double paradox of the clerical class of Gordon College graduates. First, while the clerks were educated in order to better serve the colonial regime, they were a key group in bringing about the regime's sudden demise. Second, while the clerks educated themselves and others in the ways of nationalism, imagining a people pursuing a common welfare, they were key abettors of the ensuing civil war that has traumatized the country. The argument is neat, and Sharkey's mastery of the details to support it is impressive.

The book opens with a nice introductory chapter, a hodgepodge of definitions and clarifications of what is meant by colonialism and nationalism, notes on sources, location of the book's focus on local clerks in Sudan's historiography, and plea for greater appreciation of the relevance of history to contemporary society. Historians, according to Sharkey, write narratives of the past that are used in discourses of the present.

The next chapter takes this view of history seriously, and presents an extended discussion of how the term "Sudanese" came to mutate from pejorative- signifying 'black, of slave origin'- to praiseworthy. Sharkey's discussion matters a lot: racializing and ethnicizing discourses remain quite prevalent in Sudan today. It is well-worth reminding the occasional glib northern government official of the military regime in Khartoum– Sudan's equivalent of the 'dominant paradigm'– that his identity as Sudanese was something constructed by his grandparents during the colonial era, primarily in reaction to a set of incentives put in place by the British. Sudanese, according to Sharkey, came into being as anti-Egyptians. (See Eve Troutt Powell's book on Egypt and the Sudan.) The British administration increasingly soured on Egypt, and local clerks quickly saw the advantages of presenting themselves as something different, as having loyalties in a different place. No romantic imagining of the nation here, but rather a more prosaic, "Why not?" A country badly in need of pragmatism and tolerance needs to take this lesson of history the right way: identities can be deliberately crafted, and there is room for lots of optimism that imagination can overcome the charged nightmares of the past generations.

Once the identity got going, however prosaically, the romantics did contribute their fair share to spreading the word. The next chapters in the book show how much of the work of spreading a new identity was theorized and carried out by Gordon College graduates. Sharkey first shows how self-conscious the Gordon College group was: their education was a real "acculturation" into a new way of thinking about themselves and their place in society. They were the first to participate in organized team sports, to live day-to-day the choices and restrictions on choices of western vs. local clothing, the first to participate in an active "culture of words" that was no longer exclusively focused on Islam, the first to enjoy the "culture of pictures" rendered possible by photography and motion pictures, and the first to create what would evolve into "civil society", the amalgam of semi-formal associations and clubs by which dense social networks are sustained. Sharkey appropriately highlights the technological changes, especially in communication, that made possible the mutual sharing of these experiences across

cohorts of Gordon College graduates. Even though they were dispersed across the colony, their virtual or “imagined” society flourished via letters and publications.

Sharkey then shows how the self-conscious Gordon College elite turned away from assimilation or emulation towards resentment and nationalism. By the middle of the colonial period the British were quite unwilling to follow-through on the implications of empire, with its gradual internal logic of blurring of boundaries and nationalities. The Sudanese subjects were to remain in their place, quietly accepting rule by a small group of British wise men. Even late in the colonial period many of the British were unable to countenance equality of opportunity in the civil service, based on merit, between British and Sudanese. Not surprising then that literary magazines and personnel files of the clerks and inspectors were brimming with nationalist sentiments. The spirit they cultivated was to influence the tenor and pace of decolonization. In the minds of the British, the *effendi* were to gradually displace the fanatics as the threat to the regime, and then become its natural inheritors.

Finally, a short but controversial chapter, “The nation after the colony” lays out the thesis that the nationalist Gordon College elite failed their own powers of imagination, in conceiving a Sudan too conveniently like themselves. Any variation from their Arab and Islamic-tinged idea of Sudan-ness, Sharkey suggests, was going to have a tough time of it. The proof in the pudding, Sharkey argues, was the nationalist's confused and disjointed stances towards their own sisters and wives, the women of northern Sudan. The Gordon College graduates-- much like their British overseers-- took for granted that the position of women, like that of “alien” tribes, had to be defined, debated and resolved in the new Sudanese nation. Wasn't that the job of the ruler, after all, to tell everyone else how to live? A sad commentary that they could not escape the impulse to unreflective judgement so prevalent among the colonial rulers who formed them.

The only criticism I have of the book is methodological. Sharkey has presented a persuasive argument about the role of the nationalist elite of Gordon College graduates. No one can seriously doubt that their ideas and actions played a role in shaping Sudanese history. But how influential was the role? Here, we would need some benchmark. Unfortunately, Sharkey's history of this one social group leaves no room for comparison with other social groups. Three in particular are omitted. First, are the traditional and religious authorities- tribal leaders such as *omda*, *nazir*, and leaders of Sufi *tariqa* such as the Ansar and the Khatmiyya. The descendants and followers of the Mahdi family, for example, and their role in shaping the transition to independence, are nowhere mentioned. Second, is the army. Sharkey is right that the Gordon College bunch were the “first heirs to national leadership” (p. 94), but their stewardship was short-lived. Army officers contested the bequest, and quickly secured the inheritance. Can there be any doubt that they took control of shaping Sudanese history after independence? No matter how much the educated elite want to give themselves the illusion that they are really running the country, at the end of the day the man who sitting in the palace has almost always been an army man. Yet, Sharkey has no discussion of this man's (THE man's?) relationship with the Gordon College graduates, his views on 'being Sudanese' and his legacy inherited from the colonial system. Third, are the other key players of Sudanese urban society, the educated but non-Gordon College cadre of workers, who perhaps were at the forefront of popular (rather than elite) agitation and mass movement. Part of their history has been recently written up by Ahmed Sikainga in his study of Atbara railway workers, and that book is a useful complement to Sharkey's work.

I would be the first to say that, “You whetted but did not satisfy my historical curiosity,” smacks of praise by faint criticism! The book is thoroughly enjoyable reading- plenty of

interesting anecdote, stimulating theoretical reflection on the big picture, and a clear, consistent argument. It should weather the test of time as a useful model for future historical work.