

SLAVES IN COLONIAL SUDAN

Slaves into Workers: Emancipation and Labor in Colonial Sudan by Ahmad Alawad Sikainga, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press 1996, xvii, 276 p. ISBN 0-292-77694-2

This is a very interesting and well-written study which attempts to discuss not only the process of slave emancipation in the Sudan, but also the fate of the liberated slaves in the Three Towns and their role in the emergence and shaping of the Sudanese labour movement. In that respect, the book is a valuable addition to the existing literature and should be seen as a companion volume to Taj Hargey's yet unpublished thesis on the suppression of slavery in the Sudan from 1898 to 1939.

After a brief introductory chapter on slavery and labour in the precolonial Sudan, Sikainga devotes Chapters Two and Three to the discussion of slavery and labour issues generally in the Sudan and then, more specifically, in Khartoum until the end of the First World War. Against the background of the structural constraints and ideological stipulations of the colonial government which did not challenge the way slavery was traditionally seen by the Sudanese dominant classes, the author discusses two central points: how enslaved elements were massively enlisted in and later discharged from the army, and how they were seen by the government as a suitable source for hard and unskilled labour. Both sets of policies, we are told, were underpinned by evolutionary assumptions which clearly distinguished between enslaved Africans and Arab freemen. In relation to the area of Khartoum Sikainga goes into more detail, showing how the city provided the government with a labour reservoir which would not only handle—with the 'assistance' of the Vagabonds Ordinance, the establishment of the Central Labour Office and a registration system—the

rebuilding of the capital, but would also provide much needed labour for the rural areas.

In the fourth chapter, Sikainga studies the legacy of slavery from 1920 until 1956 arguing that the emancipated slaves remained stigmatised as the prevailing social values were not changed by abolition and other legal measures. Then, in the fifth chapter, leaving aside the emancipated slaves for the moment, the author focuses on colonial labour policies concerning the formation of agricultural labour and the immigration and settlement in the country of thousands of West African labourers who mainly worked in the Gezira.

It is in the last chapter of the book that Sikainga returns to the question of the relationship between freed slaves and the labour movement showing the existence of a strong link between slave emancipation, ethnicity and labour. Arguing that the ex-slaves cannot be seen as a distinct class on their own, Sikainga sees them as one of the vital parts which, together with pre- and post-Second World War migrants, and wage and nonwage workers, came to constitute a mass of subalterns who, far from being powerless and timid, were the creators of a vibrant popular culture. That gave rise to new forms of artistic expressions and political practice which influenced the emerging labour movement.

There are, however, two closely interrelated points where Sikainga's study could be criticised. The first concerns the relationship between ex-slave and freeborn workers which is not problematised but taken as a given. I certainly agree with Sikainga that the ex-slaves cannot be seen as a class on their own, distinct from the other groups and social categories which comprised the lower social classes of early twenty-century Sudanese subalterns. However, this does not mean that within the context of this mass of subordinates the distinction between the emancipated slaves on the one hand, and the poor Arab migrants and wage workers on the other, was non-existent. Sikainga himself acknowledges that due to the hold that pre-abolition traditional values continued to have on

dominant perceptions in the Northern Sudan, these two social groups never came to share views and attitudes in matters of every-day activities and political practice. But, really, what did that mean at the level of ideology and quotidian experience? To my mind, Sikainga's discussion of everyday life in the *dayms* or of the formation and course of the Black Block as a—failed, I would think—show-case of ex-slave political agitation does not go beyond the level of description and, consequently, does not help us to clarify how the ex-slaves-turned-into-workers' aspirations fitted with the vision of their Northern Arab counterparts.

To a large extent, this is so because Sikainga does not seem to acknowledge that the ex-slaves, simply doing what they always did during their long years of servitude, had developed a very special subordinate discourse of their own which differed from that of their fellow freeborn workers and was, as a rule, registered through a multitude of indirect and symbolic practices rather than through openly discursive and overtly political activities, such as pamphlets, newspaper articles, parties and political rallies.

This brings me to the second point of criticism of Sikainga's study. For me, the inattention to such indirect and symbolic practices *as instances of a subordinate discourse* precariously articulated with a more generalised discourse of a labour movement is the result of Sikainga's undue emphasis on textual sources of information. I find it strange that Sikainga bases his otherwise informative and clearly argued analysis on the testimony of only nine informants and that he has not consulted the numerous anthropological sources on the problems of subordinate discourses and indirect practices of resistance. As modern literature has made it clear, researchers should not allow themselves to approach their subject exclusively in terms of the dominant discourse which, at least in the case of slavery, is what archives and most secondary sources usually reflect. Being indirect and symbolic by nature—what James Scott has called 'hidden transcript'—the

discourse of slave descendants should not be treated as if it were something else. Worker organisations then, and open political activities, should be regarded as nothing more than the tip of the iceberg.

More generally, Sikainga's relying mainly on official and secondary published and unpublished sources reflects what I think is an old-fashioned approach to history which sees sources as bits of 'real', 'truthful' information that come from the past. In an anthropologically sensitive history the past is not seen as something that is necessarily objective and given. It is rather something that is continuously created and re-created by those who are involved in its construction *in one way or another*. And in the case of the Sudan and the institution of slavery such an understanding of the sources, of history and of the past in general would have given us a more subtle 'version of reality' than that offered by Sikainga's already rich and evocative study.

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