

Men and women making history always people the buildings in *Al-Khitat*; they do not sit as silently as the beautiful but muted monuments in the Comité's photographs. As we have seen, slaves fight, protest, conquer, or submit to domesticated lives in the ornate and complicated pages of *Al-Khitat*. Their own languages are lost, their identities oversimplified by Arabic terminology, but they are not silent—we just have to turn to sources other than 'Ali Mubarak to really hear them.

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Babikr Bedri's Long March with Authority

My grandfather used the edge of his gown to wipe away the tears that had run down his face from laughing so much, and after giving me time to settle myself into the gathering, said, "By God, that's some story of yours, Wad Rayyes." This was a cue to Wad Rayyes to continue the story my entrance had interrupted. "And afterwards, Hajj Ahmed, I put the girl in front of me on the donkey, squirming and twisting, then I forcibly stripped her of all her clothes till she was as naked as the day her mother bore her. She was a young slave who'd just reached puberty—her breasts, Hajj Ahmed, stuck out like pistols and your arms wouldn't meet round her buttocks. She had been rubbed all over with oil so that her skin glistened in the moonlight and her perfume turned one giddy."

Her weeping would be made the subject of one of Wad Rayyes' famous stories about his many women with which he regales the men of the village. The rage in my breast grew more savage. Unable to remain, I left; behind me I heard my grandfather calling but I did not turn around.

Tayib Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*

This chapter moves south from Cairo to the northern Sudanese society of Babikr Bedri. Babikr Bedri was a young man at the time 'Ali Mubarak was completing his *Khitat* and faced social transformations in Sudan that were equal to, if not more dramatic than, the 'Urabi rebellion or the British occupation of Egypt. During those same years, a massive rebellion known as the Mahdiyya had swept across northern Sudan, inspiring its followers with religious revivalism and anti-Egyptian protests.¹ The Mahdiyya launched Babikr into a public life that would last for many decades. And, like 'Ali Mubarak, when he grew old, Babikr Bedri put his life down on paper. In

his memoirs, the cultural topography of Sudan in the late nineteenth century comes alive, with power and sensitivity akin to 'Ali Mubarak's great imagination.

The differences between the two men are multiple and dramatic, yet in each man's narration, similarities between them emerge. Like 'Ali Mubarak, Babikr Bedri came from a deeply religious family, and his early education took place in a *kuttab*. Profoundly faithful, Babikr also learned to respect and eventually promote secular education as a critical step for Sudan's development; this would become his great mission. Both authors directly addressed their readers, asking for judgment or sympathy; both hoped to demonstrate how they reached spiritual maturity. Each man imbued his memoir with a strong sense of connection to his own community: 'Ali Mubarak to Egypt, and Babikr to the newly independent nation of Sudan.

Other similarities between the two contemporaries are that both had to negotiate vastly different kinds of authority and belief systems as they became prominent professionals, and British authorities often stood in each of their ways as they tried to pursue their careers. Babikr had been a strong believer and soldier for the Mahdi, and after the British conquered Sudan in 1898, he had to struggle against British regulations and limitations in order first to work as a trader and then to become an educator. 'Ali Mubarak struggled with the threat to Khedive Tawfiq's authority once the British had occupied the country. Babikr wrestled with British authorities over the intellectual legacies of the Mahdiyya and over control of the secularization of the Sudanese educational system.

Whereas the arc of 'Ali Mubarak's younger life was sharply altered by the example and influence of a former slave, the path of Babikr Bedri's life was transformed by his increasing sympathy for women in Sudanese society. The many slaves in his life, however, marked him differently. Slaves passed in and out of every aspect of his life. This brought no shame to him in his lifetime or to his legacy. Babikr is remembered and highly respected in Sudan for being a pathbreaking educator. He founded the first secular schools for girls and the first college for women, Ahfad College. His memoirs contain an unparalleled look at the cultural and social life of Sudan through three of the country's most significant political eras—the Mahdiyya, the defeat of the Mahdiyya after eighteen years, and the

institutionalization of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, when the British assumed control of the administration of Sudan. As we shall see, many scholars, myself included, have written about the political and social importance of Babikr Bedri's *Tarikh hayati* (The story of my life). But few have discussed the many experiences with slavery and slaves that Babikr included in *Tarikh hayati*. He did so as an insider, addressing, like 'Ali Mubarak, other insiders who would understand his relationships and his history; he wrote his memoirs in Arabic with a Sudanese Arabic-speaking readership in mind, and these achieved much acclaim. For this audience, no apologies were necessary about the presence or ownership of slaves. Slaves punctuated every phase of his life, and he included them fastidiously in the details of his experience. This chapter therefore takes a different approach to Babikr's account of his life, to examine how he wrote about the many slaves in his life and why.

The Master Narrative

Babikr Bedri began writing his memoirs in Arabic in 1944 and finished them nine years later, months before his death at age ninety-four.² By the time he died, his decades of work in education had made him a broadly respected figure in a country on the cusp of independence (Babikr died three years before Sudan achieved independence). As a young man in his late teens, he joined the religious movement of Muhammad Ahmad, the Mahdi, and participated in the siege of Khartoum in 1884–85. During the years between the fall of the Ottoman-Egyptian administration of Sudan and the British reconquest, Babikr became a merchant. Once the British took over governance of Sudan, he worked for many years as a daring and creative educator in Khartoum under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium and pioneered education for northern Sudanese Muslim girls. The first volume of his memoirs describes his youth, most notably his years under the Mahdiyya, and Babikr makes the voices and faces of his early life quite vivid. Even in English, it is clear that Babikr could hear those conversations of many years past; in the Arabic version, the rhythms and vernacular of late nineteenth-century northern Sudanese culture vibrate through the text. As his son described, Babikr wrote his memoirs in a style quite unlike that of his professional writings: "The vocabulary and style also of the Arabic

which he uses in this first volume—very different from those of his educational writings or of his account of his later life—reflect the outlook of a young man in an unsophisticated and bygone environment."³

This vibrancy and color affected almost all of the reviewers who enthusiastically noted the memoirs' historical significance. In a review article that explored the state of historiography on Sudan, G. N. Sanderson wrote that the publication of the autobiography was "an event of great importance for the historiography of education in the Sudan, and of social history generally" (Sanderson actually wrote the historical introduction for the second translated volume of *Tarikh hayati*).⁴ Another commentator, Nasr el Hag Ali, wrote in 1967: "There is no trait of Sudanese society and no element that makes the life of the individual, spiritually or physically, that cannot be traced to what the characters in Babikr Bedri's autobiography did, said, or experienced."⁵ Elizabeth Hodgkin noted that the memoirs were not written until well into the author's old age, yet they have "the freshness of a totally unselfconscious recall, with the result that many of the anecdotes throw a most illuminating light on the contemporary attitudes to women, parents, travel, food, marriage, tax evasion and death." She reviewed the first volume in translation and noted how fresh the language was "in the way they keep a Sudanese 'feel' and yet are in a convincing English doggerel."⁶ Talal Asad paid close attention to where Babikr fit into Arabic historiographical and literary traditions, noting that "there is nothing quite like these memoirs in the first-hand literature on the Sudanese Mahdiyya." The other accounts Asad includes (such as that of Na'um Shuqayr, a Syrian chronicler of the Mahdiyya) "lack the vivid detail of everyday life and the sense of immediate involvement in the social upheavals."⁷ Asad goes so far as to say that the moving way in which Babikr described triumphs and misfortunes exudes "the zest and wit reminiscent of some of the best stories of *A Thousand and One Nights*."⁸

Talal Asad's comments lead to the question of the literature that Babikr read, and how he situated himself in traditions of writing about the self. Throughout the first volume of his memoirs, he makes reference to classical Arabic poetry, such as the poems of al-Mutanabbi, to emphasize his point or his analysis of a particular situation.⁹ In other examples, he read canonical Arabic works on history for pleasure. He regularly read the *Muqadimma*

of Ibn Khaldun) aloud to an appreciative friend.¹⁰ He composed love poetry to one of his wives along the model set by the medieval Arabic tale of *Majnun Layla*.¹¹ Books mattered to Babikr. Whenever possible, he packed them away. They provided refuge from stress and offered lessons for battles and struggles he was about to confront. Not long before the battle of Omdurman, in which the Mahdist forces led by the khalifa would face a much stronger British-led army, Babikr retreated into the world of the mind:

I read the poems of Ibn al-Farid with the commentaries of al-Burini and al-Nabulusi, much of the Koran commentary *al-Kashshaf*, the first volume of al-Shihab's marginalia upon al-Baydawi's Koran commentary, al-Jamal's gloss on the *Hamziyya* and al-Bajuri's gloss on *al-Burda*. I also had al-Zawzani's commentary upon the *Mu'allaqat*; but I was not particularly attracted to it—not because of any defects in it, but because it did not stir one's heart to religious fervour as did Ibn 'Abbad's book on *al-Hikam* of Ibn 'Ata'allah, which I continued to pore over until I had almost memorized all the sayings. For men were preparing their souls for death; and daily the news of terrifying happenings deafened one's ears. You could not join any gathering where you were not asked for news, and even if you invented it people would believe it and spread it, though they had reason to suppose or even knew for certain that you had invented it.¹²

If Babikr could take advantage of his clearly substantive library to fortify himself both spiritually and intellectually with classical Arabic books, there is no reason not to consider that he took advantage of the same rich intellectual heritage when constructing his life in manuscript.

Nicole Grandin perceived in Babikr Bedri's autobiography a historic and literary revolution, because stylistically it broke with what she saw as a Muslim tradition "in which a biography can only be a hagiography" and where the literary form of autobiography is "unknown in classical Arabic literature." She asserts that Babikr Bedri "adopted a Western tradition" and that he therefore positioned himself on the cusp of two different traditions of self-narration.¹³ His choice of autobiographical style came from his ethic about cultural reality. The memoirs were written when the British were in firm control of the Sudanese government and he himself was increasingly in conflict with them; thus, Babikr had become "a Sudanese personality in public view, for whom the work of modernization and the self-development

of education were at the same time a boon for his people and a weapon against the colonial power."¹⁴ Grandin considers that by writing his life out in this way, Babikr gave his life a "militant coherence" that narrated the daily life of a Mahdist's jihad while also continuing to participate in a jihad. Grandin sees Babikr writing "under the 'I' native to the West, foreign to his own culture" as a kind of "ruse of war" in which the author legitimized those who fought against the British, in the literary framework, if not the exact language, of the British.¹⁵

The idea that Babikr would use a Western literary trope as a linguistic weapon against the British is both interesting and provocative, but I disagree that autobiographical writing has no antecedents in Arabic literary traditions; we have seen in Chapter 1 that 'Ali Mubarak Pasha, like his historical predecessors, inserted autobiography into his *Khitat*. I would go further to argue that the very nature of the struggle between Egyptian forces, the Mahdi, and the British inspired a small but politically powerful set of memoirs, written by the turn of the century, by important Egyptian, Sudanese, and European figures.¹⁶ Although Nicole Grandin does not mention them in her article, other men were caught between these political forces in the late nineteenth century and had to negotiate with British culture over the terms in which they narrated their lives.

One of the most famous of these was the northern Sudanese trader al-Zubayr Rahman Pasha, who in 1874 seized control of Darfur and with great efficiency made it a center of the slave trade between Sudan and Egypt. The victims of this enhanced trade, those kidnapped in raids and sold from his compounds, were predominantly non-Muslim, non-Arabic-speaking members of some of the region's tribes. At that time, Egypt controlled most of Sudan, though its hold on Darfur was fragile. The Egyptian ruler, Khedive Isma'il, had recently enacted laws drawn up in negotiation with British politicians and the powerful lobby of the Anti-Slavery Society that prohibited the trade in slaves in both Egypt and Sudan. Al-Zubayr's success as a raider, trader, and government administrator embarrassed Egypt's monarch and increasingly complicated relations between Great Britain and Egypt. News of al-Zubayr's slave raids reached and provoked audiences in Great Britain concerned with slavery's abolition in the Nile Valley, and humanitarian activists in organizations like the British Anti-Slavery Society directly petitioned

the Egyptian khedive to exert as much effort as possible to exterminate the trade and make Egypt and its territories a "free country."¹⁷ Isma'il responded to these petitions and pressure by hiring General Charles Gordon to conquer Darfur, in the name of stamping out the slave trade, and, once subdued, the defeated Zubayr Pasha was committed to house arrest in Cairo.¹⁸

Western accounts of al-Zubayr's activities in Darfur described them as violent acts committed by Arabs against vulnerable and victimized black Africans, and this was worsened by the "toleration of Arab governors."¹⁹ But even as the personification of the evils of slavery, al-Zubayr Pasha fascinated English audiences. He was both vilified by and perplexing to the English press. Gordon had chased him out of Darfur in 1876, much to the satisfaction of the Anti-Slavery Society in England. Gordon, in fact, wrote many entries in his diaries about al-Zubayr Pasha, and these diaries were almost immediately published after Gordon's death in Khartoum in 1885.²⁰ Contrary to the expectations of the Anti-Slavery Society, however, these entries were deeply respectful of al-Zubayr's leadership abilities; Gordon repeatedly and strongly recommended to the British government that al-Zubayr be appointed governor of Sudan, as the only possible counter to the forces of the Mahdi.²¹ Here is one example (out of approximately nineteen in the first volume of his journals) of Gordon's estimation of al-Zubayr: "We choose to refuse his coming up because of his antecedents in *re* slave trade; granted that we had reason, yet as we take no precautions as to the future of these lands with respect to the slave trade, the above opposition seems absurd. I will not send up A. because he will do this, but I will leave the country to B. who will do exactly the same."²²

After the British occupied Egypt in the fall of 1882, al-Zubayr was removed from house arrest and sent to Gibraltar. And there, in 1887, the young and soon-to-be famous female journalist Flora Shaw, who had begun her career writing about slavery and would end her professional life as the wife of Lord Lugard, colonial ruler of Nigeria, discovered the great slave trader in exile. They conducted many long interviews, meeting once a week for four months. Shaw described the scene in which they sat opposite each other at his house—al-Zubayr by the window, smoking, "dark, slight, tall, looking all the taller when he rose for the draperies of Eastern dress." She sat opposite him, where she "industriously scribbled."

And most vividly, she described the people moving in between: "Between us the interpreter, on whom the whole story depended, sat bending forward, equally attentive to one and the other; while round our chairs black servants, some of them natives of the countries of which we spoke, stood in attendance. When the narrative grew dramatic, they listened eagerly. Now and then, on a question from the Pasha, one or the other could offer some bit of information about his country or people."²³ Even though Shaw worried that the interpreter did not speak English very well—"I realize there must be many discrepancies between what was told and what was heard"—she presented the interviews as al-Zubayr finally telling, in his own words, his dramatic story.²⁴

The life that emerges is one fully shaped by the slave trade. Shaw dismissed al-Zubayr's self-proclaimed origins as so much snobbery: "Amongst the Arabs it appears that a man is not held to be of noble birth unless he can count back his ancestry, as such, for ten generations."²⁵ She was much more interested in how he arrived at monopolizing such a large sector of the trade. Al-Zubayr Rahman Pasha may have committed crimes against slaves, but Shaw was not persuaded by the humanity of those caught up in the trade. She rationalized al-Zubayr's actions by placing him in an African context characterized by deep and far-ranging barbarity. "In order to understand his own view of the work he did," Shaw wrote, "it is necessary to understand the condition of the people over whom he ruled." Shaw described these people as almost "all blacks" and cannibals in a cultural situation in which slavery "was already flourishing, in the outlying provinces, and man-hunting was everywhere a common practice, whether for purposes of eating or selling." The only occupation these Africans had, she claimed, was fighting—"their ignorance was indescribable."²⁶

In his answers to Shaw, al-Zubayr justified his conquest of Darfur with the explanation that he "had opened new channels for the commerce of the civilized world" and that by ordering the roads and allowing caravans to pass through, he had played a role in the suppression of "man-hunting."²⁷ She noted with irony that these same objectives were shared by General Charles Gordon and that "it was a curious experience to hear Zebehr Pasha speak of these same things as not only his ideal, but in some degree the accomplished work of his lifetime."²⁸ So successful was al-Zubayr, in fact, at

creating better systems of trade and communications between the "chiefs and slave-hunters" of Darfur that everyone profited from his leadership, unfairly earning him his "wide reputation for slaving."²⁹ The Zubayr Pasha who emerges in these pages refused to connect himself directly with responsibility for the slave trade. Shaw presented herself as a polite but tough interlocutor, and al-Zubayr insisted on his own integrity:

It was upon entering into these commercial questions that we first spoke freely about the slave trade. The Pasha absolutely denies that participation in it with which he is usually accredited. I spared him none of the reports generally spread about him on the subject. "I am not a baby, and I thank you for being honest with me," was his answer to an apology with which I prefaced the reading of the hard passages which refer to him in Gordon's early letters and diaries.³⁰

Perhaps it was not clear between them what it meant to actually be involved in the raiding and trading of slaves. Perhaps al-Zubayr knew that by 1882, Gordon's opinion of him had changed to a position of great respect. And perhaps al-Zubayr felt he had already answered to British suspicions, with his son having been killed by Gordon's aides soon after his own arrest and by years of exile. But one looks up from these pages wondering exactly who was responsible for the enslavement of thousands in Sudan. Even Shaw, in a way, excused al-Zubayr's feints and dodges by likening him to British citizens of her grandfather's generation: "Zebehr's mind appeared to be in the attitude which was taken by the ordinary English mind in the second decade of this century, when we had carried through successful negotiations with Spain and Portugal for putting down the slave-trade, and still refused to contemplate the abolition of slavery in our colonies. He argued that no order is possible in a country where slave-hunting is permitted."³¹

But where had he been during the sales of slaves or during their being herded into the famous compounds of El-Fasher, his capital city? Al-Zubayr denied any connection to the trade, with all of the passion of antislavery orators: "I cannot explain to you how impossible it would have been to me to sell my people . . . unless you realize that a king is indeed father of his people." His sense of connection and belonging to the people of Darfur was even more vividly articulated when he explained, "I happen

African interest British colonial racism
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to be fond of children, and often when I have been in the villages I have carried the babies in my arms. If I had sold the young men and women I should have had the mothers hanging upon my shirts, and weeping, saying 'Give me back my son, give me back my daughter that you have sold.' My steps everywhere would have been accompanied by tears. Life would not have been endurable."³² Here one wonders how the relationship between Flora Shaw, the interpreter, and al-Zubayr influenced these last published statements. What did it mean to each of them when the term "my people" arose? Al-Zubayr did not identify himself with those communities and villages-considered eligible for slave raids, groups he (or Shaw) wrongly identified as "Nyam-Nyam," people whom al-Zubayr considered to have no God.³³ Shaw had already made clear her belief that the polytheistic tribes were peoples with no culture, beliefs, or trade. And it is interesting, too, that al-Zubayr paints a scene about which most former slaves could only dream: if the pasha had himself stolen children, how dogged he would be by the mothers of kidnapped children having the access to plead personally with the ruler of Darfur for their return. But the imagined plea comes from a mother who is one of "his people," over whom he was king. The resolution of some of al-Zubayr's distancing himself from the crimes of slavery may be found in the loopholes of antislavery laws in the Nile Valley at this time and the fact that it was illegal to kidnap and sell people, but it was not specifically illegal to buy them.³⁴ Men like al-Zubayr Pasha could interpret their purchase of slaves as a means of civilizing them; he certainly saw no shame in buying many. Immediately after claiming that his footsteps would have been dogged by tears everywhere had he sold slaves, he "stated without apology that he had bought upwards of 20,000 slaves while he was at Mandugba."³⁵ Not only did his purchase of slaves civilize them but it also contributed to the increasing cultural and economic sophistication of al-Zubayr himself:

"In those countries," he said, "especially as you get farther from centers of civilization, the natives have not learned the use of steam or water, and everything is done by means of slaves. The only motive power is slave-power. If you cut off slave-power, the result would be the same as the cutting off of steam and water from England." . . . He could only say with regard to the present time, that when

the Mussulmans of Cairo or Constantinople spoke with Western statesmen of the entire abolition of slavery in these countries, they spoke of what they knew in their hearts to be impossible. They are well aware that the country is not yet prepared for it.³⁶

Al-Zubayr could denounce the kidnapping of people for enslavement. Al-Zubayr strongly pronounced his intolerance for the part of the trade that brought attendants to the harems of Ottoman and Egyptian rulers. He could speak of this to a young British journalist in a language that, despite the obstacles presented by careless or uninformed translation, she and her audiences could understand if they looked at their own history of only a few previous generations. In this sense, he performed the linguistic sabotage of autobiographical expression that Nicole Grandin earlier ascribed to Babikr Bedri. Al-Zubayr was able, with the complicit help of Flora Shaw, to present contemporary conditions of Sudanese slavery in British historical terminology. And thanks to her interviews, the British government released al-Zubayr from his gilded exile in Gibraltar and returned him to Cairo, where he was able to provide patronage for Flora Shaw as she continued her reportage on the Middle East and East Africa.³⁷ Despite the difficulties with translation, it paid for al-Zubayr Pasha to narrate his life to an increasingly influential political journalist like Flora Shaw. He won greater political freedom and the protection of imperial officials, protection against the continuing suspicions of abolitionists. In 1899, after the British-led conquest of Sudan, he returned home and prospered as a wealthy landowner and "valuable counselor of the new government."³⁸

Slaves and the Life of Babikr Bedri

Al-Zubayr Rahman Pasha's figure loomed large across Sudanese communities as well. During and especially after the Mahdiyya, many appealed to him for financial help and political support while he was in exile in Cairo, particularly those who had been captured by the Egyptian army and sent to Egypt as prisoners of war.³⁹ Babikr Bedri also came to know al-Zubayr relatively well; they were distant cousins, and al-Zubayr married a beloved but divorced former wife of Babikr's. When Babikr went to Cairo to try to reclaim this wife, he came face-to-face with al-Zubayr, who at that time was

who is eligible to be as slave?

probably the wealthiest of all Sudanese. Babikr negotiated with al-Zubayr (who emerges in these pages as very powerful and haughty) but doubted that his wife would ever return to him after living "in the house of the Pasha, the greatest of all the Sudanese today" (she did not).⁴⁰ To his face, Babikr called al-Zubayr the greatest of Sudanese, but Babikr's narrative shows that men and women with different, more spiritual depths aroused his real appreciation and respect. This was a man whose family was relatively poor when he was a child, who loved his teachers at the *kuttab*, and who, accompanied by his mother, devoted himself early to the religious teachings and movement of Muhammad Ahmad, the Mahdi. Al-Zubayr's fame arose from his monopolization of an important part of the slave trade between Sudan and Egypt, but there is no discussion in his narrative about the spiritual journeys of his life. Slaves formed a part of every aspect of Babikr's life, from his childhood well into his maturity, but all along he threw himself into Qur'anic study and tried to live a life of devotion. His support for the Mahdiyya was religious as long as the Mahdi lived; it became political once the British took control of Sudan. And within this powerful and complicated belief system of Babikr Bedri lived his slaves.

In *Tarikh hayati*, there are no justifications and no apologies for his role in the enslavement of others. Slaves were a part of the life of this faithful man, even, at times, a part of how he expressed his faith.

In the first volume, Babikr describes a bustling landscape and social life in northern Sudan, in which slaves are everywhere. Someone else's slaves are washing laundry in the river when the very young Babikr loses his robe (*tob*) while swimming, so he is able to steal another from them.⁴¹ Slaves work on his family's farm, are frequently borrowed by other people, nurse Babikr back to health when he is very ill, and share the family's poverty when times get difficult.⁴² Slaves are used as intimidators against enemies, and their lives are also symbols of debasement—to be called one is an insult.⁴³ Slaves are brought into Babikr's and others' households as children.⁴⁴ The purchase of young female slaves punctuates the most important events in Babikr's life; they are bought as gifts and wet nurses when his wives give birth.⁴⁵ Throughout his narrative, most slaves could be seen but not heard, served often in the background, and were living gifts marking life's passages. There were times, though, when Babikr and

his family depended on brave and loyal slaves and considered a few as dear companions.

When Babikr and his mother first heard the call of the religious leader Muhammad Ahmad, they were deeply moved and joined his movement. As the rebellion grew more successful, Babikr and all of the men in his family adopted the *jibba* (the patched robes worn by the Mahdi and his followers) and joined the Mahdi's army in the siege of Khartoum. As Ahmad Sikainga has written, the majority of those who followed the Mahdi were "small traders, poor farmers and herders," people like Babikr Bedri, his parents, and his family. Sikainga discusses how British officials assumed that the antislavery laws pushed through in the late 1870s provoked such widespread support for the Mahdiyya, but the enthusiasm that Babikr and others shared for the Mahdi's message actually came more from disenchantment with the policies (usually economic) of the Turco-Egyptian administration. Interestingly, as Sikainga points out, many slaves also responded positively to the Mahdi, "who promised them freedom and salvation."⁴⁶ As we shall see in Babikr's account, this was often a source of conflict between slave owners and particular slaves they had possessed for years. Although the Mahdiyya cut Sudan off from most of the borders of its neighboring, slave-buying countries, and al-Zubayr Rahman Pasha had been removed as a major trader, the internal slave trade continued. Even as the movement weakened under the Mahdi's successor, Khalifa al-Ta'ishi, and was defeated, slaves accompanied Babikr and other supporters throughout.

Slaves in the Background

After British-led armies defeated the forces of the khalifa and as British officials formed the administration of the Sudanese government, British officials and soldiers paid close visual attention to Sudanese slaves. Individual officers explored Khartoum, Omdurman, and the rest of the country, taking pictures such as the one shown here of a slave woman washing clothes. Although the camera focuses not on her face but on her labor and the movement of her arms as she works, the woman is centered in the photograph—she is foregrounded and highlighted.

Babikr rarely saw his slaves in such a central light or narrated their presence so closely. But they formed the background of his narrative, and

Gender

few pages pass in the memoirs without some mention of slaves. He introduces slaves early in his narrative, after he has gone to hear the Mahdi for the first time. His father had been summoned to help lay siege to Khartoum and wanted Babikr to stay home to supervise work on the family farm. Babikr remembered:

But passion for Holy War had mastered my mind, and I embarked my mother and my wife and my father's second wife and all the sesame in a boat which I had hired, and sailed to Jirayf, leaving my brother Musa Bedri and the slaves that were with him to work the farm. At Jirayf I disembarked and went to the camp by myself, and when my father saw me he was astonished.

"Why on earth have you come here?" he said. "In whose care did you leave the farm?"



Anonymous photograph of a slave woman washing, n.d. Sudan Archive, Durham, SAD-1/116.

"In God's care," I replied. "The Holy War is more important than farming."

In response to Babikr's zeal, and his leaving the supervision of the farm to one brother and many slaves, his father shook his head, "whether in astonishment or admiration I do not know."⁴⁷

The bodies of other slaves, probably former slave soldiers hired by Gordon to fight for the Egyptian government on the other side of the siege walls, warranted Babikr's closer attention when they were dead:

While we were looking at the enemy dead, most of whom were blacks, someone noticed that some of the corpses were on fire, and called our attention to one of them. I saw that its wounds were very red, then it turned black, then a little foam came out of it, then smoke like the smoke of a cigarette, and finally it caught fire and became all charred.⁴⁸

A few years later, after many difficult experiences under the khalifa's rule in Omdurman, Babikr went to his mother, then living with his half brother Sa'id under conditions that Babikr thought disrespectful to his mother. Babikr was unhappy with this:

At sunset Sa'id invited me for the evening meal. He had in front of him some sweet millet-stalks, and I picked up some of them and said to his small slave girl, "Take these to my mother." I do not know whether such terrible extravagance angered him, or whether it was for some other reason, but after that he never invited me to eat with him again.⁴⁹

Slaves also served in the background as Babikr begins to realize his talent for trade and as he wrestled with the complicated taxes of the khalifa's bureaucracy. His cleverness with math helped his uncle Malik prosper, and throughout their dealings, Malik's slave Ma'mun runs the errands, carries the inventory, and brings Babikr's much-loved mother closer to him, back from his half-brother Sa'id's home.⁵⁰ What do these quick glimpses—the agricultural workers, the small girl serving at the table, the dead slave soldiers, and the busy errand boy—offer the reader? To those Sudanese contemporaries of his or younger nationalist audiences reading Babikr in his original Arabic, such glances may have offered scenes familiar from their own youth. For scholars and former Sudanese government officials

reading him soon after the first volume was translated, the flash of slaves across the pages offered details of a realistic panorama of Sudanese life during the Mahdiyya. I see people so fully absorbed in the service of others that they are barely there—it is the service they performed that holds together the tasks and resolutions of Babikr's life.

Slaves as Gifts

It is easier to see the figures of the slaves, or perceive how Babikr appraised them, when he described slaves who were exchanged to commemorate the milestones in his family's life. As Babikr became more and more adept at trading cloth and gum, first for his uncle and then for himself, he was able to purchase more slaves. In one instance, he made a profit of 114 riyals, and proud of this moment he wrote: "So I bought an old slave-woman called Umm Na'im for my wife. This Umm Na'im died long after at the age of more than 130; for she said that she was older than Sultan Husayn [the sultan of Darfur] who was crowned in 1254 (1838–9) and died in 1292 (1875–6) and she died in 1357 (1938–9). I also bought another slave-woman for my mother."⁵¹ Because he had enough money, Babikr could bring in more help for his wife, and this slave caught his interest. Umm Na'im had a story, a long past with a history that Babikr shared. Since he knew when she died, decades after he bought her, one wonders if Umm Na'im remained in his household.

Each time Babikr made an important sale and expanded the size of his coffers, he bought slaves, increasing his status and that of his wives. The gift of a slave sometimes accompanied the closely negotiated financial exchanges that preceded Babikr's marriages. In the following example, Babikr, as he put it, "could not get out of my head this idea of marrying one of the Egyptian women who were in the Sudan" and asks a friend with an Egyptian wife if she will find someone suitable for him. The best choice, it was felt, was Nafisa, daughter of Saliha, widow of an Egyptian officer killed in Khartoum. Babikr offered forty Maria Theresa riyals for her bride price and trousseau, which he admitted was not much. The mother also thought this too little, but Babikr sent this message back with his friend: "Since I don't know anything about her daughter, forty riyals is enough for the time being. If when I am married I find the girl suitable, her mother can ask me for whatever she likes; but if she turns out not to be suitable, why then, forty riyals is

not such a loss." Saliha agreed, certain that her daughter would be suitable. Nafisa did please Babikr, and when he saw her on their wedding day, her clothes and belongings also impressed him, which led him "to give a generous appearance when they asked me for anything, and to try to appear to them as a rich man."⁵² Her relatives watched this in the days following the wedding and mentioned to him that while Nafisa was willing and capable of grinding corn herself, "if you think fit to lighten her tasks, you will know what to do." Babikr had thought Nafisa had a servant who was a slave, but this was not the case. So, as Babikr wrote, when the relative left him, "I went to the slave market and for sixty riyals bought the most beautiful slave-girl that was there and presented her to my wife."⁵³ Her beauty made her expensive (more expensive than the price he paid for his wife's dowry and trousseau) and therefore a more fitting gift for a much-valued wife.

Babikr began trading for his uncle Malik in 1892 but two years later went into business on his own. By 1896, he considered himself a rich man and was spending too much money on naming-parties for his babies. By 1898, however, he was considerably poorer: "I will not conceal from the reader that I was now short of money, as I had been devoting myself to the study of religion" so the naming-party for the daughter born this year was "below average."⁵⁴ He also had increasingly to confront the onerous customs collections imposed by the treasury of the Mahdiyya. One of the customs inspectors at Omdurman was an old friend; Babikr brought him gifts from his trading journeys in exchange for turning a blind eye to hidden goods he did not want to declare. This became a profitable relationship for both of them, and when his friend had a daughter, "I bought him a slave-girl to nurse her."⁵⁵

Babikr's riches rose and fell with his personal circumstances but also as a result of the khalifa's many wars and the subsequent closing of trade routes. By the end of 1897, the price of grain had quadrupled, and those, like Babikr, who had not hoarded were in financial trouble. He complained, and the economic burden of slaves was part of his complaint:

Our grain was finished, and I had very little money, and my household—counting my own family and slaves and guests—numbered more than forty persons. What made the mud even stickier was that al-Risala, Yusuf's wife [Babikr's

al-Masallimiyya, with Babikr very ill. Neither the official nor his uncle paid his symptoms any attention or showed any concern. Unexpectedly, Babikr's brother Musa arrived, to find Babikr alone, sick, and hungry in a nearby mosque and the uncle eating with the official. Babikr remembered:

Musa was very angry, and calling for Sabah al-Khayr and Salim, our slaves, told them to saddle the horse and bring it round. When my uncle 'Ali heard that, he tried to propitiate Musa, who, however, would not listen to him. Then 'Ali tried to use his authority to compel him to leave the horse and the slaves, but this was no good either, because Musa had stirred Sabah al-Khayr to anger by telling him. But I knew nothing of this, because I was lying in the mosque.⁶³

Good Now

It is important here to notice that Musa used Sabah al-Khayr as a threat, and that Sabah al-Khayr's anger at the mistreatment of Babikr demonstrated to the family his loyalty and strength. Babikr remembered this but, in so doing, related how even such loyalty rarely alleviated the weight of social inferiority that slaves had to bear. And in his narration of this experience, he also related the lesson in generosity that his brother Musa, using Sabah al-Khayr and Salim as examples, taught him. Sabah al-Khayr and Salim came for Babikr in the mosque and put him on a horse; then they all set out for the journey back to Khartoum. As they passed through one village, they realized how hungry they were, so Musa bought millet bread for everyone, to Babikr's peevish consternation:

We were very hungry, and Musa spent the whole of what he had left on a little of it, and gave the two slaves a share of it equal to the share he left for us, while I thought that we should have had more than the slaves. Then a beggar came along, and I thought that we might give him only a little of the food, and make up the rest with kind words, but what must Musa do but invite him to sit and share the meal with us. Then I felt mean, and admired my brother greatly.⁶⁴

In many parts of his memoirs, Babikr presents himself as a man continually wrestling with his faith, trying to be as devout a Muslim as he could. During that terrible bout with malaria, he vividly recounted the dream he had during his fever, in which his limbs are severed one by one, but he is saved from pain by angels (*houris*) awaiting him in paradise, who even years later made him wish he had died then. But in the instance just shown of Sabah

al-Khayr, whom Babikr consistently described as an exceptionally reliable slave, Babikr could not easily find in his faith a way to honor that reliability. Musa had to remind him. It is fascinating to me that Babikr made sure this image of himself, and his stinginess toward his slaves, was not forgotten.

Babikr did pay homage to the memory of Sabah al-Khayr on several occasions, and in almost all of them, Sabah al-Khayr rescued him from personal threats and indignities. In one example, during a battle with the "Turks" (as Babikr calls the Ottoman-Egyptian forces against whom the Mahdiyya rebels), Babikr and Sabah al-Khayr had to choose between wading or swimming across the Nile at a point where the river was very wide:

I confess that while at first I grasped my horse's bridle and led him bravely, after a bit I found myself behind him, at times holding on to the cantle of the saddle, and at times sprawling on his rump, with my undaunted slave Sabah al-Khayr swimming in front and leading him. At last we landed on the island, all scattered, and if its people had been ready to fight us, they would have forced us to plunge back into the river, or would have slaughtered us by ones and twos.⁶⁵

During this phase of the Mahdiyya, Babikr served under the leadership of Wad al-Nujumi, one of the Mahdi's earliest supporters and, after 1885, the governor of the provinces of Dongola and Berber. Wad al-Nujumi commissioned Babikr to elicit local support from the communities of these provinces. During the period in which he worked for Wad al-Nujumi, Babikr crossed many miles of territory with his family, among them young children. Babikr was able to obtain official permission from al-Nujumi's administrators to order villagers to supply him with transport or food, but sometimes it looked to the villagers as if Babikr was exploiting them. At one point, the Bedri family had reached a village and dismounted in a date grove that belonged to a merchant named Fadl Shanbu. Without being told, "Sabah al-Khayr went in to get a few dates to quieten the babies." This infuriated Fadl, who protested vigorously, even when Babikr's father cautioned him about getting angry "when the slave came in to take a few dates" for the babies, telling him al-Nujumi's armies would seize everything he possessed. Although this eventually did occur to the hapless Fadl, most of the villagers from whom Babikr had to get food were not intimidated. Babikr had to ask the mayor (*'umda*) of each village to collect food

for him, and as he acknowledged, "most of them made difficulties, and had it not been for the formidable Sabah al-Khayr, we would have been in trouble."⁶⁶ On one large farm, Babikr found an untended donkey tethered to a gate. Somehow Babikr had become separated from his father and needed the donkey to catch up.

The donkey's owner had other plans:

A tall burly man came up and told me to dismount, and when I demurred gave me a blow that knocked me out. When some time had passed and I had not reached the village, Sabah al-Khayr came back to find out what had happened to me and found me there lying on the ground. As soon as I had recovered I told him what the man had done to me, and said "Look, there is his track!" So we followed it, and found the man at his water wheel, with the donkey grazing not far off. We took the donkey, but the man saw us and caught us up at the very place where he had hit me. He snatched at the donkey, but Sabah al-Khayr gave him a blow that felled him to the ground. Then he tied his hands behind his back and drove him along with us, I riding the donkey, until we reached the house, where we tied him up with a stick under his knees, and put him out in the sun.⁶⁷

You can see clearly here, as Babikr shows you, how easily and intimately the two worked together and how much Babikr relied on his slave for protection. In the first volume of these memoirs, Sabah al-Khayr is remembered again and again as a real and trustworthy companion. Sabah al-Khayr was a slave who rarely needed to be given orders—he seamlessly anticipated the needs of this family. When Sabah al-Khayr forgot to wait for orders, shortly after helping Babikr swim across the Nile, Babikr easily forgave him, "owing to his many and multifarious cares."⁶⁸

Although Sabah al-Khayr was an important person in key events of Babikr's life, Babikr himself never mentioned this beloved slave's birth or death or the date or event of his being purchased. His actions were interwoven into the Bedri family's lives, but none of his autonomous experiences earned a description. Perhaps that should be expected, as Sabah al-Khayr was, after all, a slave to Babikr and never a social peer. Ultimately, perhaps, that was the saddest mark of enslavement, part of the "social death" with which Orlando Patterson characterized slavery in his study of the interna-

tional trade.⁶⁹ The enslaved lost their connectedness to a shared history, or certainly to a shared genealogical history. In the second volume of *Tarikh hayati* Babikr deflected being called a slave by an Egyptian official by saying, "I count my ancestry back through twenty generations. You don't go further back than the name I know you by," in a chilling comment on what slavery obliterated (in the eyes of slave owners).⁷⁰

Rebellion and Disorder

But if slaves rebelled against this ordering of their lives, if they asserted ties or claims to their own families, then Babikr recalled in detail their pasts. He noted their births and coexistence emotionally, as evidence of the depth of their betrayal when they turned against their owners. Their betrayal added to the upheaval and violence that followed the defeat of the khalifa and of the entire Mahdist state in 1898. When Lord Kitchener and the Egyptian army captured Omdurman, many black soldiers in the *jihadiyya* used the upheaval to reunite with enslaved members of their own families. Babikr saw these reunions as the corruption of another family network, as he described in the following event:

Shaykh 'Abd al-Lati Waqi'allah had a slave called 'Ali, who had been born in his house and circumcised with his children, and to whom he gave a very expensive teak-wood bed, on which he had lain during the circumcision. In the year 1315 (1897-8) when this slave was twenty years old he ran away and joined the *jihadiyya*. One day 'Abd al-Latif, who was my neighbor, sent for me by one of his sons, and when I got there I found his slave 'Ali with four of the Negro Guard, demanding his mother and the teak-wood bed on which he had been circumcised. I said, "Perhaps you have a right to the bed, since you were circumcised on it; but as for your mother—the law does not allow you to take her unless you pay her price." So he took the bed and told his master he would bring the money to pay for his mother.⁷¹

Babikr outlines the slave's lineage very clearly as one incorporated into his master's family: he "had been born in his house and circumcised with his children." Babikr scorns 'Ali's efforts to claim his own mother, however, as being outside the law. And Babikr justifies his outrage by the "fact" of the slave breaking the bonds intimately connecting him to his own master.

Resistance breaks through the traditional, even respectable, anonymity of slaves' own family backgrounds more violently in the next excerpt. Here again, ties that Babikr considered significant were bloodily disrupted:

That night a soldier who had been a slave of Ibrahim Bey al-Ya'qubabi came to the door of his house and called him by name. When Ibrahim came out to him he thought he had come to guard him and his family, so he welcomed him and was about to shake his hand; but the soldier shot him dead, and watched him wallowing in his blood. Then his family and the neighbors came out and found the soldier, who had been known to them since his childhood, trampling with his boots on the stomach of the corpse; and all went in again and hid themselves, fearing death; and the soldier went off.⁷²

In this horrific scene, the slave's violence (an "atrocious" as Babikr called it later) smashed not only a life but a lifelong connection. Everyone was traumatized by this betrayal of Ibrahim Bey by a dependent that, Babikr strongly asserted, should have honored people who had owned him as a child.

Babikr saw with his own eyes another troubling event, one that signified to him how far his society and social traditions had been toppled:

I and some of my relations who were my guests had left my house to visit Muhammad walad Abbashar, who had been in the Karari battle. As we reached the south-eastern corner of the market we saw a Negro soldier leading a slave-girl by the hand, coming out of the market by the gallows, (east of where the post office is now). Then we saw Ibrahim Tamim the merchant from Aswan (who seemed to be the slave-girl's master) running after them; and when he had caught them up he seized hold of the girl's hand, to take her back with him. The soldier at once loaded his rifle and shot him, and he leapt up in the air and fell to the ground—we saw it from less than 200 meters away. Then the soldier took the girl's hand again, and they went away laughing loudly. When we asked about it, we learnt that the slave-girl had been Ibrahim Tamim's concubine, and that the soldier was her brother, and that both had been born in his house.

Incidents like these were atrocities of conquest by the regular army of a civilized government.⁷³

This must have been a terrible incident to witness, but even though Babikr investigated this "crime" to find out its cause, his account leaves many

questions open. Babikr assumed that the relationship between Ibrahim and the slave girl was one of ownership and sexual intimacy and scoffed (certainly affected by the violence of the shooting) at the almost flirtatious behavior of the soldier and the girl. Neighbors or other bystanders told Babikr that the girl and the soldier were siblings and had been born into the Tamim household as slaves.

Some doubt has been thrown on whether or not Sudanese *jihadiyya* actually did try to come back for brothers, sisters, or mothers still enslaved. As Ahmad Sikainga has presented the situation after the battle of Karari in 1898, "These soldiers ransacked Omdurman, entering houses and taking a large number of slaves under the pretext that they were siblings."⁷⁴ Why would this have been a pretext? From Salim C. Wilson's memoirs, explored in the following chapter, we know that former slaves felt strongly, sometimes violently ready for revenge, and constantly sought or hoped for reunion with their lost families. From the eyewitness accounts of military officers in Omdurman at the time, there was terrible chaos—one recounted that "for three days we pillaged the city and then order was restored."⁷⁵ I wonder what was in the hearts of the soldier and the slave girl as they wreaked revenge on a man who knew their relationship, who had owned them together, and who refused to let her go. They leave Babikr's pages reunited and laughing, but the violence of their reunion scandalized those for whom such a relationship could not represent a legal family relationship.

Babikr Bedri was deeply protective of his family's integrity and very concerned that he, his parents, his wives, and his siblings stay connected to each other through the battles of the Mahdiyya, through his growing trade networks, and even during years of exile in Upper Egypt, when he was separated from many of his relatives. The marriages of the women in his family were another means of maintaining family cohesiveness. As discussed earlier, Babikr regularly bought slaves for his own brides or for the weddings of other female relatives. Babikr's sense of custom and his understanding of religious law compelled him and his male relatives toward a strict interpretation of what kinds of marriages were appropriate for the women of his family. For this reason, the lives of the women in this family were often as abruptly uprooted or transformed as the circumstances of slaves, who could be bought or sold at any moment.

Said
All slaves
Sudanese

After the British-led armies had destroyed Omdurman and routed the remnants of the Mahdist forces, they imprisoned many of the fighters. Families were forcibly separated from each other or collapsed under the strain of capture and exile. In a scene reminiscent of some of the worst slavery kidnappings as narrated by former Sudanese slaves, Babikr described the breakdown of one family:

I know of two men and their wives who abandoned their two children, since they were unable to walk farther, and their parents could not carry them because their ages were seven and ten or thereabouts. The two boys were crying out, "Mother! Father! Don't leave us! Will you get children older than us?" But the parents seemed not to hear. Upon whom rests the blame for the crime of the death of these two innocents? Who could say?⁷⁶

Babikr and some of his brothers were sent to Upper Egypt, where he stayed for months as a prisoner of war. The British at this point, in 1899, occupied Egypt, and it was to British officials that Babikr applied for permission to return to Sudan. When this permission was granted, Babikr began to gather up his relatives in Egypt, even if this meant disentangling the women from marriages and their own small families. He insisted on bringing his sister Umm Tabul back to Sudan with him, back to their father, even though she had become happily married. Umm Tabul's husband and father-in-law begged Babikr to leave her with them, but she obeyed her brother, saying that in spite of her satisfaction with her marriage, "I won't stay away from you now, and give you pain all your life, and make you reproach yourself for having fallen short in your duty to me." Her obedience enabled him to insist that the husband divorce her so that she could return with her people to Sudan.⁷⁷

This event repeated itself among other Sudanese families leaving Egypt, and some called on Babikr for help. Babikr was happy to help in cases where women, reluctant to leave Egypt for Sudan, had married in ways considered deeply inappropriate. [One typical violation of marital norms (for women) was marriage to a slave or to a husband who could have been a slave due to his non-Muslim, non-northern origins.] A friend approached Babikr and asked for his support in gathering up a sister who had married "a Negro sergeant-major" but who had promised she would return with

her brother to Sudan. At the moment of departure, however, complications arose. An Egyptian policeman intervened and asked the sister if she would go with her brother and Babikr or remain with her husband. She then said to her brother, "'If it weren't that the women at home would think me an outcast because I've married a black, I'd go with you; but I couldn't stand that. So good-bye to you.' Her brother slapped her on the mouth but she laughed and went off with her sister, leaving us standing there looking foolish."⁷⁸ While Babikr presented this memory as an example of an unsuccessful attempt to reassert social norms (and, perhaps, as a cautionary note to what he, as a Mahdist, considered the corrupting influence of Egyptian society), [this excerpt also illustrates one of the greatest stigmas of Sudanese slavery—the racialization of slaves' identities.] Appearance, tribal affiliation, profession, and skin color identified the black officer as a slave. The self-respecting sister of Babikr's friend chose not to face the social opprobrium she felt sure to meet if she returned home with a husband whose skin color would signal to her peers that he was a slave. Bab

G. N. Sanderson noted years ago that the solidarity of the northern Sudanese extended family "and the weight and wide ramifications of its influence—not least among the political and administrative hierarchy—can hardly escape even a casual observer." Sanderson considered that "family politics" in Sudan bore significance greater than "merely domestic relevance" but enabled families to make marriage alliances, and these alliances had the potential to create powerful political alliances.⁷⁹ Lillian Sanderson found in Babikr's memoirs important information about "the roles of individuals within the extended family, the attitude of society to women and the functions of the family as 'an old boy net.'"⁸⁰ Certainly these alliances of marriage assumed urgency under the tumultuously changing circumstances of northern Sudanese society at the turn of the century. With the Mahdiyya defeated and wiped out in 1899, families like Babikr's had to renegotiate their position in a changed society with new authorities once the British stepped in to build an administration in Sudan.

Perhaps the political implications of marriage explain the attitudes of Babikr, the wife who refused to leave her black husband on the grounds that she would be ostracized in her own community, and those who would have scorned her and rebuked such a marriage. Slavery remained

a significant networking institution itself, and even in the last years of the Mahdiyya, trade in slaves grew increasingly active in regions where non-Muslim tribes lived, such as the Bahr al-Ghazal.⁸¹ The trade enabled the development of a racial ideology by which entire geographical areas of Sudan were considered slave zones, or, as Amir Idris has described:

Constructed category
The slaving area was constructed by those involved in the slave trade in terms of Islamic versus non-Islamic, Arab versus non-Arab descent, brown versus black color with each racial category giving meaning and representation to its opposite. These invented categories included terms such as *abd* or slave for Southerners or *Fallata* or *Gharaba* for western African immigrants and Western Sudanese. Consequently the importance of race in the Sudan is linked with the construction of Arab origin.⁸²

As Idris concludes this discussion, "These pre-colonial processes of enslavement, indeed, imposed social meanings on social, cultural and religious differences among the people of the Sudan and served as the basis for the structuring of society."⁸³ But slaves in northern Sudanese society were also facing a new political day with the coming of the British, who, it could easily have been assumed, would have been eager to immediately abolish all practices of enslavement once they took power.

They were not. British officials in the new government of Sudan, the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, were deeply reluctant to make so drastic a move. Throughout Sudan, British officials confronted a resistant population of diverse peoples and communities. They were keenly aware that thousands of northern Sudanese, under the Mahdi, had defeated the armies of Egypt scarcely a generation before. In regions where tribes were acephalous, such as the Dinka tribes of the south, the British were baffled by the fact, as it seemed to one official, that "the African seems to have little political loyalty to anything."⁸⁴ The regions of the Dinka, like those of the Nuba in the Nuba Mountains, had suffered slave raids for decades and were fierce in their resistance to armed British soldiers seeking to impose a new kind of political order. British observers could be strikingly unsympathetic to communities scarred by slavery, as exemplified by the comment of the East Africa Commission: "It should always be remembered that one of the principal curses of slavery, apart from its immoral character and its economic

New form of
failures, was the production of the slave mind. A human being accustomed to slavery, when freed, seems to have lost all incentive to work.⁷⁸⁵

The British brought to Sudan particular ideals of "free labor," and the common belief that slaves were inherently lazy did not encourage officials toward decreeing unilateral manumission. Patrick Manning has written that these officials came to Africa with a different system of slavery, the Atlantic slave trade, embedded in their sense of history; they were "genuinely convinced that the status of the slave in Africa was not one of significant inferiority." But they also worried that "the emancipation of slaves would bring significant social upheaval." Manning charges these officials with "moral inconsistency"; their desire to "run inexpensive colonial governments and to utilize African labor cheaply further encouraged them to wink at slavery."⁸⁶ The British who came to establish a government in Sudan feared "that sudden abolition would lead to vagrancy and prostitution."⁸⁷ As they set up ministries to administer social policies, they increasingly worked closely with the groups of northern Sudanese who had owned slaves for generations. As Ahmad Sikainga has traced, these officials came to share "the slaveholders' view that without discipline the slave would be idle, mischievous and even dangerous."⁸⁸ Because of these factors, the British tampered little with slavery during the first two decades of their administration in Sudan.

The second volume of Babikr Bedri's memoirs narrates his life experiences from the beginning of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899) until the assassination of Lee Stack and the formation of the Sudanese government in 1925. His descriptions reveal his increasing interaction with British officials as he developed his own professional interest in education. It also describes his continued possession of numerous slaves throughout the twenty-five years that the volume covers. During these years, he expresses an ever-deepening sympathy for northern Sudanese Muslim women, sympathy he eventually implemented in his founding of the first secular school for girls in Sudan. Although he also cared for many of his slaves during this period, several women in particular, he offers examples showing his disapproval of people he identifies as slaves or former slaves trying to break through their social positions of inferiority. Any discussion of manumission had to be introduced by a friendly and respected British official. Only

gradually and haphazardly can the reader perceive that much changed for slaves and former slaves during this period of Sudanese history and Babikr Bedri's life.

In the first pages of the second volume, Babikr recounts the continuing chaos in the defeated city of Omdurman, and one can feel how powerful traditions of enslavement remained. Although Lord Kitchener led the armies that entered and pillaged the city, many of the troops were from the *jihadiyya* regiments of the disbanded Egyptian forces, and as we have seen, these soldiers had been slaves or came from much-raided tribes such as the Dinka. Babikr witnessed the intrusion of British soldiers into his home, who took some of his possessions and attributed to them a touristic curiosity—"I think they took these merely as curios." But the behavior of the Sudanese soldiers merited more of his attention, for they were taking everything of value they could find: "copper, beads, money, ornaments and animals." As they looted his house, Babikr found an officer outside, a sergeant major, who answered Babikr's plea for help and reprimanded the soldiers immediately. It seems they had "overstepped the time limit during which the town was declared open to them, as they very well knew." But when the sergeant major interceded, the soldiers "now displayed a servile humility, very different from the brutal arrogance which they had shown on entering our house." The sergeant major even made the soldiers put everything back in Babikr's house and placed two of them as guards against further looting, even when Babikr insisted this was not necessary. Perhaps this was out of his connection to Babikr from an earlier experience—this was the same black sergeant major who had married a northern Sudanese woman, whose bride had refused to leave Egypt with her brother. So honorable was this man that Babikr remembers gratefully that "it was he who received my sword and returned it to me a couple of weeks later after the battle of Omdurman."⁸⁹

While he tried to pull the pieces of his economic life back together, his slaves stayed with him, but his narrative gives hints that many other slaves were trying to escape forced labor. Babikr berated a wealthy chief of a village near Madani for doing little to help his people during an outbreak of meningitis, prophesying future poverty for the chief: "If your houses fall down, you won't be able to repair them because your slaves will have run off to Madani to get their freedom papers."⁹⁰ But this kind of threat does not seem to have

affected Babikr, whose own slaves prove themselves loyal again and again, especially when he feared catching meningitis in this region. He became ill with stomach pains and prayed out loud, sure that death was near. But his oldest slave, Khamisa, made him tea and ministered to him, and he remembered her saying to him, "Master, I think you lost too much blood when you were cupped at Madani and that's what's given you this turn. Please let me pour some of this up your nose." Soon Babikr recovered, saved by his respectful slave.⁹¹ In these times of illness and famine, slaves were his last currency, cited as all he had (along with two camels and worthless coins).⁹² Only by hiring more slaves could Babikr make the bricks to build new shops so that he could reestablish himself as a trader.⁹³ While they shared his poverty, slaves formed a major part of Babikr's economic recovery plan.⁹⁴

After several years of trying to make ends meet through trade, Babikr turned his attention to the education of northern Sudanese children. He was courted by the authorities to generate local support for secular schools and, in 1903, began to train as a teacher.⁹⁵ Many pages of the second volume detail the development of Babikr's enthusiasm for education and his negotiations with both Egyptian and British officials for how best to train young Sudanese for eventual political autonomy. When, later in 1903, Babikr helped open a school in the town of Rufa'a, he struggled to translate and teach British textbooks of mathematics while appealing for support and help from the local British administrator.⁹⁶ The graduates of the Rufa'a school did well, and Babikr made a name for himself as an educator. He eventually became close to Mr. Crowfoot, deputy director of education, although it took Babikr years to convince his friend of the importance of establishing a school for girls.⁹⁷

When Babikr writes about his work at the school or his campaigns for more financial support for the school, there are no slaves mentioned and seemingly no slaves present. Part of his work to establish the girls' school meant trying to bridge social traditions that kept communities suspicious of educating their daughters, but these traditions also sanctioned slavery. Babikr continued to own slaves well after the end of World War I and brought his prejudices about "Blacks" and "Negroes" to his organization of schools. In the late 1920s, a British official selected a "Negro girl" named al-Risala to be a trainee teacher and brought her to Omdurman. As Babikr

remembered, "This was against my advice, but he told me that we were not fair to the Negroes."⁹⁸ Soon the girl ran away. In searching for her, Babikr luckily met with "a relation of her master's" who informed him that she was at home in Khartoum because her family had decided it was time for her to marry. Although Babikr had strongly expressed his views that such a girl was not a suitable teacher, he encouraged her and her family to try to complete a year's training. She returned with him, but true to his prophecy, "al-Risala did not turn out a success as a school-teacher."⁹⁹ Babikr's lingering dismissal of al-Risala's potential would have been just one of the pressures this young woman faced in post-World War I Khartoum, as she struggled between her future as a married woman and the much more untraditional role (for a woman of her ethnic identity and economic background) of becoming a teacher.

Babikr had much kinder words for another woman, a slave named al-Rahma, whom he purchased in the 1920s (along with a donkey) and kept in his possession for five years, "until I was retired on pension, after which she left me and I sold the donkey; I am grateful to them both."¹⁰⁰ Soon after purchasing al-Rahma, Babikr began a tour of inspection of ten local schools in an eastern district, and a British Dr. Cruikshank accompanied him, "he and his servant on horseback and I and my slave girl on donkeys."¹⁰¹ He took care of her when she was afraid during these treks (on several occasions they surprised lions),¹⁰² and she cooked wonderful dishes for him during their travels: "I enjoyed my food just as if I had been at home; for I had al-Rahma with me and she was good at cooking all kinds of dishes—thin kisra and delicious stews of every sort."¹⁰³

Immediately, on this page, Babikr contrasts the valuable work of al-Rahma with his discovery of a scene of women working in conditions that distressed him deeply. In al-Qirayha village, Babikr made the rounds with a clerk, Muhammad Efendi, to see how cotton was being picked.

I found that he had about sixty women pickers, all with their hair uncovered and their *tobs* wound tightly round their loins, outlining their flanks, while the younger ones had their breasts bare. And passing to and fro among them was a young lad, only about twenty years of age, riding a colt and supervising their labors. What made matters worse was that, the cotton plants being low, they

had to stoop to pick. When I saw this offensive sight, all too likely to affront the Ja'aliyyin who are so jealous of the modesty of their womenfolk, my feelings were thoroughly roused and I called to the lad, "How much do you earn by pimping in this fashion?"¹⁰⁴

Babikr protested that if a foreigner were to see these women, he would look at them lewdly, and suggested that each woman be given a headscarf, a blouse, and a basket to protect her modesty. Babikr also expressed concern over the long hours the women were forced to work.

Babikr described the work and the bodies of these sixty women with unusually vivid detail—his description of them reminds me of the photograph taken, during the same period, of the woman washing clothes shown earlier in this chapter. But the statement that they presented "an offensive sight" reveals, I think, the contradictions of sympathy and discomfort about female slavery and female labor with which Babikr wrestled in this second volume. He defends the honor of the Ja'aliyyin community, knowing the sight of immodestly dressed women will be a visual insult to them. Yet he also vocally deplores the conditions under which these women work. Babikr mentioned the wages earned by these pickers but does not mention how they were hired—if they were free laborers or slave laborers. His efforts to spare "the poor women two long walks" show his concern for their well-being and their bodies, but their seminudity made their work somewhat obscene.¹⁰⁵ They present a stark contrast to his wonderfully loyal, and protected, slave al-Rahma, a new form of slave labor that went against the old ways of owning slaves.

Slaves and the British

As comfortable as his relationship with al-Rahma was, Babikr could not avoid the questions of those British officials sensitive to the continuation of slavery and hopeful for the integration of former slaves into the Sudanese economy. While there seems to have been no discussion of slavery when he and Dr. Cruikshank traveled together with their slaves through villages outside Khartoum, other officials were not content to ignore Babikr's slaves. Mr. Currie, deputy director of education, had become Babikr's friend through their close work together creating a successful school for boys and

trusting him to explain Sudanese customs and political situations. At some point in 1909–10 (the memoirs are not clear on the date of the following encounter), Currie asked Babikr and some other Sudanese leaders whether or not the people of the Jazira were pleased that the railway had reached their largest city, Sinnar. Babikr replied that the common people were pleased, but not the elites. Currie had understood the opposite—that the elites must have been happy with how much the government had restored their leaders to positions of authority. Currie had concluded that the common people had been most upset about the freeing of their slaves. Babikr contradicted him:

"Compared with the deep worry of the elite, the freeing of the slave is a trifle."

"What worry?" he asked with the keenest interest.

"During the Mahdiyya," I answered, "I, Babikr Bedri, was a wealthy, well-to-do merchant, but on its overthrow I became a poor man. You, Your Excellency, Mr. Currie, found my salary £2 per month and doubled it to £4 and later £6 per month. It is natural that I should be loyal to you for your generosity; but the Shari'a law forbids me to love you because you are an infidel. So I am torn by a conflict of loyalties."¹⁰⁶

According to Babikr, Currie did not pursue the discussion of abolition and its discontents in Sudan any further, but not long after, Babikr was forced to engage with another official, A. P. Coote, an inspector appointed to Rufa'a, for help dealing with one of his slaves. The following narrative gives a view of how complicated social negotiations between slave owners, the British, and slaves were becoming.

Now I had a slave called 'Abdallah whose family comprised his mother, his children, wife and sisters; 'Abdallah stirred the others up to be rebellious against me. I complained about him to Mr. Coote, who sent for him, gave him a word of warning and sent him back to me. A couple of days later he sent for me and asked me if I was happy with the way he had handled the matter of 'Abdallah and his mother. I said I was very happy. He said that he, on the contrary, had not slept easy the last two nights. I asked him, "why so?" For reply he asked me a question.

"If your father, or someone you loved or feared, were to say to you, 'Change a verse of the Qur'an for me,' would you do what he asked?"

"Certainly not," I replied.

"Well," he said, "with us freedom is something like that: and that is the reason why I have been suffering severe pangs of conscience."

"I will put your conscience at rest," I said: "for I will set them free, for God's sake."

He thanked me, saying, "Tonight I shall sleep the sleep of the just."¹⁰⁷

Babikr freed 'Abdallah and his mother immediately. But this did not end his ownership of slaves. He continued to buy slaves for decades after this experience and to justify it to British officials.

These discussions often took place during political difficulties between the government and more nationalistic Sudanese figures like Babikr. He prefaced the following discussion he had with District Commander Huddleston in 1925 with "the first thing which the British expect from their subordinates is obedience."¹⁰⁸ And not long before their discussion, the governor-general of the Sudan, Sir Lee Stack, had been assassinated in Cairo, and all Egyptian professionals and military were being expelled. The British carefully watched Sudanese elites like Babikr for signs of where their loyalties lay, and expressions of obedience to British authority had taken on a political urgency. Huddleston detailed for Babikr the economic reforms that the British were trying to introduce to organize the profits of cotton cultivation. One of the most important reforms, Huddleston thought, was that tenants of farms would earn 40 percent of the profits in exchange for plowing, irrigating, and bringing the cotton to market. Babikr disagreed:

At this I exclaimed, "Why! We used to treat our slaves better than that!"

"How so?" he asked.

I told him that we gave each slave a plot to cultivate for himself on one day a week and another day on which he could either rest in his own home or cultivate in his plot if he chose; and he could reap from the crop on his personal cultivation enough for his needs or to buy a beast. But his food and clothing, both for him and for his wife and family, were provided by his master throughout the year. So, I concluded, if the Government were to allow each tenant a portion of his holding, similar to that which we gave our slaves, enough to provide him with his food for the whole year, he would prefer a tenancy on that basis to the unheard-of basis which he, the Governor, had described.¹⁰⁹

Huddleston changed the subject, but Babikr stipulated to his readers that being so candid was his way of serving his country. Commenting that few Sudanese would give a high British official such an honest answer, Babikr prided himself on his outspokenness: "I count myself among this minority because I want to serve my country and consider that to withhold critical advice from the authorities is a kind of betrayal. Our duty is to inform them on how we expect them to treat us, but not to try to compel them to act upon our advice."¹¹⁰ What is also compelling here is Babikr's use of the past tense when he wrote, "We used to treat our slaves better than that," evidence perhaps that the current economy had eroded slave owners' ability to be so generous. But even if there is a hint of nostalgia here, there is no regret—clearly, Babikr believed an environment in which slaves could profit so well was superior to a political and economic atmosphere run by foreigners who understood little about Sudanese society. Everyone knew then how creative and effective an educator of Sudanese children Babikr Bedri was, but it is important to note how hard he worked to educate the British about Sudanese society, and in particular, about slavery. The customs, economics, and traditions of slavery formed a crucial part of the Sudanese nation that Babikr was learning to politicize, and to uphold.

Babikr Bedri was a man endowed with incredible sensitivities to children, one who looked back publicly on his own childhood and wrote about how his parents raised him and whether he agreed with their choices; sometimes he questioned his treatment of his own children. Babikr was a man who, as he matured, learned to appreciate the difficulties of women's lives, who fought for decades with both the British and northern Sudanese villagers to open a school for girls. He put his own daughters in school as proof of his dedication and his belief that secularly educated girls "would help prevent our educated men from marrying foreigners, a thing which would bring to naught our efforts in educating them."¹¹¹ When he encountered impoverished mothers abandoned by their husbands, he employed them and hosted them within his own household.¹¹² He drew on his sense of Islamic law and faith to be just to the women in his family and in his country and, by the time he was middle-aged, even challenged certain laws

when they seemed to stifle women's development: he strongly protested the custom of wives staying in their mother's household even after marriage and refused to let his daughters do the same.¹¹³

Treating women fairly and justly was, for Babikr Bedri, a responsibility of moral and spiritual authority, as was treating his slaves well. But Babikr's immense imagination did not stretch as far when it came to changing the status of his slaves or slaves in his society. From the two volumes of his memoirs analyzed here, he continued to honor the system of enslavement, and it was difficult for him to see new positions or roles for those who bore the stigma (whether fairly or not) of slavery. Nor would he trace the pasts of his slaves. Their childhoods were absent for him, even if he had purchased them as children. If slaves like Sabah al-Khayr or al-Rahma matured, they did so only in relation to their masters. If slaves tried to seize control of their lives, without permission, Babikr criminalized it. That was an act seen as treachery to the childhoods they shared with their owners. And as much as he cared for some of his slaves, and saw them married and having children, one wonders if Babikr ever chose to see them as adults. They were never given the choice, or the chance, of education. What neither 'Ali Mubarak's *Khitat* nor Babikr Bedri can teach us, however, is what these slaves talked about in their native languages before Cairo or Khartoum became their home. We must turn to other sources to explore the struggles of slaves, contemporaries of these two men, to find a language in which to narrate their own history.