

I

From Colonial Economics to Political Economy, 1820–1940

Is it possible to write a global history of economic development?¹ To make this question more specific, let me modify it slightly. Can the global history of mid-twentieth-century economic development be told as the story of the proliferation of five- or ten-year plans and programs, of project management and assessment, of growth targets, and of national income accounting?² In other words is the history of development during the middle decades of the twentieth century the story of its elements that spread and became globalized, or is it the story of those concepts that remained local, resisted globalization, and became intelligible only when situated in local contexts?³ If one focuses on technical elements without examining the social imaginations that were embedded inside the development discourse, one might assume that the answer to the question of whether a global history is possible is an emphatic yes; indeed, a generation of scholars writing about the history of development and its ideological companions such as modernization theory have used a model of diffusion to write about how technical concepts and tool kits emanated outward from one or at most a few locations, such as MIT, the London School of Economics, ECLA (the Economic Committee for Latin America), or the Soviet offices of planning.⁴ Yet what if the diffusion narrative is incorrect?⁵

¹ Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, eds., *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

² Hirschman and Berman, “Do Economists Make Policies?” pp. 779–811.

³ Moyn, “On the Nonglobalization of Ideas,” pp. 187–205; also see Rothschild, “Isolation and Economic Development in Eighteenth Century France,” pp. 1055–1082.

⁴ See Joseph Morgan Hodge, “Writing the History of Development (Part 1: The First Wave),” *Humanity* 6:3 (2016), 429–463, <http://humanityjournal.org/issue6-3/writing-the-history-of-development-part-1-the-first-wave> [accessed July 17, 2017]. This discussion is informed by conversations with Nils Gilman.

⁵ Sivasundaram, “Sciences and the Global: On Methods, Questions, and Theory,” pp. 146–158.

Sure, the technical vocabulary of economic science spread across the globe like wildfire in the service of development during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The intrepid research of postcolonial scholars such as Timothy Mitchell has shown us the extent to which the colonial world served as a living laboratory. In addition, we now know that even the experts whom historians of science ordinarily assume to be the most firmly ensconced in elite networks of theoretical knowledge developed their breakthroughs in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.⁶ While expanding the geography of where the concept of development was developed as both a discourse and a technical phenomenon has been a significant contribution to the literature – making possible the new field of the global history of development – it still falls short precisely because it propagates the idea that a single development discourse was adopted globally.⁷ Although there was a shared technical vocabulary of development, that vocabulary was set to divergent ideas of what it meant to be developed. How do we explain these divergent ideas?

For an example of this divergence in the Sudanese case, just look at the writings of the Oxford-educated Mekki Abbas in 1952. Mekki was the first Sudanese director of the Gezira Scheme, the largest financial investment in the country at the time, when he wrote, “Indeed, should the civilizations which rose in the Mesopotamia of Iraq and other parts of the Fertile Crescent have any future parallel in the Sudan, it will be mainly due to the prosperity contributed by this Mesopotamia when its cultivable 2 million acres are fully developed.”⁸

To the Anglo-American reader at first glance, what is striking about Mekki’s statement is the connection he draws between Mesopotamia and civilization, though here we equate civilization with development, a concept frequently associated with the future. Materialist explanations grounded purely in national, social, or economic disparities cannot explain the oddness of the reference. To understand its oddity, we must use the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries, which are “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publically performed visions of a desirable future, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology.”⁹

Mekki’s reference to Mesopotamia is a gateway to understanding the social world that he and his peers – the rulers of the independent Sudanese state – believed was good from a normative perspective. And while they were completely fluent in the language of economic rationalism and manipulated the tool kits of development with dexterity, only a partial understanding of the

⁶ Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*; Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*; Morgan, “On a Mission’ with Mutable Mobiles” and “Seeking Parts, Looking for Wholes,” pp. 303–325.

⁷ Frederick Cooper, “Writing the History of Development,” pp. 5–23; Frey and Kunkel, “Writing the History of Development: A Review of Recent Literature,” pp. 215–232; Immerwahr, “Modernization and Development in U.S. Foreign Policy,” pp. 22–25.

⁸ Abbas, *The Sudan Question*, p. 8. ⁹ Jasanoff, “Future Imperfect,” pp. 4–5.

developmental project in postcolonial Sudan can be achieved without paying careful attention to the specificity of the Sudanese imagination of what defined a civilized or developed society during the decades after World War II.

In the years before Sudan became independent on January 1, 1956, Sudanese intellectuals took ownership of the concepts and vocabulary associated with development and transformed those concepts into their own distinctive Sudanese tradition. Traditions, however, do not emerge out of thin air. The rest of this chapter is dedicated to tracing the influences that made Sudanese economic policy making during the 1950s and 1960s unique. In accordance with the theory of sociotechnical imaginaries, the preoccupations of the Sudanese policy elite were not privately held, but rather reflected the hopes and anxieties of the politically, socially, and culturally dominant class. The focus on this class is justified by its control of the apparatus of the state at independence and its ability to use this control to transform its vision for society into a national development project. This is not to say that their projects were successful or that they become equally hegemonic throughout all strata of society, but that for a period of time the different development projects that this class put forward captured the energy of the state apparatus. The men who made up this class overwhelmingly came from the major cities such as Khartoum, Omdurman, Wad Medini, Atbara, and Port Sudan. Fluent in English and Arabic, they inherited from the Egyptians and the British a vision of development that equated mastery over nature, particularly in the form of large-scale irrigation projects and centralized control over the Nile, with modernity.¹⁰

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to address one more potential caveat; namely, that here we are talking about economic policy making, rather than economic science. Robert Merton defined the attributes of a science as universalism, communism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism.¹¹ But he fretted about “the abuse of expert authority and the creation of pseudo-sciences [which] are called into play when the structure of control exercised by qualified compeers is rendered ineffectual.” He then went on to state what is a very apt warning for the student of colonial economics: “The presumably scientific pronouncements of totalitarian spokesmen on race or economy or history are for the uninstructed laity of the same order as newspaper reports of an expanded

¹⁰ Harry Verhoeven, *Water, Civilization and Power in Sudan*, 36–83; also see Terje Tvedt, *The River Nile in the Age of the British: Political Ecology and the Quest for Economic Power* (New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2004), pp. 110, 212–215; for a discussion of the fact that centralized control of Nile irrigation was very much a product of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see the work of Alan Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 124–201. For a discussion of the concept of mastery in the Nile Valley, see E. T. Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Britain, and the Mastery of Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 1–26; Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, pp. 1–34, and *Rule of Experts*, pp. 1–19.

¹¹ Robert K. Merton, “The Normative Structure of Science,” in Norman W. Storer, ed., *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 267–278.

universe or wave mechanics. In both instances, they cannot be checked by the man in the street and in both instances they run counter to common sense.”¹²

This chapter discusses precisely what happens when science engages with large and unbounded questions about the nature of society; that is, when science becomes public reason. Economics, beginning in the 1930s, became the preeminent way in which governments demonstrated their reasonableness, thereby justifying their ability to make law and policy. Tracking the evolution of the economic imaginaries that became popular among the postcolonial elite reveals the ideologies of reasonable governance that undergirded the postcolonial state-making project. One of the central arguments in my book is that, during moments of crisis in Sudan – a society where until the 1980s violence between members of the national elite was largely restricted, though large-scale violence was frequently and unapologetically deployed against non-elite subjects – legitimacy was demonstrated in policy-making circles using the languages of finance and economics.¹³

The history of economics as a discipline in Sudan and Sudanese economic history must be told simultaneously. The economic imaginaries, a type of sociotechnical imaginary that I explore in this chapter and those that follow, were made possible or constrained by the different ways in which the physical infrastructure of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan was built, the networks of commodity production in which Sudan was situated, and the arrangements of people, finance, expertise, and violence that ultimately determined how wealth was distributed and controlled.¹⁴

The colonial administrators of the late 1940s and early 1950s in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and their Sudanese successors were conversant in the economic debates of the 1920s and 1930s. These debates between British and Egyptian bureaucrats and economists focused on how to renew the development project in the Nile Valley. By the end of World War I, the economic program of the Egyptian monarchy and its British overlords had exhausted itself. Essentially, the nineteenth-century development miracle in Egypt – a miracle accelerated by the global crisis of cotton brought on by the US Civil War in the 1860s – was premised on hydraulic reforms along the Nile and the continuous expansion of cotton cultivation.¹⁵ The introduction of new varieties of cotton, the infusion of European capital, the enclosure of privately owned lands, and new types of surveillance – particularly in fields such as public health – fueled the

¹² Ibid., 277.

¹³ Sheila Jasanoff, “Reason in Practice,” in *Science and Public Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 1–23. Edward Thomas, *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation* (New York: Zed Books, 2015).

¹⁴ Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso Press, 2011), p. 8.

¹⁵ Sven Beckert, “Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War,” *American Historical Review* 109 (2004): 1405–1438.

nineteenth-century growth in Egypt's wealth and population.¹⁶ Yet, the success of that era's development model depended on the acquisition of additional land, the intensification of its exploitation, and the displacement of the population into overcrowded urban slums, and it eventually collapsed, leaving yawning inequality in its wake.¹⁷

It is commonplace to equate the economy with the national economy – the ultimate signifier of the economy in our collective imagination being the gross domestic product (GDP), which is calculated based on national income accounts.¹⁸ Calculating the rate of change in GDP across time produces growth rates, which politicians, as well as economists, then use to claim that this or that country is governed well.¹⁹

Yet for the historian, this easy equivalence obscures as much as it reveals. In the case of modern Sudan, the categories of the national and the economy are hardly stable. The historian Steven Serels has recently proposed that, rather than thinking about the “national economy,” during most of Sudan's history it is more useful to speak about the gradual expansion of an integrated market for staple commodities such as grains. For Serels, grains are a particularly promising category to investigate, because communities depend on grains for their very livelihoods. The exchange of cash for basic food staples demonstrates that a community is integrated and dependent on a market. The expansions and contractions of the Sudanese grain market therefore stand in as useful proxies for the idea of Sudan as an economic unit throughout the nineteenth century.²⁰

This method allows a distinction to be made between the huge size of Sudan as a political entity – either the Ottoman-Egyptian Sudan, created by Mehmet Ali's armies in the 1820s, or the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, created by the Anglo-Egyptian armies of Lord Kitchener starting in the 1890s (see Maps 2 and 3) – and the idea of Sudan as a unit within which economic exchange occurred. A brief discussion of the difference between these two concepts historically will help illuminate what was at stake in discussions beginning in the 1930s and 1940s between Egyptian, British, and Sudanese elites about the future of the Sudanese economy.

At different times, governments in Cairo, London, and Khartoum claimed to have control of a territory that varied in size from 1821 until 1956, but that was roughly two-thirds the size of India. From north to south, the country stretched

¹⁶ Robert L. Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt, 1882–1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966).

¹⁷ Robert Tignor, “Equity in Egypt's Recent Past: 1945–1952,” in Gouda Abdel-Khalek and Robert Tignor, eds., *The Political Economy of Income Distribution in Egypt* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), p. 36.

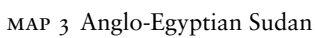
¹⁸ Jerven, *Poor Numbers*.

¹⁹ Jerven, “Users and Producers of African Income,” pp. 169–190; Speich, “The Use of Global Abstractions,” pp. 7–28.

²⁰ Steven Serels, *Starvation and the State: Famine, Slavery, and Power in Sudan, 1883–1956* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1–13.



MAP 2 Ottoman-Egyptian Sudan



more than 1,168 miles from Wadi Halfa and the harsh northern deserts to the tropical Imatong Mountains along the border with Uganda. The administrative unity of this vast territory came about as a result of the nineteenth-century imperial ambitions of Egypt.²¹

Yet, when thinking about the territory of Sudan as an economic unit, imperial claims represented on political maps as colored blotches have only limited analytical utility. Though Egypt's rulers beginning in the nineteenth century often asserted that there were economic, political, and cultural connections between the two regions dating back to time immemorial, before the nineteenth century, the connections between Egypt and Sudan were rather limited.²² At the start of the nineteenth century the Funj Sultanate of Sennar – which nominally ruled the area along the Nile River from the third cataract stretching southward until the Shilluk Kingdom, the Gezira Plain, Kassala, and westward into southern Kordofan – had begun to fall apart. The northern territories stretching toward Ottoman-controlled Nubia were ruled by the Shayqiyya Federation, and internally the merchant and clerical classes had gained greater autonomy; yet most importantly for this study the rulers of Sennar during the classical period believed in administrative trade. The principal feature of administrative trade is that the sultan exercised tight regulation of the market for long-distance trade, the principal market being his court.²³ Yet, the vast majority of the population was fed locally in family-based productive units, often making use of Roman-era technology, such as the *saqiya* or Roman water wheel. For our purposes, it is worth noting that during the early decades of the nineteenth century, the central region, which became the most economically and politically advanced region of the future Sudanese state, was organized politically and economically around distinct local economies.²⁴ Counterintuitively, the Nile, which both nineteenth-century British and Egyptian writers often imagined as the unifying feature of *Bilad al-Sudan* and Egypt, was not the imagined or actual connection for the Sudanese kingdoms such as Sennar or Darfur to the outside world: instead, Sennar looked to the Red Sea, while Darfur turned toward the old desert routes.

Ottoman Egypt's growing power during the nineteenth century reoriented much of the trade and political authority in Sudan toward the expanding empire. However, it is vital to remember that nineteenth-century Ottoman Egypt was not only an empire of the Nile Valley but was also a Red Sea power. Thus while Mehment Ali and his successors' armies strengthened the connections between northern riverain Sudan, Egyptian Nubia, Cairo, and the Nile

²¹ Anders Bjorkelo, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya: Peasants and Traders in the Shendi Region, 1821–1885* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Richard Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820–1881* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).

²² Terence Walz, *The Trade between Egypt and Bilad as-Sudan, 1700–1820* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 1978).

²³ Jay Spaulding, *The Heroic Age in Sinnar* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2007).

²⁴ Serels, *Starvation and the State*, pp. 13–72.

Delta, they also strengthened the existing tendencies of central and eastern Sudan to look toward the Red Sea and Arabia. It was during this period that the Mirghani family migrated from the Hijaz region of Arabia and became both a political and religious force in the eastern region of Sudan and an area stretching into present-day Eritrea. They consolidated their power in Sudan in close connection with the rulers of Ottoman Egypt.²⁵ However, their influence on both sides of the Red Sea shows the ways in which even during the mid-nineteenth century when Cairo was formally in control of much of riverain Sudan, Sudanese society in political, economic, and cultural terms looked eastward as much as it did northward. Serels argues that eastern Sudan depended on Indian grain delivered to Red Sea ports, which tied the livelihoods of the vast majority of the Sudanese people to long-distance trade in the second half of the nineteenth century.²⁶

Naturally, the rulers of Ottoman Egypt occupied the territory of Sudan along the Nile closest to its own borders with the most intensity. There Mehment Ali's forces brutally conquered the Shayqiyya Federation, subjugated the Danagla, and finally defeated al-Makk Nimr's forces at Shandi, scattering the Ja'alín and destroying the last remains of the Kingdom of Sennar in the process. The initial conquests focused on the northern riverain areas of Sudan extending southward into the Gezira Plain.²⁷ These three ethnic groups – the Shagiya, Danagla, and Ja'alín – came to dominate the future incarnations of the Sudanese state centered on the Nile Valley below the first cataract, which marked the traditional border with Egypt.

In 1999, in the midst of a split within the ruling Islamist government in Khartoum – the National Congress Party – a number of disaffected party officials under the name of “Seekers of Truth and Justice” published the now-infamous *Black Book of Sudan*, which detailed “the level of injustice practiced by successive governments, secular and theocratic, democratic or autocratic, from the independence of the country in 1956 to this day.” Their main complaint was that the northern region, home to the Shagiya, Danagla and Ja'alín, made up only 5.4 percent of Sudan's population, but its residents held 79.5 percent of the positions in the central government.²⁸ The processes that allowed these groups to dominate the Sudanese state were set in place during the nineteenth century, when as Mehmet Ali's army conquered the northern and central regions of Sudan's Nile Basin, it began to look farther and farther afield for resources and

²⁵ Ahmad al-Shahi, “Noah's Ark: The Continuity of the Khatmiyya Order in Northern Sudan,” pp. 13–29.

²⁶ Steven Serels, “Famines of War: The Red Sea Grain Market and Famine in Eastern Sudan, 1889–1891,” *Northeast African Studies* 12:1 (2012): 73–94.

²⁷ Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan*, pp. 8–13.

²⁸ Abdullahi Osman El Tom and M. A. Mohamed Salih, “Reviewed Book: The Black Book of Sudan,” *Review of African Political Economy* 30:97 (2003): 511–514; Julie Flint and Alex De Waal, *Darfur: A New History of a Long War* (London: Zed Books, 2008); Osman El-Tom, *Darfur, JEM and the Khalil Ibrahim Story*.

slaves, eventually pushing as far south as present-day Uganda, westward into Darfur and the border regions of the present-day Central African Republic, and eastward toward the Ethiopian highlands. As Mehmet Ali's armies advanced, and in the face of rapidly increasing taxation of the land along the northern banks of the Nile, the Shagiya, Danagla, and Ja'alín merchants, known as Jal-labs, spread out and came to dominate other regions of the country as merchants, slave traders, missionaries, and political leaders.²⁹ As a result, just as the Egyptian Army extracted labor and resources from the peripheries, so too would the Sudanese communities that were displaced into the periphery by the initial Egyptian conquest.

As a consequence the agricultural regions along the Nile southward to Khartoum, where the Nile branches out into the Blue and the White Nile – and particularly along the Blue Nile extending to the border with Ethiopia – came to be understood by the Egyptians, British, and the Sudanese elite themselves as the most productive regions of the country. This region, along with land in southern Kordofan along the White Nile, became the basis of a self-sustaining grain market. In the process, political authorities of the new state imagined this region as an economic core. To maximize the economic returns from this region, labor was pulled from the areas of Sudan that were not incorporated into this grain market. Once in the core, these workers made up the agricultural labor force, extracting the raw materials that sustained the markets on which the growing city of Khartoum relied. The elites of Khartoum then sold goods abroad in order to pay for the luxuries they coveted, which became the markers of wealth.³⁰

The end of Ottoman Egypt's control over its Sudanese provinces – brought about by the rise of the Mahdist state during the 1880s and the escalating battles for control of the Nile Valley with the Ansar, the followers of the Mahdi – further entrenched the economic role of the core of the country as a grain basket, even as areas such as Darfur, the Beja regions near the Red Sea, and the Nilotic regions south of the *Sudd* were integrated into a whole. Yet even after Anglo-Egyptian Sudan came into being in 1899, with the signing of the Condominium Treaty that enshrined the dual sovereignty of both Egypt and Great Britain, the problem of feeding the local population remained paramount. In part, this was because British rule and the presence of the Egyptian army in the territory failed to bring peace as wars of conquest and resistance in the western and southern provinces of the country continued to rage until the 1920s.³¹

²⁹ Mahmoud, *The Sudanese Bourgeoisie: Vanguard of Development?* and Jok, *War and Slavery in Sudan*. An explicit statement of the thesis that the Arab elite has sought to keep Africans underdeveloped can be found in Yongo-Bure, *Economic Development of Southern Sudan*.

³⁰ Ahmed Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers: Emancipation and Labor in Colonial Sudan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

³¹ Eifatih Shaaeldin, *The Evolution and Transformation of the Sudanese Economy up to 1950* (Khartoum: Monograph Series of Khartoum University Press, 1984), p. 16.