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## CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

A great and haughty nation, proud in arms. MILTON

This volume is an attempt to trace the history of a people of the Sudan of truly ancient stock, the Bugiha of Leo Africanus, the Bugiens of seventeenth-century cartographers, the Blemmyes of Roman times, the Bugas of the Axumite inscriptions, who were quite possibly also the Buka of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, and who, since medieval times, have been known to the world as the Beja, and who for the forty centuries of their known history have watched civilizations flourish and decay, and, themselves almost unchanging, have survived them all. There will be those who, when the tale is told, will question whether the effort involved might not have been directed to ends more profitable. Beja records are indeed scanty. There are periods, whole centuries long, which for the chronicler are all but void, and even when all that is known is marshalled and sifted, there is much which must remain problematical and conjectural. There will be those also who may accuse me of unwarrantable deductions and suppositions unsupported by evidence. To this I can but reply that I have deduced nothing inherently improbable, either from known facts, or from what I know of the Beja today; and in this attempt to recall from obscurity the past of a most fascinating race I am prepared, like Barth 'to contend against the strong prejudices of numerous critics who are accustomed to refuse belief to whatever is incapable of bearing the strictest enquiry'.[1]

Moreover (or this book had never been written) there appears to me to be much that is worthy of study in the evolution of a race which knew Pharaoh in splendour and decline, which fought not unsuccessfully against Rome, which has withstood invasion and infiltration from the earliest times until the most

[1] *Travels*, vol. II (London, 1857), p. 253.



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recent with the utmost resilience, and which today, if it accepts the 'Pax Britannica', does so with reservations and with frequent reversions to ancient ways, which are certainly not those of peace.

> Properly to understand the Beja [wrote one who knew them well] we must delve into history, and in doing so we cannot fail to be struck by the pertinacity and vigour of a race which has attracted the attentions, welcome and unwelcome, and felt the impact of more powerful nations from time immemorial without experiencing any real disintegration or loss of morale.[1]

As a record of survival it is indeed unique, attributable partly to the inhospitality of the country in which they live, but more particularly to definite traits of character, preserved almost intact by their free, nomadic way of life; to an extraordinary mental and physical toughness, and no moral over-sensitiveness. The mental toughness is reflected in an obtuse and almost hostile reserve, in a determination to survive, long bred in them by the harshnesses of their life and environment, by the blood-feuds which are still their accepted custom, and by the tribal wars which have long been their relaxation. Among the Beja little value is set upon the sanctity of human life, a callous trait common to most primitive peoples, but by them shared particularly with other warrior Hamitic peoples, the Shilluk of the Upper Nile, and the Masai of the Tanganyika plains. Rude, wild, bestial, call them what you will, of unpleasant and unhygienic habits, their hair clotted with mutton fat, their bodies reeking of oil, sweat and woodsmoke, the Beja, for those whose knowledge of them goes beyond externals, will ever be a fascinating and rewarding study.

Throughout their long history they have remained supreme individualists, unamenable to authority, living widely dispersed and solitary among their deserts and mountain glens, impervious to external contacts, preserving, as though by their very

[1] D. Newbold, 'The Beja Tribes of the Red Sea Hills', in *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan from Within*, ed. Hamilton (1935), p. 144.



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aloofness and lack of curiosity, their freedom, their virility and their individuality. Wanting nothing of the world, they ask nothing better than that it should ask nothing of them. So it is they have rejoiced always in periods of weak government, or better still, of none at all, in which they are left to themselves to graze their herds, prosecute their feuds, and harry their neighbours as the spirit moves them.

The superficial portrait thus presented, that of a primitive and bloodthirsty desert tough, is admittedly an unattractive one, and could be supplemented and adorned by excerpts from the chronicles of all those whose lot has fallen among them from the earliest times. To the dynastic Egyptians they were the 'hateful Kush'. Pomponius Mela in the second century A.D. records that they are 'scarcely human but rather like wild beasts'. A thousand years later the Arab writer, Ibn Jubayr, says of them that they 'live like animals. This is the country of Islam which more than any other deserves extermination.' Juan de Castro, who took part in the unsuccessful Portuguese expedition against Suez in 1540, relates that they 'were given to stealth and rapine above all other people'.[1] Linant de Bellefonds, the French engineer who visited the Southern Atbai in 1833, thought rather better of them, though admitting their faults in full: 'liars to excess, thieves when the occasion offers, lazy beyond all description, yet brave, loyal, and often chivalrous'.[2] The German Schweinfurth, visiting roughly the same area in 1864, is less favourable: 'inhospitable without exception, false and secretive...as repellent as the thorns and as clinging as the prickles of their native plants.'[3] Abel Chapman, a naturalist, who visited the northern Hadendowa in 1921, thought them 'the most sullen and incompetent of savages',[4] and writer after writer has no better, and even worse, to say of them.

To their neighbours, whether Roman Egypt, or the Nuba,

[1] Kennedy Cooke, 'The Red Sea Coast in 1540', *Sudan Notes and Records*, vol. XVI (2) (1933), p. 159.

[2] *L'Etbaye* (1884), p. 130.

[3] From a translation in the Newbold MS.

[4] From the Newbold MS.



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and later the Arabs, of the Nile valley, the Beja have appeared always as an inimical and ferocious people, liberally endowed with most devilish characteristics, which may account for the story current among Arab chroniclers in the Sudan that they are descendants of a Ginn named Hafhaf, or Sakhr, who deceived King Solomon (Sulieman ibn Daud) in the matter of one of his wives. But in a record such as this, of a primitive survival in a world becoming progressively more complex, it is unreasonable to look for the refinements to which we ourselves are now accustomed, nor should we forget that our ancestors must have appeared very similar to the Roman invaders of our shores in 54 B.C., brutal, uncouth, and inimical to strangers. In the two thousand years which have elapsed since then we have become an altogether different people: not so the Beja, who remain now much as we and they were then, a primitive, warlike and untamable race of savages.

It is, moreover, only in the course of the last fifty years, or even less, that they have been subjected, for the first time in their history, to any real attempt at orderly administration which aims at achieving all that is to be gained from security, elimination of disease and famine, education, and development of their sparse natural resources. The effect upon a people so impervious to change has scarcely had time to show itself: yet they are perhaps now less prone than once to resort to the sword as the arbiter of all disputes, and rather more ready to maintain their rights by negotiation, which for them is a process of the most audacious advocacy, endless compromise, and masterly and repeated procrastination. This gift for compromise I believe to be one of the most deep-seated of all Beja characteristics, but it is only in recent years and under peaceful conditions that it has had opportunity to expand and develop, and to be applied to 'lesser breeds without the law'. Their capacity for litigation is immense. No case, especially one involving rights of land or water, ever ends, and they will come together and spend days in apparently endless discussion of the most minute differences with all the vigour, time-wasting



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sophistries, irrelevant evasions, and unmannerly vituperation of medieval scholastics; yet in the last resort '*Sharia* law, as interpreted by uneducated but honest tribal Kadis, is the canon applied to all cases which cannot be settled by the more gentlemanly method of give-and-take tribal compromise'.[1]

In other ways also the Beja are showing signs of greater amenability and good-neighbourliness, all of which must be accounted as gain to those responsible for their administration in a race so utterly conservative and self-sufficient, which in the past has had every reason to be distrustful of strangers and for which a mere half-century is all too short a time in which to alter innate prejudices and age-long beliefs. And though their ultimate savageness is yet only partly tamed, they happily retain the greater part of their primitive virtues: simplicity, fortitude and patience; fearlessness and generosity; a broad and far from infrequent sense of humour; and latterly, to those who have won their confidence, they have given loyalty and affection. Such confidence is not easily bestowed, and is all the more to be valued for that very reason. 'Anyone', said a one-time Beja district commissioner, 'can tame a dog; when a wolf is responsive it warms the heart.'

The qualities which today more than any others impress the observer are their aloofness, their indolence and absorbtion in their own affairs, allied to a most rigid and uncompromising regard for the integrity of territory and tribal rights. The ground under their feet, upon which they graze their animals, or grow their scanty crops, is to them sacrosanct and inalienable, to be surrendered only to superior force, though by development of their instinct for compromise they do not object to usufruct by favoured interlopers so long as the title is not in dispute. They are unusually tenacious of their rights of ownership, and equally ready to use force in their defence. The Hadendowa, certainly the most openly aggressive of the Beja tribes, regard the preservation (and, be it said, the expansion) of their territory as of such importance that they have placed on certain sections

[1] Sandars, 'The Besharn', *S.N.R.* vol. XVI (2) (1933), p. 144.



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the particular duty of its defence against encroachment by other tribes. Thus on the east the Gemilab maintain the frontier against their traditional foes the Beni Amer, the Besharin on the west are kept at bay by the Shaboidinab, and the Mahmoudalihadab, a small section on the Atbara, are responsible for preventing trespass by the Shukria.

This attitude of the Beja towards their tribal territory is perhaps best illustrated by their reaction to the threat of Italian invasion of the Sudan in the summer and autumn of 1940. When the Italians occupied Kassala there were fears that the Beja might get out of hand, or even materially assist the enemy, and indeed, in the obvious state of our unpreparedness, they might well have been excused for believing a British defeat inevitable. That the Beja, and the Hadendowa in particular, at all times rendered the most valuable services without apparent thought for the consequences of an Italian victory, became a matter of some self-congratulation to their administrators, being regarded as evidence of the rightness of our methods, and the popularity of our rule. I have my doubts. While admitting that loyalty in some measure inspired their efforts I am almost certain, from what I know of the Beja character, that they viewed the war with very different eyes to ours. The Italians employed in their colonial armies large numbers of Tigré-speaking troops, many of them Beni Amer and cognate tribes, and with these, the ancient enemies of the Hadendowa, they threatened invasion from Khor Baraka to the river Atbara. This was something which could by no means be allowed, and the war in which they so wholeheartedly supported us was for the Hadendowa but another incident, albeit a major one, in an ancient feud. It was a war fought in defence of tribal territory, and that the British had approximately similar objectives in their efforts to defeat the Italians was merely incidental. When it was all over they were extremely annoyed to find themselves deprived of the fruits of victory, which for them meant unlimited loot of Beni Amer cattle, and a general and enjoyable harrying of the tribe as a whole.



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Of Beja indolence it is almost superfluous to speak. No nomad is fond of hard work, even in the service of his precious herds, but in this the Beja far surpass anything within my experience. Leisure is more to them almost than life: of manual labour they will none, and they will starve rather than set their hand to tasks which with a little effort would ensure a certain degree of prosperity and freedom from want. It is true that the Amarar now provide much of the dock labour at Port Sudan, but for the cultivation of their cotton holdings in Tokar and the Gash Delta the Beja rely on West African and Eritrean labour, their interest in the matter being confined to the collection of the benefits of the industry of others on pay-day, and in encouraging their animals to trespass on the cultivation when no one is looking. Even in the herding of their animals they will often employ the otherwise despised Tigré who, though themselves Beja of a very ancient stock, have been schooled by long ages of serfdom to labour for others for little reward.

The Beja today probably eat far more grain than did their milk-drinking ancestors, but they grow little of it themselves, even when opportunity offers, though under certain circumstances they are not averse to indulging in husbandry of a sort, if so it can be called:

> When some fortunate rain falls and the *khors* spate from the hills the tribesman scatters a little seed, and without cleaning or fencing his plot hopes three months later to return and harvest the fruit of his labours. Stray camels...find and devour this unexpected succulence, to the high indignation of its owner who then considers himself entitled to preposterously exaggerated compensation.[1]

The essence of the whole operation, as in the growing of cotton, is that no work is involved, and that the reward is enjoyable only when it can be obtained with a minimum of exertion, or better still, none at all. They have been unwilling even to make the most of their main asset, their livestock. They

[1] Clark, 'The Manners, Customs and Beliefs of the Northern Beja', *S.N.R.* vol. XXI (1) (1938), p. 19.



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breed an excellent strain of camel, and the southern sections have large herds of cattle, but apart from a few camels sold to the government as police remounts or in Egyptian markets they are utterly uninterested in the possibilities of the stock market, and have allowed the extremely profitable camel trade with Egypt to become the monopoly of the acute gypsy tribe of Rashaida, who are only recent immigrants from the Hedjaz. They are now less allergic than before to any sort of hard work, but they are at all times indifferent and erratic workers and with the money earned from an acre or two of cotton, or from a few weeks' labour on the Port Sudan quays, will retire to their hills the richer perhaps by a camel or a few goats, there to idle away their time until need or inclination drives them again to work.

Theirs is admittedly an inhospitable country whose very barrenness and lack of fertility emphasize the futility of effort, and this, allied to memories of a warrior past, when all essential tasks were done by slaves or captives, has helped to mould the Beja reaction to labour which may make demands upon their energy:

> They sit in the exiguous shade of their prized acacias watching their attenuated herds at graze, and priding themselves that they are...overlords of countless leagues of country, exempted for ever from the degrading necessity of manual labour.[1]

It is an attitude which might spring from mere stupidity, were it not that the Beja are by no means a stupid race, nor even quite so uncouth or Boetian as they themselves very often give the impression, largely with the object of discouraging the tedious attentions and enquiries of strangers. There are some very acute though undeveloped minds to be found under the most unlikely mops of hair, and their language alone, rich, intricate and discursive, is not the tongue of a slow-witted or unimaginative people, and shows traces of an ordered and well-matured culture. They are great raconteurs, and both among the

[1] Clark, *op. cit.* p. 20.



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To Bedawie- and Tigré-speaking tribes a well-stocked mind and a fluent tongue are in great demand during the hours of almost limitless idling beneath the shade trees of the well centres, or over the coffee cup round the camp fire of an evening.

Attention has been called not infrequently to their alleged stupidity as evidenced by a notable lack of scholastic success, despite over twenty years of intense effort by the government to make it otherwise. This has been attributed mainly to the initial difficulties experienced in learning the language of instruction, Arabic. This may be so to a certain extent, but I attribute it far more to a fundamental lack of interest, and the unreceptiveness of the Beja mind in dealing with things outside the sphere of their normal agelong pastoral environment. At the best they may only half absorb new ideas, and all but completely misunderstand them, and I am inclined to believe that they will never develop much further mentally until either their standard of living can be raised very considerably, as is happening in the Gash, or their primitive desert environment suffers a complete transformation, which to say the least is most unlikely.

Of their aloofness it is enough to say that they have had little or no cause throughout their long history to repose much confidence in strangers. All those who have gone to the Beja country since the earliest times have done so for the purposes of exploitation. The Pharaohs wanted gold, the Ptolemies gold and also elephants for their Asian campaigns. The Sabaeans and the later Himyarites came for trade and remained as a dominant aristocracy. The Romans were less rapacious; they wanted only marble and other similar stone for their monuments, and were otherwise content to let the Beja well alone. The Arab intruders of the Middle Ages came for gold and precious stones, and the Turco-Egyptians who succeeded them for loot of any description, setting an example as yet unsurpassed of senseless oppression, cruelty, and the plunder of all who were so unfortunate as to be within their power to dominate. The British, the last invaders with whom the Beja have had to



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deal, have indeed refrained from extortion and barbarity, yet it is perhaps not easy for the Beja to forget the battlefields in which they were mowed down by gunfire in support of the corrupt and decrepit Egyptians who had so misruled them. It is not surprising, therefore, that distrust of strangers is deeply ingrained in the Beja mind, and though now with the passing of the years they are prepared to admit our good intentions, we have a passion for orderly government of which they most heartily disapprove.

The Beja live in small family groups scattered here and there wherever some scant pasture or water is to be found, and even when discovered in the recesses of their hills and deserts the lack of a common language intrudes an all but insurmountable barrier to closer relationships.

> A loosely coherent patriarchal society wandering in small groups over the plains in search of grass...which has evolved in the course of time a machinery for settling its own affairs, adapted to its environment and needs, based largely on the universal Beja axioms of procrastination and forbearance.[1]

The difficulty of their language, and their reluctance to speak any other, quite apart from their natural antipathy to strangers, makes the task of administration more than ordinarily difficult, and one which is by no means eased by the frequency with which political officers in the service of the Sudan Government are transferred from one district to another. District commissioners after two or three years spent in mastering the intricacies of the Beja tongue, and in getting to know the people in other ways, are no sooner in a position usefully to apply their hard-won knowledge than they are whisked away to attend to the administrative wants of the Fur or the Azande, and have to start all over again in an entirely different environment. However commendable such a policy may be with a view to giving the administrator as wide an experience as possible, and in preventing him from becoming too parochial, a more flexible policy

[1] Sandars, 'The Besharin', *S.N.R.* vol. XVI (2) (1933), p. 149.



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