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Source: *Northeast African Studies*, 2002, New Series, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2002), pp. 33-66

Published by: Michigan State University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41931300

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Land Tenure and the State in the Precolonial Sudan

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> Everyone knows that an agricultural country practices agriculture.
>
> Ouologuem Yambo, "1901"

History is a form of reasoning about the human experience, in which one uses evidence derived from primary sources to test interpretive ideas. Both evidential corpus and conceptual architecture deserve most careful scrutiny. This study addresses both evidential and interpretive aspects of land tenure in the precolonial Sudan, a topic concerning which, at present, no historiographical orthodoxy prevails.[1] The Sudan's place in the world is controversial, and there is disagreement concerning the choice of appropriate frames of reference for the conduct of comparative historical discourse.[2] The very notion that "land tenure" is a fit concept for the analysis of Sudanese history is still a new and far from universally accepted idea.[3] While considerable information about land tenure is available for some places and periods within the broad sweep of Sudanese history, wide empirical lacunae also exist. All this places a heavy burden upon the interpretive assumptions of practicing scholars.

Arranging the Toolkit of Theory

Theoretical statements may be ranked hierarchically on the basis of the scale of the problems they address.[4] Satisfying historiography requires

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Vol. 9, No. 1 (New Series) 2002, pp. 33-66

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the application of a level of theory appropriate to the scale of each situation to be analyzed. Low-level theory should not ordinarily be used to explain very large-scale historical phenomena (kingdoms are not routinely lost through the want of a horseshoe-nail), nor high-level theory very small ones (it was probably not the greenhouse effect that caused the plant in my window box to die last winter). Within the wider Africanist discourse, much discussion relevant to land tenure in the precolonial Sudan suffers from the misplaced application of otherwise-useful theoretical concepts to situations at a level to which they are ill-suited. While an exhaustive treatment of this topic lies beyond the scope of this essay, a series of illustrative examples may serve to demonstrate the problem. These examples will be arranged in ascending order of scale, corresponding in a heuristic sense to what the Marxian tradition terms forces, relations, and modes of production.

The Problem of the Application of Low-Level Concepts to Large-Scale Historical Phenomena

To cite the most obvious example, Jack Goody has maintained that a handful of low-level technological variables should be taken as major determinants of African social structure and historical process.[5] Common sense supports Goody to the extent that significant changes must indeed have accompanied the introduction of ironworking or the camel, of animal traction or machine irrigation, of the broadsword, the horse, or the plow. But the claim that these traits, singly or in combination, define the meaningfully distinctive qualities of a society, let alone a reified "African society," is refuted concretely by the historical experience of the Sudanese kingdom of Sinnar: the more northerly provinces possessed and used all the technological items mentioned while the central and southern provinces, clearly by choice rather than ignorance or deprivation, did not.[6] Similarly, the Sudan's four-thousand-year record of intermittent literacy in a wide variety of languages both native and borrowed vitiates by its very existence a questionable but popular school of thought that attributes very large and irreversible historical effects to the introduction of the written word.[7] The point of this demonstration (aside from proving that Sudan's literature is not as widely known

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among Africanists as it deserves to be), is to illustrate the limitations of social analysis based exclusively and superficially upon changes in a few selected forces of production alone.

Land tenure is a concept that, at a minimum, should involve both human beings and land. By definition it cannot rightly be reduced to one variable. However, before leaving the realm of monocausal, materially grounded interpretations, it is worth noting that conventional liberal wisdom has undertaken to isolate land as a factor of production and then to remove it from the historical consideration of precolonial Africa by claiming it to be so abundant as to constitute "virtually a free good." As Goody expressed it, "land was not a very scarce resource and hence its tenure could hardly provide the basis of differentiation for the 'class' system."[8] This assumption has led liberal scholars to the conviction that (always excepting Ethiopia) where governments existed in precolonial Africa (or institutional structures that, if observed elsewhere, would be considered governments) they could not have rested upon any meaningful relationship with the land. One of two conclusions must follow: either the social entity in question, all appearances to the contrary, was not a state, as Janet Ewald has argued in regard to the southern Sinnar dependency of Taqali;[9] or it was a polity out of Disneyland, in which, as Nancy Fairley put it, "control over subsistence resources was not of central importance."[10] The present study, in contrast to the views of other scholars summarized here, will argue that it is as ill-advised to isolate the question of land from wider considerations of social context as to embrace naive technological determinisms.

The Problem of the Application of Intermediate-Level Concepts to Large-Scale Historical Phenomena

A more sophisticated analytical approach, at the intermediate level, offers interpretations that emphasize limited sets of institutionalized relations among key groups of people and certain economic activities deemed to be decisive in determining the quality of society. Two such sets of institutionalized relationships have earned historiographical prominence.

One school has elevated to privilege the exchange function and groups engaged in that activity. Perhaps the most keenly reasoned example of

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this approach was the proposed (later repudiated) "African Mode of Production" of Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch,[11] but statements linking long-distance trade to state formation are commonplace in the Africanist literature. In the historiography of the precolonial Sudan, the most important exponent of this approach is William Y. Adams, who has argued, for example, that the southern medieval Nubian kingdom of Alodia "was primarily a slave-trading state, as was its successor the Funj Kingdom in the Late Middle Ages."[12] The flaw in this approach is that the Sudanese kingdoms, when viewed from a continent-wide perspective, were conspicuous not for the export of slaves (some slaves were exported), but, on the contrary, for the extreme feebleness if not insignificance of their commerce in any form.[13] If trade causes states, as Adams and others seem to suggest, then how could one of the oldest and most resilient of African state traditions ever have derived from one of the more trivial exchange systems of the continent?

A second school of scholarship focused at this intermediate level of analytical complexity has emphasized slavery and the nexus of institutions upon which it impinges. While the Sudan has inspired some work in this tradition,[14] the primary geographical focus of the school is clearly and justifiably elsewhere. Particularly important to Sudanese historiography are the comprehensive interpretive statements of Paul Lovejoy and Claude Meillassoux, for these, unlike works of equal merit but circumscribed regional scope, convey arguments that claim immediate relevance to the issue of land tenure in northeast Africa.[15] Specifically, this school addresses as major themes the various arrangements under which slave labor was deployed upon the land, and also the often-complex relationship between slavery and the distribution of political power. Both themes evoke resonances in the precolonial Sudan. The problem facing this school of interpretation in the Sudanese context is a corollary of its very success elsewhere. Having found slavery and its attendant institutions to be a very powerful explanatory key to the late precolonial history of West Africa, this approach flounders badly when confronted with a historical situation in which, while the familiar sets of institutionalized arrangements concerning slavery may well have existed, they did not dominate. This flaw typically manifests itself as an inability to discriminate between historical periods. Thus

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Lovejoy misleadingly conflates evidence from very different stages in the history of Sinnar,[16] while Meillassoux projects West African conditions observed during the brutal heyday of the Atlantic slave trade back upon the comparatively placid Middle Ages.

A similarly flawed periodization is proposed by John Thornton in his *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680.*[17] Following Goody, he makes the claim, preposterous to Northeast Africanists, that land in precolonial Africa was irrelevant as a basis for wealth: "People wishing to invest wealth in reproducing form could not buy land, for there was no landed property. Hence, their only recourse was to purchase slaves, which as their personal property could be inherited and could generate wealth for them."[18] When arguing that in Europe one rewarded followers through grants of land but in Africa through allowing them to acquire slaves,[19] Thornton may indeed be correct for the time and place from which his data derive—West and West Central Africa as transformed during the era of the slave trade. However, the state of affairs he presents as a timeless and universal continental norm was not typical of earlier periods of African history, nor of precolonial African states in general.[20]

One may certainly conclude that studies organized at the intermediate level of analytical scale convey valid and useful historical insight, particularly where the elements chosen for emphasis overwhelmingly dominated the social setting. Unfortunately, as the debate of the 1970s over the proposed "African Mode of Production" revealed, conceptual efforts organized at this scale run a serious risk of excluding from consideration factors vital to sound analysis.

The Need for a Formulation of Appropriate High-Level Concepts

The search for a sound and comprehensive periodization for African history has inspired several analyses at a higher level of generalization. These seek to classify all African societies on the basis of a limited but sufficient number of significant characteristics drawn from the inventory of political economy. The broad classificatory entities thus assembled correspond in scale of analysis to the "modes of production" of Marxian discourse, to which they also bear greater or lesser degrees of

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descriptive similarity. Few if any ventures seek to pursue such a designation with the requisite logical rigor,[21] and the value of the exercise is clearly heuristic. However, that value is not to be underestimated. Jacques Maquet's *Afrique: Les Civilisations Noires*[22] has been in print for almost 40 years, not because it is flawless but because it holds firmly in mind a few basic truths that seem to have escaped some vastly more subtle analysts—notably, as Ouologuem Yambo put it, that "an agricultural country practices agriculture."[23] Of central importance to the present study is Ralph Austen's *African Economic History,* whose otherwise-sensible approach to precolonial realities deliquesces on contact with northeast Africa: "some regions not easily incorporated into general patterns (particularly the Nilotic Sudan and the adjoining Horn of Africa) receive little attention."[24] Here is a conceptual challenge, indeed! What "general pattern(s)" of political economy might serve to fill the gaping hole in Austen's typology?

One proposal, advanced by Donald Crummey and others for the case of Ethiopia, has been to identify this precapitalist northeast African state society as "feudal,"—certainly in the descriptive liberal sense and perhaps also, with some qualifications, in the Marxian.[25] In a similar spirit, one of the present authors has applied the term "feudal" to Sinnar.[26] Crummey and Shumet Sishagne have recognized land tenure as one of the important features of apparent commonality among a number of old northeast African states,[27] a theme to be considered at length below. Finally, the present authors have elsewhere proposed a high-level heuristic category based upon descriptive criteria that embraces all the precapitalist states of northeastern Africa (among others).[28] This is the old agrarian "state without cities," typically a geographically large, decentralized polity based primarily upon the extraction of agricultural surplus from a class of producers by a hereditary ruling nobility. The elite wielded limited numbers of slaves as instruments of state but did not allow them to supplant the free commoners in production. The exchange function was socially encapsulated and subordinated to precapitalist understandings of the interests of the state. Foreign commerce in particular was limited in volume and value, and strictly regulated.[29] The only gathering of people that approximated a town was the court complex of the capital, often in theory (when not also in practice) perambulatory. The authors believe this model to be broadly

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consistent with Crummey's understanding of "feudalism," and propose that it not only fills the northeast African lacuna in Austen's typology but also possesses considerably wider relevance.

The present study holds that the issue of land tenure in the precapitalist states of northeastern Africa should be approached in the first instance at a high level of theoretical reasoning, comparable to the Marxian mode of production, which respects the fundamental importance to the region of the agriculture of free subject commoners. While useful insights may indeed derive from reasoning at an intermediate or low level of theorization, such inferences should not be allowed to obscure that basic reality. The preceding lengthy discussion has been necessary because the wider Africanist discourse, conspicuously ignorant of, when not actually malevolent toward, northeast Africa, has popularized the sets of concepts introduced above, and these, however valuable in some other historiographical contexts, do not contribute to a sound understanding of the state societies of precolonial northeast Africa. Indeed, the authors believe that a better comprehension of precolonial northeast African state society will contribute materially to the advancement of our understanding concerning the historical experience of other parts of the continent, notably the medieval Central and Western Sudan.

The Ancestry of Old Agrarian State Society in the Sudan

The mesolithic transition to food production began early in northeast Africa.[30] While most communities grew at least some seasonal crops, given the Sudanese terrain, predominantly pastoral lifestyles prevailed there from the outset as the linguistic ancestors of modern speech communities staked their respective claims to lasting homelands. Thus, for example, the spatial distribution of Eastern Sudanic, and within that tradition at a somewhat later date the distribution of Nubian, may both be understood on this basis. Given the range hunger of arid-environment pastoralism in general and the patent territorial acquisitiveness of early Sudanese food producers in particular, one may reasonably infer that land had ceased to be anything remotely resembling a "free good" in the

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Sudan long before the rise of the state.[31] The conquest of significant parts of the northern Sudan by pharaohs of the Egyptian New Kingdom consolidated the establishment of state society in the northern Sudanese Nile Valley during the first millennium BCE. Historiography concerning this period, and for a long age to follow, relies very heavily upon archaeological data, evidence of sterling quality but derived almost exclusively from that small stretch of the Nile banks presently submerged by Lake Nasser, mute testimony whose relevance in the vast elsewhere always demands a bridge of inference when not also a leap of faith. Special credit is due to William Y. Adams, who alone has accepted responsibility for framing a general historical synthesis.

The prevailing archaeologically grounded interpretation concerning the impact of the coming of the state upon older Sudanese societies commands assent. It is a truism of the ancient agrarian world that the governments of sedentary states usually despised and often feared the free pastoral societies that surrounded them. Therefore, it is not surprising that when ancient Egypt annexed the northern Sudan, the archaeological record shows, as Bruce Trigger noted, that there was a "shift away from pastoralism" in favor of crop cultivation on lands of which "most, if not all . . . were owned by the crown,"[32] according to the principle that "the king owned all land and merely delegated its use to others."[33] At that point, "class stratification began to replace ethnic division as the main cleavage in Nubian [northern Sudanese] society," as Adams put it; "the bulk of the Nubians were now *fellaheen,* and . . . shared the unhappy lot of their fellow peasants in Egypt and other parts of the world."[34] As the very graves of the newly impoverished subject class vanished from the archaeological record,[35] their remains also documented the introduction of a significant change in diet to compensate the new peasantry, to a degree, for the loss of the abundant animal protein enjoyed by their livestock-keeping forbears. This compensation was the domesticated pig, the consumption of pork being a fairly reliable cultural marker for sedentary state society in the precolonial Sudan.[36]

Did the principles of old agrarian political economy, so conspicuous when first introduced into the Sudan three millennia ago, ever falter before the onset of the colonial age? There is much wisdom in the perspective of Adams, who refused to be lured into the ethnically

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grounded racist interpretations of his Orientalist predecessors and asked that the history of the northern Nile-Valley Sudan be seen primarily as "a continuous narrative of the cultural development of a single people."[37] Of similar merit is his view of the broad sweep of political process: "new dynasties arose when rebellious factions within the state captured the symbols of divinity; successor states arose when external barbarians captured them."[38] In all cases, the state itself endured. This vision of long institutional continuity across the ages can explain why the captive princes of early-nineteenth-century Sinnar were still known by the medieval Nubian title of *sawakira,*[39] and contemporary royalty was addressed with the ancient Meroitic salutation *Gar Mol.*[40] The monarch so honored still laid claim to the ownership of all the land in his kingdom and still exacted political payments from a class of pork-eating peasant producers, too poor to leave archaeologically tangible remains. Measured by these criteria, the hypothesis of continuity has much to commend it.

Yet as the discourse of the Nubiologists moves forward in time and southward out of the tiny zone examined carefully by archaeologists, new paradigms at lesser scales of conceptualization intrude, tending to undermine the vision of institutional continuity. All are empirically grounded and each conveys valuable insight that must be reconciled with any high-order interpretation.

One of the intrusive new organizing concepts is the familiar privileging of the exchange function. For example, when nucleated villages with artisans and evidence of a trade in pottery and other goods appeared at some Meroitic sites, Adams chose to regard this development as "an important turning point in African history.... [Meroe] is at the same time the last of the great Nilotic [i.e., old agrarian] empires and the first of the 'empires of the steppes' which arose in the wake of the caravan trade."[41] Moreover, "the spread of... [Meroitic] civilization to the steppelands was probably due in large measure to the extension of overland trade routes."[42] It is unnecessary to attack this model, for it promptly met its end at Adams's own hands. Upon reconsideration, Adams reached the completely contrary conclusion that the Meroitic southlands were "a kind of royal fief," characterized not by the hegemony of the caravan trade but rather by the absence of urbanization and commerce. Moreover,

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he found that in the archaeologically documented northern zone, "the rise of a wealthy middle class led to political decentralization and a decline in the absolute power of the monarchy."[43] The present authors, bearing in mind the experience of eighteenth-century Sinnar, wholeheartedly endorse the latter interpretation. Commerce benefited the ruler of an old agrarian state only as long as he himself dominated it.[44]

A second intrusive set of organizing concepts concerns an array of technological innovations considered by Goody and others to constitute important historical determinants. Current Sudan scholarship does not make extravagant claims for the introduction of ironworking during Meroitic times,[45] but the roughly contemporary adoption of the ox-driven waterwheel, it has been plausibly argued, allowed new land to be brought under cultivation, improved the productivity of existing fields, and stimulated an increase in population and general prosperity.[46] Neither invention is seen to have altered basic social realities. However, such a claim has been advanced for the introduction of the camel at the close of the Meroitic period. The beast is said to have "wrought a social and political transformation among the nomad peoples comparable to that which followed the introduction of the horse among American Indians."[47] It is important to problematize the camel and the relations that developed between camel-keepers and subsequent Sudanic states, for dramatic claims have been advanced by Ibn Khaldun and many successors concerning the politically disruptive historical role of such nomads.[48] One of the present authors has elsewhere presented evidence that on the whole the claims of Ibn Khaldun were exaggerated: in the Sudan, both camel and cattle pastoralists were normally integrated into the political and social structure of the old agrarian state.[49] The presence of a pastoral element in society had considerable influence upon the question of land tenure, a theme to be taken up below.

What remains of value in the claims advanced for the camel is a broader vision that reveals periodic major resurgences of pastoralism at intervals across the long span of Sudanese history. Bearing in mind the fact that the pastoral lifestyle in the Sudan antedated the state, and that the conditions of existence among pastoralists were in many if not all respects superior to those of the peasant class in old agrarian state society, it was only to be expected that whenever the mailed fist of the

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king loosened its grip, the pastoral way of life reasserted itself. There may have been numerous such episodes of pastoral resurgence. The one that accompanied the introduction of the camel and the collapse of Meroe has been noted. By far the most conspicuous, however, was the pastoral resurgence a millennium later that accompanied the decline of the medieval Nubian kingdoms. This episode is often understood to have been brought about by an invasion of the Sudan by Arabs.[50] The pastoral resurgence of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries brought lasting changes to the Sudan. It adopted Islam as its ideology, in opposition to the Christian kings. It defined Arabic as the language in which the new lifestyle was to be conducted:

> the only major northern Sudanese groups who did not join it were those Nubians who lived along the Nile so far north into the desert that even camel-herding was locally impossible, and the eastern communities of To-Bedawi speakers who had no need to adjust to the new post-medieval system of pastoral emphasis because they had never ceased to practice it.[51]

However, what must be questioned is whether the pastoral resurgence of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries also permanently changed the time-honored principles of political economy characteristic of the old agrarian state. For the case of the Nile Valley, to which the ancient and medieval state tradition appears on the basis of present knowledge to have been confined, the answer is clearly negative, for in the sixteenth century the age of pastoral resurgence ended and the familiar state institutions of earlier times reasserted themselves as the Funj kingdom of Sinnar.[52] Moreover, the new age also witnessed the rise of analytically comparable polities under an Islamic rubric across the wide lands of the west, notably the kingdoms of Dar Fur and Wadai. For the several centuries to follow, the genie of pastoral resurgence had been returned to its bottle.

The historiography of the ancient Sudan offers a compelling vision of the forcible imposition of state society by the pharaohs upon a predominantly pastoral Sudanese populace, of whom the majority were stripped of their livestock and reduced to a class of impoverished peasants. This

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historiography has proposed a hypothesis of fundamental institutional continuity that evokes clear resonances across long ages to the very eve of the colonial conquest. Yet the moment ancient Sudanese monarchs replaced Egyptian ones, the class loyalties of the historians switch from sympathy toward the subjects to admiration for the kings.

One important result of this adopted partisanship has been that the periodic episodes of pastoral resurgence in times of royal weakness could be attributed only to causes extraneous to the social formation itself, notably technological innovation or foreign invasion. The available sources, whether archaeological or literary, do not speak at length about agricultural issues such as land tenure. Rather, they encourage a shift of historiographical emphasis from the rural preoccupations of the human majority to the minutiae of elite life at court or (when such existed) in towns. It has proven all too easy to forget that "an agricultural country practices agriculture."

The Late Precolonial Sudan, 1500–1900

In the early nineteenth century, a northern Nigerian pilgrim bound for Mecca could have traveled from Lake Chad to the Red Sea with the permission of only three governments: Wadai (following its annexation of Baghirmi), Dar Fur (following its annexation of Kordofan), and Sinnar (or the Turkish regime that replaced it in 1821).[53] The vast zone thus delineated of course experienced many political vicissitudes between the end of the Middle Ages and the colonial conquests of the nineteenth century. The fortunes of dynasties waxed and waned, and at intervals constituent provinces of the great empires changed hands or enjoyed an age of autonomy as small states. However, no ruptures in basic principles of state and administration may be observed until the final decades of decline leading to the loss of independence. While not all parts of the region have received the attention they deserve, existing studies suffice to demonstrate the commensurability of governmental structures throughout the region and across time. They also testify to the universality of a social structure composed almost exclusively of two distinct classes, a landholding elite often called the ***hukkam*** (those who rule) and a class of subject commoners termed the ***masakin*** (the poor).[54]

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Land within Political Economy

"The government," as Gura subjects said of the Funj regime in Sinnar, "ate taxes;"[55] and each Sudanic lord looked at his land and subjects with surplus extraction in mind. As Sultan Bakhit of Dar Sila put it, "this land of ours has no other wealth than the cattle of our nomads and the goats, donkeys and *takaki* [homespun cotton cloth] of the Daju [sedentary cultivators]. That is all there is. Taxes can derive only from that which exists."[56] Sudanic regimes existed through the extraction of surplus from the class of subjects. Most forms of wealth derived ultimately from the land, but the process of creating wealth was mediated both through the labor of its producers and through the modes of its extraction. "Land tenure" is a concept best considered within this wider context.

The forms in which wealth was available were important for several reasons. In the eastern Sudan (as in Ethiopia, but in contrast to the central and western Sudan, where a standard all-purpose currency in the form of cowries had been in use since medieval times), the exchange function was not highly developed. Awkward, limited-purpose currencies consisting of units of grain, salt, cloth, or other necessities prevailed, and facile conversion from one form of wealth to another through money was not possible. Some forms of wealth were not easily transported and had to be used, whether by the producers themselves or by an appropriating lord, close to where they originated. Gold, copper, ivory, and civet were highly transportable and could even be profitably exported, despite the overhead. So could slaves, but their transport, like that of less valuable livestock within the area, was more difficult. Grain, like corvée labor, was a vital form of wealth that was not easily transportable. One may note the unprecedented outrage expressed by recently colonized subjects of Dar Masalit when compelled to carry and deliver grain for the first time to their new Turkish masters.[57] Under ordinary circumstances a lord's grain treasury consisted of stores scattered throughout his land, its actual use being vulnerable to local pressures. It is in this context that one may read the few extant charters surviving in medieval Nubian, which seem to allocate the king's grain to church officials, presumably leaders in the villages where the crops were grown and the royal assessment levied.[58] Often it was more expedient to send hungry members of the Establishment,

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notably soldiers, to where grain stores existed than to attempt to move staple food.[59] Finally, the production of diverse forms of wealth evoked quite different attitudes on the part of the producers, a situation that called for the deployment of a variety of extractive techniques. This theme requires extended discussion.

In some areas, exemplified by the extreme north along the Nile banks, the cultivation of field and tree crops was the sole major productive activity. The subjects, since their own livelihoods derived from this source, did not need to be compelled to participate, and a conventionally passive and easily ruled peasantry took shape. The peasants valued their livestock, especially the indispensable oxen that drove the irrigation water wheels. However, since these could eat only from the same fields that would otherwise support humans, it was not possible to accumulate a socially transformative surplus in the form of oxen.[60] Over most of the rest of the region embraced by the kingdoms, both swidden agriculture and camel or cattle pastoralism were possible. Here, too, the claims of the state could rely upon the self-motivation of the subjects, who would in any case produce crops and livestock for their own use. However, in this setting the tendency of surplus agricultural wealth to accumulate in the form of livestock was given full play, and at the point of diminishing returns, agriculturalists tended to become pastoralists. Since the latter, as history had shown, potentially or actually posed a major threat to the exercise of state power, it behooved the lords to limit the wealth and thus the numbers and might of the nomads through rigorous and when necessary, forceful appropriation of livestock.[61] Finally, in some areas, and notably in the hilly districts of the south, nonagricultural products of such great value that they could profitably be exported were found, conspicuously gold and copper. Since the subjects themselves were not allowed to keep or export such things—precious metals and the like went directly to the lords as tribute—they had no positive incentive to engage in their production. An unusual degree of coercion was therefore required to force them to interrupt their own agricultural activities and generate exportable wealth. The method employed was to levy a tribute payable either in gold and the like or in slaves. Each community of subjects was obliged to buy peace from the government with precious goods, to seize neighbors as captives at tax time, or to endure government

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reprisals in the form of slave-collecting raids. Spaulding has described the system as "institutionalized insecurity."[62]

In short, the geographically determined potentialities of each region for crop growing, pastoralism, or export-good production guided the government in its choice of administrative techniques; and these, over time, created a variety of rather diverse relationships between the lords of the state and their subject communities. This diversity, however, should not be allowed to obscure the underlying fundamental logic of rule common to all: the government ate taxes, which could derive only from that which existed.

Formal Categories of Land Tenure and Payment

Analytical convention distinguishes between two culturally relevant forms of land tenure, on the basis of which demands for two forms of payment, "rent" and "tribute," are rationalized.[63] One is "ownership," on the basis of which the owner may claim "rent" in return for the use of his land.[64] In the present comparative context it will be useful to identify this form of tenure by its Ethiopian name, *rist.* In the Sudan, as in Ethiopia, ownership rights were usually construed as vested in an individual, normally said to have been the one who first cleared the land and opened it to cultivation. (In the Arabic administrative idiom of Dar Fur, for example, such an owner was termed the *sid al-fa's* or "owner of the mattock.")[65] However, in Sudanese practice—and in contrast to Ethiopian conditions—at most times and places the *sid al-fa's* was not a living individual but rather the ancestor of a subject-class lineage. It was to the head of the lineage, the owners-as-heirs, that the small rent payments were normally made. (In Sinnar, for example, this payment was known by the Nubian term *dugundi.*)[66] While the examples cited here have been drawn from the experience of Sudanese swidden cultivators, pastoral groups and others also laid claim to the ownership of land through the idiom of lineage seniority and extracted rent payments from those said to be later immigrants.[67] In all situations, the Sudanese landholding institutions comparable to *rist* tenure erected a hierarchy of wealth and rank within communities of subject producers and established a local arena of competition for the modest but not insignificant

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rewards at stake.[68] While these basic realities certainly found their counterparts among the Ethiopian peasantry, the idiom in which they were expressed, given the contrast in prevailing principles of succession and inheritance, differed greatly. The lineage idiom that structured Sudanese society evokes but feeble resonances from the highlands.

In Sudanic kingdoms, as in Ethiopia, the ruling elite apportioned all the land among themselves as fiefs—the corresponding Ethiopian term is *gult*—and they relied primarily upon tributary payments drawn from the inhabitants of these holdings, rather than rent.[69] One common Sudanese idiom for the identification of such a fief was to identify it as the abode (Sinnar and Wadai, *dar*) of the group of people who lived there. As Adams has pertinently noted in regard to medieval Nubia, the "legal principle which held that all land belonged to the Crown . . . was expressed in a legal fiction that all the king's subjects were his slaves."[70] This choice of an idiom that emphasized labor rather than land did not mean that Sudanic lords were indifferent to the territorial extent of their fiefs—on the contrary, precisely delineated boundaries existed, though not all are presently known,[71]—but it did imply that they would never have committed the liberal error of trying to isolate the human from the spatial component of the concept of land tenure. In Dar Fur and its sphere of imperial influence, a fief was often identified primarily in the spatial sense as a *hakura*—a term directly comparable to the Ethiopian *gult*.[72] The same lord who could grant a subject the right to own or use land could also take it away.[73]

It is important to emphasize that few or none of such fief holdings appear in the historiographically conspicuous Arabic land charter literature that appeared during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under intrusive and corrosive Mediterranean influence. These concern small grants to holy men, merchants, and royal relatives. R. S. O'Fahey alone, in his discussion of Dar Fur, has maintained that the extant charters typify time-honored patterns of landholding rather than innovative aberrations. This position has been systematically dismantled by G. Michael La Rue in his study of the evolution of land tenure in nineteenth-century Dar Fur and has been categorically denied from the outset by other scholars.[74]

A conspicuous feature of the Ethiopian elite was its mobility. Given the prohibitive cost of transporting vital necessities such as grain, it was

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normal for a lord and his retinue to "eat" from one district after another in succession. In contrast, many Sudanic courts established at least somewhat more permanent capitals, the provision of which required measures unfamiliar to the highlands. The preferred Sudanic solution, having fixed the capital in a fertile and populous area, was to delineate near it a demesne, from which the immediate subsistence needs of the lord could be satisfied. In Sinnar, the demesne was called the *kursi* or "seat" of the lord, and in Dar Masalit it was called *kirsh al-fil,* or "the belly of the elephant."[75] In principle, free subject commoners were obliged to work the lord's demesne in addition to their own farms, a labor obligation known in Sinnar, for example, as *dahwa,* and in Dar Masalit as *kumal.*[76] However, as early as the close of the seventeenth century, some lords began to find it expedient to have their demesnes cultivated, at least in part, by slaves.[77] The relative importance of servile cultivators on the demesnes increased steadily during the following period as intrusive Mediterranean attitudes and practices concerning slavery gained favor. By the time of the fall of the kingdoms, slave ownership was no longer a monopoly of the nobility, and agricultural slavery had spread from the demesne into the surrounding countryside.[78] However, the defining characteristic of the demesne as a form of Sudanic landholding was not the fact that in later years slave labor was often deployed on it. Whether cultivated by the labor of subjects or the labor of slaves, its function was to provision the capital of the lord.[79]

A Sudanic Serfdom?

The Ethiopian peasant, Crummey has concluded, was not a serf: he owned his land and was not bound to it, nor to a master, nor was he subject to formal disabilities before the law, nor prohibited from advancing himself socially, conceivably through marriage into the elite.[80] In regard to each of these criteria, however, a stronger case could be made for a resemblance between the status of Sudanese subjects and conventional serfdom, as is perhaps best illustrated by evidence from Sinnar.

The Sudanese *masakin* were subject to sumptuary laws that defined in some detail the permitted visible manifestations of their lowly rank. The exhibition of legally excessive opulence, be it merely a clean cloth

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garment, was an offense (in Sinnar, for example, the legal term was *sibla*) that justified the seizure of the offending amenity by any of the *hukkam,* if not stronger measures.[81] In Sinnar, the *masakin* are known to have suffered serious legal disabilities. The testimony of a subject in court was worth only a fraction of that of a nobleman, and the same applied to the penalty for killing or injuring a subject; even the word or life of a foreigner had greater value.[82] Only through his lord could a subject seek justice.[83] Marriage between elite and subjects (or between either group and slaves) was not legally possible.[84] In the absence of a market in land and under the cultural constraints of lineage discipline, a formally free peasant landowner who could neither sell nor otherwise alienate his landholding, and who could only petition his lord for the transfer of his personal tributary dues and services to another master, came very close to being formally bound to land and lord. It remains to consider the option of flight.

Prevailing Africanist scholarship is inclined to view the acquisition of slaves primarily as an injury inflicted on one society by another. The dominant image is that of "foreign raiders emerging from elsewhere to seize our people." [85] This stereotype is undoubtedly correct for many times and places, not least those dramatic historical episodes of massive slave export fueled by foreign demand. The old agrarian states of the eastern Sudan, in turn, conformed to expectations, albeit in comparatively anemic fashion. They, too, sent out raiders to seize foreigners as slaves, and exported some to the Middle East. Other slaves, also in thoroughly conventional fashion, they deployed locally as faithful but expendable elite tools of state, notably as soldiers.[86]

What this received wisdom tends to obscure is that enslavement also played a different and very important regulatory role within the structure of the old agrarian Sudanic states themselves. Enslavement was the punishment for certain key forms of deviance that threatened the social order and the ultimate sanction in the disciplining of labor. Some of the forms through which internal enslavement was exercised are evident in the surviving records from Sinnar. For example, when the cultural norms surrounding marriage were violated, all illegitimate children, whether the offspring of commoners or the offspring of irregular mixed liaisons between members of the legally endogamous social groups (commoners,

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slaves, nobility), became slaves of their local lord.[87] Communities of subjects who failed to meet their tribute obligations were routinely attacked by the government's forces and subjected to the seizure of individuals as slaves. Particularly pertinent to the question of a possible Sudanese serfdom was the rule that each lord had the right to claim for his own all stray livestock, including slaves, that appeared on his fief. This implied that a lord could decide at his pleasure whether or not any individual who entered his lands without appropriate credentials was a slave.[88] A peasant who elected to exercise his formal freedom of personal status, by leaving the land his lineage owned or he rented and the fief of the lord to whom he owed his tributary payments, would soon find himself explaining to another nobleman why he was something other than a stray animal to be enslaved forthwith. There were persuasive arguments: perhaps he had merely come temporarily to trade, or even as an incipient Islamic holy man, or as a member of a known community the lord was unwilling to offend. Groups of immigrant settlers, on occasion, might be accepted as free commoners. On the other hand, a lord who received other noblemen's subjects without consigning them to eternal anonymity, through the social death of enslavement and then the prompt disposal of them through sale or tribute payment to his superior, could expect to hear soon from their former lord demanding restitution.[89] In practice, free commoners who left their homes—notably refugees from hunger and drought—were routinely enslaved,[90] so much so that some have even described slavery in Africa as primarily a state of separation from one's kin.[91] Such were some of the common forms of enslavement in its internal, regulatory function, the exercise of which owed little to foreign influences without or market forces within.

In short, an understanding of enslavement is absolutely vital to comprehension of the old agrarian system of land tenure, for it was precisely through the threat of enslavement, directed not against foreigners but against one's own lower orders, that a government rendered objectively superabundant land politically scarce.[92] Only the threat of enslavement was sufficient to compel subject producers to turn aside from their life-giving fields and flocks to generate tribute payments in the form of non-agricultural products such as gold, copper, or slaves. Occasionally people risked enslavement by fleeing their homes due to war, tyranny, or natural

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catastrophe. Normally, however, the threat of enslavement had the effect of binding formally "free" Sudanese subjects to their native lands and masters.

The Medieval European Comparison Reconsidered: Exorcising the Bogey of Ethnicity

European visitors to the old agrarian states of northeast Africa almost invariably described some or much of what they saw there in terms of their own culture's medieval experience. For a modern historian, that comparative reference is deeply embedded in the literature of primary sources and must be either justified rationally or explained away. In the case of Ethiopia, a number of scholars have elected to measure African realities against the brief but insightful synthesis of European feudalism formulated by Marc Bloch.[93] However, in other African settings this historiographical approach has been rejected, apparently under the intellectually hegemonic influence of the sister discipline of anthropology, in favor of a variety of interpretive schemata that privilege religious or linguistically grounded concepts of ethnicity. (For example, one may note Jack Goody's use of Lucy Mair's work on East African clientage to dismiss the applicability of medieval European concepts—in this case, vassalage—to the interlacustrine kingdoms.)[94] Even Crummey, in his essay on feudalism in Ethiopia, felt obliged to take great pains to emphasize that, with very few exceptions, all the people he was discussing belonged to one ethnic group and could therefore legitimately be analyzed in historical, rather than anthropological, terms.[95] Was that argument necessary? The old agrarian states of the Sudan, in contrast to Crummey's "Abyssinia," knew many ethnicities. Does that necessarily invalidate meaningful comparison to the medieval European experience? In order to follow Goody in answering these questions in the affirmative, it would be necessary to believe two things: that ethnicity played no significant role in medieval Europe; and that northeast African ethnic groups were more real than the governments who ruled them. The present study holds that both propositions are false.

Few Africanists have enjoyed an extended encounter with the historiography of medieval Europe; rather, they have tended to base their

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comparisons, when such have seemed appropriate, upon brief syntheses by eminent medievalists—of which that of Bloch is certainly as worthy as any. Unfortunately the broad synthetic statements taken as normative by Africanists are in fact epitomes of England and France in the High Middle Ages. While they may indeed convey truths of central importance—for example, central to the framing of an analysis based upon modes of production—they also conceal many things that an Africanist embarked upon a serious comparative undertaking should know, especially the ubiquity of ethnicity, kinship, and indeed the whole array of social institutions customarily addressed in the African context by anthropologists. The further back one moves in time from the fourteenth century, and the farther out in space from the central heartlands of France and England, the more conspicuous these hidden realities become, and the more obvious the limitations of the broad synthesizing paradigms.

The authors believe that medievalists and students of precolonial Africa have much to learn from one another; in the present limited context, however, a few suggestive examples must suffice. Whoever doubts the significance of ethnicity in medieval Europe need only turn from the heart of France and England to their peripheries, or to the experience of the Baltic peoples under the rule of the Teutonic knights.[96] A student of state formation in Africa and of the differentiation of elites within a hitherto comparatively egalitarian society could certainly profit from an examination of the comparable institutional developments among early medieval Germans. Both ethnicity and land tenure constituted key variables in the formation of German feudal society.[97] Some medievalists have chosen to emphasize the formally contractual, legalistic terms in which relations among members of the European feudal elite were couched when written down, while anthropologists, relying primarily upon the spoken word, have often found the idiom of kinship to be more pertinent in understanding the structure of the elites of African states. The apparent clash of realities imposed upon the mind by the application of these contrasting methodological approaches may be bridged through consultation of the genealogical tables appended to Steven Runciman's *Sicilian Vespers.* One learns that most of Europe in 1282 was governed by a single interrelated clan of hereditary nobles, just as

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surely as was Sinnar in 1700.[98] In short, medieval Europe, like the old agrarian states of northeast Africa, had its multiplicity of ethnicities and its complex systems of kinship relations, and both, along with the elaboration of land tenure institutions, contributed to the organization and function of feudal society. A good case can be made for the application of anthropological concepts to the historical records surviving from medieval Europe, and one of similar merit for the borrowing of historical insights derived from the study of European feudalism in the study of Africa. However, the latter project requires a deeper familiarity with medieval Europe than has hitherto been brought to bear.

The tendency of an older generation of anthropologists to reify the ethnic groups they delineated for investigative purposes is a familiar problem and need not be addressed here. What is asked of a historian is to question the unqualified and absolute quality of such definitions, and when appropriate to expose their provisional and contingent nature.[99] At any given moment in the history of one of the polyethnic old agrarian states of northeast Africa, most of the subjects on a nobleman's fief would probably have identified themselves as members of an ethnic group in the sense familiar to anthropology. Yet the microhistory of such a community over time reveals that beneath a group identity superficially couched in the idiom of kinship lay a complex web of emigration and immigration. Each single ethnic group of subjects was in reality a composite amalgam built up over time through the absorption of individuals and groups.[100] Given the paucity of diachronic knowledge, valuable insight may be derived from Fredrik Barth's astute observation of several communities in Dar Fur. Barth identified the source of legitimate group membership as the fiat of the nobleman invested by the capital with the right to rule the territory on which the subjects lived.[101] Barth's analysis has profound implications for both history and political economy. From a historian's perspective, deeply rooted in time, it would be misleading to say that each ethnic group of subjects had a homeland. Rather, the exercise of state authority over both land and subjects created first (in the analytical sense) a tribal homeland and then a tribe to occupy it. For comparative insight derived from a historical situation in which the processes by which state and ethnicity were forged in a comparatively accessible late-nineteenth-century past, one may borrow the

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perspective of Catharine Newbury. Her careful analysis of the incorporation of the Kinyaga region into the "feudal" kingdom of Rwanda finds the king's key tool to have been a historically unprecedented assertion of state control over all the land, with the result that the Ikinyarwanda-speaking populace of Kinyaga was duly differentiated into the land and cattle-holding "Tuutsi" and subordinate "Huutu" ethnicities or castes familiar to subsequent anthropological discourse.[102] From the perspective of political economy, the fief was more real than the tribe—until the kings failed.[103]

In summary, neither of the major objections advanced by critics against the pursuit of comparative analysis between the old agrarian states of northeast Africa and medieval Europe can withstand serious scrutiny. Medieval Europe, like northeast Africa, was an ethnic mosaic. Feudal society had to accommodate all manner of cultural idiosyncracies. The ethnic groups of northeast African states did not come into being in isolation from or in defiance of the governments that ruled them. They became what they were under the tutelage of the regime. The presence of ethnicity as an element in the social construction of both medieval Europe and late precolonial northeast Africa need not prevent a comparison between the two.

Conclusion

Land tenure is a complex social phenomenon that includes human beings, land, technology, ecology, and power relations. It deserves to be conceptualized, in the first instance, at a level of theorization sufficiently high to embrace all of its component aspects. Studies focused more narrowly may well yield valuable insights, but they should not be allowed to obscure the more fundamental verities—especially the fact that "an agricultural country practices agriculture."

The initial imposition of the old agrarian "state without cities" upon the northern Nile Valley in Sudan has been analyzed persuasively in terms that incorporate an understanding of the changes in land tenure that this social transformation entailed. However, if only because of the nature of the surviving sources, the subsequent course of ancient Sudanese events has usually been read from a royalist perspective that

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says little about land tenure. In contrast, the comparatively rich documentation available for the states of the late precolonial period not only amply supports William Y. Adams's vision of basic institutional continuity across the ages, but also reveals that even on the brink of colonial conquest the ancient conflicts between rulers and ruled—not least concerning the terms under which land was to be used—remained keen.

Land tenure in the kingdoms of the late precolonial Sudan is best understood in terms of a precapitalist state society in which a hereditary nobility led by an elected king used its armed mastery of the land to exact political payments in many forms from an ethnically diverse class of subject producers. State power was distributed spatially through the subdivision of the realm into landholding units assigned to noblemen as fiefs, and the larger holdings were often subinfeudated. Many noblemen at all levels of the hierarchy relied upon a special demesne for the immediate provision of their sedentary court establishments. State policy contributed substantially to the decision as to how each fief was to be exploited, and also to the terms of social organization to be tolerated among the resident subject community assigned to the task of provisioning the court establishments.

Within the subject community a form of precapitalist landownership comparable to the Ethiopian *rist* prevailed, but the exercise of these rights through the extraction of *dugundi* or its analogues had meaning only within the community and did not compromise the superior claims of the nobility. The subjects were constrained by sumptuary laws, prohibited from marrying outside their class, and subjected to legal disabilities; only from their lord could they seek justice. It is not known whether Sudanic terms for "subject cultivator" such as the Nubian *turbal* (late precolonial) or *torpa* (medieval) implied formal binding of the individual to land and lord as in conventional European serfdom. However, the constraints of family discipline among subject kin groups, backed by the threat of enslavement of the deviant who fled, yielded a very similar result.

Such were the realities of old agrarian state society in the Sudan, rooted in the late precolonial system of land tenure, that inspired European visitors to describe what they saw in terms of feudalism. The comparison has much to commend it. The paradigm of the old agrarian

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"state without cities" applies equally to Ethiopia, the present study holds, and may therefore serve to define the hegemonic social formation of precolonial northeast Africa as a whole—subject to appropriate acknowledgment of the "nations without kings" of Somalia and the Southern Sudan. With that qualification, it is the set of social arrangements outlined here that Ralph Austen would have needed to understand in order to fill the regional lacuna in his typology of precolonial African political economy. From a continental perspective, the fragmentation of sixteenth-century Songhai under the impact of the Atlantic slave trade, as analyzed with clarity and eloquence by Claude Meillassoux, finds a parallel in the fragmentation of eighteenth-century Sinnar at its opening to the markets of the Middle East. Similar forces sapped the energies of Dar Fur. The present authors believe the model given here to be the best paradigm by which to organize the admittedly less generous sources of information about the medieval Western Sudanic states of Ghana, Mali, Songhai, and Kanem-Borno. Were these not also old agrarian states similar to Wadai, Dar Fur, Ethiopia, or Sinnar? The possibility of an even wider relevance need not be excluded.

Notes

1. Because most of the evidence concerning land tenure in the precolonial Sudan derives from the final period of independence before colonization, the most relevant literature is that which concerns the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For an introduction, see Lidwien Kapteijns, "The Historiography of the Northern Sudan from 1500 to the Establishment of British Colonial Rule: A Critical Overview," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 22, no. 2 (1989), 251–66; G. N. Sanderson, "The Modern Sudan, 1820–1965: The Present Position of Historical Studies," *Journal of African History* 4, no. 3 (1963): 435–61; Richard Hill, "Historical Writing on the Sudan since 1820," in *Historians of the Middle East,* ed. Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 357–66.
2. For examples of various contrasting viewpoints, see Jay Spaulding and Lidwien Kapteijns, "The Orientalist Paradigm in the Historiography of the Late Precolonial Sudan," in *Golden Ages, Dark Ages: Imagining the Past in History and Anthropology,* ed. Jay O'Brien and William Roseberry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 139–51; Abdullahi Ali Ibrahim, "Breaking the Pen of Harold MacMichael: The Ja'aliyyin Identity

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Reconsidered," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21, no. 2 (1988), 217–31; and Ibrahim, "*Sahir* and Muslim Moral Space," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23, no. 3 (1991), 387–99.

3. Initially Janet Ewald, in an otherwise constructive effort to take oral traditions and testimonies seriously as historical sources, may have underestimated the centrality of land tenure to precolonial Sudanese states. Representative expressions of this position may be found in her *Soldiers, Traders, and Slaves: State Formation and Economic Transformation in the Greater Nile Valley* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 8 and 43. On p. 66 she acknowledges that "the king also needed to extract a surplus from the land." However, she doubts his ability to do so.
4. This concept is familiar to social scientists but not to all historians of the precolonial Sudan. For a lucid introduction, see Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 19–25.
5. This viewpoint is expressed well by Jack Goody in his *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), viii, 76: "the nature of 'indigenous' African social structure, especially in its political aspects, has been partly misunderstood because of a failure to appreciate certain basic technological differences between Africa and Eurasia. It is these differences that make the application of the European concept of 'feudalism' inappropriate . . . [because] the so-called feudal systems of Africa lacked a feudal technology."
6. For an introduction to the kingdom of Sinnar, see R. S. O'Fahey and J. L. Spaulding, *Kingdoms of the Sudan* (London: Methuen, 1974); and Jay Spaulding, *The Heroic Age in Sinnar* (East Lansing: Michigan State University African Studies Center, 1985).
7. Jack Goody is the central figure in this school, but it is represented in the Sudan by Janet Ewald. See her "Speaking, Writing, and Authority: Explorations in and from the Kingdom of Taqali," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, no. 2 (1988), 199–224. An extended critique may be found in Jay Spaulding, "The Birth of an African Private Epistolography on Echo Island, 1862–1901," *Journal of African History* 34, no. 1 (1993), 115–41.
8. Goody, *Technology, Tradition and the State*, 29 and 12.
9. Ewald, "Speaking, Writing, and Authority," 209; Ewald, *Soldiers, Traders, and Slaves,* 8, 43, and 181. For a critique, see Jay Spaulding, "A Premise for Precolonial Nuba History," *History in Africa* 14 (1987), 369–74.
10. Nancy J. Fairley, "Ideology and State Formation: The Ekie of Southern Zaire," in *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies,* ed. Igor Kopytoff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 91.

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11. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "Recherches sur un mode de production africaine," *La Pensée* 144 (1969), 61–78.
12. William Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 471.
13. Roland Oliver, *The African Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 136: "It was not merely that the region between Nile and Chad was remote and inaccessible, but that its home industries were feeble and lacked any traditions of excellence." From the nineteenth-century, continent-wide comparative perspective adopted here by Oliver, the observation is correct. The possibility that this state of affairs might have been advantageous and therefore preferable to the people of the area is not considered.
14. For an introduction, see Lidwien Kapteijns, "The Use of Slaves in Precolonial Western Dar Fur: The Case of Dar Masalit, 1870–1905," *Northeast African Studies* 6, nos. 1–2 (1984), 105–26; Jay Spaulding, "The Business of Slavery in the Central Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1910–1930," *African Economic History* 17 (1988), 23–44; and the sources cited in these works.
15. Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
16. Lidwien Kapteijns, review of *Transformations in Slavery*, by Paul E. Lovejoy, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 17, no. 2 (1984), 331–32.
17. John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
18. Ibid., 87.
19. Ibid., 105.
20. See also Ray Key, "'I Am Here to Plunder on the General Road': Bandits and Banditry in the Pre-Nineteenth Century Gold Coast," in *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa,* ed. Donald Crummey (London: J. Currey, 1986), 109–33.
21. For an introduction to some of the problems entailed, see Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1975).
22. Jacques Maquet, *Afrique: Les Civilisations Noires* (Paris: Horizons de France, 1962); Maquet, *Civilizations of Black Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). A neglected work of similar merit is George P. Murdock's synthesizing effort in the *Kulturkreis* tradition, *Africa, Its Peoples and Their Culture History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959).
23. Ouologuem Yambo, "1901," in *The African Assertion: A Critical Anthology of African Literature,* ed. Austin J. Shelton (New York: Odyssey Press, 1968), 191.

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24. Ralph A. Austen, *African Economic History* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987), 1.
25. Donald Crummey, "Abyssinian Feudalism," *Past and Present* 89 (November 1980), 115–38.
26. Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* xiii-xiv.
27. Donald Crummey and Shumet Sishagne, "Land Tenure and the Social Accumulation of Wealth in Eighteenth-Century Ethiopia: Evidence from the Qwesqwam Land Register," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 24, no. 2 (1991), 241, note 2.
28. Lidwien Kapteijns and Jay Spaulding, *Een Kennismaking met de Afrikaanse Geschiedenis* (Muiderberg, Netherlands: Coutinho, 1985). An English summary is available in Kapteijns and Spaulding, *The Periodization of Precolonial African History,* (Working Paper 125, Boston University African Studies Center, 1987).
29. Lidwien Kapteijns and Jay Spaulding, "Precolonial Trade between States in the Eastern Sudan," *African Economic History* 11 (1982), 29–62; Lidwien Kapteijns, "The Organization of Exchange in Precolonial Western Sudan," 49–80, and Jay Spaulding, "The Management of Exchange in Sinnar," 25–48, both in *Trade and Traders in the Sudan,* ed. Leif O. Manger (Bergen, Norway: Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen, 1984).
30. For an introduction, see Christopher Ehret, "On the Antiquity of Agriculture in Ethiopia," *Journal of African History* 20, no. 2 (1979), 161–77; Lech Krzyzaniak, "New Light on Early Food-Production in the Central Sudan," *Journal of African History* 19, no. 2 (1978), 159–72; and Peter Behrens, "Wanderungsbewegungen und Sprache der frühen Saharanischen Viehzuchter," *Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika* 6 (1984–1985), 135–216.
31. Christopher Ehret and Merrick Posnansky, eds., *The Archaeological and Linguistic Reconstruction of African History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 8; appearing in an editorial "Overview," the statement about Eastern Sudanic may be attributed to Ehret. Robin Thelwall, "Linguistic Aspects of Greater Nubian History," in Ehret and Posnansky, *Archaeological and Linguistic Reconstruction,* 51–52.
32. B. G. Trigger, *History and Settlement in Lower Nubia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Publications in Anthropology, no. 69, 1965), 111–12.
33. B. G. Trigger et al., *Ancient Egypt: A Social History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 226.
34. Adams, *Nubia,* 231.
35. Ibid., 237. "Peasants, unlike tribesmen," Adams observes, "have few luxury possessions. As alienation of landholdings progresses, moreover, even their standard of daily living is apt to sink to a marginal level, under the

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weight of debt and servitude. One incidental result of this process is that peasant populations tend to 'disappear' archaeologically. Whether they can no longer afford funerals and mortuary offerings or whether they no longer care about them, their graves can seldom be recognized."

36. Jay Spaulding and J. L. Spaulding, "The Democratic Philosophers of the Medieval Sudan," *Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika* 9 (1988), 247–68.
37. Adams, *Nubia,* 5.
38. Ibid., 413.
39. Jay Spaulding and Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Salim, *Public Documents from Sinnar* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1989), 386, and the references cited therein.
40. Jay Spaulding, "*'Gar Mol!'*—A Meroitic Survival in the Court Ritual of Sinnar?" *Meroitic Newsletter* 15 (1974), 10–11; and Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 13.
41. Adams, *Nubia,* 305.
42. Ibid., 329.
43. Ibid., 380.
44. Adams reverts at intervals to liberal commercial determinism: thus Meroe collapsed because the Blemmyes seized the trade route to Egypt (*Nubia,* 390); Alodia and Sinnar were essentially slave-trading states (471); medieval Nubia was destroyed through having lost a trade war with West African competitors (509); and so forth. Clearly these references, some bizarre, are merely ad hoc applications of an explanation dear to the author and do not derive from a systematically considered reading of reality.
45. B. G. Trigger, "The Myth of Meroe and the African Iron Age," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 2 (1969), 49; P. L. Shinnie, *The African Iron Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 97. An older generation of scholars was inclined to attribute very great significance to Meroitic ironworking.
46. Adams, *Nubia,* 346–48.
47. Ibid., 383. Adams here paraphrases the idea originally formulated by Trigger (*History and Settlement,* 131).
48. For example, see P. M. Holt and M. W. Daly, *The History of the Sudan from the Coming of Islam to the Present Day,* 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 23.
49. Jay Spaulding, "Farmers, Herdsmen and the State in Rainland Sinnar," *Journal of African History* 20, no. 3 (1979), 329–47.
50. The best exposition of this thesis is found in Yusuf Fadl Hasan, *The Arabs and the Sudan from the Seventh to the Early Sixteenth Century* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1967). For an alternative interpretation of the rise of the modern Arab Sudan, see Spaulding, *Heroic Age*; and

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Spaulding, "The Chronology of Sudanese Arabic Genealogical Tradition," *History in Africa* 27 (2000), 325–37.

51. Spaulding and Spaulding, "Democratic Philosophers," 260–61.
52. Jay Spaulding, "The End of Nubian Kingship in the Sudan, 1720–1762," in *Modernization in the Sudan: Essays in Honor of Richard Hill,* ed. M. W. Daly (New York: L. Barber Press, 1985), 17–28.
53. For an example of such permission, granted in written form to the Kano pilgrim 'Isa Hasan, see Lidwien Kapteijns and Jay Spaulding, *After the Millennium: Diplomatic Correspondence from Wadai and Dar Fur on the Eve of Colonial Conquest, 1885–1916* (East Lansing: Michigan State University African Studies Center, 1988), Document 86, 433–37.
54. In addition to works previously cited, see the following studies, some of which directly address the old agrarian state itself, while others discuss the transformation of old agrarian state society under the impact of intrusive capitalist influences: Lidwien Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith and Sudanic Tradition: The History of the Masalit Sultanate, 1870–1930* (London: KPI, 1985); and Kapteijns, "Dar Sila: The Sultanate in Precolonial Times, 1870–1916," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 92, nos. 23–24 (1983), 447–70; R. S. O'Fahey, *State and Society in Dar Fur* (London: C. Hurst, 1980); George Michael La Rue, "The *Hakura* System: Land and Social Stratification in the Economic History of the Sultanate of Dar Fur (Sudan), ca. 1785–1875" (PhD diss., Boston University, 1989); Neil McHugh, *Holymen of the Blue Nile: The Making of an Arab-Islamic Community in the Nilotic Sudan, 1500–1850,* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994); Marie-José Tubiana, *Survivances Préislamiques en Pays Zaghawa* (Paris: Institut d'ethnologie, 1964); Marie-José and Joseph Tubiana, *The Zaghawa from an Ecological Perspective* (Rotterdam: Balkema, 1977); Alessandro Triulzi, *Salt, Gold and Legitimacy* (Naples, Italy: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1981); Anders Bjørkelo, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Dennis D. Cordell, *Dar al-Kuti and the Last Years of the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Ladislav Holy, *Neighbours and Kinsmen* (London: C. Hurst, 1974); and Holy, *Religion and Custom in a Muslim Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
55. Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 128.
56. Kapteijns and Spaulding, *After the Millennium,* Document 94, 469–73.
57. Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 71.
58. A reading of texts and proposed translations may be found in Ali Osman Mohammed Salih, "The Economy and Trade of Medieval Nubia" (PhD diss., Christ's College, Cambridge University, 1978), especially the document presented on 232–34.
59. Ewald, *Soldiers, Traders, and Slaves,* 23; Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 418–20.

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60. Compare James McCann, *From Poverty to Famine in Northeast Ethiopia: A Rural History, 1900–1935* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 177–80.
61. Spaulding, "Farmers, Herdsmen;" Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 91–96; O'Fahey, *State and Society,* 98–99.
62. Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 96–99.
63. Crummey, "Abyssinian Feudalism," 127.
64. It is important to distinguish "ownership" in the precapitalist sense discussed here (justifying the payment of a fee comparable to *dugundi* to the lineage of a *sid al-fa's*) from the intrusive and culturally alien Islamic concept of *mulk,* also meaning "ownership" but in the context of a capitalist, not a precapitalist, frame of analytical reference. *Mulk* tenures were introduced during the age of collapse and are attested by numerous written documents of the day. Often kings granted them to holy men, while nascent bourgeois enclave communities also construed landholding in terms of *mulk.* A landholding "owned" in the sense of *mulk* could be transferred through sale or pious bequest, or encumbered by mortgage or *amana,* while a landholding "owned" in the sense that *dugundi* could be charged for its use could not be so alienated or encumbered. Significantly, the colonial regimes regarded the latter form of "ownership" as communal tenure vested in a tribe and the former as private property in real estate.
65. Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 40–41, 268, note 87, and the sources cited therein; La Rue, "The *Hakura* System," 173–75 and 186–89.
66. Jay Spaulding, "Taxation in Sinnar," *Northeast African Studies* 6, no. 1–2 (1984), 127–46; Fredrik Barth, "Economic Spheres in Darfur," in *Themes in Economic Anthropology,* ed. Raymond Firth (London: Tavistock, 1967), 152.
67. For an extended discussion, see 'Abd al-Ghaffar Muhammad Ahmad, *Shaykhs and Followers* (Khartoum: University of Khartoum Press, 1974); Talal Asad, *The Kababish Arabs* (New York: Praeger, 1970); and Ian Cunnison, *Baggara Arabs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).
68. Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 40–48; see also Holy, *Neighbours and Kinsmen.*
69. Compare Crummey, "Abyssinian Feudalism," 127.
70. Adams, *Nubia,* 437.
71. Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 39–43.
72. The term *hakura* as employed in this study refers to the form of landholding defined with greater precision by Kapteijns as an "administrative estate [administrative *hakura*]." See *Mahdist Faith,* 144–47. Compare La Rue, "The *Hakura* System," 176–202.
73. Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 90–91; Spaulding and Abu Salim, *Public Documents,* Document 16, 109–15; Barth, "Economic Spheres," 152; Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 70; and La Rue, "The *Hakura* System," 178 et passim.

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74. R. S. O'Fahey and M. I. Abu Salim, *Land in Dar Fur* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); La Rue, "The *Hakura* System," 332–408; Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 135–37, 139, and 294, note 68; Ewald, "Speaking, Writing, and Authority," 218–23; and Ewald, *Soldiers, Traders, and Slaves*, 113; Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 150–60. La Rue's current views may be found in "'Mud on the Belly of the Bull,'" forthcoming in Donald Crummey, *State, Land and Society in Sudanic Africa.*
75. Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 39–41; Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 149; Ewald, *Soldiers, Traders, and Slaves*, 81–90. In his tenth-century account of the medieval Nubian kingdoms of Makuria and Alodia, the Fatimid diplomat Ibn Salim al-Aswani was careful to distinguish the specific demesne districts from which the capitals of Old Dongola and Soba, respectively, were provisioned; see Giovanni Vantini, ed. and trans., *Oriental Sources concerning Nubia* (Heidelberg and Warsaw: International Committee for Nubian Studies, 1975), 606 (Old Dongola) and 615 (Soba).
76. Spaulding, "Taxation in Sinnar"; Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 149–50.
77. O'Fahey and Spaulding, *Kingdoms of the Sudan*, 63–66. For villages of slave cultivators, see Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 169; and Kapteijns, "Dar Sila," 450.
78. Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 33 and 48–61; Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 193–94 and 208–9; and Ewald, *Soldiers, Traders, and Slaves*, 83.
79. The views expressed here may be contrasted with those of Meillassoux (*Anthropology of Slavery*), who is very keen in his analysis of the deployment of agricultural slaves by kings, but leaves no room for free cultivators—certainly not on royal estates—and cannot even imagine a kingdom that relied primarily upon nonslave labor.
80. Crummey, "Abyssinian Feudalism," 129.
81. Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 78–79; Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 43; and Ewald, *Soldiers, Traders, and Slaves*, 95.
82. Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 76 and 155.
83. Ibid., 76. For a comparison with Dar Fur and Dar Masalit, see Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 147; Kapteijns and Spaulding, *After the Millennium,* 330–34; and La Rue, "The *Hakura* System," 173.
84. Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 2.
85. For example, see Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, and Meillassoux, *Anthropology of Slavery.*
86. Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 152–55; and Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 60–72.
87. Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 77.
88. This institution is best known from the western kingdoms: see Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 151 and 163; and O'Fahey, *State and Society,* 103. For the comparable institution in Sinnar, see Spaulding, "Business of Slavery," 32.

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89. Spaulding and Abu Salim, *Public Documents,* Document 45, 247–50; and Kapteijns and Spaulding, *After the Millennium,* Document 109, 528–33.
90. Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 36, 50–53, and 115; Spaulding, "Business of Slavery," 31; and Kapteijns and Spaulding, *After the Millennium,* Document 109, 528–33.
91. An extended defense of this interpretation may be found in S. Miers and I. Kopytoff, "'African Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality," in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives,* ed. S. Miers and I. Kopytoff (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 3–81.
92. For a striking example, see Wendy James, *'Kwanim Pa: The Making of the Uduk People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 46–59, especially the episode recorded on p. 50.
93. Crummey ("Abyssinian Feudalism," 115, note 4) cites a number of distinguished contemporary studies of Ethiopia that adopt this approach. The paradigm may conveniently be found in M. M. Postan's introduction to Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), xiv.
94. Lucy Mair, "Clientage in East Africa," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 2 (1961): 315–25; and Goody, *Technology, Tradition and the State,* 8.
95. Crummey, "Abyssinian Feudalism," 118–20.
96. For an introduction, see Manfred Hellmann, *Das Lettenland im Mittelalter: Studien zur ostbaltischen Frühzeit und lettischen Stammesgeschichte, inbesonders Lettgallens* (Münster: Böhlau-Verlag, 1954); Paul Johansen, *Siedlung und Agrarwesen der Esten im Mittelalter* (Tartu, Estonia: Elwert, 1925); Paul Johansen and Heinz von zur Muhlen, *Deutsch und Undeutsch im mittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Reval* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1973); Harri Moora and Herbert Ligi, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaftsordnung der Völker des Baltikums zur Anfang des 13. Jahrhunderts* (Tallinn, Estonia: Eesti Raamat, 1970); Vilho Niitemaa, *Die undeutsche Frage in der Politik der livlandischen Städte im Mittelalter* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1949); and Robert Bartlett and Angus MacKay, eds., *Medieval Frontier Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
97. For example, see Walter Schlesinger, "Herrschaft und Gefolgschaft in der germanisch-deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte," *Historische Zeitschrift* 176 (1953), 225–75; or James C. Russell, "The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity" (PhD diss., Fordham University, 1990).
98. Steven Runciman, *The Sicilian Vespers: The Rising Which Brought About the Overthrow of the Universal Papal Monarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).
99. For example, a perceptive historian's critique of one hitherto anthropologically defined Sudanese situation may be found in Douglas H. Johnson, "Political Ecology in the Upper Nile: The Twentieth Century Expansion

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of the Pastoral 'Common Economy,'" *Journal of African History* 30, no. 3 (1989), 463–86.

100. For an Arab example from Kordofan, see Andrew P. Davidson, *In the Shadow of History: The Passing of Lineage Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1996), 223–60.
101. Barth, "Economic Spheres," 152.
102. Catharine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). See 61, where the new regime is termed "feudal," though the concept is not elaborated upon; 79–81, where the imposition of what the author terms "land clientage" is introduced; and 86, where a clear overview of the transition and its implications is given.
103. For the coming of tribal independence to the Arabic-speaking subjects of Sinnar, see Spaulding, *Heroic Age,* 381–411, and Spaulding, "The Chronology of Sudanese Arabic Genealogical Tradition." See also Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith,* 63, note 3, and 271–72; and La Rue, "The *Hakura* System," 181 ff. The "tribes" themselves do not necessarily agree with the authors' point of view.

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