

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE 'SAFE HAVENS'?

IMPOSING STATE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE SUDANESE PLAINS
AND THE ETHIOPIAN HIGHLANDS

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Abstract

The new state frontier between Sudan and South Sudan has thrown into relief the enormous problems that modern boundary-making can create. This article first sketches some of the recent consequences of the civil war and the new frontier for local peoples of the Blue Nile, many of whom have now sought refuge in South Sudan as an alternative to Ethiopia. It is then shown that political and social relations in the mountainous borderland between Sudan and Ethiopia have long been in creative flux. From antiquity, local peoples have played one side off against another, pursued trade while retaining some autonomy, and found allies and safe refuge when necessary. The modern state aims to impose clarity along its borders, but from the nineteenth century onwards, examples from this borderland show how destructive this can be. The lessons are now being learned afresh in the Blue Nile and adjacent areas of Upper Nile.

Introduction

This article focuses on the newest of Africa's states, South Sudan, and its international boundaries.¹ One of these is itself the newest in the whole continent, the boundary created by its secession from the former Sudan in 2011. However, many of the region's borders, including at least the eastern stretches of this one at the 'tri-junction point' where South Sudan meets both the present-day Republic of Sudan and Ethiopia, are heavy with history. The lines are sharp on the map, if not yet always on the ground; but in the past, the whole border zone of the escarpment, hills and valleys where the Sudanese plains meet the Ethiopian highlands – a stretch we can call the Blue Nile Borderlands – was a zone of comings and goings, mixing and matching, and a certain autonomy among many local communities. They were long used to taking advantage of the geographical opportunities of this sharply hilly landscape, making their own alliances and seeking their own security. Our present-day opposition of 'state' and 'non-state' actors, along with much of the terminology associated with the modern state – starting with the boundaries themselves – simply does not fit the way that borderlands used to

¹ Editor's note: this paper is also due to be published later this year in *The Borderlands of South Sudan: Authority and Identity in Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Chris Vaughan, Marieke Schomerus and Lotje de Vries, Macmillan/Palgrave. The editors of JASO gratefully acknowledge permission to reproduce it here in a slightly amended version.

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work, and from the point of view of many local communities, perhaps still ought to work. While current attention is being drawn to the politically difficult Sudanese borderland issues of today,² the social and cultural relevance of much older history is still worth exploring. This article offers a few perspectives from the long-term past on today's frontier zones with western Ethiopia.

The Blue Nile Borderlands (south): today

Spearheaded by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), the second Sudanese civil war spread from the south into the northern provinces of Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile in the mid-1980s. These regions of fairly isolated hills are arguably very ancient places of refuge. There is one major difference between them, especially in the context of modern conflicts, in that the peoples of the Nuba Hills of Kordofan have not had the regular option of leaving the Sudanese state altogether for another country. But in the case of Blue Nile, it has repeatedly been possible to move eastwards into the hills, up the valleys, and into the Ethiopian state sphere.

It was in the course of 1987-89 that a substantial proportion of the rural population of the southernmost districts of Blue Nile province, including virtually all the Uduk speakers, did indeed leave their homes and seek refuge over the border in this way. An official UNHCR camp was set up at Tsore, near Assosa, in a locality already known to the Uduk as Langkwai, where their grandfathers used to go hunting (and where some memories even remained of seeking safety from raiding with the sheikhs of Beni Shangul in the 1890s).³ Unfortunately this was only the first of a continuing series of enforced movements (see Map 1). The anti-Mengistu insurgency in Ethiopia itself meant the refugees had to leave this camp in early 1990 and to return to the (southern) Sudan, where they sought safety with the SPLA. By mid-1990 they were obliged to cross back into Ethiopia and spend nearly a year in the large camp at Itang, on the Baro. The fall of Mengistu in mid-1991 then meant they had to return to Sudan, along with hundreds of thousands of southern Sudanese, and to spend about a year in the Nasir area of Upper Nile province. The split in the SPLA later that year was a key factor in the Blue Nile refugees' subsequent spontaneous return – again – to Ethiopia, where a transit camp was set up for them at Karmi and by 1993 a new UNCHR camp at Bonga, well

² Douglas H. Johnson, *When Boundaries become Borders: The Impact of Boundary-Making in Southern Sudan's Frontier Zones* (London: Rift Valley Institute, 2010). Available for free download at www.riftvalley.net

³ Wendy James, 'Kwanim Pa, *The Making of the Uduk People: An Ethnographic Study of Survival in the Sudan-Ethiopian Borderlands* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 37-40.

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upstream of Gambela. Bonga had been a military training camp for SPLA recruits (from both southern and northern Sudan) during the Mengistu regime, while a century previously it had been a refuge for Koma people from further down the Baro-Sobat corridor seeking safety from the western Oromo chief Jote Tullu (with whom large numbers of Dinka were themselves seeking security from Turco-Egyptian raiding in the Sudanese plains, as I discuss below). Under the terms of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005, a programme for the assisted return of all Sudanese refugees was set up, and by 2007-8 those who wished to return to their homeland in the Kurmuk District, now a part of the new northern Sudanese state of Blue Nile, had done so.⁴

There were high hopes for peace in the Sudan at this time. But the provisions of the CPA for the three 'transitional areas' (Abyei, S. Kordofan and the new Blue Nile State) were not fully implemented. Specifically in the Blue Nile, the process of 'popular consultation' was largely carried out, but no conclusions formally arrived at or implemented. The expected peaceful demobilization of the SPLA forces indigenous to the region failed to take place. Elections were indeed held in April 2010 according to plan, and the former commander Malik Agar, as they say these days a genuine 'son of the Blue Nile', was elected Governor of the State on the SPLM ticket. The result of the southern referendum in January 2011, however, soon began to look worrying for the people of Blue Nile. Serious violence broke out in S. Kordofan even before the independence of South Sudan on 9 July 2011, and was followed by the same in Blue Nile from 1 September 2011. The new Blue Nile State then saw the start of aerial bombing by Khartoum on a scale never seen before, along with unprecedented ground attacks. Humanitarian access has been denied to international agencies. Following the formal recognition of the SPLM/A-North, the succession of paper agreements between various parties has not, at the time of writing, improved the security or even the plain survival chances for the people of Blue Nile. It is still very uncertain how the demilitarized buffer zone proposed as part of the September 2012 negotiations between Sudan and South Sudan would work on the ground or how far it will reassure displaced local communities along its route.⁵

⁴ Wendy James, *War and Survival in Sudan's Frontierlands: Voices from the Blue Nile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, paperback edition, 2009).

⁵ 'Agreement between The Republic of the Sudan and The Republic of South Sudan on Borders', 27 September 2012, Addis Ababa. Accessed 3 October 2012 at <http://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2012/09/27/sudan-and-south-sudan-full-text-of-agreements/>

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A brief bird's eye view of the predicament of Blue Nile civilians as of early 2013 is as follows. Systematic aerial bombing continues on a regular basis.⁶ Many tens of thousands have left the new Blue Nile State, confined as it is now on three sides by international frontiers. A good proportion are back in Ethiopia, where the old camp of Sherkole in Beni Shangul has been re-opened and at least two new camps established. But the majority – and this includes thousands of Ingessana people from the northern part of the Blue Nile State who had not been part of the earlier mass refugee movements – fled to the adjoining stretches of Upper Nile, now a foreign country. A majority of the Uduk and Koma seem to have gone straight across the new border to seek refuge at Doro (known to them as an old mission station). Here, and in several other new camps in Upper Nile state of South Sudan, they have joined together with other Blue Nile communities, especially the local Meban people, long regarded as friends and neighbours, culturally related and with whom they have intermarried over the generations.

Themes in the social history of an ancient frontier zone

The western escarpment of the Ethiopian Highlands, as it rises from the plains of the Nile basin, constitutes a really ancient political frontier region between centres of state formation whose story we can trace back at least a couple of millennia. The middle stretches of this frontier zone have long been of interest to archaeologists, linguists and historians, who have often focused on the complexities, for local communities, of life betwixt and between the great civilizations of North-east Africa. They have revealed the way in which such borderlands can be places of cultural exchange and enjoy a degree of autonomous political action, peripheral perhaps, but crucially often able to support or withdraw from the networks of trade and patronage which reach them from one side or the other. Older forms of resource sharing and political co-operation in the frontier zone of course tended to be targeted by state-forming centres from time to time, from the Nile Valley or from the Highlands, but attempts to co-opt the local leadership rarely lasted. At the same time, the swing of fortunes led again and again to the influx of refugees seeking 'safe havens' for themselves in the hills and valleys, with luck making new homes, if not able to return in due course to their former ones. These conditions certainly seem to have fostered the survival of minority languages in the frontier zone. Along with the diversity of languages as such, a capacity of many individuals to

⁶ Recent evidence includes an online report for *The Huffington Post* by Matthew Leriche, 'Terror and Crisis in Sudan's Blue Nile State', 15 January 2013, accessed on 16 January 2013 at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-leriche/sudan-blue-nile-terror_b_2480153.html

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speak two or several languages is characteristic of this region today,⁷ and must have facilitated both cultural give-and-take and political alliances in the past.

For an illuminating example of vital exchanges taking place in the 'remote' western periphery of old Abyssinia, we can refer to a very early source on trading networks. According to the testimony of Kosmas in the early sixth century, as discussed by Richard Pankhurst, Aksum was engaged in relatively peaceful barter relations with the people at a gold-mining district referred to as Sasu. This was probably in the southern or south-western parts of Agaw country and Gojjam. It seems unlikely to me to have entailed crossing the Blue Nile to what we now know as the very important gold districts of Beni Shangul, though this is just possible, and would bring us closer to what is now South Sudan (see Map 2). Camps were set up by the long-distance traders, enclosed by thorn fences. Meat from the oxen they had brought, together with lumps of iron and salt, were laid on top of these fences; the natives (I would guess almost certainly Gumuz speakers: 'the language is different and interpreters are hardly to be found') would come bearing gold nuggets called *tancharas* (a word still current in the twentieth century) and lay them on what items pleased them. If acceptable, the traders would then remove the gold nuggets, and the locals would collect their goods.⁸

Frontier communities such as these, as James Scott has demonstrated for Southeast Asia,⁹ are never simply 'remote' in the sense of being quite out of contact; they are often quite well informed about political goings on in the centres of power, and again typically have traditions of participation in these centres as soldiers, royal servants, intermediaries and seasonal labourers. Elite families in such a frontier zone were not uncommonly linked by marriage to the seats of chiefship and kingship; in the case of the Funj Kingdom of Sennar (1504-1821) this was highly formalized, royal daughters being allocated to chiefs and princes in the periphery (the case of Fazoghli on the upper Blue Nile is a well-known example), thus associating the latter, and their offspring, with the royal dynasty and elite class.¹⁰ Belonging to a chieftom or kingdom was essentially within an ongoing socio-political set of such networks.

⁷ Wendy James, 'Sudan: Majorities, Minorities, and Language Interactions', in *Language and National Identity in Africa*, ed. Andrew Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 61-78.

⁸ Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands: Essays in Regional History from Ancient Times to the End of the 18th Century* (Lawrence, NJ and Asmara: Red Sea Press, 1997), 28-30.

⁹ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).

¹⁰ Jay Spaulding, *The Heroic Age in Sennar* (East Lansing, MI: African Studies Center, University of Michigan, 1985).

By contrast, for the 'modern' nation state as it has emerged in this part of Africa through the imperialisms of the nineteenth century and international law in the twentieth, 'belonging' is a matter of permanent individual citizenship and the drawing of agreed territorial limits on the map and then on the ground (though for parts of the South Sudan even the first stage has not yet been agreed). The boundaries are supposed to provide peace, to control exchange and trade, and especially to clamp down on population movement. But this cannot happen overnight, as recent events along the imposed borderlines testify only too clearly. Borders themselves can provoke trouble; we recall the studies brought together in Ferguson and Whitehead's landmark volume *War in the Tribal Zone*.¹¹ Studies from both ancient and modern times show how imperial borderlines transform the regions in which they are imposed. The frontiers themselves have to be defended, so border posts and guards are brought in; military and other recruitment can cause problems for locals; and increased trade demands can cause rivalries and conflict between communities far beyond the reach of empire itself, in the 'tribal zone' beyond its edge. Before focusing on such processes from the early nineteenth century onwards, let us look a little more carefully at the older history of the central borderlands between Sudan and Ethiopia, not as far back as Aksum but to the late eighteenth century, and see what can be learned about pre-imperial frontier issues from one of the most observant early travellers in our region.

Bruce's observations on the old frontier zone

James Bruce's travels through Abyssinia and the Funj Kingdom in 1768-73¹² have given us not only portraits of the royal capitals at Gondar and at Sennar, but a detailed personal story of negotiating his trip across the frontier zone (Map 2). The borderlands as he traversed them himself were obviously a world unto themselves. 'Central' powers were at such a distance, even for cavalry, but especially for those on foot with a few donkeys and mules for transport, that agreements over grazing and water, tribute-paying to one side or the other and even military alliances were made with a variety of neighbours rather than with central powers. There was little direct control, administration or surveillance of the borderlands. The powers on either side themselves depended on effective patronage over a hierarchy of traditional local authorities. The links between 'centre' and 'periphery' were not so much a matter of

¹¹ R. Brian Ferguson and Neil L. Whitehead, eds., *War in the Tribal Zone: Expanding States and Indigenous Warfare* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2nd printing with new Preface, 1999).

¹² James Bruce. *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, 5 Vols (Edinburgh: printed by Ruthven for Robinson, London, 1790).

devolution as of the dependence of royal power upon a pyramid of individually agreed tributary links with outlying chiefdoms and localities. These were variable and most certainly without any clear territorial defining boundaries on the ground.

Bruce does give some rich descriptions of the 'Shangalla' people, known by this blanket term long used of the linguistically diverse groups of the western lowlands, whom he clearly admired: 'Many nations of perfect blacks inhabit this low country, all Pagans, and mortal enemies to the Abyssinian government.' However, they were hunted by newly enthroned kings, the season being just before the rains, when the people were still living in the forests preparing their food for the approaching winter. At that point, 'the poor savage ... retires into his caves in the mountain, where he passes that inclement season in constant confinement, but as constant security; for these nations are all Troglodytes....'¹³ He expands a little further on: the Shangalla retire 'with their respective foods, all dried in the sun, into caves dug in the heart of the mountains' these are not hard rocks like basalt or marble but 'of a soft, gritty, sandy stone, easily excavated and formed into different apartments ... made generally in the steepest part of the mountain.'¹⁴

He gives a description of the system of the slave tributes demanded from neighbouring Shangalla groups by all local governments in the area – that is, highland chiefdoms subject to Gondar. There are also passing references to the best gold country being among the 'Guba' and 'Nuba' either side of the [Blue] Nile north of Fazuelo.¹⁵

Bruce claims that these lowlands were never seriously disputed between the sovereign powers of Abyssinia and Sennar; incursions would happen from time to time, and claims made over their people and their resources, including not only the predominantly hunting-and-gathering Shangalla but also the cattle-herding peoples who also used the pastures and woodland of the escarpment and its outliers. His account of the way that local powers on either side of the border accommodated the seasonal movements of the pastoralists has special resonance for us today, as we compare the old borders of Sudan with the new, especially those of South Sudan, where pastoralist groups claim seasonal passage rights. An internationally prominent case is that of Abyei, where the resident population are historically Dinka. However, the district was transferred from the authority of Bahr el Ghazal to Kordofan in 1905, and the question of whether Abyei should be part of the North or the South is now a highly explosive issue. In Bruce's day, local communities, especially transhumant

¹³ Ibid., Vol. II, 545.

¹⁴ Ibid., 550.

¹⁵ Ibid., 562.

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pastoralists, could make working political agreements with local authorities on either side; there was no need to declare total allegiance to one distant sovereign power or the other. The following account relates to the region corresponding broadly to that of today's Dinder National Park:

The Arabs, who fed their flocks near the frontiers of the two countries, were often plundered by the kings of Abyssinia making descents into Atbara; but this was never reckoned a violation of peace between the two sovereigns. On the contrary, as the motive of the Arabs, for coming south into the frontiers of Abyssinia, was to keep themselves independent, and out of the reach of Sennaar, when the king of Abyssinia fell upon them there, he was understood to do that monarch service, by driving them down farther within his reach. The Baharnagash [Viceroy of this region]¹⁶ has always been at war with them; they are tributary to him for eating his grass and drinking his water, and nothing that he ever does to them gives any trouble or inquietude to Sennaar. It is interpreted as maintaining his ancient dominion over the Shepherds, those of Sennaar being a new power, and accounted as usurpers.¹⁷

Good relations of a locally agreed kind, and in this case crucial to trade, are also reported between the Agow of Damot (to the south of Gondar) and the neighbouring Shangalla (in this case almost certainly Gumuz). The goods exchanged include some of the same items, such as iron and cattle products on the one side and gold on the other that we know from Kosmas were already important more than a thousand years earlier:

Though the country of the Agows of Damot is generally plain and laid out in pasture, each tribe has some mountain to which, upon the alarm of an enemy, they retire with their flocks. The Galla, being their neighbours on the other side of the [Blue] Nile to the south, and the Shangalla in the low country immediately to the west, these natural fortresses are frequently of the greatest use during the incursions of both. They alone, of all the nations of Abyssinia, have found it their interest so far to cultivate their neighbours the Shangalla, that there are places set apart in which both nations can trade with each other in safety; where the Agows sell copper, iron, beads, skins, or hides, and receive an immense profit in gold; for, below these to the south and west, is the gold country nearest Abyssinia, none of that metal being found in Abyssinia itself.¹⁸

These observations illustrate my main theme: that deep within the western and southern frontierlands of old Abyssinia, local communities might claim regular places of safety in the hills where they could retreat from invaders, even with their animals. In some cases where

¹⁶ In Amharic, literally 'Ruler of the Sea' (*bahar-negash*), indicating one of the viceroys of the maritime or north-eastern facing lower slopes of Abyssinia.

¹⁷ Bruce, *Travels*, Vol. II, 520.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 431-2.

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trade was important, neighbouring groups might set aside places of safety for it to take place. Today, while both retreat for security reasons and the search for cross-border exchanges of all kinds still dominate the lives of borderland communities, local autonomy over these things has all but evaporated.

Bruce eventually left Gondar to cross the western lowlands himself on his way to Sennar and in due course home through Egypt. He set off in a NNW direction on 26 December 1771, refusing a royal escort and with just a few companions. Despite both actual and threatened attacks, the party eventually reached the last outpost of Ras el Fil, the final district under Abyssinian authority on their route. There was no established frontier; the capital of Atbara district of the Sennar kingdom, at Teawa, was still some distance ahead. And although there had been still poor diplomatic relations between the two kingdoms since an Ethiopian invasion of Sennar several decades earlier, Bruce noted the way in which these two frontier chiefs maintained, of their own local initiative, a balance in their social and political relations, and even divided up whatever taxes they could raise from the nomads between themselves.

Ras el Feel consisted once of thirty-nine villages. All the Arabs of Atbara resorted to them with butter, honey, horses, gold, and many other commodities; and the Shekh of Atbara, living upon the frontier of Sennaar, entertained a constant good correspondence with the Shekh of Ras el Feel, to whom he sent yearly a Dongola horse, two razors, and two dogs. The Shekh of Ras el Feel, in return, gave him a mule and a female slave; and the effect of this intercourse was to keep all the intermediate Arabs in their duty.

Since the expedition of Yasous II against Sennaar [in 1736] no peace has ever subsisted between the two states; on the contrary, all the Arabs that assisted the king, and were defeated with him, pay tribute no longer to Sennaar, but live on the frontiers of Abyssinia, and are protected there. The two chiefs of Atbara, and Ras el Feel, understand one another perfectly, and give the Arabs no trouble; and if they pay their rent to either, it is divided between both.¹⁹

Protection of marginal or displaced groups by more secure chiefdoms or kingdoms – such as the Abyssinian protection mentioned by Bruce above of some Sennar nomad Arabs who had supported them – was a recurring theme in the history of rural politics across our whole region. Even on the most local scale, it was central to Jean Buxton's innovative analysis of how the internal political structure of Mandari chiefdoms emerged from their ability to provide security, as she found the situation in the 1950s.²⁰ On a larger scale, Bruce's accounts of the immediate approach to Sennar and the city itself in his day reveal the importance of

¹⁹ Bruce, *Travels*, Vol. IV, 325.

²⁰ Jean Buxton, *Chiefs and Strangers: A Study of Political Assimilation among the Mandari* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

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security to such political centres. He encountered various encampments of 'Nuba' described as coming from Fazuclo and provinces to the south upon 'the mountains of Dyre and Tegla', that is, from what we now know as Fazoghli on the Blue Nile (entry point to the uplands of Beni Shangul-Gumuz) and the Nuba hills.²¹ These communities in effect provided military protection to the city, and further 'Nuba' encampments were noted to the north of the city as Bruce left it on his final departure.

However, even military slavery was by no means a simple matter of domination by the centre over the periphery of Sennar. A decade before Bruce's arrival, a 'Hameg' cavalry officer (Abu Likaylik) from Jebel Gule (just north of what we now know as the Ingessana hills) had mounted a successful coup, which helps explain why Bruce was told that 'Slavery in Sennar is the only true nobility'.²² The establishment of the 'Hameg regency' in the Kingdom of Sennar led to a strengthening of ties with its own southern periphery and the dependent principalities there. There is no doubt that Sennar's ties with its very southernmost periphery and its southern neighbours were important through its history; and here we must of course mention the links, and continuing speculation on organic connections, between the Funj Kingdom of Sennar and the Kingdom of the Shilluk.²³

Imperial encroachment: from the Blue Nile to the Baro

Following immediately on the Turco-Egyptian conquest of Sennar in 1821, Mohammed Ali's troops undertook a large-scale invasion of the upper Blue Nile in search of gold and slave recruits to the army. A vivid testimony to the brutality of this first modern imperial impact in the old frontier zone was provided by Frédéric Cailliaud, who accompanied the expedition.²⁴ From the point of view of the new centre of Ottoman power in Khartoum, the borderlands of the upper Blue Nile were simply a 'no-man's land' ripe for exploitation.

It was in the heart of Beni Shangul, on the route southwards from Famaka, the last outpost of Turco-Egyptian rule, towards Assosa and Fadasi, that a team of Spanish archaeologists recently discovered a pair of massive stone-built forts. These were attributed

²¹ Bruce, *Travels*, Vol. IV, 419.

²² *Ibid.*, 459; and see discussion in Wendy James, 'The Funj Mystique: Approaches to a Problem of Sudan History', in *Text and Context: The Social Anthropology of Tradition*, ed. R. K. Jain (Philadelphia: ISHI, 1977), 95-133.

²³ For a general discussion of theories of the 'origin of the Funj' and specifically linguistic, social and ethnic connections between the capital city of Sennar and places in its southern periphery, see Wendy James, 'The Funj Mystique'.

²⁴ Frédéric Cailliaud, *Voyage a Méroé, au Fleuve Blanc, au-delà de Fâzoql dans le midi du Royaume de Sennâr*, 5 Vols. including Atlas (Paris, 1823-27).

by local people to Italian constructions of the Second World War, but they turned out to be from the early days of the Turco-Egyptian invasion. 'Previous forms of exploitation had been irregular and unsystematic, restricted to a few raids and to the appointment of local rulers nominally subjected to the central governments of the region – the Funj sultanate or the Abyssinian kingdom. The Turco-Egyptian conquest brought a more direct and oppressive involvement of the state in the frontier...'²⁵ By 1855 the focus of the 'predatory state'²⁶ had shifted to the far southern peripheries of the Nile basin, and Beni Shangul's trade in gold and slaves was left to smaller-scale operators, including both local chiefs and commercial interests. We can add that, from the point of view of local populations along our frontier zone, the Turco-Egyptian occupation was the beginning of the end for the old 'safe havens'.

We have a relatively rich range of sources on the frontier zone as a whole for the later part of the nineteenth century, as not only were the Turco-Egyptian Sudan and the Abyssinian Kingdom competing for territorial control in its northernmost stretches, but the Italians were entering the same arena. By the early 1880s the imagined borders of the Egyptian Sudan were extensive, and extending, even as the state was crumbling. They reached southwards to include Beni Shangul (in today's Ethiopia), as far as Fadasi and even the then independent chiefdom of Anfillo (overlooking the Sobat valley, down towards Nasir; see Map 2).²⁷

A little-known Dutch adventurer, Juan Maria Schuver, travelled at this time to these extreme southern parts of the known borderlands, a region of hills and valleys which of course now form part of South Sudan's frontier with Ethiopia. Schuver had started up the Blue Nile on an impulse in early 1881, hoping to find a new route through to the East African coast, but was frustrated by political machinations and had to return northwards.²⁸ His explorations along the escarpment southwards have left us important testimony concerning how 'modern' state sovereignty and forms of frontier control were beginning to impinge on local peoples. The journey took him well south of the zones already under regular Turco-Egyptian or Abyssinian control and into the lands of Jote Tullu (originally known as Bula), independent chief of the Leka section of the western Oromo (see Map 2). Jote's chiefdom was

²⁵ A. González-Ruibal, 'Monuments of Predation: Turco-Egyptian Forts in Western Ethiopia', in *Slavery in Africa: Archaeology and Memory*, ed. P. J. Lane and K. C. MacDonald (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2011), 251.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 276.

²⁷ F. L. James, *The Wild Tribes of the Soudan: An Account of Travel and Sport chiefly in the Basé Country* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1883). Frontispiece map: 'Abyssinia and Adjacent Countries'.

²⁸ Wendy James, Gerd Baumann and Douglas H. Johnson (eds.), *Juan Maria Schuver's Travels in North East Africa, 1880-83* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1996), 329-46.

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based at Kumbabi, near the modern town of Gidami, a little north of modern Dembi Dollo and very close to the edge of the plateau overlooking the Baro-Sobat corridor and the White Nile plains. Schuver arrived there in August 1881 with a party of traders from Fadasi, hoping to be provided with guides to continue his journey.

Treated initially as a prized guest, Schuver was invited to select cattle for slaughter in his honour, provided with honey wine and allocated a cluster of specially built huts for himself and his party. He testifies not only to the prosperity of the countryside but to the political and military resources of the kingdom: 'If I call Bula a "King" it is because a man, who can easily raise 20,000 spearmen, without counting his slave-troops and negro-vassals and who enjoys power and authority comparatively greater than any constitutional monarch, cannot be well called by the same name as the first small village "chief".'²⁹ Schuver himself wanted Jote's help in exploring the possibility of future commercial trade routes down the Baro-Sobat, but the latter would have none of this, constantly harping on his fears of an attack from the Abyssinians, whom he represented as extending their conquests in the Galla (Oromo) lands every year.

It soon became clear that Jote was perfectly serious. He certainly had an impressive local entourage and supporting forces. There were apparently several thousand people in town, many of them Dinka and other people originally from the lowlands of the White Nile who now formed Jote's armed guards and supporters. On a visit to the market, Schuver found an orator praising the remarkable event of his own arrival, asking the people to bring him gifts and build him a house, as 'the man who will prove to be *the Saviour and Protector of our country*'.³⁰ The reason for this soon became clear: Jote wanted to recruit Schuver to his own adventures and assembled slaves and arms for Schuver's personal deployment in the planned operation against the Sayo Oromo (to his south-east; now the Dembi Dollo area, just above Gambela).

Nor were Jote's aggressive campaigns restricted to his Oromo neighbours. Schuver tells us that the plains to the west, below Kumbabi, were emptied – which had not been entirely Jote's fault, as they had been first devastated by Turco-Egyptian trading expeditions in the upper Nile regions (and, as mentioned above, smaller 'Sudanese' groups of Koma were already sheltering from Jote's raids far upstream on the Baro, right at the foot of the mountains). Some of the population had sought refuge with Jote himself, offering their services voluntarily as herders and mercenary troops in exchange for peace.

²⁹ Ibid., 58.

³⁰ Ibid., 65.

The plain between Leqa and the lake is nearly desert and the Dinka tribes till the Sobat river have been so completely cut up by the inroads of the slave-traders, that they have been obliged to look to the Gallas for protection. There are in fact, in Leqa, something like 2000 Dinka slaves. 'Slaves' though their position is one of such, is scarcely the word, but I can use no other term. They are for the majority young men, who have fled to the Leqa country in order to escape death by starvation, their country having been destroyed by the 'Jellabs' and being still threatened by them in such a way that the formation of new settlements is out of the question.³¹

The five-day campaign against Sayo was a sorry effort. And, as Schuver had foreseen, it was not long before Jote's kingdom of western Wallagga was indeed invaded and annexed by Mahdist forces from the Sudan, in 1885. Jote briefly converted to Islam and retained his position, but then invited in the Shoan commander Ras Gobana, who was able to expel the Mahdists. 'King' Bula had lost his independence and spent the next phase of his career as *dejzmach* Jote Tullu, watching as his domains were progressively integrated into modern Ethiopia.

Gwynn's boundary, 1902: imperial peace?

Agreement on the actual line of the border across this region, where there was no simple separation between the peoples, the local chiefs, or the territory of Sudan on the one side and Ethiopia on the other, had to wait until after the disruptions and incursions of the Mahdist state and the establishment of Anglo-Egyptian Condominium rule in 1898. C. W. Gwynn was given the task of delineating the central sections of the border, ending up with a much more westerly line than might earlier have been expected, which became the basis of today's boundary (Maps 1 and 2). It had been agreed with the Emperor Menelik in Addis Ababa in 1899 that the district of Beni Shangul, with its still strong links downstream to the Sudan, should pass to Ethiopia, but little else was clear.

Gwynn spent the winter of 1899-1900 on the southerly part of his survey, from Roseires on the Blue Nile (the old town on the eastern bank, opposite modern Damazin) down to the Sobat. He published a description of his various journeys almost immediately,³² and later, with the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, he followed this with a particularly illuminating

³¹ Ibid., 68.

³² C. W. Gwynn, 'Surveys on the Proposed Sudan-Abyssinian Frontier', *Geographical Journal* 18, no. 6 (1901): 562-73.

retrospective.³³ His relations with Abyssinian officials were always a little ambivalent. He was surprised to find that there were no Abyssinian posts of any size in Beni Shangul, where control was apparently in the hands of a few Sudan Arab families who had established themselves there under the old Egyptian government. He later realized that these were 'nothing more than slave raiders' from whom Menelik extracted tribute payable in gold, and while having to work with the existing agreement that the district be included in Ethiopia, he decided to include its outlying western hills in the Sudan, partly because their people 'appeared to stand in fear of their Beni Shangul neighbours'. Three years later, he discovered that one hill he had selected as a boundary marker because it was said to be waterless and uninhabited 'was actually the headquarters of the most active of the slave raiders – one Ibrahim Wad Mahmud. When it came to the final delimitation of the frontier, this gave rise to some trouble, and it became necessary shortly afterwards to send a little army to clear up the matter.'³⁴ Ibrahim Wad Mahmud was later hanged at Wad Medani; Jebel Jerok, near modern Kurmuk and just north-west of Assosa, was firmly included in the Sudan; and communities such as the Uduk-speaking groups who had fled from his raids, and those of Khogali Hassan over the previous years, were sufficiently reassured to return home.³⁵ By 1910, Kurmuk was established as a frontier police post opposite Beni Shangul, and, no doubt because of the continuing cross-border trade, has since developed a twin on the other side; we have today 'Sudanese Kurmuk' and 'Ethiopian Kurmuk'.³⁶

Certain unfinished business remained from the early demarcations. For example, various agreements between the Sudan and Ethiopia allowed for some flexibility over the low plains of the 'Baro salient', including access from the Sudan side to the river port of Gambela, where there was a resident British Consul for Western Ethiopia.³⁷ This arrangement might now be seen as an attempt to preserve a 'modern', state-endorsed version of ancient borderland flexibility; unfortunately it did not survive the Second World War. Less well known than this special river access across the border was an interesting zig-zag on maps of the same period. This took the frontier line from the Sobat north-eastwards to follow the Jokau (or Gerre)

³³ C.W. Gwynn, 'The Frontiers of Abyssinia: A Retrospect', *Journal of the Royal African Society* 36, no. 143 (1937): 150-161.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁵ Wendy James, 'Kwanim Pa', 48-53.

³⁶ Wendy James, 'No Place to Hide: Flag-waving on the Western Frontier', in *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After*, eds. Wendy James, Donald L. Donham, Eisei Kurimoto and Alessandro Triulzi (Oxford: James Currey Publishers, with Ohio University Press and Addis Ababa University Press, 2002), 261-8.

³⁷ The complicated history of the Baro salient is outlined in Faisal Abdel Rahman Ali Taha, 'The Problem of the Baro Salient', *Sudan Notes and Records* 58 (1976): 21-30.

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tributary upstream, through the Anfillo forest to the high summit of Tullu Wallel near Gidami, and thence in a sharp north-westerly turn to the peak of Jebel Gemi, nicely positioned where the 9th parallel met the southerly end of Gwynn's border.³⁸ A purely hypothetical line of this kind, drawn through genuinely 'little known country' or perhaps a late 'no-man's land' from the point of view of the mapmakers, had even less chance than the agreement over Sudan's access to Gambela of surviving conflict between the colonial powers.

Snapshots from the Second World War

Gwynn's memoir of 1937 was written in the knowledge that the boundary lines with Ethiopia he had been largely responsible for were about to become crucial. Hugh Boustead³⁹ and others have written in detail of the frontier campaigns of the Second World War, with Ethiopia under Italian occupation and already threatening the Sudan. By 2 July 1940, the Ethiopian Emperor had arrived in Khartoum in the first stage of a plan to escort him by land over the frontier and back to his rightful throne. Just two days after this, the Italians, taking advantage of their temporary superiority, crossed the frontier at several points. The town of Kurmuk, originally a frontier post established in 1910, was itself bombed (a foretaste of what was to come in later years).

By September 1940 Boustead had moved his headquarters upstream to Sennar.⁴⁰ The multiple problems of frontier-crossing echoed those of earlier times – for example, the experiences of James Bruce – but with the extra presence of a specific line on the ground agreed by treaty between the two sides; there were also the new dangers of political scale and of modern military technology. The chosen route into Ethiopia led across the 'Shankalla wilderness'. As the advance party assembled 18,000 camels and left Roseires in November, the tall trees along the river – which had so impressed Bruce with their verdant growth and flourishing wildlife – 'provided them with grazing and cover from the wandering Savoia bombers'.⁴¹ From another source we discover that the Allies were not at all shy of co-opting local groups along the route in a manner reminiscent of the Gondar rulers in Bruce's time. To divert attention from the progress of the first convoy and a company of the battalion, a platoon and sixty Sudan police had entered Gumuz country to the south of the convoy's route,

³⁸ *A Handbook of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, London (Naval Staff, Intelligence Division), 1922; see accompanying map in end pocket.

³⁹ Hugh Boustead, *The Wind of Morning: The Autobiography of Hugh Boustead* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

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presumably along the Blue Nile river itself. They had distributed arms to the people there, in order to distract the Italian garrison in the hills above, at Gubba. The diversion had succeeded and was followed by RAF raids on Gubba, 'while the armed negro peasantry kept the garrison in a state of increasing alarm. Unnerved, the Italians withdrew from this isolated forward post a week or so before the Emperor's arrival on the frontier.'⁴² The road from Roseires was now open; the Frontier Battalion eventually made it up to the highlands, escorting the Emperor, who rode for at least for part of the way in a lorry; and the rest is mainstream history.

Less well known are the efforts of *Bimbashi* Evans-Pritchard in defending what was then still a somewhat hypothetical border much further south, drawn right across Anuak country. In command of assorted 'Anuak irregulars' in the Akobo region, south of the Sobat, he fought against Italian-led troops, which sometimes involved attacking villages where they were in occupation. In a graphic account published in the last year of his life, Evans-Pritchard notes that, fortunately for him, all Anuak could handle rifles, and they did not object to living on the country. The campaign depended on mobility and good intelligence. He had made a point of recruiting part of his band from the eastern regions of Anuak country, where there was some regard for the opinion of the Anuak king (whose domains had never been effectively governed from Addis Ababa and obviously had little sympathy for the Italians).⁴³

In the 'post-imperial' era of Mengistu's dictatorship in Ethiopia, the Sudan–Ethiopian border became a frontier of the global Cold War. This itself prompted large numbers of local population movements, mostly by individuals and small groups seeking relative safety as civil conflict developed on both sides. Beyond this, however, the physical access provided by the Baro-Sobat valley as it opens out from the mountains into the Sudanese plains was transformed once again into an important economic and political corridor of opportunity, as Mengistu's regime supported the SPLA during the 1980s. The Ethiopians permitted SPLA bases and refugee camps for Sudanese – mainly southerners but also some from the then northern Sudan – to be established inside Ethiopia from the Kurmuk area down to the Gambela region and well south of the Baro river itself.

South Sudan: the people of Blue Nile face a new international frontier

While the international boundary with Ethiopia was hardening from the early twentieth century onwards, something of the old flexibilities remained within the internal provincial

⁴² Christopher Sykes, *Orde Wingate* (London: Collins, 1959), 258-60.

⁴³ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Operations in the Akobo and Gila Rivers, 1940-41', *The Army Quarterly and Defence Journal* 103, no. 4 (1973): 470-79.

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divisions of the Sudan. The original 'Sennar' province, which stretched as far southwards as the 9th parallel, was succeeded by several phases in which the 'Fung' province was variously defined and redefined, divided into Northern and Southern Fung and adjusted according to the changing fortunes of its constituent *omodiyas*. The southernmost boundaries, however, remained (as they had been) inclusive rather than exclusive. But in 1938, in the context of diverging policies for the administration of Northern and Southern Sudan, the Meban, Uduk and Koma areas were withdrawn from Kurmuk to come under the administration of Upper Nile Province. The growth of Kurmuk after the War, however, justified fresh thinking about the boundaries of the new Blue Nile Province. In 1953, the two *omodiyas* of Yabus and Chali el-Fil, defined as the territories of the Koma and Uduk peoples, were re-transferred from Upper Nile back to Blue Nile, successor to the old Fung Province. The Sudan Interior Mission had been active among them since 1938, following their initial establishment among the Meban at Doro, now left behind in Upper Nile. The reasons for the transfer of Yabus and Chali in 1953 had nothing to do with ethnicity or religion, but were purely administrative: it was easier to include them under Kurmuk, which had seen an expansion of trade and other activity since the end of the Second World War, than to leave them under the distant authorities in Renk. Although the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972 did provide for a local referendum in Chali el-Fil as in Abyei, neither took place, and the 1953 transfer to Blue Nile has not seriously been disputed since. It has, however, spawned a host of problems for those people who found themselves regarded as 'southerners' within the 'northern' Sudan, especially since the resurgence of the civil war in 1983.⁴⁴

The SPLA first moved north into the Blue Nile Province in 1984, and by 1985 they were passing through it regularly between bases in Ethiopia and in Upper Nile. Their programme (at the time) of democratic reform for the country as a whole found a response in the Blue Nile as in some other regions and communities of the 'north', and the SPLA was able to recruit. They advanced on Kurmuk and took the town in late 1987, retreating after a major struggle in which aircraft and international support summoned by Khartoum played a part. The SPLA returned two years later, however, and retook the town briefly (eventually holding on to it after its third capture in 1997).

I can illustrate something of the contradictory and these days very dangerous ways in which such events draw in borderland peoples with a snapshot of the second battle for Kurmuk in December 1989. This was part of a key moment in global as well as international

⁴⁴ Wendy James, *War and Survival*, 2009.

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history: the Berlin Wall was literally crumbling, and the Cold War frontier between Sudan and Ethiopia was doing so metaphorically. And the local indigenous communities of the borderland were being drawn into various sides of the conflict to the point where relatives and neighbours found themselves actually firing on each other, as the following example illustrates.

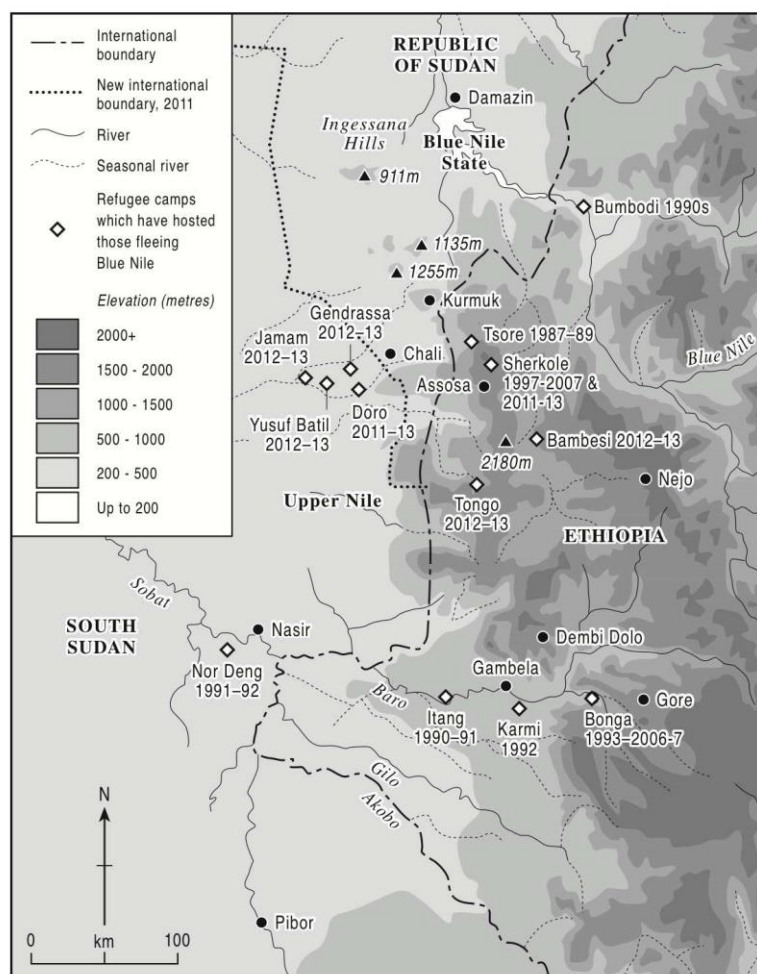
By late 1989, Sudan government forces were encamped on the south side of Jebel Kurmuk. SPLA forces approached from bases in Ethiopia and ascended the north side, so they could look down on the troops below. They included some Uduk-speakers, but there were also some among the government forces. I have heard accounts from different sources in which Uduk-speakers on the mountain heard their own language being used by government soldiers down below. They shouted something like 'Is that you lads down there?' and got the answer 'Yes'. 'Well, look out, because we're going to fire this great big gun!' The answer soon came back: 'All right, go ahead; we're out of the way now!' This shows graphically how a minority frontier language like Uduk has life in it partly despite the marginal position of the speakers; between them they have a wide variety of individual networking experiences and several languages in addition to the mother tongue. Survival strategies of the marginalized can operate right under the radar of the 'officer class', confusing the official rhetoric of war, in which loyalties are assumed to be either on the side of the state, or with the resistance movement and against it. This was obviously true in ancient times, but it is still important today, even since my example from 1989 – witness the uses of the mobile phone and internet, which are giving a fresh lease of life to minority languages and loyalties across all kinds of borders.

The 'tri-junction zone' where the borders of Sudan, South Sudan and Ethiopia meet today on the map in the hills south of the Yabus river is largely empty of its former residents and effectively administered by nobody. These same hills once offered refuge to people displaced by slave-raiding in the nineteenth century, as testified by Schuver and by my own informants of the 1960s; I had no difficulty then in finding material evidence of former occupation, such as grindstones, on the flat summit of Jebel Bisho. In the 1990s, I heard from refugees in Ethiopia of people having sought safety again in these same hills. A thorough archaeological survey of the whole of the present Blue Nile State would certainly add an important dimension to our understanding of the dynamics of borderland life today and of the problems which will always face the states which have imposed their borders on such a complex physical, and hence social, landscape. The survival of local populations now depends on the protection that can be offered by state institutions – or the international organizations they are

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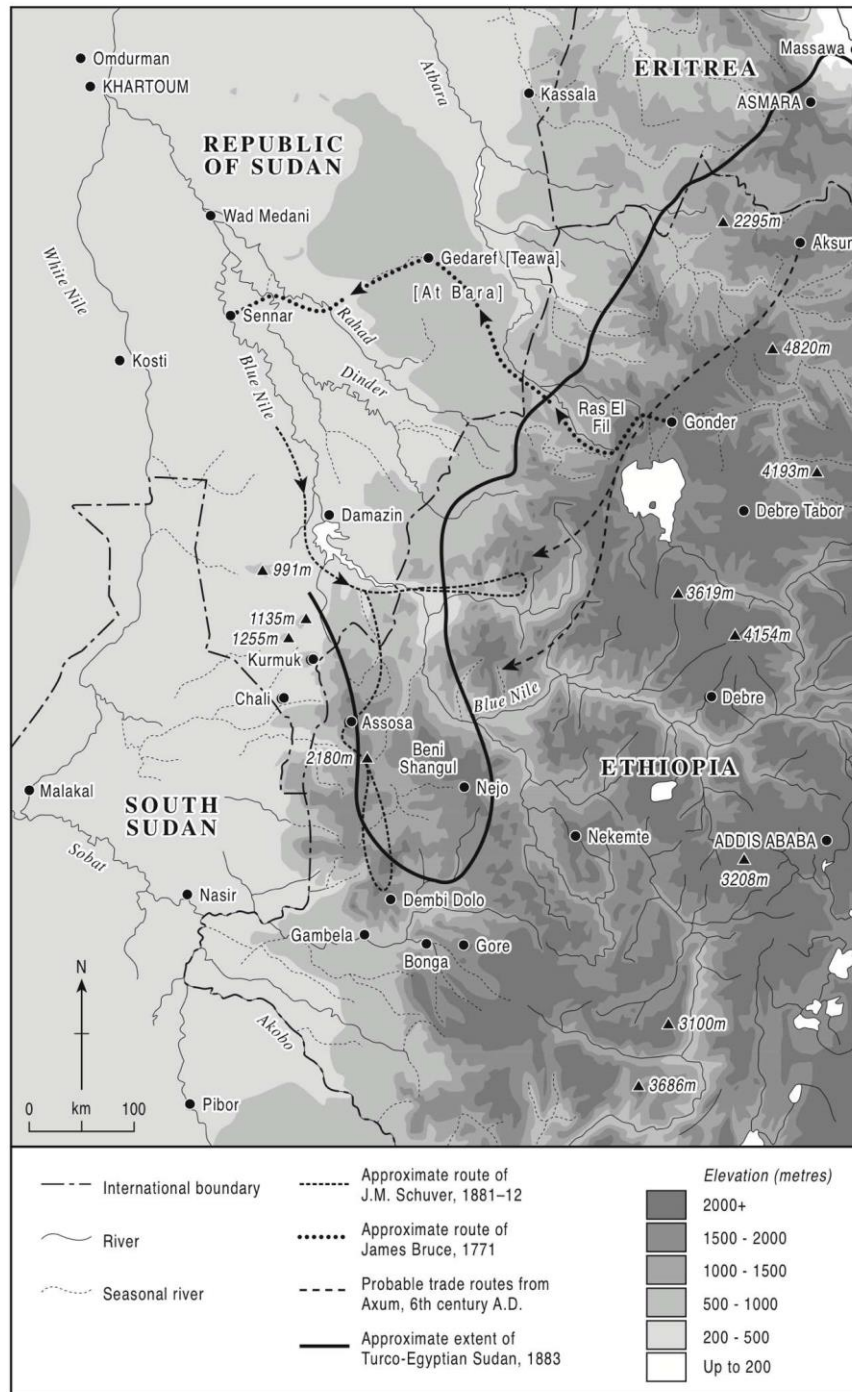
mandated to bring in – rather than the old-style protection offered by geographical opportunity, neighbourly alliances, or local chiefly patronage. A new set of dangers has arisen around questions of citizenship and political loyalty to remote national regimes, and 'safe havens' are disappearing from the frontier country. Multiplying the number of modern international boundaries in this region of Northeast Africa scarcely seems to promote greater security for the local populations; unfortunately it seems to be having the opposite effect.

Maps 1 and 2 below:



1. The South Sudan/Blue Nile borderlands, showing official camps for Blue Nile war refugees from 1987-2013

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2. Legacies of the past in an ancient frontier zone