

## **The Episcopal Church of Sudan in War and Peace**

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The history of the Episcopal Church of Sudan belongs to chapter three of the history of the Church that lives upstream from the cataracts in the River Nile.

The first church above the cataracts was the church in ancient Kush, a different daughter of the Coptic and Byzantine Churches of Alexandria, Egypt. This church grew from Christian monks seeking refuge south of Egypt, and from bishop-led missions sent by the Byzantine emperor. This church prayed in Greek and in the languages of the Nubian kingdoms. Baptism included making the sign of the cross on a child's forehead with a red-hot iron. This Nubian Church flourished for centuries as a state church. It declined as migration and new caravan routes shrank the economy. By 1500 only architectural ruins and linguistic traces remained by the time Muslim Arab forces from Egypt consolidated control. But Today's Sudanese Christians today know very firmly that the so-called Ethiopian eunuch whom the Apostle Philip met and baptized while travelling on the Gaza road was not Ethiopian. He was a court official of a Nubian kingdom located near today's Khartoum.

The second church above the cataracts arose from the work of Roman Catholic missionaries, particularly from the Austrian Empire. In 1848, Sudan with Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire. An East African and Red Sea trade in human beings was

flourishing. The genius of these Roman Catholic missions was to empower runaway and freed slaves on the periphery of Africa to become evangelists back in the heart of Africa. Their slogan was, “The regeneration of Africa by Africans.”<sup>i</sup> Roman Catholics labored to create schools and agricultural stations in the Nuba Mountains and the valley of the White Nile. All this went down to dust when a messianic Muslim reformer arose on an island in the Nile in 1881 to drive the Turks and all ancillary foreigners out of Sudan. This mystic and brilliant revolutionary appealed to the highest authority:

There is no god but God

And Muhammad is the Prophet of God

And Muhammad al Mahdi is the successor of God’s Prophet.

As you know if you have seen Laurence Olivier as the Mahdi and Charlton Heston as the heroic English resister in the movie *Khartoum*, the Mahdi prevailed. The second church in Sudan came to an end.

The third church in Sudan is the one we have come to know in our day as a companion and a friend who lives by the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead. There were years in the 1980’s and 90’s when some of us feared that civil war, combined with schism, might once again kill off the church. But this third chapter, after violent death and slow death time and again have done their worst, seems to be a story of a church rising again and again to new life.

Chapter three began in 1898, when European imperialism was at its zenith. A British and Egyptian combined military force defeated the Mahdi’s successor government. An

Anglo-Egyptian Condominium government was installed. This precarious alien authority resisted restoring real estate in Khartoum to the returning Roman Catholic missions. It resisted Protestants interested in reaching out to Muslims in northern Sudan. The Condominium sought to keep a fragile peace by assigning missionary societies to territorial spheres. The Roman Catholics – under protest – consented to sail their iron steamboat up a tributary of the White Nile to the territory belonging to the Shilluk people. Presbyterians travelled on rented Nile sailboats and slowly attracted Nuer people to their medical stations and schools. The Church Missionary Society appointee Archibald Shaw stuck it out for three decades at Malek in the assigned Dinka territory on the east bank of the White Nile. From one of his hard-won students Shaw earned the epithet of “the white man with the soul of a Dinka”. Shaw was also alert and adaptive enough to realize that the Church could not be contained by any single ethnic group. So it happened that CMS schools arose to lead generations of students from reading the Bible to competent leadership in law, public health, and the military. These Christians spoke Zande and Moru, Kakwa and Bari, and more. When it suited them, they sang hymns together in Arabic.

More than one hundred years have passed since Christian mission strategists and British governmental planners began to put their mark on the terrain which the Prophet Isaiah described as a land which the waters divide.. The Anglican Diocese of Egypt and Sudan, after an infusion of zeal from the Church of Uganda, gave place in 1945 to one Diocese of Sudan. After the Condominium gave way to an independent republic, mission schools were taken over by the government. Foreign missionaries were expelled. Ecclesiastical

autonomy followed in 1976, when four indigenous bishops covered the whole national territory. Today those four dioceses have proliferated to thirty-one.

I want to highlight two events that have marked the self-governing Episcopal Church of Sudan in ways never planned by any strategist in a London office, whether ecclesiastical or governmental. The first event was a terrible fifty-year, two-round civil war which devastated the society of southern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains, and most recently the western territory of Dar Fur. The second event, devastating the church from within, was a schism. Both these events speak to me of the surprising, unceasing power of God to bring life out of death.

The war's general shape is known to Americans: northern mechanized and air power against southern guerillas on foot; anti-guerilla tactics that sent millions of refugees fleeing first into neighboring countries to the south and west, later east into Ethiopia, south into the Turkana desert of Kenya and the outskirts of Khartoum in the north; the prolonging of war and of life through airlifts of food aid from abroad; and finally a stalemate yielding a second peace agreement in 2005. This agreement is now being implemented with the creation of an independent South Sudan on July 9, just three weeks from today.

These two generations of fighting devastated the Episcopal Church of Sudan.

Congregations were scattered and killed; churches, schools, and hospitals destroyed; the authority of tribal elders and church leaders attenuated by the disorder and displacement.

Many bishops could not travel in their dioceses but were instead found fretting in poverty under the shade of a tree in Nairobi, or Kampala, or Khartoum. Meanwhile, in refugee camps, in rebel armies under forests, and among the rural population clinging for survival to patches of farmland and shrinking herds of cattle, a spiritual war was going on.

Marc Nikkel was a Californian missionary teacher who cultivated friendship with Dinka people for a decade. He listened intently to their daily prayers and their spontaneous laments, as war ripped at their lives. He saw a people who for two generations had disdained Christian testimony to God in Christ now open and turn. The issue was spiritual power.

“Dinka, be they rooted in their own traditions or baptized and committed Christians, are a profoundly spiritual people. In a homestead one hears the divinities invoked numerous times each day. Among Christians the names of the Trinity are ever present, called upon to bless the common things of life. The old powers, the *jak*, were part of the fabric of life, their names given to newborn infants: Deng, Garang, Atem, and Alier. The powers, embodied in carved pegs and pots erected in shrines alongside virtually every family homestead, bound clans and families together, united them with their ancestors, cattle, and the land. It is to these powers that bulls were sacrificed, punctuating the seasons, anticipating good rains, sufficient fish and healthy cattle. So tightly knit was the social order with the sacrificial system, with cattle wealth, with the wealth of the elite and hope of continuity, that few individuals could renounce any part of the whole.

“Only the raids of 1991 seemed to confirm unequivocally something that had been gnawing at the system since the 1970s. Evangelists, mostly converted in Khartoum during the 1960’s [the time of the first round of the civil war], had returned home to challenge the *jak* and the cults. Then for six years, from 1985, Bishop Nathaniel Garang has travelled the land on foot, like a threadbare prophet behind the battle lines, proclaiming the Gospel, denouncing the *jak*, baptizing and confirming. Increasingly it appeared that the *jak* – long known as the source of stability and continuity -- were revealing their vindictive, death-dealing character, betraying the very people who were their most loyal adherents, killing their children, their wives and even respected diviners. Doubts rose, but responses were cautious. With the raids, however it appeared that divinity himself, Nhialich, had given his verdict on the entrenched loyalties of the Dinka to their old powers. ...

“As the invasion drew near the diviners of the great powers – Bar and Lirpiou – frantically slaughtered dozens of bulls, invoking their powers to protect people and land. Yet the aggressors broke in upon these most sacred shrines, cutting the throats of the diviners amidst their sacrifices. The *jak* had betrayed their masters....Stripped of their cattle, dying of shock, survivors began to believe that the Christian Gospel they had heard might be genuine....

“In February 1994, ECS leaders, foremost being Archdeacon John Kelei, called the population to assemble. Literally thousands of sacred objects – carved posts, stools, drums and spears – were burnt at Zion [an enormous cruciform church constructed at the

old cattle camp of Pakeo to be a shrine for the meeting of all peoples] before an estimated crowd of some 30,000. Across Bor area the overwhelming majority of shrines to the ancestral powers, great and small, had been leveled. This massive holocaust marked one of the most remarkable events of *metanoia* in the history of Dinka Bor, indeed in the entire land of Sudan”.<sup>ii</sup>

“The center pole of the cattle shed has become the cross of Christ”, says one song. The landmark high point of a seminomadic people’s encampment is now the cross of Christ.

According to Marc Nikkel, 3,000 such songs were composed in the Bor area alone, and another 1,000 by the Dinka youth in Kakuma Refugee Camp in the Turkana Desert of Kenya. One of the most popular songs of the 1990s was composed by Mary Alueel Garang:

“Let us give thanks;

Let us give thanks to the Lord in the day of devastation;

Let us give thanks to the Lord in the day of contentment....

God has not forgotten us.

Evil is departing and holiness is advancing:

These are the things that shake the earth.”

When one realizes that such Christian leaders as Nathaniel Garang of Bor and the late Manasse Binyi of Kajo-Keji Diocese were themselves first-generation Christians, and

that some of them were intimately engaged in traditional cults, it becomes easier to understand the intensity of the new life in Christ experienced by those they in turn have baptized.

War became the unintended occasion for a mass movement to Christ among southern Sudanese. It is no wonder that in the Book of Acts, the books of the Prophets, in the miracle of the Exodus and the tribulation of the Exile, the Sudanese Church hears its own experience anticipated. The power of God displayed in the resurrection of Jesus grounds their hope and energizes their living.

Life within this Spirit-powered ECS has also known strain and division. A six-year schism known as the leadership crisis distressed the church between 1986 and 1992. As a member of an Anglican province now living through our own schism, I listen with admiration to the story of a miracle of reconciliation which was accomplished in Sudan.

The year 1983 saw the end of a semiautonomous government of southern Sudan, which had been led by Abel Alier, one of those first-generation Christians shaped by Shaw's work at Malek and the Secondary School of Rumbek. Decentralization was decreed from Khartoum, tensions between ethnic groups rose, and sharia law was recognized in the national constitution. According to Samuel Kayanga and Abe Enosa, personality conflicts between the aging Archbishop Elinana Ngalamu and the Provincial Secretary John Kanyikwa led to accusations and civil court actions. The Church's Constitution called for the Archbishop to retire after ten years in office, but when that date arrived the

Archbishop was away in Nairobi for medical attention. In his absence, a Synod declared him retired and elected Bishop Benjamin Yagusuk Archbishop. The Church disintegrated into Ngalamu and Yagusuk camps. The cathedrals in Juba and Khartoum were closed, facilities controlled by bishops loyal to Ngalamu were confiscated, and each camp found supporters within Sudan's government.

Reconciliation did not come quickly. A group in Juba calling themselves "concerned Christians" were stymied by the prevailing national spirit of decentralization. The rival primates rejected the suggestion from a 1988 pre-Lambeth gathering of African bishops in Limuru that they desist from ordaining new clergy and enthroning new bishops. Yet Benjamin and Ngalamu maintained friendly personal relations. Meeting publicly for the first time at a memorial service in Juba, they hugged. Speaking publicly in Khartoum the next year, Ngalamu declared that the leadership crisis was his problem, and that Sudanese Episcopalians should leave it to him and Benjamin to resolve. Three weeks before Ngalamu's death in 1992, terms of reconciliation were reached by a committee of senior clergy:

- Ngalamu and Benjamin should both be recognized as Archbishops
- both archbishops should retire;
- all excommunications should be rescinded;
- all consecrations and ordinations performed during the crisis should be accepted by all;
- the two synods should combine, neither one absorbing the other;

- both sides should prepare to confess their sins and heed the words of Jesus, “If you forgive others the wrong they have done to you, your father in heaven will also forgive you.”

Archbishop Ngalamu died in September, but in November three public acts of reconciliation took place, one each in Juba, Khartoum, and Nairobi, with participation by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Sudan, a representative of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Sudanese political leaders. Over against skeptics who criticize the cost of the negotiations and the top-heavy leadership that resulted, two close observers called the reconciliation a miracle. “The miracle God has started working out in the ECS may one day lead, “ they said, “to the final realization of peace in Sudan.”<sup>iii</sup>

As a member of a rich Anglican province which has allowed its own schism to go on now for something like two decades, I am humbled by this example from my brothers and sisters in Sudan.

Peace is still elusive i-- n South Sudan, between the Khartoum core and the peripheral peoples of Sudan, and even within and between the churches of Sudan. Life is hard, death threatens, and the church still begs God for his Kingdom to come. But what God has done over the past hundred years, in and through his church in Sudan, makes me believe that he is keeping this church as the apple of his eye.

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<sup>i</sup> Roland Werner, William Anderson, Andrew Wheeler, *Day of Devastaion, Day of Contentment* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), p. 178.

<sup>ii</sup> Marc R. Nikkel, “‘Look Back Upon Us’: the Dynamism of Faith among the Jieng”, in Samuel E. Kayanga and Andrew C. Wheeler, *“But God is Not Defeated: Celebrating the Centenary of The Episcopal Church of the Sudan, 1899 – 1999* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1999), p. 151-153.

<sup>iii</sup> Samuel Kayanga and Abe Enosa, in *“But God Is Not Defeated”*, 159-164.