Zainab’s Story:
Slavery, Women And Community
In Colonial Sudan

Susan M. Kenyon
Department of History and Anthropology
Butler University

ABSTRACT: This is an ethnohistorical inquiry into the origins of the modern town of Sennar, Central Sudan, which was founded in the early 20th century as a “colonial colony” for ex-slave soldiers and their families, the Malakiyya. Drawing on the life story of one of the original settlers, Grandmother Zainab, as narrated by her descendents, it considers what light this throws on the experience of slavery in the late 19th century, and shows how essential were women’s contributions to the establishment and growth of the new colonies, which were set up by the Condominium government. This chapter in Sudanese urban history, like the experience of slavery more generally, is largely ignored in the official record, yet has contributed substantially to the physical and cultural shape of contemporary towns like Sennar, where it continues to be reflected in social and ritual practices.
Introduction

Some time around 1880,1 a baby girl was born in Omdurman and was named Zainab. Her father was a soldier named Buggi; of her mother, little is remembered, not even her name. When Zainab was still very young, she was taken to live in Upper Egypt, where she joined the family of an Ababda2 agha (nobleman)3 named Osman Murab. There she stayed until she was a young woman; during this time, she might have married4 and she had a child, a daughter, of whom nothing is recalled. When still young, Zainab returned to Sudan, accompanying a soldier named Mursal in the Anglo-Egyptian invasion of 1896-1897. After the ensuing battle of Karari, Mursal and Zainab spent a few difficult years in Khartoum and Omdurman. During this time, Zainab gave birth to twins, Muhammad and Asha, and then, within a few years, Mursal was retired from the army. Alongside 40 other ex-soldiers5 and their families, Zainab, Mursal and the twins traveled 200 miles south to settle in a new community known as Makwar, on the western bank of the Blue Nile. There Mursal became a farmer, working the land granted him as a pension by the government, and building a family home in the center of the new community.

Unfortunately the marriage did not last. Mursal divorced Zainab, and in due course she remarried a man known as Marajan the Arab. She and the twins went to live with Marajan in his village of Jumayza, near Sinja, where he already had a formidable reputation as leader of spirit possession rituals known as zar nugara. It was during her stay in Jumayza that Zainab discovered her own spiritual powers, training with a local woman to become a practitioner of another form of spirit possession, zar burei.

As soon as Muhammad, Zainab’s son, was old enough he became a soldier like his father. He does not appear to have seen much active service and after serving his time, he too retired to a pension in land and became a farmer in Makwar, now
officially known as Sennar. In addition, building on what he learned from his stepfather, he became a much feared leader of zar nugara. Asha also settled close by, having married a soldier from the nearby village of Kabbosh.

Marajan died in the early 1930s and Zainab then returned to live with Muhammad and his wife Sittena in Makwar. There she stayed for the next three decades, collaborating with her son in diagnosing and treating various types of disorders and sickness, and establishing her own reputation as an inspiring leader in burei zar. When she died around 1960, Zainab was widely mourned well beyond her immediate family, as a much loved and respected haboba. She is still remembered today as a woman who made important contributions to the emergence of the new market town of Sennar.

What we can learn of these contributions is the topic of this paper.7

This narrative of Zainab’s life, thin though it is, is significant on several different levels. Not surprisingly, perhaps, in view of ongoing discrimination in Sudan, her descendents, who happily shared with me what they knew of her life, never mentioned one important fact: Zainab was of slave background. This is suggested, however, by various events in her life: her association with the army from birth, her father’s name (particularly the lack of a family name), her sudden move to Egypt when still young and her subsequent stay with a non-related family where she met with vaguely hinted misfortune. Indeed she is sometimes referred to as al-Murabiyya, the Murab woman (or possession).8 However, it is her return to Sudan with the Anglo-Egyptian invasion force that confirms her status. The soldier she accompanied served with the IXth battalion, translated from the Turkish tisaji orla in the narrative of her daughter-in-law, a woman who came from a similar background and employed several Turkish terms (including agha) when recalling Zainab’s life. The IXth battalion was made up of Black Sudanese “ex-slave” soldiers, and played an important role in the reconquest...
of Sudan by the Egyptians and their allies, the English. Finally their move to Makwar in the early 20th century associates both Mursal and Zainab with the new Condominium government project to settle some of the "detribalized" ex-slave soldiers in "civilian" (Malakiyya) colonies. Indeed Zainab and her descendents are invariably described as Malakiyya by friends and neighbors alike, a term applied to both people and their settlements, with overtones of government property (Johnson 1988: 80).

In addition, the narrative hints at topics about which all too little is known. Since they left no formal records and were indeed generally disregarded by those who did leave records, slave women have been almost completely silenced in this part of the world. In an important thesis that deserves to be better known, Sharkey (1992) shows just how much we can still learn about them from available written records, including what is omitted. The narratives of Zainab's life offer only the skeleton of an individual life, but from its context and from later accounts by her descendents and friends, we can begin to make educated guesses about how slave and ex-slave women lived during this time. Over and above this, however, Zainab left embodied memories in the ritual of zar which continues to be widely practiced in this region. As Boddy (1989, 2007), Constantinides (1972, 1991) and others have shown, performance of this ritual provides colorfully dramatic glimpses of life under slavery in the 19th century. It also reflects the active spiritual roles assumed by women more generally in early 20th century Sudan.

Equally significant, the narrative offers evidence of the historical agency of women in the ex-slave colonies of Sudan. Other writers (James 2007; Johnson 1989; Sikainga 1996, 2000) have noted the importance of the Malakiyya colonies in Sudanese urban history, but there has been no systematic attempt to investigate either the settlements themselves or the roles assumed by women. Indeed the colonies no longer provide
the discrete communities that they did even as late as the 1970s, when I first began ethnographic research in the Sennar region. While the case of Zainab does not provide extensive information about women or family life in the first half of the 20th century, it is possible to offer some generalizations about them from what we learn of her and her family. In particular we can begin to unpack their economic and social roles, as they actively created community in settlements based only on men’s shared experience of the military. It was women who not only provided stability in the early colonies, but who built a meaningful social world for their families from a settlement of strangers. Even more specifically we can understand the leadership women took in providing healthcare explanations and curing resources well before biomedical opportunities were available, and in creating spiritual meaning for those who only nominally (at best) accepted and understood the message of Islam.

Today the modern town of Sennar sits on the west bank of the Blue Nile, some 200 miles south of Khartoum. Despite ongoing confusion among residents and even eminent historians (Warburg 2008), it is not a direct continuation of the old Funj capital of the same name. Rather it is situated several miles south of the great Funj city, which was largely destroyed by Mahdist forces in 1884. New Sennar in fact grew out of an ex-slave settlement, Makwar, one of several military colonies established by the Condominium government in the early 20th century. This settlement later became the site of a large hydroelectric dam and pivot of a major agricultural project, the Gezira Scheme. Confusion over names is due mainly to the colonial government’s decision to link their accomplishments to the old and famous name of the great Funj Empire. In the process, a whole chapter in Sennar history was virtually erased. Unpacking the life of Zainab helps to restore it to view.

Finally the narrative of Zainab highlights the contributions of women, slave or freeborn, to the newly emerging towns of
colonial and post-colonial Sudan. Much of this information is
drawn from accounts gathered in the last 30 years which were
thus offered with hindsight concerning the colonial encounter.
However, at a time when large numbers of Sudanese men are
working overseas or elsewhere in Sudan, and women are once
more forced to rely on each other for material and emotional
assistance, it is worth remembering that lessons learned in the
Malakiyya colonies helped shape the opportunities that con-
tinue to be utilized in contemporary Sudanese towns.

The following account of the early history of the modern
town of Sennar in Central Sudan, therefore, shows clearly
that ex-slaves, particularly women, played a major role in
creating such communities. That the communities survived,
and in many cases (such as Sennar) prospered, is testimony to
their achievements. This chapter also contributes to the recent
discussion about slavery in northeast Africa, particularly the
links between colonialism and military slavery, to show how
despite the stigma still associated with a servile past, local nar-
ratives can offer insight into this important period in Sudan’s
history. My research is based on long-term fieldwork in Su-
dan, particularly Sennar (or Sinnar), on the Blue Nile, where I
have now been conducting ethnographic research for almost
three decades. As the capital of the former Funj Empire, which
dominated this region for several centuries (1504-1821), Sennar
boasts a long and glorious history, and for much of that time
owed its prosperity to its large slave population. While the
modern town of Sennar may be only indirectly related to its
Funj namesake, it too has been considerably shaped (econom-
ically, socially and ritually) by the fact that it grew up around
a settlement for ex-slave soldiers. Their wives, mothers and
sisters also made important contributions to the development
of the town and thus to the modern nation-state of Sudan.
Slavery in Sudan

From the early 16th century, much of the area of the lower Nile (the modern state of Sudan) was dominated by the Funj sultanate, based in their capital town of Sennar (O'Fahey and Spaulding 1974). According to the Tabaqat Wad Dayf Allah, Sennar was founded in the year 910 (1504-1505) by the Funj leader ‘Amara Dunqas, after his armies had successfully overrun the “land of the Nuba” to the North (Hillelson 1923; Holt 1960). The earliest records of Funj traditions date only to the late 18th century (Holt 1960; Warburg 2008) and much of our information comes from accounts by European travelers to the region. In 1701, for example, the Franciscan missionary Theodoro Krump spent several months in the city and noted how prosperous the city was:

One should know that in all Africa, as far as the Moorish lands are concerned, Sinnar is close to being the greatest trading city. Caravans are continually arriving from Cairo, Dongola, Nubia, from across the Red Sea, from India, Ethiopia, [Dar] Fur, Borno, the Fezzan, and other kingdoms.... After Cairo, it is one of the most populous cities. Every day a public market is held in the square in the best possible order, with various merchants and wares that are to be sold. In one place there are trade goods, in another elephant’s teeth, in others are camels, horses, donkeys, wood, onions, dates, wheat and dhurra from which they bake bread and with which they also feed cattle. Here are straw, cane for the camels, meat, chickens, wood and similar things, each being bought and sold in its special place (Spaulding nd: 285-286).

With no apparent sense of irony, Krump observed: “This is a free city, and men of any nationality or faith may live in it without a single hindrance.”

In fact the city’s economic and political prosperity, as Krump noted, was based on slavery, a very old custom in the Nile valley.
Indeed some writers (Sharkey 1992: 23) trace it back to Pharaonic times. Krump (cited in Spaulding nd: 285-286) made it clear that trading in human beings was already highly lucrative in the Sennar market:

Furthermore, every day at the public market human beings who are slaves (men and women of every age) are sold like cattle. Every day 200 or 300 of them are led out onto the square. Turkish merchants, with the permission of their law, make them serve their wantonness, and then sell them to other lands such as Egypt and India; great are their ill-gotten gains! Those under twelve years of age are as naked as God sent them into the world; the older ones have an old rag about the body to cover their private parts. When they are sold people say to the responsible party, "bring me those slaves." Then the purchaser, without shyness or shame, looks them over like cattle, at their mouths and teeth, and the whole body. If one pleases him, he lays out the value, for in this land it is not the custom that one offers one's wares (at a set price) but rather that the purchaser must say how much he wants to give for them. If the seller is not satisfied with that price, and thinks it too small, he says "Iftah Allah," that is (in Arabic) "(May God) open (your hand to give more)." This goes on until the seller is satisfied, or until another purchaser offers more. The ordinary price of a male 15-year-old slave is 30 florins, or if he is well-formed, 40. A female slave of this age, if she is of clear complexion, is sold for 50 or 60. At times, especially in the case of Ethiopian girls, they are sold for 80. In Egypt such a boy will be sold for 60, 80 or even 100 guilders, and a girl, if she is pretty, goes for about 100, depending on the quality of her beauty.

While in Sennar, Krump and his companions visited the royal Funj palace and met the King and, later, one of his leading subjects, the Shaykh of Qarri, and included an elaborate account of the extravagant ceremony which accompanied court life. The Funj sultan himself received tribute in human beings from his vassal states, maintained a slave army, and oversaw
regular slaving raids into the territory of the southern Blue Nile region. Accounts by both foreign travelers (such as Krump or James Bruce) and insiders (as reflected in the Funj Chronicles\textsuperscript{10}) make it clear that the Funj, like the Fur in the west, regarded non-Muslim peoples outside their territory, particularly to the south, as inferior and thus legitimate targets for enslavement. For centuries inhabitants of southern Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and the Upper Blue and White Niles were prey for these powerful northern Muslims (Johnson 1988, 1989; James 2007; Kapteijns 1984; O'Fahey 1980). Derogatory generic ethnic or geographical labels were created to refer to these vulnerable groups: Fertit (below Darfur), Janakhara (below Wadai) and Shankalla or Hamaj (below Sennar). These terms were as much a “state of mind” (Sikainga 1996: 8, citing Yusuf Fadl) as a location, shifting over time as the slave trade pushed further south.

Not all slaves remained powerless and oppressed. The institution of military slavery, a feature of both the Funj sultanate and the Fur kingdom in the West, was more than simply using slaves as soldiers: it was a corporate status which offered opportunity and power to some (Johnson 1988). Indeed traveler James Bruce (1790), who visited Sennar in 1772, noted just how well-treated military slaves were. He also commented on how influential slaves were in both the army and the government, adding “slavery in Sennar is the only true nobility” (1790 (4): 459). Close to the capital, the Funj settled entire villages with slaves who worked on the royal lands and protected the civil authorities (Sharkey 1992: 25, 175; Spaulding 1982: 9). The village of Kabbosh, just south of the old Funj city, was probably one such community.\textsuperscript{11}

By the early 19th century, the Funj sultanate had become weak from internal divisions. In 1821, Khedive Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha, viceroy to Egypt for the still powerful Ottoman Emperor, sent an army to invade Sudan, ostensibly to protect his imperial master’s southern borders but mainly to take control of the slave trade. The Funj quickly submitted and from 1821-1885 Sudan was
ruled from Egypt, a period remembered as the Turkiyya. Ottoman power was imposed through an extensive bureaucracy and military force, the latter drawn largely from slaves or ex-slaves, of mostly Sudanese origin.

Under the Turkiyya, military slavery became increasingly important, drawing on two long-standing racial theories: not only were certain "races" naturally inferior, but also certain "martial races" were physically and culturally suited for warfare (Johnson 1988, 1989; Leopold 2006: 183). With captives from southern Sudan, Muhammad ‘Ali planned to develop his army of jihadiyya, regular professional soldiers of Sudanese “Blacks,” felt to be naturally warlike, who would enable him to create an Egyptian empire independent of the Ottomans. Slave trading intensified in Sudan throughout the 19th century, with raids predominantly in the region of the southern Blue and White Niles and the Nuba Mountains, from where Mohammed (1980: 16) estimated that in just one year, 1822-1823, as many as 30,000 men were captured. These were transported to Upper Egypt, where those selected for the army were converted to Islam by Sufi holy men appointed by the Khedive (Hill 1959: 25-26; Kapteijns 1984). High mortality en route, disease, and the generally poor condition of many captives when they arrived in Egypt, however, left Muhammad ‘Ali dissatisfied with the results. He urged greater efforts on his generals, but within a few years, conscription of the Egyptian peasantry was also needed to expand the military ranks (Holt and Daly 1979: 57).

Many captives did not reach Egypt but were sold in the Sudan itself. Under the Turkiyya, slave ownership soon became a feature of the new middle class, no longer an elite prerogative, as under the Funj. By 1839, Holroyd (cited in Sharkey 1992: 27) could write: “Most of the lower orders possess one or two slaves.”

Muhammad Sa’id (1854-1863), under pressure from the British, made slave trading illegal in the Ottoman Empire, but it continued in Sudan well into the 20th century. Prohibition simply drove it into the hands of private traders, whose fortified stations,
zara‘ib (sing. zariba), dominated the politics of the upper Nile in the 1860s and 1870s (Johnson 1992). In the late 1870s, however, Turkish authority finally began to crumble in Sudan. A nationalist religious movement was gathering momentum, led by the devout Sufi scholar Muhammad Ahmad ibn ‘Abdullah. Driven by a variety of motives: a divine messianic vocation, a calling to reform Islam, a desire to expel Ottoman rule, even a desire to protect the slave trade (the banning of which threatened powerful economic interests in northern Sudan), he attracted a large following. His personal followers, religious men or Dervishes known locally as Ansar, were drawn from a wide spectrum of the population, including defectors from the ranks of the Ottoman army (Sikainga 1996). By early 1885, they had succeeded in defeating the Ottoman forces and freeing Sudan from imperial rule. From 1885 to 1898, the period Zainab spent in Upper Egypt, Sudan enjoyed a respite from foreign occupation.

Meanwhile in 1882, the khedival administration representing Ottoman government in Egypt had collapsed. British representatives occupied the country, creating a Protectorship. They disbanded the old Turco-Egyptian army and created a new force under British officers. Some soldiers were recruited from among the peasantry, Egyptian and Sudanese; but the British (like Ottomans and Funj before them) preferred those who came directly from the Sudan, mainly Dinka, Shilluk and Galla (Mohammed 1980: 16). The first Sudanese battalion in the new army was raised in Egypt on May 1, 1883 and designated the IXth Sudanese, the battalion in which Mursal served. Between 1886 and 1889, four more Sudanese battalions were raised in Egypt and by the time of the joint Anglo-Egyptian invasion of Sudan in 1896, seven of the 18 battalions in the Egyptian army (the IXth to the XVth) were Sudanese. By this time the professional armies of both Sudan and Egypt were therefore made up of regular soldiers of similar background: “displaced” southerners, including so-called “Arabs” and “Blacks,” who had no real tribal allegiance or homeland, but owed their loyalties to the army in
which they happened to be serving and to their national leaders as commander-in-chief. Although many of the slaves had been freed through conscription, their freedom was nominal at best (Johnson 1988: 146-147; 1989: 76). They had no home to return to and no other means of support than the army and the state, regardless of who was in control. This “ambiguous liberty” was passed on to their descendents (Johnson 1988: 147).

Furthermore troops were accompanied by large numbers of dependent noncombatants (women, concubines, children, porters, elderly) who outnumbered the fighting men, often by a large margin (Johnson 1988: 152-153; Leopold 2006: 183-186). Discussing the black slave troops in the Mesalit kingdom of Darfur, Kapteijns (1984: 108) was told by an elderly informant in 1980 that “each jihadi was accompanied by his wife; she with her basket on her head, followed her husband everywhere, even into slavery ….” Mitford (1935), who in 1884 was himself one of nine British officers serving in the IXth, noted that every soldier “was entitled to one wife, and for her keep she drew a piaster a day,” the equivalent of a fifth of the soldiers’ wage (1935: 1750). Soldiers’ wives were slaves or captives themselves, or the daughters of other soldiers, though sometimes when battalions were transferred, whole families would stay behind to become the households of the incoming battalion. When soldiers died, their dependents were attached to the household of another soldier (Johnson 1989: 78). Zainab herself may well have been either inherited by Mursal, or paid to him as part of his wages. Indeed we have no proof that she was free born; Zainab bit Buggi could have been Buggi’s slave.

Colonialism Restored: The Colonial Colonies

Ostensibly to avenge the death of General Charles Gordon and restore what was claimed to be rightful Ottoman authority, the Anglo-Egyptian invasion of Sudan in 1896-1898 had various
other driving motives, particularly British government fears of French colonial expansion. Slave soldiers fought on both sides in the conflict. In the Mahdist army, the Jihadiyya riflemen were the only permanent body of trained soldiers (Johnson 1989: 79). At least a third of the invading army consisted of the Sudanese battalions, in the vanguard of the advancing forces (Sikainga 1996: 59). The two armies finally met at Karari, just north of Omdurman, where troops loyal to the Khalifa were routed by the invaders led by Sir Herbert Kitchener, a battle known in the West as the Battle of Omdurman. This horrifically illustrated the technology gap between the two forces. Mahdist soldiers, mostly armed only with spears, repeatedly charged Kitchener’s machine guns, resulting in almost 11,000 Ansar dead on the battlefield (Daly 1986: 2). Once again Sudan fell under foreign domination. Egyptian/Ottoman authority was restored in the name of Condominium rule whereby power was shared, at least nominally, by British and Egyptian authorities. In practice, the Egyptians were subordinate to the British who assumed all the senior positions in government.

The Sudanese battalions also played an important role in the subsequent pacification of the country. The IXth Battalion was sent south and stationed in the abandoned Funj capital of Sennar to restore order in the southern Blue Nile region. Its ranks were filled by drafting and training ex-soldiers from the area, men who had fought in both the Khalifa’s and the Anglo-Egyptian armies. These men were now dressed in British uniform, trained and employed to stabilize the surrounding countryside.

After the conquest, however, thousands of unemployed soldiers from both sides presented increasing security threats to the new colonial state, particularly in and around the capital Khartoum. At the same time a large agricultural work force was urgently needed to rebuild a shattered economy. As early as 1900, a proposal known as “colonisation” was being discussed as a way of settling small groups of ex-soldiers, especially those still drawing government salaries, on conquered but unoccupied
land in different parts of the Sudan. This plan would serve to pension off old soldiers, remove them from the crowded capital, and keep them in some form of government service. Worth noting is that the term "Sudanese" was already being used officially, not in anticipation of future nationalism, but specifically for "detribalized" slaves and ex-slaves, including those who had been forcibly conscripted into the army ranks.15

In a letter to the Civil Secretary, W. S. Sparkes (PUB 3/2/7), first government inspector16 to Fashoda in the new Condominium administration, justified the proposed scheme thus:

This colonization scheme, if carried to a successful issue, will provide a means of practically pensioning off old soldiers without any cost to the state, and each colony may, in future, become a fertile center for the recruiting of the Sudanese battalions. Under these circumstances it may be considered only fair that the army budget should bear some part of the expenses, at any rate of the initial expenses.

The civil administration is prepared to give free grants of land, but it is not in a position to meet the expenses that will necessarily be incurred...

The colonial government clearly did not intend to invest much money in the resettlement project. On March 16, 1900, a board meeting was held in Omdurman to report on the proposals, based on reducing each Sudanese battalion by roughly 300 men. These were to be selected by their battalions according to age and character, volunteers or those entitled to leave, and they were given the choice of either settling in a colony or returning home, if they still had one. The proposals were approved and implementation of the colonies began within the year.

Several recommendations throw light on these new settlements as well as insight into government strategy at this time. The gendered bias of the recommendations is striking. Potential women settlers are barely mentioned though their presence is
everywhere assumed and is clearly vital for the success of the venture17 (PUB 3/2/7):

1. The new colonies should be located near large villages or towns. It was felt that “Sudanese” disliked settling away from centers of population. “No doubt the nearer colonies are to big villages, the easier it is for men to buy sugar and tobacco,” the Board noted, reluctant for the Sudanese to become independent of the consumer market. Furthermore, it was appreciated that colonies in the more popular provinces had greater potential to become large communities in themselves, potential centers of government support in otherwise alien environments.

2. The land settled must have adequate water, either rain or flood water. Gedaref, Blue Nile or Kordofan, areas where land and water were plentiful, were regarded as most suitable. From the outset the Board was concerned with the economic and agricultural success of these settlements though never appeared to consider how effectively old soldiers would fare as farmers.

3. Wage labor on government farms was not an acceptable alternative to colonies. “It is doubtful if you would get much work out of a man when they have not the same incentive to work that is afforded by the cultivator making his own profit,” observed the Board. The unstated intention was to create new independent communities, on whose support the government could unequivocally depend.

4. Each colony should have its own headman, assisted by some kind of clerk. He was to be responsible for directing the building of the village, the issue of bread and seed, the settling of disputes, collection of grain and subsequent distribution of profits. Where there was more than one colony in a district [muderich], each must have its own staff. The overall administration was to be supervised by an inspector, at least at first a British officer who would visit the different colonies from time to time to ensure they were running smoothly. Overall control of the colonies remained firmly with senior colonial authorities.
5. The size of the land allocated was either one *feddan* of irrigated land or two to three *feddan* of rainfed land. This could possibly become the cultivator’s property, “as a free gift” after three or even two years, if during this period the colonist cultivated it “properly.” Presumably the “propriety” of each colonist’s performance was to be determined by the British inspector.

6. The men should pay no taxation while government tenants but should pay back what had been advanced by the government in seeds, tools and other needs. From the outset the government made it clear it intended to spend as little as possible on establishing the new communities.

The proposals were accepted by the Board. Three of the earliest colonies were established in Blue Nile Province, an area largely abandoned during the Mahdiyya. At this time it held some scattered Funj villages, more recent squatter settlements of civilian refugees from the Mahdiyya, with a small merchant class remaining from the Turkish occupation. However there was plenty of arable, irrigatable and untitled land along the river. The new colonies were settled in Kabbosh, Makwar and Helmi (later known as Helmi Abbas). Kabbosh and Makwar both lay on the west bank of the Blue Nile, south of the old Funj capital of Sennar, while Helmi was to the north on the east bank of the river. In government documents of the period, such settlements were generally referred to as Malakiyya [civilian] settlements, to distinguish them from regular army barracks nearby. The IXth Sudanese battalion, for example, continued to be stationed in the old Funj capital, while the Xth and XIIIth battalions were in Kabbosh.20

For the most part we have little information about everyday life in the new colonies. The rules laid out by the government related largely to the ex-soldiers’ formal obligations and reveal little about their dependents. We know, however, that these settlers were transplanted families (the soldiers were permitted to bring one wife, and given material support for up to three children, PUB 3/2/7) or at least heads of families who married
local women. They had no "tribal" links to another homeland, no extended families, no formal history. They carried little status in the larger local community, being regarded for the most part as rough, uneducated soldiers with a servile background. H.C. Jackson, for example, was sent to Sennar in 1909 as an Assistant Inspector and left the following observations (1954: 75):

> After the battle of Omdurman many time-expired soldiers in the Sudanese battalions were released from service and quartered in special villages with their former N.C.O.'s as Sheiks.... Each of these colonists had been given a few acres of good rain or pasture-land, one acre of Nile foreshore and vegetable seeds to sow on the rich soil left by the receding Nile, they were also supplied with enough dura to keep them going until the next harvest, which would have been much heavier had they not converted much of their seed grain into Merissa [fermented beer]. They were a happy, cheery community, intensely loyal to the government and always anxious to turn out on parade to greet any distinguished visitor and to do odd jobs like wood-cutting which were uncongenial to the Arab.

The paternalism of colonial attitudes is clear in Jackson's comments, as well as the administration's expectations of loyalty and support from the colonists. What he and others failed to see, however, was that the Malakiyya were also more worldly than other inhabitants of the area. They had seen something of other places and cultures, bringing traditions from a wide area to enrich the emerging social and cultural life of these new communities. The colonies had a distinctive culture and language which owed much to their military background but also to the communities from which their ancestors had originated (Johnson 1989: 82). The settlers also did not feel bound by the same conventions as the larger Muslim world of which they were now part, even though they were never completely divorced from the surrounding countryside.\textsuperscript{21}
Over the next 20 years several requests were made to provincial governors to investigate the potential for new colonies. Blue and White Nile provinces appear to have taken the largest number, though the number of settlers was never that great: by 1922-1923, there were 23 colonies in total (Hargey 1981: 259-260; Sikainga 1996: 64). In that year, Inspectors visiting the colonized villages enumerated 116 individuals (plus their families) in Kabbosh, 114 in Helmi Abbas, and 45 in Makwar, who were eligible for colonist tax exemptions.

For various reasons, political and economic, the ex-soldiers/Malakiyya colonization scheme was abolished in 1930 (Sikainga 2000: 28-29). The rights of existing colonists to cultivation and tax concessions continued to be recognized but no new colonies were established and no concessions were awarded to ex-soldiers who subsequently settled in colonist villages.

Both Kabbosh and Helmi developed only slowly from their military origins. They, like other colonies, provided a hospitable haven for runaway slaves who were quickly absorbed into the new settlements. By 1920, they were firmly established communities, and guaranteed independent livelihoods to both original settlers and later arrivals (Hargey 1981: 253-254). They remained small and relatively unimportant, however, and today are still regarded as Malakiyya villages. Makwar, on the other hand, quickly outgrew its origins to become an important town, mainly because of its strategic location on the Blue Nile, with access to the hinterland in all directions. In addition, the agricultural potential of this area soon impressed the colonial authorities, who were looking for ways to increase revenue and production, particularly large-scale cotton production to support the flagging British manufacturing industry. In 1904, proposals were already being discussed for the construction of a vast irrigation project in the large fertile triangle or “island” (jazira) of land between the Blue and White Niles. Makwar was the site chosen for building a dam to support this project. The British government guaranteed initial funding in 1913, though the project was then postponed...
because of the First World War. Work was finally begun in 1918, involving large numbers of Egyptian workmen and laborers from all over Sudan. When the dam was formally opened in 1925, to great fanfare, the colonial authorities decided to revive the famous name of the old Funj capital for the developing town; and in 1931, its name was officially changed from Makwar to Sennar, “Makwar being a name of no honour or antiquity” (Arkell n.d.: 31). Even before the dam was completed, the colony of Makwar had been transformed. The grand opening in 1925 effectively marked the end of the village of ex-slaves and the beginning of a prosperous market town. Older local inhabitants still occasionally refer to Sennar as Makwar, a name now attributed to an early Malakiyya headman, Hassan wad Makwar. Officially, however, the modern town of Sennar dates to the dam and the economic impetus that brought to the country as a whole. Yet as I have shown, the modern town was rooted in the Malakiyya colony of Makwar, a subaltern base that made significant if neglected contributions to the emerging market center.

Modern Sennar grew rapidly. The government’s ambitious plans for intensive agriculture and irrigation had attracted laborers and business people from all over the country to work on the dam, and many settled in the fast-growing community. In the decades following the opening of the dam, people from the northern riverain area (Danaqala, Shaiqiyya, Ja’aliyyin) were drawn to the town by prospects for trade and commerce; many of them now form the core of local business interests. Construction opportunities expanded rapidly as the demands escalated for homes, offices, stores and administrative buildings. Educational and medical facilities followed the increasing population. The first hospital and schools were built in Sennar in the 1930s, a boys elementary school first and in 1939, an elementary school for girls. Administratively, Sennar had become a District Headquarters with two District Assistants, plus judicial and administrative offices based in the town. These various resources, together with opportunities for acquiring their own
home, offered significant incentives for whole families to move to Sennar from their villages.

Gradually the ex-army colony was absorbed by the expanding town which grew up around it. It was situated on the edge of what would become the First Class district, a largely residential area close to the main market and mosque, where government officials and prosperous businessmen settled. Newcomers clearly regarded the colony with some disparagement, variously referring to it as the neighborhood of the Fertit, district of the Malakiyya or, more insultingly, as the place of garbage/rubbish [al-Ghubush]. Yet at this time there were few resources such as running water, electricity, or in-ground sewerage anywhere in the town; on a practical level, life in the old colony was probably not that different from the rest of Sennar.

The patrons of the Malakiyya, the British, were also equivocal in their support, as their attempts to create a reliable base of wage labor from the ex-slave population were frequently challenged (Sikainga 1996; Sharkey 2003). As early as 1914, an investigation tour by Wingate revealed that the majority of colonists were living in squalid conditions and were not receiving the promised rations or allowances (Sikainga 1996: 63). Apparently the situation did not improve. In 1932, rains in Sennar were slight and many people, especially some of the “Blacks” were “feeling the pinch very severely.” However A.J. Arkell, District Commissioner in Sennar District from 1929-32, was not sympathetic, since they had refused to go picking cotton in the new Gezira Scheme despite the government offer of free transport. Arkell clearly felt that the Malakiyya continued to owe loyalty to government ventures, a sentiment reflected in other colonial records. He also found the challenge of keeping Sennar clean and orderly difficult, despite the introduction of refuse pits around the native lodging, dug by prison labor and prosecuted offenders. All of this he blamed on the laziness and
“condition of the people,” specifically singling out the “Blacks” of Sennar (Arkell nd: 15/45).

Freedom, independence, and expectations of government support, therefore, did not necessarily bring equality or ease of life to the Malakiyya colonists. The stigma of their past was not readily forgotten, despite the rhetoric of Sudanese nationalism and increasing demands for nation-state independence. Yet the colonies themselves persisted even as they were integrated into the expanding urban centers.

How were a small group of soldiers and strangers able to create a self-supporting community in a totally new environment? What was life like in these settlements? What information is available about them? The next section considers what we can know about life in the colony of Makwar, in particular about the roles of Malakiyya women.

**Women and Work in the Colonies**

As the government hoped, the colonies provided a fertile training ground for new generations of salaried soldiers. Many of the sons of colonists readily joined up, as we saw in the case of Muhammad. Active soldiers were often sent off to serve in various parts of the empire, indeed of the world. Even those who were considered retired were expected to support the government as needed: to turn up for parades and show support for government projects, to assist with government schemes, to meet with government officials, even to help with local insurrections (Jackson 1954: 75-76). Johnson (1989: 79-81) was told by a military veteran that “soldiers were not allowed to retire but just worked and served until they dropped. When no longer fit for active service they were put onto light work such as looking after the officers’ gardens.” Old soldiers worked, not just as farmers, but as wood cutters (for the steamer service), night watchmen (for government offices), or irregular policemen.
Some acted as intermediaries between the government and their communities. Some became traders, tailors, butchers, or mechanics, but these were all trades learned in association with the army, and the government continued to be their principal patron and to make demands on their time.

It was in fact the women who were the most long-term and stable residents in the new colonies (Johnson 1988: 153). Much of the daily work of building community fell to them as their men folk were away, in the army, serving the government, even visiting their other families (for they were only allowed to bring one with them to the colony). This is clearly illustrated in the case of Sittena, who became Zainab’s daughter-in-law. She was born in the early 20th century and raised in the village of Kabbosh, like her mother and grandmother before her, but the men in her family, such as her father and grandfather, came from outside. Soldiers in the Ottoman armies, they had other wives in other parts of the empire and “were not around much when I was growing up.” Although Sittena’s own husband, Muhammad, had grown up near Sinja and in Makwar, he too was absent when their children were small, serving in the colonial army. It fell to Sittena, her mother, aunts and sisters, to tend the fields so that everybody had something to eat, and to raise their children in a safe and stable community.

Government allotments (hawasha) to new colonists ranged from one to three feddan of land, and were invariably scattered some distance from the nucleated settlement itself. Settlers were also provided with grain (beans and sorghum) and basic agricultural implements to clear and cultivate their land when they first arrived in their new homes, which had to be constructed. All this was their responsibility, assisted by their families. Their wives and children were used to hard work. As a servant in the Osman Murab household, Zainab would have been expected to perform a great range of duties, both agricultural (including care of livestock, since the Ababda were pastoral nomads) and domestic. The big difference for her in
Makwar was that she was now answerable only to her husband; and the fact that the marriage did not survive far into their life together in Makwar is a telling commentary on Mursal’s expectations in that relationship as well as on Zainab’s own strong personality.

Sharkey (1992: 41) notes that in 19th century Sudan “it is fair to say that women in general, free and slave, bore a proportionately heavier workload than men.” Within the household:

the female majority performed the bulk of the domestic chores, which were often slow, dreary, and tiring. Women ground the grain necessary to make the day’s bread, cooked the meals, and fetched the drinking water. They also took care of the children…. (Sharkey 1992: 36-7).

The same no doubt held true for most rural women in the early 20th century, but was especially so in the colonies where there were no existing resources or domestic equipment, other than what the women had been able to bring with them. Additional labor for women there would have included washing clothes, a job now done collectively on the banks of the Nile (a mile walk in the dry season). They would also have to carry water from the river, not just for drinking but for various household chores such as damping down the courtyard, house repairs, and personal washing. Firewood for cooking had to be collected, and this too could entail walking long distances in the hot sun.

As children of slaves, the women were no doubt used to such heavy chores. Sharkey (1992: 39) comments that what distinguished slaves’ labor from that of free men, who shared some of their workload, was “its heaviness”:

Slaves worked the shaduf, the hand-operated bucket at the end of a rope, to water the vegetable gardens, and also drove the oxen at the waterwheels, or saqias, which irrigated the fields of wheat, cotton, durra, and other...
crops... Both male and female slaves worked to prepare the soil, sow the seed, weed the fields, harvest, thresh and winnow the grain. Children also worked by scaring birds away from the crops....

Women slaves had also been involved with caring for livestock, particularly goats, and in Western Sudan they watered and pastured cows, donkeys and horses as well (Kapteijns 1984: 112-123). In sum, “Free men [and women] worked, but only slaves toiled” (Sharkey 1992: 40).

In the early days in Makwar, women’s expectations and workload had not changed very much. Those who came with the ex-slave soldiers were well-prepared for their new life, and had experience of a wide range of domestic and agricultural jobs. Life in the new colonies of Makwar or Kabbosh was not that different from what they had experienced earlier, with the big difference that they now owned the fruits of their labors. While the labor might have been unending, this sense of ownership that came with their freedom no doubt alleviated the endless toil.

By the 1920s, the former colony was being absorbed into the expanding town, and today there is little, structurally, to distinguish it. This, however, should not lead us to underestimate the physical effort it first took to establish the new settlement, by a relatively small number of adults. The house Mursal built for his family is no longer standing, but the spacious compound he established remains, together with much of the mud-brick house that Muhammad built in the 1930s, still the family home. While the soldiers themselves may have cleared the land for the compounds, women would certainly have helped erect the lean-to (rakuba) and the grass-hut (ghotiya), structures which in this region continue to provide basic shelter for newcomers to squatter settlements on the edge of town.

Another occupation, albeit one perceived as disreputable by colonial authorities and Muslim Arabs alike, was brewing mer-
issa, the alcohol that many colonists, especially men, imbibed so happily (as Jackson noted above). During the Turkiyya, female slaves in northern Sudan had been employed in "merissa [beer] shops," where older slave women would brew and sell the beer while younger slave women served it (Spaulding and Beswick 1995: 522). Beer brewing was almost certainly a women's job in the Malakiyya colonies and continues to be associated with Malakiyya neighborhoods. At first, merissa was prepared for home consumption and for sharing with friends and neighbors. Over time, as single male migrant workers arrived in Makwar to work on the dam and associated projects and looked for places to relax, beer brewing became an important source of income there for women. As the need for cash increased, women sold other forms of refreshment; tea, snacks, and stews could all be offered from the roadside and drew on skills and equipment they already had. At a time when there were few opportunities for women to work, these informal activities, in the "cracks" of the formal labor market, offered important and increasingly necessary sources of income.

Equally in demand with newcomers to town, and often associated with merissa shops, were sexual services. Spaulding and Beswick (1995: 528) discuss how, with the collapse of the old Funj social order in the 19th century, the commoditization of slave sexuality had expanded dramatically. Not just the nobility but the new middle class all sought to profit from marketing the sexual services of their slaves. These profits declined dramatically under the Mahdiyya, but the restoration of colonial rule under the Condominium in the early 20th century restored a social order:

amenable to urban and small-town middle-class morality that mandated expensive arranged marriages among the off-spring of respectable families. The ensuing demand for sexual services outside marriage may thus be read in terms of dominant bourgeois Arab-Islamic values that asserted
firm control over female sexuality and defined family honor in terms of the impeccability of its womenfolk.

In addition, in areas where there was a large migrant male work-force (such as Makwar in the early 20th century), the demand for sexual services meant that merissa shops often doubled as brothels. These offered additional opportunities for women to support themselves at a time when the colonial economy offered them few alternatives for wage employment. Underscoring their preoccupation with society's morality and health, colonial records had long stressed the link between liberated female slaves and prostitution (Sikainga 1996: 83; Spaulding and Beswick 1995). Similarly in later decades, Muslim Arab neighbors gossiped about threats posed to their world by the alleged immorality of the Malakiyya. In neither case is this proof that large numbers of Malakiyya women ever supported themselves through sexual work, but shows how the context of the times makes it difficult to investigate this in an impartial way. What is clear is that many Malakiyya women were left to support their families with the help only of other women, at a time when the options for acceptable female employment were extremely limited.

Creating Relatedness23

Preparing land for cultivation, harvesting and processing the crops, while raising twin babies and making a home with few resources, were thus Zainab's earliest tasks. These could only have been accomplished with support from neighbors and relatives in the new settlement, as we see in nostalgic reminiscences of life in the colonies. Najat is the grand-daughter of Muhammad, great-grand-daughter of Zainab, and she recalled working in their family's allotments when she was a child (probably in the late 1950s):
He [Muhammad] had one hawasha just outside the present district of al-Gal’a, near canal number nine where he used to grow peanuts. When we were small we used to go and help cut the beans. That was where they cut the food for the animals. They used to walk there, and carry us when we were small, do their work and then walk back.... His other hawasha was the other side of Sennar Station, where he grew sorghum. Sittena my grandmother used to walk there.... We would go and come in the same day, walking right through the huge rubbish dump in that area, full of hawks and awful things. We used to go early. Dawn would be breaking when we crossed the first and second railway lines. When we got to our cotton field, the one near the ninth irrigation canal, morning had already come and by noon we returned home.

Near the river we also have a vegetable garden where we grow squash and cucumber... We also have an island downstream, and when the river goes down it is in mid-stream. That island was also my grandfather’s... we go there to find watermelon. He owned that since before the time of the dam.

Her account makes clear that the ex-slave soldiers, Mursal and Muhammad, left a solid patrimony in land to their descendents. It also underscores that female labor was essential to making that land productive and that a great deal of hard physical work was involved in doing so. The allotments Najat describes are scattered over a wide area, and each involved a long hot journey on foot. Sometimes the women would stay overnight on their land, sleeping in a simple lean-to, so that they were ready to start work early the following day. More commonly they would walk five or six miles each way, carrying their children and grandchildren, and returning the same day. Equally important, the fact they could do so freely, without threat of attack or penalty, suggests how quickly and effectively a safe community was secured. Credit for this should not be attributed solely to the vigilance of colonial rule; certainly the
determination of these early settlers was a major factor in creating a safe society for their children.

Slavery is conceived of as being lost to one’s ancestors (Cole and Middleton 2000: 90). The experience of being enslaved was a “critical event” (after Das 1995) which severed hundreds of thousands of individuals from links to their ancestors and family, as well as from past memories and culture. The colonists’ experiences of family life had been shaped by slavery, where not only their productive and reproductive selves were owned by someone else, but where they were strangers among strangers in an alien land. Creating a social life based on themselves, therefore, one where they were responsible not only for their own labor but for their own dependents and for their future, was another major challenge faced by the early colonists. Perhaps the biggest contribution the women made was in building social networks, of actively creating “relatedness” (after Carsten 2007) for themselves and their families, shaped both by the larger Islamic society of which they were now part, and by the emerging culture of the colonies themselves. This has provided the basis for a new sense of identity, genealogy, and memory, for future generations of Malakiyya.

Related to each other only through the military and their common experience in slavery, people in the early colonies came from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, variously diluted by their subaltern experiences. Lacking kin as well as ancestors, they turned to neighbors and friends as surrogate kin, creating overlapping bilateral and matrifocal networks of relationships in which mother-child and sibling ties were particularly emphasized. This type of strategy has been described for several other subaltern societies (after Stack 1974). Describing a depressed Anglo-Indian community in West Bengal, for example, Bear (2007: 43) talks of their “expansive bilateral reckoning based on affective households”… which “gives particular weight to fraternal and sororal connections.” This is the basis of a “flexible system of kinship” which meant
that "conjugal families can be remade instantly in the present, even if one of the core couple ... had unknown origins. ... Its bilateral form also reflects the frequent historical experience of abandonment." Bear could equally well be talking about community in the Malakiyya colonies, where people had no memories of their ancestors, and where men were frequently absent. Muhammad's son Hissein, for example, became a soldier and was stationed in Egypt where he married an Egyptian woman and spent most of his life, returning only once, many years later, to visit his sisters. He was typical of many Malakiyya men, who were attracted back into the army and rarely returned to live full time in the colonies. As in other subaltern societies, households were centered on women. Children were raised largely among maternal kin and in turn, where households cooperated closely, they adopted the idiom of maternal kinship. In the tendency of women like Sittena to describe many of the people with whom she interacted as khalti, mother's sister (or a derivation thereof), we can see the actual process of creating relatedness at work.

Malakiyya women thus expected to work from an early age, in the fields and at home. They grew up in tight-knit families and neighborhoods which were linked primarily through women and in which women cooperated closely with each other. Najat illustrates this well as she continues:

In those days, at harvest time everything was plentiful and everyone shared. If someone had peanuts they would share with other people and in turn we would give them some of our produce. One day we would plant this person's allotment, the next we would plant someone else's and then when the sorghum was grown we would go to beat this person's, another day to help someone else. Then when their harvest was ready they would bring a basket of tomatoes or squash to us.
Cooperation and sharing extended to child-rearing. Hajja Fatima, an elderly Malakiyya woman I knew in 1980, recounted how she grew up very attached to her mother and grandmother, both of whom had lived in Daraw in Egypt before they came south with the colonial armies and became colonists in Helmi. After her marriage she had to leave them to move to Makwar, but in time became close to her new neighbors: to Zainab’s family. Zainab’s daughter-in-law Sittena was younger than she was but their children were close in age. Fatima recalled how when she was ill and unable to feed her own baby, Sittena nursed him. Their children were thus milk siblings, and enjoyed a particularly close relationship.

The same flexible processes were at work when creating descent or lineage. Creating genealogy was a particular challenge for people who had no roots or “kinship memory” (after Lambek 2007; also Carsten 2007: 9) but who needed descent credibility to be accepted into mainstream, free society. In places like Makwar, this was facilitated by the patrilineal, patriarchal ideology that predominates in this part of the world (Sharkey 1992: 114). Since the father’s genealogy is what counts in the larger society, this could give their descendents both historical memory and a free identity, if suitable marriages were arranged over time. At first, as colonies were small and the population in the surrounding countryside sparse, daughters of the first generation in Makwar largely married other Malakiyya, either within the same colony or with the neighboring colonies of Kabbosh (quite common) or Helmi (less common). Both Zainab’s children, for example, married Malakiyya from Kabbosh while Hajja Fatima, whose parents came as colonists to Helmi (where she was born), married a man from Makwar. Many of these young husbands enlisted in the army and were frequently away, often indefinitely, so that women of the second generation, like the first, were dependent on each other, strengthening matrifocal networks.
By the time the next generation of Malakiyya came of age, however, there was a large migrant population in Sennar, drawn by job opportunities with the dam and the agricultural schemes, and they expanded the pool of marriageable partners for Malakiyya women. While their background made them undesirable brides for peoples claiming Arab descent, they found ready husbands among other strangers in northern Sudan, particularly southerners or westerners (from Darfur or Kordofan, including the Nuba mountains). Zainab’s oldest granddaughter, for example, married neither a soldier nor Malakiyya but rather a driver for one of the agricultural schemes, a Beja from Meridi in southern Sudan. Their daughter, Najat, also married a southerner, a Dinka. It is the ethnic identity of their daughters (Zainab’s great-great-grand-daughters) as Dinka that is relatively uncontested. Because of the strong regional principle of patrilineal descent, within a few generations many Malakiyya children have thus acquired the necessary genealogy to underwrite respectability.

Links through females also became part of the local process of creating genealogy in Makwar, in contrast to the prevailing patrilineal ideology. Among Grandmother Zainab’s many descendants, for example, she has now become a “focal ancestor,” the apex of a lineage which encompasses at least five generations and in which the links are often fairly vague. While Zainab’s own father plays only a nominal role in this genealogy, her son Muhammad is an important link, not least through his wife Sittena, whose many Kabbosh relatives are thus integrated into this same descent group. Additionally, descendents of other former Malakiyya settlers also relate to Zainab through the idiom of matrilineal or non-unilineal kinship, expressing through kinship a sense of shared identity, even though the term Malakiyya continues to carry a distinctly stigmatized moral quality.

Thus if slavery was the “critical event” that “dominated local and social imaginaries and changed the shape of the lives of
those caught up" in it, then in the social world of the colonies, we can see the "new modes of action" which emerged among the survivors (Carsten 2007: 4). These in turn changed the categories within which people operated, as the ex-slave Malakiyya learned to relate to each other in new ways and over time have established significant new social groupings. Surrogate kin formed one such set of relationships; those associated with spiritual activity, with spirit possession, another. The agency of women in shaping those relationships was central, especially that of Grandmother Zainab.

**Spiritual Meanings and Practices**

Many Malakiyya men were active in Sufi brotherhoods, into which they had been introduced in Egypt, no doubt as a consequence of their conversion to Islam. They were especially involved with the Gadriyya, Ahmadiyya, and Tijaniyya Brotherhoods, as indeed are some of their descendents.26 Some women told me that their fathers and grandfathers played the drums (*noba*) in the brotherhoods, probably influenced by their experiences in the Black battalions' military bands. Sikainga (2000, 2008) talks about how these musical experiences fed directly into the popular culture of Sudan in the 1920s and 1930s:

One of the most important influences was that of Sudanese soldiers who served in the Egyptian army, the modern Egyptian army in the 20th century. Many of these soldiers were trained in Western musical instruments such as brass instruments and so on. They played a major role in the introduction of new styles of music—modern music, particularly after they were discharged from the army (Sikainga 2008).
Men were also active in spirit rituals celebrating both good ("red") and bad ("black") spirits. Muhammad, son of Zainab, for example, had followed in his stepfather's footsteps and became a formidable leader in nugara zar spirit possession rituals in Makwar. Through this he offered community assistance in dealing with health and social disorders as well as space for negotiating with non-human domains. However, according to contemporary informants, his spiritual powers brought him into conflict with a fearsome sorcerer, a Fertit man, who lived in one of the new squatter settlements in town and was using his spiritual powers to ingratiate himself with the colonial authorities. A terrible struggle ensued, in which Muhammad, despite his fearsome control over nugara spirits and fire, was defeated. He died soon afterwards, apparently a broken man, and his spiritual paraphernalia has been stored at the back of the family home, awaiting a successor, though to date none has arrived.

When recalling Muhammad’s spirit activities, it is generally in the context of healing, and I still meet women today who consulted Muhammad about therapeutic concerns. Muhammad practiced his spiritual craft from his home, where both he and his mother separately buried offerings to their spirits, and regularly made sacrifices in their ongoing contracts with the spirit world. This knowledge of various spirits had been acquired by the Malakiyya during the time they spent in Egypt, was particularly associated with women, and was brought directly by them to colonies like Makwar. Certainly women and men in the colonies knew the spirits before Zainab moved back to Makwar/Sennar. I learned from Hajja Fatima that several types of zar beliefs and rituals were common in Daraw, Egypt, where her mother and grandmother had lived; and as most writers contend (Constantinides 1972; Makris 2000; Lewis et al. 1991) it is probable that this knowledge was disseminated by the Black battalions throughout the Ottoman empire, including Sudan and thence to the various colonies.
However, in Makwar at least, these early practices and beliefs remained disorganized and have not lasted; indeed there are few memories of them.

Zainab would certainly have known about spirits such as *zar* when she lived with the Ababda, although it was not until she moved to Jumeyza that her own spiritual powers were awakened. Her followers are insistent that Zainab did not inherit them: the only significant fact I learned about her mother was that she did not know the spirits. Zainab’s *zar* was unique to her. It came directly from “the palaces,” from the time she lived in Ottoman Egypt, where by the 1860s *zar* spirit possession rituals were widespread (Klunzinger 1878). Female slaves played leading roles in these rituals which may well have been shaped by the knowledge they remembered of their homelands.

In Jumayza, under Marajan’s prompting, Zainab had started training with a leader in *burei zar*, learning how to summon the spirits and how to negotiate with them, as well as how to recognize the special illnesses and disorders caused by those spirits. By the time she returned to Makwar, Zainab had undergone the formal ceremony inducting her into leadership in *burei zar*, and over the next three decades she established a reputation as a formidable but compassionate leader [al-umiya]. This ultimately is why Zainab is remembered by name when most Malakiyya women are not: because of her strong powers in spirit possession. What Zainab brought to Sennar was a set of beliefs and practices which resonated with the lives of the residents there. This did not simply provide a panacea for various health disorders at a time when there were few other curing options, though that was important. The *zar* ritual she introduced provided a means for Malakiyya women to confront their slave past, less as a form of resistance (by the 1930s this life was largely a thing of the past) but rather as catharsis. In *zar*, women (and men to lesser extent) confronted, in embodied form, the various powerful traumas and shames they
and their mothers had experienced, experiences that otherwise defied words and understanding. Furthermore, both ritual and beliefs drew on the powers women recalled from 19th century Egypt, human and otherwise. What remains striking about the possessing spirits in burei zar is that they all belong to categories of people found in 19th century Egypt, identities made explicit by the dress and accessories they demand. The seven categories are Derewish (Sufis), Pashawat (Egyptian officials), Khawajat (Europeans), Habashi (Ethiopians), Blacks/Sudanese, Arabs, and Women (Sittat, from each of the other categories). These are variously represented in all burei zar ritual, though a certain local variation is found (Boddy 1989; Constantinides 1972; Kenyon 2004; al-Nagar 1975).

These spiritual powers, recalling a particular moment in history, were variously used as a source of energy or potency in dealing with the new problems of life in the colonies. This is what attracted newcomers, in ever increasing numbers, to Zainab’s house of zar, and fairly quickly her work eclipsed that of other spirit practitioners in the area. Zainab offered well-tried ways of dealing with new problems (of general disorder as well as physical illness) to women of many backgrounds, linking them to cosmopolitan and supernatural powers that had shaped her own early life. She also connected them to a network of women in similar positions, new migrants to an urban home in which they were strangers. Perhaps most important of all, Zainab’s ceremonies offered entertainment and diversion to lives that were exhaustingly dreary. Zainab’s zar was “like a party,” women still recall fondly. At the ritual events she orchestrated, women could briefly forget the drabness of their own everyday lives, the endlessness of their labors, as they recalled, obliquely but dramatically, a different world, one linked to both slaves and the more powerful, one which they briefly could join. And everybody was welcome, regardless of how much they could afford to contribute. The spirits themselves provided.
Zainab trained five women in zar, all Malakiyya, who took over from her after she died, each practicing independently in Sennar and the surrounding countryside. Between them they dominated the practice of zar burei in Sennar until the late 20th century, when Rabha (Zainab’s grand-daughter, the last of the five) died in 1998. Now their successors, also five in number, are running zar burei ritual in Sennar. Only one of them, the daughter of Rabha, has a Malakiyya background; but the zar they practice is “all from Grandmother Zainab.” Their genealogy in zar connects them directly to the Malakiyya colonies, and ideologically to the “palaces” of Ottoman Egypt. In this way, the whole experience of slavery becomes the ritual “Housepost,” not just for the practice of zar as it is found in Sennar, but also for the levels of relatedness found in various circles in contemporary Sennar.

Several writers (Comarroff and Comarroff 1993; Ong 1984; Sharp 1992) have shown how spirit possession, in various cultural contexts, facilitates adaptation to modernity. Constantinides (1978: 185), based on fieldwork in Sudan in the 1960s, similarly argued that the ritual of zar “has provided one of the prime bases for such female solidarity as exists in the urban areas and that it has played an important role in women’s adaptation and integration into multi-ethnic urban society.” In Sennar this solidarity, personified through links to Zainab, explains the ongoing success of zar, long after the settlement was transformed from a sleepy ex-slave colony into a modern market town. Equally important, however, is that in this way, memories of a subaltern past officially forgotten are kept alive, publicly celebrated, in ways that recall the life and experiences of one particular young woman: Zainab, bit Buggi.
Conclusion: The Legacy Of The Colonies

This paper was written primarily to start unpacking a subaltern history largely silenced in the formal records of Sudan: that of women from slave or ex-slave background. The story of slaves is known almost entirely from the perspective of the enslaving class or the dominant position, while accounts of slave women are additionally imbued with a distinct prurience (e.g., Klunzinger 1878). Thanks to the efforts of scholars such as Johnson (1988, 1989, 1992), Sharkey (1992), Sikainga (1996, 2000), Spaulding and Beswick (2000), the histories of peoples enslaved in the 19th century are beginning to emerge, on their own terms, from the silence that cloaked them for many years. At the same time there is much in these accounts that resonates with what we find in Sudanese society today.

That both slavery and gender remain significant, albeit contested, categories in contemporary Sudan is evident from the narratives of Islamist women given by Nageeb (2004). These show clearly that the trope of the slave, as the antithesis to civilized human being, repeatedly translates into “Black” versus “Arab” in everyday conversation. In their affirmation of a positive identity in these terms, Nageeb describes how ordinary young Sudanese women today spend lavish amounts on cosmetics for skin-bleaching, hoping to secure an attractive husband and dispel any suspicion of slave origins. Within the contemporary Islamist discourse described by Nageeb, there appears to be room for some women to negotiate their position through excessive piety and vigorous devotion to religion. There is less space for those still believed to have slave “blood,” which is why skin color is thought to be important in establishing family status and attracting good marriage alliances. This bias is of course ironic, since many ex-slaves have light skins, proof (as in the case of some of Zainab’s descendents) of female slaves’ perceived availability as sexual objects rather than of honorable descent.
Yet those whose ancestors were forced into slavery have now become part of the very fabric of society. For several generations, as free "Malakiyya" citizens, they contributed effectively to the creation of a new colonial and post-colonial order. Malakiyya wives, mothers and daughters were often in the vanguard of exploring independent lives in expanding urban neighborhoods while their male relatives were away for extended periods, in many cases serving their country. It was left to the women to clear the land and harvest the crops, to feed their families and to marry their children, to cure the sick, and give meaning and stability to their new community.

Today these contributions remain particularly relevant as new generations of men leave homes, in even greater numbers, chasing prospects elsewhere in Sudan or abroad. At the same time, expectations of social and religious correctness are being redefined for ordinary people left behind. Those families, often dependent on female labor, are expected to continue to meet the demands of Islamic propriety and obligation (wa-jiba), which can be particularly onerous without the support of the traditional extended family or even a steady source of income. Survival strategies drawn on by many women in the poor neighborhoods of Sudan’s major towns seem strikingly familiar. Creating jobs in the interstices of the male-dominated local economy, establishing pseudo-kin support with relative strangers, finding marriage alliances for their children, and negotiating spiritual and therapeutic meaning in the pluralist systems locally available: all these recall long established practices employed a century ago by newly freed colonists in strange and unused lands.

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NOTES

1 Dates are calculated largely from the context of Zainab’s life. Her birth date is based partly on the fact that she died in 1960, described then as an old woman.

2 The Ababda are a northern Beja, Arabic-speaking people who formerly lived in the mountains of Upper Egypt and Sudan. Nomadic camel and goat herders, they were supporters of Ottoman authority from the outset, assisting Muhammad Ali’s 1821 expedition south into Sudan and winning various concessions from the Egyptian and later British authorities.

3 The Turkish honorific was basically a term of respect. Osman was not necessarily of noble birth.

4 In the narrative I recorded, I was told that “her belt was cut,” gutta rahatt, referring to a wedding ritual in which the groom cuts the bride’s skirt.

5 These numbers are found in the file CIVSEC 5/6/33. Unpublished records from the Condominium period were consulted at the Public Record Office in Khartoum and at the Sudan Archive in Durham University. Files CIVSEC 5/6/33, CIVSEC 57/3/C and PUB 3/2/7 contain the documents relating to the Malakiyya colonies.

6 Haboba, Grandmother, is a term generally implying respect, used in addressing older women. It can also, as in this case, imply the sense of a founding ancestor.

7 Many people still remembered Zainab when I went to Sennar in 1979 and talked with me about her life. The fullest accounts were recorded in interviews with her daughter-in-law, Sittena, and grand-daughter, Rabha, in 1983; with Hajja Fatima in 1981-1984; and with Haboba Khadega in 1981. Rabha’s daughter Najat did not meet Zainab, but has been an ongoing source of information about Zainab’s family.

8 Both meanings are implied in the Arabic term.

9 The Kitab al-Tabaqat of Wad Dayf Allah is a collection of stories about the lives of about 260 Sufi scholars and saints in the Sudan, from roughly AD 1500-1800. It was compiled at the beginning of the 19th century (Hillelson 1923).
Ahmad Abu ‘Ali’s history of the Kings of Sinnar, known as ‘The Funj Chronicle’ (katib al-shuna), was compiled in the early years of the Turkiyya, and translated by Peter Holt (1999).

Bruce 1790 (4): 419-21 provides a description of these villages. Also Spaulding 1982.

Johnson 1989: 76 noted, “The slave soldier was... a product not just of slavery but of the system of military slavery. He was not a soldier because he was a slave; rather he was a slave because he was a soldier.”

In East Africa, Johnson (1989: 77) suggests the ratio was as high as 10:1 or even 12:1.

Zainab, daughter (or girl) of Buggi.

Johnson (1989: 80) quotes a 1899 letter from Slatin Pasha to the Sirdar in Cairo, urging the return of new army recruits to cultivate their masters’ land. It was also Slatin who banished the word slave from official Sudan government correspondence, though his own reports clearly reveal his condescension towards the Black soldiers.

This position was later called District Commissioner (Daly 1986: 73).

Boddy (2007) and Sharkey (2003) both illustrate vividly how Condominium officials brought their own gender biases to Sudan.

One feddan = 1.038 acres.

In his discussion of the growth of land tenure in 19th century Sudan, Spaulding (1982) shows how closely linked it was to slave ownership.

According to Zainab’s daughter-in-law, Sittena, and grand-daughter, Rabha.

Johnson (1989) suggests that in many ways they functioned like the old zara’ib (slave trading centers) of the 19th century, which served as a magnet for surrounding communities.

In 1920, for example, the Assistant Governor of Blue Nile Province noted that “the better the fathers are looked after, the more likely are the sons to recruit” (in CIVSEC 5/6/33).

After Carsten (2004), this term is preferred to the more familiar “kinship” because the focus is on actual active relationships rather than formal ideology.

It should also be noted that matrilineal biases, recalling earlier social practices, have been described within Sudanese society as a whole (Kheir 1987).

Cf Bear’s (2007: 38) discussion of the word Jati among the Anglo-Indians: it “can be understood as referring to a type, sort, or class.” ... “It is a term that suggests that in the flow of social life there exist
hidden shared and often inherited essences that are revealed by personal demeanor." Outsiders in Sennar continue to view Malakiyya as sharing inferior essences derived from their experience in slavery.

26 One of Zainab’s great-grandsons is a faki in the Gadriyya brotherhood in Sennar today.

27 This man may have been an ex-slave, but was not associated with the military colonies and indeed his career hints at the conflict and resentment felt between the two groups: the ex-military and the civilians.

28 Zar spirits are mainly inherited through the female line (Boddy 1989; Kenyon 1991).

29 Sharkey (1992: 99), citing Barclay (1982), suggests that female slaves much more than males might have carried on aspects of their pre-enslavement heritage.

30 Since the time of Zainab, this is the term used for female leader in zar in Sennar (though not in other places where leaders are referred to as Shaikha). According to Makris (2000: 151) umiya is the older term.

31 Sennar’s hospital was built in the late 1930s, but for several decades was associated more with death and dying than with offering any real health care options. It was also too expensive for most poor rural migrants.

32 This I also found to be true in Sennar, where older women are concerned about the damage being done to their daughter’s self esteem as well as to their skins.

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Bruce, James (1790). Travels To Discover The Source Of The Nile, In The Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, And 1773. 5 volumes. Edinburgh: J. Ruthven.


