History, Slavery, and Liberation

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Last spring, while Tunisians and Egyptians erupted in the most determined and optimistic political protest movements seen in two generations, southern Sudanese prepared to secede. And in July, after months of watching dramatic images from the demonstrators in Tahrir Square, the world was presented with pictures of a new country with a beautiful, colorful new flag, of thousands of people who had voted into existence the Republic of South Sudan.[1] On Al-Jazeera, CNN, and BBC, interviews with southern Sudanese revealed the profound relief and freedom that these new citizens felt as they repeated the word "liberation" to describe their feelings in this heady moment of independence.

South Sudan experienced secession as a victory; it has been a great loss to northern Sudan and a profound monument to Sudan's failure as a state. In the spring of 2011, the University of Pennsylvania held a symposium with scholars from all over Sudan to discuss the future of Sudanese people if the South seceded, which provided a microcosm of the mood. All of the scholars assumed the South would leave, but the dread expressed by those from the North contrasted sharply with the hope and joy shared by those from the South. The metaphor many used was of a "necessary divorce," with the southerners urging, like the determined, departing spouse, to keep it an amicable breakup. We are all still waiting and watching to see whether such amiability will be possible.

The secession from the North and the establishment of the new republic bear enormous meaning for African and Middle Eastern history and demonstrate, yet again, how closely connected these histories have always been. For example, what kind of country will the Republic of Sudan continue to be, now that Libya's Muʿammar al-Qadhafi is gone? Libya's long involvement in Sudanese concerns, particularly in Darfur, ended suddenly. Just days ago, at the time of this writing in late December, the leader of the Justice and Equality Movement, Khalil Ibrahim, died from wounds inflicted during an attack on his forces in Darfur by the armies of the North. Once able to march his own soldiers into Omdurman, to the deep humiliation of the government of President Omar al-Bashir, Khalil Ibrahim had become increasingly exposed, according to the *New York Times*, because of the death of Col. al-Qadhafi, his "chief patron and weapons supplier."[2]

The geography of the Nile Valley must be renegotiated, and by more than the two Sudans, in terms of the flow of the Nile, of oil, and of thousands of displaced Sudanese refugees. How will South Sudan work with its riparian partners on the question of utilizing the Nile, an issue that has polarized discussion between Egypt and Sudan on one side and Ethiopia and Uganda on the other? The long struggle over the Jonglei Canal, which, when finished, would open up southern Sudanese oil for production, has yet to be settled between any of these states, although rumors persist of oil companies already involved in their own discussions with South Sudan's president Salva Kiir.

Most important, what does southern Sudanese independence mean for the hundreds of thousands of displaced southerners, now refugees in Nairobi, Cairo, Alexandria, Damascus, Beirut, and Tel Aviv? Cairo alone hosts a huge number of these refugees,

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whose status with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees has remained stubbornly opaque for years. As the refugees have crossed various borders into Middle Eastern cities, they have often borne with them the stigma of demeaning labor. With no legal status or documentation, they perform largely domestic work and are often insulted as ʿ*abīd*, or "slaves," in cities like Cairo and Khartoum, where people from their tribes or communities worked as actual slaves generations ago. Few among the displaced know why this epithet is hurled at them, just as those doing the insulting often do not know the labor history between the regions of Sudan, between Sudan and Egypt, and between Egypt and the rest of what was once the Ottoman Empire.[3]

The history of slavery is ugly, sad, and often dirty. Stories of the dignity of particular slaves or the consciences of regretful or grateful owners cannot be told without accompaniment by the stories of humiliation, violence, and sorrow. The history of slavery in the Nile Valley has not been graced yet with a civil rights movement. Few communities claim pride in the fact that their ancestors were enslaved. But without exploring this history, we cannot understand why so many southern Sudanese reveled in the word "liberation" when the independence of this new country was proclaimed.

NOTES

[1]Some examples of these images can be found at www.aljazeera.com/inpictures/2011/07/20117914399440591.html (accessed 28 December 2011).

[2]"Sudan's Government Says Powerful Rebel Leader Is Dead," *New York Times*, 25 December 2011.

[3]I have written about this more extensively in *Tell This in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan and the Ottoman Empire* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

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