

Prologue

'ABID, A WORD WITH A LONG HISTORY

In the fall of 2005, a group of Sudanese refugees erected a makeshift camp on the grass of Mustafa Mahmud Square in the middle-class Cairo neighborhood of Muhandiseen. They had chosen this site for its proximity to the offices of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and their camp was set up in protest against the legal limbo in which they found themselves and for which they held the UNHCR responsible. Most of them, having fled the long civil war in the south of Sudan or the newer war in Darfur, had lived in Cairo for months or even years without being legally recognized as refugees. This status kept them from being able to find jobs or to gain access to education for their children. They lived in poverty along Cairo's margins.¹

But Mustafa Mahmud Square is not a marginal urban site: it is a bustling hub in the middle of the city. Across from the refugees' shantytown, on the other side, stands the grand Mustafa Mahmud Mosque. For months, the refugees relied on the charity of the mosque, which offered food and showers. Many in the neighborhood supported the refugees' attempt to make their voices heard, but patience wore out after three months and three thousand refugees had spread across the square. The UNHCR offered the refugees better apartments and reviews of their status, but the refugees insisted they be granted the means, and documentation, to leave Egypt. In answer to the impatience of Muhandiseen's residents and the employees of the UNHCR, police ended the stalemate and charged the camp early in the morning of December 29. They hosed the refugees with water cannons and dragged others away to buses. The *New York Times* reported the next day that twenty-three refugees were killed, several of them children.²

In the messy diplomatic aftermath, officials from the UNHCR and the Egyptian government wrestled with questions about the refugees. The gov-

ernment's spokesman, Magdy Rady, offered this apology: "We are sorry. What happened is unfortunate, it is sad, but it was not the intention of the police. The Sudanese pushed us to do this. They do not want to settle in Egypt. They want to move to another country. We did not know what else to do. It was a very difficult situation." Mr. Rady admitted to being mystified by the intransigence of the Sudanese. "I do not understand. What were they fighting for?"³

Later investigations explained with more clarity why the Sudanese wanted so badly to leave Egypt. Not only had their legal limbo made economic mobility all but impossible; these southern or Darfuri Sudanese daily faced discrimination. Gamal Nkrumah described their situation a few weeks later:

Questions are now being raised about how Egypt has failed Sudanese asylum-seekers. And it is not only the authorities who are implicated, but the public as well. Sudanese people, particularly southerners, face daily harassment in the streets of Cairo. They are subjected to racist taunts, and insults hurled from the unemployed. Egyptians are understandably angry at the deplorable conditions they face, including joblessness and disenfranchisement, and it appears they have been unable to resist the temptation of scape-goating the estimated five million Sudanese residing in the country.⁴

An Egyptian columnist for *Al-Masry al-youm* echoed the indignation of Gamal Nkrumah in an opinion piece published several years later, in which she described watching a young Egyptian woman harass a southern Sudanese woman while riding on the Cairo Metro. The reporter, Mona Eltahawy, intervened only to have the Egyptian girl and her mother berate her and tell her it was none of her business. The young Sudanese woman thanked her. Eltahawy responded in her article: "I could only imagine other times she'd been abused publicly. We are a racist people in Egypt and we are in deep denial about it." Looking back over recent history, she continued, "What else but racism on Dec. 30, 2005, allowed hundreds of riot policemen to storm through a makeshift camp in central Cairo to clear it of 2,500 Sudanese refugees, trampling or beating to death 28 people, among them women and children?"⁵

Many Sudanese refugees would welcome the sensitivity of Nkrumah and Eltahawy but may have wondered, as I did reading these accounts, why none of these reporters repeated the exact insults hurled at refugees on Cairo's streets. As I learned from interviews with Sudanese refugees even before the Muhandiseen incident, the most painful epithet was *'abid*, the Arabic word for "slave," a word intended for darker-skinned people of African descent. I think the silence around this word, even between the most caring of observers, reflects a larger silence about the legacy of slavery that connects Egyptian history to Sudanese history. When the Egyptian government's spokesman, Mr. Rady, expressed his bafflement about what the Sudanese refugees were fighting for, he also disclosed a lack of awareness about how the southern Sudanese are connected, painfully, to Egyptian society.

The refugees also expressed their determination to leave Egypt and their exhaustion at carrying a history on their backs about which they, too, had little understanding. Their large and loud presence in Muhandiseen dredged up clumsily articulated historical memories of earlier generations of Sudanese forcibly migrated to Egypt and other parts of the Ottoman Empire. The refugees have followed, unfortunately, in the footsteps of thousands of slaves who crossed the same paths hundreds of years before. They are caught in the grips of a historical geography. When they arrive in Cairo, they look like the people who once labored as slaves, in the eyes of a population that attributes a particular kind of social and cultural darkness to the south of Sudan or Darfur. This imagined map has distorted and perverted "their understanding of the world."⁶

The following chapters will attempt to fill in these gaps in historical geography by exploring the maps made by slaves caught in the slave trade, from the south of Sudan, to Egypt, to Ottoman cities in Anatolia, and to Europe. By looking at the narratives of a group of people who were born within a decade of each other in the late nineteenth century and died by the 1960s, I hope to show how slaves and the experience of slavery affected each one and how they told their stories to very different audiences. Each of the former slaves discussed in the book traveled thousands of miles, to different cities and homes, learning different religions and languages

that helped them integrate socially as best they could. Each of the former slave owners narrated how slavery was an experience of childhood; what was more challenging, as their writings show, was how to make the transition into a different, “modern,” and postcolonial political environment in which, to use Frederick Douglass’s phrase, “the old things of slavery” had no place.⁷

Chapter 1 focuses on the topographical textual map of Cairo that ‘Ali Mubarak wrote between the years 1886 and 1889 while he was minister of public works and commissioned to tear down and rebuild the parts of Cairo deemed too old and unsustainable. Through the pages of his famous *Al-Khitat al-tawfiqiya al-jadidah*, ‘Ali Mubarak explored the impact slaves had on Cairene, Egyptian, and his own personal history. From ‘Ali Mubarak we learn how some Egyptians divided slaves racially and ethnically, often in oversimplified ways. But never is their participation in history ignored.

I move from Egypt to Sudan in Chapter 2, which analyzes the narrative of Babikr Bedri, a one-time fighter in the Mahdi’s army, a trader in Sudan, a well-known educator who founded a school for girls in the north of the country, and a longtime slave owner. Babikr Bedri’s lively memoirs tell another side of the history of slavery in Sudan. They also reveal how contentious the issue of slavery became as the British grew more involved in the administration of the country, particularly after 1925. A slave-owning nationalist like Babikr had to confront British contempt for his leadership (even from officials who liked him) because of the structure of his household.

Chapter 3 examines the memoirs of Salim C. Wilson, a Dinka man enslaved in the south of Sudan, who confronted the religious rebellion of the Mahdi personally and who left Sudan for England under the sponsorship of British Protestant missionaries. Salim was a contemporary of Babikr Bedri and would have recognized many of the historical experiences narrated by Babikr, but from a deeply different perspective. And unlike Babikr, Salim’s own name, like that of many Sudanese slaves, mapped stages of his journey out of his homeland—Salim was the name his first owner gave him, and Charles Wilson was the name of the missionary who gave him his first home in England. He learned Arabic as a slave and English as a free man and worked as a lecturer in England, telling the story of his enslavement. He published his narrative in several editions, each time working to prove

how Christianity had civilized him. But Salim also remembered his life before slavery and worked equally as hard to prove himself an authority on the anthropology of his own people.

Chapter 4 explores the intimate connections between family life and enslavement that are also made clear in the memoirs of Huda Sha'rawi and Halide Edib Adivar, national leaders who, like Babikr Bedri, grew up in households where slaves helped raise them. Huda was one of the founders of the Egyptian women's movement, and her Ottoman contemporary, Halide, was a leading voice among Turkish women. Both were nationalist pioneers who grew disappointed with their male colleagues' lack of commitment to issues and laws concerning the rights of women. Both also grew up in households in which there were Sudanese, Ethiopian, and Circassian slaves, reflecting the larger network of the slave trade found in Cairo and in Istanbul. To different degrees in their memoirs, both Halide and Huda confronted how slavery reflected on their own maturity, personally and politically, as they grew into outspoken national figures.

Chapter 5 studies the lives of a group of Sudanese former slaves who were freed by Italian Catholic missionaries in Khartoum and trained, linguistically and theologically, to become missionaries themselves. All of them became nuns or priests and moved from Sudan to Egypt, sometimes to Jerusalem, then to Italy for their training. Only a few of them returned to Sudan, but when they did, they were figures who commanded respect. One of them, Father Daniel Sorur Pharim Deng, wrote articles that explored the philosophy of slavery and the meaning of abolition. Father Daniel also wrote and lectured about what enslavement had done to his Dinka family and the damage caused particularly between him and his mother. Father Daniel and the other black sisters discussed in this chapter wrestled with racist European attitudes, much as Salim C. Wilson did in England, but most were able to make their homes there.

The final chapter outlines the symbolic power of one of the world's most famous former slaves, Saint Josephine Bakhita. Many of the refugees from the southern Sudan who fought the police in Muhandiseen sought refuge afterward in Saint Bakhita Centers throughout Catholic and Protestant churches in Cairo. Her life has been emblematic for Sudanese refugees for decades, never more so than when Pope John Paul II canonized her in 2000.

Like the former slaves who preceded her, as discussed in Chapter 5, Bakhita became a Catholic in Italy. But she was sold to an Italian consul in Sudan and went to Italy with him to escape the Mahdi's armies. Barely educated and never fluent in Italian, Bakhita fought to become a nun, and her case became a cause célèbre in late nineteenth-century Italian society. Once free and a woman religious, Bakhita, too, toured the country, showing her scars and sharing her experiences. She dictated these to another sister, and her translated memories have been reprinted at least ten times, in numerous languages. Although she may have been the least articulate of the former slaves in this study, spiritually she was by far the most eloquent. Even though they all traveled just as far, it is Bakhita's history that has been retold the most times to refugees who see in her life and the work she was forced to do a model for their own circumstances. To some scholars, she has redefined the very historiography of slavery. With her smiling image found on many church doors in Cairo, perhaps she adds to the history that 'Ali Mubarak first began writing down.