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# DĀRFŪR AND ITS NEIGHBOURS UNDER SULTĀN ‘ALĪ DINĀR, 1898–1916

by  
A. B. THEOBALD

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, the Sultānate of Dārfūr formed one of a string of independent kingdoms, such as Sennār, Wadai, Bagirmi, Bornu, the Hausa States, Melle and others, which stretched right across north-central Africa from the Red Sea to the Atlantic. Very little is certainly known of the history of Dārfūr until the accession of the first of the historic Fūr Sultāns of the Kayra dynasty, Sulaimān Solong, the date of whose accession is variously estimated between 1596 and 1640. There followed ten other Sultāns, before Dārfūr was conquered by al-Zubair Rahma in 1874, on behalf of the Turko-Egyptian government, and the last of these, Sultān Ibrāhīm Muhammad al-Husain, was killed.

During this long period, the frontiers of Dārfūr did not vary greatly. Kordofān to the east was debatable ground between Dārfūr and Sennār, and for a brief period at the end of the eighteenth century, it was ruled by the Sultān of Dārfūr. Similarly, to the west, the Sultāns of Dārfūr fought intermittent wars with varying success against the Sultāns of Wadai. On the long border between the two kingdoms, lay a number of petty Sultānates, whose “Dārs” sometimes maintained a precarious independence, but were more often tributary to either Dārfūr or Wadai. Such were Dārs Gimr and Tāma in the north, Dār Masālit in the centre, and Dār Sila (or Sūla) further south. Generally Dārs Tāma and Sila fell within the sphere of influence of Wadai, and Dārs Gimr and Masālit in that of Dārfūr. Thus the frontier between Dārfūr and Wadai was undefined and fluid. In the south-east of Dārfūr proper, the Rizayqāt, the most powerful of the Baqqāra group of tribes, nominally admitted the suzerainty of the Sultāns of Dārfūr, but defied them when they dared.

The Turko-Egyptian administration of Dārfūr after 1874 was not accepted submissively by all the people. The legitimate heir to the Sultānate, Hārūn, held out in the great central massif of Jebel Marra until he was killed in 1880. The young Austrian, Rudolf von Slatin, who became Governor of the district of Dāra in 1879, and Governor-General of all Dārfūr in 1881, was soon engaged in attempting unsuccessfully to stamp out the local repercussions of the Mahdist rebellion, and at the end of 1883 he was compelled to surrender to the Madhists.

Rebellions continued against the Mahdists, for the Fūr supported their legitimate Sultāns—first ‘Abd Allāh Dūd Banja, then Yūsuf Ibrāhīm, then Abū Khairat. All were hunted down and killed. The head Shaikhs of the Rizayqāt and of the Ma‘āliyyia were beheaded; and a serious insurrection headed by a faki, known locally as Abū Jummayza, was suppressed. On the western marches of Dārfūr, Dar Tāma was overrun; but Dār Masālit successfully resisted the Mahdist armies.

After the final defeat of the Mahdists by Kitchener in September 1898, ‘Ali Dinār, grandson of a former Sultān of Dārfūr, Muhammad Fadl, who had been kept as a prisoner in Omdurman for some years by the Khalifa, returned to Dārfūr, gathering followers as he went. He out-marched Kitchener’s candidate for the vacant Sultānate, seized al-Fāsher from the Mahdist Amīr Umm Badda, and defeated the puppet Mahdist “Sultān”, Abū Kauda. He had succeeded to the Sultānate of a land which had been devastated and drenched in blood during the preceding years; its

manhood depopulated by the Khalifa's demands for his armies; its western frontiers undefined; and its great tribes, particularly those of the Baqqāra in the south, unwilling to accept his authority.

The Sudan Government, itself faced by the formidable problem of administering a vast country which had been devastated by almost continual fighting for seventeen years, and which was certain to be a financial liability for many years to come, was unwilling to undertake the additional burden of governing distant and bankrupt Dārfūr. 'Ali Dīnār was therefore recognized as the ruler of Dārfūr so long as he "was obedient to the Government's authority and complied with its orders", and paid a nominal tribute of £500 annually. Slatin was appointed Inspector-General of the Sudan in 1900, with special responsibility for Dārfūr affairs.

'Ali Dīnār's first task was to impose order and obedience on his people. After chastising the recalcitrant Banī Halba in the south-west; the Ma'āliyya, allies of the Rizayqāt in the south-east; and the people of Dār Gimr in the north-west, by the end of 1902, this had been achieved.

There remained the problem of the frontiers. In a Declaration on 21st March, 1899, Britain and France described their respective spheres of influence between the watersheds of the Congo and the Nile, and in doing so, were compelled to attempt to define the frontier between Dārfūr and Wadai. The operative section of the second paragraph read that the frontier "shall be drawn as far as the 15th parallel in such manner as to separate in principle the Kingdom of Wadai from what constituted in 1882 the Province of Darfur; but it shall in no case be so drawn as to pass to the west beyond the 21<sup>st</sup> of longitude east of Greenwich (20° 40' east of Paris) or to the east beyond the 23<sup>rd</sup> of longitude east of Greenwich (22° 40' east of Paris)." The fourth paragraph of the Declaration provided for the appointment of Commissioners "to delimit on the spot a frontier line in accordance with the indications given in paragraph 2 of this Declaration." Thus was created, in effect, a zone of contested, or at the best neutral, interests between the 21st and 23rd parallels, which should one day, it was intended, be delimited in such a way that the frontier should mark "*what constituted in 1882 the Province of Darfur.*" But did anyone know exactly what constituted the western limits of Dārfūr in 1882?

'Ali Dīnār was himself anxious to know what were the boundaries of his kingdom, and in reply to a query, General Wingate, the Governor-General, on 1st May 1901, gave him a general description; but in referring to the western frontier, merely said that it was "the former boundary with Borgo" (i.e. Wadai). After some minor frontier troubles between the Sudan and Dārfūr, Slatin, on 22nd December 1903, described the Kordofān-Dārfūr boundary in detail, but was again vague concerning the western limits of Dārfūr. "From El Mulam," he wrote, "the line will continue to the border of western Taaisha, Masalit, and stretch to the border of Dar Tama, and the old frontier between Darfur and Wadai," Clearly both Wingate and Slatin assumed that at least the three Dārs of Gimr, Tāma and Masālit belonged to Dārfūr. Indeed, the first official map of the Sudan, published in 1904, clearly marks these three Dārs as being part of Dārfūr, while Dār Sila is shown as part of Wadai.

The years 1903-09 were the most peaceful that Dārfūr had enjoyed since the Turko-Egyptian conquest. 'Ali Dīnār's relations with Mūsā Madibbū, head Shaikh of the Rizayqāt, were strained; but he was only obliged to fight one major campaign, against the Masālit, who were compelled to recognize him as the suzerain power early in 1907. Although there were minor raids back and forth along the Dārfūr-Kordofān



THE BOUNDARIES OF DARFUR  
According to Sudan Govt. in 1904  
Scale 1:4,000,000

FIG. 2

frontier, relations with the Sudan Government were on the whole good. 'Alī Dīnār paid his tribute regularly, and a constant flow of courteous letters and presents passed between him and Slatin.

Meanwhile, however, the French had been pushing steadily forward from the west until they impinged on the western districts of Wadai. They took advantage of internal rivalries for the throne of Wadai by supporting a certain Asil, against the reigning Sultān, Muhammad Salih Dūd Marra. By 1908, many Wadaians had deserted to the support of Asil, whose authority extended to within two days' march of Abeshr, the capital of Wadai. In the following year, the final advance was made, and on 2nd June, 1909, the French occupied Abeshr. Sultān Dūd Marra was deposed and fled to the east, and Asil was installed in his place. The French assumed that all the petty Sultānates in the disputed frontier zone between Wadai and Dārfūr belonged as of right to the former, and they acted accordingly. By the end of 1909, they had installed their own nominee, Hasan Kolongawi, as Sultān of Tāma, and the Sultāns of both Dār Gimr and Dār Sila had submitted to the French.

The French then proceeded to reconnoitre towards the borders of Dār Masālīt; but in January, 1910, they were ambushed at Bīr Tawīl, near the frontier, their commander killed, and their column annihilated. A combined Masālīt and Fūr force then marched into Dār Tāma, and ejected the Sultān who had been appointed by the French. Having received reinforcements, in April the French defeated a large Fūr force at Guerada in the north of Dār Tāma, and their protégé, Hasan, was again restored as Sultān. In May 1910, Dūd Marra, the fugitive ex-Sultān of Wadai, took refuge with Sultān Tāj al-Dīn of Dār Masālīt, thus creating a new source of friction with the French. Thus ended the first phase of the campaign.

When the rains were over, the French command at Abeshr received authority from the Government to punish the "rebellious" Masālīt, and to attempt to capture Dūd Marra. The column marched into the heart of Dār Masālīt. On 9th November 1910, the French were attacked with bewildering speed at Dorata, their square was broken, and the commander, Colonel Moll, was killed. The Masālīt, believing the battle to be won, began to loot the French camp, thereby giving the remnants of the French force an opportunity to re-form, and to turn defeat into victory. In January 1911, yet another French column marched again into Dār Masālīt, won a second battle at Dorata, recovered the remains of their dead from the first encounter, and burnt the Sultān's village. This completed the chastisement of the Masālīt.

In October 1911, Dūd Marra surrendered to the French, and shortly afterwards, the Sultān of Dār Masālīt made his peace with the French, by which he ceded to them the western third of his Dār. Meanwhile, in May, the French had driven Fūr raiders out of Dār Tāma, and re-established their authority there. Thus by the end of 1911, fighting ceased on the western marches of Dārfūr, where the French exercised control, if not an effective administration.

'Alī Dīnār's reaction to the French incursions had been violent. In October 1909, he reported to Slatin that the French had occupied Dār Tāma, "although it is a stronghold of our frontiers." He asked the Sudan Government "to issue orders to the French to withdraw in accordance with the terms of international law." But, he added, "If your Government is not able to stop their advance into our frontiers, please let us know immediately. We will then rely on God, and protect our lives and our country until the will of God is clearly established." Slatin replied soothingly, "The boundary of Darfur under your rule is well known to the French Government, and you must not be afraid that France will encroach on it, so long as you are loyal

to the Anglo-Egyptian Government." A little later (19.1.1910), Slatin was more positive. "The Government will preserve the integrity of your country," he wrote, "and resist any foreign power having malicious intentions towards you, as long as you are loyal to the Government."

In March 1910, the Sudan Government was informed by the British Foreign Office that the French authorities had agreed to instruct their troops "to avoid any collision with Ali Dinar, and not to cross the Darfur frontier." This assurance was in fact valueless, because the French conception of what constituted "the Darfur frontier" was entirely different from that of the Sudan Government or of 'Ali Dinār. When the French aggressions continued, and 'Ali Dinār continued to complain, Slatin's explanation (23.4.1910), was that there must have been "some false information on the part of the natives of Wadai, who told the French officials that the district in question belonged to them."

Two months later, in June 1910, writing from Vienna, where he was spending his leave, Slatin was still confident that the French troops would obey orders not to cross Dārfūr's frontiers, but said that nothing further could be done until he returned from leave. On October 15th, he had an interview with M. Roux, the French Acting Consul-General in Cairo, after which he declared that he had received explicit verbal assurances from M. Roux that the French would not enter Dārs Tāma and Masālit. In fact, all M. Roux had said was that orders had been given to the French officers, "*N'entreprendre aucune installation sur des territoires n'étant pas reconnus d'une manière incontestée comme des dépendances du Sultan Acyl.*" At the same time, the French reserved the right of self-defence against bands which attacked them, and of pursuit of the aggressors back to their homes.

Nevertheless, Slatin was satisfied, and he fired off renewed assurances (20.10.1910), to 'Ali Dinār that the French had again promised "not to interfere or intrude on the frontier of Darfur, which is Dar Tama and Dar Masalit." 'Ali Dinār was duly grateful; but when he heard of Colonel Moll's march into Dār Masālit in November, he was correspondingly more bitter and enraged at what he regarded as the bad faith of both the French and of the Sudan Governments. The French, he wrote (24.11.1910), were clearly "ambitious of taking possession of Darfur," and "we shall, by the help of God, take our chance fighting them, till God shall decide between use." Slatin was equally indignant, and wired to the British Agent and Consul-General in Cairo (30.12.1910), "Neither I nor the Sudan Government can be held responsible for Ali Dinar's actions in future, if French troops remain in the disputed districts." But they did remain; and throughout 1911 and 1912, 'Ali Dinār continued to protest in vain, and to call in vain for the assistance of the Sudan Government in ejecting the intruders. As late as 24th August 1913, we find him writing to Slatin, "I have only a deadly hatred for the French. All my letters to you carried complaints against them, and you have told me not to fight with them on the frontier, and repeatedly sent the good news that you will settle the question of our frontier, the frontier of my fathers and forefathers, and I have always been waiting for the accomplishment of your promise, but until now nothing has been settled."

'Ali Dinār could not of course know that the question of the frontier between Dārfūr and Wadai had caused considerable diplomatic activity in Khartoum, Cairo, London and Paris; and that the Sudan Government had in fact been giving him its full support. The obvious solution to the problem was the delimitation of the frontier, which had been envisaged in paragraph 4 of the Anglo-French Declaration of 21st March 1899. At the end of 1909, this course was suggested to the Sudan Government



by the British Government. But General Wingate did not think it was practicable, "because any mission for this purpose would be exposed to attack by the lawless bands along the frontier, which the disturbed state of that part of the country called into existence." Wingate and Slatin appear to have been so convinced of the obvious rightness of 'Alī Dīnār's claim to the disputed territory, that they pressed at first merely for a declaration by the French that they would respect Dārfūr's frontiers. This, as we have seen, was provided in March 1910, and again by Roux, with reservations, in October.

When these promises did not produce satisfactory results, the Sudan Government was slow in taking further action, and it was not until January 1911 that Slatin wrote a memorandum, in which he presented the case for 'Alī Dīnār and the Sudan Government in full. There was no documentary evidence; but Slatin lodged a deposition by himself, supported by evidence from his book, "Fire and Sword in the Sudan", that Dārs Tāma, Gimr and Masālit were actually administered by him when he was a Governor, and later a Governor-General, in Dārfūr from 1879 to 1883; and a further deposition to the same effect by al-Nūr Bey 'Anqara, who was Governor of the western districts of Darfur from 1879 to 1882. There were other depositions by more minor officials. No attempt was made to claim Dār Sila.

The French case was never formally stated; but it seems to have rested on such flimsy evidence as that the Sultān of Masālit had sent presents to Asil, when the latter became Sultān of Wadai, and that the French military commander had been welcomed when he visited Dār Tāma. Reference was also made to the writings of Dr. Nachtigal, the German explorer, who had travelled from Wadai to Dārfūr in 1874. The year 1874 was not of course the operative date in question; and in any case, in the map illustrating his journey, Nachtigal had shown Dār Gimr as lying within Dārfūr; Dār Masālit as partly within Dārfūr, and partly in a neutral zone between the two countries; and Dārs Tāma and Sila as wholly within the neutral zone. The French, however, promised to produce all their evidence when delimitation was undertaken.

The proposal for delimitation did not in fact prosper. In March 1911, Slatin wrote to Wingate that he considered it necessary for the French to recognize Dārfūr's right to Dārs Tāma and Masālit *before* a delimitation commission visited the area, because 'Alī Dīnār could not be expected to resign his right to two provinces; and because the Sudan Government was bound in honour to 'Alī Dīnār to uphold the 1899 Declaration as they interpreted it. When this point of view was put to the French Government, a long silence ensued; but in March 1912, the French Foreign Minister made the counter-proposal that before delimitation took place, "*La Grande-Bretagne soit, de son côté, à même d'imposer son autorité, d'une manière efficace, sur le Sultan du Darfour.*"

Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, realizing that the negotiations were making no progress, then changed his tactics, and in May 1912, suggested an Anglo-French conference to consider the dispute. The French agreed in principle, but procrastinated. They first suggested that the conference should be held in December; then at some date during the first three months of 1913.

Grey considered, "It would be useless further to press the French Government to meet our wishes concerning the date and place of a conference which it is manifestly their policy to postpone for as long as possible." He therefore proposed arbitration. Negotiations continued at a very leisurely pace throughout 1913; but by January 1914, it had at length been agreed that an arbitration tribunal should be set

up, according to the procedure of chapter 4 of the Hague Convention of 1907. There was still, however, plenty of room for manoeuvre, and thus of cause for delay, in considering the composition and terms of reference of such a tribunal, and of this the French took full advantage. But the interminable correspondence was rudely interrupted by the outbreak of the first World War in August 1914.

In August 1916, the British Foreign Office asked the Sudan Government what concessions it was prepared to make to settle "the long-pending dispute". The Sudan Government replied that it was prepared to concede Dārs Tāma and Sila, for it was generally agreed in Dārfūr that in the past they had been more frequently under Wadai than Dārfūr; but that it was essential for the Sudan to keep Dārs Gimr and Masālīt. At the Peace Conference in 1919, this compromise was adopted. But even then, it was not until 1922-23 that a Boundary Commission delimited the frontier. The agreement between Britain and France, fixing the frontier as it is today, was finally signed in January 1924.

Let us return briefly to 'Alī Dīnār. At the end of 1913, he fought an unsuccessful campaign against his old enemies, the Rizayqāt. The Sudan Government maintained an attitude of strict neutrality towards this struggle; but 'Alī Dīnār accused the Government of encouraging the Rizayqāt in their opposition to him. At the end of 1913 too, a considerable number of the Zayādiyya tribe, who could bear the exactions of 'Alī Dīnār no longer, fled from Dārfūr, and took refuge in Kordofān.

Thus when the first World War began, 'Alī Dīnār was already deeply disgruntled with the Sudan Government. When Turkey entered the war in November 1914, and the Khedive 'Abbās II of Egypt was deposed by the British in December, the tone of 'Alī Dīnār's letters to the Sudan Government and to Sudanese notables, sharply changed. In a long letter to Sayed 'Alī al-Mirghani on March 20th, 1915, he poured out his grievances against the Sudan Government. France had taken parts of his country which had always belonged to Dārfūr, and the Government had done nothing to help him; the Rizayqāt had rebelled, and the Government had supported them; the Zayādiyya had deserted, taking some of his property with them, and the Government had not sent them back; the Kabābīsh had raided into Dārfūr and looted camels and cattle, but he had received no justice from the Government; the Government had refused to allow his representatives to buy mules in the Sudan, or ammunition in the Hijāz; and finally, the Government owed him £2800<sup>1</sup>. With all these accumulated grievances, however unjustified many of them might be, fanned by the blaze of a world war, with all its accompanying unrest and rumours, it is not surprising that on April 22nd, 1915, 'Alī Dīnār declared his complete independence of the Sudan Government, and refused to pay any further tribute; or that, in May, he wrote to the Shaikhs of Kordofān tribes, urging them to rebel against the Sudan Government.

Clearly, the Sudan Government could not allow such a damaging blow to its prestige to pass unnoticed, or to permit 'Alī Dīnār's inflammatory propaganda among the Sudan tribes to continue unchecked. Moreover, the Sudan Government believed that 'Alī Dīnār was in close touch with the Sanūsī to the north, and that he was being influenced by Turkish or German agents. Actually, after the occupation of Dārfūr, it was found that these fears had been much exaggerated. It is true that 'Alī Dīnār received a trickle of arms from the Sanūsī; and that in February 1915, Enver Pasha, the Turkish Minister for War, wrote to him, urging him to join the Jihād against the Christians. But another letter from Nūrī Bey, Enver's half brother, who was attached to the Sanūsī as a military adviser, which was despatched to 'Alī Dīnār in August 1915,

<sup>1</sup> I have been unable to find any justification for this charge.



did not in fact reach him till March 1916; and 'Alī Dīnār's own letters to the head of the Sanūsī, to Enver Pasha, and to the Sultān of Turkey, were not written until the early months of 1916.

After 'Alī Dīnār had renounced his allegiance in April 1915, there were many voices urging Wingate to launch an immediate attack on him. But the Governor-General was determined to bide his time. The military and financial resources of the Sudan Government were very small, and a campaign fought in distant Darfur would strain them to the utmost. Moreover, during the second half of 1915, Britain was engaged in the desperate Dardanelles campaign, and the opening of a new theatre of operations, which might require reinforcements of British troops, was not favoured by the military authorities. But by December, the evacuation of the Dardanelles had eased the manpower situation. At about the same time too, 'Alī Dīnār's attitude had become more threatening. On 25th November, 1915, he wrote to the Inspector, Nahūd, complaining that travellers from Dārfūr were closely examined and delayed at Nahūd, and ending fiercely, "If you do not cease this conduct, By God and His power, you will be turned out of Nahud." The Sudan Government therefore moved a small force of the Camel Corps to protect this important trade centre, and the surrounding tribes. When the Governor of Kordofān informed 'Alī Dīnār of this action, his reply was to send two fishing spears and two throwing sticks, inscribed with his name and defiant verses from the Qur'ān, to the Inspector at Nahūd, and to reinforce his own frontier post at Jebel al-Hilla. On February 6th, 1916, he wrote a final wild letter of defiance and threats, addressed to "The Governor of Hell in Kordofan and the Inspector of Flames at Nahud."

The time for action had come. A mixed force of all arms, numbering about 2,000 men, marched from Nahūd on March 16th, 1916, and crossed the frontier into Dārfūr. 'Alī Dīnār's army was defeated at Beringia, about twelve miles north of al-Fāsher, on May 22nd; al-Fāsher was captured, and the Sultān fled. Further movement had to be postponed until after the rains; but on November 6th, his camp was surprised by a flying column under the command of Major H. J. Huddleston, and 'Alī Dīnār, last Sultān of Dārfūr, was killed.

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The chief sources for the study of the reign of Sultan 'Alī Dīnār are to be found in the archives of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of the Sudan, particularly:—

- (a) The series '*Alī Dīnār: Historical*' (Intell. 2:2-2:5) contains a rich, but somewhat bewildering mixture of Intelligence reports and correspondence concerning 'Alī Dīnār.
- (b) The series '*Alī Dīnār: Correspondence*' (Intell. 7:1-7:5) consists mainly of the hundreds of letters that passed to and fro between 'Alī Dīnār and the Sudan Government.
- (c) The *Monthly Intelligence Reports* (Nos. 60-268) provide a valuable digest of fact and rumour on the affairs of Dārfūr under 'Alī Dīnār.

The *Wingate Papers*, now in the custody of the University of Durham, will undoubtedly provide much additional information, when they have been organized and opened to students. Thanks to the courtesy of Mr. Richard Hill, I have been able to examine the documents for the years 1915-16, and these have been fruitful.

*Sudan Notes and Records*, and other periodicals, contain a number of very useful articles. The French point of view in the Wadai-Dārfūr frontier dispute is well presented in a series of articles in the monthly periodical, *Bulletin Mensuel du Comité de l'Afrique Française*.