Breaking the Pen:
(of Sir Harold ibn MacMichael ibn Hicks)
The Ja'aliyyīn Identity Revisited

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Introduction

Contemporary research on the ethnic identity of the *Ja'aliyyī*[1]n of the Northern Sudan directly challenges the indigenous genealogical tradition that took its present-day form in the tenth century AH/sixteenth century AC. The indigenous tradition characterizes the *Ja'aliyyīn* unequivocally as Arabs, who descended from al- 'Abbas, the paternal uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, (ṢAAS)[2] In contrast, MacMichael's *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan,*[3] the baseline for all subsequent investigations,[4] argues that:

In so far as the *Ja'aliyyīn* congeries can be regarded as a single whole its homogeneity consists in the common Berberine or Nūbian strain that exists in a very varying proportion in all its component parts.

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[1]The *Ja'aliyyīn* is used in Sudanese genealogies in a general and a restricted sense. The former includes all the riverain dwellers between Dongola and the Sixth Cataract such as Biddayriyyah, Shāyqiyyah, Rubātab, etc. The latter sense is restricted to the *Ja'aliyyīn* proper, who lived between the confluence of 'Aṭbarah and the Nile and the Sixth Cataract. Se Yūsuf Fadl Hasan, *The Arabs and the Sudan* (Edinburgh, 1967), 146. In this paper *Ja'aliyyīn* is used in its general sense.

[2]Most of the genealogical traditions were collected by H. A. MacMichael (1882-1969), who joined the Sudan (British Colonial) Political Service in 1905 and rose to be the Civil Secretary in 1926. He published his translation of the traditional texts and his commentaries in the second volume of his *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan* (London, 1922). For a brief, and cogent presentation of these texts see Hasan, *The Arabs*, 203-213. For contemporary offshoots of the tradition see al-Fahl al Fakī at-Tahir, *Tārīkh wa uṣūl al'Arab bī Sūdān* (Khartoum, 1976); Abdulllahi Ali Ibrahim, ed., *Al Sūr al Māni' al Bāṣ fī 'ittiṣāl Ibrāhīm Ja'al bī 'Aṣlih al 'Abbās* (Khartoum, 1401 AH/1981 AC), and the numerous writings of 'Uthmān Hamdallah.

[3]Published in two volumes by Cambridge University Press in 1922. A reprint of it appeared in 1967.

[4]William Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (London, 1977), 551.

There is also a strong infusion of Arab blood more particularly in the *Ja'aliyyīn* proper, but the error into which the native genealogists have wilfully slipped consists in ignoring the Nūbian element and finding the common race factor of the *Ja'aliyyīn* in the tribe of Quraysh. The facts being as they are, it is impossible to specify any particular tribe of Arabia as being that to which the Arab element in the composition of the *Ja'aliyyīn* group can be attributed in any exclusive sense.[5]

Trimingham, too, describes an admixture of the indigenous folk (Nūbians) and the Arabs, who settled in the *Ja'aliyyīn* area from the fourth to the ninth century AH/ninth to the fourteenth century AC, as "either Semitized Hamites or *Semitized Negroes* (his italics) but more clearly as Semitized-Negroid-Hamites."[6] Nonetheless, Trimingham's characterization of the process that evolved the hybrid identity of the *Ja'aliyyīn* as the Arabization of indigenous groups and the indigenization of the immigrant Arabs[7] has been widely adopted.[8] Hasan's term "Arabized Nubians"[9] says it all very simply and has been widely accepted.[10] Unfortunately, this contemporary discourse about the ethnic identity of the *Ja'aliyyīn* has been, to a greater or a lesser degree, a misguided project. It began largely as a critique of the indigenous genealogical tradition and has not advanced very far beyond that initial point. Its strength is its scholarly disbelief in that tradition. Academic legitimacy lies in its political authoritativeness arising from its access to and use of knowledge as a "sacred resource." In appropriating history and truth as its own, scholarship left "lore"

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[5]MacMichael, *History*, Vol. I, 235. The hybrid identity of the Sudanese Arabs predates Macmichael. *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan: A Compendium Prepared by Officers of the Sudan Government* (Khartoum, 1313 AH/1905 AC) describes their identify along similar lines and does not fail to doubt the genuineness of the genealogical tradition. See Muhammad Abdul Hai, *Conflict and Identity: The Cultural Poetics of Contemporary Sudanese Poetry* (Khartoum, 1396AH/1976 AC), 2-3. All citations from MacMichael and other works have been adjusted to conform to the conventions of orthography employed here.

[6]J. S. Trimingham, *Islam in the Sudan* (Oxford, 1949), 18.

[7]Ibid., 82.

[8]Hasan, *The Arabs*, 175; Muddathir 'Abd Al-Rahim, "Arabism,Africanism, and Self-identification in the Sudan," in Dunstan M. Wai, ed., *The Southern Sudan and the Problem of National Integration* (London, 1393 AH/1973 AC), 32; Adams, *Nubia*, 557.

[9]Hasan, The Arabs, 152.

[10]Sayyid H. Hurreiz, *Ja'aliyyīn Folktales* (Indiana, 1397 AH/1977 AC) XI; Adams, *Nubia*, 557; Ahmed al Shahi and F. C. T. Moore, *Wisdom from the Nile,* (Oxford, 1398 AH/1978 AC), 32; Hayder Ibrahim, *the Shāyqīyyah* (Wiesbaden, 1399 AH/1979 AC) 15; Sharafeldin E. Abdelsalaam, "A Study of Contemporary Sudanese Muslim Saints' Legends in Sociocultural Context," Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1403 AH/1983 AC, 5. Ali Mazrui speaks of this hybrid as Arabized Africans. See "The Black Arabs in Comparative Perspective," in Wai, ed., The *Southern Sudan,* 68.

and "myths" to the folk[11] who takes "pride in their fictitious *nisba* or tribal genealogy."[12] But to date scholars have merely created a second, separate "genealogical tradition" in its own right as it will eventually become clear.

MacMichael advised against taking the assertions of the genealogists as literal statements of fact. He was aware, however, of their considerable value "if understood in a figurative sense — if, in other words, they are taken as parables."[13] MacMichael only mentioned this concept in a footnote and never cared to elaborate it. Adams understood the "parable metaphor" as indicating the segmentary lineage system of the Arabs which functions as a system of non-government; that is, the fiction of universal kinship takes the place of formal government institutions.[14] The parable metaphor, however, proved to be peculiarly upsetting to subsequent researchers. Cunnison states:

> here is little sign that MacMichael gave much thought to the problems which his justifiable skepticism raises. If the genealogies are incredible as literal statements of fact, what are they credible as? How are we to take statements liberally? What kind of meaning are we to extract from genealogies if they are parables? MacMichael stops short of telling us.[15]

MacMichael had so many reservations about the ethics and quality of the genealogists' scholarship[16] that there is little sign he could have answered Cunnison's question. Intolerance of the ambiguities and indeterminacies a metaphor generates is a sign that literalism has set in. Not surprisingly, Cunnison finally describes genealogies as ideologies[17] and, as such, a falsification of the record.[18] Trimingham has preceded him by characterizing them as "artificial" and "fictions" that cannot be trusted.[19] The words "fictions,"[20] "alleged,"[21] and even "non- fictions"[22] became automatic in this authoritative

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[11]Michael Herzfeld, "Levi-Strauss in the Nation State," *Journal of American Folklore*, 98, 390 (1985), 192.

[12]Trimingham, *Islam*, 19.

[13]MacMichael, *History*, Vol. I, 131.

[14]Adams, *Nubia*, 564-565.

[15]Ian Cunnison, "Classification by Genealogy: A Problem of the Baqqārah Belt," in Yusūf Fadl Hasan, ed., *Sudan in Africa* (Khartoum, 1391 AH/1971 AC), 188.

[16]MacMichael, *History*, Vol. 2, 1-15.

[17]Cunnison, "Classification," 194.

[18]Ibid., 189.

[19]Trimingham, *Islam*, 16, 9.

[20]Hasan, *The Arabs*, 164; Adams, *Nubia*, 604.

[21]B. G. Haycock, "Medieval Nubia in the Perspective of Sudanese History," *Sudan Notes and Records*, 53 (1392 AH/1972 AC), 33.

[22]Hasan, *The Arabs*, 139.

discourse. Literality, finally, has assumed the familiar question of the usability of the genealogical tradition in the construction of the history of Arabization of the Sudan.[23]

The objections of scholars to the genealogical tradition are misplaced and the imputation of bad faith to its authors is unwarranted. The tradition has been criticized for deliberately ignoring the Nubian substratum which the scholars believe contributed significantly to the formation of the present-day *Ja'aliyyīn*.[24] James has rightly pointed out that such criticisms originated among the writers of the Colonial period in the Sudan, who asked "ethnographic" questions of the genealogical tradition which it could not answer. Those questions, according to James, were very different from those in the minds of the compilers of the genealogical tradition.[25] The bias toward the Arabs in that tradition indicates a whole view of the past, based on historical experience and transformed into a particular cultural representation of it.[26]

Scholars must find some way to account for this tradition in order to understand the *Ja'aliyyīn* identity. Adams wished there had been a foreign observer, whose coherent record on the Arabization of the Sudan could have clarified the confusing and conflicting testimony of the tradition.[27] Spaulding sniped at the genealogists for being "richer in humanity than science."[28] Cunnison, on the other hand, argues that genealogies are seriously limited

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[23]Ibid., 135, 212; Adams, *Nubia*, 551. Hasan's *The Arabs*, which draws on Medieval Arabic sources, is a lucid presentation of the historical memory in the genealogical tradition. He cautions, however, that any conclusions drawn from these genealogies as to the tribal origin, must be accepted with some reservation. See *The Arab*, 135. Adams values these traditions highly in contributing to our understanding of the cultural history of the Sudan. Nonetheless, he points out that their worth to the conventional historiography is slight. See *Nubia*, 592.

[24]MacMichael, *History*, Vol. I, 243; P.M. Holt, *A Modern History of the Sudan* (London, 1963), 6; Hasan, *The Arabs*, 152; Adams, *Nubia*, 556. This is not true in every case though. Regarding the Danāqlah of Dongola, whom MacMichael is inclined to count as *Ja'aliyyīn*, two pedigrees indicate the autochtonous element among them. See *History*, Vol. I, 198-200. Trimingham, on the other hand, states that genealogists may recognize the native element, but they despise it and only acknowledge the Arab. See *Islam*, 6. MacMichael, however, uses what he had identified as a bias to the Arabs in the genealogies as an evidence to dismiss or support claims to being an Arab. For instance, he dismisses the claim of the Dabānyah of Eastern Sudan to be Arabs because their name does not occur in the genealogies of the Arabs in the Sudan. See *History*, Vol. I, 253. MacMichael, incidentally, argues elsewhere in his book that the riverain genealogists, who knew little of the distant Baqqārah of Western Sudan, either omit them or allot them a shadowy ancestor. See ibid., 273. If this last statement is true, the distant Dabānyah could have as well escaped the attention of the genealogists.

[25]Wendy James, "The Funj Mystique," in Rarindra K. Jain, ed., *Text and Context: The Social Anthropology of Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1977), 99.

[26]Ibid., 129.

[27]Adams, *Nubia*, 557, 551.

[28]Jay Spaulding, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār* (East Lansing, 1985), 197.

as a system of ethnic classification. Instead, he proposes that we have to proceed by means of cultural characteristics to that end.[29] James, however, cautions against having unequivocal trust in apparently unbiased clues such as material culture, linguistics and ritual forms, etc., in preference to the genealogical tradition. She continues:

> A body of local tradition . . . , represents an interpretation of the evidence in the memory of those who have inherited a particular past. That interpretation is itself a social and historical fact; and to take account of it is to enrich, not to impoverish, a historical inquiry. Study of a local framework of historical interpretation, or a series of such frameworks, may yield meanings that can be entirely missed in a purportedly objective ethnographic inquiry.[30]

Inventing an ethnic or religious identity is not only a common practice, it is also legitimate. Herzfeld has admirably analyzed how Greek folklorists and scholars of the nineteenth century constructed their Hellenic identity to establish a link with Classical Greece. In analyzing this constructed identity, Herzfeld's intention was not to suggest that they did so in defiance of facts. He views them rather as assembling what they considered to be relevant cultural materials and using them to state their case.[31]

His approach to his "dead informants" is quoted below in length to contrast with the heavy-handedness the authoritative discourse in view shows toward the genealogical tradition:

> An anthropologist does not try to expose informants' "ignorance" of their cultural universe; it is only possible to say something about how they perceive and articulate that universe. In much the same spirit, our aim here is not to challenge the factual basis of early Greek folklore studies or to treat their motivating principles as somehow erroneous. Since we are treating the scholarly sources as "informants" out of the past, we should no more attempt to debate with them than we would consciously force a living informant to adopt a particular anthropological theory. Of course, there are factual errors aplenty in these sources, and one is sometimes tempted to mutter about poor standards or even fraud. But imputations of bad faith lead nowhere—especially when our

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[29]Cunnison, "Classification," 195.
[30]James, "The Funj," 129.
[31]Michael Herzfeld, *Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology and the Making of Modern Greece* (Austin, 1982), 4.

aim is to discover why our "informants" thought as they did rather than to assume the answer in advance.[32]

Failing to cope with MacMichael's parable metaphor, authoritative discourse has slipped into being a genealogical tradition in its own right. The conflicting origins suggested by scholars for the *Shāyqīyyah* of the *Ja'aliyyīn* group made Ibrahim say that their origin remains guesswork.[33] MacMichael, literally, "hazard(s) a theory" that they are partly descended from the Bosnian, Albanian and Turkish mercenaries, who had done garrison duty and formed settlements since the conquest of Sultan Selīm I in Nubia in 923 AH/1517 AC.[34] A Beja origin is suggested for them by Trimingham.[35] Their military ruling class, according to Haycock, is an Islamized Arabized 'Abābdah.[36] Adams, on the other hand, identifies the same class once as an Arab aristocracy ruling and amalgamating with their Nubian subjects[37] and again once as nearly pure Nubians, "despite their professional disdain for their Nubian subjects."[38] In view of their ethnic diversity, Ibrahim is inclined to see them as a "spectrum of many groups, some of them the ancient Egyptians, the ancient warriors of Napata and the Kings of Jebel Barkal and Meroe, and later on the Beja and the Arabs."[39] They are, in short, the conventional Arabized Nubians.[40] No wonder then, that the authoritative discourse sounds very much like genealogists at work down to the orthodoxy of the "Arabized Nubian." In dealing with the genealogical tradition, scholars have been very demanding with respect to rigor and factuality. It is amazing, though, how small an amount of domestic rigor and consistency they can live with.[41] Stripped of their Arab

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[32]Ibid., 10.

[33]Ibrahim, *The Shaiqiya*, 9.

[34]MacMichael, *History*, Vol. I, 215.

[35]Trimingham, *Islam*, 84.

[36]Haycock, "Medieval Nubia," 20. The 'Abābdah live in the eastern desert that extends between Egypt and the Sudan. They are considered Beja though they themselves claim to be the descendants of Kāhil, a descendant of al Zubayr ibn al 'Awwām, a companion and a cousin of the Prophet (ṢAAS). See Hasan, *The Arabs*, 140.

[37]Adams, *Nubia*, 563, 604.

[38]Ibid., 606.

[39]Ibrahim, *The Shāyqīyyah*, 10.

[40]Ibid., 15.

[41]Adams has perceptively pointed out the quaint and weak evidence some of these scholars produced to support their theories. MacMichael describes the typical *Shāyqī* as "sallow complexioned" and "often hard to distinguish from a Turk "muwallad" (i.e., born in the Sudan . . .)." Yet a century earlier the traveler Waddington had described the *Shāyqī* as "clear gloss, jet-black." See Adams, *Nubia*, 604-605. In addition, the war-like character of the *Shāyqīyyah*, which informed some guesses about their origin (for example, MacMichael, *History*, Vol. I, 214), is attributed, in Adams' words, to some exotic strain in their blood. See *Nubia*, 606.

identity, the *Shāyqīyyah* have a long wait ahead until the scholars' guesswork materializes into a substitute identity. However, no exercise in scientific rigor alone is capable of producing an adoptable ethnic identity. Ethnicity takes from all the facts available the ones that are relevant and usable.[42] It derives from a cultural interpretation of descent[43] and, hence, the cruciality of self-ascription to the rise of an identity.[44]

A literalization of a different order came from the paradigm that assumed a cultural continuity of Sudanese people and culture. Playing down the role of the Arab immigrants, Haycock stressed factors such as trade, war, religion, and Egypt influences contributing to cultural change in the Sudan. The basic population, according to this view, survived the process of Islamization and Arabization.[45] To Adams, who first introduced the continuity paradigm,[46] it was the true modern Nubians,[47] who specifically survived those two processes. He viewed the Christian and Islamic periods as a broadly defined "Medieval perspective" in Nubian history. In this context, he argues against the migration theory which attributed major cultural changes to the arrival of new people.[48]

The first challenge to MacMichael's widely accepted hybrid identity of

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[42]A number of Northern Sudanese "Arab" scholars have appropriated the thesis of the Arabized Nubians (Africans) to substantiate their argument for defining post-independence Sudan as an Afro-Arab state. See 'Abd al Rahīm, "Arabism," Abdul-Hai, *Conflict*. Teirab Ash-Shareef analyzes the poetics of this argument in Abdu-Hai's poetry. See "The Jungle and the Desert: The Search for Cultural Identity in Muhammad 'Abdu-Hai's *Al 'Awdah ilā Sinnār*," A paper presented to the First Conference of the Sudan Studies Association held at Baltimore, Maryland on March 26-27, 1982. The faculty and genuiness of the thesis aside, those scholars must have found it useful to argue with the nationalists of the Southern Sudan who have always described the Northerners as Arab invaders from Saudi Arabia. See Dunstan Wai, *The African-Arab Conflict in the Sudan* (New York, 1981), 181. The Afro-Arab concept in the Sudan raised a lively discussion during the joint annual meetings of the African Studies Association and the Middle East Studies Association held in New Orleans in Nov., 1985. A report n the discussion clearly indicates the different political, intellectual, academic and business interests at work in promoting the concept. See *The Chronical of Higher Education*, December 4, 1985.

[43]Charles F. Keys, "The Dialectics of Ethnic Change," in Charles Keys, ed., *Ethnic Change* (Seattle, 1982) 5.

[44]Anya Peterson Royce, *Ethnic Identity: Strategies of Diversity* (Bloomington, 1982), 29.

[45]Haycock, "Medieval Nubia," 18.

[46]James has pointed out some of the conceptual difficulties the paradigm can run into regarding the viability of the entities it selects to illustrate continuity. See James, *The Funj*, 106-107. Trigger, on the other hand, cautions that while scholars formerly overstressed discontinuities in Sudanese history, they may now tend to underestimate them. See Bruce Trigger, "Reisner to Adams: Paradigms of Nubian Cultural History," in J. M. Plumley, ed., *Nubian Studies* (Warminster (England), 1973), 225.

[47]They are the Nubian-speaking Muslim groups who occupy the stretch of land along the Nile between the Egyptian-Sudanese frontier and Dongola.

[48]Adams, *Nubia*, 591, 666.

the *Ja'aliyyīn* came from Spaulding, who was strongly influenced by the continuity paradigm. He openly rejected orthodox orientalists' analytical concepts, including "Islamization," "migration," "Arabization," "syncretism," "miscegenation" and "tribalism."[49] Instead, he offered the concept of continuity in Sudanese historical institutions because of their functional salience.[50] Spaulding suggested vaguely that the *'Ja'aliyyīn*, together with all the subjects of the Funj Kingdom (910-1237AH/1504 1821 AC)[51] can be viewed as Nubian Muslims.[52] Arab identity. was appropriated by the rising middle class. That identity "represented the whole complex of burgeois Islamic institutions and values developed in *Sinnar* (Sudan) during the Heroic age (1061-1164 AH/1650-1750 AC)."[53]

Spaulding's position apparently meets Cunnison's call for an ethnic classification based on cultural characteristics rather than on genealogies.[54] Spaulding argued his case admirably based on two points. First, he traced *Kora*, a communal feasting and a very inexpensive marriage form in present-day Sudan to the *Kora* (Eucharist) of the Christian Nubians.[55] Second, he sought to prove that the institutional system of the *Sinnār* Kingdom was an accumulated historical legacy rather than a wholesale importation from the Muslims or the Arabs.[56]

To view Sudanese culture in the light of continuity is laudable, particularly since the long-standing hybrid, syncretist, survivalist tradition has reached an intellectual impasse. This tradition suffers increasingly from the problem of attempting to allocate each cultural feature to a particular ethnic origin. Humodi, for example says that the sanctity of the saint's tomb could possibly have deep roots in both the indigenous beliefs and Christian saint-worship. Notwithstanding, he argues forcefully that ancient Arabian super natural beliefs have had influence on the present-day sanctity of the Muslim saints' tombs.[57] The survivalist tradition is clearly entering that stage where digging into either domain of the hybrid whole yields equally eligible proofs; a stage where arguments go in circles.

Cultural characteristics do not constitute an ethnic identity. As symbols,

[49]Spaulding, *The Heroic*, xv.
[50]Ibid., xvi.
[51]Ibid., 3.
[52]Ibid., xvi, 3.
[53]Ibid., 287.
[54]Cunnison, "Classification," 189, 195.
[55]Jay Spaulding, "Kora: A Theme in Nubian Cultural History," *Africa Today*, 280, (2nd quarter, 1982), 61-68.
[56]Spaulding, *The Heroic*, xvii.
[57]Salah El-Tigani Humodi, "Arab and Islamic Origins of the Tomb and Sacred Enclaves in the Sudan," *Sudan Notes and Records* 48 (1977), 112.

they point to a distinctive identity. Nonetheless, it is the boundary behavior which is basic to the definition of an ethnic group. Royce argues the significance of boundary behavior to a definition of ethnic identity in the following:

> No ethnic group can maintain a believable (viable) identity without signs, symbols, and underlying values that point to a distinctive identity. However, those signs and symbols are products of interaction with other groups, and part of the viability of the identity depends on the comprehensibility of the ethnic content and its manipulation so as to present a positive image across boundaries.[58]

Spaulding elegantly analyzed the historical setting in which the "sons of the Arabs" identity was adopted by a rising middle class in (the eleventh century AH/sixteenth century AC) Sudan to present its "positive image across boundaries." But in suggesting that the *Jaʻaliyyīn* are Nubians through and through, he regrettably dismissed their ideology about their origin as a falsification of the record, which he intends to set straight. At this point he parts ways with the parable metaphor.

Spaulding's thesis ran into two technical problems. First, it contradicted Hasan's well argued point that the Arabs not only arrived at the *Jaʻaliyyīn* land in large numbers from the third to tenth century AH/the ninth to the sixteenth century AC, but also that they caused a considerable drain on the human resource of the Nubians by slavery.[59] Adams agreed with Hasan's assessment of the demographic situation of the *Jaʻaliyyīn* region at that point of time. He described the Arabs as coming to that region in wave after wave absorbing most of the scattered inhabitants.[60] Second, Spaulding had to account for omitting the Arabs. When asked about the Nubians, the genealogical tradition said that they disappeared from the face of the *Jaʻaliyyīn* earth. One account related that God sent snakes which attacked them and caused them to desert their homes and emigrate to far-away places. Another account related that an Arab chief wanted to evict them. Whereupon they threw themselves

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[58]Royce, *Ethnic Identity,* 7.

[59]Hasan, *The Arabs,* 175, 49, 111, 131. Hasan, however, seems to have changed his mind on how slavery drained the human resources of the Nubians. He argues in a recent article that only a limited number of slaves were probably imported by the Arabs from Nubia itself. The bulk of the slaves, he continues to say, were procured from regions further to the South of Nubia in sub-Saharan Africa. See Yu-suf Fadl Hasan, "Some Aspects of the Arab Slave Trade from the Sudan. 7th-19th Century," *Sudan Notes and Records,* 53 (1392 AH/1972 AC), 3.

[60]Adams, *Nubia,* 550-556, 584. Adams has had his second thoughts though. He states that when historical annals speak of the movements and conquest of Arab "tribes," we can never be sure whether mass migrations or only small redistributions of populations are involved. See *Nubia,* 568.

suicidally into the Nile and vanished.[61] Spaulding's argument will be hard put to compete with such a "mythopoeic" turn of argument. A mythopoeic mind is just one edge among many the genealogical tradition has over authoritative discourse. The "falsifications" in the tradition pointed out by academic discourse are not ordinary lies. They are a cultural interpretation of descent in which a historical memory, a mythopoeic imagination, and a pride in boundary meshed and evolved into the Arab 'Abbasī descent of the *Ja'aliyyīn*.

MacMichael's parable metaphor remains the best way to go about understanding the ethnic identity of the *Ja'aliyyīn*. Cunnison has rightly pointed out that except for the metaphor, MacMichael has provided next to nothing by way of indicating how to handle it.[62] Knowledge, however, is not a way paved with certitude. So long as we avoid misusing or abusing it we should not be concerned that we are not as yet clear as to how to use the metaphor. Literalization, as I have tried to show, is the surest way to abuse MacMichael's parable metaphor. Thanks to the literally-oriented authoritative discourse, instead of one troublesome genealogical tradition, we now have three. Furthermore, the insights which were supposed to better our understanding of the genealogical tradition[63] have been wasted in the construction of other 'genealogical traditions'. Like the indigenous genealogical tradition, they were constructed on a number of presuppositions about what is relevant.[64] James' argument that the genealogical tradition is a local framework of historical interpretation[65] opens a myriad of metaphorical ways of probing the criteria of relevance of the genealogical tradition without necessarily relegating it to raw data for insatiable scholarly investigations. These are only few options to hanging on to the vicissitude and tensions of the parable metaphor.

The genealogical tradition has also been disapprovingly described as standardizing the inter-relationship among the *Ja'aliyyīn* to link them to al 'Abbs.[66] Standardization, let it be remembered, is in the nature of genealogies. To a *Ja'alī*, his genealogy defines an outer enclosure of his identify where Arabism and Islam intermesh. Adams has perceptively pointed out the dialectics of this intermeshing when he compares a West African Muslim

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[61]Ahmad A. Nasr, *Tārīkh al 'Abdallāb min Khilāl Riwāyatihim al Samā'iyyah* (Khartoum, 1389 AH/1969 AC), 110.

[62]Cunnison, "Classification," 188.

[63]Adams, for example, has aptly introduced the principle of segmentation to understand the genealogical tradition as the "system of non-government" among the Arabs. See *Nubia*, 564. Such insightful notions are invariably inundated by the "genealogical" concerns of their authors.

[64]Herzfeld, *Ours Once More*, xl.

[65]James, "The Funj Mystique," 129.

[66]Hasan, *The Arabs*, 152.

and a Sudanese Muslim. The former, he says, claims to be an Arab, *pro form* because he is a Muslim. The latter, he continues, claims to be a Muslim because he is an Arab and Islam is his tribal religion.[67] Spaulding, as we have mentioned earlier, reverses the dialectics and views the Arab identity of the *Ja'aliyyīn* as a derivative of their Muslim identity.

To a *Ja'alī*, let it be remembered, the genealogical tradition does not constitute the one and only boundary option before him. I observed among the *Rubatāb* that the exhibition of a written genealogy which goes back to forebears who are irrelevant to the lineage context of the village is viewed with uneasiness if not with outright suspicion. At the village level, the *Ja'aliyyīn* differentiate between "Arabs", denoting nomads *per se* and including even the non-Arabic speaking Beja,[68] and "*Nās al Balad*" (village people). The *Nās al Balad* own the land whereas the "Arabs" work on a seasonal basis and provide other services to its owners.

The *Nās al-Balad,* however, claim in the same breath to be "son of the Arabs" in relation to their ex-slaves and other" Sudanese" (indigenous African communities). The late al Majdhūb, a poet of great renown, related the one about his relative who was astounded to discover that the poet, who belonged to the prestigious *Majādhīb* of the *Ja'aliyyīn*, had been running into all sorts of problems to obtain his "Sudanese" nationality certificate just after the independence of the Sudan. The stupefied relative could not believe that a "Sudanese" certificate is a matter of issuance in the first place let alone that a "son of the Arabs" need to suffer before getting it. The *Nās al-Balad* are segmented further into *Ja'alī* lineages, non-*Ja'alī* lineages, and Nubian lineages as we shall indicate later.

Unaware of this segmentation, Werne (1852) contrasts his *hāyqī* informants to their "priests" *Faqīs*. The *Shāyqī* informants told Werne, "with something like scorn," that they were not Arabs, and had no descent from any such race, while the "priests" assert the contrary. MacMichael, incidentally, updates Werne and maintains that the *Shāyqī* of his day do not disclaim an Arab identity.

In the light shed by the contextualization of the term "Arabs", Werne's contrast is not as real as he wanted us to believe or as MacMichael has actually been led to believe. The *Shāyqī* will still not call himself an "Arab" if so requires the context. Al Shahī states: "In one context to claim descent from an '*Arab*' tribe is a matter of pride; in another context, to be an '*Arab*' (his italics) indicates a nomadic way of life and an associated inferior social status."

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[67]Adams, *Nubia*, 550.

[68]Occasionally this pushes language to the limit of absurdity. An informant from the *Rubatāb* tribe began a humorous story with these words "There lived with us once an Arab who does not know Arabic." He made up for that by saying, "That is to say he is a *rattānī* (speaks a gibberish) of the *Beja* tribe."

Hence, the contradiction between the claims of the *Shāyqī* and their priests can be resolved. When they talked to Werne, each group was apparently focusing on a selected image from the multiple identity of the *Shāyqī*.

It is now becoming clear to field workers that the *Ja'aliyyīn* live and interact according to a locally based, oral genealogy along with the written standardized one in defining and coping with their multiple identities. James' call for the contextualization of ethnic terms is well taken without necessarily entailing the preference she has for the "view from the field" over the written genealogical tradition. The two traditions are not mutually exclusive. The dearth of written genealogies in Kordofan had caused MacMichael, for example, to be attentive to the locally-based disjuncted genealogies. Incidentally, the body of tradition he collected is not silent on the indigenous origin of a number of tribal lineages that claim an Arab descent. Similarly, the field reports on the existence of distinct Nubian communities among the *Ja'aliyy⁻ in*, who claim the broader Arab identity, indicates the intricate segmented mosaic of the identity of a Sudanese Arab. This does not, however, imply that the locally-based genealogies are more credible than the written ones. Both traditions are invoked by the *Ja'aliyyīn* in the appropriate situation to get their "positive image" across to other groups. Contemporary research on the *Ja'aliyyīn* identity has to emulate the *Ja'alī* himself in metaphorizing the parable. In performing identity on multiple levels, the *Ja'alī* is immune from literalization.

It will not be out of place to relate here an anecdote about MacMichael's genealogy as constructed by Sudanese, who probably knew nothing about MacMichael's seminal research on Sudanese genealogies. I understand the anecdote here in its original sense as not published. To my mind, it is not a merely passing piece of humor but a statement entitled to the same status scholars ascribe to their own words. I relate it only to indicate roughly how to emulate a Sudanese Arab when he argues with a genealogy.

Toward the end of the first decade of this century a fight broke out between the *Kabābīsh* and the *Kawāḥlah* tribes of Northern Kordofan over the ownership of Kajmar watering-point. The matter was put before MacMichael, the then District Commissioner of Northern Kordofan. He ruled in favor of the *Kabābīsh*. 'Abd Allah *wad* (son of) Jād Allah, the *Kawāḥlah* chief and a devout *Mahdist* follower, was extremely indignant. When MacMichael took his pen to sign his verdict, Jād Allah snatched the pen and broke it. 'Abd Allah wad Jād Allah was eventually removed from the *Kawāḥlah* chieftainship. His praise-singer recorded his feat for posterity. A line of his song refers to MacMichael as the son of Hicks. Hicks, it may be remembered, was the British general sent at the head of a huge army by the "Egyptian Government" in consultation with Britain in 1301 AH/1883 AC to put an end to the successful *Mahdist* revolution. Hicks' army was eventually routed, to a man, by the

Mahdist forces. Whether or not the singer knew MacMichael's genealogy, is inconsequential here. Prompted by an irresistible association of images, the singer meshed together Jād Allah's defiance of MacMichael, which resulted in a crushed pen, and the *Mahdist* crushing victory over Hicks. In grafting the present onto the past, or vice versa, the singer came up with a biological interpretation of culture. A genealogy for MacMichael was constructed in the process, but that was incidental. Neither the singer nor his audience were particularly interested in the accuracy of the genealogy. To them, it was more important that it served as a metaphor for defiance.

Summary and Conclusions

The article critically examines the contemporary discourse on the ethnic identity of the greater *Ja'aliyyīn* of the Sudan. In its scholarly disbelief in their Arab identity established by the indigenous genealogical tradition, the discourse concluded that they are Arabized Nubians or outright Nubians. Using the concept of ethnicity as an interpretation of descent and essentially self ascribed, and the general theory of metaphor, the article argues that the discourse has been grossly literal and unimaginative. No wonder that it slipped into being a genealogical tradition in its own right due to its positivistic claim that an "objective" identity can be deduced from historical evidence by logical process.

An attempt is made in the article to breathe life into MacMichael's concept of genealogy as a parable. Cunnison, as we have seen earlier, dismissed it as too ambiguous to be of any use to the scholar. The article, however, argues that the ambiguity of the concept is just right to accommodate James' call for the contextualization of ethnic terms; "the view from below," in her own words, for the context of these terms.

The written traditional genealogy defines for a *Ja'alī* his outer enclosure where Arabism and Islam intermesh. Nonetheless, the exhibition of this genealogy in local contexts is viewed with uneasiness if not with outright suspicion. At the village level, on the other hand, the *Ja'alī* differentiates between "Arabs" denoting nomads per se, including even the non-Arabic speaking Beja, and the *Ja'aliyyīn* who own the land and hire the landless "Arabs". A *Ja'alī*, however, claims to be a "son of the Arabs" in relation to his ex-slaves and other indigenous African communities. The article draws attention to the *Ja'alī's* way of contextualizing his identity as he moves between his relevant identity boundaries.