

## A Jewish Scholar in a Muslim Community: The Sudan's Life and Writings of Sigmar Hillelson (1911-1933)

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### Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to highlight the contribution made by S. Hillelson, a German of Jewish origin who studied at Oxford and became a British subject in 1908. He joined the Sudan Civil Service (SCS) from 1911 to 1933, serving in the Education Department, the Intelligence Department and the Civil Secretary's Office. It was suggested that the (SCS) famously known as the Sudan Political Service (SPS) was second only to the acclaimed Indian Civil Service (ICS) during the British Colonial time. The Service has been almost a closed British club with a noticeable chauvinism and Prejudice against non British Subjects. The paper gives a brief history of Jewish presence in the Sudan and the origin of the (SPS) as a background to the study. The Paper attempts to examine this thesis, looking into his relationship with British, non British and Sudanese colleagues and students. The paper also attempts to look into his life in the Sudan and after he left the country. A survey of his writings about Sudan is given. Based on the investigation made, the paper found no evidence to suggest that he was treated differently by his British colleagues on the basis of his race or religion.*

**Key words:** Sudan colonial administration, Sudan literature, S. Hillelson, Jewish community in Sudan.

### 1. Introduction

The presence of Jews in ancient Sudan is not well covered in the historical records available, however, the fact that Jews were at Elephantine on the border between Nubia and Egypt, (Omer n.d. A), Abyssinia and Yemen may possibly suggest that there must have been some Jewish infiltration into the Sudan at sometime in their history.

Based on an article published in Sudan Notes and Records (Hillelson1933), the authors of the Historical Dictionary of the Sudan claimed that the earliest known Jewish traveler to the Sudan since the advent of Islam was David Reubini (1490 -1540) who wrote his account of his trip from the Red Sea to Sinnar. (Lobban Jr 2002:142)

During the Turco- Egyptian period in the Sudan (1820-1885) many Ottoman Empire Jew subjects came to Sudan for trading purposes and did their business in major trading centers such as *Suakin, Shendi, Sinnar and Al Obeyed*, while others took administrative positions with the government of the day, Prominent among them was the acclaimed Amin Paha, the Governor of *Equatoria* (1878-1889) (Lobban Jr 2002)

Under the *Mahdist* state (1885- 1898) "non -Muslim communities that settled in Sudan since the *Turkkiya* which included Copts, Syrian Christians, Armenians, and Jews, were forced to convert to the Islam". Prominent of these converts were some leading families in *Omdurman* such as the Ashkenazi family of Mendel (Arabized as *Mandeel*) and Moshe Ben Zion (Arabized as *Musa Basiyoni*)" (Omer, n.d. B)

Following the fall of the *Mahdist* state and the re- occupation of the Sudan by the Anglo- Egyptian forces, it was found that only eight Jewish families survived . Seven of these were Sephardic from Iraqi and Egyptian origin and one single Ashkenazi family of Mendel . (Omer n.d B) (Malka 1997), (Abugarja 2004)

Most Jews, both Ashkenazi and Sephardic settled well in the colonial Sudan and found success in commerce, banking, manufacturing, education, law, medicine and in government positions. (Malka 1997). Anti-Semitism was relatively rare – the community never faced danger during World War II.

However, Sudanese independence in 1956 and the new republic's focus on pan-Arab movement and the growing sentiments towards Israel have created an inhospitable environment, and a mass exodus started after the Six Day war in June 1967. Sudanese Jews immigrated to Europe, USA and Israel while a handful number of them remained in the Sudan to the present day. (Lobban Jr 2002:143) The Jewish synagogue in Khartoum (built 1926) was sold and turned into a Bank in murky and shadowy circumstances in early 1990s.

The most authoritative history of the Jews in the Anglo- Egyptian Sudan remains the 1997 Ele Malka's book titled: *Jacob's children in the land of the Mahdi* (Malka 1997) The author was born and raised in the Sudan in 1910; his father was the Sudan chief rabbi from 1906 to 1949. Malka chronicles the Sephardic Jewish community's history from its beginning in 1885 (when there were only eight families) to the late 1960s, when the Jews left the Sudan for more hospitable countries.

A more elaborated work is the 2004 Abu Garja's book titled: *The Jews in Sudan: Readings on the book of Eli Solomon Malka "Jacob's Children in the Land of the Mahdi"* (Arabic text) (Abu Garja 2004) Abu Garja's book, although in most parts is a mere translation of Malka's book, nevertheless it attempts to identify the remnants of the Jewish families and individuals who remained in the Sudan at least until 1989. (Abu Garja 2004)

This paper is not about the history of Jews in the Sudan. It is about a Jewish individual who played an important role in shaping Sudanese culture and education during the condominium. The paper attempts to profile the life and writings of Sigmar Hillelson, a British Subject of German origin who served in the Sudan as an educator and administrative officer. He was described as an Arabist, linguist, lecturer, tutor, intelligence officer, administrator, broadcaster and writer.

S. Hillelson was a member of the Sudan Civil Service (1911-1933) A review of the Sudan political Service (SPS) -as it became known- the mainly British Christians public school and Oxbridge men will be given as a back ground to the working environment in which this Jewish, non British man found himself in. We will briefly describe the Gordon Memorial College (GMC) in which he served from 1911 to 1926 and discuss his relationship with British, non British and Sudanese colleagues and students. The paper will attempt to look into his life in the Sudan and after he left the country. An attempt will also be made to look into his writings about the Sudan. Finally a bibliography of his writings will be provided.

## 2. Sources

For Hillielson's professional career in the Sudan, the National Record Office (NRO) in Khartoum hosts most of the documents related to the Condominium, including Education Department files, Intelligence files and Civil Secretary's Office files. However being away from this source and in the absence of an on line catalogue of the holdings, the present author is unable to access the records available there. There is however some published sources that shed some light on the official side of the officers. At least there are three sources:

- *The official record of lists of the Sudan Political Service* (Sudan Political Service 1930)
- The up dated edition known as the *Blue Book* which listed staff of the service to 1952.
- The Sudan Archives Durham (SAD) maintains an *official list of Government officials from 1914 to.1952.*

Literature on the human side of the British officials in the Sudan include the memoirs and reminiscences written by many ex officers in the Service, including some of whom Hillelson Shared positions being colleagues at (GMC), the Intelligence Department and the Civil Secretary's Office are consulted . See for example (Attiyah1946) and (Davies 1956). Of more secondary literature on this see for example (Beshir, M. O 1969.) (Deng F, and Daly, M 1989) and (Sharkey 2003) For his life and work after he left the Sudan a look into the BBC archives especially the Near eastern Department is made. For his writings and the bibliography, a number of Library Open Access Catalogues (OPAC) are consulted and in particular the catalogues of the *University of Khartoum, Durham University, London University and the Library of Congress.* The Index to *Sudan Notes and Records (SNR)* (El--Nasri 1980) is also consulted.

### 3. Sudan Political Service

The (SPS) is distinct from Sudan Civil Service (SCS), whereas the first is limited to administration; the later relates to professional or technical services e.g. the respective agricultural, education, forestry, legal, police and public works departmental staff (Kirk-Greene 1989: 10).

This is evident from the (SPS) booklet published in 1930 as it listed only the Political service personnel (Sudan Government 1930). The service was officially known as (SCS). However, for no known reason some time after 1914 the term Sudan Political Service Started to be used. K.D. D Henderson a member of (SPS) suggested that it was probably a mistranslation of the Arabic word *Siyasi* which means both political and administrative (Henderson 1989: 19) Sometime after 1922 it was often referred to as the Sudan administrative service (SAS) to distinguish its members from the departmental civil service. (Daly, 1986:84). Several attempts were made to “profile the (SPS) Or to study the “sociology of imperialism” as put by Kirk- Greene (Kirk –Greene 1982) .See for example (Collins, R 1972), (Mangan 1982), (Collins, R and Deng F. 1984) and (Deng, F and Daly, M (1989),

It was generally concluded that, almost all the personnel of the (SPS) were product of the British public school system, Oxbridge graduates, with recorded athletic achievements in addition to some other traits such as “, stamina, resourcefulness, confidence, team spirit and loyalty....” (Daly 1986:85) The church is always strong in [colonial] Sudan (Kirk-Greene 1990:21). It was noted that “a staggering one third of all men who joined were the sons of clergy men” (Kwarteng, K 2011) It was also suggested that “The serious dedicated and near evangelistic atmosphere of the (SPS) was so often noticed by visitors to the Sudan”. (Kirk- Greene 1982:25)

People with foreign accents were firmly refused employment. Wingate rejected one candidate because “there was something Levantine about him .... [And] as you know that fact alone makes him undesirable” (Kwarteng, K 2011: 238) Up to 1939, 315 men joined the service of whom 224 attended what has been called “Early leading schools”, that is the most famous and well established English public schools (Daly 1986: 85) Famous among these schools were Eton, Rugby, Winchester and Marlborough (Sudan Government 1930) Throughout the whole period of the service’s existence “not a single student was recruited from the English provincial universities or university colleges.” There was an obvious bias towards Oxbridge” (Daly 1986:85)

The (SPS) was almost a closed club for British subjects. “When in 1906 an applicant for government employment, who had been born and raised in Brussels, listed his native language as French, Wingate commented “that any parental or political connection with Belgium would not be desirable for a Sudan Official” (Daly 1986:87) However; this was not strictly followed in the Civil Service. S. Hillelson a Jew of German origin was appointed in the Department of Education (1911) and John Maverogradato of Greek parentage was appointed at a later period in the legal Department and as a lecturer at Gordon Memorial College and continues in the service after independence as Legal Counsel, Ministry of Justice 1958-1961. There were also few Austalians, NEWZEALANDERS AND South Africans at a later stages of the service.

Prejudice against non British official was noted as early as 1900 as in the case of E.E Bernard, a Maltese Catholic who was appointed during that year as Financial Secretary. His difficult relationship with “Wingate and many other officials [and] the criticism worded in personal terms he received such as exacting and miserly, a Levantine, the Maltese cross are partly attributed to that fact. (Daly 1984: 45) He was described as “an outsider in the small world of Anglo Egyptian officialdom” (Daly 1986:57) Even Slatin Pasha a close friend of Wingate was not immune from this kind of chauvinism being an Austrian of Jewish ancestry.

### 4. Sigmar Hillelson Biography

There is very little information about his personal life in his papers presented to (SAD) after his death by Mrs. I. Hillelson in 1961. In fact it says nothing about his upbringing, and pre university education. A draft catalogue of the papers gives a brief description as follows:

“ Collected poems and sayings of Shaykh Farah Tuktük; notes and scripts relating to broadcasts made by the Arabic service of the B.B.C.; 61 photographs, mainly Rejaf Conference, 1928 and Mongala” (Sudan archives Durham n.d)

There are two lines about his career path in the Sudan between 1911-1933: Department of Education (1911-1925) Civil Secretary Office (1926-1933) (Sudan archives Durham n.d) The Sudan Government (staff) lists tell us that he was transferred to the Intelligence Department (1926- 1929) where he served as Assistant Director of Intelligence under R. Davies following the dismissal of C.A.Willis as Intelligence chief after the 1924 nationalist movement. It was unusual to see such academically- oriented man to be appointed to such job of an intelligence officer, a position that:

“...severely practical and political one involving delicate contact with all sorts of people [religious notables, tribal leaders and urban intelligentsia or *Effendia*] and demanding tact suppleness and all round capacity for accommodation and compromise” (Attiyah1946:156)

It is possible that the appointment was made mainly on the merit of his Arabic skills (both oral and written) in order to explain to the public the government policy and to monitor and curb the rising tide of dissent which started to appear in the local press following the 1924 White Flag nationalist movement.

Hillelson was finally transferred to the Civil Secretary's Office as Assistant Civil Secretary (1929-1933) serving under Harold McMichael who was described as a remarkable but wasn't exactly a lovable man. (Henderson 1987:19) He was second only to Angus Gillan who was to become a Civil Secretary in 1935 after the departure of McMichael.

He retired from the service on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 1933. (Sudan Government 1933) It is of interest to note that his name never appeared as a member of the (SPS) in the 1930 List nor the so called blue book, an updated edition reprinted in 1956 being a summary record of nearly 400 officers who served in the (SPS) between (1899-1952), despite the fact that he occupied such prominent political positions in the Intelligence Department and the Native Administration.

His birth date, family background and education appeared in *The Balliol College Register 1832-1914*) According to this source he was born in Berlin on August. 12, 1883, the fifth of Fehx Hillelson. He was educated at Gymnasium zum Grauen Kloster, Berlin; Balliol 1904-8 (C.B., A.D.L.); WiUiams Ex.; 2nd CI Mods. 1906; 2nd Lit. Hum. 1908 Arnold Soc. Studied Oriental languages at University Coll., London; Ouseley Sch. in Persian1909, ditto Arabic, 1910, London University (Balliol College University of Oxford n.d). He was a founding Editorial member of the *Sudan Notes and Records* (1918) and his name was in the editorial committee until 1938, five years after he left the Sudan. In recognition of his valuable service in the field of Education the king of Egypt “... gives and grants [him] the royal license and authority to bear the insignia of the fourth class of the order of the Nile....” (The London Daily gazette 1925)

After the end of his career in the Sudan, he served for some time in the Foreign Office, and became a member of the staff of the *BBC*. In 1937 he emerged as the Director of the *BBC's Near Eastern Broadcasting service* during the Second World War (1940-1945.) Being a fluent Arabic speaker and with a good experience with the Arabs, the foreign Office was very interested to engage him in the broadcasting service mainly to monitor the Bari broadcast. The *BBC* eventually took him over when it began to transmit its own Arabic program (Briggs 1995:373) The Arabic Service of the *BBC* has been used extensively and successfully to win the hearts and minds of the Muslim and Arabs and as a counter propaganda to Berlin Arabic Radio and its mouthpiece, the Iraqi Younes Bahri who gained a lot of sympathy in the Arab world to the German cause by his inflammatory broadcasting against the allies.

His appointment did not go without controversy .In June 1942 Captain Alan Graham an MP for Wirral (1935-1945) asked Mr Brendan Bracken MP, the then Minister of Information whether, in view of the need to prevent further exacerbation of anti-Semitic feelings among the Arabs and in view of the complaints already received from Moslems both in the Near East and in this country, he will reconsider the advisability of the retention as the official in charge of the Near East Department of the British Broadcasting Corporation of Mr. Hillelson, a Jew of German origin? (The Hansard 1942)

The Minister refused the suggestion and in his reply he explained that:

“Mr. Hillelson was born in Germany.... [And] became a British subject in 1908. He was a distinguished member of the Sudan Civil Service from 1911 to 1933. [And that] high tributes have been paid to his work in Sudan by a succession of Governors General, and, indeed, by all who worked with him.... I cannot believe that the House will accept for one moment my hon. and gallant Friend's suggestion that a man who has been a faithful public servant for 31 years should be removed from his appointment on the ground that he is a Jew of German origin.” (The Hansard 1942)

Captain Alan Graham retreated from the suggestion saying that he was misunderstood by the Minister and that he mistaken the purpose of his Question and objection. He said that he has no objection in the slightest to the character or attainments of the distinguished public servant.

The period from 1945 until his death in 1960 was rather obscure, though his name surfaced from time to time as member of the *Royal Asiatic Society* and a frequent reviewer of books in its journal. (See bibliography) Sigmar Hillelson died in 1960.

There is no evidence to suggest that his British Colleagues at (GMC), the Intelligence Department or the Civil Secretary Office were treating him differently on the basis of his origin or religion as was done in the case of E.E Bernard, a Maltese Catholic or Slatin the Austrian. In fact one of his superior at the Intelligence Department refers to him as a friend (Davies 1957:185) Evan Pritchard, the acclaimed anthropologist and professor stayed with him in Khartoum before travelling to Rajaf language conference in 1928. He even acknowledged the hospitality given to him by Hillelson and his wife. (Evan-Pritchard 1940) Being a founding editorial member of the (*SNR*), Hillelson probably persuaded Evan-Pritchard to publish a number of articles in the journal.( for Evan- Pritchard contribution to SNR see (El-Nasri, Abdel Rahman (1980)

There is no evidence also that he was treated differently by his fellow British tutors at the (GMC) This was in contrast to the treatment received by another non British outsider but an Anglophile , Oxford educated Christian “teacher” at the College. The account given by Edward Attiya, a Levantine in his memoirs tells us about the aloofness of the British tutors and about the fence which divide them from non British colleagues at the college. He gave many stories on how he was excluded from official and social association with his British colleagues at the college and in formal gathering (Attiya 1946:137)

It seems that he maintained cordial relationship with a number of Sudanese colleagues and students at the college as well as friendships with some prominent Sudanese notables. For example he acknowledged the help he received in writing his book *Sudan Arabic Texts* from many native and former pupils at the (GMC), Sheikhs Babikir Badri and Abdulla Omer al- Bana, Abd-al- Rahman Eff. Ali Taha and Sheikh Eff. Mustafa and Sheikh Ahmed Osman AL- Qadi of the *Hadarat al-Sudan* (Hillelson 1935: v) Hillelson wrote a forward to *Alarabia fi Al-Sudan* a book by one of his Sudanese colleagues at the college and in fact it was him who recommended it to the Department of Education for publication. The author was full of praise to him for:

“...his generous soul that loves knowledge and its fascination with research.... [And] that he feels a sense of gratitude that he could not express in words” (Al-Dareer, Abdalla 1922:194)

It was his friendship with Sheikh Babikir Badri, the Girls Education pioneer in the Sudan that probably influenced his writings and understanding of the Sudanese culture and ways of life. In his acclaimed memoir, Sheikh Babiker mentioned in several pages his frequent visits to Hillelson to teach [His Excellency] Arabic and explain the Sudanese colloquial (Badri 1959 :250) Hillelson also asked and encouraged Badri to write *Kitab Al-Mutalla'a Al-Wattanyia-* an easy reading textbook for primary schools.

Sheikh Babikir Badri had also helped him to understand some peculiar customs and tradition in the Sudan regarding women treatment and probably he saved him from blushes and embarrassment. He relates that when Hillelson Published an Arabic poem in *Hadart Al-Sudan* in 1930 as a farewell to Mr. Udal, the Director of Education on his retirement, there was a mention of the ladies of Rufa'a (*Banat Rufa'a*) that they will be sad and miserable on Udal departure.

The people of Rufa'a were very upset thinking that there must have been something fishy between Udall and the ladies, so they decided to travel to Khartoum to confront him and write a formal complaint to the Governor-General to clear the honor of their ladies. Babikir Badri himself, being a rational man was also upset and although he said he trusts Hillelson and was sure of his integrity and innocence, nevertheless went to see him and explained to him what it meant for ordinary people to speak publicly about their ladies (Badri1959 :30)

The "affair" ended happily. Hillelson apologized to Sheikh Babikr and to the people of Rufa'a regretting the misunderstanding.

### 5. Writings

Hillelson wrote 5 books and more than 20 articles and reviews related to the Sudan (see bibliography) His interest in the Sudanese studies has two purposes:

- An academic interest, being a linguist and Arabist. In this regard his contribution though not really follows strict academic standards, but remain valuable and probably the only source of information about some aspects of Sudan folklore and history.
- As an official of Sudan Government with working knowledge and acquaintance of the native language, writing is part of his job to help British officials in provinces and at the central government in Khartoum to communicate with natives.

Hillelson used a multiple and varied sources in his writings both written and oral. He listed his written sources for the "*Sudan Arabic texts with translation and glossary*" and other published articles related to the history of Sudan. He has also mentioned a network of informants and story tellers both at (GMC) and elsewhere for writing the articles on riddles, proverbs, nursery rhythms, anecdotes and the daily life of the Sudanese. He translated and published in 1923, some extracts of the early Sudanese biographical Dictionary the *Tabaqat Wad Dayf Alla* (see Bibliography)

In general, his writings can be classified in the following categories:

- Ethnology and Folklores, including proverbs, riddles, folktales, nursery rhythm, anecdotes and tribal customs and traditions
- Language
- Anthropology
- Poetry
- History
- Biographies

### 6. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to highlight the contribution made by one of the earliest scholars to study some aspects of Sudan's culture and tradition. It is undoubtedly valuable scholarly achievement in a virgin area of study during the condominium. The publishing was greatly helped by the fact that he was a tutor in the only post secondary school in the country at that time and probably his work in the intelligence Department helped him collect information from the intelligence reports emanating from provinces and unavailable otherwise. The outstanding Sudan Notes and Reports founded in 1918 on the initiative of H.A. McMichael and in which Hillelson was a founding editorial member( 1918- 1938) has also a contributing factor in his writings as most of his writing appeared in that journal.

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