A Journey to Inner Africa
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We set forth on the 13th (25th) of March. The black army marched in regularity, guns at the ready, drums rolling; the Governor-General accompanied us awhile, until finally he bid me farewell, entrusting me to the detachment, and the detachment to me, whereupon he took his leave of us. A command was given to stand at ease; the ranks began to waver and make noise.

The detachment appeared picturesque and motley. Sheikh Arbab rode in front of it, wrapped in his white ferdeh, his coal-black feet visible underneath and his face, blacker than the feet, above. He had been the husband of the famous Nasra, who played an important part in the Sennaar state while it existed. Arbab had played the roles of her husband and one of her ministers, and he still retained a certain influence on the people, now as a subject of Mohammed Ali and in consequence of a special influence that Nasra had on the original conquerors of Sennaar, Ismail Pasha and the Defierdar. Sheikh Arbab rode in front as the principal, official guide, surrounded by several sheikhs and meleks of nearby mountains. Behind him rode some hundred men of the regular

1 A region in Ethiopia known for its gold deposits.
2 Nasra bit Adlan (1810–53), a member of the Fung ruling dynasty.
and national cavalry. The latter were black, the former white; the latter
naked to their waists, the former wearing a variegated collection of
dress. There were Albanians, Bosnians, Circassians, Epireans, Turks,
and Montenegrins, all in their national costume, sometimes comple-
mented by stray garments that happened to be to the owners’ liking.
That was the regular cavalry! In their wake walked rows of camels, don-
keys, and mules, carrying either burden or riders; they were followed by
the infantry, some thousand negroes of various tribes and mountains,
amongst whom officers and two battalion commanders stood out for
the whiteness of their skin. The soldiers were in rags, that was true,
but their guns and ammunition were in good order; and as we shall
see, these soldiers are no laughing matter, strange though a black army
might seem marching in the manner of Europeans.

The march proceeded at a slashing pace, weaving through thickets
of trees, now going down, now climbing mountains, now disappearing
in hollows created by mountain streams. After an hour’s journey, we
proceeded to circumvent the Khassan mountains, covered with numer-
ous tukkels, the mountains being very thickly peopled. Despite being
under the protection of the government and very close to the prin-
cipal encampment, some of the inhabitants watched the detachment
approach with wild eyes, from afar, whilst others fled their dwellings
altogether. The soldiers wanted very much to look inside the tukkels, to
see whether there was anything left behind, a child or something else,
anything that could be stolen and later sold, but a single word sufficed
to stop them from any attempts at plunder.

Nature presented all the luxury of a mountainous country; yet these
were neither Swiss mountains, reaching far into the clouds, nor those of
Albania or Montenegro, craggy, naked, terrible, and impregnable—no,
you were akin to the Southern Urals, or to the mountains of Ser-
bia, with their splendid valleys (plateaux): picturesque and beautiful
mountains! . . . The forest was not much changed; the baobab appeared
again, and Samadera stood there in all its magnificence, its great fruit,
reminiscent of giant pumpkins, swinging on long, thin stems.

The detachment marched without a halt for six or seven hours, and
for all that, whenever a wild chamois appeared before them, several
soldiers and Arabs would give chase, the Arab’s spear reaching it more readily than the soldier’s bullet. Those chamois and antelopes often amused us when, frightened by the crowd of people and deafened by the noise and the report of the gun, they almost invariably threw themselves under the soldiers’ feet: poor creatures, did they really hope for mercy!? . . .

In the Ramleh stream, we found, to our surprise, an ample flow of water on the surface, while better rivers—proper, respectable rivers such as the Toumat—go under the sand owing to the heat, and it is only during the rains that they emerge into the world in all their abundance of waters, with all their crushing force of fast-flowing waves. Having quenched our thirst, we proceeded further and an hour later halted at the Disah. There was no water, but the soldiers knew where to find it; in a quarter of an hour, the entire dry bed of the Disah was peppered with small holes filled with water, dug with no other tools than the hands and finger-nails of our negroes.

On the morrow, ascending ever higher and eventually attaining 3,000 feet, we reached Benishangul.

Benishangul is a range or, it would be fairer to say, a cluster of mountains crowned with villages. The population of the entire area amounts to 10,000 and consists of the negroes of the Berta tribe and the Arabs of the Jaali and Khomed tribes.

The negroes are either slaves or soldiers of sorts, conscripted in case of war; the Arabs are rulers; seeing that the former far outnumber the latter, it often happens that they kill their ruler and appoint another instead; it is always an Arab, however, one of the red ones, for the negroes respect their skin-color. There is constant turmoil and anxiety here, as in any military republic. The word republic was not unintentional. Benishangul, as well as all the mountains situated beyond it, are separate republics which live independently, almost deprived of any communication with the rest, and thus are easily destroyed by the raids of any enemy that is stronger or bolder than each of them taken

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3 An ethnic group living along the border of contemporary Sudan and Ethiopia.
4 Ja’alin, an Arabic-speaking ethnic group in Sudan.
5 Possibly the Abu Homed tribe of Sudan.
on its own; while also being prone to destroy themselves. The negroes of the White Nile, as we shall see, are governed differently; they are the valley negroes.

About two years ago, the tribe of Benishangul was defeated by Mohammed Ali’s soldiers, and henceforth, they have been obeying him again—that is, paying their taxes. The government wants no other part in the affairs of the negroes or the Jebel Aali Arabs: let them fight each other to their heart’s content—the government could not care less; that might even be for the best, for they would be sooner ready to be conquered. Despite being dependent upon the lawful government, however, the negroes and the Arabs looked upon us with much dislike and even talked of preventing us from going into the mountains, for they knew from experience that, should you give in to the Turks, wherever they passed there would be nothing left but razed ground. Yet all their designs led to nothing; indeed, they were pretty defenseless against some thousand well-armed soldiers, even if their entire population were to stand in the field!

Our own soldiers, and especially officers, were no less tempted to attack the negroes once we were already in the mountains and thus could beat them so easily and yet so profitably. Everyone was willing to obtain a free slave, which would be their lawful property in the time of war. Yet considering that there was no apparent hostile movement on the part of the negroes—who were constantly kept in check by their own Arabs, the latter being well aware of the intention of the Turks—and realizing that a camel injured by them or a stolen donkey were not at all worth demanding that the negroes pay for it with their blood, I strictly prohibited the soldiers from launching any attack or engaging themselves in plunder or violence.

We spent two days in Benishangul, which was rather hard upon the soldiers, for they had to constantly guard the camp while at the same time resisting the temptation that so often presented itself to them.

Upon our arrival, on the very first night, the mountains all round us, as far as the eye could see, got covered with signal flares, which heralded alarm, catastrophe, the invasion of an enemy army. These

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6 Jabal Awliya, a place next to Khartoum. Kovalevsky refers to the Arabs of Sudan.
signals, being transported from one mountain to another, reach the most distant lands with the speed of the telegraph, letting the natives know whence the enemy is coming; who the invaders are, whether it be the Galla, their own people, or the Turks; and how strong and dangerous they appear. Yet what purpose does it serve? The best they know to do is flee their tukkels and hide themselves in some impregnable gorge.

I have only just noticed that, following everyone’s example, I get carried away and call Mohammed Ali’s government Turkish and his soldiers Turks; that is how they all express themselves here, yet it is not done to show that their ruler obeys the Porte—oh no, far from it! The Egyptians stand by their distinctive nature, or at least so they say, for, as we have already noted, there are almost no Egyptians to be found in the army, nor in Mohammed Ali’s government, while Turks of various countries and descents prevail everywhere without exception. As for the negroes, they are slaves, and not even worth mentioning; the army being the only place where they are feared, especially in the mountains: disturbed by the sight of their homeland, of the mountains, so irresistible to those who have spent their early years there, the negroes often desert the ranks and can easily turn their guns against the whites, who scarcely ever amount to one-hundredth in any detachment.

The negroes and the Arabs of these parts, like any population living under the influence of seasonal rains, dwell in tukkels, wicker huts made from bamboo, with high conical roofs. Those possessed of a higher station or wit place their huts on tall props to preserve them from being completely flooded during the rainy season; the tukkel is surrounded by a gallery, also wicker, but rather more loose so as to ensure the free passage of air inside it. The double fence makes the interior of the tukkel dark; but then again, why would these people need light! They do nothing and, moreover, spend most of the day under a sprawling fig-tree in a common gathering, to which women, too, are freely admitted. Not only do they not wrap themselves in Mohammedan veils, but they leave their nakedness quite uncovered, their dress consisting of a single narrow belt tied below the back-bone: a leather fringe decorated with various metal trinkets and ornaments. Some wear even less; yet they are proud of their luxuries and decorations—which consist of numerous
necklaces, ivory bracelets, ear-rings, nose-rings, and lip-rings—the other object of their pride being their hair. You cannot but wonder at this naked lot taking so much trouble with the dressing of their heads! The negro is quite naked, and yet his bushy, wavy hair, akin to the fleece of the merino sheep, has several pretty little feathers sticking out of it. The Arabs of these parts shave their hair into a pattern, sometimes leaving only the top, made to stand like a crown, sometimes shaving the top alone so that the remaining hair flows in strands or in locks shaped as rings. Such head-dress comes at a high price. Women are forced to use a forked piece of wood or a little bench instead of a cushion, putting their heads inside it, as if it were a pair of pincers, to preserve their hair. Some negroes, men and women alike, plait their hair into small braids; but there are too many types of head-dress to mention them all. Women tie their fringe-like belt at the back. Men—who use instead a piece of leather, a quarter in length—tie it at the front, so that it is only the back-side that is slightly covered, while a single knot sticks out at the front, this being their only dress; although, as I have noted, some dispose of it altogether. The Arabs are less naked, some of them, sheikhs, for instance, even wearing a ferdeh, a long piece of fabric draped round the body in a free fashion.

At first the sight of this naked humankind strikes you as barbaric; the coal-black skin-color amazes you; but then, accepting it as some kind of special dress, you become accustomed to it. Were it a white person, you think, then, of course, his nakedness would be disgusting as it would define every part of his body; but he is black, so everything is merged together in a single vague color. Eventually, the very color no longer alarms you, as you find certain charm in this black, greased skin, smooth, tender, and glossy like kid-skin. The mountain people, both the negroes and the Arabs, are for the most part well-built, especially the offspring of the two races crossed; their movements are supple yet mostly frantic, like those of animals. The negroes have limited wit, their minds constantly remaining in a child-like state, and if they do something bad it is mainly done on an involuntary impulse, without thought. Yet they do possess some notion of honesty, manifested more strongly in those more civilized! After a rebellion of
negro troops in Walet Medina, the military tribunal demanded that they name the instigators; one instigator surrendered himself, without any prompting from others. He was shot. Despite such a terrible precedent, another stepped out of the ranks, also voluntarily, and came to the same end; and then another dozen people followed his example. There was no evidence against them, yet they themselves claimed to be no less guilty than their comrades. One must say, however, that life is a most insignificant thing for a negro, who can readily die at any moment.

The negroes are idolaters; or it would be fairer to say, they have no religion except superstitious rituals. The Arabs pretend to be Mohammedans. Yet they have neither mosques nor priests, and all they do by way of practicing their religion is recite the holy prayer: “La ilaha ill Allâh, Muhammad rasul Allâh.” The Arabs are very tempted by the paradise promised by Mohammed; were it not for it, they would abandon their faith altogether, for it does restrict their freedom somewhat.

A negro from these parts once told me, with child-like simplicity, about his deceased kinsmen: “So many of our people are already gone, God knows whereto. I remember my father going, my grandfather, and my brother also. People say they are dead: good! For they shall return; they cannot lie there buried till the end of time!” His simple speech was met with a chorus of laughter from the Turks, and yet one could, after all, glimpse in it some notion of Resurrection! One of the Turks said, “Indeed! Return they shall; oh yes, they shall come anon.”

That might be the reason why the negroes have this custom: they come to graves and, pelting them with stones, say, “Rise, rise!” Yet the dead will not rise.

After a two days’ stay at Benishangul, we commenced our ascent from the encampment. Everyone was very glad: both the soldiers, who had been bored with constantly being on guard duty, and the Arabs, who were happy to realize that on this occasion, the clouds had passed over them without a thunderstorm.

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7 Again, perhaps Kovalevsky has in mind Wad Medina.
8 The Shahada, or the profession of creed: “la ilaha illa llah muhammadun rasulu llah” (Arabic; There is no God except Allah and Mohammed is His messenger).
The *mek* of the village, an old man the likes of whom I was never to see again, volunteered to accompany me, despite all my attempts to convince him to remain at home—I was worried that he would die on the road. They brought him a white horse with a little bell round the neck, which was to remind us of Russian post-bells throughout the march; having mounted the horse, not only did our guide keep tight, but he also pranced all along the way, and would often gallop ahead at full speed. The bell denominated his high title. Behind him marched 150 or so Arabs and negroes, armed with bundles of spears; yet this was not, of course, the defense that we relied on in case of an attack.

We marched back east but, having reached Geta, turned south and, at about noon, halted and made a camp by the Sorgol, its banks shaded by the bright greenery of the so-called negro lemon-trees. The tree is quite similar to the ordinary lemon-tree in its aspect but much larger and more luxurious; its fruit is the same in appearance; once ripe, it tastes very sweet and refreshing, its flowers, however, being quite different.

We had hitherto seen *tukkels* upon the mountains we had passed and, occasionally, above the *tukkels*, some armed men in a threatening position. Hereafter, everything was deserted. The beautiful land of Kamamil, adjacent to the Toumat, stood completely devastated by the Galla negroes.