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BOOK REVIEWS

Tore Nordenstam, *Sudanese Ethics*. Uppsala, The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968, 239 pp. Sw. Kr. 15.

The object of this study is less ambitious than its title might suggest. For one thing, Nordenstam's concern is entirely with the *Northern*, i.e. Arab-dominated, Moslem, Sudanese. Secondly, the concern is not, at any rate directly, with their ethics, but with their ethical outlook. What we find in the book is not an actual description of how the Sudanese behave, but an account of what some Sudanese say are right ways to behave, or say their fellow-tribesmen say are right ways to behave. Thirdly, and unavoidably, the study is selective; among the traditionally recognized virtues, the author selects for consideration a small number, which he thinks are paramount in the lives of the Northern Sudanese: courage (*shajā'a*), generosity (*karam*), hospitality (*diyāfa*), honour (*sharaf*), decency (*ird*), dignity (*karāma*), respect (*ihṭiram*), and self-respect. These, one may well feel, are all in some manner related, and concerning them Nordenstam has a thesis to propound: the Sudanese ethic, he holds, is in the main 'other-determined' and 'outward-oriented'.

A study of this kind was perhaps worth attempting, but in this instance the results are meagre. This is in part due to method. Nordenstam's conclusions are almost exclusively derived from eight interviews, involving a total of three university students, conducted in English, and whose transcript amounts to over one half of the book. To begin with, it is difficult to think of informants in a post-colonial society more unrepresentative than university students. There is an almost overwhelming probability that, after long years of European-oriented education they should – at least to some degree – be culturally alienated from their fellow countrymen or tribesmen. Significantly, when speaking of the latter, Nordenstam's informants say 'they', or 'the people of the villages', seldom, if ever, 'we' or 'my people'. How likely is it that they should express accurately the outlook of people of whom they find it natural to speak in such terms? The risk of distortion is

further compounded by Nordenstam's decision to conduct his interviews in English. This decision he defends (p. 73) on the grounds, roughly, that moral concepts can be investigated in any language, provided it is one which is sufficiently well understood by interviewer and interviewee. But this is false. Take for instance the matter of moral courage. Nordenstam hypothesises that in the traditional Sudanese ethic "to stand up for one's principles is a duty which would be regarded as belonging to the department of dignity rather than the department of courage" (p. 84). The interviews tell a different story, however. In what is probably the most significant single statement of the transcripts, Nordenstam's informant remarks: "I think the Sudanese have not yet reached the stage to appreciate what principles are, what one means by saying that a man should stand firmly besides his principles, and so on" (p. 136). Now this remark, if true, proves one thing: that the traditional Sudanese, even though they might say 'A has lacked dignity' in every situation where *we* (Nordenstam, his English-speaking reader) say 'A has lacked moral courage', would still further differ from us in that they would never describe these situations by saying 'A has failed to stand up for his principles'. They wouldn't, because they couldn't. This thought is one which they lack the conceptual, and presumably the linguistic, resources to express. Had he been working from the Arabic, Nordenstam might have avoided misrepresenting the Sudanese on this crucial point.

Why is it crucial? Because if true, the remark about the Sudanese not yet having reached the stage to appreciate what principles are is the one piece of solid evidence (though one which – incredibly – passes Nordenstam entirely by) for what constitutes after all the book's main thesis: that the Sudanese ethic is on the whole other-determined and outward-oriented. By this the author means, roughly, that in the assessment of actions little attention is paid by the Sudanese to the spirit in which they are done; or more roughly still, that the Sudanese lack the notion of 'conscience' or 'inner life'. This may well be true, but to establish it would take more work and imagination than have gone into this book.

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