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Inside people

SUDANESE ETHICS, by Tore Nordenstam. Published by the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, P.O. Box 345, Uppsala 1, Sweden.

This is not, as at first sight may appear, a study of the Sudanese and their ethics with regard to the troubled South Sudan. That is a work which is unlikely to be tackled until years hence. when it can be done in retrospect.

This is a much more modest work. The author spent five years on the staff of the Department of Philosophy of Khartoum University. During this period he collected material for a doctoral thesis, and this is an edited version of it.

It is based on interviews with Sudanese university students during which he sought to discover such things as how the young Sudanese regard qualities which are traditionally highly valued in Sudanese society, such as courage, generosity, hospitality, honour and self-respect.

Nordenstam certainly chose a novel road to his thesis. He spends his first chapter defining ethics and his second on defining their implications. His third, fourth and fifth chapters are mostly taken up with generalisations on ethics anywhere, and it is not until part II of the book that we get down to the meat of the matter with some case studies of the traditional Sudanese virtues.

Interviews. These came, somewhat easily, from talks he had with three of his own students. One defined a courageous man as one who never asks for help or looks for the aid of anybody, not even that of God, adding, "Prayer in the face of danger or difficulties is sheer cowardice".

When asked to comment on generosity, another told the tale of a European tourist who had stayed with a sheikh for a fortnight and had a ram slaughtered for him every day. When on the day of his departure the tourist asked for the bill, the sheikh said he felt as if he was stabbed in the back.

The third, on the question of decency, pointed out that it was the responsibility of Sudanese men to protect the "ird" of their women, and asserted that any Sudanese man is considered to be the guardian of any Sudanese woman.

To preserve the "ird" of i one's female relatives means above all to protect them from extra-marital sexual intercourse, and the author explains: "Virginity is much valued, and various precautions are taken to preserve it, for, as the saying goes, 'virginity is like a match - once you strike it, it is of no use'."

Much of the rest of his book is taken up with verbatim accounts of interviews with his three informants.

The author draws no conclusions of his own, and he leaves the reader hanging in the air with the record of the interviews wondering just how much value can be placed on them, particularly in view of the circumstances in which the recordings were made.

As a record of research work it is useful, but the author has barely scratched the surface of his subject.