

AFRICA, Vol. 40:1, Jan. 1970, pp. 85-86.

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

Sudanese ethics. By TORE NORDENSTAM. Uppsala : Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968. Pp. 239. Sw. Kr. 15.

THIS book, written by a Swedish philosopher who taught at the University of Khartoum for several years, is an account of certain aspects of popular Sudanese ethics based on intensive interviews in English with three of his Sudanese students. It is divided into three parts: the first is a discussion of the methodological problems involved in the descriptive analysis of moral systems, in the second part certain traditional Sudanese moral concepts are isolated and analysed, and the final part (roughly half the book) consists of a transcript of all the tape-recorded interviews.

Nordenstam's fundamental aim – to describe the structure of popular morality in terms of the language of virtues rather than the language of deductive norms – seems to me a promising one. He is right in thinking that we can learn more about traditional Sudanese ethics through an examination of their views of the virtues that characterize a good man, a good woman, etc., rather than through a formal analysis of the way in which rules for good action are logically derivable from basic moral imperatives. And yet the results of the author's own analysis of the major Sudanese virtues are disappointing. The reasons for this can be traced to faulty methodology. Thus in the first part of his book Nordenstam makes the distinction between two kinds of investigation of moral systems as follows : ' (i) Consistently morphological, synchronic research where moral systems ... are selected as isolates for intensive study; (ii) Historical studies, causal analyses, studies of e.g. the relations between moral systems and other kinds of systems (like social systems, personality systems) ' (pp. 40-1). As a professional philosopher, Nordenstam feels himself specially competent to engage in the first kind of study which, he maintains, is logically prior to the second kind. Morphological analysis is here interpreted as the attempt to uncover the cluster of meanings denoted by indigenous Arabic virtue terms such as *shaja'a*, *karam*, and *karama*, translated 'for technical purposes' as 'courage', 'generosity', and 'dignity' respectively. How and to what extent these concepts operate in social life are assumed to be questions that come within the province of the anthropologist or historian.

Now the attempt to explore the meanings of moral concepts must involve some analysis of the wider language of which they form a part, and hence of the social life which gives shape to that language. To say, as Nordenstam does, that 'there is no necessary connection between any one concept and any one language' (p. 73) is not merely a mistaken view, but a surprising one from

someone who considers the analysis of Sudanese virtue terms a worthwhile enterprise. In this connection the author's unfamiliarity with Arabic (which he admits but discounts), the inadequate grasp of English on the part of his informants (and hence their uncertainty concerning what they are being asked, and how they should convey their answers), his somewhat mechanistic view of language and translation in general, and his decision to refrain from undertaking a systematic analysis of relevant aspects of the social life in which moral concepts are embedded, seem to me the source of much that is misleading or otherwise unsatisfactory in this book. A single illustration must suffice to indicate some of the unfortunate results of Nordenstam's style of analysis. At the conclusion of his chapter on 'generosity' (*karam*) Nordenstam writes : 'In so far as there is any clear rationale behind the inclusion and exclusion of items in the informants' conception of generosity ... it seems that the field of generosity is limited, on the whole, to the exchange of material goods, especially money, food and drink. *Time is not considered to have any value in itself*, and so it could not be a sign of generosity to spend one's time on assisting a friend or relative' (p. 91, my italics). Now this sounds as though 'to spend one's time assisting a friend or relative' does not have any value in itself – but it does, as Nordenstam himself notes on a previous page, although it is not called *karam* but *ta'awun*. To translate the former only and never the latter as 'generosity' is grossly misleading since to English-speakers part of what the informants recognize as *ta'awun* is called 'generosity'. Translation is rarely a one-to-one process. Just as 'generosity' may be translated meaningfully into Arabic by a wide range of words (a single term or a periphrasis, as the occasion demands) so too with *karam* into English. Nordenstam appears to assume that the analysis of Sudanese virtues can be carried out through a kind of lexicographical enumeration of English equivalents. But to explicate the logic that serves to draw clusters of ideas together as a distinctive moral concept, a simple lexicographical approach is not enough – indeed on its own it can be misleading. (The informants themselves are confused, for example, as to whether they are dealing with 'generosity' or *karam* – see pp. 140-1 S. 23.) To understand the meaning of a moral virtue which is prominent in the ethical system of a society requires an exposition of the kind of social roles to which the virtue is anchored, of the social conditions within which it is appropriately expressed, and of what constitutes a failure to so express it. It is only fair to say that some of these problems are occasionally considered, but nearly always sketchily and as it were in passing. Examples of virtuous behaviour are frequently given, but rarely related to a form of social life. They tend, therefore, to have a curiously inconsequential air about them. It is possible that being an anthropologist and not a philosopher, I have misunderstood, and therefore undervalued, the author's style of analysis. As against this I would sum up my dissatisfaction with it by maintaining that contrary to what seems to be Nordenstam's basic assumption, the descriptive analysis of a moral system by the philosopher and by the anthropologist are not two different kinds of enterprise but essentially one.

TALAL ASAD