

PREFACE

The research which is the basis for the following account of Ingessana religious institutions began when I was a member of staff of the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences of the University of Khartoum in the Republic of the Sudan from 1969 to 1973. Apart from my teaching commitments, my first concern was to identify a region where I could undertake some useful ethnographic research. The southern provinces had been ruled out for some time because of the civil war, and consequently a considerable amount of anthropological research had been, and was being, conducted in the northern provinces. Cunnison and Asad had already published their monographs on the Baggara and Kababish respectively, and further research among other nomadic pastoralists was being carried out by Sudanese colleagues.¹ Dar Fur too was the scene of considerable research activity.² The great irrigation schemes were also being researched³, as were the traditional riverain peasantries on the Nile north of Khartoum.⁴ The first urban anthropological studies were being undertaken.⁵ Confronted by such an extent and variety of impressive research it was not at all obvious to me where and what was left to be done.

Fortunately my friend Osman Mohammed el Hassan, then a deputy secretary at the Ministry of Social Affairs, invited me to join a social and economic survey he wanted carried out in a wide area around the lake being created by the dam on the Blue Nile then being completed near Ed Damazin. I accepted gladly. I knew that Wendy James had recently carried out field research in this part of the Sudan but I had little doubt that here was an opportunity to survey a region which the literature, such as it was, suggested to be especially promising as a location for anthropological field work. This tour in December 1970 allowed me to visit several different peoples, from the Kadallu (Gumuz) to the east of the Blue Nile, to the inhabitants of Jebel Gule to the west, to the people of the Ingessana Hills as well as other hill dwelling groups to the south, such as Ragreig and

¹ Abdul Ghaffar among the Rufa'a el Hoi, Abbas Ahmed among the Hassaniya and Hissinat, and Hassan Mohamed Saleh among the Beja.

² By the Tubianas among the Zaghawa, Ladislav Holy on the Berti, Fredrich Barth, and then Gunnar Haaland on the Fur. The historian Sean o'Fahey was also in Dar Fur carrying out research in the field.

³ Tony Barnett was carrying out field research in the Gezira, and Gunnar Sorbo was in the Khasm el Girba irrigation scheme.

⁴ Ahmed al Shahi among the Shagiya.

⁵ Farnham Rehfish had done research in Omdurman, and Taj el Anbia was researching el Obeid.

Mughaja. It has to be admitted that the people who inhabit the Ingessana Hills between the Blue and White Niles attracted me as much for sentimental as for academic reasons. Before I even saw the Ingessana Hills my interest was aroused when the chief of police in Ed Damazin, the immaculate Captain Ahmed Hijaza, on learning that we were to go to the Ingessana Hills, and then failing to dissuade us from going there, insisted that an armed platoon of his finest police accompany us. We managed to negotiate this generous consideration down to one armed policeman.

After the initial and general tour of the Southern Funj region, when I returned to the Ingessana Hills, I was advised by the Executive Officer of the then Roseires Rural Council to base myself in Soda because of its accessibility. There I arranged, through the good offices of the head teacher of the primary school, a meeting with a group of influential elders so that I could explain my intentions and plans. It is not without relevance to the argument of this book to record that the elders, after they had listened to what I had to say, at once expressed their dislike of the project, refused to cooperate, and suggested that I should return to Khartoum the next day. They did not want to have anything to do with me and my plans. Just as I had ignored Captain Hijaza's advice, I did so again, and rationalised my decision with the conviction that my noble and scholarly intentions, and my sympathy for the people, must have been lost in translation. I returned to Khartoum resolved to attempt another approach.

Back in Khartoum I reckoned that if I could find some Ingessana migrants in Khartoum, Omdurman, or Khartoum North, I might succeed in winning their support for the research. With some ingenuity and the help of one of my students I found the six Ingessana in the urban population of the Three Towns which then numbered some three million. They listened to my story sympathetically and said that I should not pay too much heed to the elders. I visited them regularly, and during the next vacation returned to the Ingessana Hills, coincidentally to Soda from where I had been rudely ejected, to the home of Ahmed Geili, one of the young men I had found in Khartoum North, and who had agreed, since he had not been able to find any work, to accompany me back to the Hills. News had gone ahead that he was returning with me, and his father turned out to welcome both of us. But not into his homestead, we had to pitch our tent some distance away. So the field research began.

The original objective of the research was to secure data which could be used to write a comprehensive record of the salient institutions of Ingessana society. A secondary objective, at first only vaguely formulated but which was to become more prominent and theoretically worked out several years later, concerned what was at first conceived of as the extraordinary persistence of a distinctive Ingessana culture. Wendy James, for example, writing about the different degrees of assimilation of northern Sudanese culture and the spread of Islam in the Southern Funj remarked that the

population of Jebel Gule had assimilated northern Sudanese culture to become 'a relatively sophisticated place', where 'only two old men could, with difficulty, remember any of the old language.' By contrast, according to James, the Ingessana 'stick in the main to their traditional ways' and so 'the relative independence of the Ingessana culture is quite striking' (James 1971: 204, 209. cf. Jedrej 1974). It took me several years to realise that Ingessana culture and its persistence are not two separate issues. It is not a matter of first describing Ingessana culture and then looking for an explanation for its persistence. It is impossible to describe Ingessana institutions and beliefs, conduct and practices, without at the same time accounting for their enduring and defiant quality.

Episodes of field research were carried out during university vacations, and always from what was now the base in the south western part of the hills. In 1973 I was granted leave of absence for two terms and this, together with the summer vacation, allowed for a more extended sojourn than had previously been possible. On reflection I found that this pattern of intermittent residence in the field did not detract from the research. Indeed my personal relationships seemed to develop during my absences as much as when I was among the people. In 1985 I returned for three months from January to March and was gratified by the warmth of welcome from my old friends, those that were still alive, and from the boys, now young men, some of whom I barely recognised, but who remembered me well enough. Though based in one locality I have travelled in the course of the research all over the Ingessana Hills, sometimes by Land-Rover, but mostly on foot, or on a donkey, and on one memorable occasion travelled south to the River Yabus to stay with two groups of Ingessana who were there with their herds of cattle.

Language was always a problem. I first had to learn colloquial Arabic and then tackle Ingessana. I was greatly helped in this by the Ingessana in Khartoum whom I visited at least once a week during terms. Towards the end of the research I was confident, if not fluent, and could follow and engage in conversations. However, the formal speeches and orations of elders, because of its highly figurative and allusive style, was to the end very difficult. In 1985 I took with me into the field a tape recorder to try and remedy this situation but it failed before I was able to make any satisfactory recordings. I had to rely on what I thought the oration was about, and then compare what I thought was said with what my Ingessana friends understood of what was said.

Since then other commitments have taken me back to west Africa and also to the land of the Oromo and Konso in Ethiopia. The latter visits have been of particular value because of the place of highland Ethiopia in Ingessana historical experience.

That the people, or at least those that came to know me well, eventually accepted what I was doing was more a consequence of their accepting me and

then myself and my wife as harmless, even sympathetic individuals. I made few attempts to trace the ownership of cattle, of dealings with merchants, of debts and credits. Nor did I interrogate my neighbours about their kin and affines and inflict upon them the 'genealogical method'. I had done all that in a previous research project in west Africa. Instead I deliberately allowed my curiosity about their lives to be guided by what they thought it was important for me to see and hear, taste and feel. And this, of course, changed as my relationships developed. To begin with I was taken to events where strangers were an accepted, even a necessary, part of the proceedings. Later friends would invite me to family affairs and elders to accompany them on their business. Though I became aware of less obvious but very significant elements of their religious lives I did not pursue these matters immediately but allowed the people to introduce me to them when they thought it appropriate. I had sat in sullen and collusive silence with some Ingessana in the homestead of the custodian of a shrine when a young Sudanese Arab, staying with the local merchant, came into the homestead expressing disgust at the pigs running about, and demanding to be shown pagan effigies and idolatrous shrines. If there are aspects of Ingessana religion of which I am unaware that is as much the choice of the people as a function of my reluctance to engage in bruising bouts of penetrative ethnography.

There are, however, other obvious lacunae, and these are a product of gender. My relationships with women were very different from those with men. During the second visit I deliberately sought out certain women, usually ritual specialists, and interviewed them in a more or less formal manner. For those who agreed, and one or two refused, this seemed to them an acceptable procedure. The occasions when I was in the company of men and women together were only slightly less infrequent than when I was in the company of women only, and that was very rare.

Though I would have valued a wise old Ingessana companion steeped in the lore and wisdom of his or her society, and willing to share with me a quest to investigate further into the limitless depths of Ingessana culture, I have to say that there was no such individual. Several elders took an interest in what I was doing and they became friends to whom I could turn for help and advice, to answer my questions, and to seek explanations of particular points and events. Sometimes this provoked discussion, often inconclusive, among them. More often than not they were more concerned to find out what I had learned and from whom. Sometimes they corrected my information, or elaborated with some further details, but they usually suggested where I should go and whom I should see to find out more. Rather than being informants they seemed to define themselves as the supervisors of a struggling research student. On one occasion I encountered an Ingessana man doing some practical ethnographic research. His wife had just given birth to twins and he was consulting the female ritual specialist about the

details of what he ought to do when I appeared to interview the same specialist about the same topic.

The field research could not have been undertaken without the permission of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of the Sudan and the support of the University of Khartoum, and these are gratefully acknowledged. I would especially like to thank Dr Peter Harries-Jones and Dr Taj el Anbia who did all they could and more to make the research possible. Dr Mohamed Ibrahim Ahmed Abu Salim, Director of the Sudan Government Central Records Office, kindly gave permission to consult the government archives. The Economic and Social Research Council of the UK funded a second period of field research, and the University of Aberdeen granted leave of absence which allowed the work to be done. Some of the results of the field research have already appeared in print. Much of chapter five was originally included in an article on 'Some structural features of Ingessana marriage and affinity' in *Africa* 49 (1979): 377-387. Material in chapter six appeared in 'Cults of the dead among the Ingessana' in *Anthropos* 74 (1979): 40-46. Chapter eight originally appeared as 'Twins, dreams, and testicles: an Ingessana ritual institution for the promotion of life' in *Sociologus* 38 (1988): 19-34, and chapter nine as 'A note on ash symbolism in Africa' in *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 114 (1989): 111-123. I would like to thank the editors and publishers of the journals for permission to draw upon these articles here.