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## **“A White Man’s Enterprise”: Colonial and Post-Colonial Irrigation Development on the Gezira Plain, Sudan**

### **The Background**

The Gezira irrigation system in Sudan is probably the most famous irrigation effort of British colonial power anywhere in the world. It started in 1925 with 300,000 feddans (one feddan equals 0.42 ha) and now covers an area of some two million feddans, principally under gravity irrigation. The Gezira model was based on an agricultural policy that both “controlled” and “helped” the tenants. The tenant, meaning the male farmer who was regarded to be the head of the family, farmed units of 30 feddans, with the main crops cotton and sorghum grown in strict rotation. The irrigated area was divided into blocks of 15,000 feddans on average. Each had a block inspector and two field officers. A group inspector supervised six to ten blocks. The field personnel were “superimposed like the canal system itself on the life of the Gezira.”<sup>1</sup> In post-colonial African irrigation policies, the settlement factory model was transformed to a certain extent, but irrigation maintained a strong modernization mission. With the options for strict control being less, however, post-colonial schemes had to focus on building support structures for farmers. A certain translation of colonial coercion and force towards extension and training filled the gap. Forced production schemes were translated into extension programs to support the African peasant who was considered ignorant, uneducated, and in need of modernization.<sup>2</sup> Gezira and its successors share many characteristics of imposed production regimes.<sup>3</sup> Landscapes were changed into new geometric shapes with straight canals and square plots. In the same way as they transformed landscapes, colonial powers tried to transform African social reality. One shared property of the African colonial irrigation schemes is their character as tenancy settlement projects, which allowed stronger production control.

### **The Story**

Gezira has been described in the terms outlined above, as a centrally planned, British colonial development effort, by several authors. And it is not untrue: it was centrally planned. However, there are a few narratives that can be added to gain a better understanding of Gezira:

Firstly, the perspective of “British colonialism” itself will be discussed, as from an early stage the private firm Sudan Plantations Syndicate became key in the development of irrigation in Sudan. Representing the private British cotton industry, the Syndicate managed several smaller (pilot) irrigation schemes in Sudan, before becoming the agency responsible for managing the Gezira Scheme for the Sudan Government. It is clear that—within a spirit of cooperation—the Sudan Government and SPS had different ideas about what to do in Gezira, and never fully trusted each other.

A second perspective is that of the principal actors within Gezira. The ideas and ideals of planned irrigation and profit in Gezira had to be realized by African farmers and European officials. These officials and their families lived in Gezira and interacted on a daily basis with the farmers. In my work, tenant responses to SPS control will be discussed—although based on indirect sources, as the voices of tenants are not directly available in the sources. Through this discussion, it will become clear that tenants were not loyal, silent receivers of colonial wisdom—farmers had their own agendas. Another important group are the British inspectors of the SPS,

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<sup>1</sup> A. Gaitskell, *Gezira: A Story of Development in the Sudan* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> K. M. Baker, *Agricultural Change in Nigeria* (London: John Murray, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> M. W. Ertzen, “Colonial Irrigation: Myths of Emptiness,” *Landscape Research* 31 (2006):147–68.

who were responsible for close control, but who were also closely controlled by SPS management themselves. After all, they had production goals to meet. The working schedule of SPS inspectors was strict. Their ideas, frustrations, successes, and leisure activities—including drinking heavily at night when visiting each other—will be discussed.

A third perspective will highlight the development of Gezira over time and show that despite extensive planning efforts by many individuals and institutions, the overall image emerging is that of a Sudanese Jack Sparrow: “Do you think he plans it all out or does he make it up as he goes along?”