

South African President Mbeki, in Sudan, Scores British Colonialism

by Lawrence K. Freeman

South African President Thabo Mbeki carried out a brilliant flanking maneuver against the legacy of British colonial/imperial practices when he spoke before the Sudanese National Assembly on New Year's Day. For several months, members of the United States Congress, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Western media outlets have been attempting to whip up popular opinion into a frenzy against the government of Sudan over allegations of genocide in Darfur, in western Sudan. Instead of picking sides in this conflict, President Mbeki instead accurately changed the topic to the methods used by the British Empire against people of Sudan and South Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries, which set up the present-day conflicts in the first place, pitting "Arab Muslims" against "indigenous Africans."

In his speech Mbeki identified three leading military representatives of British colonialism, who participated in the racist-genocidal policies to keep Africans in enforced backwardness. By bringing up the name of British General Charles "Chinese" Gordon, the Governor General of Sudan, who lost his head (literally), when the Mahdist (Islamic) forces first achieved independence from British control, Mbeki broke up the controlled environment surrounding the crisis in Darfur. Mbeki surely knew that the mere mention of the defeat of Chinese Gordon in 1885 still drives the British aristocracy into fits of rage.

Then, Mbeki dropped a bombshell. "The last personality I would like to mention is Winston Churchill, who served under Lord Kitchner. . . ." Churchill, who traveled to Sudan as a reporter with Kitchner, later wrote of the excitement he experienced when he watched as Kitchner's forces slaughtered 40,000 Mahdists, as the British bloodily re-conquered Sudan in 1898. Capturing the racist hatred the British have towards the Sudanese believers in Islam, Mbeki quoted Churchill, as he compared the followers of Islam to a dog with rabies.

Rather than backing one side against the other in the conflict being orchestrated in western Sudan, Mbeki discussed how Sudan and his own South Africa have both "suffered from our shared colonial past, the terrible legacy of countries deeply divided on the basis of race, color, culture, and religion." Mbeki understands that Sudan, South Africa, and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, are still battling the deliberate

policy of genocide carried out by the heirs of Gordon, Kitchner, and Churchill, as they use the tensions and antagonisms built up in Africa by British colonial method, to facilitate the looting of its natural resources.

Documentation

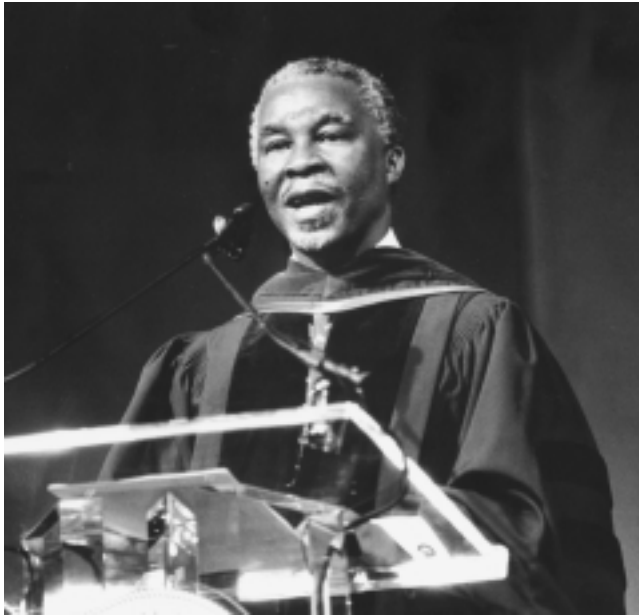
Here are excerpts from President Mbeki's speech to the Sudanese National Assembly on Jan. 1, 2005.

My delegation and I are honored to have the possibility to join you and the rest of the Sudanese people as you celebrate your 49th Day of Independence. . . . I believe there is a particular poignancy that attaches to the fact that it is we, South Africans, rather than any other Africans, who have the privilege to stand here today to wish you a happy birthday! You were the first among the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa to gain independence from colonialism, opening the way towards the total liquidation of colonialism and apartheid on our continent. We were the last to achieve liberation from white minority rule and apartheid, marking the conclusion of the work you had started, of the final abolition of colonialism in Africa. . . .

But perhaps . . . we should step backwards briefly to look into our shared colonial past, once again to make the point that there are many factors that should propel us towards common action. I am certain that even the school learners of this country will be familiar with certain names drawn from, and representative of, Sudan's colonial past.

I refer here to such a name as the British General Gordon, whose colonial war ended when he perished here in Khartoum at the hands of Sudanese patriots. I refer to the British Field Marshall Viscount Wolseley, described in his country as "a gallant man, an earnest soldier, . . . one of the greatest military products of the Nineteenth Century," who, however earnest he may have been, arrived too late to save his compatriot, who, strangely, became known as Gordon of Khartoum.

I refer also to another British soldier, Lord Kitchener, who led the colonial army that defeated the patriotic Mahdist forces at Omdurman in 1898, and occupied Khartoum, which



Speaking in Sudan on its Independence Day, Jan. 1, South African President Thabo Mbeki singled out Winston Churchill, and three British military leaders of the colonial era, for deliberately creating the kinds of antagonisms in Sudan and South Africa, which those nations are still struggling to overcome in order to successfully develop. Here, Mbeki in Washington in 2000.

Wolseley could not capture and in which Gordon died.

The last British personality I would like to mention is Winston Churchill, who served under Lord Kitchener, and wrote the famous account of the colonising exploits of Kitchener in Sudan in the book entitled *The River War*.

Let me quote a short paragraph from this book, which quotation tells the whole story about what our colonial masters thought of us. Churchill wrote:

“How dreadful are the curses which Mohammedanism lays on its votaries! Besides the fanatical frenzy, which is dangerous in a man as hydrophobia in a dog, there is this fearful fatalistic apathy. The effects are apparent in many countries. Improvident habits, slovenly systems of agriculture, sluggish methods of commerce, and insecurity of property exist wherever the followers of the Prophet rule or live. A degraded sensualism deprives this life of its grace and refinement; the next of its dignity and sanctity.”

What Churchill said about Mohammedans was of course precisely what our colonizers thought about all Africans, whether Muslim or not. And this attitude conditioned what they did as part of their colonial project, including what their soldiers, such as Gordon, Wolseley and Kitchener did to those they sought to colonize.

Perhaps you are wondering why I make this brief excursion into Sudanese colonial history. In reality, it was also an excursion into our own, South African, colonial history. The same British names I have mentioned also appear in our own colonial history. To some extent we can say that when these

eminent representatives of British colonialism were not in Sudan, they were in South Africa, and vice versa, doing terrible things wherever they went, justifying what they did by defining the native peoples of Africa as savages that had to be civilized even against their will.

Gordon came to South Africa to advise the British colonial power on its wars against our people. Wolseley came to lead the British forces to crush the Zulu people. Kitchener came to introduce the scorched earth policy during the Anglo-Boer or South African War, that resulted in the first emergence of concentration camps, and the conduct of open warfare against women, children, and the elderly, to force their armed husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers to sue for peace, as did the Boers in 1902.

And Churchill came to South Africa, as he did to Sudan, to serve under Kitchener, and write for the British press.

In the end, the point I am making is that our shared colonial past left both of us with a common and terrible legacy of countries deeply divided on the basis of race, color, culture, and religion. But surely, that shared colonial past must also tell us that we probably need to work together to share the burden of building the post-colonial future.

In any case, whether in 1956, when you gained your independence, or in 1994, when we achieved our emancipation, we had to answer the same question—what kind of societies should we build, given not only the fact of their diversity, but also the tensions and antagonisms that existed among its diverse parts?

You have spent fully half a century searching for an answer to this question, if we take into account that the war in the South first broke out in 1955. We have spent a mere decade striving, like you, to find sustainable answers to the same question.

You have had to deal with the challenge of a protracted military conflict in the South, a new conflict in the West and tensions in the East and North and elsewhere in this great and major country of Africa.

Whatever the immediate origin of these actual and potential conflicts, the fact they exist or are threatening tells the common story that we still have not found the answer to the question—what kind of Sudanese society should we build, given not only the fact of its diversity, but also the tensions and antagonisms that have existed among its diverse parts? . . .

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