

THE INNOCENCE OF FIELDWORK LOST IN THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPES OF WAR:  
A CASE STUDY FROM THE UPPER BLUE NILE (1965-2015)

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***Introduction***

There is a big difference between the highly specific nature of modern aid projects – in time, space, objectives, methods, funding, organized team-work and reporting back duties – and what we like to think of as the more creative, personal nature of academic research in the social sciences, especially ethnographic fieldwork. What has recently become known as ‘classic’ fieldwork never seems to have been boxed in by questionnaires on method and timing answered in advance. Rather, it was supposed to remain exploratory, and open to the unexpected. The ‘ethical controls’ of today’s bureaucratic paperwork rarely prepares the researcher for the independent judgement that he or she may have to exercise in the field, especially in the more politically and socially turbulent regions of world today. I was staggered when I recently looked up the current tangle of procedures that Oxford’s own Central University Research Ethics Committee requires researchers to go through (<https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/curec>, last accessed 31 October 2015), quite apart from those of the academic and other funding bodies, NGOs and political gatekeepers they will face if they plan to work overseas.

Perhaps the root questions of most ethics review boards etc. arise from the medical need for potential treatments to be tried out and thus experiments to be done on living human beings. Many questions assume that the researcher will be dealing with individuals in a structured situation (perhaps a focus group). One that struck me on the CUREC forms was ‘Will you be working with children?’ But we do not study individuals or categories of persons as such; we study fields of social relations, interactions and live opinions. You cannot exclude children from your study, nor can you draw clear boundaries, or screen out linguistic differences, disagreements and inequalities, as they shape, together, the social world you are investigating. Moreover, that world will be changing over time, and there are limits to what can be understood about it on the basis of one limited research trip. Repeated visits are always to be sought if possible, providing

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perspectives on the seasons, at least, and changing conditions over the years, through soliciting memories, but also reading historical sources, and thus adding to what you can discover of the life of your community's grandparents. Fieldwork should never be restricted in space: you should ideally visit places where your informants say they used to live, or where their children have now moved. Nor should it be artificially restricted in terms of language: you should aim for meaningful conversation in the context of one or more relevant languages yourself if you can manage it, but otherwise through a range of local interpreters. You should not be satisfied just gathering information from an anonymous focus group according to pre-set questionnaires, formulated in the language of the research project itself. As far as you can, you should actually be getting to know people, as they should be getting to know you.

I have never worked as a direct employee of any government scheme or aid agency in order to provide them with specific information for a defined project, but concentrated rather on publishing the fruits of my original, 'innocent' efforts to add to the ethnographic record on little-known minorities in the Upper Blue Nile region borderlands linking Sudan and Ethiopia (the main examples being James 1979, 1986, 1988) or to explain my own approach to comparative anthropology in general (2003). My sources of funding have been almost entirely through universities where I was fairly free to operate as an independent researcher, or through the former UK government-funded Social Science Research Council (SSRC), later morphing into the present Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which has come to exercise much more intensive financial, methodological and 'ethical' scrutiny over research and researchers. The national or gender identity, social experience, theoretical grounding, language abilities and existing local knowledge of the researcher tended to be recognized in the old days as relevant to whatever their research might achieve. They were expected to be able to make sensible political or 'ethical' decisions as and when the local circumstances might change. As my own experiences have shown, one may find that sometimes it is helpful to be seen as an authority, or an NGO figure, and basically friendly to people, whether Muslims or Christians (though in some cases I had to insist I was definitely NOT a missionary!) Despite even today's vetting and oversight by funding and ethics boards, individuals and research teams will always have to exercise their own judgement in the production and use of research findings. In the troubled times of uncertainty over where authority might properly lie, let alone in regions dominated by actual currents of conflict and war, the researcher may need to draw on considerable reserves of good sense, diplomatic skill and a

view of future outcomes beyond those of the ethics questionnaires that have already been answered.

### *1. From Oxford to Khartoum, 1960s*

During my time as a graduate student at Oxford's Institute of Social Anthropology (later 'Social and Cultural Anthropology'), competition for research funds was growing, and various specifically 'colonial' sources of funding were disappearing. Several of us going through the old pattern of a Diploma and B.Litt. (now M.Litt.) decided to seek jobs in the country where we hoped to do our research for the D.Phil. as a way of getting started. This is basically how I found myself, by 1964, teaching in the University of Khartoum. The Department of Social Anthropology and Sociology there (founded in 1958, two years after the country's independence) was keen to appoint young lecturers and give them access to its own research funds from the Ford Foundation. But before that happened, I had a steep learning experience.

The Sudanese authorities, and people generally, were respectful of the university and its activities. In the case of our department, this was partly because Ian Cunnison, as the first professor, made sure that plenty of 'applied' topics were included in the teaching, along with classic writings by the Seligmans, Evans-Pritchard and so on. I remember that we had two core courses on 'Social Problems of the Sudan': the first on rural, the second on urban issues.

My very first opportunity for a taste of research came when our department was invited by the Ministry of Health to send a team to investigate an apparent breakdown in mental health in the slums around the city of Port Sudan. Having just arrived, I was the only staff member free to take this on. We put together a group of students, and a senior colleague agreed to join us for the first few days to introduce us to the Town Council officials and get us started. We divided ourselves up into pairs, took the train and devised a plan for covering representative areas of the two main shanty towns. Because of political upheavals in October of that year our trip had to be cut short, but we returned in the early months of 1965 to complete the study. The officials had told us that the main problem was drought in the nearby Red Sea Hills, with pastoralists losing their cattle and therefore squatting in the town, where they began to suffer. Yet, our findings turned out to be quite different; in the shanty town behind the slaughterhouse lived mainly temporary or seasonal labourers who made good money in the docks and took it home to the Nuba Hills or other rural areas, even in the south of the country. In the wide open spaces of the second shanty town, we

again found relatively comfortable people, many of whom had moved out of the city centre because of overcrowding. This settlement was known as Dar el Salaam (Haven of Peace). When we presented our findings to the Town Council officials, however, they denied that anybody lived there at all. Pointing to a map of the city, they said, ‘But nobody is living there! It is scheduled as a First Class development.’ We had to report that we had estimated the population at 2,000 and that none were pastoralists from the hills; the text was included in our departmental journal, attracted some interest and later reprinted (James 1969). This whole exercise could perhaps be seen as a modest example of what used to be known in the colonial period as ‘applied anthropology’. In the old days, anthropology came to be seen as a handmaiden of colonialism. But even then, this sometimes masked the way anthropology could critically analyse – and perhaps even call into question – colonial rule and administration (James 1973). At least we had been free to design our own approach, and methods, and write up what we hoped would be a helpful report, even though it was pretty critical of the relevant authorities (and far from what our sponsors had expected).

## ***2. Planning ethnographic exploration in the Sudan***

At that time, the options for personal research funded by the department’s Ford grant were fairly clear. Applications were considered by a number of committees within the university, but I do not remember going through any difficult interviews. Key discussions were mainly a matter of *where you planned to go*, as some areas were sensitive; for example, because of the escalating conflict in the south, none of us could have gone there. I seriously looked into the possibility of the Nuba Hills, an area that boasted the complexity and diversity of two or three dozen different indigenous languages, but Ian Cunnison dissuaded me from that idea – and in any case we were being joined by a new colleague already committed to doing research there, Jim Faris. I eventually focused on the possibilities of the hilly country of the Upper Blue Nile province and started exploring the archives in the National Records Office, which I found fascinating. The archivist explained quite straightforwardly that I could read anything on the Blue Nile except files on slavery.

I did take up the study of colloquial Arabic as a desirable skill for fieldwork anywhere in the country, though my strongest interest was in the linguistic and cultural diversity of Sudan’s marginal regions. In reading more about the patchwork of peoples that had long survived in the



Map. The Blue Nile Borderlands: relief and key places in the text

borderlands with Ethiopia, I became interested in the earlier history of the Kingdom of Sennar, which had reached into the mountains (for many of the places mentioned in this article, see Map). In one or two places, I learned that twentieth-century missionaries had settled with the local people and produced both language materials and a rising generation of kids who were learning English – this finally decided me to focus on the Uduk-speaking communities and their immediate neighbours to take advantage of the language situation, as I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to spend in the region. By the time I set off for the field with a university Land Rover and driver in late 1965, it was nearly two years since the local missionaries had been expelled (like others across the whole of the southern Sudan and its borderlands) on suspicion of their sympathy with, and support for, the growing insurgency.

In applying for my funding and basic permissions from the university, I did mention the ongoing dam-building project on the Blue Nile at Roseires, and how there was a need for general information about existing communities and development possibilities in the region. I also made a point of discussing my plans with officials in Roseires, reading in their files, and visiting various places in the district. But no demands were made on me to make any 'useful' contribution to the ongoing potentials for development. I was then welcomed by various officials when I made it down to the southernmost district HQ of Kurmuk, right on the Ethiopian border. In fact one afternoon the police were kind enough to invite me to join them on a short walk over the rocky gorge for coffee on the Ethiopian side. This was very helpful, as the shops in Ethiopia's twin town of Kurmuk were filled with Italian pasta and other goodies on which I could stock up.

I did have problems with officialdom later in the rural areas, but they had nothing to do with my academic research as such. My first visit to the old station of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) at Chali, some thirty miles away, was made at the suggestion of a group of Kurmuk officials who had themselves been invited by the pastor to help celebrate Christmas Day. We went in convoy; I decided this was a good place to begin my real fieldwork, focusing on the little-known Uduk people with the help of language materials originally provided by the missionaries and assistance from youngsters who knew some English. My driver was glad to leave that evening with the officials on his way back to Khartoum, leaving the Land Rover with me, and the church people were happy to have me for a while. However, Chali was a sensitive place, having been part of the 'southern' province of Upper Nile until 1953, when it was transferred to the 'northern' province of Blue Nile. This was done purely for reasons of administrative convenience, but it did separate

the Uduk (and some others) from their friendly neighbours the Meban, who had also been part of the zone in which the SIM had worked and established their first headquarters at Doro, a good distance west of Chali.

After my first week or two as a guest of the Chali church people, a local policeman showed up. Did I have permission to stay there? I had to return to Kurmuk to be interviewed by the authorities and send a telegram to the university to get them to provide a letter from the Ministry of the Interior allowing my extended stay. Permission was eventually given, and I began to see that my research plan was not the key problem. Later that year, when I returned to spend the whole 1966 rainy season in a remote village, the local police from Chali occasionally visited my hut, six miles or so from their station, to check up; they were very pleased when I was once or twice able to present them with a bag of my own home-grown tomatoes. But the merchants in Kurmuk made a collective complaint to the officials about my presence – they thought I was a returning missionary. At the same time, I had left the Land Rover with the Kurmuk police for safe-keeping, but when I engaged a new driver and we collected it, we found several hundred miles on the clock beyond my personal allocation from the University, plus a minor broken spring or something. On the way back to Khartoum we had to report this to the Province Police HQ in Wad Medani and then get the university to sort it out with them. I emerged a blameless innocent, wronged by the forces of law and order.

I was keen to persist with the Blue Nile research, returning (mainly during Khartoum vacations) for shorter field visits in '67, '68, and '69, occasionally accompanied by a Sudanese student on 'fieldwork training' or teenagers now moving to and from schools or jobs to the north, which always smoothed the way with the officials and merchants. I always made it clear when passing through places that I was a teacher in the university, which gave me some standing. I think it is worth emphasizing the value of return trips to the field. I have always suggested to students that whatever time you have, at the very least, divide it in two. What you learn on your return will be well worth it: you will be remembered, may be greeted as a friend, and learn the background to things that happened when you were there before. Even in the context of modern aid projects, I believe that showing up as a known person makes you less obviously a tool of your sponsors and gives you more independence!

### ***3. And on to Ethiopia: the calm before the Revolution***

By 1969, I had left the Sudan to write up my D.Phil. I then taught briefly in Denmark and Norway before returning to a lecturership back in Oxford in 1972. In the course of 1974-75 I had my first chance of some sabbatical leave. I got a grant from the then Social Science Research Council to go to Ethiopia to start on a comparative survey of linguistic minorities in the west of that country (several related to those on the Sudan side) and their relationship with the history of Ethiopia as a whole. This involved quite a detailed application, to cover three visits in all, and a formal interview in London (though nothing like the scrutiny and form-filling demanded by the ESRC today). I secured an attachment as a visiting researcher at the Haile Selassie I University in Addis Ababa, which gave me access to libraries and a range of useful contacts. In the early 1970s, the university and its academic staff were very supportive of research on the variety of languages and peoples across all parts of the country. Many regional dissertations had been prepared by students in history and related disciplines, and were available in the library of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies. They put me in touch with a recent graduate from the western fringes of the then province of Wallega, bordering Sudan. She travelled there with me and introduced me to key people who helped me in planning my fieldwork. It was not long before I was able to liaise with Norwegian Lutheran missionaries, who were very supportive on both my first and second visits. These were the last years of imperial Ethiopia; there was no particular interference from the government. However, the third trip of the series (planned for 1976) had to be abandoned because of the demise of Haile Selassie and the advent of the socialist regime, accompanied by violence and the imposition of a high level of state surveillance. The western border with Sudan became a Cold War frontier from 1976-89, and anthropological research, whether by Ethiopians or foreigners, became impossible. My practical research activities moved back to the Sudan following the 1972 peace agreement there.

### ***4. An opportunity for urban research in Juba: before the storm***

My next sabbatical opportunity was in the academic year 1982-3: by this time I was married to Douglas Johnson, a historian who specialized in the southern Sudan. He was actually engaged by the Southern Regional Government based in Juba to work on the development of an archive project and was making regular visits there. It made sense for me to join him during my sabbatical, with our two small children. My academic plan, approved at the Oxford end as the

main basis for my sabbatical leave, was to study the rise of the southern dialect of colloquial Arabic ('Juba Arabic') as part of the social history of the town. I kept a low profile with regard to my research, deciding not to go through the formalities of grant applications and official permission, and was able to take things up quietly with neighbours and friends as I got to know the town and the ways in which Juba Arabic worked. I found a very useful source in the local church-sponsored radio, which broadcast popular plays in the street dialect, mainly about the dilemmas and temptations of life in the town and how to cope with them. I recorded these and engaged a local student to help with translation. I even met and got to know some of the production team, who gave me copies of the typescripts of some of the plays. In some cases, it was very interesting to compare the script with the live radio performance as I had recorded it! With the help of my husband, I was able to start on what I hoped would be a substantial series of interviews with some of the older residents of the town, many of them retired military men. This work could only proceed modestly, and while I encountered no official objections, there might have been problems if I had tried to interview elite figures.

However, our time in Juba could not be completed because of the fresh outbreak of civil war in May 1983. Douglas's project had taken us to Malakal for a while, from where we managed a quick trip eastwards to the Uduk villages of the Blue Nile, which was invaluable for my own research, though it lasted only just over a week. Back in Malakal, we found ourselves stranded as a family for a while following the outbreak of a mutiny in Bor. Douglas's Sudanese colleagues were able to take the truck back, but the road back through Bor to our home in Juba was closed to us as a foreign family. At the same time, while many foreign personnel were leaving, none of the UN or NGO bodies would give us seats on their planes. This was because Douglas was officially a Sudanese civil servant, and if he and his family were helped, many others would also feel entitled. We were eventually found places on Sudan Airways out of Malakal, though northwards to Khartoum, with the help of Douglas's old contacts in the Upper Nile provincial government. It was two or three weeks later that we were suddenly offered air passage back to Juba by the US embassy, who had seats opening up unexpectedly (Douglas being a US citizen). We could no longer carry on our respective activities in Juba and eventually got home to Oxford.

By 1986, Sudan's new civil war had spread from the southern provinces northwards, unexpectedly entering the Nuba Hills and the Blue Nile Province (here, of course, with particular support from the Ethiopian side). Some youngsters from the local minorities had already been

recruited into the national police and military forces, a regular career during the years of peace; by the early 1980s others were being recruited into the SPLM/A (John Garang himself visited the Blue Nile in 1986 explaining that their cause was a nation-wide struggle for democracy and religious freedom). The severe counter-insurgency measures of 1987 forced a very substantial proportion of the Uduk-speaking people to flee (James 2007). They were on the move for six years, crossing the Ethiopian border and back several times, at one point finding themselves deep in Sudan's southern Upper Nile Province.

### ***5. Sudan's second civil war: refugee treks to and from Ethiopia***

In the course of this prolonged disaster, I found myself engaged on a series of 'emergency' humanitarian visits to a string of camps where the core of the Uduk people had sought refuge; this was my first experience of working as a professional consultant. In 1991, I went twice to Nasir, Upper Nile, reporting to the UN Operation Lifeline Sudan in Nairobi on the background to the unexpected arrival of refugees from the Blue Nile. OLS were keen to have any background on who these people were and why they had left their homes for Ethiopia, moved to and fro a couple of times before being obliged to join the large camp for Sudanese at Itang near Gambela, then having to flee with everyone else from there back over the Sudan border as the new Ethiopian government established its grip. It was, I believe, the local military (SPLA) who suggested a site south of the Sobat river for the Blue Nile people to camp, where they were easy to guard, and neither the military nor the OLS officials minded me joining them there. After two reports in which I strongly recommended that these particular refugees should be allowed to move upstream to drier country, this did happen in early 1992. But partly because of a recent split in the SPLA, one night a faction suddenly led a dash back again to Ethiopia, and as an emergency were given shelter in Karmi transit camp, near Gambela.

I made it to Karmi later and reported on the background to this unexpected event to the Addis Ababa office of UNHCR. In this new situation of refugee need, I collaborated with all authorities as best I could, making recommendations and so on. From Karmi, I travelled with officials from the UNHCR and local government in Gambela, along with leaders of the refugees, helping decide which places to recommend as the best options for a new 'semi-permanent' settlement (nobody wanted to restore the old-style refugee 'camps'). No authorities were posted to Karmi, as it was to be only a staging post, though the aid agencies did visit on weekdays to provide assistance. By the

beginning of 1993, I had been back with ITV's programme *Disappearing World* to make a documentary. The series had pioneered modern ethnographic films in many parts of the world; in 1992 they had decided on three new films to be screened the following year, not about tribal worlds as such, but about the consequences for what were still thought of as traditional cultural groups who found themselves in war zones (the other films that year were set in northern Burma and Bosnia). Because the transit camp of Karmi was a new, open-ended, informal situation, as a film team we were able to get on with our project without much interference at all (MacDonald 1993). In fact, we ourselves had to act on behalf of the authorities when fighting broke out on a Saturday afternoon. This happened between the Blue Nile people for whom the transit camp had originally been set up and newcomers from the southern Sudan who had later been permitted to settle around its fringes. It began as a minor quarrel between women at the river, but stone-throwing against the new arrivals soon spread. One of their elderly women was quite soon knocked flat by a stone and injured. Rumours spread that she was dead, reaching us in the film team as we were trying to find out what was going on. Men took up their spears and throwing sticks throughout the camp, and fear spread as the women started packing up their possessions ready to leave. No agencies or officials were around, having gone home for the weekend. The only vehicle present at the time was ours (i.e. the television team's). As the sun was going down, we decided that something should be done, so I went with the driver and one refugee leader to report the situation to the UNHCR, the police and the army back in Gambela. Things had calmed down by the time we returned, but the film crew had caught some sensitive footage, including a couple of explosions and at least one fire on the fringes of the camp, which were attributed to guns or grenades brought in by the newcomers. Several injured people, including the first woman who had been severely hurt, were then ferried back to town by the officials. The refugees themselves requested that I should never allow scenes of the fighting to be shown in public. This was also the feeling of the film team, so the resulting documentary was relatively mild in tone – but as a result of our own 'ethical' judgement rather than the kind of top-down decisions that might be made these days. A fuller account of the event, the emotional memories it invoked and its wider significance can be found in James (1997).

## ***6. Bonga: new government, new approaches to refugee settlement***

Once the plan for a brand-new refugee settlement site had been decided, at Bonga further upstream from Gambela, officialdom slowly began to assert its presence. Again I provided background reports for UNHCR's Addis Ababa office; then, in 1994, the main Geneva office invited me back to do a 'Progress Report on the Bonga Scheme', which I accepted with backing from Oxford (details of the various reports I wrote during these years can be found in James 2007: 322). It was not easy, mainly because the provisions of the original scheme were to allow the refugees to have access to land and become partly self-sufficient. While this had looked all right from the central government's point of view, it began to look much less attractive to the local population of the Gambela district and to those in authority there. I sent in copies of my report – which did emphasize the original understandings of the scheme as a partially self-supporting one – after leaving the country, thus avoiding any interference in its arguments at the time. I also avoided any direct criticism of the kind I would certainly have faced in writing such a report for the UNHCR and government authorities a few years later, by which time there had been a population explosion of bureaucracies, institutions and officials in Bonga.

### ***7. Officialdom spreads to Bonga***

During the 1994 stay, I did meet early representatives of ZOA Refugee Care (the initials mean 'S.E. Asia' in Dutch, referring to the region where they had first worked). They specialized in training refugees in productive skills, such as weaving, ironworking, bee-keeping, basketry and various agricultural skills, all of which would help them settle back in their home countries when the time came for them to return. A few years later, in 2000, I was formally invited to return to Bonga as a consultant for ZOA to produce a report on the community services in the scheme (everybody had now slipped back into calling it a 'camp'). Again, with Oxford's support, I went with the best of intentions. However, I now ran into the modern kind of situation which so many scholars in the aid and humanitarian fields find themselves in.

The situation was that the UN had offered ZOA a budget for the development of 'community services' in Bonga. But I understood that the official government Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) was of the view that this budget should have been allocated directly to them, as they had an official presence and range of activities already in Bonga. On my arrival in Addis Ababa, the head of ZOA was called up to a Ministry office, and he took me along. The disagreement over the UN funds was quite evident, and I was asked specifically about my role. I

made it clear that I was not being paid any fee by ZOA for my proposed assistance and that my international travel expenses were being covered by my university. In return for what I could do in helping plan the extension of community services, I would be glad to accept practical assistance with accommodation and local travel in the Gambela region. The top official then looked at me and in a distinctly accusing way said something very close to this: ‘Now, Professor Wendy, *you have your own agenda*, don’t you?’ So I said, more or less, ‘Yes, of course I do; those refugees in Bonga, I have known them quite a long time; I know something of their history since they lived in Sudan, and I can speak to them in their own language. If there is anything I can do to help improve social services in Bonga, I am very glad to be of use in this area.’ The official finally gave his approval for me to join the ZOA team in Bonga, but said that I could only have permission to go there and do the work if I were accompanied by a minder from ARRA. So that’s what happened; a young fellow was appointed as my minder, and we took the plane together down to Gambela. I had in fact met him on my 1994 trip and had found him a bit difficult. But we now had to get on with things together. He stayed in the ARRA compound, and I knew I was expected to stay in the ZOA compound, so I did. At the start we met up each morning and went around the settlement as he introduced me to various people I already knew and explained to them what I would be doing. But after three days or so, he said to me quietly, ‘Look, you know, I have a number of things to see to in Addis. I think I shall have to leave soon; do you think you will be able to manage on your own?’ I thanked him for his support, said I’d do my best and wished him a safe trip back. The next day I asked the permission of the second-in-command at the ZOA camp (the head person was away for a bit anyway) if I could move out and stay in the camp itself; he had no objection, so I left for a hut vacated for me by a family I had known well since the 1960s and who were probably expecting me.

### ***8. Concluding observations***

Because of my extended experience on both sides of the Sudan–Ethiopia border, I was asked to be a ‘Resource Person’ to speak on issues concerning the Blue Nile in 2003, when the official Sudanese peace talks had moved from Machakos in Kenya to Nairobi. The resulting text of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005 included various quite positive recommendations for post-war demobilization and rehabilitation, but unfortunately these have never been fully implemented.

The Bonga refugee scheme remained in place up to and beyond the CPA. But the return and rehabilitation of the Bonga refugee community to Kurmuk and their homeland within the newly instituted Blue Nile State (the southerly portion of the old Blue Nile Province) was carried out mainly through 2006-7. The CPA included provision for a referendum to be carried out among the people of the southern provinces of Sudan (but not for anyone from the northern provinces, including Blue Nile). The overwhelming vote was for secession by the South, which duly took place on 9th July, 2011. However, provisions for post-war recovery were not fully implemented for the transitional areas of Abyei (as of the time of writing, still waiting for a promised referendum of its own), Blue Nile or the Nuba Mountains in S. Kordofan. These latter two regions in particular were simply treated by Khartoum as fully back under central government control, despite arguments on their behalf that had been made in the course of the peace negotiations. The war has since continued in both regions and has led to fresh massive flights of refugees (James 2015). In the case of Blue Nile, these have been either back yet again to Ethiopia, where at least one of the old camps has been reopened alongside several new ones, or over the brand-new international border with South Sudan, where Doro in Meban country is just one of several brand-new camps (as explained above, the Uduk and their Meban neighbours have much in common, and still get on well). I have not been back to 'the field' since this new period of complete upheaval, but have tried to keep in touch with events from a distance and have had several enlightening meetings with old friends now resettled in the Sudanese diaspora (mainly USA).

As indicated above, I have tried at particular times in the past to co-operate where I could with those who were helping to deal with emergency situations in regions I already knew. It was quite gratifying to me, therefore, to be approached for background and advice by representatives of various aid agencies that have been carrying out recent emergency work in the Sudan–Ethiopia border regions, now complicated further by the secession of South Sudan. The most influential of these have been Médecins Sans Frontières and Amnesty International. I have been extremely fortunate in having had a good deal of individual research freedom, backed by established universities, but also face-to-face encounters with the real world of struggle between the powers-that-be and the world of well-funded organizations. I am very conscious that the rising generation of researchers in anthropology have to cope with a jungle of new regulations that mine knew nothing of, but also very confident that they have the resilience, good sense and imagination to produce illuminating and original work of historical and cultural value that will outlast any

specific tasks they may decide to take on. That surely must remain our basic ambition and ‘ethical’ obligation.

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