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Mover and Shaker: Grace Mary Crowfoot, Intimate Conversations, and Sudanese History

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HEATHER J. SHARKEY

MOVER AND SHAKER

GRACE MARY CROWFOOT, INTIMATE CONVERSATIONS, AND SUDANESE HISTORY

OVERVIEW: THE RATIONALE FOR THIS STUDY

At the fourth annual conference of African studies in France (*4èmes Rencontres des Études Africaines en France* [REAF]), which revolved around the broad theme of “Cosmopolitical Africas” (*Afriques cosmopolitiques*), several panellists considered “traces of intimacy” in African history regarding individuals and their modes of oral, literary, and artistic expression. Drawing inspiration from many scholars, including Stoler (2002), who wrote about “cross-racial” relationships in Southeast Asian colonial systems, Goffman (1959), whose sociological analysis of face-to-face “interaction rituals” is now a classic, and more, their aim was to consider close, and often idiosyncratic, exchanges –intimate encounters–in making history. I presented this study on Sudan at this conference and in this context, focusing on Grace Mary Crowfoot, a British polymath and superwoman of her era, and assessing the impact of her informal interactions with Sudanese men and women during the early twentieth century. As I tell it here, her story forms part of a collection of short biographical studies I have begun writing about figures whose lives in Sudan and Egypt transcended national and regional boundaries while producing global entanglements.¹

1. I would like to thank Elena Vezzadini and Elizabeth Hodgkin for their feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

INTRODUCING GRACE MARY CROWFOOT AND MAKING A CASE FOR INTIMATE EXCHANGES

Grace Mary Crowfoot (1877-1957) – known as Molly to her friends – was a botanist, archaeologist, textile historian, and trained midwife. She was also the mother of four daughters, one of whom, a fellow archaeologist, published a short online biography in 2004 attesting to her accomplishments (E. Crowfoot 2004). During the early twentieth century, Grace Mary Crowfoot lived in Sudan and Egypt, and later in Palestine, where she published many articles and books, including, for example, a botanical study of the flowering plants of northern and central Sudan (Crowfoot 1928), and an analysis of hand-spinning in Egypt and Sudan from ancient to modern times (Crowfoot 1931). To most historians of modern north-east African history, her works are likely to sound obscure simply because natural history (in this case, botany) and material culture (in this case, *vis-à-vis* textiles), have not been central concerns in the field. By contrast, Crowfoot’s publications on the plants and handcrafts of Palestine (for example, Crowfoot and Baldensperger 1932; Crowfoot 1943) continue to attract attention, perhaps because the historical patrimonies of Palestinian folklore, ecology, and textile production have become so contested (and therefore prestigious) in the post-1948 context of Israeli-Palestinian politics and rival nationalist imaginings (see, for example, Novick 2014: 37 and Weir 1989: 34, 115, etc.). Likewise, her publications on spinning remain respected works among hand-weaving enthusiasts around the world,² while her reputation among archaeologists who specialize in textiles appears to run high as well. Indeed, in 2015, the Textile Research Centre in Leiden, the Netherlands, which recently acquired a “Crowfoot Collection” of spinning and weaving equipment from her grandson, called her a “Grande Dame of archaeological textiles” (Textile Research Centre 2015).

Grace Mary Crowfoot was in some ways a “colonial” character, because she spent her career in the British Empire, and yet as far as I know she never had a paying job, so her status was unofficial. For this reason, an historian seeking her in places like the British National Archives in London, the Sudan Archive in Durham, or the National Records Office in Khartoum is unlikely to find her, unless sources mention her in passing as the wife of John Winter Crowfoot (1873-1959). A committed archaeologist himself who, lacking independent wealth, earned an income for most of his career by holding jobs in the educational sphere, John Winter Crowfoot served with the Education Department in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan from 1903 to 1926, first as Assistant

2. Grace Mary Crowfoot’s book on hand-spinning was re-issued in 1974, while one can buy new offprints of the original 1931 edition via online booksellers. It was also recently featured on a website called Handweaving.net which is maintained by a software engineer (and serious amateur hand-weaver) living on an island near Seattle, Washington!

Director of Education and later as Director of Gordon College in Khartoum. He subsequently became Director of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, where he investigated Iron Age ceramics and other subjects (E. Crowfoot 2004; Thornton 2011).

Despite her near-invisibility in official British sources, Grace Mary Crowfoot intervened in early twentieth century Sudanese history as a result of private conversations – we might call them “intimate exchanges” – that she had with men and women in northern Sudan. She had an especially striking impact on female scholarship and women’s health. Conversations were her theatre of the intimate: they were ephemeral, and left few traces in colonial archives, but left an impression on history. Studying the intimate may allow us to recover the history of this singular woman, and more broadly of Sudanese and British women in this period. At the same time, her story reveals some of the historical entanglements that have drawn places like Sudan, Britain, Egypt, and other countries together, while suggesting the role of individuals in making global history.

THE EDUCATED FEMALE

I first encountered Grace Mary Crowfoot and became curious about her when I read the translated Arabic memoirs of Babikr Bedri (1856-1954), whom many Sudanese still hail as the “father” of Sudanese girls’ education. A devout Muslim, Babikr Bedri fought in the jihadist armies of the Sudanese Mahdi as a young man, but later collaborated cautiously with the British and promoted British-style “modern” education for boys and girls, adapted to Muslim culture, for example, by the inclusion of Koranic study. He founded many schools, and laid the foundations for a higher institution for females – now called Ahfad University for Women – which his children and grandchildren later developed.

What influenced and inspired Babikr Bedri as he became an early Sudanese champion of girls’ education? After 1900 in Sudan, he apparently saw the girls’ schools that Christian missionaries were setting up near Khartoum – for Egyptian expatriates and separately for poor children of slave backgrounds – and realized their potential for local Muslim girls of distinguished families (Sharkey 2003: 55). Before Babikr Bedri, it was unthinkable for a “good” Muslim girl to attend school outside her home. His memoirs contain stories about how he had to convince his neighbours to send their daughters to school, and about the promises he made to protect the girls’ honour or to prevent male strangers from seeing them (Bedri 1980: 132, 139-40). His memoirs are equally remarkable for their stories about his pedagogical creativity – in spite of limited resources – as manifested, for example, in the way he decided to teach world geography to children by painting a globe onto a pumpkin, or by devising rhymes based on materials in current Arabic books as mnemonic devices (Bedri 1980: 116, 119-20).

Babikr Bedri included some memorable pages in his memoirs about Grace Crowfoot, who impressed him with her sharp intellect and sense of adventure (Bedri 1980: 206-8). She appears in them with a degree of specificity that no other female matches. In 1917, he wrote, Grace Crowfoot accompanied her husband on a trek to inspect government boys' schools. In a humorous passage (which is not only funny, but which also illustrates his brilliance as a memoirist in using sharp details to conjure images), Babikr Bedri describes how Grace Crowfoot dressed like a man – confusing one Sudanese village leader who hosted them – and how she rode a camel fearlessly. During this trip, whenever they stopped for a break, Babikr Bedri helped her collect botanical specimens, record their Arabic names, and describe their life cycles, thereby supplying some of the information that later appeared in her book: indeed, she gave Babikr Bedri credit accordingly (Crowfoot 1928: Foreword). For example, he wrote:

Next morning we feasted our eyes and I filled the honoured lady's bag with all kinds of blossoms, writing their names down for her according to the varieties of trees from which they came. She was particularly delighted with a *sidr* [*Ziziphus jujuba*, or jujube] tree bearing blossoms of four other species, *indarab*, *'aradayb*, *dabkir*, and *haraz*. This is called "*al-qula'i*", which I explained to her in a note as follows: "*Al-qula'i*" is the term given to a shoot of a species of plant growing upon a branch of a different species of plant, having no stem nor root in the earth. It grows from a seed eaten by a bird and deposited in its droppings upon the branch of a different species at the beginning of the rainy season (Bedri 1980: 207).

We cannot know exactly what they said to each other during the trek: this is a practical problem of trying to understand an intimate and fleeting medium like conversation. What is clear, nevertheless, is that Grace Mary Crowfoot appeared in the *Memoirs of Babikr Bedri* as a role model: an exemplar of the dedicated modern female scholar and wife.

In 1956, when Sudan gained independence from Britain, only an estimated 4% of Sudanese females were literate, but even this low literacy rate reflected the rapid efforts of figures like Babikr Bedri to develop girls' schools during the first half of the twentieth century, and represented an increase over the 1% of females said to be literate in 1945 (Sharkey 2003: 68). Female illiteracy has inhibited historians, who in the Arabic-speaking regions of Sudan tend to rely on textual sources. Oral history has arguably never "taken off" as an historical method in Sudan to the degree that it has in other parts of Africa, notwithstanding a few vivid exceptions (Sharkey, Vezzadini, and Seri-Hersch 2015: 8), and therefore, for the pre-1956 period, Northern Sudanese history as written has almost exclusively been *men's* history, while the responsibility for studying women has mostly fallen to anthropologists who do fieldwork. This absence of women from the historical record now makes Grace Mary Crowfoot's scholarship on textiles – one of her other areas of expertise – even more valuable.

FEMALES IN SCHOLARSHIP: WOMEN AS WEAVERS AND ARTISTS

To write her book *Methods of Hand-Spinning in Egypt and Sudan*, which was published in 1931, Crowfoot used archaeological evidence from ancient Egypt and Sudan together with evidence drawn from what she observed. In Sudan, besides collecting botanical specimens during the treks she went on with her husband, Crowfoot collected information from spinners and weavers, who were almost all female. She spoke to women in villages, took photographs with her own camera, and drew— or later enlisted one of her daughters, identified as “D.”, suggesting either Dorothy (born 1910) or Diana (born 1918), to draw— detailed pictures of what spinners and weavers did and made (Crowfoot 1931: Foreword).

From the short biography that Crowfoot’s daughter Elizabeth published on an internet site devoted to unearthing the history of female archaeologists, we know that one day, Grace Crowfoot visited the distinguished Sudanese Muslim Sufi leader, Sherif Yusuf al-Hindi, and admired a camel-girth she saw in his tent. She was so impressed by its artistry that she asked to meet the maker, who turned out to be a woman named Sitt Zeinab (the lady Zeinab). Sitt Zeinab rode to Khartoum by camel so that she could set up her loom to teach Crowfoot how to do it (E. Crowfoot 2004).³

Crowfoot described Sitt Zeinab as “a famous spinner and weaver...from the Batahin of Abu Deleiq”, who made one of the finest yarns that she had ever seen. So intelligent and resourceful was this Zeinab that she included blue and red threads besides “the usual black and white ones” in her weaving, even though the colouring of wool was not practiced in Sudan. Crowfoot explained that Sitt Zeinab obtained red yarn by “unravelling certain German shawls imported into the country”, and took blue yarn from a blue fabric, a kind of serge, imported from France and sold “in traditional lengths for the native market with an unwoven portion at one end”: these unwoven threads were what she then used (Crowfoot 1931: 12; see also Plate 10). These details are valuable for two reasons: Crowfoot gives us a specific example of a mostly female art and of a single artist, Sitt Zeinab, whose work would otherwise be unknown and forgotten; and she reminds us that under British rule Sudan had trading connections— other partners in history— with places like France and Germany, too.

Crowfoot’s book on hand-weaving implies that the gender dynamics of spinning and weaving were in a state of flux: these arts were not “traditional” in the sense of being static. Most of the weavers and spinners she met and photographed were women or girls, and yet she did encounter a few older

3. The Sudan Archive in Durham contains photographs donated by heirs of the Crowfoot family. Among these are many photographs, taken by Grace Mary Crowfoot, of spinners, weavers, and other artisans. There are even glass negatives of pictures showing Sitt Zeinab weaving a camel girth! SAD .8/36/1-4 (J.W. and G.M. Crowfoot Collection).

men, at least one of whom, from a place in the Nuba Mountains, she photographed and included in her book (Crowfoot 1931: Plates 33 and 34). The further south one went in Sudan, she noted, the more likely it was that one would meet a man who spun or wove. By contrast, the men she met in the northern regions who did spinning tended to be “old men...who are rather ashamed of it”, suggesting that in the early 1930s, Sudanese spinning and weaving were becoming increasingly “female” arts (Crowfoot 1931: 39).

Today, few historians of Sudan are likely to read Crowfoot’s books about textiles, botany, and even archaeology, because Sudan historians tend to write mostly about political and social history from the perspective of what educated men wrote or did. But Crowfoot’s books deserve wider attention. In their details we may be able to find things – as in this case, about women’s artistry, trading networks, and the history of Sudanese material culture – that we would otherwise not detect.

In a similar vein, her book on botany also contains useful details, because through conversation, she learned about the material culture surrounding various plants. She was able to tell us, for example, that some Sudanese people not only ate the fruit of the *Zizyphus ‘spina christi’* – *sidr* in Arabic – but also put the branches of the tree over the doors of houses at weddings, while others favoured the branches of a particular olive, *Olea chrysophilla* – *dadd’a* in Arabic – to make walking sticks (Crowfoot 1928: Plates 96 and 112). She also hinted that plants might testify to global exchanges: for instance, she described *Argemone Mexicana*, the “Mexican poppy”, as “a wanderer from overseas, possibly imported [from North America] with cotton, now spread over the Sudan” (Crowfoot 1928: Plate 5).

INFIBULATION AND THE FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING CONTROVERSY

Grace Mary Crowfoot did not attend university, apparently because her parents considered it to be unnecessary for females. But she had a keen interest in medicine, and studied midwifery at the Clapham Maternity Hospital in London before her marriage, in part because she had been considering a career as a Christian medical missionary abroad. In fact, her daughter remarked, it was only when she started to become more serious about this career that John Winter Crowfoot realized that he needed to hurry and ask her to marry him or else risk losing her to medicine forever (E. Crowfoot 2004)!

In 1919, while she was living with her husband in Khartoum, a midwife invited her to attend a Sudanese childbirth. She came away shocked (Sharkey 2003: 57). At this birth, she saw first-hand what it meant for a Sudanese woman to be “circumcised” according to the local practice of infibulation, which entailed the excision and suturing of the external female genitalia and the near-closure of the vaginal opening. This operation had grave consequences for many women during menstruation, sexual intercourse, and, as

Crowfoot realized, childbirth. It meant that to deliver a baby a Sudanese woman required an incision through scar tissue, and new stitches (or re-infibulation) afterwards to close the wound.

It is safe to say that the British in Sudan did not consider it polite to discuss female genitalia in public, but Grace Mary Crowfoot refused to keep quiet. In 1921, at a dinner party, she sat next to the British Governor-General, Sir Lee Stack, and discussed the Sudanese practice of infibulation. We know this because years later, C.A. Willis, the British director of Sudanese intelligence, recalled in his unpublished memoirs (now preserved in the Sudan Archive at Durham University) that the Governor-General called him to the palace the next day and described his embarrassment at having to sit at the dinner party while Grace Mary Crowfoot insisted on speaking loudly about the practice (Sharkey 2003: 57)! She also asked Stack to bring British midwives to Sudan so that they could try to address, and perhaps even stop, the practice.

As a result of this conversation, the British colonial regime – which otherwise paid little attention to Sudanese women's issues – agreed to start a midwifery training programme in Khartoum. The authorities hired two of Crowfoot's friends, the British sisters Gertrude and Mabel Wolff, whom Crowfoot had met years before when she was studying midwifery in London. The Wolff sisters tried to encourage hygienic practices during childbirth (for example, by teaching Sudanese women how to boil knives to sterilize them), and allegedly promoted a less extreme form of infibulation. Many scholars have now written about the phenomenon of infibulation in Sudan, successive controversies that have arisen around attempts to stop the practice, and its persistence until today, despite all efforts (for example, Abusharaf 2006; and Boddy 2007). Crowfoot's impact or legacy on the history of female circumcision and its controversies is obviously important, and yet very ambiguous. She forced British officials like the Governor-General, Sir Lee Stack, to acknowledge the practice, and to dedicate resources to Sudanese women's maternal health. But did her efforts, and the efforts of the Wolff sisters and others, change minds and stop or even modify the practice? The jury, so to speak, is still out. What is clear is that Crowfoot's overtures to the Governor-General helped attract funding to women's medical care and led to the training of Sudanese midwives, including early pioneers like Batoul Muhammad 'Isa and Sitt Gindiya Salih, who were among the first salaried female government employees in Sudan (Elhadd 2011; and Sharkey 1998: 25-28 for a biography of Batoul Muhamad 'Isa).

CONCLUSION

Years ago, I visited the National Portrait Gallery in London, and after looking at paintings of English kings and queens – Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, and so on – I wandered into a room of twentieth-century British luminaries. I found myself facing the painting of a messy-haired female scientist seated at her desk

with a sculpture of molecules. The label announced that this was Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin, winner of the 1964 Nobel Prize in chemistry, and the wife of Thomas Hodgkin, a man whose name I recognized because I had read one of his books, entitled *Nationalism in Colonial Africa* (1956), some years before. (Thomas Hodgkin's book, which was published in the year Sudan gained independence, took a Marxist approach, and treated African decolonization with an optimism bordering on jubilation.) "Crowfoot?", I wondered. "Could this be a relation of Grace Mary Crowfoot?"

And so she was. Grace Mary Crowfoot, botanist, textile historian, archaeologist, and midwife, was the mother of Nobel Laureate Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin (1910-1994), who was only the third female after Marie Curie and Curie's daughter Irène Joliot-Curie to win the Nobel Prize for Chemistry. Strikingly, even now, on the label attached to her portrait in the online catalogue, the National Portrait Gallery connects Dorothy to her distinguished husband, but not to her distinguished mother (National Portrait Gallery 2016)! Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin was an Oxford professor who trained a generation of chemists, including the future Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. Some now say that news of Crowfoot's winning the Nobel Prize appears to have been a turning point – and a major source of inspiration – for Thatcher in the midst of her budding political career, despite the differences in their political outlooks. Indeed, the story of their relationship became the subject of a radio play by Adam Ganz, which was broadcast by the BBC in 2014 (BBC 2014). Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin made major discoveries through X-ray crystallography, for example by finding the molecular structure of penicillin, which enabled the semi-synthetic production of antibiotics after World War II. Two of her other notable successes include discovering the structure of vitamin B12 and insulin. I see a resemblance between the kind of high-patience, detail-oriented work that her mother applied to the study of Sudanese plants and textiles and the high-patience, detail-oriented work that her daughter applied to the chemical analysis of molecules. Strikingly, Dorothy Hodgkin's daughter – and Grace Mary Crowfoot's granddaughter – Elizabeth Hodgkin (b. 1941) has maintained the family connection to Sudan. She taught medieval history at the University of Khartoum in the 1970s, helped found a newsletter called *Sudan Update* in the 1980s (while also working for Amnesty International), and more recently served as a fellow of the Rift Valley Institute, which promotes the study of policy and action in Sudan and neighbouring countries (Rift Valley Institute 2016). According to Elizabeth Hodgkin (who wrote an email to the author in August 2016), her mother Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin traced her interest in a career in science to a trip to Sudan, in 1923, when she was thirteen years old. In particular, during her stay, she visited the Wellcome Laboratory in Khartoum and met Dr. A.J. Joseph, whose work inspired her.

On a whim, I conducted a Google search on Babikr Bedri and found references to Zeinab Badawi, who is one of his great-granddaughters. Zeinab Badawi is an Oxford graduate and a journalist on BBC's World News Today

programme who is based in London, where she has also served on the Board of Trustees of the National Portrait Gallery – the same museum where the painting of Grace Crowfoot’s Nobel-prize-winning daughter now hangs. UNESCO featured her for International Women’s Day in 2016, and discussed her recent commitment to the UNESCO General History of Africa programme (UNESCO 2016). As internet searches suggest, Zeinab Badawih has also founded a charity known as the Africa Medical Partnership Fund (AfriMed), which helps local medical professionals in Africa – perhaps continuing the thread of grass-roots medical care that runs through this story.

While preparing my paper for the REAF conference in Paris, tracing connections between people while speculating on this history of intimacy through conversation, I felt as if I were uncovering a subterranean history of illustrious women and their networks across time and place. This history connected, for example, one Zeinab – SittZeinab, talented and illustrious weaver of camel girths – to ZeinabBadawi, BBC journalist; and Grace Mary Crowfoot, botanist, textile expert, and trained midwife, to Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin, Nobel-prize-winning chemist. Maybe that is one of the things that the history of intimacy can do for us: it can help us uncover histories of women that formal records otherwise ignore or hide. In the Sudan, Grace Mary Crowfoot was what a speaker of American English might call a “mover and shaker”: she initiated events and influenced people, even if she did so behind the scenes. Through the history of intimacy, perhaps we may be able to find evidence of other movers and shakers among mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, and their descendants.

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