Part III

Encounters with Modernity, Sudan and Sudan–Ethiopia borderlands
Chapter 6

The rise and decline of lorry driving in the Fallata migrant community of Maiurno on the Blue Nile

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Maiurno on the Blue Nile in central Sudan was founded as the last station of the Fallata hégira (religious migration) from the defunct Sokoto Caliphate (northern Nigeria) after its fall into the hands of the British colonial army in 1903. Its name derives from that of the Fulani Sultan, Mai-Wurno, who first settled there with his people and followers. The first generation of settlers remained conservative, resistant to any influence of the host communities and suspicious of anything connected to the colonial administrators, whom they considered to be ‘unbelievers’. But the immediate descendants of the first migrants proved to be more enthusiastic – even more so than the local people – towards the instruments of the modern colonial economy in Sudan. Lorries were one of the first and most important of these instruments, and the lorry drivers – those who steered these instruments – obtained a novel and remarkable status from their role. Lorry driving started to attract recruits from among the Maiurno youths from the 1930s, and lorry driving reached its zenith in the 1960s and 1970s. But in the last fifteen years this profession has witnessed a drastic setback and decline.

My chapter traces the introduction, development and decline of lorry driving in Maiurno.1 Through this, I examine the perceptions that the Maiurno people had of themselves, their place in the world and the changes that have taken place from this early settlement until today. Unlike Duffield (1981), who treated this subject from a capitalist point of view, our study focuses on the glorious image of the lorry driver as reflected in the eyes of the Fallata in Maiurno and the other Fallata-related communities along the Blue Nile. It will argue that the fantastic image that

1. This chapter is based on data that have been collected since 1996 by Prof. G. Schlee and the author on the Fallata communities of the Blue Nile within the framework of the project: ‘Ethnicity in a new context’. The author is indebted in this regard to the German sponsoring bodies (DFG and Max Planck Institute) as well as to Prof. G. Schlee, the initiator and head of the project. The author is also grateful to Dr Leoma Gilley for comments on the wording of the first draft of this chapter.
developed derived not only from the financial comfort of the lorry driver; there were other more important factors that contributed to its creation. The decline of the transport business in Southern Blue Nile over the last fifteen years has negatively affected the lorry driver's financial comfort, but his image started to lose its glitter some years before. This study also tries to examine why this is the case.

The Formative Period of Maiurno Society

Present-day Maiurno town lies on the western bank of the Blue Nile, 15 km south of Sennar, and covers an area of approximately 8 sq. km. It has c. 30,000 inhabitants. The major ethnic groups living in it are the Fulani (71.7 per cent), Hausa (16.4 per cent) and Songhai (7.7 per cent). Arabic is widely spoken by almost everybody, but language use in Maiurno is also characterized by multilingualism (Fulfulde, Hausa and Arabic).

All informants emphasized the simplicity of life in Maiurno during the first three decades after its establishment (1900–30) and yet evidence from our data and archival sources show that this new settlement witnessed its most turbulent life during this period. Many new waves of migrants from West Africa and from other regions in Sudan followed the steps of the hegira and joined Sultan Mai-Wurno in Maiurno. Some clan leaders went out of Maiurno to found their own settlements with the consent of Mai-Wurno, while others, namely the core of the Borno Fulani, left in resentment because of mistreatment by the Maiurno ruling circle. Other groups headed southward along the Blue Nile and eastward to River Atbara and River Setit to escape from famine. This period also witnessed the construction of the Sennar dam, for which most of the physically able Maiurno people provided labour. There were also, at this time, internal disputes among those competing for power. Mai-Wurno came into conflict with the colonial administration because their policies were unsettled and they were unclear about what position and recognition they were to award him. Other

2. The bulk of these are originally Fulani who were assimilated into Songhai culture and lost the use of their ancestral language (Fulfulde) long before their migration to Sudan. The percentages indicated above were obtained from a language survey carried out by the author in 1977 while preparing for his MA.

3. These include the Katsina Fulani richest migrant, Faruku, who founded Hillat al Beer (jointly with a Borno Fulani clan leader, Jawro Hamma), Dindir Kawli and Wad al Obeid (information from Omar Jum’a Muhammad, eighty-four years old, born in Dindir, interviewed in Maiurno on 08 November 2000). They also included Mai-Laga, a Sullubawa Fulani clan leader, who left around 1925 to found the village of Mai-Laga on River Setit in eastern Sudan (information from Osman Hassan Muhammad, eighty-three years old, born in Maiurno, interviewed by the author and Catherine Miller in Mai-Laga on 08 March 1996).

4. The best example is that of Sultan Ahmed of Misau, who returned from Mecca in response to his people’s request and moved away with them to establish his own settlements (Gağani and Abd al Khallag, c. 70 km and 75 km, respectively, south of Maiurno on the Blue Nile) in 1915. For example, the founders of the villages of Basis Hamma Kumbo and Wuro Jibo, both on the western bank of the Blue Nile, about 80 km and 85 km, respectively, south of Maiurno.

5. In 1930 Mai-Wurno burst out in front of the DC of Mukwar: ‘I am not a fool. I know why the Government treats me with undeserved suspicion thinking that I will stir up trouble’, Sudan Central Records (SCR): 36-D-15, 4 February 1930.
Maiurno people were also opposed to the colonisers' strong promotion of secular schooling.7

It was under these conditions that aspects of modernity started to take shape in the village, mostly coming from outside. The first non-local (Arab) merchants came from the Gezira, from al Jadid, some 30 km south of Khartoum. Simultaneously, a group of Hausa traders emerged, notably Abarshi and Mai-Saje. When the first group of tailors8 arrived in Maiurno in the mid-1920s, the market was, by and large, dominated by the Hausa traders. As sewing machines were installed in shops, the relatives of these Hausa traders monopolized the early opportunities to be engaged in this new ‘ultra-modern’ profession.9 In 1925, Sultan Mai-Wurno’s compound moved away from the river to its present site, while Dan Galadima Hassan and his brother Wali, the Sultan’s successive viziers, were left behind as shaikhs of the Hausa (traders’) quarter. It is worth noting that the members of the Maiurno ruling family, although originally Fulani, spoke Hausa as their first language at that time, and were thus identified as Hausa rather than Fulani. So the result of the above association, as noted by Duffield (1981: 37), ‘was to render Hausa the language of both market and authority’.10 This, of course, had some bearing on Fulani/Hausa relations in Maiurno. It created a feeling of dissatisfaction among the Fulani, who constituted the great majority of the inhabitants, leading some of their clans (mostly the Borno Fulani) to migrate from the village, as noted above.

However, this situation did not last for long. The emergence of lorry driving in the 1930s changed the balance of power. The first three generations of Fulani engaged in this occupation balanced out the prestigious comfort enjoyed hitherto by the Hausa group of merchants. Later on, it also overturned the situation in terms of affluence and prestige.

Introduction of the Lorry and Lorry Driving in Maiurno

The first lorry in Maiurno was bought by Sultan Mai-Wurno in 1930. This event was associated with a series of disputes between Mai-Wurno and the colonial administration, engendered indirectly by the way Mai-Wurno wanted to secure money for this purpose. By 1928 the Sultan had already established two of his wives in Dindir Kawli, a village founded by his followers on River Dindir (approximately 35 km east of Maiurno). His intention was to make Dindir Kawli the second seat of

7. For the reasons for, and ways of resistance to the secular school by the early Maiurno generations, see Abu-Manga (1993).
8. Some of them were Arabs from Gezira, whereas two of them were Borno (Kanuri) from Gedaref.
9. The first two local tailors were Abbakar Dabalo and his brother Tahir, and the latter was the first Maiurno citizen to own a sewing machine. However, both of them later shifted to trade and opened shops in the market, thus adding to the group of Hausa merchants.
10. Now the situation has changed considerably. Today Fulfulde is spoken in the Sultans’ compound more than Hausa, and the family has started once again to be regarded as Fulani, which suggests that language is stronger as an indication of identity than ethnicity. More discussion on this point will be made in a subsequent work.
his court for ruling the newly founded Fallata settlements in that area. However, he seemed not to have needed the lorry only 'for visits of his villages in Dindir and for transporting his grains', as established by Nasr (1980: 11–12) and Duffield (1981: 115), but probably also to compete with the other heads and chiefs enrolled in the Native Administration, in terms of status and prestige.

Up until this time he had no source of capital, so he dispatched his son Muhammad Tahir, in December 1929, to collect money from the Fallata settlements established by his followers in eastern Sudan (Gedaref/Kassala area). But by that time a new Native Administration law had already been promulgated which gave him no rights to these settlements. Accordingly, Muhammad Tahir was ordered to return from Gedaref, an action that stirred the fury of Mai-Wurno against the colonial administration. After a series of letters between Kassala, Gedaref, Medani and Makwar (now Sennar), in April 1930 Muhammad Tahir was given restricted permission to visit Gedaref and Kassala towns only (and not the surrounding Fallata villages). However, even in these towns he was able to collect 'abundant money – sheede kifayya', as stated by an informant and confirmed by colonial reports: 'His son had been to Gedaref and Kassala; he had been able to scrape together enough money to purchase the motor lorry which he had set his heart on, and to all outward appearance he regarded the incident of his son's treatment at Gedaref as closed.'

The story of the first driver of that lorry – Awad Salim by name – is not shorter than the lorry itself. Awad Salim, identified as Dongolese by one informant and as Malakiyya (ex-slave) by another, was working for the company where the lorry was bought. He was asked to drive the lorry to Maiurno and bring back the number plates. But Awad Salim then decided to continue working in the lorry, although Muhammad Tahir had already promised the job to somebody in Kassala. At last Awad Salim settled permanently in Maiurno, married one Fulani woman and then another Mawalid Fulani woman originally from Shaikh Talha. He gave birth to many children, who grew up as Maiurno citizens with a rich linguistic repertoire (speaking Fulfulde, Hausa and Arabic).

11. Maybe following the tradition of some of his predecessors in the Sokoto Caliphate, notably Muhammad Bello (after whom he was named), who used to have court seats in both Sokoto and Wurno in present-day northern Nigeria.


13. Omar Jum’a Muhammad (see note 3).

14. From Governor, Blue Nile Province to the Civil Secretary, Sudan Government, Khartoum, BNP/SCR/36.G.3, 21 April 1930. As an aftermath of this ‘lorry incident’ the colonial government decided at last to demarcate a strip of land for Mai-Wurno and to give him some kind of title or status within the framework of the Native Administration.

15. In the 1960s he moved to Sennar and died there. His Fulani widow left afterwards for Saudi Arabia to join her former husband in Medina. When the author performed the pilgrimage in 1995, he found her still physically and mentally fit. She asked about many Maiurno people, most of whom were already dead. She died two years ago, aged over 100.
A few months after the purchase of the first lorry, the Sultan brought another, second-hand one, this time not out of necessity but in order to fulfil the promise made by his son to the Hausa driver from Kassala – Ibrahim Bayaza by name. That person, according to one informant, used to have two lorries of his own. When Muhammad Tahir, who happened to be travelling in Ibrahim Bayaza’s lorry, expressed his wish to find a driver of his calibre for the lorry his father intended to buy, the man got rid of his own lorries and came to Maiurno to serve Dan Fodio’s descendants in order to gain their blessings. But, as mentioned above, ‘the Arab refused to step down’. The Sultan was then obliged to buy another lorry so as to create a job for the Hausa driver. Towards the end of the 1930s, a third lorry was bought jointly by the Sultan and a merchant of Syrian origin coming from Wad Medani. In order to be well established in Maiurno, that merchant married into Mai-Wurno’s family and opened a shop in the market. During the 1940s and 1950s, lorry ownership became independent from the monopoly of the royal family and extended to local merchants and successful lorry drivers, who, with the exception of one, were all Fulani.

With regard to lorry driving, our informants disagree on where the first generation of Maiurno drivers received their initial training in this profession. While one informant insists that they all started and were trained outside Maiurno (Medani, Khartoum, western Sudan), another informant asserts that they started their apprenticeships in Maiurno under the first three outsiders and then, later, travelled outside, where they received advanced training until they became drivers. Unfortunately, five of the six members of this first generation are now dead, and only the surviving member (Muhammad Ibrahim Sajo, eighty-seven years old) could be interviewed. He emphasized with a kind of pride that he was trained by the khawaajaat (white men), which may support the assertion of the first informant. However, it is important to note that the ‘Italian War’ (the Second World War) constituted a significant factor in their career, not only in terms of the skills and experiences gained during their service in Eritrea and Ethiopia, but also regarding the orientation of their characters and behaviour, as will be seen later. But, with all their adventures in the above war, only one member of this generation was successful enough to own a lorry.

Most of the members of the second generation of Maiurno drivers received training under Arab drivers in Wad Medani, Khartoum and western Sudan. They

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16. Omar Jum’a Muhammad (see note 3).
17. Duffield (1981: 115) listed it erroneously as the second.
18. Omar Jum’a Muhammad (see note 3).
20. These were Bazagalli, Abbakar Busa, Muhammad Sajo, Muhammad Bello Abd al Wahab, Yahia Galadima and Ahmad Duddu.
21. Interviewed in Maiurno on 13 November 2000. His master was called Michael, pronounced Misheel, which sounds like a Lebanese Christian. M. Sajo was also proud of having been examined for the driving licence by a British man. His driving licence is dated 1935.
22. In reference to the Sudanese campaign in Eritrea and Ethiopia during the Second World War.
23. They include people like Osman Shanuwa, Hamid Parapato, Mu’az Abdullahi, Abbakar Mai-Katuru, Sanda Sawamil, Siddig Saksaka, Muhammad Abbakar Moli and Shindo Turaki.
then came back and started to operate regular trips between Sennar/Singa and southern Blue Nile to Rosseiris, Kurmuk, Geissan and even inside the Ethiopian territories, some as hired drivers and four of them with their own lorries.

All our informants agreed that lorry driving in Maiurno reached the apex of its glory in the 1960s with the emergence of the third generation of drivers whose members were far more numerous than those of the preceding generations. Until the last years of the 1960s, only two or three members of this generation had lorries of their own; all the others worked as hired drivers, based mainly in Singa. At that time Singa was the central market for gum arabic and sesame, produced in the areas of Dali and Mazmoum.

Many factors contributed to the ascension of lorry drivers to a distinguished class in Maiurno in this specific period. Members of all the three generations overlapped and associated together to constitute a large occupational group. Secondly, the transport business in Sudan at that time flourished considerably, and this eventually reflected positively on the drivers’ income. So, with their high income, they had access to all means of comfort that were inaccessible to the other sectors of the Maiurno society. Thus they soon came to surpass in status the hitherto prestigious classes of the merchants and tailors. This situation continued as such for more than two decades. When Duffield was doing his research in 1977 there were forty-seven lorries owned by Maiurno people: six owners had two lorries and one had three (Duffield 1981: 113). The number of drivers in that year reached 160, the overwhelming majority of whom were Fulani, which led Duffield to conclude that ‘lorry driving and especially lorry ownership is largely the prerogative of the descendants of Maiurno’s Fulani and not its Hausa settlers’ (ibid.). So, if in the 1920s Hausa was ‘the language of both market and authority’, in the 1970s Fulfulde became the language of lorry driving and the transportation business, and it started to displace Hausa in the ‘market’ and ‘authority’ domains.

The Glorious Image of the Lorry Driver in Maiurno and the Related Fallata Settlements

An informant recalls: ‘We started to see lorries here in Maiurno since the time when the “unbelievers” [probably Greeks] used to pass through on the way. We usually went out, with nothing on us except our pants, to watch the lorries’. So the first sight of lorries in Maiurno was associated with the ‘unbelievers’, the ‘business’ of whom the first conservative generation of the migrants resisted strongly, including their (i.e. the ‘unbelievers’) secular system of education and their way of dressing. It is paradoxical that, in the end, Maiurno became indebted for its social and economic development to this ‘unbelievers’ thing’.


25. Muhammad Abbakar Moli, seventy-eight years old, born in Maiurno, member of the second generation of drivers, interviewed in Maiurno on 14 November 2000.
We have seen that all the six members of the first generation of drivers served in Eritrea and/or Ethiopia in the early years of their occupational career during the ‘Italian War’. Some of these drivers seemed to have been outstanding on the war front, which earned them a praise song by the famous woman singer, the late Ai’isha al Fallatiyya. An informant recalls some verses of this song, whose words run as follows:

Return once again; return once again
Gondar is far, oh usta … Allah
He pressed the accelerator until it rang
He knocked the gear shift lever until it sang … Allah
Don’t let a child overcome you
Don’t let the hills overturn you … Allah
… its [the lorry] driver is from the kai wannan.

Such folk literature about lorry drivers is abundant in the Fallata settlements along the Blue Nile south of Maiurno. One of the popular songs in that area (and in Maiurno as well) is Gunduwaare, which eulogizes a number of the first and second generations of the Fallata lorry drivers. An informant relates that during the 1950s, when a driver was to stay overnight in a certain village in that area, girls would bring him fried chicken and boiled milk and spend the night chatting (innocently) with him. There was even a woman in that village who was so infatuated with lorry drivers that she sometimes accompanied some of them on their trips. Her nickname appears in the above-mentioned popular song of Gunduwaare. Other descriptions of the lorry driver of that time included in our data are the following: ‘he was more important than a government employee’; ‘he was the mughtarib of

26. She was the first Sudanese woman singer heard on the radio. She was of Hausa background, taken to the front to entertain the Sudanese army fighting in Ethiopia during the Second World War.
28. A town in Ethiopia near the Sudanese border, one of the fighting fronts.
29. A Hausa expression meaning ‘oh you’. In the Sudan it symbolizes the Fallata in general (i.e. all people originating from West Africa). A colleague at Khartoum University coming from Kassala (near the Eritrean border) affirms that this specific song is well known in his hometown.
30. Such folk literature, however, might not be confined to the Fallata settlements, because an epithet in praise of an Arab village called al Dali (on the way between Singa and Mazmum) exists in Arabic, probably composed by its inhabitants. It says:
   Al Daali habibak Al Daali is your beloved (village)
   Abu-Manga yiwaaddik Abu-Manga takes you (to it)
   Wa l khaawwaaja yiijihak And the white man brings you back
31. Omar Jum’a Muhammad (see note 3).
32. One working in a Gulf oil country. The mughtaribin are associated with abundance in every aspect of comfort.
this time; ‘he was compared to the head of state’; ‘he was higher in the eyes of the
public than the president of the world’; ‘he was a wonder, he was one of the
wonders’.

All our informants agreed that the driver derived his greatness primarily from his
ability to drive the lorry and not from his comfortable financial position. This is also
evident from the fact that he was held in higher esteem than the lorry owner (i.e. his
employer). ‘This driving used to be [regarded as] a wonderful thing,’ says an
informant. ‘When he [i.e. the driver] came out, he would walk swaggering.’ At that
time the drivers used to wear short trousers, identified with the ‘unbelievers’ and
government employees. Even children playing lorry games used to adopt the names of
distinguished drivers.

The position of the drivers in the Fallata society of the Blue Nile combined with
their magnificent image in this society contributed effectively to the psychological
formation of their personalities, developing in some of them a complex of greatness
and superiority. Some of them came to be known for inconsistent and contradictory
behaviour. For example, one of the drivers, having worked for some time under the
Italians in Ethiopia during the Second World War, strove to behave in a European
manner. He wore a European mode of dress, even at a late age, which was unusual
in Maiurno society at that time. He also used to break wind in public, an act that is
considered very shameful in the Fulani culture. He did that – he said – because the
Europeans did not find it shameful.33 He usually did not greet people whom he did
do not know very well, and he might not respond to others’ greetings, especially early
in the morning. Another driver34 boasts of being trained by the _khawaajais_ (white
men). In the interview he emphasized that, at the time he became a qualified driver,
’an naas ma bta crif haaja’ – ‘people didn’t know anything’. The use of the third
person feminine (_btacrif_) in reference to ‘people’ in this phrase has pejorative
connotations in Sudanese colloquial Arabic. This person had hardly any friends in
Maiurno, even among his fellow drivers. He used to be tough with the passengers;
he did not hesitate to insult a passenger or spit in his face or even ask him to step
down from his lorry in the middle of a trip. Another driver used to smoke marijuana
in public, though it is not only socially unacceptable but also prohibited by law.35

These examples should not be taken as general characteristics of the old Maiurno
drivers. They are some extreme cases confined to individual members of the first and
second generations. The anomalous behaviour described above was engendered by
the large gap that existed between their experiences in the urban milieu where they
spent the first years of their career (including their travels and adventures during the
’Italian War’), on the one hand, and the simple and conservative society (of Maiurno)
in which they later came to live, on the other. At the other end of the continuum of
behaviour and style there were many drivers with normal and even modest
characters, with the majority somewhere in between.

33. He once advised the author to break wind whenever he felt like it – for the sake of his health.
34. Interviewed in Maiurno on 13 November 2000.
35. This same person, being a colleague of the author’s father, smoked marijuana many times in
the author’s presence while the latter was a child.
Development of the Maiurno Drivers into a Distinguished Class

We have seen that in 1977 there were about 160 drivers in Maiurno. Of course, these did not all have the same status. They could be classified into first, second and third class drivers according to a number of variables, such as age, experience, skill, lorry ownership and other personal qualities. A group of five or six junior drivers might have been trained under a single senior driver. Therefore, another possible classification of these 160 drivers would be to group them according to masters (usually few in number) and students (usually many in number).

By the time Duffield was doing his research in Maiurno (1977–79) the lorry drivers had already formed a distinguished class. The emergence of this class followed a gradual process that started to take shape in the early 1960s, when the number of the drivers ranged between thirty-five and fifty. At that time there were no asphalt roads in the entire country. During the dry season the majority of Maiurno lorry owners and drivers were to be found south of Sennar in the areas of Mazmoum, Rosseiris, Geissan and Kurmuk, which were the main commercial centres in Southern Blue Nile region. By the end of May, when the rains were about to begin, their activities there would start to lose momentum, and, from the middle of June until October, the roads south of Singa were virtually closed to lorry traffic. Almost all the lorry owners and drivers would return to Maiurno, some hired drivers coming along with their lorries and some others parking them in their owners’ respective hometowns or villages. So ‘at the end of the season’ (in their words), the hired drivers would collect all their savings and return to enjoy a pleasant three-month vacation. This vacation used to be a peak period, not only for the drivers but also for the village in general. Their excessive expenditure used to animate the economic life and their handsome appearance used to attract the admiration of people, especially of children and young girls. For ‘not only do drivers form friendship groups amongst themselves, but they strive to maintain the appearance of sophistication and affluence with their fluent Arabic, clean, pressed gowns, dark glasses and heavy wristwatches’ (Duffield 1981: 113). Some drivers were known for their particular styles of turban winding. Every well-established driver had to have a blanket, the value of which matched his status. For example, first-class drivers possessed expensive wool blankets. At a certain time they also possessed coats for winter.

As mentioned above, during their vacation the drivers associated amongst themselves in the form of friendship groups, usually according to their generation. They used to take breakfast (around 9.00–10.00 a.m.) in restaurants. By that time they had already bought foodstuff for lunch (lamb meat, fish, chicken, vegetables, salad, etc.) and sent it to their respective homes. Before midday, members of each group would gather in the house of the colleague who had a convenient guest-room to play cards.36 The owner of the house sometimes offered lunch to the entire gathering; otherwise a number of them would send for food to be fetched from their homes and to be eaten collectively. They would disperse in the early evening. Some of them would meet once again in the late evening to chat, while others reserved this time for the family.37

36. The house of the author’s father used to be one of the gathering places.
37. The author does not remember seeing them taking alcohol.
Until the 1980s, the Maiurno drivers did not have a formal organization and yet they were ‘united as one block’, according to one informant. They used to exchange visits with the Singa (Fallata) drivers, whereby reciprocal grandiose hospitality was offered, including the slaughtering of rams. Before the end of their vacation, some lorry owners would come to Maiurno to book drivers. The Maiurno drivers were highly valued by Arab lorry owners, because of their integrity, loyalty to their profession and hard-working nature: ‘Sawwaagin Maayrino ’indahum sunt a ’aalamiyya (The Maiurno drivers have international fame [i.e. very high value]),’ states an informant.38 ‘If you didn’t hire a driver from Maiurno, [it was as if] you hadn’t done anything.’

This pattern of the drivers’ life and socialization during their vacation continued to varying degrees until the early 1980s. The flourishing of the transportation business in Sudan during that period largely facilitated their lavish lifestyle.

During the height of their social and economic position, lorry drivers were the dream of every girl of marriageable age. A number of lorry drivers married into the Arabized Fulani and Arab families of Shaikh Talha, from whom wives were, otherwise, not easily accessible to the simple (vernacular-speaking) Fallata of Maiurno.39 It was during this period that rich Maiurno people of all occupational and professional classes, especially successful lorry drivers, came to own the highest number of efficient lorries.40 At that time (and until recently) ‘lorry ownership is seen by the bulk of Maiurno’s population as the zenith of social and economic success’ (Duffield 1981: 116). Lorry drivers were among the first Maiurno citizens to construct relatively beautiful houses and get access to electricity and piped water.41 Some of them were enlightened enough, through contact with the Arab communities (of their employers), to be able to realize the importance of Western (secular) education and thus to secure it for their children.42 Their wives used to compete in wearing the most fashionable clothes. The drivers’ travels and visits to big towns and cities, in addition to their financial affordability, permitted them to acquire items of fashion and modern gadgets very early on, such as beautiful clothes for themselves and their families, radios, cassette recorders, etc.

38. Abu-Manga Muhammad (see note 24).
39. Shaikh Talha is situated across the river. Its inhabitants were a mixture of old immigrant Arabized Fulani and many other Sudanese (Arab) tribes. Even the originally Fulani among them identify themselves as Arabs, and thus regard themselves as being superior to the vernacular-speaking Fallata of Maiurno. So, in many cases acceptance of a Maiurno husband by a Shaikh Talha family indicates the social and financial competence of the former. Maiurno-Shaikh Talha relations will be the subject of a subsequent paper.
40. The author’s father owned two efficient lorries, a tractor and a Land-Rover for private use. See History A in Duffield (1981: 116).
41. Muhammad Ibrahim Sajo (see note 20), a member of the first generation of drivers, was the third person in Maiurno to build a house of brick – after the Sultan and A. Kagu. He was the third to join electric power to his house. Interviewed in Maiurno on 13 November 2000.
42. All children of the author’s father attended the school. His firstborn is the first in the area to reach the status of ‘Professor’, and one of his daughters is the first female in the area to reach the status of ‘Assistant Professor’.
From the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s the lorry drivers constituted a distinguished social class in Maiurno. We described them as a class because they were ‘united as one block’, and they had a distinctive outer appearance. In addition, they had their own jargon, derived mostly from the lorry parts (moving around like the fan, standing still like the brake, the woman’s differential (pronounced *difrinshi*) in reference to her (bulky) lower part). Due to their close contact with the Arab societies of their bosses, many of them developed the habit of swearing ‘by divorce’ (*aley at talang*), which is unknown in Fulani culture. But, above all, they had conventional ethics and values that they observed as strictly as possible.

The Conventional Ethics and Values of Lorry Drivers

The Maiurno drivers’ society used to be distinguished by a series of ethics and values, some of which were also shared by drivers of other non-Fallata societies. Some of these ethics and values were dictated by the rough topography and the strangeness of the people and geography of the regions in which they ran their activities. The ethics and values provided by our informants are summarized in the following points:

- Maximum assistance to a colleague whose lorry had broken down in the bush. This included waiting and helping in the repair of the fault, offering minor spare parts or lending the expensive ones (such as tyres, etc.). This is in addition to offering food and water to the lorry assistant guarding a broken lorry.
- A driver had to be honest and trustworthy vis-à-vis the lorry owner. If he was not, he would lose the sympathy of his colleagues for having damaged their image.
- A jobless driver was not expected to have his colleague sacked in order to replace him (an act referred to in their jargon as ‘*friita*’ (jacking)). If a driver was sacked by a lorry owner after a long period of service, his colleagues were not supposed to accept employment with that lorry owner.
- Financial assistance to a driver who had lost his job, including invitations for breakfast by his colleagues and provision with pocket money (known as ‘cigarette money’, even if he did not smoke).
- A driver travelling in a lorry driven by a colleague would not be charged any fare. He would, in addition, be fed by his colleague throughout the journey. If the lorry owner was the one managing the lorry and he insisted on charging the guest, the host driver would ask the owner to deduct the cost from his salary; otherwise he would threaten to ‘step down’ (leave his job).
- When a group of drivers met (accidentally) in a restaurant, the first one to get up would pay for all the others. Usually everyone would try to precede the others.

Lorry Owner-Driver Relations

Most of the lorries driven by the Maiurno drivers belonged to Arab merchants in the Gezira (between Medani and Khartoum), Sennar and Singa. A few of them belonged

43. For example, ‘If it is not so, I will divorce my wife.’
44. A jack is a portable device for raising the axle of a motor vehicle so that a wheel may be changed.
to merchants or successful former drivers from Maiurno itself. When a lorry owner was to engage a driver, this was usually done through verbal agreement (as to the salary) between the two parties. In other words, there was no question of a written and signed contract, since the majority of the drivers and many of the lorry owners were illiterate. No witnesses were even required, because the relation between the two parties was that of absolute mutual trust. All the driver needed was a notebook in which his deductions during the season were to be recorded. Apart from his salary, he was also paid a certain amount of daily pocket money, even if the lorry, for any reason, was not travelling for many days. The driver was entrusted with the lorry and would usually be advised by the owner that ‘money is not important; just keep the lorry in a good condition’. He might sometimes be left to travel about to seek for loads in his own way and bring the revenue. In other cases the owner would load the lorry with general supplies and merchandise, such as tea, sugar, oil, soap, salt and bales of cloth, which the driver would sell on his southward trip to the Southern Blue Nile. From there he would bring hardwoods, roofing laths, palm fronds and other material for furniture and building with the money he made on the way. These two systems of working conditions were ideal for the driver, because during the entire journey he had an open fund for his financial needs and hospitality, and had more freedom to fulfil his obligations towards his colleagues, which would keep him in high esteem. This would also give him an opportunity to prove his integrity. An informant\(^45\) reported that he had been working for a merchant in Wad Medani for many years under this system without having a single case of mismanagement or any doubt as to his integrity by the lorry owner.

A third system of working conditions, which was deemed unpleasant for the driver, was the case in which the owner himself or someone delegated by him (Arabic, \textit{wakiil}) carried out the task of managing the lorry, thus reducing the driver to a mere ‘steering-wheel driver’. Not only was his freedom regarding hospitality expenses and the satisfaction of other lorry-driving ethics and values considerably curtailed, but also it would annoy him that the owner or his \textit{wakiil} would keep intervening in matters related to the way he was driving. Therefore, drivers, especially of the later generations, started to refer to \textit{wakiils} (including the owners following their lorries) by terms associated with negative connotations such as ‘\textit{caarid}’ (obstacle), \textit{kataawit} (cut-out) or \textit{mufattish} (controller). However, it seems that there were also cases – though very rare – where the driver and the lorry owner (or his \textit{wakiil}) worked harmoniously and remained friendly with each other.\(^{46}\)

What the lorry owner did not like most on the part of the driver was to see his lorry and the driver always dirty or the lorry often broken down. ‘You were a good driver if you travelled from here [Maiurno] to Kurmuk and back without breaking a spring sheet,’ confirmed an informant. Such a driver would be regarded as a model.

\(^{45}\) Ahmad Omar Muhammad, sixty-five years old, born in Maiurno, interviewed on 19 December 2001.

\(^{46}\) Abu-Manga Muhammad (see note 24) quotes himself as one of these cases. At a certain time his employer’s nephew followed him as \textit{wakiil} and the two of them were on good terms: ‘He was like my son.’
On the other hand, apart from the wakiil, the driver did not like to see the lorry owner seeking information about his conduct, asking if the driver had the habit of taking alcohol or visiting prostitutes in other words 'spying on him'.

In the case of a disagreement between the owner and the driver before the end of the season, the latter would 'step down' (leave his job) by one of the following three types of symbolic acts: (1) carrying away his blanket; (2) throwing the ignition key to the owner; or (3) asking the owner to 'give him his account' (i.e. to calculate his deductions and give him the rest of his entitlement for the period of his service).

First-class drivers were usually known for their stability and long service in the same lorry, due to their unquestionable integrity, good experience in management, seriousness and charisma. In fact, it was these attributes that qualified them as first-class drivers. Such drivers usually continued smoothly up to the end of the season, i.e. the beginning of the rains. When leaving for their vacation they would get all their rights from the lorry owner amicably.

In the preceding sections we have tried to describe the position of the lorry driver in Maiurno during 'his days', right from the beginning up to the dawn of his heyday in the mid-1980s: his actual position, the picture he strove to portray of himself and his fantastic image in the eyes of the society. Throughout our description we used the past tense, because this situation has now changed drastically, and what we have said above no longer applies to the present-day lorry driver. But, before discussing the various factors behind this change, it is necessary to explore the nature of the connection of the Maiurno lorry drivers with the Southern Blue Nile region, where they mainly ran their occupational and commercial businesses.

**Maiurno Drivers in the Southern Blue Nile Region**

The Southern Blue Nile (Arabic, As Sādiq = the South) plays an important role in the history of lorry driving among the Fallata community of Maiurno and its related settlements. This region geographically comprises the area extending roughly from Wad al Nayyal south to the Ethiopian border and the northern edges of the (former) Upper Nile Province. The major commercial and/or administrative centres of this region are Rosseriris, Damazin, Geissan, Kurmuk, Mazmoum and Bunj. Almost all the Maiurno drivers were at one time connected with this area, either as lorry assistants, drivers or businessmen (after having retired from driving). Eight of them got married there,47 and half of these succeeded in establishing stable families, in addition to their Maiurno families.

To understand the nature of relations, connections and interaction between the Maiurno drivers and the different categories of people living in this region, we first need to delimit these categories as follows:

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47. These are Abbakar Suleiman (nicknamed Kharrim), Abbakar Muhammad Bello (nicknamed Mastuul), Siddig Saksaka, Al Zubeir Abdalla Ali (nicknamed Basha), Abd al Rahman Ali Babikir, Abd al Halim Mahmoud, Ibrahim Abu-Bakr (nicknamed Iro) and Ali Abbakar Busa.
1. Local inhabitants of the region (Berta speakers, Gumuz speakers, Hamaj, Ingessana, Uduk, Burun, etc.), including the Fallata immigrants (Fulani, Hausa and Borno (Kanuri)).

2. Jallaba Arab merchants who have not yet been integrated into the local communities.

3. Government employees, mostly policemen, teachers, medical assistants and (male) nurses, and recently soldiers and army officers. With the exception of the soldiers, these employees have mostly come from the Arabs (or Arabized groups) from both inside and outside the region.

4. Lorry drivers from different ethnic groups, with the Fallata constituting the largest single ethnic group.

The place of the lorry driver in the socio-economic network involving the above categories of people is dictated and explained by another important factor, namely, the underdeveloped nature of the area with regard to the fundamental services (schools, hospitals, etc.), especially roads. The only existing asphalt road ends in Damazin. As this region falls within the zone of heavy rainfall, all the roads from Damazin in every direction except the north remain closed to traffic for at least four months of the year. The topography of the region, with its many streams and hills, is considered harsh by the non-local inhabitants. Thus, the Jallaba Arab merchants, the government employees and the drivers share the common factor of 'living in a strange land', and that unites them and creates in them a feeling of solidarity in opposition to the local inhabitants of the region. This solidarity is usually expressed and affirmed through a mutual exchange of free services and gifts.

The lorry driver, however, is the central figure that links the other categories of people together and connects them with the outside world: he brings merchandise from the northern towns to the Jallaba Arab merchants stationed in that region and transports the region's products for sale in the north. In the course of his travels he also carries messages and variable goods back and forth between the Jallaba and their respective families in the Gezira. He transports the government employees to their posts in the remote areas and brings them their needs from the towns. He may also carry messages to their respective families in the north. Until recently, he used to transport the schoolboys and students from the remote villages of the region to their boarding houses in towns and bring them their necessities from their parents.

Evidence from our data indicates that the Maiurno drivers are the closest outsiders to the local inhabitants of the area. They are the people who were able to penetrate into the remote small villages carrying important items such as sugar, soap and clothes to the villagers, in addition to 'aspects of civilization'. Many of the Maiurno drivers are known for having opened roads to certain areas. But, above all, for a long time they have been providing the villagers with the main opportunity for

48. E.g. Faroug al Digel opened a road in the area of Fadamiyya (eastern side of the river); Abbakar Kharrim and Abbakar M. Bello opened many roads in the area of Yabus; Abu-Manga’s lorries opened roads in the areas of Malkan and Samca.
labour and income. Until the escalation of the civil war in this area in the late 1980s, the main and – for some people – only cash products of the area were bamboo, palm fronds and hardwood. Growing these items does not involve any cost, because they are found naturally in the bush. The inhabitants cut or collected them for sale to the drivers, or the drivers hired labourers from the local people to do the job. Maiurno drivers such as Abbakar Kharrim, Abbakar Muhammad Bello and Zubeir Basha were able to broaden their businesses in this way. The three of them established families there and became more identified with that area than with Maiurno. They all confirmed that they did not encounter any communication problems, as Arabic is widely used as a lingua franca. Yet, through long and close contact with the local people, they were able to pick up some words and phrases of Berta and Uduk. However, the rest of the 100–150 Maiurno drivers centred in Damazin before the war were not on such close terms with the local inhabitants.

The image of the driver in that area was greater even than it was in the north, owing to the role he played in the general socio-economic setting of that region. His business was not confined to simple transportation, as he also secured labour and income for the local people. Besides that, he assumed the role of a postman and was regarded as an explorer, adventurer and messenger of civilization. Until recently the first driver (or convoy of drivers) to reach the distant towns of the regions (e.g. Kurmuk and Geissan) after the rainy season was (were) received with cheers and ululation by a large number of the citizens (of both sexes) outside the towns. For many months he (they) would be seen in the eyes of the citizens as the hero(es) of the year.

The civil war in the extreme southern, south-eastern and south-western parts of the region redivided all the inhabitants into just two groups: the rebels and the victims, irrespective of any ethnic considerations. During the assaults on Kurmuk, Yabus, Chali and Bunj, the Maiurno drivers participated considerably in the evacuation of the citizens. In the 1987 assault on Kurmuk the convoy of lorries carrying the evacuated citizens was able to escape due to the good knowledge of the two Abbakars (Abbakar Kharrim and Abbakar Muhammad Bello) of the paths they had once opened through the bush.49 During other intermittent assaults over the following ten years (1983–97), many of the Maiurno drivers suffered loss of life and property. Now their businesses in that area have been reduced considerably, as a large part of the region is still in the hands of the rebels.

The Decline of Lorry Driving in Maiurno

Many factors have contributed to the decline of lorry driving in Maiurno and the eventual loss of the drivers’ glorious image. Some of these factors are external in the sense that they are not directly related to lorry driving, although they affected it considerably. Other factors are directly related to lorry driving and the driver, and are therefore classified in this study as internal.

49. Detailed descriptions of the escape were provided by Abbakar Suleiman (Kharrim), sixty-nine years old, born in Maiurno, interviewed in Damazin on 26 February 2002 and Abbakar M. Bello, sixty-nine years old, born in Maiurno, interviewed in Damazin on 27 February 2002.
The main external factors behind the decline of lorry driving relate to the general economic deterioration that Sudan has been steadily undergoing for the last twenty years. This deterioration has been caused by both natural and man-made disasters, in addition to internal and external unfavourable political changes. This is, of course, without mentioning the general economic setback that the whole world has witnessed, be it in the Western countries or in the so-called Third World countries.

For the last twenty years Sudan – along with many other countries of the Sahel zone – has been struck by waves of drought and desertification. These disasters have affected its fragile economy, which is predominantly based on rain-fed agriculture. Any decrease in sorghum, sesame and gum arabic production leads to an equal decrease in the sources of work for lorries, i.e. transportation. The situation has been aggravated by the international fall in the prices of the three major cash crops of the country; namely, cotton, gum arabic and sesame.

Political misfortune is also one of the main factors behind the economic stagnation in Sudan. Shortly after the military junta of Jaafar Nimeiri came to power, the administrative machinery of the country started to lose its vigour, as it opened the door for the general mismanagement of the national finances. By the mid-1970s, Sudanese citizens had already started to suffer from hardship (devaluation of the Sudanese pound, price rises, a scarcity of necessary supplies and deterioration in educational and health services). This period coincided with the boom of ‘ightiraab in the Gulf countries, where skilled Sudanese were in high demand to provide labour and administrative expertise. The majority of trained and competent civil servants left the country to be administered by those who were less qualified and who could not get jobs abroad.

Although the civil war started as early as 1955, it worsened at the beginning of the 1980s reaching its zenith in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It has exhausted the major part of the already meagre national resources. With the exception of a few privileged sectors of the society, every Sudanese individual has been dramatically affected by the war and it has been disastrous for the Maiurno lorry owners and drivers. As one informant stated, the occupation of the Southern Blue Nile (the main region of their activities) by the rebels ‘has brought a complete end to them (i.e. the Maiurno lorry drivers)’ (‘intaḥat minnahum tamaam’).

The unfortunate choice of the Sudanese government to support Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War made Sudan lose the sympathy of the rich Gulf countries and their hitherto continuous and unfailing financial aid. This, coupled with the accusation that the country is hosting terrorism and violating human rights, has exposed it to all kinds of economic pressures by the Western countries, especially the USA (instigation of the IMF against it, cuts in development aid, unavailability of loans and economic embargoes).

The general economic setback engendered by these factors has affected all aspects of life in Sudan, including the transportation business, on which the value of the economic collapse is dependent.
driver primarily depends. However, it should not be assumed that there have been no positive changes in Sudan during this period. In fact, there are some areas that have witnessed remarkable development and progress. More importantly, for the purpose of this study, the areas related to education, the building of asphalt roads and the introduction of modern means of transport have seen significant changes. It is paradoxical that development and progress in these specific areas have also affected the lorry-driving institution negatively. The value of the lorry driver depends essentially on the remoteness of the society with which he interacts from places and societies that might be considered more modern and cosmopolitan. The less modern and cosmopolitan the society, the more valuable he becomes, and vice versa. This is evident from the unfriendly relations claimed by all our driver informants to have existed between them and the passengers on the route between Medani and Khartoum. In the 1970s many of the Maiurno drivers avoided carrying passengers in this region. Unlike the Southern Blue Nile region, where the driver moves and stops at his convenience, in the Medani-Khartoum region passengers are conscious of time. It is here that the driver hears the question that he hates most, that is, ‘At what time do we arrive?’ Such a question, for him, is a kind of interference in destiny, ‘for it is only God who knows if they will arrive or not’. Passengers in this region ‘have no respect for the driver: they treat him like a normal person’, complained a driver informant. For the same reasons, students constitute another group of unpopular passengers.

In the 1970s, the unfriendly atmosphere was confined to the ‘civilized’ urbanized area of the Gezira and further north. However, ‘civilization’, since then, has been progressively pushing its way towards the peripheries, including Maiurno and beyond it, through widespread education, more efficient means of communication and other aspects of modernity (for example, television). Unlike the findings of Duffield (1981: 109–10) in 1977, nowadays one hardly ever sees children pretending to drive lorries or hears songs eulogizing lorry drivers.

Another external factor that has contributed to the drivers’ loss of their former status in Maiurno was the appearance of two new competing social classes: the educated people (university lecturers, government employees, university students) and the ‘mughtaribiin’ (those working in the Gulf oil countries). While the former surpassed them in outer appearance, the latter surpassed them also in affluence.

Moreover, most of our informants agreed that the recent expansion of asphalt roads and the introduction of comfortable buses and minibuses for passengers and heavy trucks for carrying loads also played a great role in decreasing the value attributed to lorry drivers.

The internal factors
There are many internal or direct factors that are responsible for the reduction of prestige for lorry drivers and subsequent ‘devaluation’ of the lorry driver in Maiurno. The most important factor emphasized by all our informants is the tremendous increase in the number of drivers, which made the ‘supply’ far greater than the ‘demand’. ‘Formerly,’ remarked an informant, ‘if a lorry owner sacked a driver, he might not find a replacement for a long time. Now he finds ten of them waiting.’
addition to their large number, the present-day drivers are said to be of a lower quality compared with the early generations of drivers. They do not receive sufficient training and they obtain driving licences very easily. Former drivers used to undergo a long and tough process of training whereby they started as junior lorry assistants for about five to seven years, after which the successful ones among them were promoted to senior lorry assistants. At this stage their duty would include, besides taking care of whatever was in the lorry (load, passengers, the lorry belongings, etc.), checking the engine oil, warming up the engine in the morning, tightening the loose nuts and bolts after every trip, helping the driver to repair any major faults and, at a late stage, driving the lorry to a water source to wash it. So, by the time this assistant became a full-fledged driver, he had already acquired the basic mechanical skills as well.

Another internal factor underlined by our informants is the inability of today's driver to comply with the ethics and values of lorry driving. His meagre income does not allow for the conventional hospitality and cooperation vis-à-vis his fellow drivers. Spare parts have become too expensive to be released freely for a broken lorry, and jobless drivers have also become too common to be financially assisted as before.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen that the formative period of the Maiurno society witnessed a series of turbulent events, and life in that period was not as simple as our informants believed. The early years were characterized by flux and change, in which the lorry and the lorry driver acted as both channels and symbols of modernity. As a distinguished class, the lorry drivers maintained the brightest image in the eyes of Maiurno society for a period of about twenty-five years (c. 1960–85). The decline of lorry driving and the eventual eclipse of the driver's star afterwards resulted from a number of external and internal factors, including the spread of education, economic deterioration in some areas and its progress in others. The coming of the civil war to Southern Blue Nile was a final (and maybe fatal) blow to the Maiurno lorry-driving institution.

Social classes are never constant. They emerge and develop under certain conditions and die out with the change of these conditions. Today, the lorry drivers in Maiurno do not stand out from the members of the other socio-economic sectors. Efficient lorries have become very few, while the running cost of old lorries is too high. Therefore, many drivers have abandoned their occupation. Some of them have taken up simple farming (usually regarded as a last option); others retail second-hand spare parts on tables in Sennar and Damazin; while others remain idle, surviving on (irregular) remittances from their sons. There is no chance to uphold the conventional ethics and values even among the few drivers who are still working. So, briefly speaking, one can conclude that the institution of lorry driving in Maiurno has undergone a near total collapse.