The Double Face of Sir Samuel Baker’s Anti – Slave Trade Campaigns in the Upper Nile Valley, 1869 to 1874

By

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

No account of the history of anti-slave trade campaigns in the River Nile valley can be complete without the mention of Sir Samuel Baker. On 1st April 1869, Baker commenced a campaign at Cairo to the Upper Nile Valley to suppress slave trade and introduce legitimate commerce in what is now South Sudan and Northern Uganda. My paper analyzes this expedition, which lasted four years, with the view to unearth Samuel Baker’s true motivation in undertaking it. Using interviews conducted in northern Uganda and basing on published information concerning slave trade abolition movements in Africa during the nineteenth century, I established that Samuel Baker exhibited double character; on one hand, he was a philanthropist, the other, a racist. Although Baker’s legacy in northern Uganda and South Sudan is so strong that schools, roads, hospitals and even children are named after him, it is only because his brutal conduct and denigration of Africans was no measure to that of the slave hunters whom he defeated. Even though Baker did not capture and banish Africans into slavery, he despised, taxed and killed them.

Keywords: Sir Samuel Baker, Expedition, Philanthropist, Racist, Upper Nile Valley.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most eccentric features of Victorian England was the presence of young men of leisure, inheritors of the industrial revolution fortunes for whom England was too small, among them Samuel White Baker (Middleton, 1972). At a time when Africa was dreaded in Europe as the Whiteman’s grave, Baker undertook two risky albeit adventurous expeditions to the Upper Nile Valley; the first, in his own words, to find the sources of the Nile and the second, to suppress slave trade and introduce legitimate commerce. This paper is concerned with Baker’s second expedition that commenced on 1st April 1869 and lasted four years.

Samuel Baker’s second expedition was commissioned by Khedive Ismail of Egypt. Originally, Egypt was a territory of the great Ottoman Empire of Turkey. Then in 1805, Mohamed Ali, Turkey’s overseer of Egypt, revolted, declared Egypt independent, and fought off attempts by Turkey to regain the control of the country. For years Mohamed Ali had known that the Upper Nile valley abounded with gold, ivory and slaves.

In 1821, Mohamed Ali annexed the Sudan. Kordofan was annexed in 1822 and the new capital, Khartoum, was established in 1823. By 1830 that town had became the centre of great slave and ivory trade; by 1859 armed bands, composed chiefly of Dongolani, had pushed beyond the boundaries of Egyptian-occupied territories in all directions and had established trading posts as far south as Palaro, on the northern edge of Acholi-land (Girling, 1960).

Meanwhile in Egypt, Khedive Ismail Said, the grandson of Mohammed Ali, came to power. He was western educated, having spent most of his early life in England and France. Bullied by the west and cornered by Egypt’s financial instability, Ismail Khedive undertook to abolish slave trade. He used the pretext of ending the slave trade on the Nile valley to extend his dominions as far south as possible. The Khedive appointed Baker, Governor General of the Equatoria Province, and tasked him to fulfill the dream.

The atrocious conduct of the slavers

“In the countries beyond the pale of authority in the upper Nile”, wrote Baker, “there were between 10,000 to 15,000 slave-hunters, people who were mere outcasts from the miserable society of the Arabs of the Sudan. These men,
instead of cultivating the land and following some honest, industry had adopted the nefarious business of kidnapping women and children in the upper countries” (Baker, 1873).

The Arab slave hunters made surprise attacks on villages, usually at daybreak. They would first shoot their guns in the air to frighten the villagers, who would panic and run off into hiding, leaving behind their cattle and children. The captured slaves were tied together by their necks and taken into the Sudan. To help them identify their run-away slaves, the Arabs marked their captures cheeks by making three deep vertical cuts on each cheek. The slaves walked the whole distance to Sudan and were forced to carry heavy loads including ivory. Any slave who became so weak to continue the journey either was left in the wilderness to die a slow death or was shot down (Geria, 1973).

To the losses of the natives in oxen, goats, and sheep, to the wasting of their fields, and destruction of their huts, was added the theft of women and children. In the hunt for slaves, neither age nor sex was spared. Whatever fell into the hands of the robbers was driven to the camp, and of course, the men were able to get away more easily than the women and children (Junker, 1980).

By 1869, the ruins of slave trade were all over the territory as recorded by Baker:

When we arrived at Fatiko, we found the paradise of Africa. The country is situated among the mountains, at an elevation of about 4000 feet above the sea. The average temperature is about 78° or 76°. The rainy season lasts about nine months, but the rain does not fall every day. Six or seven days sometimes succeed each other without rain, and then follow a very heavy shower; in fact, it is just like a very fine English July (Baker, 1873).

And then:

I had been in the country years before, and when I arrived, I found that many parts that I had formerly seen most flourishing had been entirely devastated by these rascally slave-hunters. Whole villages had been burnt, and for 84 miles, we passed through a country without a single inhabitant, whereas I recollect that years ago there was a teeming population there. This population was now gone.

Indeed, Baker was not new in the region. In 1862, he had led the first expedition to the upper Nile the aim of which was to discover the source of the Nile. Baker travelled up to Bunyoro Kingdom and became the first European to see Lake Lutanzige, which he named “Lake Albert”. From Lake Albert, he followed the Nile upstream and “discovered” what he called the Murchison Falls.

Achievements of Samuel Baker

As head of the pioneer expedition to suppress slave trade and introduce civil administration in the Upper Nile valley, Samuel Baker had a lot of privileges and powers. The agreement he made with the Egyptian authorities went, in part, as follows:

We, Ismail, Khedive of Egypt... Considering the savage conditions of the ethnic groups, which inhabits the Nile basin... An expedition is organised to subdue to our authority the countries situated to the south of Gondokoro; To suppress the slave trade. The supreme command of this operation is confided to Sir Samuel White Baker for four years, commencing from 1st April 1869; to whom we also confer the most absolute and supreme power, even that of death, over all those who may compose the expedition (Baker, 1874).

Having secured overwhelming powers, as stated above, Baker set out to introduce Egypt's government in northern Uganda and the Sudan. He soon found himself in the unenviable position of being a Christian in command of two or three Mohammedan regiments, appointed to put down a most cherished Mohammedan institution. Said he, “When I was travelling up the Nile, after cutting through the obstructions, I felt somewhat between a General and a Missionary” (Baker, 1974). Indeed, Baker’s actions and writings showed that he was torn apart between a conqueror and humanitarian worker.

When his expedition reached Gondokoro, Baker found that the slave-hunters had been there, and had time to foment intrigues and to incite all the tribes against him. Instead, therefore, of meeting friends, he encountered many enemies. Being a man of enormous energy, Baker was not moved by the treachery of the slave hunters. It was not by accident that Samuel White Baker was chosen to pioneer this task. It required an exceptional man and in many respects, Baker was. He was the eldest son of a family of West Indian sugar planters and had sufficient money to indulge in fancies. He had a passion for big game hunting and adventure. He was an impressive figure of a
man, standing more than six feet tall with a huge physique and wearing a long black beard. He was courageous, impetuous and self-opinionated. He had a huge elephant gun made for him, so large that it broke the shoulder of anyone else who tried to use it. This is what one of his servants said of him:

He believed firmly in the efficiency of physical punishment in dealing with his inferiors and he had a huge contempt for Africans. He liked nothing better than to come to “physical explanations” with those who opposed him. When he fought, he was always to the front: when he fired, he never missed. He was indeed a man! If we did not obey his order, he shook us; then our teeth dropped out (Girling, 1960).

In spite of the contempt mentioned above, Sir Samuel Baker and Lady Baker inspired the natives everywhere with the greatest possible affection. Delme-Radcliffe who visited Acholi-land in 1899 reported, “They never ceased to tell us wonderful things about the doings of ‘mundu’ or Lion’s-mane as they called Sir Samuel, and of ‘Anyadwe’, or Daughter of the moon, which is their name for Lady Baker” (Delme-Radcliffe, 1905).

Bakers’ effort as Governor of the Equatoria province to end slave trade and extend Egypt’s authority as far south as Bunyoro-land caused a lot of excitement among the Acholi. He was called “Pasha” and revered as the man who defeated the most feared Kuturia, as the notorious slave traders, were called among the Acholi.

Baker himself wrote that:

In my enthusiasm, when I started from England, I built castles in the air, as we all do; but at the expiration of the term of this long expedition, I can only thank God that my castle was built. I left the country, I can assure you, with the greatest possible satisfaction. The whole of that large region was in a peaceful state. I marched down to Gondokoro through the warlike tribes of Bari, without firing a single shot. I found nothing but peace and goodwill throughout that great territory. All my cares were therefore over, and I had nothing to do but to thank God most sincerely (Baker, 1873).

Slave trade ended and Samuel Baker became the most respected European visitor throughout the Upper Nile Valley. He is feared and adored for having defeated the deadly Kuturia Arab slave traders.

The price paid by Africans

Although Baker has received a number of honors for his efforts to end slave trade in the upper Nile regions, it is quite doubtful whether he was driven by the love for humanity and philanthropism. He showed in his actions and writings that he was a racist and even an enemy of the people he chose to call savages. Baker wrote repeatedly that his pet monkey was more civilized than the Africans (Baker, 1866). In Ismailia, he bluntly penned:

The treachery of the Negro is unbelievable; he who has not a moral instinct, and is below the brute: how is it possible to improve such abject animals? They are not worth the trouble and they are only fit for slaves, to which position their race appears to have been condemned. (Baker, 1874).

In all his trips, Baker took many things to establish legitimate trade. “Every day men came in with elephant tusks which they sold for a few beads, and everything seemed as prosperous as possible” (Baker, 1973). How could Africans have prospered when they exchanged ivory for a few beads! This trade clearly had unfair terms similar to the one he went to abolish.

Baker introduced taxes in the areas where he abolished slave trade as if to demand payment for what he did. When the people of Acholi resisted his taxes, Baker wrote:

These natives, like most others, are fond of protection but do not like to pay for it…Taxation with a Negro is a frightful difficulty, because he always has an idea that if you are his friend you must give him something and he give you nothing. When they heard that I was going to tax them, it was a serious difficulty (Baker, 1973).

Moreover, Baker fomented inter-ethnic conflicts among the Africans. “When we arrived at Rionga, I, of course, found an ally. Then we went through the ceremony of exchanging blood” (Baker, 1973). Rionga was a rival claimant to the throne of Bunyoro against King Kabalega.

All documented accounts on Baker show that he believed firmly in military might. To him the use of force was the norm and he used it excessively in most cases especially when dealing with Africans. Below are Baker’s own words on the subject of force:
The first steps in establishing the authority of a new government in a tribe hitherto savage and intractable were of necessity accompanied by military operations. War is inseparable from annexation, and the rule of force was indispensable to prove the superiority of the power that was eventually to govern. The end justified the means (Baker, 1874).

The Bari people, living in the Sudan, north of the Acholi-land, were wretched in their encounter with Baker and his team (Finnstrom, 2003). Here is Baker’s treatment of the Bari when they went to him to enquire what he and his team were up to on their territory:

On our return to the camp, I took a snider rifle, and practically explained to the rascals in the village on the knoll what long range meant, sending several bullets into the midst of the crowd that scattered them like chaff. I at once ordered colonel Abdel-el-Kader to take eighty men and some blue lights and to destroy every village in the neighborhood. The attack was made on the instant. The large village about 700 yards distant, which I had raked with fire of a few sniders, while Abdel el Kader descended the slope to the attack, was soon a mass of rolling flames. In an hour’s time, the village volumes of smoke were raising in various directions (Baker, 1874).

Again, he stated:

A shot from a Muscat stretched one Bari dead. The guards pounced upon another and seized him by the throat. This was a native of Belinians; he was hanged on the following morning to a tree on the pathway by which the Belinian Baris arrived through the forest to attack the camp. This was hoped would be a warning that might deter others. (Baker, 1874)

Then:

I believe that if it were possible to convert the greater portion of African savages into disciplined soldiers, it would be the most rapid stride towards their future civilization. The fact of obedience being enforced, and the necessity of order, industry and discipline together with clothing and cleanliness, is all that is required to bring a savage within the bound of good management. A savage who has led a wild and uncontrolled life must first learn to obey authority before any great improvement can be expected (Baker, 1874).

Had Baker been a diplomat and a peacemaker, the captured Bari would have been sent back to his people with words of peace and friendship. People all over the world are curious about strangers on their land. Baker needed to explain to the people that he was on a pacific mission. The most northern “tribes” of the White Nile are the Dinka, Shilluk, Nuer, Kytch, Bohr, Aliaib and Shir. According to Baker:

They are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry; nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition. The mind is as stagnant as the Morass, which forms its puny world. The men are perfectly naked, apparently not knowing that they are so (Baker, 1868).

About the Kytch he wrote:

The Kytch is the exception of all others in abject misery and in the lowest stage of savagedom...They never cultivate...They wonder like storks over the country, searching for lizards, mice, snakes, locusts and white ants...Nothing can be lower in the human race than this wretched tribe; there is hardly a remove in advance of the chimpanzees, except in the part of speech (Baker, 1868).

Throughout Baker’s travelogues, he never showed any sympathy with the Africans whom he ostensibly led expeditions to save from the yoke of slavery. Whatever he wrote about Africans, showed contempt and hatred for them. Questions are being raised whether he was driven by a sense of philanthropy or love for the 10,000 pounds salary per year that the Khedive promised to pay him. Many of the Acholi, Madi, Shilluk, Nuer, Kytch etc. of the Upper Nile valley who revere Baker and name their children, schools and roads after him probably do so because they have not read what Baker wrote about them.
CONCLUSION

The Bakers returned to Britain in 1874 and bought an estate in Devon. He continued to travel and write books until his death in 1893. Florence Anyadwe outlived Baker by 23 years and in later life was looked after by her stepdaughters, one of whom was six years her senior. Baker never received quite the same level of acclamation granted to other contemporary British explorers of Africa, and has never been as well regarded or famous as Burton, Livingstone, Speke or Stanley even though he was knighted in 1866 (Monish, 2013). Baker is vilified because of his attitude towards the Africans and Arabs he met during his travels and is now considered as a racist. Unlike Burton, Speke or Livingstone, Baker detested most of the Africans that he met and treated them like the animals he fondly hunted.

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