The History of Policy in the Zande Scheme

Conrad C. Reining

University of Minnesota

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The Zande Scheme was a bold and unique development scheme started in 1945 in Zande District of the southern Sudan as a pilot project for the social and economic advancement of the populations of the remote regions of Africa. I wish here to trace the history of the policy behind the scheme, beginning with the original proposals, noting the changes in those proposals, and the gradual shift in orientation of the scheme from a philanthropic to a profit-making venture and finally, I seek to account for replacement of the original ideals with commercial principles.

Since the reconquest of the Sudan in 1898, the southern Negro provinces had been kept separate from the northern Arabic provinces and a policy had been followed for the protection of the population, resulting in a relatively undeveloped economic state, even by African standards. There had not been full agreement on the so-called “Southern Policy” and in the 1920’s cotton had been introduced as a government cash crop on a small scale into Equatoria Province. Cotton was not a popular crop and results were good only when direct compulsion was employed. Cotton was regarded by both administration and people as a crop which merely allowed the men to pay their taxes. (Catford, 1953).

Dr. J. D. Tothill, the author of the scheme, was hired by the Sudan Government in 1938 as the Director of the Department of Agriculture, with the specific mission of initiating the development of the southern Sudan. He had been Director of Agriculture in Uganda and closely associated with the development of cotton as a successful cash crop there.

After a preliminary survey of the southern provinces in 1939, Dr. Tothill stated that cotton would be the most profitable crop for Zande District because it seemed to compare favorably with good cotton growing areas in Uganda. He did not believe the road distance of 300 miles to a river port to be an insuperable factor, nor did he consider the previous unpopularity and poor production of cotton in the province to be worthy of concern. He wrote that although cotton was a proved crop agriculturally in parts of the province, it had never developed commercially for these reasons: a. poor prices, b. the arousing of suspicions by the forcing and regimentation of the crop, c. the
necessity for siting ginneries before the proving of the crop in particular areas, \( d. \) the reduction of marketability by poor ginning, and \( e. \) cultivation of a variety shorter and harsher in staple than competing types. Of these, he assigned the greatest importance to the effects of the past price level, for this had been far below that paid in Uganda.

As the war was drawing to a close in 1943, he submitted a new proposal entitled "An Experiment in the Social Emergence of Indigenous Races in Remote Regions" and assigned it the goal of "the complete social emergence and the social and economic stability of the Zande people." (Tothill, 1948, p. 916). He recommended that some remote, relatively large and well-populated area be chosen for a 30 year trial. Zande District of Equatoria Province, with its 40,000 taxpayers and its geographical remoteness seemed to him to be eminently well suited for the experiment. A primary reason for this choice was the relatively favorable agricultural climate and the presence of some good soil, (H. Ferguson in Tothill, 1948, p. 918) implying reliable food production with little danger of famine, a factor not to be ignored in many other parts of the southern Sudan. Also, the Zande people (Azande) were considered to be industrious and amenable to organization. (Ferguson, 1954).

Dr. Tothill, in unfolding his plan for the experiment, stressed the need for education. He stated that the educational system should be gradually improved so that 95 percent of the Azande would be literate in 30 years time, for he felt the scheme was unlikely to succeed without universal education. The start was to be at the bush level, with education available for every Zande boy and girl, and he hoped for secondary schools in the area and even, eventually, a university for the South. He believed that Khartoum area to be a likely one in which to sell the surplus goods from the scheme, which were to be cotton cloth, burlap sacks, soap and coffee. The most important of these, by far, was to be cotton cloth, for he hoped for a production large enough to clothe the 170,000 Azande and, in addition, to earn most of the money to pay for imports and the interest on the government loan for building factories. Dr. Tothill proposed that parts of Zande District be designated to cultivate cotton, oil palms, coffee and jute. In the cotton growing area he planned that each family should cultivate one acre of cotton in rotation with the usual food crops. He estimated that 10,000 families could produce about 6,000,000 pounds of seed (unginned) cotton annually.

Dr. Tothill further recommended the erection in Zande District of a modern ginnery and a spinning and weaving mill which were to be small units capable of expansion. He believed that a few mill-hands imported from Egypt, India or the United Kingdom could, with time and patience, teach the Zande people the work in the factories. Because little had been done in Africa to teach natives factory work, other officials must have had doubts about his faith in the unpracticed Azande. He admitted that he had little to go on, other than his observations that many Africans take naturally to tailoring with a sewing machine, but he could see no "\textit{a priori} reason why the Zande people would not take naturally to the management of spindles."
In addition to the four export industries, he believed some industries would be required for the production of goods to be consumed locally in their entirety, such as sugar, bricks, timber, iron and charcoal. He expected locally produced bricks and timber to be used in the construction of houses and factory buildings and hoped that there might be an improvement in Zande housing inspired by the use of these materials. He wanted to avoid the use of as many imported materials as possible, since he hoped to achieve a high degree of self-sufficiency for remote regions, by manufacturing locally produced raw materials into goods to be consumed locally, with only enough exports to pay for the bare minimum of necessary imports, such as machinery.¹

Due to illness, Dr. Tothill was not able to draw up further detailed plans and in July, 1944, a meeting considered proposals for the Zande Scheme drafted by his successor to the Directorship of the Department of Agriculture. A number of important changes was subsequently made in Dr. Tothill’s proposals although the spirit of his work continued to be referred to throughout the planning and operation of the scheme. His primary point of providing facilities for universal education of the Azande within thirty years was turned aside by the assumption that the proposed general increase in educational facilities would provide enough education for the Azande. The actual increase in educational facilities during the first ten years of the scheme did not suit the Azande, however, nor can it be judged to come near to Dr. Tothill’s intentions.

By mid-1945, Dr. Tothill’s proposals for several cash crops had been simplified into a single crop project. Only cotton survived the initial committee meetings on peasant crops. The fibre and sack industry was never discussed. After 10 years there were less than 100 acres of sugar cane and less than 20 acres each of oil palms and coffee, all grown as plantation crops. In comparison, Zande cultivation of cotton was to exceed 20,000 acres in some seasons. Dr. Tothill’s emphasis upon a modern gin for the preservation of the cotton was countered by the purchase of antiquated machinery which was used until 1955 when a modern gin was installed. The more familiar, longer-staple cotton was to replace the higher-yielding, short staple variety which he had suggested for the Azande.

Nothing came of his suggestions for “partnership” for Azande or for participation of Zande individuals in the administration of the scheme. Throughout the first ten years of the scheme, there was no deviation from the making of policy and decisions solely by the Europeans of the governing board and the district administration.

The principle of an attractive price to the cultivators in lieu of direct compulsion, which Dr. Tothill held to be vitally important throughout his proposals, was largely ignored in practice, as was the corollary of keeping prices at favorable levels relative to those in adjacent territories. Instead, compulsion was relied upon to produce

¹ Much of this report is based on unpublished material obtained from open administrative files in headquarters at Yambio, Nzara, Juba, and Khartoum. The kind permission of the officials in charge is acknowledged.
adequate amounts of cotton. Zande families were required to cultivate at least one half acre of cotton as a public service and failure to do so was punished by various means, usually by requiring a month's service on public works.

Even with the theme of self-sufficiency, Dr. Tothill had advocated a general improvement of communications and the shortening of the line of transport by building a new road northeast to the Nile and the development of a new port. This proposal was soon defeated on the grounds of economy.

Early in the planning phases, most of the major points in Tothill's proposals had been deleted or modified, including multiple cash crops, modern ginning machinery, a favorable level of prices to the cultivators, a strong educational program, and partnership for the Azande. In addition, the policy of self-sufficiency was voted out of the plans by an early committee, although this was the theme of Dr. Tothill's proposals upon which had been based the idea of industrial development of a remote region. The industrial aspects were retained while supporting ideas were eliminated, resulting in the establishment of a costly industrial experiment in an uneconomic location. The factor of remoteness remained in the Zande Scheme, but without the justification inherent in Dr. Tothill's proposals. Nor was any compensation for the remoteness of Zande District devised by the planners who followed Dr. Tothill.

In June, 1945, the Governor General's Council in Khartoum approved in principle the modified Zande Scheme and the setting up of the Equatoria Projects Board (referred to as the 'board' in this report) to administer it. The board consisted of three ex-officio directors: the Director of Agriculture and Forests, the Governor of Equatoria Province, and the Director of Economics and Trade; three other Directors, one from the Department of Agriculture and Forests, one from the Finance Department and one from the Board of Economics and Trade; and a Secretary to be furnished from the Department of Agriculture and Forests. The Chairman was, at first, the Director of Agriculture and Forests and, later, the Governor of Equatoria Province.

There were strongly divided opinions about the feasibility of the industrial aspect of the scheme and a crisis arose early in 1946, during a committee meeting, when the Assistant Financial Secretary stated that his office was seriously questioning the financial soundness of the industrial portion of the scheme, particularly in light of the threefold increased estimates for the cost of machinery. He could not see the necessity for the spinning and weaving mill and could not understand why it was referred to as the core of the scheme. He pointed out that only about 400 people were to be employed in the mill and, further, that the price of cotton was then high enough so that Zande cotton could be profitably exported as lint.

Other members of the committee countered with the opinion that the financial aspects of the scheme should not be allowed to override the social aims and that the spinning and weaving mill was a central feature of the original plan by Dr. Tothill to increase the level of
self-sufficiency of the Azande to aid their social emergence. The Governor of the province indicated that he would withdraw his approval of the scheme if it were to be only a cotton exporting project; he pointed out that two such projects for the Azande had been disapproved previously. The District Commissioner expressed himself even more strongly, contending that the withdrawal of the spinning and weaving mill would be a breach of faith. He threatened to resign his post if there were changes in policy which would remove the industrial aspect from the scheme and thereby produce "a shabby and worthless substitute" in the form of a cotton exporting scheme.

There continued to be fear of inefficient operation of the scheme if there should be much deviation from accepted commercial practices. A new member of the board in 1947 expressed the opinion that the scheme had been "launched at a time rendered wholly unpromising by world conditions and that the technicians had been allowed to rush ahead before the administrative machinery had been manned and put in working order." In the next year, another member new to the board expressed similar doubts about the bold approach to the scheme, saying that too much rush had cost more money than need have been spent and that the remedy lay in good management which was not possible without "ruthless bookkeeping and auditing."

Others, particularly the province and district administrative officials, reacted strongly to what they saw as overly commercial tendencies in the proposals to eliminate the industrial features of the scheme and to expand cotton production for export in view of the high selling prices and strong action on their part was required to retain the philanthropic direction of the scheme. At the time of the early crises, there was already the awareness of factionalism, for the Director of the Equatoria Projects Board, in proposing increased cotton production, referred to opposing arguments as those of "the administration," while the District Commissioner allied himself with the "socio-logical" faction, as opposed, presumably, to the commercial faction.

The Equatoria Projects Board and its staff tended to become autonomous as its policies were opposed and an element of secrecy can be noted in its operations. The permanent organization of the board in Zande District was staffed largely with former government officials, so the orientation of operations differed little from established governmental practices and the directors of the board continued to be high government officials acting in a commercial capacity for the board. Nonetheless, the staff of the board in Zande District insisted on the fiction that it was a commercial concern independent of the local administration. This isolation was justified in terms of maintaining business privacy, but it added to the ineffectiveness of communication between the people and the policy forming agencies which characterized the Zande Scheme. The aloofness of the board from the local affairs added to the suspicion the Azande had about the machinations of the scheme, and the commercial bias soon proved to be based on inapplicable premises.

Most of the construction of the factories at the industrial center was completed and installation of machinery was begun by the end
of 1950. The spinning and weaving mill began to produce edible oil from cotton seed early in 1951 and cloth by November, 1951. In about six years, despite numerous difficulties, a complex factory had been installed where there had been only bush before.

In the operation of the scheme, as in the planning phase, some officials did not agree with the "bold" proposals of Dr. Tothill and there was apparent a fear of wasting money and inefficient operation. This short range view had little competition, because the longer range views of the idealists had so few tangible aspects. The idealists held a much weaker position from the start than the commercialists because so little of the social aims of the scheme was formulated or, indeed, capable of formulation. No one has ever amplified or defined the "social emergence" which was the primary aim of the scheme. No analysis has been made of the relationship between the economic and the social aspects of the scheme, though some officials spoke in terms of this dichotomy. No specific suggestion has yet been made concerning the social development of the Azande. In 1955, the money set aside for social development five years before was still largely unspent, due to a lack of ideas of what to spend it on. The hopes laid by the members of the Zande District Local Advisory Committee upon social technicians to implement the social side of the scheme, as engineers were implementing the mechanical side, shows the lack of insight into the problems of social development. That there is no science of social engineering did not enter into the calculations of the idealists.

The commercialists had their way, because their arguments were familiar and appeared sound. Before the end of the construction period, the board had assumed a commercial basis and had withdrawn its ultimate responsibilities to the high level of the government offices in Khartoum, cutting off its responsibility to the Azande or identification with them. The district and province administration was left to defend what remained of the original ideals. The passage of time, with frequent replacement of personnel, helped to efface the major objective of the scheme. Original ideals were replaced by aims which had become quite short in range and the scheme from the official side eventually was composed of a number of specific tasks and positions. This was particularly true of the board which seemed to consider its main objective to be the keeping of its own books in order and in the black. The financial success of the first years, due to the high price of exported cotton and the willingness of the Azande to produce large amounts of cotton, allowed a false sense of the validity of these arrangements.

The Europeans were aware that they are not paying the Azande one one-hundredth as much as they themselves would require to maintain interest, but the fact that the Azande were willing to start working hard supported the belief that the dual standards were sound. In the absence of ideas of how to control economic change, the officials tended to restrict the amount of money which the Azande were allowed to earn. The knowledge that the intentions behind the scheme were to help the Azande to improve their lot, gave credence to the
policy of paying low prices for the cotton which was exported at large profit, in order to pay for the expensive industrial experiment. An extraordinary chance was lost to attract the interest of the people by the positive incentive of good returns for their cotton, in view of the very favorable world cotton market. While the Azande were losing interest in the growing of cotton, due to the feeling that they were being deceived, the officials continued to work on the assumption that they were following a policy designed to ultimately benefit the Azande, but were guided in making the policies for the scheme by standards for the Azande which neither the Azande nor the Europeans would apply to themselves.

In an effort to clarify the operations of the board, certain business principles had been instituted which led to the primacy of solvency within the board. It can be seen, in retrospect, that the Azande bore these costs out of the money which they could have received for their cotton. The low level of rewards resulted in the serious decline in cotton production and the decline in the board’s profits. By 1954, the board was in dire financial straits, for it had lost money in the previous season and an operating loss was predicted for the current season, unless cotton production could be increased and there was no assurance of that. The Minister of Finance reported to the Council of Ministers in Khartoum that the previous years had been extraordinary in allowing large profits on the cotton exported and that governmental subsidies would be necessary in order to keep the board and the Zande Scheme operating in the future, even after all possible economies, abandoning most of the programme of agricultural development and curtailment of the cotton supervision program. The Minister of Finance commented that the Zande Scheme had not been started as a commercial undertaking for the making of profits, but as a social experiment, and that the possibility of profits from high cotton prices had perhaps concealed its real purpose. He also indicated that nearly half of the government’s investment of LE. 1,000,000 in the board’s activities had been recovered through export duties on cotton and import duties on machinery, stores and goods for sale. He pointed out that a projected mill in the northern Sudan was to be subsidized from the start. All costs in Zande District, except for unskilled labor, were higher than they would be at the new mill, yet there had been no subsidies to the mill in Zande District.

After an excursion for several years into the realm of commercial independence and business principles the board was brought back to its original purposes. When the profits were no longer available, the social theme was brought up again and the position of a small industry in a difficult location was recognized. But the ignoring of the Zande reactions up to that point were to make the situation still worse. The results of the following crop in 1955 showed conclusively the temper of the Azande, for it was a castastrophically small one, less than half the minimum amount needed to keep the board going at the proposed level of subsidies. The uprisings which followed interrupted my observations and further disturbed the operations of the scheme.

That the frankly imperialistic cotton projects of the Belgian Congo
should have proved to be more generous in the judgment of the Azande must be viewed as high irony, as must the deterioration of the scheme, which was inspired solely by altruism, into what seemed to the people to be gross exploitation.

This brief history shows that problems in the planning of technological development are not confined to inter-cultural situations; we need to investigate our own various motivations for sponsoring development. Also, this history clearly demonstrates once more that the best of intentions are no insurance of furthering the welfare of a population undergoing directed change. In fact, ideals can often obscure the need for ideas. Long range ideals, unsupported by specific knowledge can lead to the emergency employment of principles which are not consistent with original aims. The presentation of both the European side of the Zande Scheme, as in this paper, and the Zande side in work elsewhere can contribute to the solution of some of the problems inherent in technological development in underdeveloped areas.

LITERATURE CITED

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