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Darfur in War

The Politicization of Ethnic Identities?

KARIN WILLEMSE

The so-called Opposition Forces in Darfur rebelled against the Sudanese military government of General Omar al-Bashir early in 2003. The Opposition Forces consisted of the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement (SLA/SLM, formerly the Darfur Liberation Front) led by Abd al-Wahid Mohamed Nur, a former member of the Communist party; and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) led by Khalil Ibrahim, a former member of the National Islamic Front, the main Sudanese Islamist party. Though these factions were not indigenous to Darfur, they justified their cause by accusing the

government of neglecting the huge economic problems in Darfur while doing nothing about the increasing insecurity and lawlessness related to the continuous influx of high-tech arms into the region. Immediately after the first violence broke out in February 2003 the local government organized a habitual "tribal conference" in al-Fashir. While local leaders proposed negotiation with the different parties, the government was determined to crush the rebellion through military force. It thereby used local militias, now commonly referred to as Janjawiid.

The Janjawiid are usually characterized as "Arab" nomads who have been provided with arms by the Sudanese government. The strategy of turning Arab nomads into a militia is not novel: it was applied by consecutive regimes in the civil war with southern Sudan. Both the democratic regime (1985-89) under the leadership of Sadiq al-Mahdi, and the current Islamist regime, armed Arab nomads from Kordofan and Darfur and turned them into so-called *murahiliin*. The recent deployment of similar counterinsurgency tactics in Darfur suggests that the conflict represents a "southern Sudan speeded up" rather than a new "Rwanda in slow motion."²

Ironically, the recent peace negotiations between the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Norway, and the warring parties on the North-South conflict in Sudan which took place in Naivasha, Kenya, fuelled the insurgency in Darfur. The people of Darfur feared that an international success might allow the Sudanese government more room to isolate Darfur and keep them out of national politics altogether. The anxiety of local sedentary groups to lose all grip on political and economic power in their region seems justified by the impunity enjoyed by the *murahiliin* in South Darfur and their increasing political influence. At the same time, the Sudanese government favours a war in Darfur as it temporarily postpones the problem for the government of how to deal with the large numbers of soldiers who have now become redundant in the South. It also prevents its officers from plotting against one of the most unpopular regimes Sudan has known. Moreover, the presence of oil in Darfur might be an ulterior motive for the government to divide, displace, and disband the population in order to "rule" the oilfields, as was the case in the South.

Apart from fighting techniques and the application of a "scorched-earth" policy, the ethnic rhetoric used to justify the violence also bears similarities with the war in the south. In Darfur the conflict is constructed as one of "Arab Muslim nomads" against "Black African farmers." This religious-racial discourse of Islamic superiority hides the fact that the parties involved are all Muslims who are linked with each other by a history of exchange, intermarriage, and even life-style: until recently

Since early 2003 Darfur has been the site of mounting violence which has led the UN to describe the conflict as currently "the world's worst humanitarian crisis." The US Congress even labelled the conflict a "genocide." Diverse ethnic groups as well as the government were engaged in violence in the 1980s and 1990s. However, violence has reached a new dimension in the recent war where racism has become the main legitimating discourse of the conflict. The recent history of the conflict suggests, however, that the root causes are socio-economic and political rather than ethnic.¹

Fur farmers who converted their wealth into cattle might take up a nomadic life-style, "becoming" an Arab Baqqara nomad within a generation.³ Similarly, Arabs have become Fur farmers. Constructing the war as a conflict between fixed ethnic groups fits well into the Islamist government's discourse, but hides a more complex history.

A religious war between "Arabs" and "Africans"?

Although the Sudanese Arab elite from Central Sudan are involved in the war in Darfur as affiliates of the Arab

nomads, the meaning of "Arab" carries different connotations of class and culture. The educated Arab elite residing in the Nile Valley have constructed themselves as *awlad Arab* and *awlad al-balad*, children (sons) of Arabs and inheritors of the land. They were instrumental in founding political Arab nationalism and claimed the Sudanese nation-state as theirs. By constructing Sudan both as Islamic and Arab they excluded not only Southerners, but other marginal groups like the Fur, the Beja, and the Nubians, respectively in the west, east, and north of the country. Alternatively, the notion of "Arab" that is used for the nomadic peoples in Darfur is used in the sense of Bedouin and indicates backwardness and marginality.

When the current military regime, backed by the Islamist National Islamic Front, took power in 1989 it proclaimed Darfur the "least Islamized region after the South." This stigma concerned all Darfurians: nomads and sedentary farmers alike. This racist Islamist ideology has in the recent war in Darfur been adjusted, or one could say "refined." Since members of the Fur and the Masalit, both predominantly sedentary farmers, and the Zaghawa, semi-nomads, have become involved in the rebel movement they have been cast collectively as Black Africans: black suggesting the status of a slave and automatically of a non-Muslim. These so called "non-Muslims" have become opposed to Arab Muslims which, in Darfur, now include nomads. However, these recent events date back to a much longer history of ethnic strife and political conflict.

After the Darfur sultanate became part of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of the Sudan in 1916, it was divided into "*dar(s)*," administrative areas under the control of appointed tribal leaders. This division led to clearly demarcated "homelands" related to fixed ethnic identities referred to in names such as "Dar Zaghawa" and "Dar al-Arab," particularly in North-Darfur. Although the tribal leaders never lost complete power, in 1994 the native administration council was "re-invented" in order to govern the area via local leaders "on the cheap": it directly led to renewed conflicts in the far west of Darfur.⁴

Due to ongoing desertification camel nomads, who had been allotted "*dar(s)*" in the far north of Darfur, suffered most from the deteriorating environmental conditions. In particular since the droughts of the 1970 and 1980s they would more frequently and earlier in the season come down with their camels that trampled, ate, or otherwise destroyed the not yet harvested crops of the local farmers and threatened to deplete the local water resources.

Moreover, in the 1980s ethnic identities became increasingly politicized. In 1981 Darfur people rallied for a Darfur governor demanding equality with other regions in Sudan under the 1972 Regional Auton-

omy Act. However, the installation of a Fur as governor turned out to be a bone of contention. Intellectuals claiming Arab descent organized themselves in the Arab Congregation which was supported by the government. As intellectuals from other ethnic groups were drawn into the conflict as well, ethnic differences were fed into national politics and became even more fixed. As a consequence, raids by Arab *fursan* (knights) and Fur *malishat* (militia) were quite unproblematically cast as an ethnic conflict waged between the "Arab belt" versus the "African belt." The Fur felt that the Arabs aimed at destroying their ancestral rights to the land, while Arabs claimed that Fur threatened to oust them under the slogan "Darfur for the Fur." The influx of high-tech weapons in the same period due to the war between Libya and Chad, the donations of arms by diverse political parties after the democratic elections, and the arming of militia by consecutive governments has fuelled this conflict.

Youth, guns, and the quest for power

In the media the term Janjawiid, referring to the Arab nomadic militia, has been dissected into "evil" (jaan) "horsemen" (jawid), or even devils riding horses carrying GM 3 rifles. However, prior to the recent conflict, the term was used more generally to refer to "rabble" or "outlaws", in particular in cases of banditry and camel theft committed predominantly by young men.⁶ It is this reference to young men that is crucial to any understanding of the situation.

In the early 1990s, when I conducted anthropological research in Kebkabiya, a town that has been recently under heavy siege, conflicts over scarce resources concerned predominantly Fur and Zaghawa, groups that have now become allies in the conflict. The failure of traditional negotiation and peace keeping mechanisms, such as tribal reconciliation conferences—the last one between Fur and Arabs took place only in 1989, to no avail—proved to be not only due to the politicization of ethnic identities. Of importance as well was the discontent within the ethnic groups. The authority of tribal leaders, and elderly men in general, was increasingly contested by young males. The general neglect of Darfur in national development plans left youngsters with few possibilities of becoming a "man" in socio-cultural terms. They had difficulties paying for the bride-price and wedding arrangements that mark maturity and social status. Even when they did marry, young nomads were hardly able to provide for their families as nomads. For their part, many young sedentary farmers had to migrate to towns for some extended period of time in order to earn the money necessary to raise a family. Moreover, despite the high expectations placed on education, educated young men barely had the means and ability to provide for their families.

In farming communities in Darfur, women are the main cultivators while single young men are often redundant. Formerly they would wander from one Quranic school to the next, or engage in odd jobs for survival. Single nomadic young men were most important for herding camels. In times of drought only young men would tend to the smaller herds temporarily leaving behind women, children, and the elderly in small settlements near sedentary peoples. This process of settling by female nomads coupled with male out-migration among sedentary farmers has created communities that consist of predominantly female-headed households, of both sedentary and nomadic backgrounds. These populations engage with increasing frequency and scale in interethnic exchange, share-cropping, and intermarriage. As the temporary nomadic settlements have become more permanent and, moreover, host a larger number of young male nomads, the nomadic lifestyle becomes increasingly extinct. This change creates insecurity and anxiety among the settled nomadic communities. Moreover, in order to survive the new settlers need access to land, water, labour, and knowledge, thus competing more directly over exactly the same resources that sedentary farmers use in these transition zones. These happen also to be the areas where most of the outbursts of violence have taken place.



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In these deteriorating conditions of deprivation and despair among nomadic and sedentary young men "without a future," weapons form an easy and immediate satisfaction in the quest for respect, self-identity, and a sense of control. The label genocide seems therefore to miss the point: apart from its legal complexity, the conflict has its base in socio-economic and political factors with a far more complicated history. Moreover, it is not clear whether the Janjawiid are ethnically homogeneous, or include young men from diverse ethnic backgrounds. And, even though youths who make up the Janjawiid have been armed by the government, this is not to say that the government is able to control and direct this monster it helped create. In Africa, where a majority of the population is under 30 years of age, conflicts which engage predominantly youngsters is unfortunately more common than the "uniqueness" of the conflict in Darfur might suggest.

Due to the high presence of young disenfranchised men, the conflict has taken on an especially troubling gender dimension. Women are systematically verbally abused, raped, assaulted, mutilated, their relatives killed in front of their eyes, while young men of "battle age" are main targets of mass killings. This gender biased targeting, or "gendercide," is part of many recent so-called ethnic conflicts.⁷ In Darfur, where ethnic affiliation is traced patrilineally, intermarriage results in women begetting children of different background than their own. This also means that women, as the keepers in many cases of multiethnic families, react to ethnic wars in a different way than men who tend to identify more with a fixed, unified, ethnic identity. Women and children of diverse ethnicities have in fact been caught similarly in the crossfire between rebels, government, and bandits. At the same time women have proven to be resilient and perseverant when it comes to constructing a future for their children. Though peace-negotiations will be a long and difficult process and do not seem to be possible in the near future, not only the obvious tribal leaders and government officials should be party to negotiations: young men and women should be included as well. In Darfur the saying "Your mother's family is from the heart, your father's family comes from far" might be of help in trying to find an alternative, common denominator for reconciliation-talks.

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Sudanese refugees from Darfur wait for aid distribution at Brejin camp in eastern Chad.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Shamil Jeppie for his valuable input in this article.
2. John Ryle, "Disaster in Darfur," *New York Review of Books*, August 12, 2004, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/17326>.
3. Gunnar Haaland, "Nomadization as an economic career among the sedentaries in the Sudan Savannah Belt," in *Essays in Sudan Ethnography*, ed. I. Cunnison and W. Jones (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1972): 149-172.
4. Alex de Waal, "Counter-insurgency on the cheap," *London Review of Books*, August 5, 2004, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n15/waal01.html>.
5. Sharif Harir, "Arab belt' versus 'African belt': Ethno-political conflict in Dar Fur and the regional cultural factors," in *Short-cut to decay. The case of the Sudan*, ed. Sharif Harir and Terje Tvedt (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1994):153-161.
6. Abdullahi Ali Ibrahim, "Janjaweed: What's in a name," *Sudan Studies Association Newsletter* 24, no. 2 (2004): 15.
7. Gendercide Watch, www.gendercide.org.