Civil War in Sudan: The Impact of Ecological Degradation

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Since the firing of the first bullet in 1983, the reappearance of war between Northern and Southern Sudan has generally been interpreted as a typical ethno-religious conflict deriving from differences between Muslims and Christians, or Arabs and Africans. While this categorization had served as description of the earlier manifestation of the conflict in the 1950s, and still has some bearing on how the war is being conducted and perceived, my opinion is that the nature of the conflict has changed. Conflicts are processes, not static states, and over the last three decades developments in the Sudan have gradually if consistently changed the nature of the conflict from being a classic ethno-religious conflict to one mainly over resources, with the economic and resources crisis in the North emerging as a driving force in the Sudan civil war.

When the colonial powers introduced their market economy in Sudan towards the end of the last century, they simultaneously restricted its development and expansion by indigenous Sudanese in order to maintain political and economic control. After independence, however, a Sudanese “national bourgeoisie” began to evolve from a primarily mercantile social class now ostensibly freed from colonial control. There were, nonetheless, several strong barriers to the development and progress of a middle class whose European equivalents had brought about the industrial revolution. In Sudan they lacked the major prerequisites for industrialization—mainly capital, technical and scientific know-how and markets—and so their focus shifted from manufacturing production to the extraction of natural resources.

The collapse of attempts at industrialization—mainly substitute industrialization—led to exploitation of accessible natural resources in a manner so thoughtless and unscrupulous that it soon endangered the peasant and pastoralist societies in Northern Sudan. During the 1960s and 1970s Southern Sudan remained relatively unscathed, as a result of its isolation during colonial rule and the earlier civil war, and its poorly developed transport facilities.
Since the 1970s, the world trade system has been undergoing a structural crisis, and the efforts of the rich countries of the North to overcome this crisis had negative impact on poor countries of the South, clearly manifesting in unfavorable terms of trade, servicing and repayment of foreign debt, structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and a general worsening of the economic situation. This pressure has in turn been transmitted by the elite resource extractors of the South to the poorest people and their natural environment. Unfair terms of trade at international level are reflected in unfair terms of trade at the national level. Just as poor developing nations were exporting more and buying less, so the rural peasants and pastoralists were forced to produce more and buy less in the local market.

In Sudan, this meant a new expansion drive to exploit hitherto less accessible resources, mainly in Southern Sudan. A number of schemes were started, based on the exploitation of oil, water and land, and all in the name of “development,” but with the profit going mainly to the northern Sudanese elites. Although the civil war had been halted in 1972 with the Addis Ababa Accord which recognized the autonomy of the South, southern Sudanese were denied their share of the benefits of peace. War broke out again a mere eleven years later, after the Sudanese dictator Nimeiri had abrogated the accord he himself had signed by redividing the South (see Kebbede, Chpt. 2, in this volume).

The war in the South is best understood as resulting from opposing political approaches to the reality of diminishing resources. In search for a lasting peace it is necessary to understand this new dimension to the old conflict.

The People: Recent History

In its sheer size and diversity of geography and peoples, Sudan resembles the entire continent. More than 80 percent of its 30 million population live in rural areas, making up 132 tribes and sub-tribal groups. Black Africans predominate in the high rainfall savanna of the South, with peoples of Arab origin in the desert scrublands of the North, and mixed tribes in the central rainfall savannah.

The last census (1955/56) estimated that 40 percent of the Sudanese population was “Arab”—in the sense of cultural rather than racial identity, since Sudanese Arabs are from a mixture of Arab, Nuba and Black African stock. The Arab tribes in central Sudan, such as the Shaygiyya and Ja’aliyyinare mainly riverine farmers, while farther away from the Nile live the Arab pastoralists and rain-dependent farmers. In the poor savannah of the North and West roam the camel breeders such as the Shukriyya and Kababish, and south of them the Baggara Arab herd cattle.

Northerners of non-Arab descent comprise about 30 percent of the
population: the Nubians in the far north bordering Egypt, the Beja in the Red Sea Hills, the Nuba in the Nuba mountains of southern Kordofan, the Ingessana and other peoples in southern Blue Nile Province, and the Zaghawa, Fur, Masalit, and others in Darfur. In addition, there are many long-term immigrants from West Africa collectively known as “Fellata,” who spread one thousand kilometers across the country from west to east. The great majority of the non-Arab Sudanese are Muslims.

The southern Sudanese, who also amount to 30 percent of the population, consist of two main groups. One is the Nilotic group of primarily cattle herding Dinka, Nuer, and Shilluk who inhabit the central grasslands of the South. The second group, including the Azande, Bari, Mural, Topes, and many others, cultivate the wooded lands along the southern borders. Islam and Christianity have had a greater impact on these people than on their Nilotic neighbors, who predominantly adhere to tradition African beliefs.

The Jellaba

One important category of Arab Sudanese is the urbanized trading class known as Jellaba, who have spread all over the Sudan and into some neighboring countries. They are the wealthiest group and have exerted considerable economic and political influence on Sudan’s modern history.

The Jellaba are the descendants of Arab traders whose Islamic civilization seemed ready for far-reaching revolutionary change a thousand years ago (during the early phase of the Abbasid Caliphate), but imploded instead. At that time both arts and crafts were developing rapidly. There arose a new wave of poetry, with secular urban poet such as Abu Nuas and Bashar, and the refreshingly scientific and secular philosophical schools of Moutazilla and Ikhwan al-Saffà, and with them a modern Arabic language devoid of flowery and ornamental jargon. All these achievements seemed to prepare the ground for an historic transformation.

But in spite of the atmosphere of impending renaissance, the revolution never took place. The feudal Arab lords entrenched themselves in their states and resisted change, the Khalifas brought in Turkish and Slavic mercenaries to uphold their disintegrating Islamic empire, and the crucial breakthrough was never made. Instead of diversifying into production in the manner of European middle classes, the would-be Arab bourgeoisie became entrenched in the role of “Jellaba,” literally bringers of goods rather than manufacturers. For a thousand years their ancestors specialized in short- and long-distance trade, thus the Jellaba prefer the intricacies of commercial dealing to long-term investment and industrial enterprise, which for them remained a little-known activity. By virtue of their trading connections and geographic distribution, the Jellaba are nonetheless well-organized and adaptable. Their political talent has
been underestimated on many occasions, and when challenged they have regained their hold on the state either by the power of the vote or power of the gun, acting as Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde, according to the situation.

The Crisis of Subsistence

During the middle ages, Christian kingdoms existed peacefully side by side with their Muslim neighbors along the Nile. In the seventeenth century the Funj Sultanate replaced the collapsed Christian kingdoms in the North, while the Dar Fur Sultanate arose in the west. Sudan was invaded in the nineteenth century by an army sent by Mohamed Ali, the Turkish ruler of Egypt, who defeated the declining Funj Sultanate in 1821 and began the gradual extension of power into the South and West. The Jellaba and their private armies collaborated with the Turkish rulers in the penetration and plunder of the South.

The memory of the brutal slave trade conducted mainly by mercenaries of the northern Jellaba has lived on in the culture of the South. The experience of such aggression by Arab Muslims against black Africans gave rise to southern resistance to Islam and the embrace of Christianity, which southerners perceived as being on their side against oppression. To this day the majority of northerners have chosen to ignore rather than admit the shameful history of the Jellaba, preferring to pretend that the slave trade happened in a different time and place, although a tendency to refer to southerners as “slaves” still persists. Slave trading magnified and distorted cultural and ethnic differences and left a lasting sense of grievance and mistrust.

When the imperial powers intervened against the slave trade in the 1870s and 1880s, it caused an economic crisis which helped precipitate the Mahdist uprising which overthrew Turkish rule in 1885. However, neither Turco-Egyptian rule (1821-1885) nor the Mahdist regime that followed (1886-1898) effect any fundamental change in the basic structure of the economy. It remained essentially a subsistence economy, with some commercial based on the use of serfs and slaves, as well as some long-distance trade ties with Egypt and the East.

In 1898 a coalition of British and Egyptian forces overthrew the Mahdists and reconquered Sudan, setting up a colonial condominium state which sought to establish “the rudiments of a modern capitalist economy whilst at the same time opposing its full blown indigenous development, since this would create a political threat to itself. . . . At the political level, during the 1920s, Native administration was created from the rubble of the Mahdist period” (Duffield, 1990: 8).

Independence in 1956 created the political conditions for the Jellaba to break away from the constraints of direct colonialism. By the 1960s their
focus had shifted from the pump-irrigated cotton schemes of the 1950s (such as the White Nile schemes) to large-scale mechanized farming of sorghum and sesame in rainland areas. These spread from eastern Sudan southwards into Blue Nile Province and then west into southern Kordofan and Darfur.

Today the area under licensed mechanized cultivation, at more than 4 million hectares (over nine million feddans), exceeds that under traditional agriculture (3.8 million hectares/9 million feddans). The former "supports" some 8,000 largely absentee farmer-landlords, while the latter is the livelihood for 2-3 million "peasant" farmers. The tractorization and intensification of agriculture dealt a severe blow to traditional peasant farming with the gross social and environmental change it inflicted on peasant and pastoralist societies. Low technology agro-pastoralism began to collapse across the central clay plains of northern Sudan, and a new and burgeoning category of impoverished people emerged who were dependent on selling their labor to survive. Many migrated to the towns, considerably swelling the numbers of the urban poor. Unlike the migration of the European peasantry during the Industrial Revolution, this move was not towards centers of higher economic production, but to areas of greater food availability—mainly through food aid. A historical pattern is being echoed in tragic fashion.

Another consequences of the rapid impoverishment of the northern Sudanese peasants and pastoralists is the abandonment of relatively benign methods of exploitation of nature and their replacement with aggressive methods which assume that natural resources are limitless. In creating a class of local resource-extractors, the inclusion of Sudan in the global market economy has directly impoverished both the environment and the rural people who depend on it for survival.

The Resources

Agriculture is the major economic activity of the Sudanese people, of whom about 80 percent are engaged in crop production and animal husbandry. The principal food crops are sorghum and millet, while the cash crops are cotton, groundnuts, sesame and gum Arabic. The main animal wealth comes from cattle, sheep, goats and camels.

Sudan has 36 million hectares of arable land, of which only one-third is cultivated, owing to constraints of water availability. A further 100 million hectares are usable as grazing land and 17.6 million hectares are natural forests. Of the 13.5 million hectares gross cultivated area, some 1.9 million hectares are under irrigation, 7.5 million hectares under rainfed mechanized farming and 4 million hectares under traditional cultivation.

The current livestock population is estimated at 27.7 million Animal Units (AU), much greater than the optimum stocking rate of 22.1 AU (1 AU
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equals 1 cow plus 1 calf or their equivalent). The range resources are also reduced by expansion of cultivation, by deforestation and by grass fires, which burn up to 30 percent of the total forage production.

Forests are being decimated in the North by the expansion of mechanized farming and increasing demand for fuelwood. At current rates of consumption versus regeneration and afforestation, all forest areas in northern Sudan will be denuded by the year 2003 (Suliman, 1990).

All rivers in Sudan are part of the Nile waters system. In addition to the White Nile and Blue Nile, the Bahr al-Arab, Dinder, Rahad, and Atabara rivers flow into the main Nile. With the exception of the Bahr al-Arab, all the other perennial tributaries of those rivers originate either from outside Sudan or from southern Sudan: this has an important bearing on the civil war. Rainfall, the only other water source, is characterized by wide-variability of distribution within the same isohyet in any one season, and this is reflected in both run-off and seepage variability. Crop production and the welfare of livestock fluctuate greatly in accordance with the rainfall patterns (DANIDA, 1989).

Human and animal life depend on a delicate balance of the soil, water, and flora that support it, and disruption of any one of these vital elements creates havoc. Factors such as climate change, land exhaustion through over-use or misuse, population growth or displacement, disadvantageous changes in land tenure, warfare or export of resources cause lasting damage to the people, the animals and the environment. All of the following disastrous factors have descended on the country within the life-span of one generations:

- Micro-macro-climatic change (the practically continuous Sahel drought since 1967)
- Diminishing and erratic rainfall and accelerating desertification (the floods and torrential rains of 1988)
- Near doubling of population in less than a quarter of a century (15 million in 1970 to 30 million in 1996)
- Displacement—both internal and external—of some six million people
- Doubling of livestock numbers within 20 years
- Deforestation on a massive scale
- Renewed civil war in the South, which is now encroaching on the West and East
- Aggressive expansion of legal and illegal rainfed farming, from 0.42 million hectares in 1967 to 7.5 million hectares in 1989

To prepare the ground for far-reaching changes in the land tenure laws and traditional practices, the Sudanese state introduced a new land act in 1970.

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The 1970 Unregistered Land Act declared that all land, occupied or unoccupied, belonged to the state and entitlement could no longer be acquired by long use. Only about 1 percent of crop and grazing land is privately owned. The subsequent distribution of “state land” to absentee landlords, encouraged the reorientation of agricultural production for export purposes. This move was sanctioned by the international “market forces,” who favor cash crops for export rather than food for the internal market.

It is a deeply disturbing indicator of the devastation of the social fabric and the natural environment that Sudan’s relatively small population is increasingly unable to sustain a livelihood in a huge and resource-rich country. The discovery of oil in commercial quantities at the beginning of the 1980s raised hopes of salvation of the country’s economic crisis. But the oil was found mainly in the South, and as with the prospect of saving water with the Jonglei Canal, success depended on control of the area.

The Civil War in the South

The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium took 25 years to subdue Sudan. This was especially difficult in the South where, until the 1920s, government consisted largely of punitive military expeditions and periods of exceptional violence.

To pacify and govern the North, the new rulers promoted the political and economic influence of Sayyid al-Mirghani, head of the Khatmiyya sect and Sayyid abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi, head of the Ansar sect. Sayyid abd al-Rahman reconstituted and to some extent secularized the Ansar organization, which became the Umma political party, while Sayyid al-Mirghani patronized the emergent nationalist movement, led by Ismael al-Azhari, and transformed the Khatmiyya followers into the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

While the British concentrated on economic, political and infrastructural developments in the North, such as the Gezira scheme, the railways, and the introduction of modern civil administration, it allowed the West and South to stagnate under the “native administration” of the chiefs and sheikhs (Africa Watch, 1990).

This policy towards the South amounted to total separation of South and North. Tribal structures were maintained. Little or no effort was made to promote social or economic development. Education—with English rather than Arabic as the lingua franca—was elementary and minimal. The result was not only isolation of the South from the North, but also from the rest of the world.

In the 1930s and 1940s nationalist political activities in the North were developing at a rapid pace. Catalyzed by internal and external developments associated with the Second World War, the political pressure led to independence.
The colonial powers only began to loosen their grip on Southern Policy in 1948, when the Juba Conference was allowed to take place, and southern chiefs agreed with northern nationalists to pursue a united Sudan.

The crash programme of integration that then occurred was too little, too late. In 1953 the 800 administrative posts vacated by the British were "Sudanised." The northern politicians allocated a mere four posts to the southerners; an insult but also an indication to how education in the South had lagged. In the South, "Sudanisation" was tantamount to "Northernisation." As independence approached, the southerners saw their British administrators being replaced by northerners. In 1955 the southern garrison at Torit mutinied on hearing that they were to be transferred to the North. Their rebellion formed the nucleus of the Anyanya separatist movement, which was to fight Sudan’s first civil war for seventeen years (Africa Watch, 1990).

Since independence Sudan has altered between civilian and military rule in a fruitless search for economic development and the resolution of the southern problem. In July 1971, when Nimeiri was returned to power after a short-lived coup supported by the Communist Party, he severed all connections with the “socialist” countries and rushed headlong to embrace the West and the prospect held out by its “free market” philosophy.

For his grand new plans to succeed, peace was crucial. In 1972, following negotiations with Joseph Lagu, who only two years previously had brought the Anyanya movement under his sole command, Nimeiri and Lagu signed the Addis Ababa Accord that brought an end to 17 years of civil war. The basis of the agreement was regional autonomy for the South, but it left several key issues only half answered.

The ten years between 1972 and 1983 were years of uneasy peace. Many Equatorians were unhappy about what they felt was the hegemony of the Dinka in the Regional Government, which became the major source of wealth and social prestige in the South. The balance of power between Equatorians and Nilotes was altered in 1979 with the fall of Idi Amin in Uganda and the return to Sudan of many well-qualified Equatorian professionals and administrators.

Most southerners were disdainful of the way Nimeiri interpreted the Addis Ababa Accord to redraw the boundaries of the South to include the Bentiu region, where oil had been discovered, into the North. This feeling was compounded when the central government ignored the concerns of local people when it gave the go-ahead for the construction of the Jonglei canal through the swamps of the Sudd.

Southern politicians were also divided amongst themselves. Equatorians against Dinka and Nuer, Anyanya “haves” against Anyanya “have-nots.” Nimeiri tried to exploit these divisions to his own advantage and began
manipulating the course of event by appointing and dismissing senior southern politicians. These machinations culminated in the “redivision” of the South in 1983. Three regions were created out of the one autonomous region, and the single regional government was abolished. While Equatorians rejoiced, the unseated Dinka and Nuer felt humiliated and deceived. The specter of a new civil war began to haunt the South, but this time the Nilotic tribes were bound to be the major actors. In the same year the Nimeiri redivided the South, a number of mutinies took place, notably the one at the garrison of Bor, which then became the nucleus of the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) of Colonel Doctor John Garang.

The SPLA, unlike the Anyanya movement, announced that it was not fighting for an independent South; its declared aim was a unified secular and democratic Sudan. The SPLA saw itself as an integral part of the struggle of all the marginalized groups in Sudan, including the Nuba and Fur. John Garang has repeatedly called for a national constitutional conference to agree on a secular and democratic constitution for the whole country. It has always been questionable, however, whether the SPLA would be able to maintain this position in the face of huge practical and psychological obstacle, not least that most of its rank and file were motivated to fight by ethnic and religious differences. During the early years of the movement, Ethiopian government support was crucial to the SPLA, and since Ethiopia had problems with its own secessionists it would have been unwilling to assist in action likely to lead to a redrawing of international frontiers. (Since the fall of the Dergue regime in Ethiopia in May 1991, of course, the Eritreans have succeeded in just such a redivision.)

Internal dissent in the SPLA reached crisis point in August 1991, when a break-away group—the “Nasir faction”—called for the overthrow of Garang and for a separate South, abandoning all ambitions for a united secular state. Although they failed to unseat Garang, they revived the principle that “self-determination” took priority over unity, and voiced a common southern attitude that the difference between the Islamic National Front regime and the opposition Umma and Democratic Unionist Party was minimal: that northerners could not be trusted. It is now debatable how long Garang and his supporters—the “Torit faction”—can keep to their original slogans.

The end of the Cold War has meant diminishing strategic importance in the global sense for Sudan, but other considerations have come to the fore and are gaining momentum. The Islamic fundamentalist movement has expansionist ambitions, and the people of neighboring Egypt have an ever-growing demand for water. In the shifting sands of the new politics of the region, all participants are forced to reconsider their course of action, and the SPLA is no exception.
Following the overthrow of Nimeiri in 1985, the “National Alliance” of radical political forces that led the popular uprising met the SPLA/SPLM at Koka Dam in Ethiopia and reached an agreement on a basic formula for peace, including the convening of a constitutional conference. The Koka Dam Agreement was endorsed by the Umma Party and rejected by the DUP and the National Islamic Front (NIF).

The Umma Party leader and new Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi soon abandoned Koka Dam, however, having successfully revived the old Mahdist alliance of Jellaba and western Baggara and obtained huge arms supplies from Libya and Iraq. He began to pursue the war with renewed vigor, arming the Murahaleen militias, whose loyalty to him “would be greater than their accountability to the law and the state” (Africa Watch, 1996).

By the end of 1988 the DUP was sufficiently concerned about Sadiq’s intentions that it negotiated the “November Accords” with the SPLA/SPLM, agreeing in principle to freeze the Islamic Shari’a laws pending a constitutional conference, to implement a cease-fire and cancel the state of emergency imposed by Sadiq in 1987. The popularity of this agreement was demonstrated when leader Mohamed Osman al-Mirghani was given a hero’s welcome at Khartoum airport on his return.

Faced with massive popular endorsement of the November Accord, and implicit condemnation of his own stance, Sadiq al-Mahdi turned to the NIF for support, setting up a new coalition government which excluded the DUP. But the army had become convinced of the futility of the war, and in February 1989, dismayed by the lack of political resolve, issued an ultimatum to Sadiq: unless there was progress towards peace, and the militia were disbanded within one week, the army would step in. Eventually Sadiq capitulated: the NIF left the government and the DUP returned. Negotiations were started with the SPLA; a cease-fire was achieved fairly quickly, and the United Nations famine relief program, Operation Life-Line, was resumed.

The constituent Assembly agreed to freeze the Islamic laws, and a date, September 1989, was set for convening the constitutional conference. Sadiq was due to meet Garang in Addis Ababa on July 4; but the meeting never took place. On June 30, with perfect timing, a military coup staged by the NIF aborted the peace process and with the fervor of “jihad” unleashed a reign of terror in the North as well as the South. The new regime escalated the war in the South to new levels of brutality with the backing of radical Islamic Arab countries. Iran, especially, became a source of enormous military and economic support. The NIF has been single minded in its resolve to solve the “southern problem” once and for all with a program of Islamization and Arabization.
The Causes

Few wars are ever fought in the name of their real causes; instead they are fought under old banners and old slogans, based on memories of past conflict. Because these memories fade so slowly, they obscure from the valiant warriors the possibility that they might be fighting for reasons no longer relevant or valid and even, on occasion, against their own interest. This is partly the case in Sudan’s current war. Although the major cause for the conflict is now the struggle over resources, most fighters on both sides remain convinced that the war is all about ethnicity, cultural identity, and religion. In the following I will try to explain this transformation in the nature of the conflict by discussing the major elements of the process.

The Cultural-Ethnic Divide

Sudan is such a vast country that for long periods most Sudanese tribes were able to live in their homelands in relative isolation from each other, free to develop their own cultural values and norms. Only when forced to move from their traditional habitats by reason of ecological degradation or political coercion did they have to confront alien cultures and peoples. These points of contact between strong ethnic identities, whether Arab or African, were also the areas of friction and potential for low- or high-intensity conflict.

When southerners are in conflict with the North, their identity with the region and self-image as black Africans come first, while at the local level tribal attachment is predominant. Apparently unity is more complex than it seems, and long and bitter conflicts have often divided neighboring peoples. In the North, although there are evident regional and tribal loyalties, they often give way to class-based distinctions. The jellaba, the secular-educated, and the army officers constitute what Dr. Alex de Waal (1990) calls the Sudanese groups. The three groups share a cluster of common features: language (Arabic), a religion (Islam), and a common cultural code, a hybrid of northern riverine cultural values. Historically the jellaba traders were partly responsible for the slave trade which transformed the cultural borders between the northern “Arab” tribes and the southern “African” tribes. From borders of cultural exchange and mutual enrichment they became barricades from behind which to shoot at one another.

Following violent military expeditions to gain control of the South, the colonial government imposed a different system of administration known as the “Southern Policy.” While in the North control of the economy and the administration was mainly in the hands of the state and secular leaders, in the South the colonial government created self-contained tribal societies, headed by traditional chiefs. The government tried to eradicate all Muslim influence, encourage missionary activities, and used English as the lingua franca. No effort was made at economic development. Education was elementary; no
secondary education was available. "At its height, the Southern Policy led to the attempted creation of a cordon sanitaire: a depopulated no man's land between North and South" (Africa Watch, 1990).

In the decades of isolation from the North and the rest of the world, the memory of the slave raids was kept alive, with virtually no personal contact to dilute its bitterness. Consequently, when the administration of the South was "Sudanized" by the introduction of northerners prior to the early years of independence, and the sons of the Jellaba slave traders confronted the southerners as their new rulers, the ethnic friction soon caught fire. Hundreds of northerners, professionals, teachers, and other were killed in the massacres which in 1955 swept through the South in response to what was perceived as northern colonialism. This was a shocking reminder to the North that it would take more than earnest declarations to transcend entrenched mistrust and enable peaceful communication to take place between alien cultural identities.

The Resource-Extractors versus Rural Sudan

The arid and semi-arid zones that make up most of the North are overpopulated, even though the population density is only about ten inhabitants per square kilometer. This is because the population are concentrated around sources of water and good soil. Over the centuries people in the semi-arid zone known as the Sahel have developed many coping mechanisms to counter occasional drought. But since 1967 rainfall has consistently been less than the previous long-term average, and the survival techniques have come under unbearable pressure from such persistent drought. There have been a precipitation deficit of 40-50 percent compared with the preceding 15 years (Ibrahim, 1984).

During the 1970s and 1980s it was widely believed that the Sahel drought was man-made; a result of the destruction of vegetation through over-grazing and deforestation for timber and fuelwood. Since the mid-1980s expert opinion has swung towards the view that changes in ocean temperature caused by global warming might be the main culprit (Pearce, 1991). However, both the regionally and globally induced changes are in the last instant the result of human interventions, the ongoing human-ecology transformations.

In addition to drought, unsustainable methods of land use such as over-grazing and intensive mechanized rain-fed farming are destroying the Sahelian ecosystem in which 70 percent of the Sudanese people live. It is my contention that the subsistence economy of this huge Sahelian zone has collapsed irreversibly as a result of human activity and climate change. The slower natural process of wear and tear has been accelerated enormously by the unprecedented exploitation of resources carried out by the Jellaba, prompted by their assimilation into the world market in the restricted role of extractors of primary
wealth. In addition, the loan conditionalities of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank considerably boosted this restructuring of resource utilization away from local needs and the local market towards the demands of international market. In this process, the decline in the international terms of trade brought about by the collapse of primary commodity price had a knock-on effect on the local market, where terms of trade have also worsened. To maintain their living standards the peasants and pastoralists had to produce more from their shrinking resource base. Failure to do so meant joining the millions of newly assetless poor.

The Fragility of the Drylands

The southern fringes of Sudan’s semi-desert zone used to have sufficient rainfall to support the cultivation of drought-resistant millet and a few other crops, but even this subsistence production has become virtually impossible because of three spells of drought in the last two decades.

Savannah covers about 25 percent of Sudan, known as the central rainlands, where agro-pastoralism is the principal method of land use. Rainfall averages 800 millimeters per annum across this belt of acacia and tall grass, where the more fertile soils support sorghum, millet, sesame, groundnuts, and cotton. This belt extends to the rich savannah in the South which gives way to the tropical forest and swamp land in Equatoria, large areas of which are not suitable for raising livestock because of the presence of the tsetse fly.

The fragility of the semi-arid lands is evident. Awareness of seasonality and careful utilization of resources are supplemented with herd diversity and selective use of certain environmental niches in specific seasons of the year. The sequence of environmental security is based on utilizing the richer southern zones in the event of long periods of drought. This movement of people and herds from one ecological zone to an area already occupied by different ethnic groups is already a recipe for tension, requiring delicate negotiation. Conditional agreements used to be reached when the need for sharing land was occasional, but now that the need is permanent the strains are greater. Furthermore, when the buffer zone between the semi-arid and the savannah is blocked by large-scale mechanized farms, then the entire way of life of the agro-pastoralists collapses.

Mechanized farming in the central rainlands has taken over great stretches of traditional farm land, water points, grazing lands and herding routes, displacing millions of small producers. Large areas of forest were cleared (including about 95 percent of the forest in eastern Sudan) to make way for the giant agricultural schemes, and with the trees went vital local sources of revenue from fuel wood and gum Arabic. The ecological and social stress caused by large-scale mechanized agriculture is well-documented (see Kebbede, Chpt. 2,
in this volume), and can be held responsible for three types of conflict: 1) between traditional farmers and owners of the big scheme; 2) among local people in the vicinity of the schemes, because of scarcity of cultivable land, obstruction of animal herding routes, or in the search for fresh grazing land; 3) between the state, as major backer of the scheme owners, and the small farmers and pastoralists. This third form is the most serious of all as the state has often opposed the spontaneous resettlement of such people when stricken by drought.

The very structure and location of large-scale mechanized farms is a source of recurrent and continuous confrontation. The whole intermediate zone between the semi-arid and the rich savannah lands have now been transformed into an arena of conflict between traditional producers as well as between the modern and the traditional sub-sectors of the agricultural systems. It is interesting to note that during period of rapid expansion of mechanized farming from 1970 to 1985, more than 20 major regional tribal conferences were organized to solve land disputes between the various ethnic groups in the central rainlands (Suliman, 1993: 107).

Enter the World Bank

During the 1950s and 1960s agricultural production was directed mainly to the internal market and the satisfaction of basic local needs. For this reason Sudanese people were able to withstand the severe drought of 1972-73 without the emergence of widespread famine. Since the mid-1970s and the involvement of the IMF and World Bank in Sudan, however, the situation has changed. A significant shift took place within the Jellaba with the opening to the West that started in 1972 and the move from internal markets to export. By the mid-1970s Sudan was being hailed as the potential bread-basket of the Arab World, and plans were laid to expand mechanized agriculture westwards using freely available petro-dollar loans.

In spite of the rapid increase in the area of land under cultivation and increased export capacity, the overall effect of the new export-oriented policies was negative. The value of primary commodities in the international market declined steadily from the early 1970s onwards, while at the same time oil prices soared to record heights. Foreign debt was growing, as were repayments and servicing dues. The economic crisis came to a head in 1978, when the IMF intervened and negotiated the first of several adjustment programs. From then until 1984 the IMF concluded five agreements with Sudan. The IMF structural adjustment programs (SAPs) were directed towards curbing the government’s budget deficit and encouraging the export sector, mainly through selective promotion of export crops and devaluation of the Sudanese currency. By greatly encouraging the expansion of mechanized agriculture, reducing the land
available to traditional farmers and pastoralists, and devaluing their monetary assets and reducing subsidies for basic needs and social services, the whole edifice of agro-pastoralism—the livelihood of 14 million Sudanese—began to collapse. Because agriculture was no longer geared towards the domestic market, the living conditions and spending ability of the laboring classes became a secondary issue. Between 1978 and 1984, a further 4.5 million people joined the army of the assetless, and at the same time “not only had the crisis within the subsistence economy deepened, producing a growing poverty of a new type unsupported by traditional systems of redistribution and reciprocity, but the economy had been redirected towards external markets, becoming increasingly vulnerable in the process. The result was the well-publicized famine of 1984-85” (Duffield, 1990: 8).

The Sorghum “Success Story”

By 1980/81 sorghum had become Sudan’s second largest export. Increase in sorghum exports was due mainly to import subsidies by Saudi Arabia, which paid $221 per metric ton for Sudanese grain, compared to only $170 per metric ton for sorghum from Thailand. The IMF pressure on Sudan to export continued unabated, even during the famine years of 1982 to 1985. During this period the Sudan exported 621,000 metric tons of sorghum, prompting praise from leading IMF economists for an apparent success story: an example of the positive impact of devaluation in encouraging the production of non-traditional exports.

Cotton versus Food

Prior to the implementation of SAPs, wheat self-sufficiency averaged 48 percent. After the SAPs implementation had begun (1978-87), the figure deteriorated to 26 percent. This was a direct consequence of IMF bias against wheat production because it clashed with profitable export crops such as cotton. The area under wheat was halved to make way for increased cotton cultivation; the World Bank gave generous support to the rehabilitation of the Gezira and other irrigated cotton-growing schemes. In view of the depressed market for cotton, Sudan lost on both counts—foreign currency earnings and food security—because of increased dependence on wheat imports, whether commercial or concessional.

Political Coercion and the Privatization of the State

The internal conflicts which have mushroomed in the Sudan from the mid-1970s onwards have reflected the growing resistance of millions of dispossessed against the new economic regime based on export of resources. To implement these policies with their harsh effects on an embittered population,
the commercial and financial interests of a significant part of the Jellaba required a new type of state, which is completely within the grasp of their group and endowed with strong powers of coercion.

Coercive acts against traditional cultivators and pastoralists were swift and brutal. When victims of famine and drought moved into the wetter areas in search of survival alternatives, they were often intercepted by the army. The only way left open for survival was to move to towns and relief centers; to eke out a degraded existence dependent on begging, charity, and petty labor, or theft and prostitution. Even in the towns these people were treated as third class citizens. The police were mobilized in arbitrary round-ups known as kasha, which sought to repatriate of migrants to their homelands, despite the fact that the land could no longer sustain them. These uprooted and homeless people are collectively known to the authorities as Shamasa—literally “those who have no roof but the sun.”

State aggression escalated in line with growing poverty and resistance. In 1983 Nimeiri introduced his harsh version of the Islamic Sahri’a laws, and the penalty was enforced on 200 people in eighteen months. All were displaced Shamasa. Resistance continued, however, with the Shamasa providing the spark for the 1985 popular uprising which, in informal alliance with the impoverished middle class of public employees, teachers, and professionals, overthrew Nimeiri’s military regime. In 1986 parliamentary democracy was reinstated, but it did not take long for people to realize that very little had actually changed or was likely to change, since the same interest groups continued to implement the same policies as before.

Eventually the more ruthless business and financial segment of the ruling elite became impatient with the obstacles created by the new democratic atmosphere, the democratic checks and balances in the state apparatus and the judiciary, and the prospect of concessions to the South in the search for peace. They wanted the system dismantled and irreversibly destroyed, and so, after staging a putsch against an already weakened civilian government, intensified the war.

The Move Southwards

Mechanized farming reached southern Kordofan and the Rahad reserve area by the end of the 1970s. By 1989, some 60 percent of the Rahad reserve was under illegal mechanized farming, and it is astonishing that the government has provided these illegal and unlicensed schemes with agricultural extension services and even fuel quotas. The horizontal expansion of mechanized farming exhausts the soil very rapidly. Yields of sorghum, millet, and groundnuts of the degraded land fell by as much as 80 percent, and some 17 million hectares have been lost to soil erosion. In some areas the land is depleted
within 3-4 years by this large-scale version of shifting cultivation, which rolls like a fire-ball across the land, deforesting and destroying the soil before moving on. Its appetite for new land is rapacious and continuous, and the only natural direction for it to go is southwards.

With the discovery of oil at Bentiu, the Jellaba became aware of the new form of wealth in the South to add to those of land and water. As far as the Jonglei canal was concerned, its construction during this period paralleled the agricultural expansion drive, even though it had been contemplated for several decades. By the end of the 1970s the South, which had been left to its own devices for so long, was moved into the sphere of interest of the Jellaba and their state.

The Lure of Oil, Water and Land

Oil. In April 1981 Chevron announced the discovery of commercial deposits of oil in the Unity field in its southwestern concession. Recoverable reserves from Unity and the adjacent Heglig field were officially estimated at about 236 million barrels. Confirmed oil reserves for the whole of Sudan are estimated at 2,000 million barrels—enough to earn the country some $10,000 million or cover its projected energy needs for ten years.

Original plans to process the oil locally were deferred in September 1982; instead, with Chevron’s encouragement, the Nimeiri government opted for the construction of a refinery and export terminal south of Port Sudan, linked to the oil fields by a 1,400 kilometer pipeline. This sudden reversal alerted people in the South to the probable intentions of Nimeiri and his backers among the Jellaba. One of the first acts of the SPLA was to attack Chevron’s oil-field operations, forcing the company to suspend work in February 1984. Since then, and in spite of pressure from Nimeiri and all subsequent governments, oil operations in the southwest have practically halted.

Water. Since the beginning of the century the idea of constructing a canal to drain the Sudd marshes of the White Nile at Jonglei has been debated by developmentalists and environmentalists. Motivated by the desire for more water downstream and the prospect of uncovering a vast expanse of fertile land, the Jonglei canal is one of the most intensively researched water projects in the world. What has always been conspicuous by its absence, however, is any serious assessment of how the local people—the Dinka, Shilluk, Nuer, Murle, Bari, and Anuak—directly and indirectly affected by the project or actually felt about it.

The Dinka, Shilluk, and Nuer who were directly affected feared the drastic changes the canal would bring to their way of life. They would not accept the prospect of life without the migration to the toich during the dry season, when they would find fish and improve the milk yield of their cows. They also
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feared the prospect of alien people being settled in their midst, and the possibility of conflict. Rumors that Egyptian farmers would be sent to the canal area sparked student riots in Juba in November 1979. There was justifiable mistrust of the project from southerners who saw the North and Egypt benefiting while their own lives were irreversibly changed, and not for the better. By drying out the swamps and taking away the “grass curtain,” the canal would open up the entire Sudd area for mechanized farming, the domain of the Jellaba, and also allow the North to move military equipment and troops into the South with greater ease. Thus the project’s giant earth-excavating machine, the biggest in the world, was one of the SPLA’s earliest targets, much to the chagrin of the governments of Sudan and Egypt.

Land. The fertile savannah plains of acacia trees and tall grass is where the “bread-basket” was envisioned. More predictable rains make these plains suitable for sorghum, millet, maize, sesame, groundnuts, and cotton. The huge expansion of large-scale mechanized farming which constantly devours new land, spread into southern Kordofan and the northern parts of Upper Nile Province. The owners of the mechanized farms, having exhausted vast tracts of the North, pushed inexorably southwards into the area inhabited by the Nilotic tribes, the major cattle economies of the South. Having seen how the Nuba were squeezed off their land in southern Kordofan, the local people were hostile to this incursion, and their response was the same.

Since the mid-1980s the Nuba began to join the SPLA in large numbers, attacking and burning the large mechanized schemes. There was a similar reaction from the people of the Ingessana in the southern Blue Nile and Bahr al-Ghazal, where the main stream of the SPLA attacked government troops and forced mechanized farms to close down. Hence, once again the plans of the Jellaba were frustrated. The call for strong government as the only solution to all Sudan’s problems began to spread, and with the NIF coup its advocates got exactly what they were looking for.

One implication of the austerity measures and currency devaluation of the IMF’s structural adjustment programs was the impoverishment of the middle classes and a marked polarization among the Jellaba themselves. In the new atmosphere only the Jellaba, with strong connections to finance capital and to the state power, could prosper. As Duffield (1990: 8) puts it: “In response to the declining profitability of more conventional activities, commodity speculation, hoarding and the use of state office for personal gain have grown in importance. . . . The leading edge of this new economic regime has been the Islamic banking system, which first appeared in Sudan with the opening of the Faisal Islamic Bank (FIB) in 1978. This development found political expression in the fundamentalist National Islamic Front.”
6. Civil War & Ecological Degradation in Sudan

On the international level the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran raised the hopes and aspirations of all fundamentalist movements in the Islamic world. They were also assured of a high degree of direct material support from a relatively wealthy state, an element that has been missing for quite a long time.

The leadership of the Islamic fundamentalist movement in Sudan is made up of urban, male, northern intellectuals with strong connections to the business and finance sectors. They have a strong anti-rural bias. Because of the shortened time in which to show a return on investment, they have adopted adventurous and aggressive forms of accumulation. Aggressive accumulation often demands an aggressive state and people with a single-minded determination and ruthlessness. The ideology behind the movement must appear pure, straight and simple, backed up by swift deterrent punishment for transgression.

South-South Conflict

When the government’s armed forces take prisoners of war from the SPLA, they are usually executed, and reports by Amnesty International and Africa Watch back up a picture of thousands of extra-judicial executions in the Nuba Mountains and the South. Atrocities against the civilian population are committed not only by the armed forces but also by a number of militias organized and armed by the government. The Murahaleen militias are drawn from the “Arab” tribes of the west—the Rezeigat, Misiriya, Humur, Zurug, and Rufaa tribes—who had traditionally engaged in skirmishes with neighboring Dinka over grazing lands. These encounters had hitherto never escalated into war, and peace was usually restored fairly quickly by means of inter-tribal conferences and long-standing protocols for settlement of disputes.

Small southern tribes distrustful of Dinka hegemony in the SPLA were also formed into pro-government militias, their opposition often stemming from harsh treatment at the hands of the SPLA. The Mundari at Terakeka responded in this way, as did the Toposa, Acholi, Latuka, Madi, and Azande in other parts of Equatoria. Remnants of the Anyanya II and the Murle militia operate in Upper Nile, and the Fertit make up the main pro-government “Popular Defense Force” in Bahr al-Ghazal. The Khartoum regime plays off one against the other. Although the North-South conflict is gradually losing its predominantly ethnic aspect, in the smaller scale South-South conflict this aspect is still alive and killing. The split in the SPLA in September 1991 probably had more significant negative impact than the entire militia operations, and although it represents division over policy and leadership, the driving force behind the rupture also had a strong measure of ethnic tension. When Commander Dr. Riek Machar, a Nuer, and Dr. Lam Akol, a Shilluk, announced the overthrow of SPLA leader John Garang, a Dinka, they failed to dislodge him but set in motion a tragic chain of tribal killings. Such events feed off long-standing rivalries.
In my opinion, the SPLA split, and the dissidents' adoption of calls for a separate South, represent widespread fatigue with the ideological aspect of the movement. The declared aim of a united, secular, democratic state had come to seem impossibly utopian, and the example of neighboring Eritrea and its secession (following the fall of the SPLA’s socialist mentor in Ethiopia) seemed to open up new possibilities. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union and the rise of nationalism, the temptation—always present—to say “why fight and die for a North that will never treat us as equals?” must have been very strong. Colonel Garang has pragmatically moved to accommodate the possibility of separation with a joint call for “self-determination,” keeping all of his options open.

Conclusions: From Ethnic to Ecological Conflict?

Sudan is such a large country that over long periods most Sudanese tribes were able to live in relative isolation from each other. This isolation encouraged the development of strong ethnic identities very suspicious of all aliens. An unhappy diversion from this tradition occurred during the slave trade period, when the northern jellaba raided the South and enslaved thousands of its people. However, the implementation of the so-called Southern Policy the South and the North returned to mutual isolation. With the advent of independence northern Sudanese replaced the colonial administration and brought back all the ethnic suspicion and mistrust, never forgotten nor forgiven. The ethnic conflict erupted violently in 1953 and continued unabated until the signing of the Addis Ababa Accord in 1972. In the same year all attempts at independence from international capital were abandoned. The temporary successful coup of the so-called free officers backed by the Communist Party in July 1971 gave them a shock, but with international backing the coup was rebuffed and the same forces hung on to the levers of state power. The price of this reprieve was the dropping of all pretense to independence from the international market and the lifting of all the barriers to foreign capital and “mutual cooperation.”

Within two decades of this surrender, some tremendous upheavals have taken place, human-made and otherwise:

- About six million people mainly in northern Sudan have become assetless and homeless poor. Some four to five million people are displaced inside the country, and some two to three million have left the country either as migrants or as refugees.
- Practically all remaining forested areas in northern Sudan, an area the size of Western Europe, have been denuded. Some 17 million hectares of rainfed arable land, half the total usable land, have lost topsoil and turned irreversibly to dust. Crop yields fell to 30
percent of their previous levels in some areas of rainfed agriculture.

- Rainfall has been less than half the average, and its occurrence has been more erratic.
- Industrial production, mainly substitute industrialization, averaged only 15 percent of capacity. Foreign debt went up from $298 million in 1972 to $14 billion in 1992 to over $20 billion in 1996. Capital flight also reached a staggering $14 billion. The Sudanese pound lost 99.7 percent of its value, falling from three US dollars to one US cent.
- Population growth rate increased from 3.0 to 3.5 percent, resulting in a 60 percent increase in numbers. Social services deteriorated to an absurdly low level. Illiteracy, previously declining, began to rise.

The unprecedented exploitation of the central clay region of Sudan through extensive mechanization coupled with persistent drought exhausted large areas in the North and forced unscrupulous landlords to expand in the virgin lands in the South, the Nuba mountains, and the Ingessena region. By the end of the 1970s they had initiated a number of schemes based on the oil, water, and land resources in the South. The response of the South was the formation of the SPLM/SPLA. This new resource aspect changed the character of the war. The indiscriminate killing of northerners, as was the case during the first civil war, became no longer significant. On the contrary, some northerners and many people from the Nuba and Ingessena joined the ranks of the SPLM/SPLA, which maintains that it is defending the whole rural Sudan against the onslaught of the Jellaba. Many of the fighters from both sides of the divide may still conceive the war as an ethno-religious conflict. The truth of the matter is that these elements are no longer as prominent as before and that the competition over resources triggered by ecological degradation in the North may already be the most important factor in the second civil war in Sudan.

Here we have an outstanding example of an ethnic-cultural conflict being gradually but firmly transformed through persistent ecological degradation into a resource conflict. The large-scale mechanized farming which is the main culprit of the ecological degradation is best understood as large-scale shifting agriculture, exploiting the soil to the limit before moving to fresh land to repeat the process. It destroys the basis of survival for the people as well as the flora and fauna. The mechanized touch turns everything to dust. In my opinion, Sudan offers a prime example of how Third World ruling elites, driven to specialize in resource utilization, have degraded the resource base to such an extent that its expansion becomes a necessity for them, justifying aggression against their own people or their neighbors.

Bearing the above mentioned in consideration means that the pros-
pects for lasting peace will depend on understanding the changed nature of the conflict. It is my contention that to avert future conflicts it has been imperative to drastically change the present mode of land use by halting the senseless tractorization of valuable lands, abandon the monopoly of the state over land ownership, and reorienting agricultural production to the internal market and the satisfaction of people’s food needs.

Lasting peace will therefore depend on: 1) land reform, returning the land to its original owners, rolling back mechanized farming, and nullifying concessions of large tracts of land to absentee landlords; 2) assisting the peasants and pastoralists to rehabilitate their natural habitat; 3) directing agricultural production to meet food self-sufficiency needs by gradual, selective de-linking from international trade as it is currently practiced; 4) exploring all the links, the direct and the intricate, between implementing sustainable development policies and the maintenance of lasting peace; and 5) achieving far-reaching democratization in all walks of life as well as respect in law and praxis of the rights of all minorities. Empower people and they will green the land.

At the beginning I mentioned Sudan’s resemblance to the entire African continent. Unfortunately that resemblance extends to the narrow specialization in production demanded by the international market, namely that of primary producer and consequent depletion (par excellence) of resources. The rural people, the Shamasa and the impoverished middle classes have been struggling for two decades against the effects of this myopic asset-stripping. It would be a tragedy for Sudan and its people if the outcome of the civil war means the continuation of the resource war of which it is but one manifestation.
Selected References


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