The Darfur War: Masculinity-in-crisis and the contingency of Sudanese citizenship

Prepared for the ASC Seminar, 15-1-2009
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Introduction

Since February 2003, Darfur has been the site of mounting violence, which has led the UN to repeatedly describe the conflict as "the world's worst humanitarian crisis." [i] The U.S. Congress even labelled the conflict "genocide." Diverse ethnic groups as well as the government were engaged in violence in the 1980s and 1990s; however, the violence has reached a new dimension in the recent war, where racism has become the main legitimizing discourse of the conflict.

> Comment [CR1]: Please specify who is using racism as a legitimizing discourse.

In this paper I will analyse the current war in Darfur from the perspective of gender identities by connecting the war to the problematic construction of masculinity by young men in the region. In addition, the fact that 2002 saw the "outbreak" of violence has made me consider the war in Darfur in the context of the Sudanese government's political project to construct a "Sudanese" national identity. I do not want to suggest that this analysis precludes any other view on the violence in Darfur; on the contrary, to say anything definitive on the nature or sources of the current Darfur war is, at this moment, premature. Moreover, this conflict—like most conflicts—can hardly be explained in terms of one underlying aspect. As an anthropologist, I think that any reflection on the war should be based on the experiences and views of the Darfur people who have lived through it, which so far I have not been able to gather. The perspectives in this essay are thus based on anthropological research in Jebel Marra in the 1980s and in Kebkabiya, North Darfur, in the 1990s.

> Comment [CR2]: What is the significance of 2002?

Here, I will attempt to look at the war by focusing on how it has become part of the construction of diverse, intersecting identities. I acknowledge the importance of economic, social, cultural, political, and other forms of marginalization of Darfur within the Sudanese nation state as determining factors in the conflict, to account for the scale and frequency of the violence. [ii] At the same time, "ethnicity," or even "race," [iii] has become the major label to refer to the violence, which has led to an exoticizing of the conflict. Particularly problematic in using ethnicity as shorthand for, if not the main denominator of the source of the conflict is that it leads to an oversimplification of the causes of the current war. I maintain that if the ethnic labels that have become racialized in the Darfur war, are not qualified the users of these labels are complicit in the discourse the current Islamist government of Sudan uses to legitimize this civil war. The paper is in fact divided into three parts.

> Comment [CR3]: It seems that race rather than ethnicity is used to label the violence. I think perhaps below you can explain that what has been racialized in the media, is more accurately understood through the lense of ethnicity?

1. Ethnicity and local conflicts: the problematic construction of masculinity among youths in Darfur

- As the late Claude Ake has once stated, it is very difficult to maintain that ethnic conflicts or violence exists; the fact that one likes different kinds of food, music, has different customs, is in itself not reason enough to kill someone else. This means that ethnic conflicts relate to other kinds of differences. In the first part of my paper I contextualize ethnicity historically which shows that ethnic identity in Darfur has become particularly meaningful, or should I say problematic, in political contexts and economic deprivation. However, and that is my main problem, by taking ethnicity or ethnic identity as a starting point for a critical reflection, I will always end up with considering ethnicity of central importance. For a good understanding of the current scale and extent of the violence I should start from somewhere else.

In the period of my research, the authority of tribal leaders, and elderly men in general, became increasingly contested by young males. Without casting young men collectively as victims, many of them do suffer from what I call a 'masculinity in crisis'. In many farming communities in Darfur, women were the main cultivators while single young men were often redundant, in particularly in times of food crises. Among the Fur, young boys from the age of 8 till about 18 would wander from one Koranic school to the next, or engage in odd jobs along the way 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 elderly in small settlements near sedentary peoples. This process of settling by female nomads coupled with male out-migration among sedentary farmers has created over the last decades communities that consist of predominantly female-headed households, of both sedentary and nomadic backgrounds, sometimes, as is the case with Kebkabiya, living in the same town or even hei. These engage with increasing frequency and scale in interethnic exchange, share-cropping and intermarriage.[iv] More recently, these formerly temporary settlements of nomads have become permanent, and are increasingly also hosting young men, which is in fact a sign that the nomadic lifestyle is becoming extinct. In other words, young males of both groups are engaged in a process of change, in which the old ways are becoming extinct, or simply 'old-fashioned', and in which the

elderly do not constitute a role-model anymore: as their ways of life of their fathers is threatened, so are the self-identities of young men based on that life-style. With the loss of their livelyhood, their past, they have become men without a 'future', at least without much cultural or social capital to acquire a 'modern' lifestyle, which in many locations is reflected in the loss of authority of tribal leaders and of elderly men in general.

For example, in the early 1990s, when I conducted anthropological research in Kebkabiya, a town that is located in one of the war zones, conflicts over scarce resources, and according to the shartai Ahmedaii this had been the case since colonial times, concerned predominantly Fur and Zaghawa, groups that have now become allies in the conflict. At that time there were several reconciliation conferences held inside the town of Kebkabiya. After one such conference the tribal leader of a Zaghawa sub-group was ambushed when returning home. It turned out he was killed, not by the 'enemy' Fur, but by youngsters of his own constituency as they felt their rights were thwarted and their needs neglected by the agreement he had signed.[1]

 In the deteriorating conditions of deprivation and despair among disenfranchised young men on both sides of the conflict, weapons apparently form an easy and immediate satisfaction in the quest for respect, self-identity, and a sense of control and may account for the numbers of young men that are engaged in the conflict: It also has caused the conflict to be gendered at another troubling dimension, namely in the nature of the attacks: women are systematically verbally abused, raped, mutilated, their relatives killed in front of their eyes, while men, especially of "battle age" are main targets of mass killings which amounts to what one could call '*gendercide*'[v]

So. Yes there is ethnicity, but it is intersected with gender and generation which is important to understand the dynamics of the conflict. At the same time, the illusion of ethnic homogeneity of the Janjawiid has become part of the political-ideological project of those who cast themselves as the "Arabs" in Darfur, though it is not clear whether the Janjawiid were indeed as ethnically homogeneous as has been

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[1] Information from a talk with one of the Zaghawa negotiators present at this conference.

claimed. Still this ideology of ethnic purity has become the mainstay of a regional discourse of ethnic and religious superiority of the 'Arabs'.[vi]

However, even these "Arabs" are composed of a diversity of groups with different backgrounds, like those formerly serving in the Sudanese Popular Defence Forces in Dar Masalit who, in turn, had been trained by the *Quwait al Islam*, a militia under the control of the Northern Sudanese General Dabi in South Kordofan; recently migrated "Arabs" from Chad and Libya and some claim even Mali; and Abbala and Baggara "Arabs" from Darfur."[vii]

Musa Hilal, who is seen as one of the main "Arab" warlords directing the Janjawiid, who aimed at purifying the ranks of Janjawiid from non-Arab elements, claimed he was waging a "holy war" under the direction of the Sudanese government.[viii] The conflict in Darfur thus became part of national politics, and thereby it has been burdened with a new political meaning.[ix]

The strategy of turning Arab nomads into a militia as happened in Darfur was 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, in the war with the South armed Arab nomads from Kordofan and Darfur and turned them into so-called *murahiliin*.[x] The recent deployment of similar counter-insurgency tactics in Darfur suggests that the conflict represents a "southern Sudan speeded up" Apart from fighting techniques and the application of a "scorched-earth" policy, the ethnic, or racial rhetoric used to justify the violence also bears similarities with the war in the south. The conflict has been cast as one of "Black African farmers" attacked by Arab nomads. Black, and it has been noted earlier in the conference, does not refer to skin colour perse: it refers to a hierarchy and, in relation to 'African', suggests not just inferiority, but refers to the status of a slave which means automatically of a non-Muslim.

At the same time, although the Sudanese Arab government from Central Sudan has been affiliated with the Arab nomads in the current war in Darfur, the meaning of "Arab" to denote each of these groups carries different connotations of class and culture. The notion of "Arab" that is used for the nomadic peoples in Darfur is used in the sense of Bedouin and indicated backwardness and marginality.[xi] Alternatively, the educated ruling Arab elite residing in the Nile Valley constructed themselves as "*Awlad Arab*" and "*Awlad al-balad*," or children (sons) of Arabs and inheritors of the

Comment [CR4]: Is it racial or ethnic rhetoric?

land. They were instrumental in founding political Arab nationalism and claimed the Sudanese nation-state as theirs. By constructing Sudan both as Islamic and as Arab, they excluded not only Southerners but also other marginal groups of Muslims such as the Fur, the Beja and the Nubians, respectively in the west, east and north of the country

Darfur: from lesser Muslims to none at all

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." Darfur People, farmers and nomads alike, were cast as not proper and thus *lesser* Muslims, as inferior and backward by the government. I taped speeches given by al-*lagna al-sha'abiya* and the ministry of religious affairs at that time and, despite the low status of Darfurians as Muslims, they were at that time considered as part of the 'North' and thus as 'fellow' Muslims who could be redeemed, their ways amended and their souls saved, if they would just mend their religious ways. Even though this might never have been a serious inclusive project of the government, the fact that Darfur was seen as part of the Muslim north and only needed some re-Islamization has shifted since the current war broke out between the 'Arab Congregation or Gathering' and the JEM and SLM/A 'Opposition Movement' (since 2002, with ever increasing intensity and scale).

Significant is this shift took place in the same period that the peace agreement with the South was formulated, which not only meant that opposition groups learned that armed resistance pays off. Also around this time the dichotomy between Arabs and Africans became the main legitimizing discourse of the war.

Now the Darfur population are cast not as fellow Muslim's whose ways must be redeemed, but black African Farmers. The term black, is not novel to the area, where Fur and Masalit were cast as *zuruq* before the onset of the current conflict. However, it has now a connotation added, namely that of connected to national politics.

Strategies to construct a unified national identity: Sudanese citizenship and the 'Other'

In the third part of my paper I argue that the Sudanese government, although it suggests to base the Sudanese national identity on a homogeneous Arab identity

Comment [CR5]: Footnote?

and a related Riverain core culture, this is in fact an illusion. The centre is as diverse as the periphery and especially since the economic crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. In this period Sudan saw a brain drain to the oil countries and the west in conjunction with the liberalization of education under the military dictator Numeiri (who ruled Sudan from 1969-1985), which created a growing number of hopeful young men and women who could now get an education close to home, in their own marginal areas. After graduation they would come to Khartoum, to get further education and in order to get a salaried government position. In the process the control of the ruling elite over its core culture and identity diminished. Civil servants would be 'insufficiently' detribalized in the view of the Arab Riverain elite, since they now could get educated near their own 'tribal' homes. Because the government had problems in paying the salaries of its employees, this connection which with the marginal areas was increasingly used as a means, also by members of the government elite, to survive. It also created an ever growing diversity within the ranks of the ruling government elite. In addition, particular the junior administrators were increasingly dissatisfied with the deteriorating economic and social conditions in which they could hardly enact their role as 'Sudanese men' who could provide for their families in a proper, elite, way.

So it was not so much the marginal groups, but this heterogeneity within the ruling government elite itself that posed the largest threat to the moral and political dominance of the government, which meant a 'crisis of dominant masculinity' in the heartland of the government, the Nile Valley.

There are two strategies that are applied by government elites also elsewhere in the world, in order to construct the illusion of a unifying national identity. This strategy rests on pointing out a common 'other' against whom to define it Self. One obvious 'other' are women: they are cast as those who have upset social order: once this order is restored, men are also back into their rightful position of power and authority, a tactic that the current Sudanese government has indeed applied, in particular when it just came to power. Another strategy is, and I quote Donaldson:

'Through hegemonic masculinity most men benefit from having control of women; for a very few men, it delivers control of other men. To put it another way, the crucial difference between hegemonic masculinity and other masculinities is not the control of women, but the control of men

Women and 'other lesser' males thus constitute the means by which national elites can mark off the boundary of their group. National identity, in this case 'Sudanese-ness', is not easy to define 'from the inside'. Moreover, a national identity has to create the illusion that it is attainable for a large as possible diversity of men, so this identity has to be defined in rather general and common terms. In actual reality, access to resources should be limited which means the ruling elite has to draw its boundaries and produce a form of restrictive citizenship. In the case of Sudan this has happened in terms of a religious-racial discourse, in terms of Sudanese Muslim Arabs against 'other' tribal non-Arab groups is central.

So if the Fur and Masalit were called '*zurug*' before the onset of the current war in Darfur, it came up as a an official legitimizing discourse with a conflation of two different notions of 'Arabs' during the eruption of the current violence and after the start of the peace negotiations with the South. Thereby the position of 'significant other' in terms of national politics and identity seems to have shifted from the South to Darfur.

To attain at a more inclusive notion of citizenship is first and foremost a matter of balanced socio-economic, political and cultural development. However, I agree with Amir H. Idris when he states that:

'The legitimising function of the apparatus of truth in the Sudan is the official denial of race as a source of conflict. By abolishing racial otherness as a socially relevant frame of reference, the dominant discourse in the Sudan removed the critical issue of ethnic and racial hegemony and discrimination from the realm of legitimate debate.(..) Contemporary scholars of Sudan's civil war thus need to seek an alternative discourse of history that can be used to understand the root causes of the tragedy (Idris 2001: 26-28 and 136)'.

An alternative discourse, I want to add that is inclusive, rather than exclusive, in terms of ethnicity, locality, gender, generation, marital status and so forth. I, we, as scholars of Sudan, have to acknowledge the differences and diversity in local histories and trajectories of transformation in order to be able to rewrite a common Sudanese national history as a means of finding alternative roads to change.

Comment [AS6]: This sentence does not seem to be complete.

[i] This was the date that a group calling themselves the "Darfur Liberation Front" officially claimed the attack on Golo, the disctrict headquarters of Jebel Marra. Political as well as armed resistance against the government had been building for a longer period in Darfur, however. Flint and de Waal for example, refer to July 21, 2001, as an important date for the start of organized resistance, when "rebel" attacked a police station in Golo (*Darfur: A Short History of a Long War* [London: Zed Books, 2005], 76).

[ii] Scholars, such as Ali Dinar, even state that the watershed that the war is thought to represent is exaggerated as violence, poverty and the neglect by the government are symptomatic for Darfur. In this respect I agree with him. Here I will argue, however, that the way the violence has been legitimized does make a difference. I would like to thank Ali Dinar for his critical remarks on a paper I presented at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Sudan Studies Association, Bergen, Norway, April 6–8, 2006.

[iii] Though race is officially not a sociological [or biological] category, since it has become part of legitimizing discourses and of the experience of people, it is thus a phenomenon to be analyzed in this context.

[iv] See further Karin Willemse, "'One foot in heaven'. Narratives on gender and Islam in Darfur, West-Sudan (Leiden: Brill Publishers, f.c.).

[v] Gendercide Watch (www.gendercide.org)

[vi] Despite the fact that Musa Hilal, the leader of the Janjawiid, claims these consist of only Arabs and that "Africans" were not allowed to become members (see for example Flint and de Waal 2005, 33–65), interviews with some "defected" Janjawiid seem to contradict this statement.

[vii] Significantly, there are also Arab nomads who refused to join this "Arab Gathering, or Congregation," for example the Bagarra Rizeigat under Saeed Mahmoud Ibrahim Musa Madibu (Flint and de Waal 2005, 122–125).

[viii] See Flint and de Waal 2005, 33–65 and Harir 1994, 161.

[ix] Political resistance against the government, however, had been building for a longer period in Darfur. Flint and de Waal for example, refer to July 21, 2001, as an important date for the start of organized resistance (2005, 76). See also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darfur_conflict. [already stated earlier; please delete]

[x] Johnson 2003, 170.

[xi] The Arab nomadic groups that have come from Libya and Chad perceive this difference differently. They claim ancestry with the Qoreish, the nomadic group of the Prophet Mohammed. They see themselves therefore as the "true custodians of Islam" and therefore entitled to rule Muslim lands. Adherents regard Sudan's riverain elite as "half-caste" Nubian-Egyptians (Flint and de Waal 2005, 53) and thus not entitled to rule the Sudan. Historically, however, the riverain elite are at the center of political and socioeconomic power and thus of notions of Sudanese citizenship. I will return to this issue later.