

Conflict in Darfur A Different Perspective



'Rebuilding after a raid'

June 2004
Dr James Morton

Resource Paper

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CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 A PERSPECTIVE FROM 1991	2
3 THE IDARA AHLIA.....	6
4 MODERN TRIBAL DISPUTES.....	8
5 FUR VERSUS ARAB OR GOVERNMENT VERSUS PEOPLE.....	11
6 CONCLUSION	22
7 LOOKING BACK FROM 2004	23

1 INTRODUCTION

After some years out of the news, Darfur has become a hot topic in the international press. This paper was written in 1991, at which time I had just completed some six and a half years working in Darfur, plus another year of research on Sudan. I was also able to draw on the work of my colleagues in Hunting Technical Services (now HTSPE – www.htspe.com). Between 1957 and 1990, more than twenty of the company's staff worked to try to understand Darfur and support the region's development: a unique resource that is now largely lost.

Since then I have been involved in other things and I make no claim to knowing what is happening in Darfur now. What I do know is that in the early years of the Omar Bashir regime in Sudan, I viewed things from quite a different perspective to most commentators. Many will feel it is a hopelessly outdated perspective. Nevertheless, it was the only one which I felt was compatible with my own direct experience and the research I was doing. Just in case that different perspective still has value, it seems worth publishing it again.¹

The following quotation from a report by the NGO Africa Watch in 1990 set the scene.

"THE FORGOTTEN WAR IN DARFUR FLARES AGAIN"

"For more than two years, an intense civil war has been raging in Sudan's western-most region of Darfur. This is a civil war without rebels: it was started when militias supported by the Sudanese and Libyan governments began attacking villages inhabited by members of the Fur tribe. After a brief respite brought about by a peace conference in June 1989, government-backed militias have inflamed the war again in recent weeks, turning this once-peaceful region of Sudan into a battleground. A new and particularly ominous development has been the involvement of the Sudanese army, which has destroyed Fur villages and detained leading Fur chiefs.

"While the war is linked to tribal conflicts and the activities of Chadian opposition groups, the main responsibility lies with successive governments of Sudan, which have conspired with Libya to inflame the conflict." ... "bloody civil war" "full-scale civil war" "Arabs give a day's warning to the villagers, telling them to vacate their village to make way for the Arabs" ... "The army gives no protection" "Other raids take place without warning: the militiamen attack at dawn, burning houses and crops, stealing animals and valuables, and killing. The raiders search the village, poking the ground with sticks; when they located an underground grain store, they open it and burn the contents. The raiders poison wells, using high concentrations of Aldrex T (a highly poisonous pesticide which is banned in most countries, but which is widely-available in Sudan, only having been banned in February 1990).

¹ The paper was first presented at a seminar to a small group at St Antony's college, Oxford and then published in Sudan Studies, the newsletter of the Sudan Studies Society of the UK.

"... (recent) army involvement suggests a new and dangerous turn: until recently, while the government had abetted the Darfur conflict, the army itself had been neutral.

"Another worrying development of recent weeks has been deliberate government intervention against the Fur. The current military government broke with tradition by appointing a non-native of Darfur, Maj-Gen Abul Gassim Ahmed Ibrahim to the governorship. In March he moved his headquarters from ElFasher to Zalingei, which lies in the centre of the disputed area, and has begun to arrest prominent Fur leaders, and detain them in the high security prison of Shalla."

I and my family, together with three english colleagues, lived with our Sudanese colleagues on the Jebel Marra Rural Development Project, in Zalingei, "at the centre of the disputed area", from 1987 until August 1990. The situation was very tense and difficult. We even sent our families back to England for a while. However, the main reason I wrote this paper was because it never felt as though we were living in the same place as Africa Watch was describing.

The quotation sounds little different from the reports being published about Darfur in 2004, over a decade later. It accuses Government of Sudan of being oppressive and at war with all of its people, in the north of the country as much as the south. It comes from a time, just after the 1989 coup which brought the islamic government of Omar ElBeshir to power, where he remains. The image of a military regime with strong Islamic tendencies seems even stronger in the era of Al Qaeda and Iraq. The report also expresses a current view that events in Darfur reflect the intrigues of realpolitik among the nations of the eastern Sahara: Libya, Chad and Sudan itself.

In what follows, I revert to the text of the original paper, editing only to reduce the length.

2 A PERSPECTIVE FROM 1991

Recent events linked to the Gulf have led to a hardening of both GOS's position and of western attitudes to Sudan. This may make what I have to say difficult to believe, even unpopular, but it is my intention to argue that far from being the driving force behind events in Darfur, government is responsible only by virtue of its abject inability to do anything at all in the area, be it for good or evil. Furthermore, I have to say that however unpopular it may be in other directions, the Omar ElBeshir regime deserves at least some credit for its efforts to resolve the problems of Darfur, for having tried to overcome that abject inability. These efforts were by no means intensive and they may not succeed. Nevertheless, they put the indifference and inertia of the preceding democratic regime of Sadiq El Mahdi to shame.

More generally, I hope to show that the deteriorating security situation in Darfur, and by extension possibly in the rest of Western Sudan, is best understood within a

rather out-of-date framework: tribalism. Even though there are modern elements in the situation they are expressed primarily on a tribal basis and, more importantly, the best hope for a lasting solution probably lies with what has been termed the Tribal Administration. I myself suspect that similar arguments may well apply to the situation in Chad. The international press discusses the Chadian situation in terms of the Islamic legion, of Government and Opposition, of Libyan backed forces. The people of Darfur, who are more than a little involved in Chadian affairs, take a simpler view. They talk of Qura'an and Bidayat, not of government and opposition.

2. Who am I to disagree?

Since 1982 I have worked twice in Darfur. For three and a half years I was attached to the Western Savannah Development Corporation in Nyala. Between 1987 and 1990, I was with the Jebel Marra Rural Development Project in Zalingei. The latter period almost exactly covered the height of the fighting between Fur and Arab. The Western Savannah project covered the homeland of the major Arab tribes, while the Jebel Marra project covered most of the Fur territory. The majority of the staff both projects were Darfuris, drawn from all the major tribal groupings.

I was not employed to learn about politics of Darfur but as a working economist. For obvious reasons it would not have been prudent to express too great an interest in what was happening, even if I had had the time. Nevertheless, I do not think that it would have been possible for an outsider to have had a much more intimate relationship with what has been happening in Darfur over the last few years. I cannot guarantee that all of what I shall say is fact. Inevitably it depends on the rumours that ran round among my Sudanese colleagues and on second-hand reports. On the other hand the rumours came from many different directions and were discussed with people well qualified to judge. Some of them were directly involved in efforts to deal with what was happening. Quite a few of them lost relatives and some of them were jailed on suspicion of involvement. My overall impressions may not be correct but I am confident that they are more or less what the people of the area thought was happening. I do not think it is practical to hope for more than that.

3. Tribes of Darfur²

I believe that all the other factors which are blamed for the increasing level of inter-tribal fighting in Darfur are merely symptoms of an underlying failure of administration. The Libyans and Chadians may be fishing in troubled waters; the democratic politicians of Sudan have certainly been doing that. They are, however, irrelevant if we want to identify why the waters have become so disturbed in the first place.

Disputes over land, grazing and water rights are fairly frequent in Darfur, as much between Arab and Arab as between Arab and Fur. Despite a great deal of

² 'Tribe' is a most unfashionable word. I try to explain in the paper why it is still a useful framework for understanding events. Again my justification is that it was the framework used by the people I was talking to.

theorising, there is no hard evidence that such disputes are any more prevalent now than they were, for example, in 1948/49 when "The premature entry of Western Baggara into Zalingei district before the Fur crops were harvested and the subsequent seizure by the Fur shartais of large numbers of cattle threatened a major clash" and the "peace of Southern District was threatened by unnecessary and vexatious boundary disputes between Habbania (arab) and Rizeiqat (arab), Habbania and Beigo (non-arab), and Taaisha (arab) and Gimr (non-arab)". In the same year "two big tribal fights were tried by special courts".

The critical difference, in my view, between the 1940's and the 1980's lies in the fact that in those earlier years the administration put considerable if not first importance on strengthening the mechanisms necessary to deal with disputes: the police, the tribal administration and the judiciary. In the 1980's by contrast, various governments have looked upon the maintenance of law and order as a residual: something to be dealt with only when it forces itself on their attention as a result of major clashes.

To the Condominium Authorities of the 1940s, intelligence about the tribes had considerable importance; for good reason as much of their problems came from that direction. Perhaps it was inevitable that the post-independence regimes should see tribalism as a relic of colonialism, of something best ignored in a modern state. They are now paying the price of their own weakness in the face of traditional structures that are more flexible and more powerful than many are willing to accept. I am not suggesting that there are not strong modern pressures on the tribes but rather that these pressures still find their expression within the tribal framework. More surprisingly, they may still be most effectively dealt with in that framework.

The best way to comprehend the different groupings in Darfur is to concentrate on language. The most important divide runs between the tribes who consider themselves Arab and who speak nothing but Arabic and the tribes who either speak a non-Arabic language or who have a clear memory of doing so. I shall refer to them as Arabs and Non-Arabs. Very roughly, South Darfur is the territory of the Arabs and West and North Darfur are predominantly Non-Arab.

Two key points must be made at the outset. Although many do so, it is false to equate Arab with nomad and Non-Arab with settled farmer. The largest Arab tribes are collectively known as Baggara, literally 'cattlemen'. Nevertheless, the Habbania, a major Baggara tribe, were described as principally farmers as early as 1905. More recently some Fur have taken up nomadic cattle management while the Zaghawa, another non-arab tribe, are large camel-owners. Second, everyone is Muslim and has been for a long time: the Fur were by tradition converted as early as the 16th century.

It may surprise many that tribal boundaries are porous. Individuals, groups, even whole clans drift from one tribe to another, as best suits their circumstances. Despite the strong preference for cousin-marriages, cross tribal marriages are very frequent. In this sense the division between Arab and Non-Arab is a tribal boundary,

no different from that between one arab tribe and another. In times of peace social relations between the Fur and neighbouring Arab tribes are close and marriages between them common. Nevertheless, the Arab/Non-Arab divide is an important political fact. Much of what has happened centres on a struggle for political power, at the regional and even the national level, between politicians representing the two groups. The use by the Arabs of the somewhat perjorative term 'zarqa', the blues for the darker non-arab peoples indicates that a racial element is also present although not perhaps strong.

There are six major Arab tribes, running from the eastern side of S. Darfur they are the Rizeiqat and north of them the Ma'aliya, the Habbania, the Fellata, the Bani Halba and the Ta'aisha. There are smaller Arab groups in North as well as South Darfur: Messiriya and others in the south, Beni Husein and various camel-owning tribes in the north.

The Fur are by far the largest single tribe, Arab or Non-Arab. After them, other non-Arab tribes are the Masalit in the far west, the Zaghawa, the Tama and the Gimr in the north-west. The Berti stretch over most of the north-east while the Meidob occupy Jebel Meidob, in the far north-east. Smaller groups include the Daju, the Beigo and the Birgid all of whom are based in the area between Jebel Marra and the Kordofan boundary, while there are offshoots of the Masalit and the Gimr in the Arab heartland of South Darfur.

3 THE IDARA AHLIA

The Arabic term 'Idara Ahlia' is variously translated as Native Administration or Tribal Administration. A more correct translation might be Civil Administration, just as civil war is 'harb ahlia'. The Idara Ahlia was developed by the British Condominium³ authorities' during the early part of the 20th century to solve the problem of local administration in a vast country, which had almost no state structures when they took it over. To this they devolved significant powers to the tribal leaders, often following existing patterns.

In Darfur, where the Fur ruled until 1916 and the Fur state had its own administrative structures, the Idara Ahlia included Maqdamates, derived from the Fur title Maqdam, as well as Nazirs at the head of Arab tribes. Leading figures in the Idara Ahlia had been influential well before. The Madibbu family, at the head of the Arab Rizeiqat, appear in virtually every period from the early 19th century up until their presence in the Sudanese cabinets of Sadiq El Mahdi. Ali Senusi, Nazir of the Arab Ta'aisha under the British, was a Malik of the Fur state and brother-in-law to the Fur Sultan Ali Dinar before the conquest of Darfur in 1916. Reportedly it was he who betrayed Ali Dinar to the British at the end; a good example of how inter-tribal relationships go all the way from marriage to betrayal.

The basis of the Idara Ahlia was judicial and dispute resolution was the vital function. As an ad hoc structure, standards varied and individual tribal courts differed widely "according to their capacity and local needs, both in powers and procedure." What surprised the then government was the extent to which the introduction of an administration based around tribes led to the formation, or reformation of the larger tribal confederations. This was because the tribal courts were allowed to win what can only be described as their customers, from other tribal courts and even from the government courts. This meant that courts with the ability to command respect for their judgements attracted customers who became, in due course, affiliated to or even members of the tribe the court represented. The Hadendowa were a particularly strong example of this; as were the "Hamar tribe of Kordofan (who) had been a byword for the feebleness of their section chiefs and the inertia of the tribesmen in general. Its federation under a Nazir from the hereditary ruling house produced an almost instantaneous effect."

The British were not unaware of the drawbacks to tribal administration, in particular the need for some check to the Nazir's power. "We have made one vital change by introducing Omdas. The previous scheme was a Nazir, supported by his relatives as Manadib, forming an executive entirely under his control." The omdas "provided a class better able to control a headstrong Nazir."

³ Theoretically Sudan under colonial rule was a condominium between Egypt and Britain, although the latter were the dominant partner.

The apparent success of the Idara Ahlia did not mean that all was peaceful. Regional Governor's reports from the Condominium era abound in major tribal disputes. Nor was it equally successful with all tribes; the most notorious case being the Ma'aliya of Darfur, whose Nazir was deposed by the British and who were subordinated to the Rizeiqat. The success lay not in the fact that there were no disputes but rather in the fact that they were controlled and settled in a manner that lasted and that appears to have been generally acceptable. Many recent disputes in Darfur have reflected the breakdown of decisions arbitrated by the British as long ago as the 1920's. They have probably lasted better than anyone could reasonably expect.

It was inevitable that the ad hoc, evolutionary approach to civil administration should come to be seen as old-fashioned, colonial and inappropriate. Even before independence the British began efforts to establish local administrations that were both more professional, with appointed officials, and more democratic, through elected councils. Since independence there have been several more radical attempts to establish more direct and democratic forms of local administration in Sudan.

However, after 36 years of independence those more modern systems have mostly withered away to almost nothing, while the tribal Idara Ahlia remains, somewhat battered but still functional. Attempts to manage the Fur-Arab dispute I shall be describing later were essentially based on those structures.

A critical weakness in attempts to modernise local administration, lay in the change of emphasis away from the judicial to the administrative. Elected councils were, during good periods, given clear executive functions over raising local taxes, running local services and so on but the critical judicial area was given far less attention. The Councils did not have judicial powers and the tribal courts continued to function under various different titles. Sometimes the judges were elected, sometimes nominated. Even more critically, the tribal leaders powers of enforcement under the Idara Ahlia powers were not replaced. Instead, additional rural police stations were established but government did not, and probably could not, provide anything like the coverage necessary to deal with so large an area and so mobile a population.

By the time I first arrived in Sudan in 1982, the possibility of reviving the Idara Ahlia, which would have been unthinkable a few years earlier, was being actively considered. It was not long before various formal measures to do this had been passed. I shall be discussing whether such a revival is feasible in my conclusion but I want to discuss the way tribes work first. For the moment it suffices to say that the tribal leaders I met at the time tended to discount the moves to a revival, mainly because these were too limited. Their judicial powers were not fully restored and, above all, their policing powers were not restored at all. The levels of pay being offered were also far too small to interest energetic and successful leaders, since they were set at around the same levels as government salaries.

4 MODERN TRIBAL DISPUTES

I believe that the best way to interpret what is happening in Darfur today is within a tribal framework, after due allowance for the way modern elements are expressed in that framework. The weakening of the Idara Ahlia, specifically tailored to manage disputes in that tribal framework, has contributed significantly to increased conflict in Darfur.



'After the conflict...'

1. What are tribes for?

To an outsider tribes seem to be constantly at war with one another and many would argue that the entire reason people form themselves into tribes is for mutual defence against outside enemies, and to strengthen their ability to compete for resources. I have come to a different view, which is that dispute mediation is the fundamental purpose of tribes, at least within the Islamic context. This reflects experience in Yemen as well as in Sudan.

Yemen is one of the most heavily armed places in the world outside the rougher American cities and Afghanistan. In the 1970's every man carried an automatic rifle in the street, on social visits or when travelling. By reputation tribal sheikhs had heavy artillery and tanks. One village I visited during a tribal dispute informed me that they had five artillery pieces, the largest 108 millimetre, and 16 heavy machine guns. This for a village which had at most two thousand inhabitants.

Yet there were several characteristics that did not make sense. First, the guns were used rather rarely. Perhaps because they were so familiar with them they were correspondingly cautious in their use. Second, they were not conspicuously loyal to their tribe. Whole villages would change tribes. Tribal sheikhs were assassinated quite frequently. When I went back to the village I mentioned, I was told that the attack never came because the opposition decided they would rather kill their own sheikh. Most puzzling of all however was the motivation behind the disputes themselves. From what I could understand, they often seemed to have started with a domestic dispute, for example where two brothers fell out and one killed the other. The murderer would flee to a nearby village, from another tribe, who would accept him and guarantee him against retribution from his own family. This guarantee was valid and if the family succeeded in killing him a tribal war would start. This seemed ridiculous. Why should the second tribe get involved at all. They would get nothing out of it except problems.

The answer seemed to be that this was a key purpose of the tribal system. To offer sanctuary so that parties to a dispute can cool off and to offer the threat of serious escalation if the dispute is not resolved, if not amicably at least firmly. The tribe is more important as a mechanism for the resolution of interpersonal disputes than it is as a means of generating group solidarity against outside threats.

And this was the secret of the Idara Ahlia. By backing the tribal system at its most crucial point, as a judicial system designed to mediate disputes, the colonial power allowed it to develop quite strongly.

Conversely, the post-independence system, particularly the democratic system, has tended to pervert that and to turn the tribes into competing groups: competing for political status, for allocations of rationed goods and so on. The allocation of power by democratic election is almost bound to have that effect. Majority tribes will, inevitably, wish to exploit their greater voting power while minority tribes will want to resist.

2. Competition for land and water

It seems obvious that competition for resources - land, water and grazing – must be a major cause of tension between tribes, especially in a poor region like Darfur. Nevertheless, in Darfur I believe it is rarely the crucial factor. Firstly, Darfur is relatively abundant in crop land and, in a good year, in grazing. The question of excessive pressure on the range-land is a complex topic. I shall merely say that I regard it as unproven. Second, there are widespread intertribal arrangements to allow the integration of livestock and crop activities. These arrangements are mutually beneficial and their collapse at a time of tribal conflict is probably the largest single cause of economic loss. An important example involves farming groups like the Fur and the Gimr hiring Arabs to manage their cattle. Thirdly, since the 1950s Darfur has witnessed a prolonged population drift from north to south, including large numbers of non-Arab people moving into traditional Arab areas. This unplanned drift to the south has happened quite peacefully, to me a strong indication that land is not an issue. When a group of non-Arab north Darfuris moves south and settles in Arab territory there is little or nothing to pay and arrangements are simple. Similarly, there are many small groups of Baggara arabs settled and farming in the middle of Fur territory, at least there were until the recent fighting drove them apart.

None of this means that exclusion from land, water or grazing will not be used as a weapon once a tribal war gets under way. Burning off the rangeland is a frequent weapon.

3. Ta'aisha v Salamat

Before turning to the Fur-Arab war, I want to discuss two other tribal disputes that took place while I was in Darfur. They both illustrate the points I am trying to make. The first of these was between the Ta'aisha and the Salamat. This happened around 1982 or 1983. It is a good example of the way an inter-personal dispute can escalate and, at the same time become an expression of old and new tensions.

The Ta'aisha are one of the original Arab tribes of Darfur while the Salamat are a non Arab group usually described as Chadian. A large community of Salamat had been amicably settled in Ta'aisha territory for a considerable time. I think it is true to say that the newcomers, the Salamat, were mainly farmers while the Ta'aisha were more involved with cattle, as is a common pattern. As the newcomers in Ta'aisha territory, the Salamat were to some extent clients.

The dispute itself started with a single murder. I can't remember which way round: let's say that a Ta'aishi murdered a Salamat. And reported himself to gaol for so doing, as was right and proper. The Salamat were not prepared to accept this and carried out a retaliatory raid killing eleven Ta'aisha. The final retaliation by the Ta'aisha left more than 40 dead. At this stage government moved in. Some Salamat villages moved away from the area where they were likely to be attacked and the fighting stopped. It was, however, several years before a truce was agreed and most of the time I knew the area, there was no local council or administration in the area and a troop of Sudanese army in Rahad El Berdi kept control.

Why did a single murder between two tribes living closely together lead to such a vicious fight? The answer was politics. The Salamat appear to have seen the introduction of elected councils as an opportunity to escape from their subordinate position as clients of the Ta'aisha. This they did by winning the elections to the local council. They tried to build on this by demanding the right to their own cattle Damins. In a cattle market the damin stands as guarantor that cattle being sold by members of his tribe are truly theirs and not stolen. For this he receives a fee. The Salamat resented the fact that their cattle were sold under the guarantee of the Ta'aisha damins. Lastly, of course, there was the matter of sugar, that fundamental indicator of political power in Sudan. As controllers of the local council, the Salamat controlled the sugar allocation.

4. Fellata v Gimr

Ostensibly, the Fellata-Gimr dispute was about land. An old boundary dispute dating back to the 1920's was resurrected, once again as the result of a series of tit-for-tat raids stemming from an individual murder in about 1984. My Project Director-General at the time, Sd Abdalla Abd el Rahman, commented at the time that it was an indication of government's weakness that the initial murder had not been dealt with swiftly enough to prevent what happened. I heard similar remarks in Yemen, underlining the point that government's first duty is to step in fast and deal with this kind of Casus Belli.



'Weeding groundnuts'

The relationship between the Gimr and the Fellata was a close one, but not one of patron and client like the Ta'aisha and Salamat. The Gimr were principally farmers and many of them had cattle hired out to the Fellata, a major nomadic herding tribe. The Fellata's principal route to the dry season grazing of Central Africa lay straight across the Gimr territory. Both sides therefore lost from the dispute. The Gimr had to repossess their cattle and probably sell most of them, as it would have been impossible to keep them locally, while the Fellata had to take a long roundabout route to Central Africa.

So why did they fight? Once again the answer lay in electoral politics. The land under dispute belonged, at least since the 1920s settlement, to the Gimr but it was farmed by Fellata. The question was which rural council did they vote for and, probably more important, which council was going to get their sugar ration: the Gimr council at Katila or the Fellata at Tullus. I am afraid I cannot report the outcome which was not finally settled before I left S. Darfur.

5 FUR VERSUS ARAB OR GOVERNMENT VERSUS PEOPLE

The Fur-Arab war of the late 1980's was far more similar to the tribal disputes of the Ta'aisha-Salamat and Gimr-Fellata writ large than it was to the war in south Sudan, critically so in that government was by and large genuinely neutral. There were, however, two differences. By the late 1980s there was a democratic government in Khartoum and public security generally was much worse. Both cattle raiding and armed truck-robberies were becoming commonplace. Although there were some other ramifications, this banditry was the main way in which Chadian problems overflowed into Darfur.

1. Mahdia, Fur State and Condominium

Although relations between Fur and Arab were good for most of the Condominium and independence periods, tensions between the two groups have strong historical roots. The Fur Sultanate of the 18th and early 19th centuries was not able to impose its will on the Arab tribes for long, but it was not for want of trying. Both the Bani Halba and the Ma'aliya have traditions which tell of their having to leave Darfur in order to escape the Fur.

However, it was not until the Mahdia of the late 19th century that the Arabs saw the possibility of facing the Fur on equal terms. The Baggara Arabs played a leading role in supporting the Mahdi which gave them opportunities they had not seen before. Various Nazirs tried to exploit this, most notably Madibbu of the Rizeiqat and Senussi of the Ta'aisha.

However, instead of uniting under to consolidate Arab control of the region, many of the Arabs treated the Mahdist regime much as they had done the Fur Sultanate: resisting it when possible and only submitting when necessary. The result was that Ali Dinar had relatively little difficulty reestablishing the Fur sultanate after the Anglo-Egyptian defeat of the Mahdia at the Battle of Omdurman. This was despite the fact that he had rival contenders among the Fur to deal with as well as the Arabs.

In the modern era, the Mahdist movement has developed into the largest single political party in Sudan and the Darfur Arabs have sought to exploit the influence this has brought on the central political scene to gain advantage over the Fur. The modern era has handed another advantage to the Arabs. Economically, the opportunities created by trade and development in Sudan have tended to favour South rather than North Darfur. This is best seen in the rapidity with which Nyala has outstripped ElFasher as the trading centre of the region.

2. The Dereij Era

Things started to come to a head during Numeiri's regionalisation in 1981. Instead of treating North and South Darfur as more or less independent provinces, they were joined as one region, with a regional assembly and a regional governor based in ElFasher. Numeiri's first appointment as Regional Governor was rejected by the Darfuri's and in his place he appointed Sd/ Ahmad Dereij, a very senior and influential Fur politician who had been a minister in pre-Numeiri governments. Since the May 1969 revolution he had spent most of his time overseas, by repute making a considerable fortune.

Many Darfuris from the Arab side, and even some from the Fur, date the start of the problems from the rule of Ahmad Dereij. At first, his administration was reasonably well balanced: Sd/ Yusuf Takana, his Regional Minister of Agriculture was a Habbania and the Provincial Commissioner for South Darfur was a Rizeiqi Ex-General. Several other Arabs held prominent places. The problems started from the the elections for Regional Governor held in 1982. To an outsider this seemed to be a classic example of the fatal Arab tendency to compete with the Fur separately, not as a group. Instead of one Arab candidate to face Dereij, there were three or four and their vote was split. Among those candidates were members of Dereij's earlier administration and subsequent ministerial appointments were biased towards Non-Arab groups, not just the Fur but the Zaghawa as well.

I cannot attempt to judge who was in the right and who in the wrong over this. I suspect there were provocations from both sides. On the one occasion I heard Dereij speak it seemed to me that he was making at least some attempt to be conciliatory, but this was late in his governorship, shortly before he disappeared into exile under rather mysterious circumstances. Whatever the reasons, the major cleavage between Arab and Non-Arab, between North Darfur and South became a live issue once again. Or to put in local terms, Ahmad Dereij reintroduced the tribal issue to Darfur and it was not about competition for resources. It was about political power.

It was not until democratic politics revived at the national level, after the 1985 coup and Numeiri's downfall, that the full effect began to be felt. Various prominent Arab leaders from Darfur won national ministries in Sadiq El Mahdi's government. This was not enough to satisfy Arab aspirations in Darfur itself, where the government seems to have attempted to ensure some degree of balance in the administration. The result was the famous 'Arab Letter', written shortly before I returned to Sudan in 1987. I have not seen the text of this letter, which was addressed to Sadiq El Mahdi as prime minister, but it was a topic of much discussion. It purported to be signed by a large number of Darfuri Arab leaders, including some who claimed not to have actually signed it. Among these, incidentally, were the Director Generals of both the projects I worked on. From what I can gather the letter represented a fairly straightforward claim on Sadiq as an Arab and as leader of the Mahdist party to redress the balance in Darfur, summed up in the phrase "You are our brother and one expects more from a brother than from other people".

I do not think that Sadiq gave in to this appeal. The Fur continued to be well represented in the Regional Ministry, most notably by Tijani Seisei, who was Regional Minister of Finance and ultimately became Regional Governor until he was imprisoned in the 1989 coup. Sadiq was in fact so unpopular in the Arab parts of South Darfur that he was more or less driven out of Nyala when he visited it at this time. By contrast when Omar Nur ElDaim, another leading Arab Mahdist, visited the Fur town of Zalingei, as Minister of Agriculture, he was politely, if fairly unenthusiastically received.

I do not think that these political pressures were a prime cause of what happened between Fur and Arab. It was more that they created an atmosphere of distrust and, more importantly, that they made it difficult if not impossible for the democratic politicians to act effectively as arbitrators of the dispute. Not, I have to say, that they showed much sign of wishing to do so.

3. The War

I do not want to tell the history of the fighting between the Arab and the Fur, raid by raid or village burnt by village burnt. It would take too long because this was a very lengthy, bitter and wide ranging dispute. I may be arguing that it was not a civil war but I am not in any way denying it was quite vicious and very damaging. Even if I wanted to list every incident I could not. They were very numerous, especially the smaller ones, and there was a considerable amount of fighting in areas too far away from Zalingei for us to hear much about it. After a fairly brief history, therefore, I am going to concentrate on a number of incidents I know about in some detail, which I think includes all the significant major events, and try to use these to explain what was happening.

There is no doubt that things had been building up at least since early 1987 and possibly even earlier but it is difficult to identify where the increase in straightforward banditry changed into something more serious. The Jebel Marra Project, for which we were working, was promoting camel ploughing. An early indication of deteriorating conditions was when farmers lost interest because the risk of having their camel rustled became too great. Similarly, one or two villages were abandoned in more remote and vulnerable areas quite early on: Keibi, for example, on the lowlands west of Jebel Marra.

As far as I know the first big attack was on villages on the northern highlands of the Jebel itself, North of Golo.



'Jebel Marra in the rainy season'

Some nine Fur villages were burnt and abandoned in this area. This happened before I arrived and I would stress that there were almost certainly a series of tit-for-tat incidents leading up to this but I do not know what they were.

The 1987/88 dry season saw a number of incidents. Some of these were cattle raids but direct tribal clashes were becoming frequent. The Fur own considerable numbers of cattle and this was where they were most vulnerable. A very great deal of what happened sprang out of raids on Fur cattle and their attempts to get them back. Conversely, the Arabs were most vulnerable to the Fur where they were settled and farming.

For us, on the Jebel Marra Project, the key indicator of the state of affairs was the number of our vehicles commandeered by the various security forces. (I shall talk about this more later.) We first started to lose vehicles frequently in May and June 1988. At this stage it still appeared to be mainly in response to banditry. Nevertheless, more serious incidents were also occurring, especially in the direction of Kas, and most significantly of all perhaps, a major Fur attack on an Arab Fariq, an attack which appeared to be quite closely linked to the Shartai of Nyertete, who was arrested.⁴

After an interval for the rainy season, the dry season at the end of 1988 started very tense and the situation rapidly deteriorated. On the project, we had to close some of our extension stations. For example, Tibi south of Jebel Marra, was not attacked but the people fled to larger villages nearby where they felt safer, although they were still returning to harvest their crops. At other places, outlying villages were abandoned although the larger central village was not. At Umm Haraz west of the Jebel our Extension Agent was supposed to cover six villages but three had been abandoned. Although the majority of these abandoned hamlets were Fur, there were also some Arab ones, Goz Mitti near Gurnei for example.

Most of these movements in autumn 1988 were around the Jebel itself reflecting the fact that it was the stretch between Kabkabiya and Kas, including the high Jebel where the dispute had its longest history. In November everything escalated and spread quite rapidly. Artalla and Wustani, two large villages on the southeastern boundary between the Fur and the Bani Halba, were burnt. Kabar, further west was attacked and the Shartai killed, and several other villages in this southern belt were attacked. By January 1989, areas to the west of Garsila were also being attacked: Amar Jadid, Kujubari and others.

⁴ Shartai is the Fur equivalent of the Arab Omda, an intermediate grade in the Idara Ahlia.

February saw perhaps the first acknowledgement from the authorities that there was a major problem, when they arrested a number of leading members of both sides, including some of my colleagues on the Jebel Marra project. That the arrests were symbolic was shown by the fact that exactly 10 Fur and 10 Arabs were arrested in Zalingei. It is also worth noting that those arrested were not, by and large, the senior tribal leaders but rather those members of each group who were known to have political aspirations and that they were townspeople. This reflected an increasing belief that the trouble was being incited by the more educated, more modernising members of each side.⁵

Although the weight of the destruction seemed to be very much in the Arab's favour, Arab fariqs were also being attacked. Shortly after the arrests a Bani Halba fariq was attacked near Uyur and it was widely reported that merchant's landrovers from Zalingei were involved: confirming the suspected link with the towns. Some of our project landrovers were also impounded on the same suspicion but they were cleared.

Perhaps the most vicious incident of the whole war, one of the few that appeared to have no motive apart from outright terrorism, took place on 13 February 1989, when four lorries travelling to the big markets at Guldo and Golo were attacked and burnt. 67 passengers were burnt on their lorries. It was reported that this attack was carried out by only 8 men on camels dressed in Army uniform. I see no reason to disbelieve what was generally accepted, that they were not actually from the army but were deliberately masquerading as such.

The next incident which illustrates how difficult it is to interpret what was happening would appear to be very similar to the Guldo lorry attack. This was on 3 March when a bus on the Nyala-Zalingei road was stopped and some Arab passengers beaten up. The wife of one of our project staff was one and she was saved by the intervention of another, Fur member of the project. It would be easy to interpret this as another deliberate terror attack. In fact it seemed the bus had got caught in a running fight between local Arab and Fur, which happened to spill over the road at the wrong time.

March saw one of the first major army involvements when they intervened in yet another clash between Arab and Fur. The Fur resisted more strongly and more than forty were killed.

⁵ With hindsight, I find the mention of Aldrex T in the Africa Watch quotation significant in this context. Although it is banned internationally it is not highly toxic to humans. To poison a well it would be far more effective to through a dead animal in. The Jebel Marra project distributed Aldrex as a useful agricultural input and I doubt that any in Darfur were aware of its significance except the staff of the two projects we were supporting. It is not impossible that Fur staff on the project were supplying information to Africa Watch.

It was May, however, that saw the final and most widespread series of attacks. These started near Umm Shalaya in the west and two days later Giri and Kargula, two important villages very near to Zalingei, were attacked and the Fur Shartai at Kargula killed. At around the same time there were some heavy attacks in the far south of the area as well.

The importance of these latest attacks was underlined by the fact the Regional Governor had spent the 'Id holiday with the Shartai of Kargula. Central Government finally took an interest to the extent that the Minister of Interior, at the time Sadiq El Mahdi's nephew, and the Minister of Housing, Ismail Abakr, a Darfuri Arab, flew in fairly rapidly. However their visit was very short and it was felt that they had not bothered seeing anyone except a few officials.

I toured Wadi Salih at this time and, by all reports, both sides seemed to have concluded that the situation was irretrievable. Arab groups who had been settled in the Fur areas for many years had left or were leaving, while the Fur and Arab leaders were negotiating over the 'repatriation' of the fairly large Fur populations in the Bani Halba towns like Kubbum and Idd El Ghanam.

Despite its inertia in the field, Government did start the process of a truce conference in El Fasher in June as mentioned in the Africa Watch report. However, it did not seem that the conference was making much progress, although the fighting did stop, possibly because the farming season was underway again.

On 30 June the National Salvation Coup overthrew Sadiq El Mahdi's regime and the Regional Government was imprisoned along with the central ministry. Nevertheless, the truce conference continued and reached an agreement, partly because the new government applied pressure and partly, I suspect, because the Fur, in particular, could accept a truce without loss of face now that the central government was no longer seen to be in the hands of the Arabs supporters.

In the sense that the number of attacks on villages was greatly reduced the truce was a success. Nevertheless, there remained great tensions especially so after the resumption of large scale cattle raiding in January. The local people were increasingly critical of the Army's inability to catch the raiders. More frequently, it seemed, they merely prevented the owners from doing the job themselves. It seemed highly likely that the Fur would once again assume that the raiders were being assisted by the Arabs and take the appropriate steps. This came to a head on 6 February 1990, when the Fur started a major attack on Arab fariqs around Jebel Gallabat, just south of Zalingei. What prompted them to do this in earshot of the only substantial Army force in the area I do not know but it did mean that for once the Army was on the spot and a fairly large battle was fought, at least it sounded large in Zalingei.

At about the same time there was a widespread rumour that Ahmad Dereij was in the area undercover, presumably to coordinate the Fur, maybe even to start an uprising. Possibly because of this the new government's response was swift. The people on the standard balanced list of Fur and Arab politicians who had been released some months previously were rearrested and the military governor of Darfur moved to Zalingei and, in effect, reconvened the Truce Conference. As the quote I read at the beginning shows, this move has been interpreted as the last stage of government's involvement on the Arab side but I can assure you it was not. It was a serious and, from all I could see and hear, entirely genuine attempt to make the truce stick. It was generally agreed that insufficient effort had been put into selling the truce to the people and that this was the principle reason behind the renewed violence.

A number of what were termed Truce Committees with both Fur and Arab members were formed which to quote the final conference document "crossed the length and breadth of the area, passing through the villages and nomad camps, seeking to learn the reasons which had led to the breakdown of the peace agreement and to assess the extent of the damage which had occurred." After nearly a month of the Truce Committees' work and endless discussions and meetings in Zalingei, a final public meeting was held in Zalingei town square in the presence of Tijani Adam Tahir, the Governor. A final conference meeting was held after dark in the Jebel Marra project horticultural nursery, which was unfortunately at the bottom of my garden; it was a long and loud occasion.

The upshot was a "Report of The Popular Committee for Salvation on the Conference to Secure the Tribal Peace Agreement." I cannot do better than quote you the statement in that report on what had caused the peace to break down:

- “ 1. The presence of what are called 'militia' on the Fur side and 'Janjawid' on the side of some Arab tribes.
2. Armed robbery in areas of contact between the tribes.
3. Clashes between herders and farmers in areas where there was dissension.
4. The fact that some conditions of the Peace Agreement were not carried out.
5. The closing of the cattle routes and some markets and watering points.
6. The spread of both light and heavy weapons, in the hands of both sides to the conflict.
7. Lack of transport for the security forces and, in some places, their lack of numbers.
8. The presence of foreign elements in the Wadi Salih area.
9. Religious and social unawareness in the districts.
10. The fact that the decisions and recommendations of the Peace Agreement were not communicated to the ordinary people in a convincing fashion.
11. A failure on the part of Government to enforce respect and to impose its authority in the areas of conflict. This was a conspicuous factor leading to the violation of the Peace Agreement.”⁶

⁶ I have been at pains to translate this accurately to reflect all the subtleties, such as 'some Arab tribes'.

The Report went on to make 26 detailed recommendations. What is striking about these recommendations is the emphasis on the machinery of law and order and on administration generally:

1. 31 new police stations with better transport and communications and specific patrolling duties,
2. Regular meetings of security committees,
3. A purge of "individuals from the regular forces and from among the officials and workers in the civil service who were in the areas of tribal conflict at the time of the incidents."
4. "Completion of the organisational pyramid for the regional Idara Ahlia, in at most one month"
5. Empty civil service posts to be filled
6. Redefinition of administrative units and re-registration of people in them, especially where refugee Sudanese tribes have settled in new areas. These shall have their own units at the level of Shaykh and Omda but be attached to the tribe to which the land belongs at higher levels. Arabs in Fur areas to be counted and the non-Sudanese among them identified. New administrative units to be created where necessary.
7. An increase in the membership of courts in the region to properly represent the tribes.
8. Members of the Idara Ahlia to treat all Sudanese citizens on an equal basis without regard to their tribal origin.
9. Six more resident judges
10. A review of the quotas of rationed goods and coordination over the rationed goods for the nomads
11. Regular tribal shows and conferences to stimulate peaceful relations
12. Regular tours by the Regional Popular Committees
13. A regional information service
14. A Peoples Defence force for the Region
15. Chad government forces to be removed from the Tisi area.

To me what is striking about these recommendations, which I do believe fairly represent the local people's wishes, is the emphasis on a need for more effective government power and, in particular, the extent to which exactly the same concerns as those of the Colonial power forty years ago are expressed: tribal shows, Idara Ahlia, defining of boundaries, justice, even the idea of regular touring by People's Committees represents no more than a modernisation of the District Commissioner's tours of earlier years.

4. Specific Events

I believe, and I think that the report of the truce conference shows that the local people also believe, that the major part of the problems between tribes in Darfur spring from relatively minor incidents which become inflated because of an inability to resolve them quickly and which, once inflated, are taken over by tribal, political and other interests. These other pressures will always exist, the goal should be to deprive them of the opportunity to exploit the minor incident by ensuring adequate policing and rapid arbitration.

Three attacks explain why: Kabar, Mirei and Giri. In all three cases it was acts of commission or omission by government authorities that set Fur and Arab against each other. Kabar was attacked and burnt and the Omda was killed not merely because he was a Fur omda⁷ but as the upshot of a series of linked events. This started with the presence of a group of armed Chadians in the Kabar area, probably part of Ibn Omar's Arab opposition to the then Chadian government. The omda of Kabar was asked by the Sudanese Army to mediate with this Chadian group which he duly did. At the meeting between the Chadians and the Army, it is claimed, the Army then betrayed and murdered the Chadians. The destruction of Kabar was in retaliation for this.

At Mirei the story was not dissimilar. The attack was a retaliation for the killing of a Rizeigat-Mahria Sheikh. This man was wanted by the government for his involvement in attacks on the Fur on the north side of Jebel Marra. I was told that he visited the Fur Sheikh in the Mirei area specifically to agree with him that they should not allow the problem on the Jebel, which was some way away, to upset their relations locally. The Fur Sheikh accepted this but the younger Fur, possibly members of the Fur militia, did not. They followed the Rizeigi out of the village and murdered him. Mirei and other villages in the area were burnt in retaliation. Had the authorities made any effort to catch and try the Rizeigi sheikh in the first place none of the events that followed need have happened.

It was probably inevitable that Giri and Kargula would be attacked as it was at the very worst time of the whole war. Nevertheless, the authorities knew well in advance that there was likely to be an attack and that there was a minor incident that would be enough to set the attack off. In that sense it was certainly preventable. The minor incident, as always, involved cattle theft. In this case the Arabs had lost some animals and had tracked them to the middle of the village. The police had, however, been unable to find a culprit so the situation was just left to develop.

⁷ I believe the fact that the Fur leader here is called Omda and not Shartai because this region, further away from Jebel Marra, had a greater mix of Arab and non-Arab, reflected in more 'Arab' structure.

5. Fur Politics

Despite the fact that the Fur appeared to have lost considerably more than the Arabs and the terms of the Truce Agreement seemed to back that view up, the tone of the Truce Conference in Zalingei was reported to me as indicating that the Fur were viewed as the most to blame. All along, they were reported as the more reluctant participants in the conference.

On the other hand, many senior Fur, notably some of my colleagues on the Project, appeared willing to take considerable political risks by joining the government before the 1989 coup or the people's committees after the coup. I believe they were hoping to represent the Fur through legitimate channels rather than as an underground resistance. One of my friends for example went to jail three times in under a year: twice for being a suspected Fur ring-leader and once for being Regional Minister at the time of the coup.

Nevertheless, there were undoubtedly Fur who wanted to fight. I think it may be assumed that they were the younger, more politically active ones who may well have wished to undermine the old Fur establishment as well as fight the Arabs. The extremists in this group were the Fur militia. We have heard much about the Arab militias and it has even been suggested that the Arab attacks on the Fur were by government backed Militia. Nevertheless, in Zalingei in 1988 and 1989, 'militia' meant the Fur. Various senior Fur politicians, notably one regional minister, were reported to be supplying the weapons. The militia also imposed a surcharge on the sugar quotas for the Fur, to finance arms purchases. They even cut off sugar supplies to non-Fur in their areas to bolster the funds collected. Direct collections were also made, in at least some cases by force. There were murders of Fur by Fur linked to this kind of activity and one of my Sudanese colleagues stationed in the countryside can vividly describe the night when the whole village was invited to a meeting apart from himself, as a non-Fur government official and two policemen.

My own field enumerators described training with the militia, not very optionally, and two of them were stationed in a village which, it turned out, was a base for a militia group. This meant that it was duly attacked by the Arabs but also that the attack was beaten off without great loss.

At one stage Fur political resistance became more open with the imposition of boycotts on the roads of Jebel Marra. The Fur were forbidden from selling crops out of the area. This naive and counterproductive measure did not last too long but it was indicative of the forces building up in the Fur community.

6. The Security Forces

It is normal to think of the military in Sudan, indeed in Africa generally, as rapacious and oppressive and easy therefore to see any civil disturbance as a popular attempt to resist the military. The sad fact is that as far as the Sudanese army in Zalingei is concerned, it lacks the capability to oppress anyone very much, outside its own miserable recruits. It is desperately short of transport and, more importantly, of the capability to keep the transport on the road.

At this time, it would not be far from the truth to say that the Jebel Marra project was the transport wing of the security forces in Zalingei. It is revealing to look at the way this worked, because it says so much about the inability of the local authorities and the security forces to provide the people of the area with the service they desperately need: rapid pursuit and apprehension of bandits. The chain of events was typically as follows: raiders steal Fur cattle and drive them off towards a mountainous area. The Fur villagers set off in pursuit but also send to Zalingei for help from the police or army. The police come to Jebel Marra project to ask for the loan of a car, if they cannot catch one in the street to commandeer. The project reluctantly agrees. The car is fuelled up, picks up the soldiers and goes to the suq to buy supplies. It finally leaves. This typically meant that they arrived at the raiders' starting point at least 24 hours after the raid. Nevertheless, they set off in pursuit and overtake the Fur posse if it has not already attacked the first Arab fariq it found. It then follows on the trail of the raiders, sometimes for days. But it almost never catches them before they reach a mountainous area where the Jebel Marra driver says that it is too steep and they must stop. At which point they all turn round and come home again. I can report this with some certainty as it was often my driver and sometimes my car.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the security forces ability to be where the action was not, is if I tell you that although we had at one point over twenty vehicles with the army, we got them all back undamaged except by crashes. I think I am right in saying that not once did they get a bullet hole.

As far as we as a project were concerned we had a considerable dilemma. We were, as a government organisation, obliged to cooperate with the security forces. We also needed them to succeed. Our staff were in the field and the project's success depended on there being peace in the area. The EDF who were financing the project found this very difficult to believe but we were convinced that the army was not, in this case, the oppressor and that the people of the area would be grateful rather than otherwise for our support to them, not as I say that it made a great deal of difference.

6 CONCLUSION

What do I conclude from all of this. Three points I think:

1. That there is no conspiracy to oppress the Fur, to take their land for the Arabs and so on. Instead there is a very substantial mess of different interests which are not actually unmanageable but that are not being managed because of the near collapse of government's ability to do anything more than the wholly routine.

2. As I have said several times, we have been watching a mixture of old and new elements being expressed in the old tribal framework. The tribal framework is also capable of generating an acceptable solution but only if it is backed up by an energetic and acceptably unbiased administration.

3. Given this, the question arises of whether the Idara Ahlia can be revived? Or even revive itself if the administration remains hopelessly weak? I cannot answer this. The threats to the Idara Ahlia are obvious: urbanisation, commercialisation and the growing force of the educated young. On the other hand it appears to be more alive than any other institution in Darfur at the moment and the constraints that led the British to support a civil administration based on the tribes remain: a lack of resources to support a more modern approach and the absence of any other viable forms developing naturally.

7 LOOKING BACK FROM 2004

The BBC is currently reporting that 'Black Africans' in Darfur are being attacked by Arab Militia known as Janjaweed. *'Some one million people have fled Darfur, where pro-government militias are accused of "ethnic cleansing".'* Senior UN officials are insisting that the international community must intervene to prevent another Rwanda genocide taking place in Darfur.

Anything would be preferable to that and I certainly do not wish what I have written to be taken as a reason to do nothing. What I do hope is that it may persuade the reader of the need, an urgent need, to find out more and to properly understand what is happening. It is too simple by far to describe just as 'Black Africans' the muslim Fur; a people who until 1916 ruled over what is, after all, called the Land of the Fur, 'Dar Fur'. It stretches credulity to suggest that there are a million Black African refugees from a total regional population, Arab and Non Arab together, that is unlikely to exceed 5.5 million.⁸ Darfur deserves better than these generalisations.

⁸ The 1983 census recorded a population of 3.1 million.