

Debunking the myths: The material roots of the Darfur conflict

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Contents

- [Ethnicity in the Darfur \(...\)](#)
- [Africa and Darfur in the \(...\)](#)
- [Africa peripheralized](#)
- [Darfur: the periphery of \(...\)](#)
- [A Darfur fact sheet](#)
- [Dominant narratives of the](#)
- [Climate change and ecological](#)
- [Deforestation](#)
- [Drought and water shortages](#)
- [Population](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

Symbols and myths are important elements in forging political affiliations and national identities. In 2000, the Northern Ireland Assembly witnessed a heated debate that a layman would have perceived as strange or rather ludicrous. The central issue was whether Easter lilies should have the same symbolic treatment and standing as poppies. How could flowers be the locus of a momentous political debate, a bone of contention among serious politicians? Yet, whoever knows the history of Ireland would know what these two flowers stand for. In fact, they are closely connected to the Irish struggle against Great Britain. Republican and nationalist movements used Easter lilies as political symbols to recall the memory of those who gave their life for the nationalist cause. On the other end of the spectrum, the Unionists and the Royalists use the poppy, sold by the Royal British Legion, to celebrate the fallen soldiers who defended the United Kingdom

This being said, no media outlet or mainstream narrative has ever subsumed the Irish conflict into one over flowers. However, in conflicts in “developing” countries, especially those in Africa, mainstream narratives are quick to label conflicts as tribal and ethnic. These recurring attempts at essentializing “peoples without history,” [1] those to whom history has been denied, evacuate all historical complexities, economic and political issues in favor of reductive a priori perceptions and simplistic causalities. To what extent are ethnic conflicts really about ethnicity? What causes ethnic conflicts? Isn't ethnicity a convenient veil that masks the real issues and a convenient rallying factor to organize belligerent groups in a struggle over resources?

Anthropologists use the concept of culture to describe human behavior and speak of ethnic units that correspond to these different cultures. Yet mainstream media resorted to a rather simplistic and naïve assumption that each tribe in Darfur was a staunchly isolated unit, as if a mythical geographic and social isolation had allowed it to maintain its distinct cultural traits throughout history. In anthropological literature, the term “ethnic group” refers to a population bearing certain traits: that it is to a large extent biologically self-perpetuating, that it shares fundamental cultural values that constitute a field of communication and interaction, and that it encompasses members who identify

themselves and are identified by others as a distinct category of population. [2] Anthropological studies have shown that ethnic difference is not based on social isolation and absence of interaction; rather, it is the foundation of social systems. [3] In other words, cultural distinctiveness and ethnic interaction are not mutually exclusive. In the case of Darfur, ethnic boundaries are fluid, flexible and temporal. [4] Solidarity and intermarriages have been regular features of tribal interactions. So, what explains why the groups polarized along ethnic lines since the conflict erupted in 2003? Why did ethnic boundaries solidify and group interactions turn violent?

Ethnicity in the Darfur context

Since the independence of Sudan in 1956, Darfur's social structure has gone through eventful transformations that have caused ethnic relations to transmute into gradual tensions and conflicts. [5] These overdetermined events resulted in an intensified ethnic emotionalism. Like most African states under the British system of indirect rule, Sudan inherited a bifurcated power system based on race and ethnicity as instruments of social control. [6] In its administration of Sudan, the colonial power relied on an influential class of business families located in the northern part of the country. These families amassed their wealth mostly through slave trading and money lending. [7] By administratively empowering this merchant class, the colonial power laid the ground for its members to be the ruling and business elite in Sudan postindependence. [8] Thus, the seat of power was located in Khartoum, and state resources were under the control of this merchant class, which was not well disposed toward sharing political or economic power with marginalized provinces such as Darfur.

Anthropologists who studied cultural and economic production systems in Darfur identified livelihoods, cultural practices, and social behaviors associated with certain ethnic groups. [9] Accordingly, the internal constitution of ethnic groups was based on cultural content, economic practices, values, and symbols shared by their members. The exploitation of land resources by a group set the contours of its ethnic boundary, which in turn secured and defined the group vis-à-vis other groups. Still, interactions occurred, especially when groups found themselves in a situation of competition over the same resource. They were able to strike formal political agreements on the use of available resources. But during the last decades, competition has intensified dangerously due to demographic changes and for environmental reasons.

The ongoing conflict in Darfur erupted when armed groups from Darfur rebelled against the government of Sudan after a complex web of grievances built up to become, by the beginning of the present century, increasingly violent and ethnically oriented. Throughout the 1980s, life in northern Darfur was deeply impacted by a protracted period of severe drought. This resulted in a mass movement of populations fleeing the ensuing hardships and destitution. Nevertheless, most analysts and commentators in Western media have perceived the Darfur conflict only as a racial/ethnic one. The line was hastily drawn between "Arabs" and "Africans," settlers and natives. International mainstream media turned Darfur into a place devoid of history and politics, one in which bad outsiders are identified as "Arabs" and native victims as "Africans." The conflict was quickly framed as an essential clash between evil and innocence. In a remake of old colonial demarcations of tribal homelands in Sudan and elsewhere in Africa, it was assumed that Sudanese Arab tribes came from the Middle East and settled in Africa. The binary Arab and African identities successfully erased historical facts, which testify to the fact that Arabs are as native to Sudan and Africa as the majority of its inhabitants. The conflict was thus looked at from a single simplistic angle. [10]

The international response to the conflict was threefold: supplying humanitarian assistance, providing security to the civilians, and trying to provide a safe environment to refugees and the

internally displaced to allow for their safe return while attempting to reach a negotiated peace through an intense engagement with the United Nations and the African Union mediators. Yet not only was the international community unable to tackle the root causes of the conflict, it could not even agree on what exactly was going on in the western provinces of Sudan. The world was divided between those who saw another African genocide unfolding and others who described it as a low-intensity conflict or a budding civil war that in no way resembled what had happened a few years earlier in Rwanda.

Even though the ethnic dimension should not be ignored, it cannot be argued it was the triggering factor of the conflict; rather, it has gradually imposed itself more as a consequence of the prolonged conflict than its cause. Numerous factors contributed to the eruption of violence— namely, social and economic injustice both on the global and local scales; poverty, poor governance, and regional factors such as the unstable situation in neighboring Chad resulting from French interventions and the military expeditions of Colonel Qaddafi. Another factor that had been present before even the start of the hostilities is ecological degradation. The impact of climate change and environmental degradation on the inhabitants of the western provinces of Sudan is absent from most narratives about Darfur. The implications of the environmental phenomena have been relegated to the economic and social spheres, while the conflict has been construed in terms of its racial and ethnic manifestations.

In trying to trace and evaluate the impact of ecological changes in northern Darfur and their role in fueling the conflict, one is struck by the fact that relations between farmers and nomads/cattle herders have always been characterized by solidarity and cooperation at times and tensions and conflicts at others. The relative harmony that existed in the state of North Darfur was substantially undermined during the 1980s due to the long period of severe drought, which has lasted from 1967 to this day, with a few periodic exceptions. This climate change has resulted in unprecedented large movements of populations within the region, coupled with severe poverty, which hit mostly the inhabitants of the arid and semi-arid lands of northern Darfur. Ecological borders between semi-arid plains, inhabited mostly by nomads identified as “Arabs,” and a large fertile oasis in the region of Jebel Mara, mainly inhabited by sedentary farmers from the Fur tribes, are an important element in the ongoing conflict.

The fact is that Darfur has been the locus of intercommunal conflicts for generations. However, these low-intensity conflicts gradually escalated and transmuted into an openly vicious war with an ethnic dimension. [11] Numerous factors are responsible for this transformation: the severe drought that hit the region forced nomadic groups to change their lifestyle and seek permanent settlements on lands that were historically considered by other tribes as their Dar; subsequent migration of increasing numbers of nomads into Darfur in search of water and grass; the collapse of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution; and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, which meant that violent confrontations, unlike the past, resulted in a large number of casualties. [12]

While the conflict in Darfur is overdetermined, and a complex web of triggering factors have contributed, we contend nevertheless that the conflict that has been going on intermittently since the early 1980s in the region of Jebel Marra (North Darfur) is in fact an ecological conflict par excellence, in which issues of race and ethnicity have been used by the warring parties, and unfortunately also by the Western media, as mobilizing tools, but regrettably have ended up being ends in themselves. [13] The erosion of soil and the depleted productivity of lands in Darfur in general, and its northern part especially, due to a severe desertification process over many decades, triggered a massive ecological migration toward southern Darfur in search of better pasture and farming opportunities. The increasing demand, or rather competition, over scarce natural resources in the drought-stricken province increasingly threatened the peaceful coexistence of different communities and the social cohesion that existed before. Desertification, deforestation, and water

scarcity, coupled with mismanagement of water resources, and inequality in power (social, economic, and political) and resource sharing are all contributing factors to the present conflict.

Africa and Darfur in the world system

Africa, like the rest of world's regions, was incorporated into a single socio-economic system, a capitalist world economy, whose fundamental dynamic exercised control over actors of this global system. Capitalist development, in its third phase—that is, as an imperial economic system—enabled the center to put in place the formal framework for economic activity and, to a large extent, determine the character of development on the global stage. After a nominal independence, ex-colonies became underdeveloped and specialized in monoproduction of unprocessed raw material to the center. This situation has contributed to the capital accumulation and development of the center at the expense of the decapitalization and underdevelopment of the periphery. The capitalist mode of production has come full circle by stretching out of its original European borders to encompass all parts of the globe. Africa has been no exception.

Africa peripheralized

By 1750, the European metropolis felt the need to expand the reach of capitalism. As industries were being established in the center, it became necessary to find new areas of primary production to guarantee profits through the exploitation of low-priced labor and land. This industrial expansion resulted in a shortage of labor within the world economy and justified the resort to slavery. Simultaneously, there was a growing demand on African land, together with the indigenous labor on it, for primary crop production. European powers eliminated any alternative indigenous source of employment and competitive agricultural produce. Africans were thus deprived of their main means of production: land. This introduced a total change in the mode of production and the social organization of indigenous society, forcing its members to participate in the development of a new mode of production that exclusively benefited the center.

By the late nineteenth century, a major crisis of accumulation hit the center and changed the game over which, to that point, Great Britain had a hegemonic control. Challenges from colonial competitors precipitated the political decline of the continent as the “scramble for Africa” began. The phase of “informal empire,” which enabled the peripheral African areas to retain some of their sovereign political institutions, came to be replaced by a formal empire that annihilated all African sovereignty by the end of the nineteenth century. Africa had to produce enough cash crops and raw materials to meet the needs of the world market and to sustain the political administrative costs of the competing European powers. The British colonial power instituted an “indirect rule” policy based on the principle of Africans ruling Africans for the benefit of the metropolis, which implied the preservation and the strengthening of tribal power and traditional chieftaincy. Sudan in general, and Darfur in particular, are a case in point.

Darfur: the periphery of the periphery

By 1916, Darfur was annexed to the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. From the outset, the colonial power focused on the riverain provinces of Sudan and assigned a handful of British officials the task of governing Darfur through the indirect rule of the Native Administration, whose powers were codified under the Powers of Nomad Sheikhs Ordinance. The 1922 Closed Districts Order declared

Darfur a closed area to anyone without a government permit. This system promoted conservatism and denied education and economic development to the province. Yet since the Native Administration needed indigenous clerks, meager education was granted exclusively to the co-opted tribal chiefs' offspring. As for development projects, riverain Sudan received the lion's share, while Darfur and the South were excluded. The telegraph system did not reach Darfur until after independence in 1956, roads were quasi-nonexistent, and the modest economic activity focused on poor-quality animal husbandry. Even by Sudanese standards, Darfur's income was low in the 1930s (less than £60,000 out of the national revenue of £6 million). Famine and disease were rampant, and the infection and mortality rates were staggering. Politically, the parliamentary system, modeled after Westminster, empowered the Khartoum elite and left little scope for the peripheral regions. The transfer of power after independence was a succession rather than a break up, and future Sudanese governments kept reproducing the same political and economic inequalities.

The colonial legacy left a power system that guaranteed domination through tribally organized local authorities. Decentralized despotism, the generic form of the colonial state in Africa, would breed recurring political and economic crisis in postindependence Sudan. In 1956, the first rebellion broke out in the South, while the low-intensity and small-scale outbreaks in Darfur would turn into violent battles in 1980s and an open rebellion against the Sudanese state in 2003.

A Darfur fact sheet

Darfur lies in the extreme west of Sudan. [14] It is bordered by Libya to the northwest, Chad to the west, and the Central African Republic to the southwest. With its 160,000 square miles, it covers approximately one-fifth of the Sudanese national territory and is divided for administrative purposes into three states: North, South, and West Darfur, with the cities Al-Fasher, Nyala, and Al-Geneina as their respective capitals. [15] This western province of the republic of Sudan was an ind sultanate until the British colonial power conquered it and incorporated it into Sudan in 1917. The Darfur sultanate dates back as far as 1650, and had been traditionally associated with two main ethnic groups the Dajo and the Tunjur [16] since the twelfth century. Basing its power on a co-opted elite coming from different ethnic groups, the Fur ethnic group managed to dominate the state apparatus in Darfur since the mid-seventeenth century, with the Arabic language becoming the language of the state by the eighteenth century. [17] Even though the Fur are the main ethnic group in Darfur, a rich mosaic of populations has lived there for hundred of years. "Arabs," who are mainly but not exclusively pastoralists, and "non-Arab" groups, comprise numerous tribes.

Under the Darfur sultanate, the settled populations who were mainly non-Arab were successful in fending off the nomadic tribes through the coercive power of the state. The heavy cavalry dispatched by the sultan could easily push back the nomads, especially the camel herders (Abbala) of the north, while the cow herders (Baggara) from the south managed to escape the sultan's punitive expeditions by withdrawing far into the south toward Bahr al-Ghazal. The historian R.S. O'Fahey notes on several occasions the similarity that exists between this situation in the nineteenth century and the present conflict, even though the intensity of the conflict and the resulting number of casualties are incomparable. [18] Eventually, Ali Dinar restored the sultanate, maintaining the old state policy of driving the nomads north and south, away from the farming areas. When the British colonial power took hold of Darfur after killing its last sultan, Ali Dinar, they not only kept the ruling elite intact but also maintained the unfriendly policy toward the northern and southern nomadic tribes. Yet contrary to the sultanate's traditional practice of granting land as freehold, the British introduced land ownership reforms that had not existed previously in Darfur. They assigned homelands (Dars) to certain ethnic groups with "imagined" boundaries and legislated communal or tribal land ownership systems. [19] Disputes over land continue to plague Darfur to this day, and when the Sudanese state

conflict. [24]

Dominant narratives of the Darfur conflict

The same neglect and marginalization that peripheral regions in the south and the east suffered was also the triggering factor of the rebellion in the western province of Darfur as early as 1991. [25] Daud Bolad, a defecting Islamist leader from the Fur tribe, tried to emulate John Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) by attempting to ignite a rebellion among the Fur. [26] He was soon captured and killed. A decade later, another rebellion appeared in Darfur, but this time it lasted longer. On February 26, 2003, under the leadership of a young Fur lawyer, Abdelwahid Muhammad Al-Nur, a group named the Darfur Liberation Front (DLF) took control of the town of Gulu in the Jebel Marra province in western Darfur. Following the advice of John Garang, the late leader of the SPLA, this budding Darfurian movement changed its name to Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/SLA) in order to reach out to all the marginalized people of Sudan and, most importantly, to garner support among other tribes in Darfur. [27] Having supported the Arab Gathering, the Zaghawa joined the rebellion, following the political schisms that split the Islamic Salvation Front in Khartoum. [28]

The conflict originated in a local civil war (1987-89) between different local militias, not organized on racial or ethnic lines at that time. Following the failed administrative reforms put in place by Khartoum in 1995, the government of Sudan got pulled into the conflict as the opposition interfered in the dispute in 2002. It can be reasonably argued that one dimension of the conflict is a civil war among Islamists, since the JEM is suspected of being the military wing of the Popular Congress Party, led by Hassan Turabi, the "éminence grise" of the Sudanese Islamist project and the main opposition leader today.

The international community, and most importantly western corporate media, characterized the conflict from the outset as the worst humanitarian catastrophe after the genocide in Rwanda. The subsequent depiction of the conflict evolved around three main axes: a stereotyping campaign against Islam as an "evil religion," a racialization of the conflict by drawing the dividing line between "Black Africans" as victims and "Arabs" as aggressors, and a characterization of the conflict as a genocide perpetrated by Arabs against Africans. The last axis centered on the questions of numbers and identity. In the United States, Darfur started attracting media attention in early 2004. Among the many articles and press reports written between April and June 2004, a common yet simplistic depiction of the conflict emerged. Arabs, who were perceived as outsiders who dominated the Sudanese state, were conducting a genocidal campaign against Black Africans, causing thousands of deaths and many more refugees in Chad and internally displaced people inside Sudan.

The term "Janjaweed" became common parlance, as media reports accused the Sudanese government of arming local Arab militias to wage an all-out war against Darfurian civilians. In the context of the American war on terror, journalists quickly turned to familiar analogies (violent Arabs) with other bloody events in order to provide the moral justifications for an immediate intervention. [29] The Rwandan genocide, to which the international community stood as an onlooker, became the prism through which some US senior officials perceived the conflict of Darfur. [30] The official narrative spoke of people without history, divided along ethnic and racial lines, who were engaged in a genocidal war. Yet, this narrative obscured a recurring phenomenon in violent conflicts, which is that ethnicity is the cloak that hides their economic nature.

Climate change and ecological degradation: An ecology of Darfur

Darfur's topography is mainly a mixture of sand and qoz soils, which cover three-quarters of northern Darfur and one-quarter of southern Darfur. Clay soils cover the western part and some pockets in the north. Mountains and hills are located in the center part with the outstanding topographic elements being the Jebel Marra plateau, the stronghold of SLA/Abdelwahid, and the Meidob hills in the north. The Jebel Marra plateau is a rugged volcanic range that covers 80,000 square kilometers and has an average altitude of 1,500 meters. [31] The elevated southern parts of the plateau have a wetter microclimate than the surrounding arid areas. Originally, the plateau had extensive woodlands, but they have been gradually destroyed to provide arable land for agricultural development.

Darfur can be divided into four main climatic zones: a rich savannah in the south with four to five months of rainy season (400 mm to 800 mm per year); a poor savannah in the middle with three to four months of long rainy season (200 mm to 400 mm per year); an arid zone located in the midst of north Darfur with a limited annual precipitation (100 mm to 300 mm); and a desert area with high temperatures during the summer and a shortage of rainfall. The rainfall in the fall season, floods, and shallow wells are all inherent and central elements in the provision of food and livelihood to Darfurians. Agriculture and pastoralism are the main economic activities, and both rely heavily on the availability of water and land. These two major resources have a potential to trigger competition and rivalries among social actors.

To understand the linkages between the ecological dimensions and the military conflict, we turn now to look at the intersection of elements and phenomena, both manmade and natural: deforestation resulting from drought, unsustainable economic activities, farming patterns, livestock and grazing habits, shortage of water supply, and increasing population.

Deforestation

The permanent reduction in the area covered by trees is an economic issue affecting the forestry sector in Sudan. Deforestation results in wide-ranging negative impacts, such as the intense degradation of land and water resources and the loss of livelihoods from forest ecosystem services. This in turn results in recurring conflict over exploitation of dwindling resources and dwindling economic opportunities. According to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the sector of forests represents approximately 13 percent of the gross domestic product. Both in rural and urban Sudan, people depend on forests for their livelihood, since trees are a valuable and highly demanded source of energy, and wood is used for construction and roofing. In the rural areas, forests are used for hunting, grazing, shade, and tree bark for medicinal purposes, as well as the production of nonwood produce such as gum and honey.

This important yet vulnerable economic resource is gradually threatened by deforestation due to the effects of climate change, energy needs, and agricultural clearance. [32] Sudan lost an average of 589,000 hectares of forest per year between 1990 and 2000. This loss intensified between 2000 and 2005 (0.84 percent per annum). In sum, Sudan lost 11.6 percent of its forest cover between 1990 and 2005. According to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and FAO surveys, closed forests have changed since the 1970s into open forestland and burned areas, pasture, or rain-fed agriculture in western and southern Darfur. This loss represents 29.4 to 30.3 percent in three decades. [33]

There are several cumulative causes of deforestation, and even if they vary according to the regions,

they can be summarized in the following phenomena or activities: drought and climate change, mechanized agriculture, fuel wood and charcoal extraction, shifting agriculture, fires, the commercial lumber and export industry, and traditional construction and brick-making. As for climate change, several studies have established that recurring drought periods in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in the irreversible extinction of a substantial number of trees in the Sahel region. There is wide agreement among climatologists that since the beginning of the nineteenth century, each fifty years have brought about a drier climate than the five decades before it. [34] Climate change, which has resulted in drier conditions and increased land pressure, has severely undermined the potential for seed distribution, germination, and new growth. In North Darfur, scarcity of rainfall has shifted the northern limit for several tree species fifty to two hundred kilometers to the south. In addition, scientific studies have shown that deforestation is a contributing factor to desertification because of soil depletion, erosion, and sand encroachment. [35]

Furthermore, wildfires and tree browsing performed by pastoralists as a technique to renew grass, and the use of foliage for camel fodder by migrant camel herders in North Darfur have negatively impacted the tree cover. Cutting trees for fuel wood and charcoal production is another activity found all over Sudan, but the more limited the resources are, the greater is the pressure, as it is the case in North Sudan and the periphery of urban centers. Brickmaking has become an income generating activity for many Darfurians, especially those in the Internally Displaced People camps. UNEP has reported that this activity contributes to severe deforestation, [36] as it consumes a large amount of firewood. [37] Finally, both Sudanese armed forces and armed nomadic groups have engaged in tree felling on a large scale to supply camel fodder and to deter farmers from returning to cultivated land. The displacement of large numbers of people due to the ongoing conflict has resulted in significant environmental impacts, since severe deforestation has taken place around the larger camps in most 4 arid parts of the country. [38]

Human activity has its share in the ecological degradation taking place in Darfur, as overexploitation of semi-arid environments through deforestation, overgrazing, and agricultural activity resulted in the conversion of land types from semi-desert to desert, despite the fact that the precipitation average may still be sufficient to sustain semi-desert vegetation. It should be noted also that soil type in North and West Darfur is less resistant than other parts of the region. Its sandy nature makes it prone to water and wind erosion.

Drought and water shortages

Sudan as a whole suffers from a shortage of fresh water. Insufficient and extremely variable annual rainfall rates have become a defining characteristic of the climate in most Sudanese regions. This phenomenon has impacted agricultural productivity and food security and has played a role in displacement of populations and conflicts. Sudan has suffered numerous long and devastating droughts in the last century. A study conducted in Darfur analyzing the data provided by rainfall stations in this province during the 1980s concluded what local populations have been experiencing for decades: Darfur is getting drier and drier. [39] The deadliest and most severe drought experienced by Darfurians lasted four years (1980–1984) and resulted in displacement and famine. [40]

Station	Year	Annual Rainfall (mm)	Annual Rainfall (inches)
1	1980	100	4.0
2	1981	150	6.0
3	1982	200	8.0
4	1983	250	10.0
5	1984	300	12.0

UNEP states with certainty that these recurrent droughts, which occurred during the last half of the

twentieth century, “have had a major influence on the vegetation profile and soil conditions seen in 2006,” and that these major drought periods were most likely the result of ocean temperature rather than local human activity such as overgrazing. [41] In other words, with the continuous climate change affecting the globe, there is a high probability that these droughts will occur again. The table below shows the long-term decrease in average annual rainfall (AAR) that Darfur has been experiencing since 1946. [42]

This trend of decreasing precipitation in Darfur has resulted in a severe trend of desertification. Millions of hectares of semi-arid grazing land have turned into desert. In its post-conflict assessment report of 2007, UNEP states unequivocally that “the impact of climate change is considered to be directly related to the conflict in the region (Darfur), as desertification has added significantly to the stress on the livelihoods of pastoralists societies, forcing them to move south to find pasture.” [43] A study conducted in 2003 in Kordofan, the neighboring region to the east of Darfur, concludes with alarming results: namely that crop models indicate a disastrous decline in crop production in the studied area and also area further south. [44]

There is largely agreement among scholars and international organizations working in Sudan that droughts and subsequent shortages of water imposed on numerous Darfurian tribes have caused changes in the traditional nomadic lifestyle. Recurring long periods of drought triggered a migratory phenomenon of more nomads into Darfur in search of water and grass. Finally, these pastoralists are gradually forced to seek permanent settlements on lands that traditionally are considered the exclusive property of other tribes (such as the Hakura and Dar).

Population

According to the Fifth Population and Housing Census, conducted in April-May 2008 and published in 2009, Darfur has an estimated population of 7.5 million persons. The fact that this census was conducted in the midst of an ongoing military conflict, which translates into incapacity for census agents to reach numerous parts of Darfur for obvious security reasons, means that the Darfurian population is probably undercounted. If we compare this figure with the size of the population in 1956, the year of Sudan’s independence, we notice a substantial seven-fold growth at the very least. The table below shows the demographic growth in Darfur since its independence. [45]

Year Population

1956.....	1,080,000
1973.....	1,340,000
1983.....	3,500,000
1993.....	5,600,000
2003.....	6,480,000
2008.....	7,500,000

Population density has increased dramatically. In 1956, the rate was three persons per square kilometer. By 1983, the figure was ten persons per square mile, and it was eighteen in 2003. This rate has most certainly continued to increase since the violence broke out in Darfur and as arid areas have been deserted in favor of more hospitable lands. It is not surprising then that the demographic element plays a major role in the conflict, since it compounds the pressures on the scarce natural resources available. Parallel to the demographic increase, the demand for agricultural products soared, and the average land holdings per household decreased. Due to declining precipitation, productivity of rain-fed agriculture declined both by quantitative and 2012 distributive measures. In reaction, farmers resorted to horizontal expansion, which encroached on

pasturelands used both by nomads and farmers alike.

Nowadays in all of Darfur, millet farming takes places without the traditional corridors that used to be left for animals to graze along during the farming season. This phenomenon touches all types of cultivable soil: qoz soil, light clay, and gardud soils. Traditionally, clay soils and wadi beds were used as grazing areas during the dry season for feeding livestock, but due to the availability of new agricultural technologies, it has become much easier to cultivate these areas through the use of rainfall moisture during the winter season or irrigation techniques, such as diesel-operated water pumps that get water from shallow wells. Furthermore, cashflow crops such as groundnut and sesame witnessed a substantial increase to respond to the market demand.

In sum, the increase in population drove substantial changes in the expansion of farming during the last decades. Millet cultivation in North Darfur increased by 150 percent in five decades, while the use of clay soils and wadi beds for agriculture increased by 300 percent. No wonder then that this situation drove fierce competition over land. The status in Darfur thus seems locked in a vicious circle. Unsustainable overuse of natural resources intensifies the ecological degradation already taking place due to other factors and fuels the competition over resources and access to land even further, feeding into more and more violence. The issue of land has proven to be a serious bone of contention in several attempts to resolve the conflict.

Conclusion

It can be reasonably argued that the present crisis in Darfur resulted in large part from the competition over continuously dwindling natural resources. It is, therefore, only logical that any serious attempt at resolving the conflict in a sustainable manner, both socially and politically, should take into consideration dimensions such as the scarcity of resources, and most of all the role of climate change and ecological degradation in pitting different social actors against each others—in addition to issues of inequality in terms of economic capital, good governance, deficit, social justice, and so on.

As stated earlier, a large body of literature, mainly from corporate Western media, gave birth to a series of misconceptions that perceived the ecological degradation as a consequence of economic and social factors, while the bloody conflicts in Darfur, which are mostly but not exclusively a result of climate change, were in turn construed as mainly racial and political conflicts. Public debates, by focusing on politics, neglect major ecological effects of climate change in vulnerable areas, such as sub-Saharan Africa. The fact is that social and economic systems are globally more closely related to climate factors than we thought earlier, and the ecological effects of climate change on vulnerable societies and polities in many developing countries—already plagued with chronic economic, financial, and political fragility—could be incalculable. [46]

Numerous reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warn that many regions across the globe will become environmentally inhospitable and economically stressed. Like any historical or social transitions, there will be winners and losers, both globally in the world-system economy, and locally on the national level. In the former case, the gap between rich and poor, developed and developing countries, will widen even further. In the latter case, farmers in high-altitude farm regions will most certainly benefit from extended growing season thanks to warmer temperatures, while other socioeconomic groups, such as Darfurian pastoralists, will have to relocate due to environmental pressures. Water will be a determinant variable in this relocation process. Therefore, “climate migration” and “climate refugees” are yet other dimensions of this phenomenon worthy of both serious scholarship and policy makers’ attention.

Differentiated and unequal distribution of social and symbolic capital will be exacerbated further, as vulnerable and disenfranchised groups, whether on a racial, ethnic, religious, or gender basis, suffer from increasing pressures and more intensive discrimination, which may lead to social upheavals and political instability.

As far as the African continent is concerned, numerous signs indicate that sub-humid and arid areas will suffer from even more droughts, worsening the food crisis for many of the continent's most marginalized groups. The serious shortage in precipitation in the Sahel region over the last four decades, from both anthropogenic warming and aerosol pollutants, has been threatening food security, water supply, and will subsequently contribute to triggering conflicts such as the one in Darfur. [47]

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P.S.

* From International Viewpoint, <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] See the excellent book Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

[2] R. Naroll, "Ethnic Unit Classification," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1964)

[3] Frederick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1988).

[4] Ibid.

[5] For a theoretical perspective see: Cliff Brown, "The Role of Employers in Split Labor Markets: An Event-Structure Analysis of Racial Conflict and AFL Organizing, 1917-1919," *Social Forces*, 2000, 29 (2): 653-81; James Mahoney, "Revisiting General Theory in Historical Sociology," *Social Forces*, 2004, 83(2): 459-89; Victoria E. Bonnell, "The Uses of Theory, Concepts and Comparison in Historical Sociology," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1980, 22(2): 156-73.

[6] In his seminal work on the obstacles to the democratic process in Africa, Mahmood Mamdani explains how postindependence African states inherited a colonial legacy in the shape of a bifurcated power. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996)

[7] Helen Young, Abdul Monim Osman, Yacob Aklilu, Rebecca Dale, and Babiker Badri, "Darfur 2005; Livelihood Under Siege," Final Report, International Famine Center, Tufts University and Ahfad University for Women, 2005, Omdurman, Sudan.

[8] This merchant class is referred to in common Sudanese parlance as Jellaba. This word refers to their style of clothing in particular and high living standard in general.

[9] A team of anthropologists conducted a study for a development project by FAO in the 1960s. See Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.

[10] Nicholas D. Kristof described the violence in Darfur in the strongest and unambiguous words in an op-ed article published in the *New York Times*: “The most vicious ethnic cleansing you’ve never heard of is...a campaign of murder, rape and pillage by Sudan’s Arab rulers that has forced 700,000 black African Sudanese to flee their villages.... The culprit is the Sudanese government.... Its Arab leaders have been fighting a civil war for more than twenty years against its rebellious black African South. Lately, it has armed lighter-skinned Arab raiders, the Janjaweed, who are killing or driving out blacks in the Darfur region near Chad.” [Emphasis by the author in both instances, not present in the original text]. *New York Times*, March 24, 2004

[11] Overall, the population in Darfur is divided into Arabs and nonArabs. The separation along these ethnic lines is less based on true ethnic separation than on cultural heritage

[12] Homeland or permanent exclusive territory, hence the phrase “Dar Fur,” i.e., the homeland of the Fur tribe.

[13] Issues such as economic marginalization of the peripheral regions, lack of development, and a democracy deficit are also major factors..

[14] Any visitor of the province of Darfur will notice the difference between the large desert areas that cover its northern part and the savannah, which stretches to the south. The harshness of the climatic conditions in North Darfur is such that two scholars of Sudan chose to open their book on the history of the conflict by the following description: “Northern Darfur is a forbidding place. It has landscapes of elemental simplicity: vast sandy plains, jutting mountains and jagged ridges, and occasional ribbons of green along the all-too-rare seasonal watercourses. A village, sometimes comprising no more than a cluster of huts made from straw and branches, may be a day’s ride from its neighbor. Every place, however humble, counts. A hand-dug well in a dry river bed can be the difference between life and death for a camel herd trekking from the valleys of central Darfur to the desert-edge pastures.” Julie Flint and Alex De Waal, *Darfur: A New History of A Long War* (New York: Zed Books, 2008), 1.

[15] Darfur was previously administered as one entity until it was divided by the central government into three states in the early 1990s.

[16] For historical accounts on Darfur see: R. S. O’Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate: A History*(New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Robert O. Collins, *A History of Modern Sudan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); M. W. Daly, *Darfur’s Sorrow: A History of Destruction and Genocide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Mahmood Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009), 75-171.

[17] For further details, see Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors*

[18] . R.S. O’Fahey draws the parallel between the present situation and that which existed after the destruction of the sultanate in 1874, when a series of pretenders to power attempted to keep Darfur as an independent state and vied for power in the context of a power vacuum. According to O’Fahey, this period, which lasted from 1874 until 1898, was called Umm Kwakiyya, or the “killing period.”

[19] For more details on the issue of land ownership, see: R. S. O’Fahey, M. I. Abu Salim, M. J.

Tubiana, and J. Tubiana, *Land in Dar Fur: Charters and Related Documents from the Dar Fur Sultanate* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[20] On the education policy implemented by the colonial power, Philip Ingelson, governor of Darfur between 1934 and 1941, states: "We have been able to limit education to the sons of chiefs and native administration personnel and can confidently look forward to keeping the ruling classes at the top of the education tree for many years to come." Quoted in Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors*, 165.

[21] P. Ingelson, "Education in Darfur," February 21, 1938, RHL, 546/7 quoted in M. W. Daly, *Darfur's Sorrow: A History of Destruction and Genocide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 135.

[22] On questions relating to the concepts of symbolic and cultural capital, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[23] See Black Book, Justice and Equality Movement, 2002, <http://www.Sudanjem.com>.

[24] See Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*.

[25] Black Book, Justice and Equality Movement.

[26] John Garang, a former Sudanese colonel, created and led the Sudan People's Liberation Army during the Second Sudanese Civil War, from 1983 to 2005. Following a peace agreement, he briefly served as Sudan's first vice president from January 2005 until his death five months later.

[27] The rebels introduced themselves to the world in 2003 when the two groups, namely the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), attacked government facilities, most notably a spectacular attack on al-Fasher airport (capital of North Darfur), where five military airplanes were destroyed and more than seventy men of the Sudanese armed forces were killed

[28] The Arab Gathering was a mysterious and amorphous collection of "Arab" movements whose goal was to establish a triangular Arab state between Libya, Chad, and Sudan in the 1980s. The Arab Gathering was instrumental in the Chadian-Libyan war, in which many Darfurians fought on the side of Libya

[29] It is not the aim of this paper to dwell on the different arguments deployed in the debate around the contested number of casualties and whether the conflict amounted to a genocide or not. Suffice it to say that the Western and particularly the US media coverage of the conflict left much to be desired. The easy recourse to ready-made clichés on Africa, Arabs, and Islam gave way to a simplistic analysis of the conflict; one that left out the complexities of the Sudanese social and political history, and other factors such as ecological degradation

[30] Susan Rice, arguing in favor of direct US military intervention, stated: "Ten years ago CNN ran footage of bloated corpses floating down Rwanda's rivers, while Washington debated whether to call it 'genocide'. As U.S. officials who were later responsible for U.S. policy toward Africa, we helped plan subsequent military interventions in Africa. But, like many others, we remain haunted by the Rwandan genocide. So it is with some humility and a full appreciation of the complexity of decisions to deploy U.S. forces that we hazard to recommend how to deal with a new Rwanda

now unfolding in the Darfur region.” (“The Darfur Catastrophe,” Washington Post, May 30, 2004.)

[31] Jebel Marra is the highest point of this plateau at 3,088 meters

[32] While the demand for forest products is high in the northern part of Sudan, most remaining forests are found in the South, which presents a potential threat for the peace agreement between North and South Sudan

[33] Ibid., UNEP and FAO.

[34] A. T. Grove, “A Note on the Remarkably Low Rainfall of the Sudan Zone in 1913,” *Savanna*, (2), 2003:(133-38); D. J. Schove, “African Droughts and the Spectrum of Time,” in R. J. D. Dalby, Harrison Church, and F. Bezzaz (eds.), *Drought in Africa* (London: International African Institute, 1977); African Environment Special Report quoted in Alex De Waal, *Famine That Kills*, 84.

[35] Sudan Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment, UNEP (2007)

[36] Ibid

[37] According to studies conducted by UNEP, firing 3,000 bricks consumes one large tree. United Nations Environment Program, *Sudan: Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment*, 107.

[38] Ibid., 105

[39] A. Clift-Hill, “Darfur Historical Rainfall Records,” *Darfur: Zaleingei*, JMRDP, quoted in Alex De Waal, *Famine that Kills*, 84.

[40] For a classic and detailed study on the concept of famine, with a special focus on Sudan and Darfur, see: Alex De Waal, *Famine that Kills*.

[41] Ibid., UNEP, 59.

[42] Ibid 60

[43] Ibid., 60.

[44] The study conducted in 2003 in Kordofan determined a baseline climate using rainfall and temperature data from 1961 to 1990. A series of global warming scenarios were then drawn to predict changes in temperature and rainfall from the baseline until 2060. The results indicated a rise of 0.5 to 1.5 C degrees in the average annual temperature accompanied by a 5 percent reduction in precipitation per annum. The study concludes that these results were alarming, and that the crop models indicate a disastrous decline in crop production in the studied area and also further south. Ibid., 61.

[45] *Fifth Population and Housing Census in Sudan*, Sudan: Department of Statistics, 2009

[46] Rainfall shifts and the ensuing El Niño cycles causes severe floods in Ecuador and substantially destroyed export crops and aquaculture, which contributed to the collapse of the banking system, and eventually led to political instability. This pattern can be seen also in the political disruptions caused in Indonesia by periods of extreme drought, which eventually destabilized the Indonesian economy and abruptly ended President Suharto’s regime.

[47] See for instance the studies conducted by Jeffrey D. Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, <http://www.earth.columbia.edu>.