Development and Cultural Genocide in the Sudan
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Genocide is easily defined: 'the deliberate extermination of a people'. It appears to occur in human history primarily in association with the emergence of the state, or in the effort of an established régime to maintain or expand its domination, and is virtually unrecorded for 'traditional' or pre-state societies. Although the concept of 'development' is by contrast exceedingly ambiguous (other than as an ideal process or social form in an evolutionary typology), the meaning conveyed would be antithetical to the definition of genocide, being some form of material or moral improvement in social existence, rather than a means towards the rapid extinction of a cultural tradition.

This short article claims that the régime in Khartoum under the 'leadership' of Omer Hassan al-Bashir continues to be characterised by political hegemony, economic disarray, cultural bias, and explicit racism, and that it has been carrying out a policy of genocide against the Nilotic-speaking peoples of the Southern Sudan known to the external world as the Shilluk, Dinka, Nuer, and Atuot. After a brief review of relevant phenomena from the pre-independence era, followed by an account of the emergence of a hybrid Western/Islamic notion of development, information is presented about some of the recent ways that international aid has been employed to undercut the very possibility of traditional culture and social organisation. In essence, it will be argued that al-Bashir seeks to 'develop' these Nilotic peoples by exterminating them culturally via his wider policy of re-creating the Sudan as a fundamentalist Islamic state.

1. Historical Background

There is little need to rehearse yet again the history of British rule in the Sudan from 1898 until 1956. Attention is only called here to the ways in which an older order of governance and policy have been transformed and re-cast in new forms since independence.

As is well known, the first three decades of British presence in the southern Sudan were notable for the absence of an agreed strategy about how the indigenous peoples ought to be governed. A broad policy of devolution – one variant of the generic concept of 'indirect rule' – typified British rule throughout the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Where local custom did not affront the morality of Christian values, indigenous forms and usages would simply be overseen by either British or British-appointed authorities. Given the rich historical traditions of Islam, from legal code to religious practice, British rule

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1 This is a revised version of the paper presented to the annual meeting of the African Studies Association in Baltimore, Maryland, November 1990.
in northern Sudan had a minimal impact. There, the foreign officials were respectful of Islamic custom, and also mindful of the ways in which religious sentiments in the Muslim world could easily become a powerful force of political opposition. Indeed, the 'recapture' of the Sudan in 1898 was considered by many to be an act of revenge against the Mahdi and his political/religious vision of an alien-free, Islamic Sudan. Conditions in the south were strikingly different: here, the British banned Islamic religious practice and the use of Arabic, and even went to the extent of physically removing Muslim merchants.

While Arabic was widely spoken in northern Sudanese communities, scores of previously unwritten African languages were spoken throughout the south. And, whereas in the north there was at least a veil of common morality expressed through Islam, elsewhere the British encountered a wide range of social, political, and moral forms, a diversity of completely unrelated societies and cultures. With a number of notable exceptions, during their first three decades of rule in the Sudan the British ruled from afar in the north and quite directly in the south. The plethora of southern languages were condensed into seven basic categories during the Rejaf conference in 1928, after which political and administrative boundaries were superimposed on the distribution of these linguistic groups. And here it is well to remember that at the turn of the century, Britain had no particular interest in the southern Sudan. It could not be annexed to Uganda or Kenya, though some effort was made in this direction. In fact, the primary reason why the British wished to stay in the region was to ensure their control over the sources and length of the Nile.

The most economical way to support colonial rule in the interests of the post-Victorian empire was to develop resources that would pay the costs of administration, and ultimately advance the economy of Britain. For the Sudan, surely the most famous illustration of this policy was the Gezira scheme, still one of the world's largest irrigation-based cotton industries. The transport of this raw product from the Sudan for processing in England was not a very complex or expensive matter, and the profits gained from this enterprise, combined with others on a smaller scale, made British rule in the north a cost-effective undertaking. Slowly but surely railway lines were constructed from the main centres of peasant production to the capital. The long-lived petty merchant class that had emerged centuries previously in and around Omdurman/Khartoum grew in power and influence in association with the new opportunities provided by external incentives. As time passed, the British oversaw the growth of wealth and capital in the hands of northern Sudanese merchants and Khartoum companies.

By contrast, throughout the duration of the colonial era, the southern reaches of the country remained an unwanted but necessary resource to ensure British control of the Nile. Beginning in 1930, and lasting nearly two decades, they were administered according to the 'Southern Policy' (a document of perennial debate for historians of the Sudan), a series of directives which collectively defined each 'tribal' population as a distinct entity. As elsewhere in colonial Africa, tribal boundaries were drawn with an eye towards orderly

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and cost-effective administration. The southern tribes were to be led down a long path of progress, step by step, first learning how to grow crops in straight rows, how to unscrew bottle caps, recite the Lord's Prayer, and cover their bodies in the European fashion. The British simply reoccupied the small slave-raiding stations that had prospered during the nineteenth century and slowly built these into centres for their particular administrative purposes and, importantly, for their own personal safety. Conscripted labourers then toiled under British behest to build narrow gravel roads that would connect these satellites of foreign domination. In the early decades of the present century the southern Sudan became a model illustration of that infamous phrase, 'the white man's burden'.

Officials in Khartoum divided the south into three distinct spheres for missionary work, thereby ruling over the proponents of three competing Christian ideologies. Trusting that a Christian education would lead eventually to an appreciation of British values and morality, officials were at one and the same time critical of missionaries for 'de-tribalising' local peoples, or for turning them into sentimental Christians and pathetic imitators of western standards. Christianising the south was an additional way to purge the region of Islamic influence. Above all else, by instructing the mission societies to produce a small cadre of literate southern Sudanese for clerical work, the colonial régime saved both the time and cost of realising the same end. All things considered, according to Douglas Johnson:

The main defect of British administration in the southern Sudan was its failure to develop local economic and administrative infrastructures ... Economic development was severely restricted, and commerce remained in the hands of northern Sudanese merchants and Khartoum companies.

2. A Novel Notion of Development

Thus far I have presumed an appreciation of the ways in which the so-called age of discovery, or more correctly, the age of imperialism in European history, was propelled by convictions about the singular moral authority, intellect, and reason of the West. Even a casual reading of the voluminous literature produced during this period reveals the fundamental racism that fuelled European domination of the non-western world. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century depictions of 'primitive' peoples were not only testaments to the achievements of natural science, but also, and more importantly, self-evidence of the racial and intellectual superiority of western civilisation. Somewhere in this murky slop of self-adulation an intellectual historian can locate the emerging roots of the complimentary notions of progress and development.


See Burton, 'Christians, Colonists, and Conversion'.

Having fallen in great numbers to British troops in the battle of Omdurman in 1898, the Islamicised Sudanese became increasingly convinced during the colonial era of their own moral and spiritual superiority. While the development of an Arab identity is, in fact, a fairly recent social and cultural phenomenon, Black Africa was for centuries an arena for capturing slaves, and the collective experience of Nilotic peoples vis-à-vis northerners left deeply engrained animosities and distrust. Indeed, prominent southern Sudanese pleaded with the colonial authorities in Khartoum to replace British-appointed Arab officials with British administrators because of the harsh and arbitrary way in which they were being treated. In other words, southerners sought European protection from northerners.

Racist sentiments towards the ‘pagans’ of the south still survive in the north. Two personal experiences come readily to mind. Having finally gained approval for my research among the Atuot of the southern Sudan from the Minister of the Interior in the late 1970s, the same official turned towards my wife and I, and said, ‘But I still do not understand why you want to go to the south. Why don’t you stay in the north and learn something about civilised people?’ As we found a short while later, itinerant northern Sudanese merchants living in small towns in the south continued to speak of, and to, local peoples as abiid, or ‘slaves’.

While there is a degree of speculation in what follows, it is not unlikely that towards the end of the colonial era the intelligentsia in the north justified their ethno-centrism in the very fact of independence. Had they not ‘got their own back’ after the battle of Omdurman in 1898? After all, even before 1956, virtually the entire political superstructure was manned by Muslims from the north. Had they not been given the secular authority of the departing British? Had they not been granted the right to govern thereafter as the dominant political and economic bloc over the undeveloped and dependent south? Certainly some Arab northerners believed that they had acquired not only political independence but also an internal colony in the process.

These considerations help us to understand how the policy of the central régime has evolved as a transformation of the preceding colonial power, namely: advance the development of the north while paying lip service to the needs of the south. After all, it was the northern Arabs that had won independence. Some of the Nilotic peoples foresaw this dilemma as the colonial era ended, but they had neither the resources nor the influence to alter the immediate course of history.

In other words, the northern Sudanese inherited from the period of British rule a hybrid sense of their cultural superiority, and during the last three decades they have continued to advance the north while neglecting the south. Most recently, however, this ‘colonial’ policy has involved a perverse concept of development. The southern Sudan has become a physical resource for northern exploitation, notably water and (at least potentially) oil. At the same time, recent events suggest that the Nilotic peoples are to be exterminated or transformed in the image of northern culture and identity.
3. The Removal of Water

A first focus of attention is provided by the Jonglei canal, a physical symbol of the legacy of British interests, now transformed in purpose and interest by the authority of the northern Sudanese. This development project was first formulated at the turn of the century, when the initial concept underscored the British wish to control the water resources of the White Nile. Progress towards its completion has been maintained in more recent years, despite a deepening awareness of the manifold ways in which the final outcome will irrevocably alter the ecology, as well as the ways of life and modes of livelihood, of the peoples whose territory it will traverse.

As indicated, modern attention to the ways in which humans might gain larger benefits from the Nile can be dated to 1904, when the Government of Egypt designed plans to dredge channels through the seasonally impassable sudd swamps of the southern Sudan. The explicit aim was to secure greater volumes of water for irrigation schemes to be sited hundreds of miles down river in the northern Sudan and Egypt. At the time it was estimated that as much as 50 per cent of the total flow of the White Nile was ‘lost’ through evaporation and seepage in the vast swamps, and that any saved could be used to expand the production of export crops in the northern Sudan. Early in the present century the fledgeling plans for the Gezira cotton scheme added further incentives to procure more water from the Nile. Toward this end, dams were erected at Sennar and in central-eastern Sudan, and then later south of Khartoum.

The first comprehensive large-scale plan to divert the waters of the Nile emerged as the outcome of the work undertaken during 1946–8 by the Jonglei Investigation Team, which produced a series of interim reports about the methods and consequences of dredging a diversionary canal to bring water from the sudd through a more direct route north and east, merging with the Sobat river south of Malakal. The detailed research by the original Jonglei team inspired a hydrological undertaking that would create an irrigation network over a much greater area, from Lake Tana in Ethiopia, with new dams on the Blue Nile and water storage facilities at Lake Kioga and Lake Victoria in Uganda, in addition to the previously mentioned diversionary canal through the southern sudd region.6

In all this mass of natural observation and speculation, only scant attention was devoted to the long-term effects of hydrological management on the resources of the indigenous peoples, whose subtle and complex modes of livelihood impressed a growing anthropological audience interested in their existence. For example, only passing reference was made to the fact that in the dry season, when cattle herds are most dependent on receding waters and pastures, only very small volumes of water would be locally available. Conversely, when riverine resources were least needed, during the rainy season, they would be most abundant. Other data indicated that some 40–50 per cent of dry-season grazing areas would effectively be destroyed as a result of the Jonglei canal. It is also probable that if a significant quantity of water

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was removed from this region, which is increasingly prone to drought, the canal will further advance the process of desertification on the eastern fringe of the Sahara. But rather than addressing these issues, government officials have boasted about the positive benefits of permanent settlements for the local transhumant pastoral groups, and how their material comforts and the national economy would improve while they became sedentary peasants.

The data collected in the planning of the Equatorial Nile Project gathered dust during the 17 years of the ‘first’ civil war in the Sudan. With the cessation of overt armed conflict in 1972, plans for resurrecting the country and the economy increasingly made mention of the Jonglei canal. Throughout the 1970s the Government sought further assistance from the West, particularly from the United States, and funds for a wide variety of developments were made available to the central authorities, with the lion’s share earmarked for northern Sudan, which some thought would become the ‘bread-basket’ of the Arab world. In the middle of the decade the Chevron Oil corporation reported positive readings from test wells bored in the immediate environs of Bentieu, in western Nuer country. By the end of the decade, the Sudan had become the second largest recipient of American aid in Africa, but one would find scarce evidence of this in the southern Sudan.

It was also during the ‘boom’ years of the later 1970s that the first full-scale dredging and excavation of the Jonglei canal began. In 1978 a European consortium established itself in the southern Sudan to supply a French company that owned the largest excavator in the world. Ignoring student protests and turning a blind eye to potentially catastrophic ecological consequences, the Government had decided that the old Anglo-Egyptian Sudan scheme ought no longer to be delayed in the post-colonial era. Bowing to political pressure from Khartoum, even the President of the Southern Sudan, himself a Dinka by birth, lauded the efforts and likely benefits.

With the re-emergence of civil war in the Sudan in 1983, work on the canal came to a halt. And five years after that, another volume on Jonglei appeared under the general authorship of Paul Howell, the original director of research in the colonial 1940s. Though local people will suffer directly from a scheme over which they have no control, Powell writes as follows:

Perhaps the most striking feature of the canal’s construction was that [the consortium] succeeded in resolving so many daunting mechanical and logistical problems, in particular the bringing of equipment to the site and maintaining an adequate supply of fuel at a time when the country was beset with transportation difficulties and shortages. A host of other practical and technical difficulties were overcome in exceptionally intractable terrain and harsh climatic conditions. Local labour was effectively and sympathetically mobilised. The halting of all construction in 1983 was a sad reward for a remarkable engineering achievement.7

In other words, a social anthropologist is here lauding the achievement of foreign technology rather than lamenting the demise of indigenous cultures.

The Jonglei canal is one of the few physical symbols the former colonists could point to as a sign of their civilising mission, and it also serves to mark another failure in that self-serving quest. More sobering are Howell’s notes on

the local impact of the canal to date. Among these, in descending order, he lists
the loss of water for irrigation expansion in Egypt and northern Sudan, vast
trenches of collapsing canal banks creating pools for malarial mosquitoes,
precipitous slopes across which people must move with their herds of cattle,
the loss of uncountable numbers of game animals for the same reason, flooding
of local habitations along the eroding banks of the canal, and new vectors of
bilharzia, to mention only a few. All this must be considered alongside the
‘indisputable fact’ that ‘the canal is designed primarily for the benefit of users
downstream of the Southern Region’.

It is hardly surprising that the régime in Khartoum embraced the Jonglei
project so firmly. It is a perverse way of developing the south: as pastoralism
becomes increasingly problematic in consequence of the canal, an ever-
growing number of southern Sudanese will be drawn to the northern region
of the country, where they will become property-less peasants in the irrigation
schemes that grow from Nile waters, and where they will be immediately under
controls by the central government. Johnson poses a similar conclusion in
slightly different terms: ‘developments planned for the Jonglei canal will
increase the number of Nilotic migrants by reducing the pastures, thus making
the inhabitants more dependent on schemes financed by the new [Arab]
capitalist class and international investors’. Thus the ‘problem’ of the
southern Sudan evaporates along with the ecology that once sustained their
livelihood. Omer Hassan al-Bashir’s policy is hardly novel. It is the mirror
image of the manner in which the U.S. Administration handled the ‘problem’
of Plains Indians a century before: by decimating their bison herds, they
eradicated the indigenous populations.

4. The Removal of Food

As if plans for a scheme that would destroy the physical environment were
not enough, al-Bashir’s Government is also embarked in an all but public
programme of genocide via a dual policy of creating the conditions of famine
in the south and insisting that the Sudan resurrect itself in the form of a
fundamentalist Islamic polity, purged of western influence and usage. It is no
wonder that many southern Sudanese continue to speak in sentimental terms
of the colonial era, when they were at least protected from the Islamicised
northerners. The new directives from Khartoum make it clear that the
assurances of political and cultural autonomy for the south, as written in the
Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972, are no longer of any value. The main reason
why the Government has not been able to impose its manner of civilisation on
the southern population has been the rise and continued existence of a popular
army in the region. Hence the double-barrelled response of trying to
exterminate the Nilotic peoples via armed Arab militia while denying them
food assistance from concerned international relief agencies.

At the time of writing the Government has successfully impeded virtually
every effort to deliver, by air and by land, critically needed food to the civilian
population in the south. In November 1990 the Sudanese ambassador to the
United States tried to explain on television how the heavy stress of weight, and

8 Ibid. p. 464. 9 Johnson, op. cit. p. 8.
metal fatigue, had been at least partly responsible for the 18-month delay in the arrival in the southern region of 3o railway trucks filled with millet. Washington bureaucrats turned a blind eye towards the policy of the authorities in Khartoum, mainly in the hope of securing their support for American goals in the Middle East. Until February 1991 the Government continued to insist that there was no food shortage or threat of famine in the southern Sudan, despite a great deal of evidence to the contrary in the international media. For example, according to Raymond Bonner:

[during an outbreak of measles in one southern town in July/August 1988] Fifty or sixty children died each day—at least two thousand altogether. Hyenas dragged some bodies away before they could be buried. There is a military garrison in Abyei, and it has a radio, but if the soldiers notified anyone in Khartoum about what was happening, the government didn’t respond.

The military commander in Abyei said in October that more than ten thousand people had died of starvation since the beginning of the year, half of them children ... A round face and a slight paunch suggested that he himself had not gone without food; and neither, it appeared, had any of his soldiers or the town’s civilian administrators.10

As noted, the Government’s policy evolved to a point where northern civilians were being armed as a militia to shoot and kill southerners. As Johnson explained in 1988:

Well-placed sources speak of a government policy to depopulate northern Bahr-el-Ghazal through Arab militia activity ... They have concentrated almost exclusively on Dinka civilian targets, looting cattle, women and children. Many cases of slave trading have now been documented.11

In addition, according to Bonner, many in informed circles ‘believe and cite as evidence, that it has been part of the government’s military strategy for southerners to die from starvation’.12 Certainly the relief effort launched by the United Nations in 1986, known as ‘Operation Rainbow’, was denied appropriate air facilities, while World Vision was expelled from the southern Sudan because the Government feared that this international Christian relief organisation would publicise the atrocities being committed there. In the southern town of Wau in 1987, World Vision reported that

[Arab troops] were travelling from house to house searching for Dinka, pulling them out and killing them. Hundreds of Dinka were hauled to the river by truck and machine-gunned. Sixty-two people were put in an empty ammunition storeroom and gassed.13

Unable to live safely in the rural countryside, many southerners have been forced to leave their only real means of subsistence behind, to seek, in vain, some railway line to stand on where they might receive a handful of grain. By denying innocent civilians this very basic requirement, the Government not only forced them north, away from their places of birth and former security, but also down the path of their own extinction. Based on his attempt during three months in 1989 to travel in Dinka country to observe the ways in which food aid was being denied, John Ryle was forced to conclude that the strategy of the national army was to ‘arm the militias to loot and burn southern villages, steal their cattle and drive their inhabitants into the north’.14

13 Ibid. p. 89.
In this amorphous world called ‘the north’, southern refugees from their own country seek out kin and relatives who have made the arduous, sometimes deadly trek before them, to find cardboard shelter in a northern Khartoum slum called Hillet Kusha, Arabic for ‘the place of garbage’. Having successfully survived famine and shortages countless times in their traditional homelands, southerners are forced to suffer from a policy of national integration and development that is being implemented via enforced famine and migration. Hence the earlier mention of a perverse notion of development. If and when the southern Sudanese embrace northern values and custom, they will become developed, recalling the manner in which the ‘western’ world defines all that is other, all that is not a mirror image of itself, as undeveloped. But there are only sticks and no ‘carrots’, since time and again externally generated food supplies were not allowed to be delivered to the southern Sudan because it did not suit the interests of the Government. Food has become a cheap weapon to enforce ‘development’, here in the manner of cultural genocide. Ryle makes the point quite clearly: ‘More and more in the Sudan the most valuable function of relief agencies has come to be to protect people from their own government’. The latter was recently reported to be selling shipments of food relief to gain cash in order to buy additional supplies.

5. Summary

No mention has been made of the rôle of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (S.P.L.A.), which has also acted in unaccountable ways with support from the international community. There is a simple, if flawed, reason for this omission. In the record of written history, the peoples of the southern Sudan have experienced a diverse variety of external governments, from the Turko–Egyptian era, through the rule of the Mahdiya and the British, and especially as inferior citizens in the independent Sudan. They have never been allowed a government of their own choice. In short, the victims cannot be held accountable for the crimes.

The Nilotic peoples of the southern Sudan have for centuries been victims of régimes that often held little concern for their own accountability. This is a problem that is widespread in contemporary Africa, as one and then another leader of a military junta declares that he will liberate the nation, and then assumes that his own particular faction must become, and stay as, the government. What we are witnessing in the broader sense is the poverty of political legitimacy in modern Africa, a phenomenon that surely has its roots in the greed and self-serving interests that resulted in the European definition of the African nation-state. Not a small part of this problem reflects the contemporary fact that ethnicity has become a scarce resource, and racism increasingly strikes against the possibility of singular identity. In the governance of the contemporary Sudan, a fundamentalist Islamic minority,

15 Ibid. p. 92.
which holds authority only because it is the sole possessor of military force, is engaged in a process of cultural genocide. As Johnson suggests, an older northern Sudanese pattern is re-emerging whereby membership in the state is equated with being Muslim... Their parallel commitment to the expansion of Islam into non-Muslim areas within the Sudan’s national boundaries is an implicit suggestion that only Muslims can enjoy full rights within the state. The opposition to ‘paganism’, which accompanies the campaign for an Islamic state, reveals the racial antagonism implicit in the Sudanese revival.17

The ‘development’ of these ideals by the régime headed by Omer Hassan al-Bashir, that has legitimacy merely because it controls the army, promises only the cultural demise of those who seek their own identity.

Towards the end of 1990, The New York Times carried a headline that read: ‘Sudanese Troops Burn Refugee Camp, Forcing Residents to a Desert Site’. These Nilotic peoples are still trying to eke out an existence some 30 miles from Khartoum, in the midst of a barren area with no water or electricity, and have little or no hope of any better location in the foreseeable future. Their earlier ‘place of garbage’ was reportedly destroyed because ‘The fundamentalists disapproved of the home-brewing of marissa, a local beer, at the camps and regarded the presence of so many southerners as politically dangerous’.18 It has been remarked that a society is developed to the extent that it is just. One can only conclude that seven years after its inception, the current civil war in the Sudan is in its infancy.