Modern Government and Traditional Structures in South Sudan

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This morning I was the *agamlong*, as the Dinka call it, the interpreter, reading the words of others. This afternoon I am speaking on my own account.

There is an English saying, “Don’t teach your grandmother to suck eggs.” It warns against lecturing people who know more than you do. So I speak with trepidation.

I feel privileged to take part in this discussion, though, a discussion that has been going on among Sudanese for some time. And I salute the Swiss Government for supporting it.

This is not routine courtesy. We have seen the spectacle - in Oslo - of donor governments pouring money into Sudan – or promising to do so. They are guided by development schemes and programmes thought up in Washington and Brussels - imported schemes not rooted in an understanding of Sudan, of its complicated history and diverse political economy. Nor of its multifarious wars. Because of this, I fear, the promise of development may remain unfulfilled.

There has been much discussion also, in the peace negotiations - in the international arena in general - of an internal source of wealth, Sudan’s mineral resources. And of oil revenues that are already flowing.

We know, though, that in almost every country in Africa with mineral resources, their exploitation has brought only poverty (Botswana excepted). There is a phrase for this: the resource curse. In Sudan, the best chance of averting this curse, it seems to me, lies in invoking the country’s real source of wealth. Not money. Not minerals. But culture.

In supporting the idea of a House of Nationalities the Swiss government has taken a subtle approach to the problem of state formation in Sudan. It has been attending to something that has been happening among Sudanese themselves, a strain of thought that has emerged from the experience of the last twenty years and more.

In the debate over the House of Nationalities a variety of purposes have been proposed. Some of these purposes may appear contradictory. Thus the House of Nationalities is intended, on the one hand, to conserve culture and, on the other, to act as a forum for debate about cultural change. It is dedicated to the preservation of indigenous languages, but its discussions are likely to take place, of necessity, in a lingua franca that is not native to Southern Sudan, in English or in Arabic. (Though you can argue that Southern Arabic, while not indigenous, does qualify as a local language.)

A third paradox is that the idea of the House of Nationalities, which concerns itself with tradition and local culture, has been discussed with greatest vigour by the most modern and cosmopolitan sector of the population, by educated people, by intellectuals, by those in the diaspora, by the youth. How many Sudanese traditional leaders are here at this meeting today? Just two.

(It is worth noting, however, that in Sudan "the Youth" is a version of an indigenous institution. Age-sets, as Professor Kwesi Prah reminded us, are a key feature of societies across Africa. In Europe and America people do not talk about "The Youth", in this sense. They talk about "young people". And Westerners in Africa are often surprised to find people of thirty years or more described as "the Youth".

In order to extend our discussion and seek a resolution of these contradictions – some apparent, some real - I would like to look at the institutions of leadership in various Sudanese societies. And at some related questions of culture and language.

The ethnic and social diversity in Sudan is not simply a set of differences in language and habitat and mode of livelihood. It is the product of divergent histories. These histories differ in the relation of particular groups to the state, ie to centres of greater military and political power.

There is the well-established divide between the northern Arab riverain groups (from which the elites of the modern Sudanese state are drawn) and the economically marginal groups away from the centre. There are equally significant differences, however, between one group and another on the periphery. As I said, such differences are not just a matter of culture or language. They are differences of internal political organization. And these differences of political organization are related to the varying relations between these groups and invading forces - ie between them and the centres of greater power – and to the extent to which they resisted or were assimilated or accommodated them.

This means, among other things, that the term "traditional leadership" (as used in the title of this seminar) is liable to mean something different from one group to another.

In documents concerned with the house of nationalities the phrase itself has already developed a number of variants The formulation "tribal leaders and chiefs" has been used interchangeably with "traditional leaders". But all these terms need to be examined: "tribe", "chief", "tradition". They may mean different things in different places. And in different languages. The political history of a particular group needs to be understood in order to understand the role of leaders within it.

The house of nationalities will be composed of leaders from many different groups. And they are likely to be leaders in different senses, with different powers and different kinds of representativeness. As Professor Kwesi Prah mentioned this morning and Dr Lam Akol reiterated, the Reth of the Shilluk is not the same in relation to his people as a chief of the Balanda or an earth priest of the Nuer. (He is, however, as we saw in last night's film, close to the King of the Anuak, in terms of his political significance, both of them being descended from the Luo ancestor Nyikang).

Let us consider the "chiefs". Today we are in the presence of such chiefs - like my uncle Chief Dut Malual - and the sons and daughters of chiefs (that is many of the rest of those present). I hope they will forgive my presumption in discussing their role.

In Sudan, as we have heard, the institution of chieftainship was taken up and developed by the imperial power, by the British administration, in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was based on the administrative model of indirect rule devised in West Africa by Lord Lugard – who was a famous British chief. Dr Lam Akol and Dr Deng Biong have explained why and how indirect rule worked in Sudan. Though they did miss out one important attraction of indirect rule to the British administration: that it saved money. Indirect rule was cheap, something worth remembering in the age of billion dollar aid programmes.

Indirect rule developed into a system of native administration, with chiefs' courts and chiefs as tax collectors. Existing pre-colonial leaders were coopted and empowered in return for their fealty to the administration. This is a system, as we are aware, that endures in Sudan to this day (though in the north it was abolished by one post-independence Khartoum government, then partially restored by another).

We heard this morning from Dr Khalid about the development of conflict resolution mechanisms under British rule, which further formalised and extended the role of chiefs.

In certain cases - that of the Azande for instance - the British administration found clear political hierarchies that had already been established in pre-colonial times. (This, as most of you know, was because the Azande themselves were under the pre-existing authority of invading lineages from West or Central Africa.) Once military resistance had been suppressed, these existing hierarchies lent themselves to incorporation into the colonial administration.

In other cases, such as that of the Nuer or Dinka, peoples who were - and still are - without an established central authority, colonial chiefs were drawn variously from existing spiritual leaders and from the few local inhabitants who had experience of the world outside Dinkaland (as soldiers for instance, in the army of the Turkiyya or the Mahdiyya.) The British had difficulty establishing the system of indirect rule among these groups because the authority of the existing leaders was limited.

But fifty years of British administration managed to establish government chiefs as part of the fabric of life among the Nuer and Dinka, as much as other groups. "Tradition" adapted to the new powers in the land.

Some tribal groups in Sudan, such as the Madi of Equatoria, are actually the creation of invading forces. The nucleus of Madi ethnicity is found in communities that formed round garrisons of mixed ethnicity set up in Equatoria under the Turkiyya.

Let us look again at the Dinka example, at the chiefly system of the Western Dinka, one that you will often described as "traditional leadership" in the recent literature of aid and development.

Among the Dinka there is a hierarchy of *baany baai* (government chiefs) comprising *bany alam thith*, *bany alam chol* (or *bany kor*) and *nhom gol*. These words translate as "red-cloth chief", "black-cloth chief" and "head of the hearth". The language is Dinka, *thong monyjang*, but the terms are translations of an imperial administrative hierarchy: executive chief, sub-chief and lineage leader, a system that was formalized by the British for purposes of tax collection and local courts. The red cloth and the black cloth are sashes awarded by the colonial administration as symbols of authority, used throughout Sudan.

(Elsewhere in Sudan, in Arabophone communities the equivalent figures were termed *sheikh* and *omda* and *nazir*. The terms were drawn from Arabic, but, again, this did not mean they corresponded to existing indigenous roles. Here I would draw your attention again to Dr Khalid Ali el Amin's paper – which has additional material he didn't have time to cover this morning.)

Pre-colonial political authority among the Dinka involved only two kinds of leader, *bany bith* and *bany wut*, the spear master and the master of the cattle camp, the spiritual leader and the war leader. Those other terms, the various gradations of *baany baai*, are, by origin, artifacts of colonialism.

Bany bith and *bany wut*, the pre-colonial institutions, still exist, but in a new relation to these other kinds of *bany*, to the other powers in the land. Among some Dinka groups the patriline that possessed the *bith*, or sacred spear (ie that had spiritual authority), also became *baany baai* - government chiefs. Elsewhere in the Dinka polity it was held that to accept a government role would diminish the spiritual authority of the *bany bith*.

There is a profound issue here concerning the collective identity of one of the principal Sudanese ethnic groups. The idea of a House of Nationalities provokes reflection on questions like this. And this is a good thing.

Historical considerations of the kind outlined above do not mean that government chiefs are inauthentic. Or that their authority is illegitimate. What it means is that their role is historically contingent; that it is itself the product of an on-going negotiation with modernity. And that it is not always separate from sources of national or regional power. It means that tradition also evolves, is continuously reinvented.

So when we speak of the House of Nationalities as an institution that will both conserve and also adapt and reconcile cultural traditions, this adaptation is something that has always happened, that happens continually. The difference, as I understand it, is that a House of Nationalities would make this a more conscious and collaborative process, something that could become central to the difficult business of constructing a national identity.

Some final words on chiefs. These days, chiefs are elected, but in many areas they are still drawn from chiefly families established during the colonial era. Often, therefore, they are part of an emerging elite within their ethnic constituency. This elite extends beyond the "traditional" realm.

The British authorities encouraged chiefs to send their children to school. Sometimes they forced them. This meant that educated elites in a good many parts of the South were – and still are - predominantly drawn from chiefly families. The chiefs may form part of a kin-based power complex that includes politicians at the national level (and military leaders in the SPLA areas). There is no clear boundary here between the traditional and the modern sector.

One of the effects of the war, in certain areas of the South, is that there are more educated chiefs. Is this a growing tendency? The SPLM/A administration, the "government of the sons" as the Dinka call it, has drawn chiefs closer to the administration in areas of core SPLA support. Elsewhere the opposite has been the case. The fate of chieftaincy under the SPLA is a question which I expect other speakers will tackle, as it is clearly central to the question of the House of Nationalities. It is encouraging that there is now an active programme of research into customary law on the part of the SPLM legal department.

As we have seen, the government chief is only one kind of “traditional” leader. There are others, not incorporated into national or local administration, who would have a claim to be represented in the House of Nationalities, ritual specialists of one kind and another: *kujur*s from the Nuba mountains, Nuer earth priests and prophets, or Zande diviners and witchdoctors.

All this means that representatives in a "House of Nationalities" might well comprise people with differing roles within their communities. So they would not be like members of a parliament, each with the same relation to their constituency. The kind of power and influence they exercised within their community would be liable to differ.

Now for some questions about other aspects of culture. Outsiders taken with the idea of an institution intended to conserve indigenous culture in Sudan should not suppose that the expressions of culture will always be to their liking. They are not to the liking of all Sudanese either.

"Traditional values" can be warlike. They can be ethnocentric, vengeful, discriminatory, sexist. The role of chiefs in peace making has often been highlighted (in accounts of events such as the Wunlit meeting of 1998). But "traditional leaders" may be war leaders too. The Nuer prophet Wut Nyang Gatkek, for instance, led a Nuer militia in the 1990s.

There is a well-documented conflict between the Dinka of Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal and two Baggara Arab tribes, the Rizeigat of Darfur and the Misseriya of Kordofan. The Rizeigat were one of the few Northern tribes where the traditional leadership survived the abolition of native administration by President Nimeiri. Yet the Nazir of the Rizeigat presided over decades of large-scale raiding and abduction of Dinka villagers from the south. (Was this because he was unable to resist pressure to become a tool of the Government? Does the absence of the Southern Cattle Rizeigat from the current conflict Darfur mean that they have learned a lesson?)

Another potentially contentious matter. One of the most striking traditional practices of Nilotic societies is ritual scarification (and removal of the front lower teeth in children). Scarification is one of the clearest marks of cultural diversity in Sudan. Such practices are opposed by most educated Sudanese. And they are routinely condemned, most recently by the Chiefs and Traditional Leaders Conference in Kapoeta County (June/July 2004). But they endure, nevertheless. Will an institution set up to preserve diversity celebrate scarification and ritual dentistry? Or will it reject it, as Professor Kwesi suggested this morning?

Well, we saw last night that change can be made in the heart of tradition. The King of Anuak still has his lower front teeth. Does this mean that Anuak villagers will leave off this practice? Such things may one day be discussed in the house of nationalities in Otalo or Pochala. *Inch'allah*. It is surely good for this to happen, for these things to be discussed at every level of society.

Similarly, many of the peoples of Southern Sudan have long practiced the inheritance of wives by the deceased husband's brother. The levirate, as it is called in the Old Testament. This is - arguably - an institution that oppresses women. (Its defenders might argue that it protects them.) Should it be preserved and celebrated? Or should it be proscribed in conformity with the ideas of individual human rights promulgated in international legislation?

This, too, is a topic that is likely to be the subject of debate in a house of nationalities. And this is how it should be. It is here, in a Southern Sudanese forum, and not in a Unicef committee room in New York that questions like this should be resolved.

Are there traditional women leaders in Sudan? With rare exceptions, such as the female rain-makers of the Lotuho, women have not had explicit leadership roles. There are, of course, women of influence to be found in every community. And there is an emerging cadre of educated women who have taken up the opportunities offered by education and the international presence. The idea of a house of nationalities has been strongly supported by some Sudanese women. But how will women be represented in it? By educated women or by women from village communities? Or by both?

Finally, Language. One thing we can all agree on, I think, is the desirability of preserving indigenous languages. As Dr Riek mentioned, this has been recognised in the CPA. More than scarification, more than particular marriage customs, local languages are the primary repository of the cultural heritage of Southern Sudan.

All over the world languages are dying out, disused, unwritten, unspoken. In Sudan, though, they survive, in their hundreds. In the Nuba Mountains alone, as is frequently pointed out, there are dozens of mutually incomprehensible languages. The preservation of these living tongues is a marvel. One that should be celebrated. But there is a paradox: in order to celebrate it, in order to discuss the preservation of this uniqueness it is necessary to use another language, a lingua franca.

Take the Nuba. Theirs was a war of cultural survival against the encroachment of Arab Islamic political domination. But in order to create political unity between different Nuba groups, in order to create common political institutions, they had to use the language of those they fought. In order to come together as Nuba they needed a language that was not a Nuba language. Likewise in the South, of course: the lingua franca is Arabic or English. And so too it will be in the House of Nationalities – at least at the national level. How, otherwise, can you be neutral between languages? Even within the states of Southern Sudan there is almost no state where only one language is spoken.

What is the best way of preserving and developing indigenous languages? It is through education, through the use of indigenous languages as the language of instruction in schools. And through the development of written forms of these languages - text books and grammars and dictionaries. But the very act of writing a language transforms its relation to the rest of the world. You preserve a language by incorporating it into the same processes that are transforming your society: literacy and universal education.

Some of you will remember the Institute of Languages in Yambio in the 1970s, set up by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. SIL is a Christian missionary organization that has taken on the task of translating the Bible into all known languages. An important part of their work in Sudan, as elsewhere, was the promotion of indigenous language education and the publishing of texts in many of the languages of the South. The Summer Institute worked with the Regional Ministry of Education and did valuable work in preserving these languages. But as an evangelical protestant organization SIL was set on the abolition of other manifestations of local culture, of traditional religious beliefs, of witchcraft and divination. Thus it aimed to preserve languages and transform culture at the same time.

Even if your aim is not evangelization, the act of preservation will transform what you are trying to preserve, whether you like it or not. It happens through education, and the self-awareness that comes from it. This is inevitable. To conserve you must transform. The point is to recognise this inevitability and shape institutions accordingly.

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