Land, territoriality and ethnic identities in the Nuba Mountains

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Introduction

This paper was written at a time when the peace negotiations between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the dominant rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) were concluded with a formal peace agreement. This happened in January 2005. Great news, indeed! But as the parties involved and the rest of us also know, such a peace agreement is not only the end of a period of civil war; at the same time it is a *beginning* of a new phase. And this beginning is the potential building of 'a new Sudan'. Events in Darfur and in Eastern Sudan have already shown that this will be no easy task. The major challenge lies with the parties. Once again, with respect to the future of the peace agreement between North and South, during the period of peace settlement and reconstruction it will be crucial that the two systems of governance as represented by the warring parties (GoS and SPLM/A) should fit together. Issues of citizens' rights are involved, including the roles played by race and gender in society. Other issues include the problem of local and regional government, issues of education, of land, and of general development. The two parties represent very different positions in these matters, with GoS representing the Arabist and Islamist tendencies of the regime, and SPLM/A taking issue with the very basis of that system. Indeed, the war itself might be said to be fought over these differences. A major challenge now is thus to find solutions that will permit the co-existence of a culturally and economically diverse population within the various regions of the country, including the building of new relationships within and between groups, new understandings of ethnic and religious identities, new relationships between local communities and national and international forces, that are capable of meeting the popular expectations of the new and alternative nature of the Sudanese state, thus producing not only a new system of governance, but also the basis of a new Sudanese national identity.

The Nuba Mountains area is an important example of these processes. The adaptational and ethnic complexity of the region is a case in point, as is the fact that the region was a battleground in the civil war, with GoS and SPLM/A controlling different parts of it. Also interesting in the Nuba Mountains is the fact that a cease-fire was established and was put into effect several years (early 2002) before the final Peace Agreement was signed, thus allowing us to see how a relatively peaceful environment might affect the local situation once the overall Peace Agreement was in place. Furthermore, as one of the three special conflict areas

(together with Abyei and the southern Blue Nile) the Nuba Mountains area is a territory that lies within northern Sudan, but has been part of the war and is contested and, as mentioned above, partly occupied by the SPLA. In this situation some sort of solution is essential if the unity of Sudan is to be promoted along the lines of the Peace Agreement. The general conflict situation in the region is also typical of other areas, with issues including those of land, population displacement, personal security, and religion. Various strategic resources – oil, minerals and water – are also located there. As in other areas, the resolution of the specific issues in the Nuba Mountains will be affected by agreements over power and wealth sharing, religion and the state, human rights, accountable and representative government, the cease-fire, and security. Furthermore, the Nuba Mountains will also be affected by the drawing of the North-South border; whether that border remains merely a regional boundary, or becomes an international border. Some consideration has been given to special administrative arrangements for the area, including a form of dual mandate system, with the government and the SPLM both involved in the administration of the areas during the interim period. This may or may not satisfy local demands for self-determination and self-government. Mechanisms should be found to consult the indigenous peoples of the area about their future administration. The right of return of refugees, displaced persons and families is now guaranteed, and mechanisms must be created to further assist the return and resettlement of international refugees and internally displaced persons. Mechanisms will also have to be devised and put into effect to manage shared access to local resources, both at local government level and between administrative units.

The argument of the paper

Taking this general state of affairs as its point of departure, the aim of this paper is to discuss the general issues hinted at above, with special reference to the Nuba people. The importance of two major processes is highlighted: that of *land* and *territory*, and that of *identity*, both of which come together in a constant struggle of the regional population for their sovereignty and for their right to deal with their own development. The history of the Nuba Mountains area is as follows: Nuba have been living in their hills with Arabs on the plains, not as a result of any natural situation but rather of unequal strength during periods of slavery. The British colonial rulers moved the Nuba down to the plains, pacified the areas and started economic development, the plains being exploited to grow cash crops, first through traditional technology, and later via the introduction of mechanized farming. These processes have been continued through several decades of Sudanese independence, promoted by independent governments backed by foreign development aid. Throughout these periods, competition for territory and re-

sources has been couched in ethnic, religious, and racial terms, with the Nuba's history as a slave population being a central part of how the relationships between groups have been conceptualized.

However, the situation should not be simplified into one in which monolithic identities such as Arab-African, Muslim-Christian and so on stand against each other. Rather, the simple point I want to make is that differently positioned actors pursue different strategies, engaging in particular relationships. Such a point of departure must include a variety of actors in our analysis, ranging from the nation state, which seeks to control resources in order to promote 'development', to local groups and people's cultural values; from the ways in which individuals, households and communities conceptualize their lives to the ways in which their lives are constrained by internal as well as external resources; and the interactions between local actors and international agencies of various sorts. This broader perspective hides many tensions. 'Communities' and 'cultures' are not objective entities, perceived identically by all actors, but are 'arenas' charged with different meanings, depending on who is acting and who is observing and interpreting. Power is certainly a basic factor that influences what goes on in such arenas, but unequal power relationships are not only found between the Nuba and the rest, but also among the Nuba themselves, both between Nuba groups and within one and the same group.

Such a broad perspective necessitates a two-sided view of how the Nuba have been involved in the history of their region. First, there is the *outward struggle*, in which the Nuba have been fighting for access to land in competition with neighboring groups and with government land-grabbing and fighting for Nuba identity in an environment of Nuba and Arabic groups. Such struggles have been maintained via various means, from armed struggles such as we see today, through political organizations and traditional leaders arguing the case of their people, to more informal protests. This level can also be seen as an inter-cultural space characterized by different boundary-making processes. And it is on this level that we see active Nuba participation in the regional history, in times of peace as well as times of unrest. As pointed out above, certain issues or themes are prominent. In the Nuba history of resistance to outside forces we see for instance *tax issues* stand out as a recurrent theme. *Land* and *identity* are two other issues that have led to active Nuba reactions. However, such struggles also have internal consequences, and in the course of time we see processes of changing economic adaptations, changes in land use, in leadership forms, gender roles, and religious affiliation, all exemplifying *internal struggles* through which the Nuba groups have sought to find their place in a wider Sudanese context. Such struggles show that processes of change have continued throughout the various phases of external struggle, and are related in basic ways to the maintenance of various Nuba groups as cultural traditions, thus representing a local space as compared to the inter-cultural space hinted at above. Once again, various developments are under

way. For a long time the Nuba in some areas have been involved in an interactive game in which they have used signs and symbols to demonstrate to an Arabic and Muslim environment that they are respectable persons and not slaves and pagans. In other areas, such processes have been influenced by Christian missionaries, giving a different empirical direction to the processes, but also with repercussions for Nuba cultural traditions. General changes in social organization have occurred, notions of physical and sexual shame have changed, and so have transition ceremonies. Food taboos have also changed, as have notions of gender relations, to mention but a few.

Why this stress on *variation*? Why underline *cultural creativity* at a local level and insist that the various Nuba cultural traditions are *constructed* and shaped in a constant interplay between local discourses and various pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial contexts? I do so because I believe that the implications of this way of thinking carry political weight, placing responsibility on the political leaders to design policies on grounds that will allow for this type of heterogeneity. The civil war in Sudan certainly illustrates that this has not been the case at national level. But it will also be a challenge to Nuba politicians to build a new future for their region within the context of the Peace Agreement.

To deal with a case like that of the Nuba thus requires an understanding of social process at various analytical levels. Certainly there are groups here that also represent distinct culture-bearing traditions. In the Nuba Mountains the ethnic picture would be defined by groups claiming to be Nuba, Arab, Fellata, Umbororo, etc., each group having its own language and with Arabic as the *lingua franca*. However, we cannot assume that ethnicity will provide the primary ordering of identities. For instance, the Nuba are divided into many different groups which, although they share some traits, represent different languages and localized cultural traditions. Similarly, the Arabs are made up of many groups that also might be described as reflecting a spectrum of ethnic variation rather than a unified ethnic identity. Rather than privileging 'the Ethnic' we need to regard ethnicity as one of several elements within a broader model of cultural complexity. In the Nuba Mountains, such elements would be religion, which would define people with reference to various Sufi orders within Sunni Islam, Christianity, and traditional Nuba religions. But as we have seen above, history and descent also play a role in the way people understand themselves, with certain groups being stigmatized as descendants of slaves. Occupation and class also play roles, as do settlement and life-style (the distinction between camp, village, and town), gender, kinship and age.

Other factors might also be added to this list, but the point here is that these domains of identity are only bounded to a limited extent and people may cross the boundaries between them. Hence, it is perfectly possible in such a situation for interactions among members of different groups to be based on codes of behavior in which the members of different groups can exist, allow others to exist and

maintain or avoid closer relations. In such a situation the ethnic boundary may be based on different cultural elements. The focus of analysis, therefore, should be on explaining the cultural meanings *that* people realize through their practice of social relationships. Such meanings are partly formed through everyday interactions and they are always evaluative. Our task is to see how such systems of meaning are construed; i.e. how people living in particular societies understand the unequal distribution of prestige, power and privilege.

A separate factor that affects these processes is that of violence. During periods of conflict more rigid identities tend to emerge and the walls between groups may grow higher. In such situations, identities may themselves be strategically tied to the conflict through active 'We' and 'Them' codifications in which 'The Other' is perceived as a threat to the preservation of the We-group. This may lead to a reassertion of cultural values as part of the violent opposition, stressing common ancestry and the sharing of common insults and suffering. This does not mean that cultures are actually made more different.

Such perspectives on culture and knowledge do not see culture as a series of clear-cut continua with clear-cut boundaries, but rather as a phenomenon in constant flux. Even so, the flux is not total. It is patterned through *social practice*, meaning that it originates not so much in our cultural ideas as in our specific experiences. We need to enter into the realm of actual interactions between people in order to see what they do and in what directions such interactions lead them. Rather than integrated social formations, our starting point should be *variation*. We seek to understand modes of practical action in society, not by seeking 'sub-cultures' but rather 'modes of signification'. People may disagree on the meaning of symbols but still hold similar identities. In short – we need perspectives that include the distinctive logic of 'world-views', 'mental habits' or 'styles of thought', at the same time as they are able to reveal how knowledge is related to the social context within which it exists, realizing that such connections are human constructions, historically evolved, culturally located and collectively reproduced. How can we show, then, that there is some reality to cultural patterns, without assuming that everyone embraces identical concepts of 'culture', or that everyone reads symbols in the same way? How can we understand that people who live within the same 'culture' can organize and emphasize differences among themselves, differences that, when drawn into the realm of social identity formation, may indeed be violent, while also recognizing that people may choose not to highlight certain differences and turn them into social boundaries?

The issue of land

The land question is very important to the type of identities indicated above. It is a basic source of survival, a source of individual and tribal pride, and a constant source of potential conflict. Any suggestion that established rights will be tampered with has always brought unrest and conflict. The evolution of the land issue in the Nuba Mountains has a rather special history. The Nuba have experienced loss of access to cultivable land through several types of processes. One is the outright land-grabbing that has been driven by expanding public and private schemes in the region, a process that has been encouraged through direct government interventions. Secondly, the Nuba have systematically lost territory to Arab groups in the region. Attempts to protest have only served to show how marginal the Nuba people are in the political set-up of their region and of their country. Efforts to argue their case in political assemblies have failed, as have many attempts to make use of the courts to challenge this process. Public courts have not been able to deal with the situation; on the contrary, in most cases Arabs have had their ownership confirmed over Nuba ownership. Conflicts with migrating pastoralists have also added to the problem. Developments since the early days of Sudanese independence confirm that the economic and political marginalization of the Nuba is on the increase, a process that has significantly contributed to the land problems that they now face. The problems have deep historical roots. Throughout their history, in the face of systematic marginalization and discrimination, the Nuba have lost access to their own resources and have lost opportunities to promote their own political and economic development. Their participation in the current civil war is merely the latest phase of this struggle. In fact, it may be argued that the land question was the single biggest issue of contention in the Nuba Mountains at the outbreak of the war, and that the settlement of the land issue, through land and land tenure-related reforms, is a key aspect of forging a lasting peace.

It should also be remembered that the land issue is interrelated with many other social, economic and political processes. Dealing with land cannot therefore be limited to the immediate use of natural resources. Rather, it requires a broader discussion of many factors that affect the ways in which the land issue manifests itself at any given time. Thus, it forms part of the general history of the relationship between the Nuba and the rest of Sudanese society, a history that goes back to a pre-colonial history of Arab slave raiding, continues through a colonial phase with attempts to 'integrate' the Nuba into a wider society, while at the same time isolating them from the influence of the surrounding Arab communities, arriving at a contemporary situation in which the level of exploitation has increased and the cultural and racial issues have once again surfaced as key elements of public policies vis-à-vis the Nuba, and which has led to the return of violent conflicts between Nuba and Arab groups in the region.

Key economic adaptations

The livelihood of the Nuba is based on agriculture. People living in the mountains and on the plains cultivate different types of fields called house fields, near fields and far fields. The first two types are in and around the villages on the sandy soil. Early-maturing varieties of sorghum, maize and beans are planted here together with peanuts. Off-farm activities, such as collecting grass, fruits, tubers, etc. have also been an important source of income, especially for women and the poor. Such activities have always been there, but the scale of involvement has varied with the level of economic stress in local communities. In the history of the Nuba the mountains and hills have been the main areas of settlement and cultivation, with people depending on a system of intensive cultivation based on building terraces to control water flow and erosion, manuring house fields and to some extent the near fields, and the collection of fodder for their animals. This intensive cultivation evolved as a response to population pressure, a population pressure brought about by the pre-colonial Sudanese context of Arab slave raids on the Nuba, blocking access to the plains and forcing the Nuba into the hills for protection. However, since the British pacification of the area and until the present civil war started in the mountains, i.e. in the mid 1980s, a general development occurred, in the course of which a majority of the people moved down from the hills and became increasingly dependent on the distant fields on the clay plains. Such fields were cleared by fire (*hariq* cultivation), and were planted with slow-maturing sorghum along with sesame and beans. There were regional variations in this pattern. In areas with a surplus of land, such as in the far south, inheritance was not of crucial importance as a means of obtaining land on the plains. Further north, in the Central Nuba Mountains where population densities were higher, all the land had been brought into use and there the transfer of plots and also of far fields was important.

But cultivation is not the only resource. Apart from rain-fed cultivation, settled people keep some animals. Cattle, goats, and some sheep and camels (pigs are also a very common feature in SPLM areas) are the most common. Apart from providing milk and meat, animals also provide fertilizer for plots, and they represent an important source of wealth accumulation. Success and failure in the management of animals is a major factor in the creation of differentiation among Nuba households. The accumulation of livestock is limited by outbreaks of disease and by the limited availability of pasture in the hills. Successful animal-keepers may come to agreement with the Baggara nomads on their seasonal migrations to northern Kordofan, thus better exploiting available resources, or the Nuba may themselves become nomads, joining a Baggara camp. It should be said, however, that such strategies have changed due to the war and the now hostile relationships between Arabs and Nuba.

The economic activities of the Nuba have traditionally been integrated with different elements of the wider socio-cultural system. The institution of the rain-maker has been important, and the timing of social and religious ceremonies and life-crisis rituals has been organized around the agricultural cycle, giving the Nuba cultural tradition its characteristic features. Agricultural production has mainly been aimed at *subsistence*, i.e. to provide the economic units (primarily families) with food for their survival. However, people have also been cultivating *cash crops*, i.e. crops that have been sold in local and regional markets in order to bring in a cash income. Sometimes grain might also be bought and sold in the market, but the major cash crops in the Nuba Mountains are sesame and groundnuts. The scope of such involvement in cash crop cultivation was limited by the technology available as well as by marketing constraints. Due to price fluctuations in local and regional markets it has been a risky strategy to become too involved with cash crops only, and these have ended up as only part of the total agricultural 'package' on which the Nuba depend, engaging in cash crops and staple crop production to a changing and very pragmatic extent. The cash crops introduced by the government, primarily cotton, ran into problems and were significantly reduced in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A new strategy that has been appearing is in the field of horticulture. Gardens have been developed in areas with suitable soil and sufficient of water. This strategy is particularly evident in the eastern parts of the region, and shows the willingness of local farmers to engage in new activities when they see how they can benefit from them. Once again, markets place limits on expansion. Charcoal-burning is yet another source of cash income. As an alternative to local cash cropping the Nuba have a long history of labor migration, both within the region and also to Khartoum and other major Sudanese towns.

In addition to small-holder cultivation, the 'pre-war' region also presents us with some agricultural schemes that have been introduced as a result of public development policies. One type is the mechanized small-holder scheme administered by the Nuba Mountains Agricultural Production Corporation (NMAPC), which attempted to expand cotton production in the region. The NMAPC was formed to 1) increase productivity, reduce production costs and provide crop protection through research and extension services, 2) to improve the economic, social and cultural standards of farmers through the provision of drinking water, social services, rural development and the encouragement of cooperative movements, and 3) to encourage group farming, mechanized farming and the organization of rotational rules for the cultivation of cotton and sorghum. These ambitious aims were not followed up by the development of an adequate administrative structure. Rather, the result was a drastic drop in cotton production. This led the Nimeiri regime to go even further in 1970 by introducing the concept of 'modernization schemes'. But they too were a failure. During the first few years the results included reduction in cultivated area within the schemes by 55 %, while administrative costs rose by 81 %. Thus began a crisis in this sector that was to last into

the 1980s. People were reluctant to grow cotton because of low prices. They were constrained in their sorghum cultivation because of the rules of rotation within the schemes. Productivity was also low due to late planting of the crops, which in turn was related to mechanical problems with the tractor fleet. Studies of these schemes in the late 1970s and early 1980s showed that the traditional sector was at least as productive as the cotton schemes and that farmers' reluctance to participate was indeed a rational choice.

A second direct state intervention in the agricultural sector was the introduction in the southern Nuba Mountains of large-scale mechanized schemes, comprising farms of 1,000 acres each. These were administered by the Mechanized Farming Corporation (MFC), which was established in the 1960s. The first scheme of this type in the Nuba Mountains was Habila, in the late 1960s, and further south, the Beida scheme was established in 1976. Unlike the modernization schemes, these were not aimed at small-holders, but rather at people with capital who could afford the necessary investments. There is an initial fee payable to the MFC to be allocated a scheme, followed by an annual rent but the real cost lies in clearing land of trees and buying mechanical equipment (tractors and combine harvesters). Furthermore, the management of such schemes, with all the capital involved, the organization of hundreds of wage laborers and the marketing, was far beyond the competence of the local farmers, be they Nuba or Arab. It was the group of *Jellaba* traders who most effectively exploited this opportunity.

The impact of the schemes can be seen on several levels. First of all, they represented processes through which the Nuba lost land to Arab groups within the NMAPC schemes and to traders and other business groups in the MFC schemes. In financial terms, the MFC schemes have been a success for their owners. The profits reaped by the traders are considerable, and this success has increased income differentials in the region. In 1979, I made a calculation of the distribution of income on the schemes among owners and workers, i.e. between capital and labor, and found that 53 % went to the owner and 47 % to the workers. Since the owners were only one or two persons, while there were several hundred workers, there was obviously a dramatic skew in income distribution. The traders' position as the dominant economic group in the area has been further strengthened, while the workers, i.e. the local farmers and poor migrants from the south, remain poor, although the schemes do provide vital additional income for these groups. These vast schemes also have an ecological impact. First, due to the non-application of crop rotations, the farmers allow the land to deteriorate; when this happens, they obtain a new scheme. This is contrary to the regulations of the MFC, but experience shows that the rules are not enforced. The schemes thus appear to be sites of 'agricultural mining' rather than farming. This means that the agricultural value of this land is reduced and that such areas, even if they are transferred to Nuba ownership, would need rehabilitation. The schemes also occupy large areas that had previously been part of pastoral migration routes.

The problem of pastoralism

Pastoralist groups are a special challenge in the Nuba Mountains. The Baggara Arabs (primarily Hawazma) and some nomadic West African groups (Fulanis in the Sudan are called *Fellata Umbororo*) represent groups that move over long distances, spending the rainy season on the sandy areas of North Kordofan State, moving southwards into the Nuba Mountains as the dry season starts and staying there, with trips into Upper Nile State for dry-season grazing. The migration of the Hawazma Baggara, for example, takes its members to the area south of El Obeid and all the way south towards the White Nile, to northern Shilluk-land around Kodok and Kaka, and to southern Shilluk-land around Tunga. On these migrations they pass through the Nuba Mountains. On these migrations they have interacted with the local Nuba, in peaceful as well as less peaceful ways. There are cases of tribes making agreements that determine when nomads can utilize farming areas. On the other hand, the pastoralists in the Nuba Mountains also represent Arab groups of people with a troubled relationship to the Nuba population. Settled Arabs have benefited from the land-grabbing policies of the governments, and the pastoral Arabs have joined the Popular Defense Forces and have also provided manpower for the *Murahilin* militias. This is another example of how previously established structures for dealing with relationships between groups have been eroded and become sources of conflict. Since the time of the British, the policy of Nuba-Arab relationships was primarily aimed at keeping the groups apart. The pastoral Hawazma who migrated through the area received no land rights, but had to negotiate agreements with the local inhabitants to be allowed to use pasture and water. For the sedentary Arabs, the British solved their problem partly by opening up new areas for cultivation, partly by drilling wells and building *hafir*s (water reservoirs), and partly by giving the new settlers ownership rights in these areas, in order to avoid mixing Arabs and Nubas in Nuba-dominated areas. This system, designed to avoid conflict between groups, was further strengthened by the introduction of the Native Administration. Through their leaders, the Hawazma pastoralists negotiated acceptance by the Nuba and other Arab groups of their use of pasture and water. They did the same with the tribes of the Upper Nile in the southern Sudan. For the settled populations, the tribal leadership became an important mechanism for solving land disputes between groups and for negotiating the acceptance of territorial borders.

A history of relating to the center

The position of the Nuba in the wider Sudanese society is one of marginality. Throughout Sudanese history, members of certain communities and groups have been regarded as second-class citizens. Examples of such groups are the Nuba,

the Ingessana and groups in Darfur, commonly called the *zuruq* (the blacks), which is a derogatory term. Such a system of discrimination is sustained and re-produced through complex socio-economic and socio-political dynamics related to processes of Arabization, Islamization, Sudanization, commercialization and modernization. They all represent major processes that indicate the direction in which integration is moving. People from various local groups have been exposed to new socio-economic forms, new behavioral patterns and new religious think-ing and activities. Wage labor is increasing in importance, while new patterns of economic differentiation appear to be based on access to ready cash. This relates to people's involvement in labor migration to the Khartoum area. The activities of Muslim missionaries brought influences that produced changes in social organiza-tion as well as in the basic notions that people hold about the world and their place in it. Such missionaries have traditionally been members of various Sufi brotherhoods. As several groups in the country are regarded as the descendents of former slave populations, with a stigma on their identity, this process of social adaptation becomes particularly crucial. The ways in which individual categories of people deal with this stigma is an important factor in explaining differences in the behavior of the groups themselves, how networks are established and how they relate to the outside world. This internal variation provides an entry into the actual processes by which wider cultural variation occurs.

The problem relates to the general history of the southern Sudan as well as such areas as the Nuba Mountains, Ingessana and Dar Fartit, as frontier regions. This frontier was a field of economic and human exploitation through raiding and slaving. It was also a zone within which ethnic and societal transformations took place, often as a consequence of assumptions of inferiority and superiority, as-sumptions reinforced by religion and presumed descent. In this century, the areas have seen an influx of *Jellaba* traders, West African Fellata and others, due to the opening up of commercial activities and the availability of wage work that fol-lowed. As a consequence of all this, the areas in the vicinity of market centers in the region are highly complex in their ethnic and cultural composition.

The evolving relations between such groups are not only defined by the local scene but also by the position of the various groups within the wider Sudanese social context. The main factor that influences this is the social power exercised by participants in the local arenas of interaction. This distribution of power is clearly in favor of certain Arabic groups and to the disadvantage of non-Arabs and non-Muslims. This is related to the long history of Arabization and Islamiza-tion in Sudan. Many societies went through this process centuries ago, but for areas in the south and in the so-called transition zone (Nuba, southern Blue Nile, Dar Fartit) it is a contemporary process and behavior that can be accepted within that Arabic and Islamic code is necessary.

There is also an ongoing contemporary process of change in Sudan. This process of social change is not one of accepting the Islamic religion or Arabic language

and customs alone, but rather of requiring ethnically diverse groups living on the Sudanese periphery to adapt to the dominant life-style of the center. Non-Arab and non-Islamized groups such as the Dinka, Nuer, Nuba, etc., show the most dramatic expression of such processes, but Arab groups that have already been Islamized are also going through similar processes. This process does not mean that people only want to catch up with the mainstream Arabic culture, but rather, as Paul Doornbos (1984) has argued, that they want materially and spiritually to participate in society in the same way as members of the stratum of traders and officials, and to be taken seriously and be considered trust- and creditworthy throughout Sudan.

This is a complex phenomenon that is related to different agents of social change. Traders are among the major agents of this change, as are modern schools, local courts and Islamic brotherhoods. This way of life is characterized by non-manual labor, non-drinking, seclusion of women and a clear public display of Islamic identity. The *Jellaba* traders represent such a way of life while the *zuruq* represent the opposite of this, as they are still regarded as a non-Muslim, non-Arab population, with a history as slaves, and they are still marginal to society. These groups suffered particular harassment in Sudanese towns during the final years of the Nimeiri regime, when sharia law was most actively applied. In the socio-economic field too, they are mostly at the bottom of the heap, serving as cheap labor in urban industries, and working as domestic servants or as casual labor. An important point is that there is a stigma on their identity with which they have to deal, if they wish to participate fully on that scene. The acceptance that they themselves have an inferior social status in the wider stratificational system of Sudan can bring about a process of emulation. But this is nothing new. Throughout the past century, the gradual integration of various groups into society has produced similar problems, leading to processes of ethnic dichotomization. The difference is that today this integration process is more penetrating than it was before. The general commercialization of Sudan and the growing degree of labor migration have both contributed to the exposure to and need to relate to other groups in a continuous manner.

The general picture then, is no longer one of a simple dichotomy of subsistence-farmers and pastoralists versus the commercial groups, who are the main agents of commercialization. Rather, it is a complex setting in which most groups have become deeply involved in the commercial process and are looking for investment opportunities to further improve their position. Thus it is important to note that we are not talking about a change from a unified, traditional culture into a less integrated one, in which new elements exist alongside old ones. What I have called 'traditional' culture is not altogether gone, nor have old people living a 'traditional' life disappeared. But with the emergence of new adaptive opportunities, the complexity of local adaptation has increased and new 'agents of change' have entered the scene. The process is characterized by local groups that emulate

the life styles of the dominant Arab and Muslim groups, trying in this way to change a marginal and stigmatized identity into a socially acceptable one. But alternative strategies are also there, for instance by joining in the war to actively fight the same process, thus shifting the focus from 'integration' to 'resistance'. In such a context, this process is interpreted as racial oppression by dominant groups, an oppression that will have to end if local communities are ever to be able again to develop their identities.

The civil war

The civil war in the Nuba Mountains is well known among those who follow developments in Sudan. The Khartoum regime was staging a military 'jihad' campaign to force their version of Islam and Arabism upon the Nuba, denying them access to land necessary for survival, and relocating them to so-called 'peace villages'. The Sudan People's Liberation Army were fighting against this outcome, and they set up their own systems of government and administration in the areas that they came to control. Through the fighting, the Nuba were positioned against Arabs, Muslims against non-Muslims. The cessation of hostilities under the negotiated Cease-fire Agreement between the GoS and SPLM/A Nuba, even with its significant shortcomings in the initial phase, helped to improve people's lives in the region and allowed increased freedom of movement as well as improved access to assets and resources, including land, albeit only to a limited extent. The Cease-fire Agreement came into force on January 22, 2002 and a Joint Military Commission (JMC)/Joint Military Mission (JMM) was established to monitor it, with the broader objectives of promoting a just, peaceful and comprehensive settlement of the conflict. The cease-fire guaranteed the free movement of civilians and goods throughout the Nuba Mountains and was intended to facilitate the creation of conditions conducive to the provision of assistance to persons affected by the conflict, including internally displaced peoples.

The cease-fire was rather successful in putting an end to open warfare in the Nuba Mountains. But some of its central features, such as improved stability, greater freedom of movement, and the opening up of areas hitherto regarded as no-man's land, re-introduced new sources of conflict that the war had allowed to subside, all of them tied to the issue of land. These include the return of pastoralists and their herds, the return of mechanized farming equipment and the return of people – all of which represent major challenges for the future.

During the war years, large tracts of the region, particularly at the foot of hills or between mountain ranges, became off-limits to pastoralists who feared the SPLA. Pastoralists became fewer and interactions between Nuba and Baggara became less frequent. Traditional migration and transhumance routes were disrupted.

Reciprocal agreements that had governed the passage of herds over agricultural land fell into disuse. In other areas, forcibly displaced Nuba no longer interacted with the nomads. The cease-fire changed all this. Pastoralist groups were increasingly visible, which led to increased local tensions. Many Nuba see the presence of pastoralists as a provocation on the part of the authorities, and express fears that increased pastoralist presence is a cover for the deployment of militia that make up for the withdrawal of Government troops mandated by the cease-fire. Whether these allegations are true or not, conflict dynamics are such that perception is as important as reality. Furthermore, it is undeniable that settled and nomadic populations are once again competing for resources – water, land – that they had lost the habit of sharing. This comes against the backdrop of a decade and a half of bloodshed. It will be difficult to revert to pre-war mechanisms to govern interactions between nomadic and settled communities.

For the past fifteen or so years, the conflict curtailed the expansion of the mechanized schemes in many parts of the region because large tracts of land were not secure enough – from the perspective of potential scheme landlords – to allow the necessary investments to be made. Once again, since the cease-fire, this has changed. Fertile plain areas that were once no-man's-land between the SPLA in the hills and the areas of unchallenged Government control are now safe and open to free circulation. These areas are especially attractive to investors because they are not currently occupied – the communities that once farmed them are still displaced – and are in good ecological shape, having lain fallow for years. Mechanized farming activity is on the rise in areas of existing schemes: in Habila, the acreage under cultivation is increasing, according to local authorities. There are also reports of on-going efforts to introduce mechanized farming in areas where there had been none during the war, such as to the east, west and south-west of Kadugli. The unwelcome return of the tractors triggers concern and anger with local communities, on both sides of the frontlines.

The displacement of rural populations – both within the Nuba Mountains and to areas beyond the region – has been the major humanitarian consequence of the conflict and the associated anti-civilian operations waged by paramilitary groups. Once again, the cease-fire changed some of this. In SPLM/A areas, populations who had sought refuge in the mountains are now venturing further into the plains to farm. Some are moving closer to their original homes, a few even returning to their original homesteads. In government-held areas, some of those who had fled to the North are returning, if not to their homes, to nearby areas where they can rely on kin and prepare for their final return. For the time being, these returns are not causing any problems: numbers are limited, and the extended fallow period imposed by the fighting has allowed the land and forest cover to regenerate, which in turn offers better cultivation, grazing and charcoal and wild-food harvesting opportunities to rural communities. But this will not last: As more people

return, there will be renewed competition for increasingly scarce resources between or even possibly within communities.

These changes show that the cease-fire in the Nuba Mountains has brought about a series of positive developments, and has provided the region of the Nuba Mountains with a better starting point from which to develop peaceful relationships following the permanent cease-fire that is now in effect. But we can also see that many challenges remain.

Where to put 'ethnicity'?

Turning now to the issue of ethnicity and to the question of what role ethnic identities play into this type of situation, I draw on the perspective developed by Fredrik Barth, first in the influential discussion in his 1969 book *Ethnic groups and boundaries* and in later comments on the issue. The basic argument of the book relates to the formation of ethnic groups. Barth took two theoretical postulates, the bounded ethnic group and the tactical management of ethnic identity, and brought them together to show how both are dynamic and subject to modulation according to circumstances. Such circumstances are represented by the existence of significant others and by the actual interactions between the members of various groups. The cultural elements that influence ethnic identities are those that keep groups apart, i.e., they are boundary markers and signals of identity, not essentialized cultural elements of the group in question. Thus group A may signify different things to group B and to group C. Barth sees ethnicity as an aspect of a relationship, not the property of a group. His analytical point is that ethnic groups are relational, that ethnicity is about social organization and cannot be reduced to cultural traits. The ethnic identity appears as a result of processes of interaction in which the criteria for self-ascription and ascription are being established. Since such criteria are not identical to the cultural traits that actually exist within a group, we cannot have any pre-conceived ideas about what they are; they are negotiated in the ethnic process.

Although Barth's contribution was a landmark in ethnic studies I think the ensuing debate has shown that we need to take a few steps beyond those that he suggested in 1969. One modification is that we need a sociology of ethnicity, as well as studies of its consciousness. We need to understand both the construction of the social person as well as of the self (Cohen 1994). Secondly, we also need a clearer view of the role of the state in the establishment of ethnic identities.

Responding to some of this criticism in 1994, Barth suggested that we should approach the modeling of the ethnic process on three different levels. The first was a micro-level analysis, in which we see personal identities established on the basis of the specific experiences of individuals. Such experiences may differ be-

tween generations and the sexes, but also more randomly as an effect of the different choices that individuals make in the course of their lives. What is important is that these experiences, whatever they are, become resources for ethnic processes. They shape people's understanding of themselves, of who they are and who others are, thus in a very basic way affecting how they understand the world around them. This is important in understanding how various stereotypes develop and give further shape to such understandings. Barth also argues for the continued importance of a middle-level analysis of ethnic groups, ethnic associations, etc., i.e. the level on which so much of the ethnicity debate has focused. This is the level of ethnic politics and organizations, of the entrepreneurship of leadership, of rhetorical strategies and of stereotypes set in motion. The macrolevel includes the state, religious groups and others who operate within the state sphere and hence also, the international arena. Barth's interest is in seeing the state as an actor, with interests to pursue to maintain state control, but at the same time being constrained by an increasingly globalized international arena characterized by a multitude of actors.

Following this general outline I further explore how we can set about analyzing ethnic processes in the Nuba Mountains. In a recent paper (Barth 2000), Barth has developed certain views on how to deal with the fact that individual experiences must be part of any understanding of the ethnic boundary-making process. The context of Barth's argument is of course his influential approach to the study of ethnicity, and whether ethnic identity is in constant flux that depends on what goes on at the ethnic boundary, or whether there are essential features of that identity that must be included in order to talk about *ethnic* identities at all? Rather than turning this into an instrumentalist versus primordialist debate, in this paper he shifts the discussion to a more basic level, the level of human boundary maintenance in general. Not only on the level of ethnic groups, but on the level of persons, nations, and so on.

The function and significance of boundaries may vary among cultures, and at this basic level some (referring to the Basseri and the Baktaman) are not particularly focused on boundaries at all. And even if there are boundaries, they may not merely keep people apart; there may be significant social engagement across boundaries. Social practice thus provides a template for the indigenous conceptualization of social boundaries. Barth argues that fundamental to the socializing and educative competence of such practice is personal experience of bodily boundaries. And as with groups, individuals experience this differently. But in both cases, they extend themselves into the world through the webs of their relationships, economic activities and inscriptions of themselves on the landscape.

In order to capture these processes, Barth argues strongly for a differentiation between cognitive categories, which tend to be definitive, and lived experience, which tends to be murky. To develop the cognitive implications of this way of thinking Barth refers to the contributions of Lakoff and Johnson. Lakoff, for

instance, argues that our basic concepts and categories are closely linked to our experiences as living and functioning human beings in an environment. They are not constructed in Aristotelian fashion as arbitrary symbols that take their meaning from their correspondence with objects that exist in the real world, and that are defined by distinctive properties. Instead, our concepts build on three kinds of perceptual source: a) our capacity for gestalt perception of part-whole configurations, b) our experience of bodily movement in space, and c) our ability to form rich mental images of perceived objects in the world (Lakoff 1987, 269ff.). From these we build kinesthetic image schemas, i.e., patterns that constantly recur in our everyday bodily experience. From such prototypes, our basic-level conceptual categories are enriched and fleshed out through experiences, and include similar experiences. The kinesthetic image schemas emerge as generalizations, schemas, of what are experienced and repeated as compelling connections. Then they are extended by metaphorical mapping and serve as instruments of reasoning and comprehension.

Categories thus structure and order the world for us and allow massive cognitive, social and political simplification. But the important point here, argues Barth, is that the use of metaphor does not come from logical necessity but as a *source of motivation*. And in situations of shared realities, where people are locked into a social organization of vested interests and mutual controls, there will be positive encouragement for cognitive assent and agreement with the others who share those interests, and sanctions will be brought to bear against those who breach this process. People are not acting out integrated structures, but each of them is an individual locus of reasoning and construction.

Linking this type of argument to the situation in the Nuba Mountains, I believe that one promising avenue might be to see such processes in terms of a 'politics of subjectivity'. Subjectivity always presupposes inter-subjectivity, and we need to write the history of such inter-subjectivity, which will require a combination of the personal, the political, the economic and the moral. The development of subjectivities can be seen as taking place on three levels: it is a political process insofar as it is a matter of subjugation to state authorities with very different rules of the political game; it is moral, as it is reflected in the conscience and agency of citizens who have rights, duties and obligations; and it is realized existentially, in citizens' consciousness of their personal relations. Michael Lambek puts it well: "In assuming responsibility and rendering themselves subject to specific liturgical, political and discursive regimes and orders, people simultaneously lay claim to and accept the terms through which their subsequent acts will be judged. People are agents insofar as they choose to subject themselves, to perform and conform accordingly, to accept responsibility, and to acknowledge their commitments. Agency here transcends the idea of a lone, heroic individual independent of her acts and conscious of them as objects" (2002, 37f.).

It is easy to see that Islam is part of the conflict in the area and also that there is a tendency among some Nuba to forge identities in opposition to this oppressive form of political Islam. Hence, the struggle takes on the form of Muslims versus non-Muslims, and in the case of the Nuba, Muslim equals Arab, and non-Muslim equals African. But once again, these are constructed differences, not essential ones. Let us look at the category 'Muslim'. At all times there has been disagreement within Islam about what it means to be a Muslim and the fact that some of these disagreements enter the political field from time to time should not surprise us. Certainly it is of interest to analyze cases of 'political Islam', but I also feel that we should not only look at Muslim politicians, but pay more attention to how 'ordinary' Muslims themselves argue concerning this issue, not only within the field of political Islam, but in everyday discourses about what is right and wrong, what is appropriate behavior, etc. Although less spectacular than *fatwa*s about jihad, such mundane issues nevertheless open up the possibility of understanding how Muslims themselves experience their religion. Such a perspective will of course show us that the problem of defining who is a Muslim in the Nuba Mountains in no way started with the Muslim Brotherhood's takeover of state power in Sudan in 1989.

To illustrate: while doing fieldwork in the late 1970s and early 1980s (see Manger 1994) among the Lafofa Nuba in Liri I was struck by how people presented themselves as being Muslims. Any Lafofa would claim to be Muslim, but there was no agreement among people that their neighbors actually deserved that label. Older people would talk about the old way of life that they had long since left, when they went without clothes and when they kept pigs. But today they claim to be Muslims although they still treasure the memory of those bygone days. Younger men argued forcefully that their elders were still holding on to pre-Islamic customs, that they were ignorant, and that they did not understand the modern world. Talking to groups of Arabs in Liri, they would recognize scarcely any Lafofa as a Muslim. They recognized the fact that some of the young people were trying to leave their old ways and become Muslims, but few of them were known to pray and even fewer were fasting.

This evident difficulty in agreeing on who is a Muslim, and what it entails to be one, is not something peculiar to the Lafofa and the southern Nuba Mountains. In most Muslim areas there are constant debates over what is Islam proper and what is not, what behavior is derived from proper Islamic principles and what is derived from other sources. What is special in this case is that the Lafofa, as a Nuba group, is a non-Arab, non-Islamic people among whom the process of conversion is a contemporary phenomenon. The debates in Liri are thus not only between different Islamic traditions, but between an Islamic tradition and a non-Islamic, 'tribal' one. But such a discussion cannot focus on religion in isolation. The way in which the Lafofa participate in this discourse is not an isolated process of religious conversion, but is fundamentally a product of a people adapting to

the realities of the day. The discussion must therefore deal with wider *social iden-tities*. As we have outlined above, the determination of personal identity has always been an issue in the Nuba Mountains. As a frontier region with a history of slave hunting, of exploitation of ivory and gold, and as part of the battlefield between earlier savannah states, there has always been a high rate of movement and resettlement, and of new groups coming together. The establishment of personal identity within broader categories such as Nuba-Arab, slave-freeman, Muslim-non-Muslim has always been of importance. A single-minded focus on religion alone would be as problematic as that on ethnicity and race.

But, as general history as well as more recent events in the Nuba Mountains show, such processes are not only characterized by a 'voluntary rendering'. Violence may well be a basic part of the process of the politics of subjectivity. In the Nuba Mountains, the result of the dynamics of the three levels is a movement away from peaceful co-existence, in which people acknowledge that various sorts of political and moral ambiguities, ambivalences and uncertainties are a normal state of affairs in such a transition zone, to one in which dichotomies based on claims to cultural authenticity dominate. In such a process, mutual respect and ethical rules constraining aggression may become transformed into violent inter-ethnic conflicts. The political dynamics represented by the civil war strengthen these processes and help establish new boundaries between peoples. A few examples serve to illustrate this point. First, parts of the Nuba Mountains areas are administered by GoS, other parts by SPLM/A, and their two systems of government have very different levels of involvement of local people, thus creating differences between members of the same adaptive and ethnic groups. Furthermore, as SPLM/A is suggesting a Western-based educational system based on the English language, whereas GoS favors a Muslim-oriented curriculum, plans in the educational sector will have a long-term effect on new generations; thirdly, the parties disagree about how the land resources of the area are to be developed, with GoS encouraging private investors from outside, while SPLM/A argues the case of local people, two strategies that will have important repercussions, as land, land use and land tenure also relate to social institutions as well as having cosmo-logical dimensions related to land, fertility and ancestry. Finally, a cease-fire and an international control force are in place in the area and can provide a platform for further humanitarian interventions and the beginning of general reconstruc-tion and development, a fact that also brings international actors such as the UN and various NGOs actively into the picture. This international involvement may help break down boundaries, but it may also help to strengthen the divisive ten-dencies through their political 'pragmatism' of accepting the rules of the game set up by the warring parties in order to be able to operate at all.

Nuba identity politics

In the discussion earlier in the paper, I claimed that the issue of marginalized groups represents a larger, national issue in Sudan. The issue is one of citizenship, and includes the challenge of how to compose a Sudanese national identity, in which not only Arabs and Muslims but also non-Arabs and non-Muslims can feel at home. Reading the available literature on Sudanese history and society, it is easy to be struck by the extent to which the processes of Arabization and Islamization have been taken for granted in the history of that country. One basic assumption among Sudanese elites seems to be that this wave of socio-cultural change is a natural process, and that it rolls on by virtue of historical necessity from the 'centers' in the Nile Valley towards the 'peripheries' in eastern, western and southern Sudan. It thus follows that it is only a matter of time before the whole country will be Arabized and Islamized. One tragic effect of such assumptions is that the political realities behind this spread of Arabism and Islam have not been dealt with in Sudanese politics. The problem is not one that can be ascribed solely to the current regime and this civil war. Obviously the Islamists in Khartoum go further in expressing their intentions towards Arabization and Islamization than earlier regimes and they make no secret of their views of people not belonging to this type of identity. The policies of the present regime thus dramatize the issue of race in Sudanese politics. But the issue of defining and constructing a Sudanese identity will not go away under this regime, and unless it is solved the future of Sudan looks bleak indeed.

This type of problem is also seen when we look at the various attempts at political and ethnic organization among the Nuba. Such attempts indicate that the Nuba themselves see different answers to this question. For many years, the General Union of the Nuba Mountains (GUN) headed by Father Philip Abbas Ghaboush, a Christian, and Mahmoud Hazeeb, a Muslim, was the only Nuba political organization, and it is interesting to examine its basic political orientation. GUN was based on a regional idea of securing Nuba resources for the Nuba people, i.e. it focused on the lack of development of this particular region, and clearly organized its supporters around a claim for territory. This strategy also meant that GUN sought to include Arab groups from the same region.

In the early 1970s a new organization called KOMOLO was set up by Yusif Kuwa Mekki. This youth organization took a more racial stance, and worked explicitly for Nuba issues, first through government organizations, but later in opposition to the same government. Yusif Kuwa joined the SPLA in 1984, established the New Kust Division in 1989 and, until his death in March 2001, was the SPLA commander in charge of the liberated areas in the Nuba Mountains. In 1985 Philip Ghaboush formed the Sudan National Party (SNP) and took his party into alliance with parties from southern Sudan. In addition to local Nuba, support for the party came primarily from Nuba migrants in Sudanese cities such

as Khartoum and Port Sudan. GUN has continued and is now more influenced by younger Nuba intellectuals and trade unions. However, as these political organizations developed, the Umma government of Sadiq al-Mahdi encouraged the arming of Baqqara Arabs, and made them form the militias (*Murahilin*) that spread terror among Nuba and Southern Sudanese groups just south of the border. This brought the SPLA, in alliance with KOMOLO, into the mountains, and by the end of the war they controlled sizeable areas in the central parts of the mountains, developing a civil administration in 1992, with a South Kordofan Advisory Council and village councils, and focusing on health, education, relief, and farming. The National Islamic Front (NIF) government declared jihad in the area in 1992, developing a mixed strategy, with military initiatives and the uprooting of people to Peace Villages (*dar al salaam*), and low-intensity warfare called 'combing' (*tamshit*), but also making attempts to recruit prominent Nuba (Peace from Within, *salaam min al dakhal*) and mobilization of pro-Nuba (*nafir al shabi*).

This particular 'climate' in the Nuba Mountains of course gives the Nuba struggle a distinct characteristic. But it also shows that people have several alternatives as to whom they want to support politically, depending on their interests and opinions. The 1990s also brought a new dimension into the struggle; that of the rapidly growing Sudanese diaspora. Throughout this diaspora we have also seen the mushrooming of various Nuba organizations such as Nuba Mountains Solidarity Abroad and Nuba Survival in London, and Nuba Relief, Rehabilitation and Development Society in Nairobi, the emergence of newsletters like *Nafir* and later *The Nuba Vision* in London, and the various positions in the Nuba struggle being presented in Western fora such as the House of Lords in the UK Parliament. In this process we also find Western organizations, primarily NGOs (such as Africa Watch) providing information on atrocities and also engaging themselves in solidarity efforts.

A quick look at issues being raised in *Nafir* seems to support my main points. The topics are by no means new: 'What is Slavery?', 'Agriculture in the Nuba Mountains', 'The Question of Land', 'Nuba Songs', 'Nuba Culture', to mention just a few headlines. But there are also stories about the new NGOs operating in the area, and pieces written by representatives of such organizations. My point is not that this is wrong; on the contrary, I support most of what I see. My point is that the dynamics provided by contemporary developments in the Nuba Mountains are similar to those of many other situations in regions and among people who take up the struggle against oppressive power-holders. The discourse of resistance is taken into international arenas, and the utilization of modern media provides new flows of information. The process is complex, and cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy of state vs. society, or state vs. civil society. Rather than look for neat categories, I believe that what we can expect to find are groups and actors that are neither 'state' nor 'society', but are linked together in net-

works in which resources, people and ideas travel. Today, some of those networks are global in scope. We are all participants in this game. Not only development economists and planners from multilateral institutions like the World Bank, bilateral donor countries, or national governments, but also the Western press contributes, as do Western academics such as myself. But so do local Africans, politicians and activists alike, often in alliance with NGOs. This is so because what goes on is part of the effects of the general process of 'globalization', in which we are witnessing an interaction not so much based on 'real-world events' as on a constant battle between different discourses of interpretation and explanation. This puts us squarely back in the realm of the social and economic power wielded by the various actors involved, and their ability to shape the discourse.

I stress this point because I perceive a tendency in the way the Nuba are being portrayed in various 'centers of resistance' in Europe and the USA to privilege a certain type of Nuba. The hegemonic view in the contemporary discourse on the Nuba is one based on the Nuba of the Central Mountains, of the areas liberated by SPLA. They are not the southern areas in which I have done most of my work. In those areas, around Talodi, Liri and Kalogi people are 'Islamized', 'Arabized' and 'Sudanized' to a degree that bears little resemblance to the Nuba as portrayed in newsletters like *Nafir*. Furthermore, they are living in Government territory, which means that they are under very different types of civil administrations than that of the Central Mountains. Politically, they have been dominated by the commercial groups and political alliances built around the Talodi Arabs, who have been supporters of the Umma through their late political leader Gemr Hussein. One may argue that this situation is a fact, and there is nothing one can do about it. My concern is about the future effect of these processes on the possibility of building a peaceful society throughout the Nuba Mountains region. This is not to say that I do not support the struggle of the Nuba, but I must also confess a certain worry that if the Nuba succeed in achieving self-determination based on an understanding that: "The Nuba live in a well-defined territory called the Nuba Mountains, which was a separate province during the British rule in Sudan with its own administration and its capital at Talodi until amalgamated in 1929, during the British rule, into the larger Kordofan" (*Nafir*, Vol. 6, No. 3, December 2000), we might get a few surprises. Such an understanding, which of course is historically correct in the sense that there actually was such a province, hides many of the problems of any future settlement of what place the Nuba Mountains region should be given in a future settlement in Sudan. One problem that the statement under-communicates is the heterogeneity of the Nuba themselves. Another is the existence of other, non-Nuba groups in the region. A focus on ethnicity and race alone may hide the fact that many of the groups share a common predicament, and that alliances should be sought across ethnic boundaries.

The importance of the state

We also need to take into consideration the contemporary importance of the nation state as a distributor of resources of importance to the population, and to look closely at how groups and individuals operate in order to obtain access to what they want from the state. Vederey (1994) opened up a similar avenue relating to the existence of the state, arguing that ethnicity is a product of state-making, that national identity is not based on ethnic identity, but rather that the first generates the second. Thus, one result of the history of colonialism and nationalism in different areas was the formation of new ethnic identities. Here, we are approaching Foucault and his perspective on the role of the state and the creation of modern subjects through practices of state power. To cover this aspect of ethnicity, says Vederey, we need a historical perspective, perspectives of political science and historical sociology, indeed all types of perspectives from which anthropology has moved away (e.g. Roosen 1989). We need to look at the historical processes that produce particular forms, and also at what forces of differentiation and homogenization are in operation.

Where the situation in the Nuba Mountains is concerned, an important problem relates to how we can understand the direction of change, and at what level of social life such changes occur. One concept that is used in discussions of processes of the kind with which we are dealing is that of assimilation. As described above, the Lafofa would be an example of such a process of assimilation, in which people try to *become* similar to the majority way of life, in order to be *treated* as equals. But the use of assimilation lumps together many processes and confuses local borrowing between groups with the force of those integrative processes that are supported by society in general, including the state itself. To my mind, the processes of Arabization and Islamization, and the contemporary one that Doornbos (1984) labeled 'Sudanization', are of a different nature than local borrowing between groups.

This brings us squarely back to the role played by the Sudanese state in its dealings with various peripheral groups, particularly blacks, who are regarded as not being proper Muslims, and as Africans rather than Arabs. The political tensions inherent in these issues surfaced in Sudanese politics in 1982 with President Nimeiri's introduction of the September Laws, giving Islamic sharia law dominant status in the Sudanese legal system, also within the realm of criminal law (*hudud*). Seen from within Sudan it was obvious from the beginning that this was a political move, meant to boost the president's weakened position. This was further strengthened through a peace settlement that was also organized along such lines of group identity, giving the Muslim Brothers a central political role. However, the effects were devastating. It not only ended the era of optimism prevalent in the 1970s, but resulted, as we know, in the political turmoil that swept Nimeiri's regime away and in a civil war that might have torn the country apart. An impor-

tant element of the conflict is the definition of the Sudanese identity, and the application of sharia law dramatized to the people of Southern Sudan, as well as northern groups such as the Nuba, the fact that their identity was at stake and that their position as equal citizens in their own country was far from secure.

However, this problem did not originate in 1982. The 18th and 19th centuries were periods when there was active pursuit of slave populations. British colonial policy aimed to isolate the African populations from Arab and Muslim influence. This policy was based on positive discrimination, but served as a stumbling block for later attempts at integration. The 1960s saw attempts by various regional groups (Beja, Nuba, Fur, as well as southern groups) to create political organizations that could further their interests in the new national center and counter the dominant position of the national parties, the Umma and DUP. With Nimeiri's takeover in 1969, such organized political forces were abolished. They were replaced by the Sudanese Socialist Union, a party and a national force intended to bridge tribal and regional differences. The success in ending the civil war in 1972 and the ambitious development strategies of the 1970s actually provided considerable optimism. However, no real integration took place and the old elites remained dominant in Sudanese politics. And old attitudes did not go away easily. My point is well demonstrated by a quote from Mansour Khalid, a key member of Nimeiri's regime from 1969 to 1978, who writes in his book *The Government They Deserve: The Role of the Elite in Sudan's Political Evolution*: "In the closed circles of northern Sudan there is a series of unprintable slurs for Sudanese of non-Arab stock, all reflective of semi-concealed prejudice" (1976, 135).

Obviously, the solution to this problem does not lie in a policy based on the continued assimilation of groups such as the Nuba into the majority culture. But this does not mean that all integration is bad. If interaction is to increase, there must obviously be some shared understanding, such as a common language, certain agreed 'ground-rules', etc. If such a 'civic' type of integration is allowed to develop there might be some hope of holding Sudanese communities together. What the Sudanese will discover at that point is something they already know from centuries of living together; that it is surprising how little we have to share in order for interaction to develop. The political challenge then is to provide space for people as *subjects*, not as *objects* to be formed in the image of a majority culture. Which brings us back to where we started, with the individual as the key starting point for any understanding of ethnic processes.

Towards some conclusions

This paper has explored a situation in which a civil war such as the one in Sudan has been conceived of as a conflict between ethnic and religious groups. By focus-

ing on the Nuba Mountains in particular we see that this type of perspective easily presents the ethnic groups themselves as solid entities and they are presented as 'actors' in their own right. This is further strengthened through a peace settlement that is also organized along such lines of group identity, channeling resources and access to the political systems through negotiated systems based on belonging to such perceived 'groups'.

This paper has challenged this type of 'groupism'. When we look at the Nuba Mountains we clearly see various processes at play, relating to ethnicity, race, nationalism, ethnic violence, identity, collective memory, migration, assimilation and the nation-state. But, summarizing the central argument that I have tried to put forward, it is my opinion that although many of these terms make us think about 'groups', we need to focus on categories, schemas, encounters, identifications, stories, institutions, organizations, networks and events. That is to say, ethnic groups must be seen as 'things in the making'.

To substantiate my position, the paper refers to the various political discourses that have evolved from the complex situation in the Nuba Mountains. A complex history, a complex man-land relationship, a complex ethnic picture with Arabs and Nuba, a complex religious picture with Muslims and Christians and traditional Nuba religions, and a long civil war have all contributed to producing a series of discourses that must be analyzed. Through the analysis of some such discourses, from a 'Nuba' perspective, from an 'Arab' perspective, and as discourses in a religious field of 'Muslims' and 'Christians', I have tried to show that the realities behind such labels are not 'things in the world' but rather 'perspectives on the world', i.e. they are ways of seeing and ways of interpretation more than they are 'facts'.

Such a perspective does not mean that ethnicity is not real, nor that groups organized on the basis of ethnicity do not exist. Rather, the point is that such groups are not 'facts' but rather 'events' and something that 'happens' (Brubaker 2004). Hence, we must study group-making as process, including the games of production of meaning and of processes of metaphorization that go into its legitimization.

It is true that in the Nuba Mountains we see a situation in which groups labeled as Nuba and as Arabs, as Christians and as Muslims have been through a civil war. But it is also necessary to make this picture more nuanced. First of all, in the Nuba Mountains it is not so much the ethnic groups that are organized, as the protagonists themselves, the Government of Sudan and its opponent the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. Through these organizations, and the war machines at their disposal, people have been forced to choose sides and to 'appear' as one or the other of the available identities. Rhetoric has been heated on all sides, with claims to speak for larger groups of 'Nuba', 'pure Nuba', 'Arab', etc.

Such processes are very real and have certainly had profound effects on the ground. But such effects cannot be conceived of as realities involving complete groups. Rather, we are dealing with categories, processes and relations. And what we need to explain are the ways in which people and organizations do things with these categories and how they thereby channel specific effects, for instance on the relationship between members of so-called ethnic groups.

I also include issues of identity in this perspective. Rather than thinking of fixed identities we need to look at the processes of identification. Once again, through new processes such as the civil war, new collective identities might develop and form the basis of new beliefs among people about who they are, which might in turn lead to very real 'group' consequences. But what we want to understand is the underlying process, rather than merely to accept the result as a de-contextualized 'fact'.

In the Nuba Mountains region the directions taken by processes of this sort have been deeply affected by the civil war, which means that violence itself becomes a factor. Fears and threats are being constructed through narratives and cultural representations of 'the Other', demonizing various groups in the process. Obviously this will affect the process of reconstruction after the war. This brings us to the current situation.

With the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of January 2005 this situation is now part of the political reality in the Sudan and must be dealt with in the process of nation-building. I do not know where these debates will take us, nor do I know in which direction the future of the Nuba Mountains will develop. However, on the ground, among the people who are still in their home areas, members of the various Nuba groups will have to deal with their predicament themselves, both as groups and as individuals. In the midst of all the unrest there is an ongoing process of defining and redefining what culture and ethnicity is all about, creating new types of solidarity between people and building a new sense of community. The issue is not so much one of realizing that this is the case as of understanding how some versions of reality win over and replace other possible versions in these processes of transformation. Such processes must be acknowledged, also in the political realm, because they will certainly affect the realism of any future political settlement. In this context it is important to differentiate between the Central Mountains, in which relatively large groups of Nuba control their territories, and the southern areas where many different ethnic groups are living together and where the dynamics of the local situation are quite different from those of the Central Mountains. At this moment, however, they belong together in a Nuba Mountains region, and the fate of this re-merger will be decided by the ways in which the various 'world views' that are currently being developed actually coalesce and are allowed to express themselves.

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