

# Is the Sudan conflict best understood in terms of race, religion, or regionalism?

Written by Richard J. Vale

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The extensive literature on the Sudan places great emphasis on the regional North-South divide, the racial divide between Arabs and Africans, and the many religious divisions created as a consequence of the confrontation between Islam, Christianity and 'traditional religions'. This essay will take these three broad divisions as starting points to understand and situate the Sudan conflict within an anthropological context of identity formation in times of longstanding violence and confrontation. It will be proposed that both the enormous diversity within Sudan in combination with the lack of a specifically and substantial "Sudanese" identity accounts for the prevalence of conflict. This absence of a widely accepted and omnipresent state identity also offers explains how identity is formed in relation to hegemony: no matter what arguments are put forward to the contrary, the Sudanese state, or lack thereof, constitutes a hegemonic regime and such hegemony plays an enormous role in identity formation, even in times of conflict and civil war when parts of the population actively defend their identities.

### Introduction

The Sudanese civil war (or wars, depending on the particular stance adopted) is widely regarded as one of the most complex instances of intra-state violence to date. Indeed, Yokwe goes so far as to assert that '[t]he Sudan case is rather unique and more intricate than the rest of the African countries in similar situations'[1] whilst others throw around the heavily-loaded term "genocide"[2], with the International Criminal Court officially charging Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir with three counts of genocide in Darfur on 12<sup>th</sup> July of this year.[3] Nevertheless, while scholars remain divided in their exact opinions, sufficient consensus exists among them to suggest that the vast and numerous differences within its population are among the root causes of the conflict in the Sudan.[4] As one non-governmental organisation has concluded after extensive research and fieldwork, 'divided by geography, culture, race, ethnicity and religion, Sudan is the world's foremost example of a seemingly intractable and endless civil war.'[5]

Of these divisions, the exhaustive literature on the Sudan places particular emphasis on the regional North-South divide, the racial divide between Arabs and Africans, and the many religious divisions created as a consequence of the confrontation between Islam, Christianity and what Falola[6] and Prah[7] term 'traditional religions'. It is these divisions that lay at the crux of the conflict. Certainly within these three categories there is an abundance of intricacies and complex inter-relations to be explored, yet to ensure a focussed and pervasive analysis this essay will take these three broad divisions as isolated starting points in order to understand and the Sudan conflict; the aim is to examine the impact such divisions has on the role on identity formation and how the identities formed in such a fractured community ultimately lead to violence and conflict. This will, in turn, allow for discussion and assessment of the role played by hegemony and subordination in identity formation so that a holistic picture of the Sudan conflict begins to emerge.

For the sake of simplicity it would be tempting to conclude that simply highlighting the above internal divisions provides a sufficient understanding for the instigation of violence in the Sudan, especially when contrasted to the view held by many South Koreans that '[i]n many ways, [...] homogeneity is one of Korea's greatest strengths. Shared values create harmony [...] It is the cornerstone that has helped Korea survive adversity.'[8] In light of a lack

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of social, cultural, religious, and racial homogeneity, then, it should come as no surprise that the Sudan is embroiled in civil war and thus the beginnings of the conflict can be forgotten to focus on more important matters such as ending the conflict. However, to merely outline the divisions without properly understanding them is ultimately useless and so it is the purpose of this essay to delve into some of the internal divisions of the Sudan so that we may truly understand the conflict; only then will people be able to contemplate bringing the war to a suitable and complete end.

Furthermore, as alluded to above, the prevalence of diversity alone fails to account entirely for the unique situation that has existed in the Sudan for so long; we need only look to such countries as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada in which the rather broadly-termed “multiculturalism” and more aptly-named “ethnic diversity” contribute to a degree of societal stability not seen in the Sudan, or Germany where regional diversity is ‘deeply ingrained’ as is ‘the line between the Northern Protestant and Southern Catholic traditions’[9]. Here some commentators might contend that in order to attain cohesion and stability a highly diverse country such as the Sudan requires a degree of economic development on a par with Western nations, or even sufficient living space for the different societal groups to form their own satellite communities within geographically large states (since over half the population of Sudan lives in just 15 percent of the land due to water shortages[10]). Such an argument, however, overlooks the existence of small, non-Western states such as the Philippines and Mauritius in which multiculturalism is celebrated and institutionalised. There is clearly more to the Sudan conflict than a diverse, economically-deprived population forced into relatively close living conditions.

What, then, has led scholars such as Gadir Ali to conclude that ‘[t]he civil war in the Sudan was inevitable’[11] and Prah to ask ‘[w]hy has the Sudan conflict so far eluded substantial peace?’[12] Here it will be proposed that it is both the enormous diversity within the Sudan in combination with the lack of a specifically and substantial “Sudanese” identity which accounts for the intense prevalence of conflict; the absence of a single strand of state identity which runs through every individual and collective in the Sudan means that these different individuals and groups are able to view themselves as remote ‘little islands of sociality’[13] in a vast ocean brimming with alien cultures and “others”. Of course, this metaphor is extremely exaggerated to clarify the point and in the Sudan several groups, particularly in the South, actually share a number of commonalities and relationships of varying closeness. However, the fact remains that the many differences and idiosyncrasies existing between the Sudan’s diverse population have been exacerbated to the point of intra-state conflict because there is no single conception of state identity to establish even the slightest semblance of unity and likeness among Sudan’s population; the different religious, racial and regional groups within the Sudan fear and fight one another because there is no plane of existence on which everyone recognises everyone else as a member of the same state and an equal. It might even be contested that the Sudan is hardly a state at all and is, in fact, a series of muddled groups thrown together in an attempt to mould the Afro-Arab region into the Western, state-centric conception of statehood.

Not only does this absence of a widely accepted and omnipresent state identity explain the unyielding nature of civil war in the Sudan, but it also offers an account of how both individual and group identities are formed in relation to hegemony. Nagengast asserts that:

‘The ideal state is one in which the illusion of a single nation-state is created and maintained and in which resistance is managed so that profound social upheaval, separatist activity, revolution, and *coups d’état* are unthinkable for most people most of the time.’[14]

Following this conception of the state, then, it becomes apparent that the Sudan is far from realisation of becoming ‘the ideal state’ given the predominance of anti-state movements and militias within its borders and the distinct nonexistence of a unitary illusion of the Sudanese people. Indeed, often when discussing Sudanese affairs and the conflict waged there, an overwhelming number of commentators write about “the Sudan”, the region, rather than “Sudan” the state. Although one should be wary of his personal motives in saying so since he is advocating the secession of southern Sudan from the North, one prominent South Sudanese politician has gone so far as to suggest that:

‘There is nothing in common between the various sections of the community; no body of shared beliefs, no identity of

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interests, no local signs of unity and above all, the Sudan has failed to compose a single community.’[15]

Rolandsen rather more objectively claims that there ‘is little binding the country together but the shared history of colonial rule.’[16]

However, even though one might argue that the Sudan does not function as a state and does not enjoy the allegiance of the vast majority of people resident within its territorial borders, that is not to say that the continuing presence of some semblance of a central authority (what one might call “the Sudanese state”) has not played a role in forming the identities of its would-be people; as Gerd Baumann notes, neither the attempts to establish a Sudanese state nor the identities of the individuals and groups who live in the Sudan are formed in a vacuum with a complete lack of awareness of, or relations with, the other – ‘there must always be room for “alterity” – for some sort of relation to the Other – in order to keep the specificity of a group’s own identity alive.’[17] In other words, the central Sudanese authority justifies its identity and existence in reference to the people within its borders, just as the many different groups within the Sudanese border shape and define their identities in reference to the central authority. Therefore, it is axiomatic that the central Sudanese authority, no matter how unpopular or unrepresentative, should influence identity formation. Taking initiative from the ideas expressed in the works of both Filip De Boeck and Sherry Ortner, particular emphasis will be played to two complementary trends: firstly, how, no matter what arguments are put forward to the contrary, the Sudanese state, or lack thereof, constitutes a hegemonic regime and, secondly, how such hegemony plays an enormous role in identity formation even in times of conflict and civil war when parts of the population are actively and hostilely resisting any such imposition upon their identities by the offending hegemony.

## Religion

‘The dominant feature of our nation is an Islamic one and its overpowering expression is Arab, and this nation will have entity identified and its prestige and pride preserved under an Islamic revival.’[18]

In view of such vehement declarations by members of the Sudan’s political élite, it is hardly difficult to understand why journalists have noted that ‘[i]t’s hard to discuss Sudan’s civil war without accounting for the role that Islam played in the conflict.’[19] It seems that the Muslims are determined to rule the region an entirely Islamic one. Indeed, it is difficult to locate an academic work on the Sudanese conflict which does not lend credence to the argument that a religious schism is, partially or wholly, responsible for the intra-state violence.[20] However, along what lines that schism is drawn is often contested; some point to a “clash of civilizations” between Islam in the North and Christianity in the South, whereas others broaden their analysis to include ‘traditional’ or indigenous religions (sometimes incorrectly grouped together as ‘pagan’ or ‘animist’[21]) situated in southern Sudan as well. Nevertheless, wherever the line is drawn, the division among the different religions present within the Sudan is an apparently irreconcilable one and one which demonstrates the intense threat posed to the Sudan’s minority identities. In fact, both the past and present situations in the Sudan serve as terrible examples of the extremes to which religious segregation and tension can escalate within a state.

Geschiere writes that religion ‘plays a front-stage role’ in the ‘quest for belonging’[22] and it can be concluded that this is because religion allows an individual to locate themselves within a collection of beliefs, rituals, customs, dialogues and even hierarchy and this placing of one’s self within an established order begins to mould and shape one’s identity. Moreover, locating one’s self within a religion enables individuals to identify themselves with likeminded others and this association with those with whom an individual shares beliefs, in turn roots one’s identity in a partially-homogenous group and helps affirm an individual’s sense of the self. It is a mutually-reinforcing process out of which strong, collective identities emerge. In the Sudan in particular, religion has proved particularly significant in identity formation, as ‘Abd Al-Rahim notes:

‘Until at least the beginning of this century, the “Sudanese” identified themselves as members of different tribes and sub-tribes, adherents to various *Tariqas* or religious fraternities, belong to this or that religion of the country, and (especially the Northern Sudanese, when thinking of wider affiliation) as Muslim and/or Arab people. But they never thought of themselves as “Sudanese”, unless they happened to belong to what were regarded as the less sophisticated, non-Islamized and non-Arabized section of the population.’[23]

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Therefore, as noted in the introduction, with the absence of a profound and overarching “Sudanese” identity crystallising the identities of the Sudan’s population around religion, a clearer picture begins to emerge of how threats to the religious *status quo*, and the existence of a significant number of others who are just as attached to their different religious beliefs as an individual is to their own, can lead to friction, division, and even outright opposition; as history has taught us, knowledge of other sections of the population who worship in a manner very different from yourself and knowledge of those who claim the existence of an almighty entity or entities different to the one with whom you identify can breed caution, suspicion, fear and intolerance.

This is especially true of the Sudan where the two predominant religions, Islam and Christianity, have been involved in zealous crusades to convert non-believers and infidels in the past; within both religions there exists, to a debatable extent, what Lynch calls ‘the exclusivist position’ which ‘argues in favor [*sic*] of the superiority of one’s own system of belief as well as the right to propagate it as widely as possible’[24]. The effects of having two exclusivist religions vying for influence and supremacy in an area have been closely examined by Falola, who concludes that:

‘In countries where Islam and Christianity compete, as in the case of the Sudan and Nigeria, the problems of stability and identity have been compounded by rivalries for religious ascendancy, resulting in the desire for religious control or even the turning of the state into a theocracy and imposing a religious ideology [...] In cases where indigenous religions are closely bound up with communal lives, the opposition by Islam and Christianity has also meant an attack on local custom and culture.’[25]

What Falola makes clear, then, is that as Muslims and Christians battle for the reins of power in the Sudan, they tyrannise and attack one another and the intensity of this constant battle makes Muslims and Christians more determined to not back down and so more attached to their respective religious identities.

Here it is extremely important to highlight that the religious competition in the Sudan is far from evenly matched; not only are indigenous religions caught in the clash between Islam and Christianity, but they are notably less aggressive in their seeking to convert others.[26] Furthermore, it is estimated that around 70 per cent of the population is Muslim, with most living in the northern two-thirds of the Sudan, with Christians and those who practice traditional religions accounting for the remaining 30 per cent.[27] With Islam possessing the aforementioned ‘exclusivist’ characteristics, as well as constituting an enormous majority in the Sudan, it is little wonder that non-Muslims feel under threat. They are right to do so. ‘Dr. Hassan Turabi [...], leader of the present National Islamic Front (NIF), argued that the south had no culture and so this vacuum would necessarily be filled by Arab culture under an Islamic revival’[28] and it was this coercive, so-called Islamic revival that led to the introduction of a great quantity of quasi-colonial, repressive policies being imposed in the South under General Abbud’s programme of Islamification between 1958 and 1964.[29] These policies included: flooding schools with Arab history, story and religious books; forcing teachers and pupils to wear the jaballia whilst in school; compelling government workers to become Muslim; building mosques in southern, predominantly non-Muslim towns and villages; making Friday the new day of rest, thus forcing the Christian minority to attend work on Sundays, their own day of worship. In addition to this, the imposition of Sharia Law across the South created a clear hierarchy, with Muslims at the top, followed by Christians, with the remaining “infidels” at the very bottom.

This unique situation has shaped identity in a number of ways, ways which help to understand the Sudan conflict in both complementary and conflicting ways: complementary in that all religious identities have been strengthened in one way or another and contradictory because this was not the desired outcome. Firstly, adopting a primordialist stance, focusing on what primordialists call the inherent and natural tendency of humans to identify themselves with a group whose members share obvious similarities[30], Hasenclever and Rittberger point to a possibility of two ultimate outcomes for identity formation in multireligious societies such as Sudan: ‘In the end, either these societies will fall apart or one community will gain dominance and suppress the others.’[31] For the Sudan this means either returning to the pre-colonial, peaceful co-existence described by ‘Abd Al-Rahim above (brought about by what would undoubtedly be a colossal collapse of the Islamic government after a lengthy and cataclysmic war between the Muslims in the North and the non-Muslims on the South) or the Islamic government would gain unquestionable control over the region and establish an absolute theocracy. However, no matter how convincing these possible outcomes appear in theory, in practice the identity crisis brought about by religious divisions within the Sudan has

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had contradictory effects. For instance, Lam Akol, a former high-ranking official in the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) which opposes the Sudanese government and fights for an independent South Sudan, has pointed out that:

'The rationale for revolution, as presented in the [July 1983 SPLA/Sudan People's Liberation Movement] Manifesto, focused on the specific grievances of the South, but the language of underdevelopment, nationality and religion were deliberately broadened in an attempt to appeal to other regions and sectors of Sudanese society who would have been hostile to a Southern independence movement, but who had their own grievance against Nimairi and the central government.'[32]

It appears, therefore, that religious identity was something of an afterthought or a scapegoat when amassing members of the Sudan's population to rise up against the state; at the forefront of the minds of those leading the revolution were the 'specific grievances of the South' and it was these which had proved potent enough to draw together a group of individuals who felt that their interests and way of life as Southerners, and not specifically Christians or practisers of indigenous religions, were sufficiently threatened. Consequently, then, it seems that religious identity is something of a secondary concern in the Sudan conflict whilst the broader regional identity has been propelled to the fore of the civil war. People are more compelled to fight for regional autonomy rather than religious freedom.

That is not to say that the dominance of Islam in the Sudan has not played a considerable part in shifting the religious identities of the Sudanese population since it has, in fact, had a dual effect. First of all, whilst the Sudanese government's attempts at imposing Islam on those in the largely non-Muslim South have not been the driving factor behind the formation of the major resistance factions in the region, they have led to those practising indigenous religions to coalesce around the larger and more internationally supported Christianity. Lam Akol again notes that:

'the current drive to Islamize the South has produced more Christian converts in the last decade than the entire colonial missionary enterprise did during the first half of the twentieth century.'[33]

We can infer from this that the members of the smaller indigenous tribes of the southern Sudan have felt their position increasingly endangered by the central government's process of Islamification and so, either sensing safety in numbers or simply following what has become an increasing trend, these indigenous religions have slowly flocked to Christianity. To what extent this conversion from indigenous religions to Christianity reflects a true and lasting alteration of religious identity in the Sudan is impossible to assess; it may well be that these practisers of indigenous religions have publicly embraced Christianity to benefit from the protection it brings as a well-funded, well-publicised world religion and so attracting both financing and attention to their cause as resisters against an oppressive government regime, whilst privately they continue to worship in the traditional way. After all, as J.C. Scott writes in his work 'Domination, Acting, and Fantasy':

'the greater the disparity in power between dominant and subordinate and the more arbitrarily it is exercised, the more the public transcript of subordinates will take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast.'[34]

In other words, the more forcefully and insistently the Sudanese government presses for those in the South to convert to Islam, the more we can expect those southerners to react in a somewhat stereotypical way: not, in this case, by pretending to be Muslim as we might expect since this is apparently acquiescing to governmental pressure too much, but by donning a Christian mask to make it known to the government that they resist the process of Islamification as a strong and united group. The term 'mask' is used here of course because in the comfort and privacy of their own homes these converts may continue to practise their previous religion, an idea Akol appears to support when he concedes that despite the high number of Christian converts in the South, 'the indigenous religions of the southern Sudan continue to inform ideas about ethical behaviour, the moral community and political action.'[35]

In the North of the Sudan where Islam is much more prevalent, the government's policy of religious oppression in the South has had the opposite effect and has seen a rise of religious zealotry as certain sections of the population turn to Islamic fanaticism:

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'To deal with shortcomings in morale and appease disgruntled parents in the north who are weary of having their sons come home wounded or dead, Khartoum has raised a parallel army: the Popular Defense Force (PDF). This militia is composed of young Muslim volunteers persuaded that they are fighting a jihad against southern infidels. The mujahideen in the PDF see war as a spiritual duty and death as a means of martyrdom and instant admission to heaven.'[36]

For those individuals who subscribe to the 'exclusivist' view of Islam and religion in general, the continuing existence of 'rival' religions in the South can simply not be tolerated and so for these individuals the government's attempts at Islamification is a vehicle for translating these sentiments and feelings into action. Their religious identity has been honed, sharpened and brought to the fore of the conflict between North and South and so, from a Northern perspective, it is possible to claim that the Sudan civil war is best understood in terms of religion and religious conquest; unlike the SPLA which has merely used religious allegiance to entice additional southerners to join the regional North-South battle, for a significant number in the North the conflict has become all about protecting and projecting their religious identity with the regional element becoming less significant.

In light of all of these different ways in which the Sudan conflict has shaped religious identity and vice versa, one constant remains: that religious identity in the Sudan, for members of all religions, is a constant struggle *against* hegemony. This is true even in the case of those belonging to Islam because, for some Muslims, it is a relentless battle to assert oneself as the dominant religion.

### Race

Mutua, on the other hand, is insistent that '[r]ace – not religion – is the fundamental fault line in Sudan'[37] and there is ample evidence to support her view. Indeed, the primordialist interpretation of the Sudan conflict is not exclusive to analysing the role played by religious affiliation, but can also be applied to explain how racial identity is drawn into the civil war. Lind, for example, invokes ancient and immutable hostilities in the Sudan, claiming that conflict arises from people fighting for 'their primary loyalty' to tribe and race, as they have done since 'history's dawn'. [38] The attraction of such an interpretation is that one's racial identity is often obvious to the outside world as physical appearance differs substantially from one race to the next; Badal explains in his article on separatism that in the case of the Sudan the racial divide lies between 'the peoples of the southern Sudan [who] are African and negroid' and the peoples of the northern Sudan who are 'not Arabs proper, but peoples of both Arab and African descent assimilated into Islamic and Arabic culture.' [39] Yokwe has traced this racial divide throughout the Sudan's history and summarised it thusly:

'Ever since the historical contact between North and South, slavery and slave trade have been practised on racial lines, always the Arab North raiding the African South and not vice versa. Such a practice has heightened the racial tension. Racism in the Sudan is also manifested in social interaction particularly in the institutions of marriage and work. In the Sudan the Arabs marry the Southern girls regardless of race and religion. But the Arabs will not allow their daughters to be married to the Southerners regardless of race and religion. In fact, in the 1960s there were cases where Arab parents slaughtered their daughters and dumped them in the river because they were found pregnant by Southern young men.' [40]

What we see here is vastly similar to the religious schism between Islam and Christianity – one group seeking to conquer or exploit the other. Except in this case, rather than Muslims battling for supremacy over Christians, Arabs are struggling to exert their dominance over Africans. Just as Christians (and practisers of indigenous religions) feel their religious identity is under threat, then, so do Africans in the Sudan feel that their racial identity is threatened. This ultimately means that racial identity in the Sudan has been shaped in much the same way as religious identity has: in the North the Arabs have strengthened their Arabic identity through a sense of superiority over the Africans in the South, and in the South the Africans have developed their strong bonds of racial identity through sheer determination *not* to be conquered and *not* to be exploited by the Arabs. Once again we see that identity formation in the Sudan civil war is two sides of the same coin, or even a double-edged sword; strong racial identity has led to cause for conflict and conflict has led to a strengthening of racial identity.

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In the context of the Sudan civil war, since one side contends that they are somehow so fundamentally different to the other that they should not be ruled under the same central authority, it seems appropriate to analyse the ethnic dimension as well as the race, especially because ethnicity is another way in which the Sudan is highly divided. In fact, the highest number of divisions exists along lines of ethnicity in the Sudan, as one trio of dedicated scholars have discovered:

'Excluding foreigners, an ethnic polarization index of 0.625 is calculated for the country. If a polarization index in excess of 0.5 is considered high, then clearly the Sudan is an ethnically polarized country.'[41]

There is such a high degree of ethnic polarization in the Sudan because of the existence of a great number of ethnic tribes. In his work, Lam Akol explains the importance of tribal affiliations and their continued relevance throughout the course of Sudan's history:

'The word "tribe" has been discarded in much anthropology, except where it translates a local word, and is resented in much of Africa as a pejorative term. Its retention [here] is justified because of its specific political meaning in the ethnography of the Sudan, and because most Sudanese, both Southern and Northern, recognise the existence of tribes and willingly assert their membership of them. The Arabic word for tribe, *gablia*, is commonly used throughout the Sudan.'[42]

The many different tribes and the many different forms of relations and interactions between them will not be explored in great depth here, firstly because the focus of this essay is specifically the role played by tribal identity in the Sudan conflict, and secondly because there are many anthropologists who have done a far better job in observing and understanding the Sudan's tribes than I could ever hope to achieve. What is important to note here, however, is that:

'Tribal societies lack the kinds of centralized authority characteristic of states. Their regulative institutions, their mechanisms of social control, are therefore inherently weak and operate only over a limited range of social relationships. Peace and security can be assured at all only within relatively small social groups, typically groups of kin. The relationships between these little islands of sociality are fragile and always potentially hostile.'[43]

The smallness and closeness of tribes naturally means that interactions between their members are frequent and intense, with each and every tribal member fully aware of the group dynamics at play. This high level of social interaction among their members means that tribes play an enormous role in forming and consolidating an individual's identity in the Sudan. An individual's tribe is an intimate network of support, protection, provision and labour and it is through the various roles available within a tribe that an individual can shape their identity; a woman might be a mother, a wife, a sister, the cook, the cleaner, the gardener and a whole host of other roles whereas a man could be a hunter, a warrior, a father, a husband, and a leader. The exact distribution of these roles will of course differ from tribe to tribe and varying degrees of overlap may exist, but the fact remains that people's roles within their tribe will greatly affect their experience of day-to-day life and their identity will form around that central pillar of being.

Aside from the internal relations within tribes, the external relations between tribes play a large role in shaping the identities of Sudan's population and there are almost as many forms of inter-tribe relations as there are tribes; some tribes, the Pari for instance, have been notably isolationist throughout their history[44], whilst others enjoy peaceful relations with a number of other tribes and rely on these for their livelihoods and trade. Still others, such as the Nuer and the Dinka, relate to one another through raiding, kidnap and states of war, but it is important to note that 'the feuding [does] not dominate relations.'[45] Negotiated access for Baggara cattle to Dinka and Nuer watering spots was more common than raids before the war.'[46] Through tribal identity, then, the Sudan's population is interconnected and shares a fundamental level of understanding which is certainly not attained through religious or national identity.

It would be easy to mistake this as a reason why the people of the Sudan might be reluctant to enter into a civil war when they have enjoyed a relatively peaceful and well-established dynamic based upon the acceptance of the above

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relations through tribal interactions, but this overlooks the enmity, explored below, that exists between the Arab tribes of the North and the African tribes of the South; although the *status quo* has been historically stable between tribes within the Northern regions and between those in the South, examples of amicable and nonviolent relations between northern and southern tribes are few and far between.

If anything, tribal affiliation has been a relatively inconspicuous factor in initiating the Sudanese conflict, except for exacerbating existing North-South tensions, and instead is more helpful in understanding why the conflict has endured for so long because, as one commentator suggests, '[t]he protracted civil war has altered the nature of traditional conflicts in Southern Sudan [...] Conflicts have become more complex' and 'new conflicts have emerged'[47]. So, for instance, the traditionally reclusive Pari who were once wary of the Dinka-dominated SPLA/M saw large numbers of their men join the SPLA's ranks when the militia stopped in their villages[48] whilst Nuer-Dinka relations became so explosive between 1991 and 1994 that it caused a split within the Southern separatist movement, with the Dinka remaining in the SPLA/M and the Nuer forming their own South Sudan Independence Movement/Army (SSIM/A)[49] – the split was so cataclysmic, in fact, that the SSIM/A fought with the northern government against their southern brethren, something which would have been unthinkable if not for the waging of civil war in the region. In addition to this, tribal relations have become increasingly more violent as a result of the Sudanese civil war, with one Sudanese local saying that 'previously we only heard about cattle raids but not killing of women and children like has happened of late.'[50]

Filip De Boeck asks: 'How does (ethnic) self-representation operate as a psychological and cultural strategy for coping with the chaotic and despotic socio-politics and economics in a peripheral "frontier" situation?'[51] The answer in the case of the Sudan can, it seems, be located within Geschiere's *The Perils of Belonging* in which he notes that 'identities can shift from inclusive to exclusive tendencies'[52]; within the context of civil war, the ethnic and particularly the tribal identities of the Sudan's populations have intensified to the extent that they have become increasingly intolerant of outsiders and 'others'. Actual violence and animosity has replaced almost ritualistic practices of raiding cattle pillaging wives between competing tribes and traditionally isolationist tribes have been drawn into conflict through increasing interaction with outsiders and independence movements. However, at the root of this intensification of identity is the exacerbation of the regional conflict in the Sudan – the ethnic hostility and fluctuations in tribal relations are manifestations of a much more fundamental identity conflict in the region.

## Regionalism

Whilst not explicitly stating so, Buzan and Weaver's concise and simple summary of the Sudan conflict effectively demonstrates that both the racial and religious tensions are framed almost perfectly by a regional confrontation; the Sudan civil war, they note, pitches 'a mostly Arab, Islamic north against a mostly black, non-Islamic south'[53]. Whilst their short analysis of the conflict is somewhat over-simplistic, it does succeed in getting to the heart of the matter and it will be argued here that they are right in suggesting that a regionalist account offers the best, most holistic means of understanding the Sudanese civil war because not only does it incorporate the issues of religion and race already discussed above, but it also brings new elements for analysis. As commentators have noted, the history of Sudan 'is full of tales of invasions, enslavement and exploitation of the South by the North'[54] and issues of Northern and Southern nationality and national identity 'occupy a central position in the conflict'[55] and so it is this historical and all-pervasive aspects of the regionalist factor which accounts for its enormous significance in understanding the Sudanese conflict.

The historical basis of the severe regional tensions in the Sudan is an unfortunate postcolonial legacy left over from the momentous occasion when power was finally stripped from the Sudan's colonial masters and granted to the newly autonomous region. Already before this process had even begun, there existed an intense suspicion of government and central authority throughout all of Africa, as Falola has discussed in-depth in her book on African culture:

'The dominant political value revolved around exploitation: the primary motive of the colonial power was to cheat and exploit Africans; and the primary duty of Africans was to resist. Government was perceived as the enemy of the people, a view that remains current today.'[56]



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In this context of suspicion, oppression and subordination, then, it was negotiated that the colonial structures erected and maintained by Britain would be transferred intact to the northern Sudanese nationalists,[57] therefore the perception of government as 'the enemy of the people' was eliminated in the North since they inherited the hegemonic legacy whereas those living in the South remained subjugated and powerless. Moreover, since the colonial regime had sought to 'preserve' the 'innate' qualities of native cultures, it had sharpened and essentialised interethnic racial divisions[58] which had only served to exacerbate regional tensions and further segregate the North from the South and so by the time the North held the reins of power the South felt completely and utterly under threat. As a result, it is little surprise that:

'Southern leaders have since argued that de-colonisation was flawed in the sense that Southerners had no influence on the process in general, nor on the future of the Southern Sudan. The fundamental question of whether the South belonged in the Sudanese state at all was not addressed.'[59]

The issue of southern independence has been a contentious one up until the present day and the fact that a referendum was held on January 9<sup>th</sup> 2011 to determine whether or not the Sudan will indeed split into two separate entities only lends credence to the extremely significant role regional identity has played in the conflict – the referendum is surely testament to the sheer force of will of those in the South to assert their regional identity. Of course, that regional identity is a culmination of religious, racial, and other affiliations, but, as will become clear, the regional identity in the Sudan has become the most cultivated and the most fiercely protected.

The determination of the Sudan's southern population in defending their regional identity has been shaped, in part, by the oppressive actions of the government in the North who, intent on maintaining the separation of North and South, developed the "Southern Policy" which mandated regional and racial segregation, whereby 'the South was to be developed along "African", rather than "Arab" lines'[60] and was to be intentionally underdeveloped when compared to the North. This policy of subjugation only served to unite the southerners further as they formed mutual bonds through their experiences of oppression and adversity; Gerd Baumann calls this phenomenon 'alterity' and has observed that '[w]hen one party argues that it encompasses the other, the other party will often respond by postulating a grammar of segmentation.'[61]

This goes a long way in explaining why the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army became such a powerful organisation as it pushed for Southern independence and attracted people from even the remotest parts of the South. John Garang de Mabior, leader of the SPLA/M, claims that the appeal of the organisation was so strong because the oppression had become so terrible that 'the marginal cost of rebellion in the South became very small, zero or negative; that is, in the South it pays to rebel.'[62]

For all its strengths, however, formation of regional identity in the Sudan has been severely hindered over the years, with pockets of disagreement and in-fighting proving extremely counterproductive to the southern separatists' cause in particular. It has already been noted that the SPLM/A suffered internal divisions which led to a splinter group, the SSIM/A, allying with the Khartoum government and '[a]ttempts were made by [the SPLA/M] to join forces with *Anyanya 2* groups, but these often ended with their fighting each other.'[63] Badal even goes so far as to suggest that in the South 'it can be assumed that there exists a condition more suitable for conflict than for a claim for a separate existence.'[64] Even in the comparatively homogenous North there exists an 'ethnic struggle for power in Khartoum.'[65]

Furthermore, whilst it can be seen to encompass them both rather perfectly, regional identity in the Sudan can also be seen to be in competition with religious and racial identity:

'the "observation" that kinship is made of flesh and blood contains the verdict that the physical facts of biological relatedness count as shared identity, which then entails the presumption that certain kinds of rights and duties will be assumed between "kin" as a matter of course.'[66]

The duties and obligations an individual may feel to his kin who, more often than not are integrated in that individual's tribe, are further compounded by the observations made by Evans-Pritchard and Rivers who 'noticed

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how systems of religion and social organization reflected and supported those kinship systems of beliefs and practices.'[67] Religion and race, therefore, can be seen as mutually reinforcing an individual's identity, and thus become of more importance to that individual, in ways in which regional identity cannot.

Nevertheless, as the saying goes, actions speak far louder than words and the outcome of the referendum that was held on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2011, which is expected to come in a matter of weeks, is expected to prove that the number of people in the South who voted for unity with the North is an extremely tiny minority[68] – even Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir has hinted that he suspects he will eventually have to concede that he can no longer rule the people of southern Sudan.[69]

## Hegemony

'[D]omination, aggression, and violence are intrinsic parts of social life. This is often expressed in terms of race, class, and gender but can also be based on religious beliefs, political affiliation, national origin, age, and physical or mental disabilities.'[70]

There are few examples of domination, aggression, and violence in recent history to the extent that has been, and continues to be experienced in the Sudan. For this very reason, the Sudan serves as a perfect case study for assessing the role played by such domination, aggression, and violence on identity formation and it has already been proposed that such oppression has had a profound effect on shaping religious, racial and regional identity in particular. Here it is possible to link this conception of identity formation through domination, aggression, and violence to the notion of hegemony, which, as one scholar has argued, 'has played an especially strong part in helping us to understand how power works to form the social person, shaping the way in which people variously experience the world they live in.'[71]

In linking hegemony, power, and identity formation within the context of the Sudan conflict, some conclusions begin to emerge. First and foremost, it becomes explicitly clear that at the heart of hegemony is the ability to actively affect the identities of those over whom it has influence, and the reverse side of this is that the individuals living under the hegemon are receptive, either knowingly or entirely ignorantly, of its influence. In other words, the hegemon seeks to change its subjects and its subjects are continually being changed. It is a two-way process: there is the top-down aspect in which the hegemonic regime exerts its influence on the population and there is the grassroots aspect by which the population absorb the hegemonic influence into their existing identities and roles and make it their own.

Which brings us to the second point, which is that because identity formation through hegemonic influence is a two-way process it is all the more unpredictable because there are so many possible outcomes: the influence of the hegemon can be overwhelming and cause the desired outcome, as has been the case with mujahideen in the North of the Sudan; the influence could be entirely rejected and instead have the opposite effect, which can be seen in the way the North's policy of Islamification has created a large number of Christian converts in the South; or hegemony and the resistance to it could reach a relatively comfortable degree of equilibrium. According to Malwal, the prevailing trend in the Sudan is that the more the attempt by the northern governments to promote the dominant religion and language in a "vain and costly effort to establish a nation state of cultural and religious homogeneity in the place of one of diversity" has only aggravated the grievances of the southern Sudanese'[72] and only served to increase their determination to oppose the North.

Ortner suggests that '[r]esistors are doing more than simply opposing domination, more than simply producing a virtually mechanical *re-action* [...] They have their *own* politics.'[73] However, he fails to appreciate that this is precisely why hegemony has such an enormously transformative and pervasive effect on identity formation because hegemonic influence has the power to change these internalised politics of both resistors and supporters alike. In his work culture, Hall expands upon this and explains that:

'Ruling ideas may dominate other conceptions of the social world by setting the limit to what will appear as rational, reasonable, credible, indeed sayable or thinkable, within the given vocabularies of motive and action available to us.'[74]

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An example of hegemonic influence shaping everyday motive and action in the Sudan can be seen in the renowned works of Sharon Hutchinson who spent several periods of her life living with the Nuer tribe of the South; instead of conversations revolving around 'cows and oxen, heifers and steers, rams and sheep, he-goats and she-goats, calves and lambs and kids' as they had during her first visit to the Nuer cattle camps in 1978-1979, less than two decades later Hutchinson found that the Nuer's conversations were now preoccupied by 'national political issues, cabinet shake-ups, regional troop movements, and the Jonglei Canal scheme.' [75] In other words, the sheer occurrence and pervasiveness of interaction with the hegemonic regime in the interim years had completely altered the interests, the hopes, and the fears of the Nuer; simply the knowledge of the Khartoum government's oppressive policies and the Sudanese conflict was enough to adjust to everyday dynamic.

This point clearly serves to address De Boeck's question when he asks: 'Are social co-operation and control limited to small pockets of society in the absence of generalised, overarching civic and political culture, or are there still wider dynamics at play?' [76] There is no doubt that there is a distinct absence of an 'overarching civic and political culture' in the Sudan. Indeed, Eisei Kurimoto notes how, in the case of the Pari from southern Sudan, this sense of isolation and removal from the state is reinforced in their everyday speech and language:

'*Gaala* is a Pari word which connotes all foreigners of lighter skin, both Arab and Europeans, as well as residents of towns. Government is also called *gaala* [...] The implication in the use of this term is that for the Pari successive rulers of the Sudan are just foreigners and their governments are also alien. To the Pari people all outsiders are enemies to a certain degree.' [77]

In calling it 'gaala', the Pari assert that they feel no allegiance to the government in Khartoum and have no sense that there is an overarching authority determining their motives and actions; of course the government exists to the Pari in the most rudimentary sense, but it is a simple and distant existence without any immediate implications for the tribe. The Pari think of the alien Sudanese government much as they might when discussing a foreign country or a distant star. This is not a recent trend and those living in the South of the Sudan have a long tradition of disregard for whatever government might come along, with Rolandsen noting that '[i]n the period up to 1918 without any close administration, it probably did not make much difference to most Southerners whether it was the Turks, the Mahdists or the British who claimed sovereignty in their territory.' [78]

However, as alluded to above hegemony is about more than asserting sovereignty over an area of land: it is about 'the mastering of history' [79] and, as Antonio Gramsci proposed in his prominent works on social and cultural hegemony, it is about how a social class or group exerts cultural leadership or dominance over other classes in maintaining the socio-political *status quo* whilst influencing these subordinate classes to accept and adopt the values of the hegemon. [80] It is this unrivalled power to change those in the lower echelons of society which explains why '[t]he African elite, irrespective of their location and sources of idea, regard culture as the number one tool in creating a difference between African and non-African, consolidating national and ethnic identities.' [81] Therefore, to answer the question posed by De Boeck earlier, there are certainly wider dynamics of control at play even in the absence of an overarching, formalised and legitimate central authority; the influence exerted by the hegemon in a population or society penetrates and infiltrates the culture and daily lives of those beneath in numerous and varied ways so that those being influenced may not be immediately aware of the existence of these external forces at work. Thus, in the case of the Sudan, whilst sectors of the population may be almost oblivious to, or completely disregard, the Sudanese government, the government in question has unquestionably shaped and altered their identities, beliefs and dialogues through the continuing presence of conflict and strife. Either directly or indirectly, the religious, racial and regional identities of those living in the Sudan have been broken down and rebuilt by the hegemonic regime in place.

As one final point it is important to emphasise that the transformative power of hegemony should not be overestimated; as an elusive and sometimes intangible concept, it is easy to sometimes see hegemonic influence and a subsequent change in society where neither exists. Indeed, Brown raises the point that '[r]esistance is a perfect vehicle for the expression of moral fervor precisely because it is so vague, so easily left to the eye of the beholder' [82] and it is sometimes tempting for scholars and students to view an event or the belief of a group and make links between oppression and resistance when, in actuality, the event or belief was created through other

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means. There is a prime example of such an event in the account of Kurimoto's stay with the Pari:

'A Pari explained his people believed the coming of the SPLA would result in a situation of "no government", as had been the case during the first civil war, and they destroyed all the things belonging to the government. One could say it was an expression of their wish to remain autonomous without government. However, the fact that 200 bags of sorghum stored by the co-operative association were seized and distributed by the *mojomiji* [the middle-aged tribal rulers] of the six villages might mean the looting was controlled by the *mojomiji* and may not have been an uncontrolled mob action.'

Here Kurimoto questions the motives of the rulers of the Pari tribe in bringing about the destruction of the government buildings. Certainly they could have been expressing their desire to be free of the unwanted Sudanese government in the North, but equally the *mojomiji* could have been using the threat of civil war to assert their dominance and maintain their own form of hegemony and stability in light of a more pressing external threat; on arriving in the Pari villages, the SPLA had proved popular enough to draw away many men to the battlefields and it is just as plausible that the *mojomiji* wanted to keep their influence over these men themselves rather than see them led astray by the southern separatist movement.[83]

## Conclusion

Enzensberger, speaking as a patronising, imperial stepfather might talk about an unwanted, unreasonable child, makes his stance known when he exclaims that in Africa '[v]iolence has freed itself from ideology' and the contemporary civil wars which occur within its borders are a form of 'political retrovirus [...] about nothing at all'.[84] Even if one should entirely reject the arguments offered throughout the course of this essay, it is fervently hoped that, if it has achieved nothing else, this essay has convincingly rejected notions such as Enzensberger's from discourse concerning the conflict in Sudan; the Sudanese civil war and associated violence is firmly rooted in a battle for one's identity and place in both group dynamics and wider society. As Hanlon rightly states, identity is 'an internal root of war'[85] and so to suggest that self-realisation, the expression of one's self and situating that self in relation to the ever-fluctuating hegemonic regime is 'nothing' is sheer ignorance and, quite frankly, an untenable position. Because a significant number of notable sectors of its population live under an incompatible, alien central authority, the conflict in the Sudan is ultimately a confrontation between groups in search of a common overarching identity under which they can unite.

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