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WHY SUDAN?

Ambiguous identities forge persistent conflict

By Laura N. Beny

The following essay is excerpted from the prospectus for *Perspectives on Genocide and Genocidal Violence in the Sudan*, edited by Law School Assistant Professor Laura N. Beny, Sondra Hale of UCLA, and Lako Tongun of Claremont Colleges, California. The book is under advance contract for publication by the University of Michigan Press. Its 14 chapters, written by prominent historians, anthropologists, social scientists, political leaders, and others, "tell overlapping stories about the social constructions of race, gender, culture, and religious and political loyalties, each of which underlies the longstanding conflict" in Sudan, according to Beny, whose essay in the book is titled "Beyond Economics: Slavery in the Sudan as Genocide." Other chapters cover Darfur, the decades' long North-South conflict, slavery, gender crimes, the political economy of oil, and political Islam.

"This book is very timely and relevant, as the crisis in Darfur has reached huge proportions and there is ongoing heated debate about UN intervention in the region," Beny noted in September, shortly after returning from a personal and research visit to the country. On September26 the U.S. House and Senate passed similar measures to authorize sanctions against Sudanese persons implicated in the commission of war crimes, and in October the Sudanese government expelled the chief UN envoy to the country.

Beny, who was born in the Sudan, frequently speaks and writes on the country. She has served on the editorial board for the Sudan Studies Association of North America and currently is a research fellow at the U-M's Stephen M. Ross School of Business' William Davidson Institute, where she coordinates and manages the Sudan policy brief series of articles on economic policy issues in the Sudan.

The question of genocide is, arguably, the most pressing human rights question to emerge in the 20th and 21st centuries. Although the Holocaust of 1930s-1940s Europe is still the template for genocide studies in the minds of most Western observers, more recent and deeply disturbing political events (e.g., Bosnia and Rwanda) have forced a more international approach. The United Nations Genocide Convention was constructed to fit the model of Europe and students of genocide are only now focusing on other case studies that may not fit established models. We are part of an emerging approach that calls for a reassessment of ideas about genocide: a redefinition, a broadening of concepts, an investigation beyond Europe, and an approach that is, at once, culturally specific and transnational. Our book also presents an approach that is gendered, not simply by the inclusion of women as victims, but more significantly by considering gender as an analytic concept.

While a few recent books on Sudan address genocide, these books narrowly focus on the current crisis in Darfur, western Sudan. International attention on Darfur has tended to overlook, except in passing, the fact that similar genocidal crises occurred in southern Sudan almost continuously from the late 1950s until 2005, when the government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) consummated the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in January 2005.

Sudan is ambiguously included in both Africa and the Middle East. This dual orientation has been a source of persistent conflict, in large part because successive post-independence governments have, while sometimes paying lip-service to multiculturalism, defined the state as exclusively Arab and Islamic. Virtually all of the ethnic groups that reside outside of what is commonly referred to as the "central riverain culture" (the so-called "Arab-Nubian core" of the Sudan) have been variously marginalized by the socioeconomic, cultural, and religious policies of successive governments, culminating with the most extreme policies of the current National Islamic Front government, which came to power via a military coup in 1989.

These policies, which have been biased toward the interests of the center, have threatened the existence of the peoples and cultures of the periphery. The non-Arab, often non-Muslim or only nominally Islamic peoples and cultures of the south, west, and east have been variously assaulted, either through direct state (or state supported private) violence or indirectly through neglect and attrition. The forms of direct and indirect assault have included imposition of the dominant culture (i.e., forced Islamization and Arabization), driving men out, intentional starvation, forced displacement and relocation, indoctrination, rape and other gendered assaults, aerial bombardment, enslavement, and

malign neglect. These assaults on human dignity have been most evident in southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains of the southwestern Sudan and, more recently, in Darfur, western Sudan.

While all this is occurring, Sudan is enjoying a growing geopolitical significance, which surged when it became an oil-exporting country in 1999. The newly oil-exporting Sudan is strategically located, culturally and geographically, to offer a window into the conflicts in the Horn of Africa and into the spread of radical Islam (or Islamism) in a vast region. It is an area long of interest because of its African and Arab combinations and tensions; its Muslim, Christian, indigenous religious interactions; its complex legal system (with religious, civil, and customary co-existing); its economic potential; and its dynamic of military-civilian conflicts. It is also a society with a complex civil society, a weak state, regional and political fragmentation, and fierce competition among sectarian, non-sectarian, religious, and secular political parties.

Furthermore, Sudanese society has never recovered from the diverse waves of colonialisms and foreign intrusions that have punctuated its history (Ottoman, Egyptian, Arab, and British) and dramatically bifurcated its land into "northern" and "southern." Sudan is a fertile testing ground for numerous inquiries in the areas of colonialism, racism, economic and human exploitation, neocolonialism, human rights, rule of law, constitutionalism, the role of religion in the state, development, self-determination, state formation, human rights, and now, tragically, genocide.

That the warring parties of the North-South conflict achieved a peace settlement in 2005 does not render such study irrelevant as it relates to that particular conflict. Indeed, sustained peace and lasting reconciliation rest fundamentally upon the establishment of truth and justice, however they are administered.