THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE DARFUR CONFLICT

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1. INTRODUCTION

Disturbing reports of the tragic events of the massacre of people in Darfur are being received on a daily basis. According to these reports, thousands of people have been killed and hundreds of thousands have fled their homes into neighbouring Chad as refugees. Darfur is not a mere humanitarian disaster, but is part of a historic continuum in which successive Arab governments have sought to entirely destroy black Africans in this biracial nation, according to Mutua (2005:1-3). Sudan, like most African post-colonial states, is a forced crucible of Muslim Arabs and black Africans. Since February 2003, Darfur has been the site of extremely violent conflict between the province's nomadic "Arab"[2] tribes, supported by the government in Khartoum, and the native "African" peasant tribes.

In this article the intention, in the first instance, is to critically analyze the complex nature of the political situation in Sudan by pointing out the deep-rooted causes of conflict between the Arab Muslims and African Christians in Darfur over many years. The displacement of more than one million people and the death of more than 50 000 people in Darfur is a practical example of the Arab-African conflict in Sudan. Factors or indicators like racism, ethnicity, tribalism, culture, religion and bad governance determine the degree of the conflict between the Sudanese Arabs and Africans. Secondly, the conflict in Darfur reflects the manifestation of the tensions between Arabs and Africans. In fact, Huntington (1993:22) points out that the principal cause of conflicts will shift away from the traditional conflict between sovereign states towards conflict between groups of different civilizations. By this he means that the fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future. These causes of conflict are all particularly pertinent to the situation in Sudan. Before the Arab-African conflict is investigated, it is necessary to look at Sudan from a historical context. The Darfur crisis is just a microcosm of the Sudanese conflict occurring over many years.

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2   "Arab" and "African" have to be put between inverted commas since there are no "pure" Arabs in Darfur but only people of mixed ethnic origin whose mother tongue is Arabic.

2.   HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Sudan is the largest country in Africa, bordered by Egypt to the north and Kenya, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to the south, Eritrea and Ethiopia to the east and the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad and Libya to the west. Its population of approximately 28 million is made up of diverse ethnic groups, who speak over 400 languages. Sudan has been plagued by conflict almost continuously since independence in 1956. At a simplistic level this conflict exists between the Arab Muslim in the north and the black Africans, predominantly Christians, in the south. However, the conflict is much more complicated (Youngs 2004:7). Sudan is ruled by General Omar Al-Bashir of the National Islamic Front (NIF), an Islamic regime that forms the power base of the mainly Arab and Muslim north, Khartoum. The south and center of the country is mainly inhabited by Christians or animist[3] groups of African ethnicity. Since independence from Britain in 1956, Sudan experienced civil wars for more than 30 years. This war was between the Islamic government of Sudan and different rebel groups. As a result Sudan's civil war is one of the world's longest-running wars (Jeppie 2004:27). The first civil war in the south began on the eve of independence. Regions, like Darfur, created their own movements to challenge the concentration of power resources in Khartoum, capital of Sudan.

Darfur, covering almost 400 000 square kilometers, is a very large province of Sudan. It borders on Libya and Chad. It is quite populous with about eight million people. Geographically, the province is centered on the Jebel Mara volcanic massif. The amount of rainfall determines the character of the population.

Camel herders are found in the northern arid zone, settled peasants in the center, and cattle nomads in the south. The black African Fur tribe makes up over half of the population, hence the name of the province Dar (home) of the Fur, and the rest is divided between over 15 different ethnic/linguistic groups. All the inhabitants are Sunni Muslims (Internet: Crimes of War Project 2004). According to Strudsholm (2004:4) Darfur had enough space for camel or horse-herding nomads and crop-growing farmers for centuries. The nomads are mainly of Arab origin. Most of the farmers have roots further south in Africa.

There are two aspects of Darfurian politics that played a key role in the development of the present conflict: Firstly, the inhabitants of the province, whether settled African peasants or Arab nomadic tribes, have consistently identified with the Muslim north of Sudan in the conflict with the Christian and animist south that

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3   Animist is the adjective to the noun, animism, which means the belief that all natural things such as plants, animals, rocks, thunder and earthquakes have spirits and can influence human events. Cambridge International Dictionary of English, 1995:46.

has persisted on and off since 1955. Secondly, the political gap in Darfur between those who identified themselves as Arabs and Africans widened from the mid-1960 onwards. Thus, the deep cause of the rebellion and the roots of the conflict, lie in the feeling of superiority and cultural élitism of the Arabs and of resentment and perceived oppression and neglect on the part of the Africans (Internet: Crimes of War Project 2004).

Asante (2005:12) says that Sudan is a very big country, the biggest in Africa. You could put South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Botswana inside Sudan. Sudan has a complex history, one that has meant conquest, devastation, rape, bondage, victory, pain and suffering for millions of the people who occupy this land. What happened in the Darfur region is that the local government administrators, mainly Arabs, treated non-Arabs and non-Muslim people in a negative manner. Africans in Darfur became angry and challenged those who were abusing them. The government's response was immediate and stern. They asserted their own authority through a pro-government group, calling itself the Jangaweed.[4] The Jangaweed, apparently with the tacit support of the government, went about killing, rampaging and brutalizing women and children in the Darfur region. People resisted the Jangaweed's objective of beating them into submission. According to Houreld (2004:13) Darfur is worse than Rwanda because the militia is targeting everything, even their water sources.

3. THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE CONFLICT

Asante (2005:12) states that the Darfur region of Sudan, which is larger than Iraq, is home to millions of people, some claiming to be Africans and others to be Arabs. They are separated not so much by religion, but by ethnic identities and political interests. It is a complicated situation, similar to that of many regions on the African continent. In fact, some people claim to practise African religion and others Arab religion, that is Islam, but they are all Africans. Their ethnic origins are directly embedded in the African continent.

Darfur, at independence in 1956, became a bastion of the Mahdist religious movement and a stronghold of its political wing, the Umma Party. Twice in the history of Sudan (1968 and 1986) it was a solid bloc of Umma voters that gave the Umma Party and its leader, Sadiq Al-Mahdi, victory at the polls. Members of the various Darfur ethnic groups, mostly from the African tribes, made up a very large proportion, between 40% and 60%, of the northern troops fighting against the southern rebels between 1955 and 1972, and then again between 1983 and the present. Thus, Islam proved to be a stronger identity factor than racial/cultural origins. Yet,

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4   Jangaweed means "a riding man with a gun" or "armed men on horses", or "devils on horseback". N Elgabir, 2004:6.

Mutua (2005:1-3) argues that the Blacks in the south either hew to their ancestral traditional African religions or converted to Christianity. The fact that black Africans in Darfur are exclusively Muslim has not stopped the Arab Jangaweed. According to this reporter, racism and religion are the fundamental fault line in Sudan, though religion has certainly added fuel to the fire in the south.

Ryle (2006:1-7) points out that the crisis in Darfur comes at a time when Sudan's war in the south seems to be on the point of resolution. It is only recently, however, that the division between Arab and African has achieved its present level of political significance in Darfur. The distinction is not straightforward. The Islamic presence in Sudan as a whole originates from the Arabian peninsula; over centuries of Islamization many indigenous peoples in the Nile Valley came to claim Arab ancestry, and speak Arabic rather than their own languages, and to embrace Arabic culture.

The fight is basically between black African insurgents and the Khartoum government and its local agents, the Arab militias. The deep causes of the rebellion lie in the feeling of superiority and cultural élitism of the Arabs, and of resentment and perceived oppression and neglect on the part of the Africans. The African rebels point out that in spite of being a loyal part of the Muslim north, Darfur is in fact as badly off in terms of lack of infrastructure, neglect of education and economic underdevelopment as the Christian south (Internet: Crimes of War Project 2004). Darfur's population is thus predominantly Muslim, but ethnically mixed with more than 30 ethnic groups. These groups can be divided into two main categories, Arab and African. In recent years, tension has become increasingly focused on ethnicity and race.

Thomas (2004) writes that manipulation of factors of race and ethnicity by both sides further polarized the two sides. Assertions of Arab cultural and economic superiority have been made in order to justify their claims to greater representation at all levels of government. The uncovering of an alleged plan to establish Arab domination in Darfur, backed by disaffected Islamists from outside the region, has given rise to the mobilization of non-Arabs.

Mutua (2004) argues that since independence from the British in 1956, the demon of Sudan has been race. The Arab north, except for brief periods when token Africans were included in government, exclusively held political and military power to protest political exclusion, military repression, enslavement and economic exploitation. Africans in the south rose against the state several years after independence. Since 1983, President Omar Bashir and his fundamentalist Islamic government declared a holy war against African groups in the south – the tribes of Dinka, Nuba and Neur. More than two million people were decimated, millions

more were internally displaced and hordes were exiled. The Arab north is arid and barren, but the south is arable with vast oil deposits which Khartoum covets and badly needs. In the west, in Darfur, Arabs seeking to escape the spreading desert kill and displace Africans for more productive land. Khartoum has been unable to vanquish Africans militarily in the south. That is why it now appears ready to conclude a peace agreement with the south.

The situation in Darfur is grim. With roots going back many decades, the current problems flared up in February 2003, when two rebel groups – known as the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) – frustrated by years of economic and political marginalization, took up arms against the national government and government installations. The government of Sudan launched a harsh response in retaliation. Militias, known as the Jangaweed, were incorporated into the fight, exacerbating ethnic and community tensions, and carrying out some of the worst of the human rights abuses in the conflict - burning down villages, raping large numbers of women and causing the displacement of over a million people (CAFOD 2004). According to Dixon (2004:17) the government always failed to protect Africans from Arab attacks. Even the policies of the government since independence in 1956 were pro-Arab. The government is steadfast in its policy of genocide and ethnic cleansing. The feeling of segregation between African and Arab tribes became very prominent under the present regime. Besides that, most of the government police and security posts were filled by Arabs.

On 8 April 2004 the government of Sudan and the armed political groups – the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) – signed a ceasefire agreement, under which both sides agreed to refrain from military action and to ensure access to humanitarian assistance. The ceasefire, however, has been largely disregarded. According to observers almost every village in the conflict region in Darfur has now been burnt down and depopulated and the Jangaweed are occupying most of the the rural areas; they have set up bases in some of the burn-out villages, and are harassing internally displaced people (Amnesty International 2004).

Characterizing the Darfur war as Arabs versus Africans obscure the reality, according to Alex de Waal, an expert on the Darfur conflict. He argues Darfur's Arabs are black, indigenous, African and Muslim just like Darfur's non-Arabs who hail from the Fur, Masalit, Zaghawa and a dozen smaller tribes. Arabism in Darfur is a political ideology, recently imported, after Colonel Gadaffi had nurtured dreams of an 'Arab belt' across Africa, and had recruited Chadian Arabs, Darfurians and West African Tuaregs to spearhead his invasion of Chad in the 1980s. He failed, but the legacy of arms, militia organization and Arab supremacist ideology lives on (De Waal 2004).

While the conflict in Darfur has a political basis, it has also acquired an ethnic dimension in which civilians are being deliberately targeted on the basis of their ethnicity. The economic dimension relates to the competition between pastoral lists (generally Arabs) and farmers (non-Arabs) for land and water. The western rebels are struggling for the ideological interest of a more equal world in which the rights of the ethnic minorities are recognized. According to Joffe-Walt (2004:12) the ethnic conflict is being perpetuated by the government's support of the Jangaweed.

The political gap in Darfur between the Arabs and Africans widened from the mid-1960s onwards. The 1980s saw repeated ethnic clashes that were precariously terminated by a locally brokered peace agreement in 1989, the same year in which the National Islamic Front (NIF), a radical Muslim organization, took over power in a military coup. There was thus a contraction between the national political positioning of the African tribes, which were aligned with the Nile Valley Arabs in their struggle to retain control of the country against the southern challenge, and their provincial positioning where they fought the local representatives of those same Arabs (Internet: Crimes of War Project 2004).

Historically, thus, the strife in Darfur has always been of a tribal nature between nomads who move along the region in search of grass and water, and farmers in agricultural zones. Traditional meetings between chiefs and tribes are used to resolve these conflicts and downscale tension to a manageable level. Drought and desertification intensified conflicts in the area between agriculture and husbandry. By the year 2003 the tribal strife developed into a political agenda by a newly emerging leadership who utilized the same old differences to promote demands for power and wealth-sharing, using slogans for the alleviation of political and economic marginalization of Darfur (Internet: Overview 2004). It is thus clear that the civil war between two rebel movements were becoming progressively more ethnically orientated and bloodier since 2003.

4.   CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Much of the conflict in Sudan has been the struggle over power and the fight of the African Christians in the south against the Islamic government in the country. The Darfur conflict also concerns the struggle against marginalization by successive Khartoum governments. This rebellion, however, originates in the west. It is a struggle that is an outcome of the fact that power, status and resources are concentrated in one area, Khartoum, and it is the Arab population that benefit from this concentration. The Arab-African racial hierarchy that exists in the northern part of the country can be equated to that of apartheid in South Africa (Duffield 2002:87).

The term 'ethnic cleansing' is being used because it is one group organizing themselves to do away with another group of people and the government is doing nothing to protect the civilians in Darfur. Many people were killed and more than one million displaced. The government denies that there was ethnic cleansing by saying: "Only 1 000 people have been killed … we challenge anyone to tell us which ethnicity has been removed and which one has replaced it" (Steel 2004:16).

International pressure on Khartoum to disarm and prosecute the militia came from all corners of the globe. The United States (UN) threatened to impose sanctions and the United Kingdom (UK) warned that military intervention cannot be ruled out (Moszynski 2004:14). The UN also presented an ultimatum to tackle security and human rights issues. However, the Sudan president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, accused the western nation of interfering in the conflict. The Sudan government also rejected the idea of foreign peacekeepers.

Sulliman (1997:2) is of the opinion that ethnic, religious and cultural dichotomies remain, however, very potent in people's perceptions of violent conflict. However, the longer a conflict endures, the higher the ethnic barrier will rise and the greater the possibility that the ethnic divide will augment the initial causes of the conflict and may even surpass them, with time, to become the dominant factor. Ethnicity, thus, often the product of violent conflict, can end up becoming an objective cause of enduring or future violence. In the same vein, Cobb (2004) argues that the present hostilities are not only the contemporary political conflict and competition for scarce land and water resources among rival ethnic groups, but also the long, complex history of enslavement and racism in East Africa. Darfur, the region that is currently embroiled in conflict, initially served as a hub in the Saharan slave trade.

The African Union (AU), the continental body of Arab and black African states, must end the hypocrisy in Afro-Arab relations. Sudan, the bridge between black and Arab Africa, should lead in rewriting the historical script between the two peoples. Since the slave trade era, Arabs have violated and dominated Africans. Yet, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the AU predecessor, ducked these inequities under the doctrine of non-interference in the internal affairs of sister states (Mutua 2004).

According to Mamdani (2004:23) there are three different meanings of Arab: ethnic, cultural and political. In the ethnic sense, there are few Arabs worth speaking of in Darfur, and a very tiny percentage in Sudan. In the cultural sense, Arab refers to those who have come to speak Arabic as a home language and sometimes to those who are nomadic in lifestyle. In this sense, many have become Arabs. From the cultural point of view, one can be both African and Arab. The political sense refers to a political identity called Arab that the ruling party in Khartoum has promoted.