Ethnic Conflicts In Sudan: The Case Of The Darfur Region.

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Introduction
For many communities in several African countries, ethnic conflicts are a challenging phenomenon. Although the intensity of these vary in time and space, their consequences are clearly seen in Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia, Burundi and Sudan. These consequences include genocide, displacement, migration, homelessness, destruction and social disintegration. The image of Africa, therefore, is entirely correlated with the socio-economic crises of hunger, environmental disasters, underdevelopment and ethnic conflicts.

The high hopes of socio-economic development, welfare and better life in Africa are failing, in spite of the fact that most African countries have attained political independence since the early years of the middle of the 20th century. Furthermore, successive governments, representing different political ideologies and different ethnic nationalities that came into power after the departure of the colonialists, have been unable to achieve and /or sustain political stability and social cohesiveness, let alone achieve development and welfare.

Ironically, the longing for recolonization is not only expressed by folks, but is also a new tendency among some African scholars. This tendency calls for a 'Recolonization of Africa', in terms of 'self-colonization by the major African power' (Mazrui 1995). This extreme and new political thought exposes a pessimistic view of the African situation. This view emerges as the result of serious conflicts of all kinds with which many African societies are plagued.

As a matter of fact, the colonialists were relatively successful in handling and stabilizing conflicts in Africa (Hurreiz, 1977). Although the European cultural waves at the colonial period were accompanied by the slogans of modernization and development, the indigenous cultural components, the ethnic heritage, remained unchanged. For instance, the British colonial policy in Africa in general and Sudan in particular was based on an indirect rule which facilitated economic exploitation. This meant that the existing native institutions were considered as a part of the colonial administration. The ethnic systems were only disturbed as little as possible (Sharma, 19730). This paper thus attempts to examine the problem of ethnic conflicts in Sudan in general and Darfur in particular, and to investigate some of their consequences for affected communities in the region.
Ethnicity in Sudan

Sudan is made up of widely divergent cultures, ethnic groups, languages, as well as geographical and environmental landscapes. This spectrum encapsulates more than 518 ethnic groups represented under various broad ethnic identities: 36% Arabs in the middle and north, 20% Africans in the south, 9% Fur in the far west, 6% Bija in the east, 21% Nubians in the far north and 5% Hamatic in the far south (Deng, 1987). The present day Sudan is a product of a long history of ethnic identities that are deeply rooted among the different communities. The ethnic consciousness thus entrenched among several communities, gradually and spatially spills over to various hitherto less ethnicized communities as the various peoples migrated from one area to the other. These ethnic Sudanese are not necessarily a group of people in a primitive stage of development, acknowledging for instance, the authority of their chiefs (sills, 1987). They are social, regional and cultural units whose members share some sense of belonging. Bearing in mind the diversity of ethnic groups in Sudan, apart from the legal and administrative points of view, the argument for a unified and homogeneous nation in Sudan cannot be taken without reservations (Abd el-Gawad, 1988).

Generally, ethnic differences are not always a disadvantage. As mentioned above, during the colonial period, the conflicts that existed among different ethnic groups were very few compared with the post-independence period. Today, some regions in Sudan are riddled with ethnic conflicts and banditry to the extent that a region as Darfur has been put under martial law. The regions of Darfur, Kordofan and the South are characterized by ethnic conflicts and tensions of several kinds. Darfur represents the extreme case in such conflicts, which results in massive destruction of human and material resources.

The pluralistic nature of Sudan in general, and Darfur communities, in particular, is reflected in terms of the conglomeration of many groups, which have their history in different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Naturally, these peoples differentiate themselves from other groups. In many Darfur communities, self-identity, social alliances and political loyalty are based on ethnicity. Darfur is itself a product of the amalgamation of several indigenous states such as Dajo, Fur, Masaleet, etc. The incorporation of Darfur into the colonial state took place 18 years after the beginning of the colonial era in Sudan (Mac Micheal, 1967).

Ethnic Conflicts and their Causes

Ethnic traditions and traditional social structures can be clearly seen among the rural population that represent about 75% of the total population of Sudan (United Nations, 1997). The entire country is characterized by poor transport and communication systems as well as a poor economy. The results include spatial isolation and low interaction among the regions, poor civil and social systems and the absence of equitable regional development. Moreover, the country as one of the Sahelians, is entirely affected by environmental disasters such as drought and desertification, which are made worse by
the absence of adequate development initiatives made possible by the presence of overwhelming ethnic conflicts, among other factors.

Darfur Region lies in the western part of the Sudan and occupies an area of about 510,800 Km², that is, about 1/5 of the total area of the country. In 1997, the population of the region was about 3.8 million, 95% of which live in the rural areas (Sudan Strategic Report, 1997).

Since the 1960s, regions such as Darfur, Red Sea, Kordofan and White Nile have been drastically hit by various environmental problems. The seriousness of these disasters emerged from the fact that they have led to the degradation of natural resources like arable lands, vegetation cover and water sources upon which livelihood in these regions is dependant. In other words, the features of environmental deterioration, in terms of desert-like conditions, erosion of arable lands and the lack of rainfall, reduce the potentialities of land to produce food for people and animals. These constraints, together with the rising population rate, do not only minimize the carrying capacity of land; they affect the traditional socio-economic system and the mode of living among the rural communities.

It is important to state that the intensity of communal conflicts in Sudan took place simultaneously with the crisis of environmental degradation during the period 1970 to the 1990s. For instance, between 1980-1998, there were 11 cases of bloody ethnic violence in Darfur. This indicates the frequency of ethnic conflicts in the region. Taking the case of Darfur, the causes of such conflicts in the region include: socio-cultural and ethnic differences, competition over natural resources, administrative and political competition, socio-economic changes, and internal and external influences.

As Darfur is characterized by several ethnic groups, researchers tend to attribute the causes of conflicts to these ethnic, cultural and racial differences (Ayyub, 1991). These differences, for some, create a sense of group superiority which hinders social interaction and worsens the gap of poor communication between the various ethnic groups in the region.

The people of Darfur are engaged in the traditional economic sector; they are divided into land cultivators and animal herders. Their lives depend totally on the natural environment. The problems of drought, desertification and the increasing population thus compel people to move from one place to another in order to sustain the needs of both human beings and animals. This cross-ethnic movement is either temporary or long-lasting. Several types of ethnic conflicts are thus precipitated by the competition for natural resources (land, pasture and water) not only within Darfur, but also between some groups in Darfur and ethnic group in other regions. Examples abound: the Arabs - Fur conflict 1989, the Rezaigat - Zaghawa conflicts of 1996 and seasonal conflicts between the confederation of Arab groups in Darfur and Kordofan and the Dinka in Bahr El-Ghazal (Doornbos, 1992).
Administrative and political rivalry among the ethnic groups in Darfur also cause conflicts. According to historical traditions, each ethnic group has its own ethnic homeland locally known as Dar. This practice does not only give the right of land monopoly to the respective ethnic groups, but also prescribes administrative and political roles for these group within their domains. Ethnic land ownership and the administration of land are interrelated. The ethnic ruler or chief is in charge of the ethnic land. Thus, newcomers or other ethnic groups which live in such lands have no right to own land or to play any major political or administrative role in their new settlements. A lot of conflicts have erupted between different ethnic groups as a result of the claim of a particular group to own or administer a land that was historically owned by another group. Examples are the Ma'aliya-Rezaigt conflict of 1968 and Arabs-Masaleet conflict of 1996.

Radical socio-economic changes which took place in the traditional African societies in the colonial and post-independence periods heavily contributed to communal conflicts in several African countries. These changes came on with the advent of modernization and western education. Eventually, these rapid and unplanned changes became responsible for the disintegration of established traditional systems in multi-ethnic environments and the creation of transitional individuals who became quite dangerous to communal peace (Mohammed, 1998; Mukhtar, 1998).

Internal influences which refer to the interference of the central government in ethnic policies and affairs also produce ethnic conflicts in Sudan. For instance, the decision taken by the central government in 1970 to abolish the native administration weakened the power and role of native administrators and opened the door for several disputes between ethnic groups (Al-Gulla, 1998). The central government's interference take several forms. In many cases, the central state creates leadership positions or leaders responsible for regional affairs. Sometimes, the central government is accused of backing a particular group against another. Furthermore, its interference is motivated by the need to gain political support or to oppose a political ideology. All these have produced several ethnic conflicts in the region.

External influences also play a crucial role in the ethnic situation in Darfur region. The region shares borders with three neighbouring countries: Libya, Chad and Central Africa. Conflicts in these neighbouring countries often spill over into the region. Examples are the Libya-Chad and Chad-Chad conflicts. Also, some ethnic groups immigrated from these neighbouring countries (like Chad) and settled in the region. These groups are often not tolerated by those with established historical roots in the region. The situation is made delicate by the fact that there are 24 Sudanese-Chadian inter-border ethnic groups that move in and out across the boundaries. These external factors intensify ethnic tensions and clashes, which are worsened by the flow of destructive weapons from outside the country, and prevalence of war culture in the region.
Socio-Economic Consequences of Ethnic Conflicts
Ethnic conflicts have had a devastating impact on the environmental and socio-economic potential of affected communities in Sudan. They have resulted in the massive destruction of properties and assets like settlements, buildings, furniture, livestock, cultivated lands, crops, and more important, hundreds of human lives. The table below reveals horrible figures of deaths and material losses of the last three ethnic clashes in the region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflicting Groups</th>
<th>Estimated Material Losses (Million Sudanese Pounds)</th>
<th>Number of Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fur-Arabs (1989)</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>1357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zaghawa-Rezaigat (1997)</td>
<td>1302.8</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masaleet-Arabs (1997)</td>
<td>318.4</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Files of Ethnic Reconciliation Conferences.

Ethnic disputes in the region often target the human resources of opposing parties. The conflicts thus constitute severe threats to the socio-economic stability of Darfur communities. The depth of the socio-economic problems and suffering of the affected communities reach the point that kinship solidarity and other local mechanisms fail to tackle the crises that emerge from ethnic violence. The situation produces a chain of socio-economic changes that precipitate the disruption of the family institution and social order.

These socio-economic changes can be summarized as:
1. Economic difficulties: Families lose their resources and means of income such as livestock, crops, assets, etc. This situation leads to other difficulties as economic hardship, poverty and unemployment.
2. Displacement: Through ethnic wars, many groups are forced to migrate because of the fear of violence and insecurity. Others lose shelter and assets and are left with no option than to flee to urban centres and other more secure places.
3. Social disintegration: Tribal fights lead to family disruption. Family members become separated in different places.
4. Change in gender roles: The new social conditions and difficulties brought about by ethnic wars, contribute in changing gender roles and inherited social traditions. Thus, individuals and families introduce new survival mechanisms within the context of their emergency situation. This factor often produces some negative elements.
5. Psychological effects: Genocide and torture which come as a result of ethnic conflict have negative psychological impacts on mental and physical health of affected individuals and families.
Conclusion
Addressing the crises generated by ethnic differences is the key to the socio-economic development of Darfur. Furthermore, regional development plans and strategies should give priority to the local specifications of the inherited ethnic cultures, traditional modes of living and the environment. These plans should be directed towards socio-economic transformation that would bridge the gap between the different groups and encourage greater social interaction in the region.

Multiple factors contribute to ethnic conflicts in Darfur and each conflict has its special characteristics. Thus, ethnic differences should not be taken for granted as the major cause of communal conflicts. For instance, conflicts erupt within groups that share the same ethnic identity. The effects of conflicts in such cases become compounded.

Relevant authorities should recognize the characteristics which define ethnic communities and evolve conflict-resolution and development policies around them. Some of these characteristics are summarized thus:

- Ethnic land ownership. This means that lands are owned by ethnic groups rather than the state.
- Deep-rooted ethnic diversity and the absence of an institutionalized civil system.
- Traditional modes of living and the dependence of communities on natural resources.
- Prevalence of environmental constraints which lead to acute competition for natural resources.
- Prevalence of several features of economic underdevelopment.
- The access to land, resources and political offices as major sources and indices of power, wealth, prestige and dominance.

There is also need to evolve an effective network of transportation, communication, and socio-economic development programmes. The above should be against the backdrop of an accountable political system capable of managing sensitive issues in a peaceful and progress-oriented manner. It should be a system that represents the different ethnic interests in the region, as well as negotiate and implement a multi-ethnic and balanced socio-economic development in the region. Moreover, the building of a sense of national unity is imperative, along with the conceptualization and establishment of a culture of peace to replace that of ethnic conflict and war.

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