

Darfur is more Complicated than Arab versus African

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There is an erroneous narrative in some parts of the media that all of Sudan can be divided into two groups; nomadic Arab tribes and sedentary African farmers.¹ The civil wars and rebellions in Sudan, according to this narrative, can be ascribed to conflict between them.

The call to action of this brief essay is to ask that the normal requirement of providing evidence of a credible motive when making accusations of criminality be reintroduced to analysis of the events in Darfur. Furthermore, that “Arab versus African” as a general motive underpinning the actions of all Darfurians be dropped as a sufficient discharge of this evidential burden. Evidence must be brought for each specific case.

The use of racial tension as a catch-all allows those making accusations of criminal behaviour to excuse themselves of a normal tenet of criminal law, namely of proving motive. Motive is supposedly proven in the general case- all Darfurian actors were driven by ethnic motivations- and so trickles down to apply to any given Darfurian without any responsibility for the accuser to provide real evidence or a coherent logic.

Instead of providing evidence as to why an actor might have ever wanted to do the things he or she is accused of, this simplistic narrative allows accusers to ascribe his or her motives to a racial dislike of the “other side”. And it is used against others, too. What are the leaders of the armed groups like the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) or the Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minnawi (SLA-MM) trying to achieve in the peace negotiations with the government? Ethnic domination for the Zaghawa over the Arabs in Darfur, of course. It’s an approach that is as easy as it is intellectually dishonest.

President Bashir’s tactics of divide and conquer would have been frustrated by forming two large united blocks, Africans and Arabs. He exacerbated tensions between them, but it was not a unifying exercise, as he sought rivalry within them also. Indeed, senior leaders from each of two of the most powerful groups that survived the Bashir era, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)

¹ (Power, 2004) is one example among many from the early 2000s. While most discussions now accept a more nuanced narrative for Darfur, present discussion of the RSF can quickly lead on to the history of the Janjaweed and then it is a short step back to the incorrect binary simplification. (Trew, 2019) is a recent example of how the issue is still not understood properly.

and JEM, explicitly state that their strength and much of their appeal comes from being ethnically inclusive.²

The RSF played a central role in removing President Bashir from office and JEM spent sixteen years in armed rebellion against him. These two groups ended up succeeding in part because they overcame the tribal and ethnic divisions Bashir fomented. The narrative of simple division between nomadic Arabs and African farmers is wrong.

This being the case, charges of violence simply on the grounds of ethnicity levelled against Darfurian groups should be seriously questioned in the absence of specific evidence.³ Ethnic cleansing may have been President Bashir's methodology, but without detailed evidence it cannot be imputed as a motive for the actions of others.

Two examples serve to make the point that there have been tensions and alliances between groupings at far deeper levels of detail than simply African versus Arab.

The first is from 2003 and looks at the early take-up of Bashir's call to arms. The African Tunjur people joined the government 'Arab' militias in 2003, fighting against the Masalit (sedentary African farmers), Zaghawa (nomadic pastoralist Africans), and Fur (both sedentary African farmers and some nomadic cattle herders) who were in revolt. The nomadic Arab Mahariya sub-tribe, meanwhile, refused to join the government militias and were penalised for it.⁴ Not only do the tribal-lines narratives not work, but neither do the farmers-versus-nomads explanations.

The second example, from 2006, shows the extent of the complexities of tribal relations. Within the Rezeigat tribe, Hemeti of the Mahariya sub-tribe and Musa Hilal of the Mahamid sub-tribe (who together later had one of the fiercest Darfurian rivalries) each signed separate non-aggression pacts with the African Zaghawa JEM rebel group. Different Mahariya leaders (including Hemeti) signed their own treaties with the African Fur SLA-Abdul Wahid (SLA-AW) group led by Abdul Wahid, as did An-Nur Ahmad's group (but not Musa Hilal's) from the Mahamid, while one group of mixed Mahamid and Mahariya under Ali Abundigat joined SLA-AW completely.

It is worth noting that there have been centuries of inter-marrying between the tribes so the lines are not always fixed, that not all Sudanese will identify with the ethnographic

² (Hamdan Dagalo, 2019) and (el-Faki, 2020). Abdel Rahim Hamdan Dagalo is the commander of the RSF, while Dr. Tahir el-Faki is the non-military leader of JEM.

³ (Flint, 2010) explains the intra-racial wars between Arab groups in Darfur.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the decisions made by different ethnic groups at the time, see (Flint, 2009 pp. 16-29).

nomenclature of sub-tribes and clans ascribed to them by western taxonomy, and that not all members of any given grouping think alike about any given topic.

This highlights the danger of imputing motives derived from ethnicity to explain alleged actions. It doesn't work when it comes to determining criminal legal liability nor even when trying to make assumptions on the balance of probability as to whether something happened. People don't normally commit war crimes or genocide, and that is as true for Arabs and Africans, or nomads and pastoralists, as much as for anyone else.

There may be some who have committed crimes, even war crimes, on grounds of ethnicity. Nothing here argues that for certain incidents this was not the case. But it is a serious and socially divisive charge to make, and far more detailed evidence is required to prove any specific case; let alone tag an entire region's worth of peoples as racist, which the narrative implicitly does.

The many accusations against Darfurian actors, such as the RSF, JEM, SLA-AW and SLA-MM, need to be looked at again. The onus is on those making the accusations to prove a credible motive on the part of the accused. Merely belonging to a Darfurian tribe or way of life over the last twenty years is not of itself proof of criminal intent.

The simplified ethnography below is by no means comprehensive for Darfur, let alone Sudan. What it does serve to show is that exclusive distinctions along the lines of Arab versus African, or nomad versus pastoralist, don't apply to Darfur. Unsurprisingly, among the millions of humans who live in Darfur, there are Arabs who farm and there are nomadic Africans, and the changing alliances and rivalries were much more localised than the Arab-African dichotomy allows for.

The ethnography names some of the tribes that have been more involved as actors in or influences over the key events in Darfur that have shaped the present situation. The names included are those that occur with more frequency in the histories of the Darfurian troubles, and as such the list serves a further purpose as a reference for those seeking context to the area's complicated ethnic tapestry. Many more groups and individuals than are listed here have been involved.

Collective Names

Abbala	Camel herders
Baggara	Cattle herders

Arab Tribes - Nomadic

Rezeigat	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nomadic Arabs divided broadly into two groups:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Northern Rezeigat, from Northern Darfur and Eastern Chad, who are Abbala. These were some of the most impoverished of all Darfurians, as after decolonisation the legal system failed to make a place for any type of land rights for these nomadic people.○ Southern Rezeigat, from South-East Darfur, who are mostly Baggara.• The Rezeigat are divided into sub-tribes, the largest of which are:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Mahamid. Musa Hilal comes from this sub-tribe, specifically the Um Jalul clan.○ Mahariya. Hemeti is one of the Mahariya leaders.○ Nawaiba.
Beni Halba	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nomadic Arab Baggara.• Traditionally had land rights in South Darfur.
Misseriya	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Semi-nomadic Arab Baggara from South Chad and South Darfur.• Fought with the Abbala Rezeigat over incursion onto Misseriya land.

Arab Tribes - Sedentary

Beni Hussein	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sedentary Arab farmers from Darfur.
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African Tribes - Nomadic

Zaghawa	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nomadic African pastoralists, with some sedentary farmers, from East Chad and Darfur.• JEM of Gibril Ibrahim and SLA-MM of Minni Minnawi are both from Zaghawa heartlands, though JEM positions itself as a pan-Sudanese movement and has members from both African and Arab tribes⁵.
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⁵ Verified by the author during interviews with JEM members during a visit to JEM's camps in South Sudan, 2014 and 2015.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The sub-tribes that have had the most impact on Sudan are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Kobe. They are mostly in Sudan, with a smaller population in Chad. This sub-tribe are the largest component of JEM and are nomadic Abbala. ○ Wogi. Minni Minnawi's tribe are almost all in Sudan and are sedentary. ○ Bideyat. A small number in Sudan, with the majority in Chad, including Chad's President Idriss Deby. They have provided a substantial number of fighters to JEM since 2003.
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African Tribes - Sedentary

Fur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sedentary African farmers, some nomadic Baggara, from Darfur. • SLA-AW of Abdul Wahid is predominantly Fur.
Masalit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sedentary African farmers, from West Darfur and East Chad.
Birgid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sedentary African farmers, from South Darfur. • Live in the same area as the nomadic Arab Misseriya.
Tunjur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sedentary farmers, originally possibly of Arabic descent but now integrated with the African Fur people, whose language they speak.
Gimir	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A large tribe in West Darfur, mostly aligned with JEM.
Borno	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Nigerian tribe from Nigeria's Borno State, present mostly in the cities of Darfur.
Fellata	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Nigerian tribe with large numbers in Darfur and the rest of Sudan, providing workers to numerous sectors including farming. They mostly avoided involvement in the Darfur conflict.