

## The politicisation of ethnicity: conflict and state building in Sudan

Is ethnic identity antithetical or complementary to the ideal of a nation-state?

### A. Introduction

#### I. Current context

On April 15<sup>th</sup> 2023, the capital of Sudan, Khartoum, was awoken by the sound of gunfire and warplanes flying above it<sup>1</sup>. Over the past few months, the country's people had been placing their faith for stability in the signing of a negotiated political transition treaty<sup>2</sup>. Yet this armed conflict, which has entered its third week at the time of writing, appears to be leading into a civil war (it has indeed). The altercation between Sudan's chief of military and head of state, General Abdul Fattah Al-Burhan, and the leader of Sudan's powerful paramilitary, Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, better known as "Hemeti," has incited this conflict. Hemeti has been head of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) since they were established in 2013<sup>3</sup>, when they emerged from the Janjaweed militias<sup>4</sup>, which responded directly to Sudan's at-the-time dictator Omar Al-Bashir<sup>5</sup>. In April 2019, Sudan's military leaders, General Al-Burhan and Hemeti, joined forces to overthrow President Omar Al-Bashir, ending his 30-year rule following a military coup in 1989. After his removal, a transitional government was formed under the Joint Transitional Sovereignty Council<sup>6</sup>, which was supposed to balance military and civilian powers. This government, including Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, was supported by civilian forces, particularly the Forces of Freedom and Change (FCC), who had led mass protests demanding civilian rule. However, in October 2021, a military coup led by Al-Burhan and Hemeti ousted Hamdok, consolidating military control and sidelining civilian stakeholders. Tensions between Al-Burhan and Hemeti escalated over power-sharing and the integration of Hemeti's paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) into the official military<sup>7</sup>. Al-Burhan became Chairman of the Sovereignty Council, with Hemeti, commanding a powerful paramilitary from Darfur, as Deputy Chairman. Despite attempts to resolve these issues, including a December 2022 agreement, the country remains in turmoil. Hemeti's RSF, numbering over 100,000 troops<sup>8</sup>, is now engaged in open conflict with Al-Burhan's military, further destabilizing Sudan and undermining hopes for political unity and civilian leadership.

#### II. Saliency to course question

<sup>1</sup>"People Are Terrified": Heavy Fighting Erupts in Sudan." Al Jazeera, 15 Apr. 2023

<sup>2</sup>Will Sudan's latest agreement bring an end to military rule? AL Jazeera, 6 Dec. 2022

<sup>3</sup>Factbox: Who are Sudan's Rapid Support Forces?. REUTERS, 15 Apr. 2022

<sup>4</sup>An Arab paramilitary group which emerged in the Western region of Darfur in the 1980s, responsible for the massacre of Darfuri rebels during the early 2000s War.

<sup>5</sup>Al-Bashir ruled the country for 30 years, following the coup of 1989. He relied on the use of private mercenary militias to assert his control and repress rebellion.

<sup>6</sup>Sudan forms 11-member sovereign council, headed by al-Burhan, Al Jazeera 20 Aug. 2019

<sup>7</sup>Will Sudan's latest agreement bring an end to military rule?. Al Jazeera, 6 Dec. 2022

<sup>8</sup>Factbox: Who are Sudan's Rapid Support Forces?. REUTERS, 15 Apr. 2022

In our quest to unravel the future course of this conflict, it is imperative to delve into the myriad of intricate and multifaceted factors that have contributed to this military and political impasse. Sudan is a country which has been scarred since its independence by a multitude of conflicts, which have increased<sup>9</sup> since Al-Bashir's 1989 coup. Throughout the 1990s, conflicts, at times reported as ethnically motivated rose, peaking in 2002 with the start of the Darfur War. Insurgents from the region rebelled against Al-Bashir's rule, who were repressed by the dictator's Janjaweed forces, provoking a conflict which killed hundreds of thousands and displaced over 2 million people<sup>10</sup>. Following this war, which eventually also contributed to the secession of South Sudan from Sudan in 2011<sup>11</sup>, the country's security and living standards have not improved, with the average person lives off of 2 USD or less a day<sup>12</sup>. Winds of change and hope for a civil, democratic rule spread when pro-democracy popular movements took to the streets in 2018<sup>13</sup>, chanting for the removal of Al-Bashir; but the only transition Sudan experienced since has been from one military rule to another.

### III. Presenting ethnic explanations to conflict & advancement of alternative argument

Ethnicity in Sudanese conflicts has been used repeatedly as the explanatory key motivating wars and lack of national unity. Indeed, Sudan is a very diverse nation: as a territory at the intersection of different lands and peoples<sup>14</sup>, it has hosted migration flows from all corners, transforming its social and cultural fabric in a mosaic of distinct identities<sup>15</sup>. Yet, while Sudan's diversity could represent one of the country's beauties, it is understood as a cause for conflict and lack of national unity. As is the case for many other African states, such social fragmentation finds its roots in Sudan's colonial history. Colonial structures of power used ethnicity to nurture rivalries and oppositions, as it eased the assertion of dominance in a "*divide et impera*" strategy<sup>16</sup>. This paper will assert that ethnic explanations, while frequently employed, are imprecise tools for deciphering conflicts and state formation in Sudan.

While it is clear so far that Hemeti and Burhan are clashing over a power struggle that is mostly political, I believe that it will be easy for commentators to once again apply ethnic frameworks to understand the conflict. Already, some<sup>17</sup> claim that Hemeti, representing Darfur's population and its pluri-decennial struggle, is moved by the will to revindicate regional interests. Indeed, while it is undeniable that the plurality of identities, religions, cultures, and ethnicities in Sudan has provided complications to peace and stability, I will argue that it isn't rivalry between ethnicities nor ethnic hatred *per se* that can be identified as the hindrance to state-building

---

<sup>9</sup>Musa, 2018, p. 170–73

<sup>10</sup>Black & Williams, 2010, Introduction

<sup>11</sup> This essay will not cover the events which led to the birth of South Sudan. For more on the secession, consult LeRiche, M., & Arnold, M. 2013

<sup>12</sup>World Bank Open Data 2021

<sup>13</sup> The spread of non-violent action: The case of the 2018–2019 revolution in Sudan. Freedom House report, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Ali, H.I., 2014, p. 381

<sup>15</sup>Sudan. 2023. In The World Factbook

<sup>16</sup>Berman, B.J., 1998 and Musa 2018

<sup>17</sup>UN News, 23 Apr. 2023

and peace processes. Rather, a politicisation of ethnicity started with colonialism<sup>18</sup>, then<sup>19</sup> exacerbated by Al-Bashir's rule, transformed tribalism into a proxy to indiscriminately justify and hide more complex tensions. Consequently, hostilities which are prominently political, economic, and resource-oriented, are misinterpreted and flattened into ethnic ones.

Roessler's theory, the "Coup-Civil War Trap"<sup>20</sup>, argues that governments in weak and fragmented countries are faced with two options: either include representatives from a rival ethnic group in government, and eventually have to face a coup led by that group; or, exclude rival ethnic groups' representatives in government, and face their rebellion or civil war. Using this framework to understand conflict and state failure in Sudan, Roessler could argue that the current political and military breakdown in Sudan is a consequence of the second option: a civil war led by the RSF representing through their military action ethnic/regional interests, being a consequence of their marginalisation in the decision-making over their process of integration within the military. Considering such an explanation as simplistic as it reduces political, religious and economic complexities to an ethnic and regionalist argument, we will go beyond such reasoning to fully grasp Sudanese and more broadly African conflict – both past and present. Moreover, it reproduces a colonial way of thinking of African societies as primitive and tribalist, failing to grasp how ethnic conflict is rather a proxy for other, non-ethnic tensions.

#### IV. Paper's structure

In the first section, I will provide an evaluation of Roessler's arguments, highlighting the fruitful contributions of his research towards understanding the causes and dynamics of coups and civil wars in African countries, while rejecting the aspects of his work that limit our awareness of the complexities of these phenomena in a more nuanced manner. Secondly, I will introduce Bruce J. Berman's research on ethnicity and identity politics in Africa<sup>21</sup>. Berman argues that tribalism has its roots in colonial rule, which utilised it to extend bureaucratic dominance by locally "dividing and ruling". This, in turn, led to the establishment of patrimonial politics and economies after colonial rule. Given Berman's framework of analysis, while being critical of issues which ought to be further discussed because incomplete, I will apply it to the Sudanese case, by incorporating work done by Sudanese scholars, who provide a clear primary explanation of the politicisation of ethnicity and tribalism in Sudan, and how it has warped the comprehension of the real causes behind conflicts, coups and civil wars in the country.

#### V. Research question

---

<sup>18</sup>Berman, B.J 2018

<sup>19</sup> Missing several dynamics: did not include for length.

<sup>20</sup>Roessler P., 2016

<sup>21</sup>Berman, B.J., 1998

Using Sudan as a case study, I will attempt to answer the issue of whether ethnic identity is antithetical or complementary to the ideal of a nation-state. I ask to what extent ethnicity is actually a central player in Sudanese politics, understood as the factor motivating, guiding, and shaping conflict and instability in states.

#### B. Roessler's coup-civil war trap

##### I. Ethnic Politics and State Power in Africa: the Logic of the Coup-Civil War Trap

Philip Roessler's Ethnic Politics and State Power in Africa: the Logic of the Coup-Civil War Trap (2016)<sup>22</sup>, is a seminal book covering years of work the author conducted through ground research<sup>23</sup> in understanding the reasons why leaders of weak states with underdeveloped administrative apparatus choose to include or exclude in their governments leaders from ethnic groups which are not their own. He individuates a quid-pro-quo dynamic between the two options according to which probable outcomes of either civil war or coups will follow. For Roessler, ethnic politics in sub-Saharan Africa explain the decision-making of state leaders who, faced with the trade-off between losing governance to rival coups or confronting rebels in a civil war, will choose the latter, as it will less likely challenge their ruling status. Indeed, while the costs of a civil war are high, they are not considered as high as those of being ousted. The way that a civil war can be pre-emptively chosen instead of a coup, is through strategic planning concerning the inclusion vis-a-vis the exclusion of the enemy, understood as the ethnic rival, in state bureaucracy. According to Roessler's data collection and empirical analysis<sup>24</sup>, he argues that there are two patterns which can be observed, that dictate a "politics of survival"<sup>25</sup>. The first one sees the cooperation at government level of the state leader with leaders of conflicting ethnic groups. This power-sharing and bureaucratic proximity will open doors for the latter to tie with the political networks of the former, allowing him to enter into contact with potential allies to conspire against the ruler. Roessler finds that when leaders accepted to work with ethnic rivals, they were eventually ousted by them, and lost control of the state. This tendency was eventually substituted by the opposite one described by Roessler, namely favouring the threat of civil war and rebellions from rival ethnic groups over the risk of deposition. Indeed, he shows that when leaders excluded any possibility of cooperation with networks of ethnic enemies, the probability of a consequent rebellion or civil war would be higher. The logic behind it accepts the fact that the leadership's status quo will be maintained after the war, even if it comes at the expense of mass military violence and the death of the country's people. Ultimately, excluding ethnic rivals in governance represents a strategy for coup-proofing the leader's regime and maintaining sovereignty.

Roessler's thesis is extremely valuable in allowing us to predict rulers' behaviours and anticipate the feasibility of coups and civil wars. Indeed, the framework is telling as to how rulers strategise political choices in

---

<sup>22</sup>Roessler P, 2016

<sup>23</sup>*Ethnic politics and state power in Africa*, lecture given at the Blavatnik School of Government by Roessler and Paul Collier on 8 Nov. 2017

<sup>24</sup>Roessler, 2011, charts

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 308

a self-survival logic: in the absence of a multi-party constitutional system, power-sharing among these forces and networks is regulated through mobilisations of violence as responses to “ethnic” disputes. The importance of ethnicity is central for Roessler, according to whom ethnicity is the most important factor in influencing power struggles, trumping economic, political, diplomatic or religious ones. For Roessler, the capacity of the country’s ethnic fragmentation and tensions to threaten the central government’s stability directly correlates with rulers’ choices, which revolve around a balancing of threats posited by potential ethnic rivals.

## II. Limits

While acknowledging the value of this book in contributing to African state-formation studies, there are limits to it - notably, in the eminence that ethnicity’s role plays in determining outcomes to security issues. While the ethnic element is overly used, it is not considered in its more telling aspect; namely in the ways “ethnicity” is used as proxy for other issues which get covered by simplistic tribalism arguments. Indeed, as I shall explore later through Berman, ethnic rivalries are generally just a façade covering patrimonial economic and political relations. As scholar Kate Baldwin discusses in her review<sup>26</sup> of Roessler’s work, the role of “big men”<sup>27</sup> in African societies is crucial in influencing the flow of goods and resources, thus creating networks of power which bypass the control of central governments. As big men are also the “leaders” of an ethnic group, by proxy, it is the patrimonial-economic relations dictating Roessler’s politics of ethnic inclusion or exclusion, rather than ethnicity in itself. Roessler’s argumentation on ethnicity depicts a society in which Africans blindly follow their ethnic leaders out of tribal belonging. Such a statement appears as oversimplifying, and, most importantly, removes political agency and intelligence from the populations of countries where such ethnic-driven coups or civil wars occur. If politics were only to follow ethnic lines, rulers’ behaviours would be completely irrelevant and have no saliency if not in their capacity to appeal to tribal discourses – which is something that is clearly disputable, given the abundance of popular protest movements which can be found in many of the countries cited by Roessler.

Baldwin concludes her review by opening and not closing the question of how sub-Saharan politics have *become* ethnically polarised - in interpretation and *de facto* - in the first place<sup>28</sup>. In the next sections, I will discuss the politicisation of ethnicity, in order to highlight how the misinterpretation of the pervasiveness of ethnicity’s role in the Coup-Civil War Trap relies on a misinterpretation of ethnicity’s proxy value in hiding economic clientelist networks, which are more likely the real basis of state instability, fragmentation, and violence.

## C. Debunking The Cruciality of ethnicity in Conflict

<sup>26</sup>Baldwin K., 2018

<sup>27</sup>From Driscoll, B. 20202: “[The big man] is the apex figure bestriding economic and political life [in sub-Saharan patrimonial states]. He is often the physical representation of personal – or Weberian patrimonial – rule: resources of the political system are his personal property; loyalty to him rather than to bureaucratic norms or procedures determines official position, and there is little if any distinction between a private and a public sector”

<sup>28</sup>Baldwin K., 2018, p. 157

## I. Ethnicity, Patronage and the African State: The Politics of Uncivil Nationalism

Bruce J. Berman's 1998 essay, Ethnicity, Patronage and the African State: the Politics of Uncivil Nationalism<sup>29</sup>, is one of the first studies on African politics and society which debunked the belief that patrimonialism and clientelism in Africa where an “indigenous” and unavoidable dynamic controlling the economic and political networks of sub-Saharan states, stemming from the ethnic fragmentation of their societies. Until then, African “politics of the belly”<sup>30</sup> had been described through Eurocentric, culturalist explanations of greed-oriented patronage relations. Different lines of thought had all associated patrimonialism to tribalism, without questioning where and how tribalism emerged, and why ethnicity in itself would and could have produced these corrupted networks. Berman's work contributes to a reframing of ethnicity as a social construct which became influential in the social identity of African states, only with colonialism. Indeed, Berman argues that prior to colonialism, societies were characterized by overlapping senses of identity and belonging, rather than by bounded ethnic clusters<sup>31</sup>. To facilitate their rule across the colonial territories, colonial powers had to decentralise their bureaucratic apparatus and did so by relying on networks with trusted local big men. Because of the absence in African sensibilities of an equivalent to European “nationalism” which dictated economic and bureaucratic relations, the colonisers invented and imposed a politics of tribalism, by overemphasising the value of the newly instated patrimonial big men, to whom local communities attached themselves. Such a feeling of attachment to a single individual who could guide a small political unit, fostered sectarianism and divisionism which, instead of taking the name of patronage, was regarded as ethnicization. In this way, colonial bureaucracy indirectly obtained an implicit legitimacy over units of linguistically and culturally similar people, by creating a belief among local communities that they were being ruled by their own leader while he was actually a façade covering his dependency on central authorities. The big man represented the community's independence on the surface, around which the aura of ethnic identity was shaped: “*Alien imperial states, did think ethnically and in so doing gave credence to a perceived social reality, which in turn they ought to manipulate and even mould*”<sup>32</sup>.

Once the African states gained independence, societies were left with a moral and material crisis, as ethnicity had produced an artificial identity, around which new dynamics of wealth and power revolved. Berman explains such process of ethnicisation in its external and internal effects. On an external, intra-group level, political tribalism developed, stemming from the politics of differentiation that had been created by colonizers' incentive towards competition and conflict over resource appropriation. Internally, within groups, moral ethnicization developed, as the community's sense of identity changed to adapt to new dynamics of power. Newly indigenous ethical codes and customs were established by the local big men according to their personal

<sup>29</sup>Berman B.J., 1998

<sup>30</sup>From Bayart, J-F 2019 “ The Politics of the Belly”: refers to a typically sub-Saharan African political-economic corruption, dictated by patrimonial networks of greed.

<sup>31</sup> Berman B., 1998, p. 310

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, p. 318

interest, and thus defined symbolical elements of identification of the group (the ethnicity). This legitimized the moral differentiation of one ethnicity against another. As the myth of nationhood developed throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, with community identity holding onto an imagined past to define its present, the same happened for these groups who, through ethnicity, found a sense of identity against an imposed modernity forcing breaks with pre-colonial pasts. The new economic superstructure based on patronage, hidden by the ethnic façade, determined a politics of sectarian identity, which fostered ethnic divisionism when conflict over resource and wealth appropriation occurred. This process can be called the politicization of ethnicity, through the ethnicization of patrimonialism, by which conflict deemed as “ethnic”, is actually economically driven.

Berman’s framework shows that using ethnicity as the filler-explanatory medium for describing state-building fragmentation, coups, and civil war is reductive as it doesn’t grasp the genesis which led to the imposition of ethnic identities on indigenously non-politically ethnicized communities. Most importantly, it shows that other, non-ethnic, but rather political, economic, and sometimes religious reasons are mobilized in leaders’ decision-making.

## II. Limits

While Berman’s work has positively contributed to the understanding of what he calls the “uncivilized nationalism”<sup>33</sup> that has been used as a framework to understand African state politics, there are limits to his research. It removes agency from the “ethnicised” communities, as they are depicted as completely voluble peoples who didn’t question the tribalisation that was imposed on them. On the other hand, when it comes to agency in the process of imagining communities, it is hard to identify when and to what extent all nations, cities, or any politicised community, perceived that the creation of a pseudo-historical narrative was in the making.

The next section will use Berman’s analysis to understand how the social construction of ethnicity in Sudan determined its politicisation, from the country’s independence to Al-Bashir’s rule, and what it entails for its civil wars and coups.

### D. Politicisation of ethnicity in sudan

#### I. Corroborating Berman through Hayder Ibrahim Ali

Since Sudan obtained independence in 1956 from the United Kingdom, it has undergone a long and tortuous process of nation-building, which still has not found stability to this day. Having to face an everpresent colonial heritage, tied with the lack of a national identity, and an everchanging social fabric caused by numerous immigration flows, the state-formation course has been far from simple and linear.

---

<sup>33</sup>The combination of ethnic-based patronage with lack of civil society setting impossible conditions for democracy.

In his article Whither Sudan?<sup>34</sup>, Hayder Ibrahim Ali, director of the Centre for Sudanese Studies, provides an overview of Sudan's convoluted path towards stability and offers an in-depth explanation of the problems associated with nation-building. It is telling that, without citing Berman's oeuvre, he makes parallel claims to his in describing the links between corruption, the state's capacity to unite, and the politicisation of ethnicity in Sudan. He explains that "*colonialism used cultural diversity for negative objectives, namely to help its colonial project by entrenching tribal affiliation and thus be able to 'divide and rule.'*"<sup>35</sup> Then he argues that this façade of self-administration used for indirect rule had been put in place to inhibit the formation of a national sensibility and, as a by-product, established networks of patronage following these ethnic lines. Indeed, this mechanism was maintained by the post-colonial state, as its regimes found that the fragmented constituency model was functional to keep on "dividing and ruling" the country. Thus, instead of working on the dismantling of tribal exclusionary belongings, the postcolonial Sudanese governments reinforced them by entrenching a party-politics based on regionalism and patrimonialism. Contrarily, the opposition, namely the Islamist parties, prior to overthrowing the civil government in 1989, gained momentum by campaigning for a one-party system, founded on the values of Islam<sup>36</sup>. Accounted that such a model escaped the configurations of pluralist Western democracies, they argued it would nevertheless provide peace and unity, as it would be based on the only country's common denominator: the quasi-universality of Islam's spread across Sudan.<sup>37</sup> As an overarching, uniting force, working as a social glue, it would dismantle the division caused by traditional party politics. Nevertheless, when the National Congress Party<sup>38</sup> realised that, even within Islam, a national homogeneity of its practice was missing, the regime once again resorted to "*divide et impera*" schemes, fuelling ethnic imaginations. Indeed, Islam in many Sudanese tribes is practiced in the Sufi Way<sup>39</sup> which contrasted with the precepts that Al-Turabi's party had in mind. As Sufism represented a strong identitarian factor in many Sudanese tribes, ethnicism was reinforced along the lines of religious creeds, which led the National Congress Party to ultimately have to respect and depend on religious sectarianism to stay in power. Now, instead of contesting it, they instrumentalised and encouraged religious affiliations to feed into ethnic constructions which facilitated rulership. The most important point to understand is that sectarianism, tribalism, and the clashes recorded as ethnic since Al-Bashir, have rather been disputes over resource and wealth accumulation. They have taken the name of tribal, due to the longstanding overlapping made between ethnic and economic struggles, which have been taken advantage of by governments to facilitate their rule by dividing wealth allocations regionally along

---

<sup>34</sup>Ali, H.I., 2014. Whither Sudan?

<sup>35</sup>Ibid, p. 318

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, p. 320

<sup>37</sup>U.S. Department of State, 2022

<sup>38</sup>Al-Bashir's party, founded by lawyer and scholar Al-Turabi in the 1970s.

<sup>39</sup>From Britannica Encyclopedia: "Sufism, mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God."

tribal lines. In addition, Ali argues that the more centralized the state is the more autonomously will local “administration” develop, by further relying on tribal networks and leaders.

Cases like the Darfur War exemplify this misunderstanding between ethnic and economic reasonings: as Al-Bashir’s government further centralized, the Sudanese provinces increasingly became intolerant towards the administrative and financial neglect of the government towards their needs. As droughts and desertification have frequently scarred the Darfur region, Khartoum’s failure in handling such crises set the conditions for unrest and insurgency to develop against the central government. In addition, because of the wealth distribution being unequal in Darfur between the Arabs (Humra) and the non-Arabs (Zurqa), the latter, living in extremely dire conditions, rebelled against the former to fight for a more balanced sharing of resources. This led to the Janjaweed’s massacre of the Fur, Zaghawa and Massalit peoples in the early 2000s.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, while ethnicity is an important factor in the understanding of this conflict, it is not the central one: ethnic hatred wasn’t the driving force of war, but wealth allocation and distribution were. Indeed, as scholar Mukhtar Musa (see below) points out, “*Disputes and conflicts [do] erupt in traditional tribal-based societies from time to time due to overgrazing or tribal reprisal, but they are usually limited and contained by tribal customs.*”<sup>41</sup> The lack of limitation and containment that was witnessed in the Darfur War shows that tribal explanations attributed to it have been conflated and that economic and resource-strategic ones have been overlooked.

While I acknowledge that ethnicity does play an influencing role in Sudanese politics, especially given Al-Bashir’s regime’s tendency to define “Sudan” and “Sudanism” through a rhetorical overemphasis of its exclusively Arabic nature<sup>42</sup>, it is usually a proxy for more material, gain-oriented goals.

## II. Contemporary issues

Abdu Mukhtar Musa, Sociology Professor at Khartoum University, argues in his article The Tribal Impact on Political Stability in Sudan<sup>43</sup> that there is a crucial difference between the concepts of “tribe” and “tribalism”. While the first is defined as “a social entity with values that tie the group and preserve its interests”, the second is rather a “base for identity implicating a sense of belonging, *in overriding other identities*, including a national one, which transforms the tribe into a political unit or polity”<sup>44</sup>. This distinction is fundamental in understanding how colonialism and then Sudanese politics have transformed a culturally apolitical factor – ethnicity – into a politicised one which has now become a proxy obscuring deeper causes of conflict and social fragmentation. When speaking of the conflicts in Darfur, Mukhtar Musa argues that “[w]ith the deterioration of the economic situation, (...) new [pseudo-ethnic political] groups became involved in the disputes either for political/partisan or electoral gain, or through the sale of weapons. Consequently, they used to instigate strife to

<sup>40</sup>Commanded by Al-Bashir against the insurgents.

<sup>41</sup>Musa, 2018, p. 168

<sup>42</sup>Ali, H.I., 2014. Whither Sudan? p. 387

<sup>43</sup>Musa, 2018

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 167

*divide tribes and to perpetuate conflict for their own interests.*<sup>45</sup> Mokhtar Musa's article helps us maintain Berman's argumentation on the social constructivism of ethnicity while allowing us to go beyond the limits of that 1998 text. The criticisms I posited against it are resolved, firstly, in providing agency to the colonised peoples, and, secondly, by allowing us to recognize the anthropological undeniability of tribal units in Africa as existing pre-colonial identities. In understanding ethnicity/the tribe as a social entity, versus the process of ethnicization/tribalization as a social and political construction, one can assert that indeed Sudan's social structure has a regionalist-identitarian element, that is not - or at least was not - a factor which would have necessarily obstructed a political feeling of national unity *in itself*. Instead, firstly because of colonialism, and later because of regimes with hyper-centralised governments in Khartoum, peripheral provinces felt unheard and underserved, legitimizing a tribal vindication of their political identities through patrimonial networks, which filled the administrative holes of governmental absence.

To contribute to this argumentation, it is insightful to look at what was recently discussed by Khalid Medani, Associate Professor of Political Science and Islamic Studies at McGill University, for Al Jazeera on the question of ethnicity in the current (Spring 2023) conflict<sup>46</sup>:

*"This is not so much an ethnic but a political crisis, reflected in the political and military competition between the two generals. However, I think the notion that this and other conflicts are ethnic, is something oftentimes incorrect. There is no correlation in Africa or Sudan between the density and the number of ethnic groups and conflict. So, as easy as it is to reduce this conflict to an inter-ethnic one, it's simply not the case. I would suggest that historically the issue in Sudan is an imbalance between the center and the periphery. This actually gives us a much better understanding not only of the present conflict but also of the last thirty years under the rule of Al-Bashir, which invested 60% of the national budget into the military. The remaining went into a very limited geographical triangle around Khartoum, which had to do with the concentration of state power at the centre - something which dates back to the colonial era. Understanding that the conflict is an historical one between the center and the periphery can help understand the conflict between Burhan's army, that is manned by many from the central part of the country, and Hemedi's paramilitary, which comes from the so-called periphery but does not represent the majority of Darfuris. Looking at the conflict from the center-periphery vantage point also helps us understand the issues and conflicts in Eastern Sudan as an example of culturally, politically, economically and historically very marginalized areas: Southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile. Understanding it as a long history of imbalance between the center*

---

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 169

<sup>46</sup>Transcript is adapted for reading by the author.

*and the periphery, both in terms of the absence of representation of those in the margins, but also the absence of economic and infrastructural investment, is really important.*<sup>47</sup>

Additionally, as discussed by founder and president of Sudan Policy Forum Waleed Madibo, in the same Al Jazeera interview, resources and wealth allocation represent the most crucial driving force in Sudanese conflict. Indeed, the tribal or regionalist argument can be quickly overlooked, as there are reports that Hemeti is siding with the Russian Wagner paramilitary group to conduct territorial explorations in southern Darfur to extract gold to be sold to Russia and the UAE.<sup>48</sup> This economic power gives Hemeti and the RSF a clearly different face which exposes the “ethnic” appearances of conflict, as a financial, profit matter. It is also telling, that the RSF’s recruits are not soldiers fighting for ideology or ethnicity, but are instead mercenaries, mostly from the poor areas of Darfur. In this perspective, going back to Berman’s framework, Hemeti can be considered not only a general but a patrimonial big man, whose trust and economic generosity dictate the allegiance of thousands of fighters from his home region, Darfur.

#### E. Conclusions

I have explored the question of ethnicity’s role in state formation and stability by looking at Sudan’s recent history which numerous conflicts and coups have scarred, oftentimes labelled as ethnic or tribal in their *casus belli*.

By discussing Roessler’s “Coup-Civil War Trap”, we have understood the logic of tradeoffs that leaders in weak states face when considering whether to include or exclude representatives of ethnic rivals in their governmental network. His research tells us that inclusion leads to coups, and exclusion leads to civil war. We have accepted this logic but nuanced it by debunking the idea that ethnicity is the main informative cue used by leaders in decision-making and that elements tied to economic and clientelist networks prevail. To argue this, I employed Berman’s framework of analysis to understand ethnicization as a colonial product that has led to the establishment of patrimonial relations and sectarianism across the country. We have seen how this phenomenon is applicable to Sudan, in reviewing its postcolonial history which provides examples of how regimes used the “divide and rule” mechanism to secure their sovereign position. Specifically, ethnic divisionism is welcomed by rulers because, as they recognise that the country is fragmented in its resource and wealth distribution in a way that benefits the centre over the peripheries, using tribal argumentations on the lack of unity of the country makes it easier to attack political and economic enemies.

Current and past conflict has been motivated by wealth-oriented aspirations, of which Hemeti’s behaviour is an example. While one could argue that he started a civil war because of being excluded by

<sup>47</sup>How Are Sudan’s Resources Linked to the Conflict?, Al Jazeera, 28 Apr. 2023

<sup>48</sup>Central African Republic/Sudan, Africa Intelligence, 2023 and Exposing the Financial Network behind Hemeti’s RSF in Sudan, Global Witness, 2023 and In Sudan, Wagner’s Shadow Looms behind General Hemeti, The Africa Report, 2023 and Hemeti, the Sudanese general fighting for absolute control, The Financial Times, 2023.

Al-Burhan in decision-making over the process of integration of the RSF in the official army, we refute that his interest was to revendicate a regionalist or ideological stance. In parallel, Burhan didn't exclude him because he considered Hemeti a representative of Darfur, but because of the awareness that his motivations to rule were economic and tied to his international interests with players in the commerce of gold.

The politicisation of ethnicity is a social construct which can be manipulated in different directions. The way it has been mobilised in Sudan is an example of how tribalisation processes inhibit nationhood. Nevertheless, this should not obstruct us from using decolonised and non-Eurocentric frameworks of seeing ethnicities as identity units which are separate from political processes of ethnicisation. In this way, nationhood could be complemented by the diversity which comprises Sudan and many other sub-Saharan states, making their mosaic identities not antithetical to state-building.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ali, H. I. (2014). Whither sudan? *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 7(3), 380–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2014.932110>

Baldwin, K. (2018). Ethnic politics and state power in africa: The logic of the coup–civil war trap. By philip roessler. Cambridge: cambridge university press, 2016. 418p. \$99. 99 cloth, \$34. 99 paper. *Perspectives on Politics*, 16(1), 156–157. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717004108>

Bayart, J.-F. (2009). *The state in Africa: The politics of the belly* (2nd ed). Polity.

Berman, B. J. (1998). Ethnicity, patronage and the african state: The politics of uncivil nationalism. *African Affairs*, 97(388), 305–341. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/723213>

Black, D. R., & Williams, P. D. (Eds.). (2010). *The international politics of mass atrocities: The case of Darfur*. Routledge.

Bleck, J. (2020). Philip roessler. Ethnic politics and state power in africa. The logic of the coup-civil war trap. Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2016. 389 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. \$110. 00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1107176072. *African Studies Review*, 63(1), E11–E12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.72>

*Central african republic/sudan: Wagner suspected of backing hemeti from car.* (2023, April 28). Africa Intelligence. <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2023/04/28/wagner-suspected-of-backing-hemeti-from-car,109949863-art>

Chotiner, I. (2023, April 20). The failed “coup-proofing” behind the recent violence in sudan. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/the-failed-coup-proofing-behind-the-recent-violence-in-sudan>

Collier, P., Chauvet, L., & Hegre, H. (2008). *The challenge of conflicts*. Copenhagen Consensus Center. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25504>

Driscoll, B. (2020). Big man or boogey man? The concept of the big man in political science. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 58(4), 521–550. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X20000579>

El-Affendi, A. (n.d.). *The Darfur conflict revisited: Lessons un-learned*. Retrieved 8 May 2023, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/2/26/the-darfur-calamity-revisited-lessons-un-learned>

Erdmann, G., & Engel, U. (2007). Neopatrimonialism reconsidered: Critical review and elaboration of an elusive concept. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 45(1), 95–119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14662040601135813>

Etefa, T. (2019, June 18). *Explainer: Tracing the history of Sudan's Janjaweed militia*. The Conversation. <http://theconversation.com/explainer-tracing-the-history-of-sudans-janjaweed-militia-118926>

*Ethnic politics and state power in Africa*. (n.d.). Retrieved 8 May 2023, from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvreXf\\_SezM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvreXf_SezM)

*Exposing the financial network behind Hemedti's RSF in Sudan*. (n.d.). Global Witness. Retrieved 8 May 2023, from <https://en/campaigns/conflict-minerals/exposing-rsfs-secret-financial-network/>

*How are Sudan's resources linked to the conflict?* (n.d.). Retrieved 8 May 2023, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/inside-story/2023/4/28/how-are-sudans-resources-linked-to-the-conflict>

*In Sudan, Wagner's shadow looms behind General Hemeti*. (2023, April 20). The Africa Report.Com. <https://www.theafricareport.com/302166/in-sudan-wagners-shadow-looms-behind-general-hemeti/>

Jok, J. M., & Hutchinson, S. E. (1999). Sudan's prolonged second civil war and the militarization of nuer and dinka ethnic identities. *African Studies Review*, 42(2), 125. <https://doi.org/10.2307/525368>

Kaballo, S. A. (1989). Sudan: Coup in khartoum: will it abort the peace process? *Review of African Political Economy*, 44, 75–78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4005842>

Keese, A. (2016). Group identifications: African and global categories. In *Ethnicity and the Colonial State* (pp. 36–83). Brill. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv2gjwxf.6>

Kiser, E., & Sacks, A. (2011). African patrimonialism in historical perspective: Assessing decentralized and privatized tax administration. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 636, 129–149. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41328555>

Koos, C. (2022, May 10). *Kiir and Machar: Insights into South Sudan's strongmen*. The Conversation. <http://theconversation.com/kiir-and-machar-insights-into-south-sudans-strongmen-182522>

LeRiche, M., & Arnold, M. (2013). *South Sudan: From revolution to independence*. Oxford University Press.

*Military takeover ends Bashir's rule, but not protests.* (n.d.). Retrieved 8 May 2023, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/4/11/sudans-military-seizes-power-from-president-omar-al-bashir>

Musa, A. M. (2018). The tribal impact on political stability in sudan. *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 11(1/2), 167–188. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48602241>

*'People are terrified': Heavy fighting erupts in Sudan.* (n.d.). Retrieved 8 May 2023, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/15/heavy-gunfire-heard-south-of-sudanese-capital-khartoum>

Pilling, D., & Schipani, A. (2023, April 21). Hemeti, the Sudanese general fighting for absolute control. *Financial Times*.

Reuters. (2023, April 15). Factbox: Who are sudan's rapid support forces? *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/who-are-sudans-rapid-support-forces-2023-04-13/>

Roessler, P. (2011). The enemy within: Personal rule, coups, and civil war in africa. *World Politics*, 63(2), 300–346. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887111000049>

Roessler, P. G. (2016). *Ethnic politics and state power in Africa: The logic of the coup-civil war trap*. Cambridge University Press.

Siddiqui, V. P., Usaid. (2021, October 26). *Sudan's toppled PM taken back home, military sources say*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/26/protesters-in-sudan-return-to-the-streets-against-military-coup>

Sudan. (2023). In *The World Factbook*. Central Intelligence Agency. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/sudan/>

*Sudan forms 11-member sovereign council, headed by al-Burhan.* (n.d.). Retrieved 8 May 2023, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/8/20/sudan-forms-11-member-sovereign-council-headed-by-al-burhan>

*Sudan latest: Tens of thousands on the move; spectre of ethnic clashes, hunger draws closer | UN News.* (2023, April 28). <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/04/1136172>

*Sudan's Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok resigns from military-controlled government after deadly pro-democracy protests.* (n.d.). Sky News. Retrieved 8 May 2023, from <https://news.sky.com/story/sudans-prime-minister-abdalla-hamdok-resigns-from-military-controlled-government-after-two-reportedly-killed-in-pro-democracy-protests-12507986>

*Sudan's spreading conflict (Iii): The limits of darfur's peace process.* (2014, January 27). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/sudan-s-spreading-conflict-iii-limits-darfur-s-peace-process>

SudanTribune. (2023, May 7). *Russia's bloody hands in Sudan.* Sudan Tribune. <https://sudantribune.com/article273697/>

*Sufism | definition, history, beliefs, significance, & facts | britannica.* (2023, March 30). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sufism>

*The spread of non-violent action: The case of the 2018–2019 revolution in sudan.* (n.d.). Freedom House. Retrieved 8 May 2023, from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2022/civic-mobilizations-authoritarian-contexts/Sudan-s-summary>

Tounsel, C. (2023, April 17). *Sudan crisis explained: What's behind the latest fighting and how it fits nation's troubled past.* The Conversation. <http://theconversation.com/sudan-crisis-explained-whats-behind-the-latest-fighting-and-how-it-fits-nations-troubled-past-203985>

U.S. Department of State. (n.d.). *2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sudan.* <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sudan/>

*Will Sudan's latest agreement bring an end to military rule?* (n.d.). Retrieved 8 May 2023, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/inside-story/2022/12/6/will-sudans-latest-agreement-bring-an-end-to-military-rule>

*World bank open data.* (n.d.). World Bank Open Data. Retrieved 8 May 2023, from <https://data.worldbank.org>

1) المعترك القبلي: نزاع أرضي أم إنحباس عقلي – (ولاية شرق دارفور نموذجا) - صحيفة الراكونية. (C.E., November 30). <https://www.alrakoba.net/391292/%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%b9%d8%aa%d8%b1%d9%83-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%82%d8%a8%d9%84%d9%8a-%d9%86%d8%b2%d8%a7%d8%b9-%d8%a3%d8%b1%d8%b6%d9%8a-%d8%a3%d9%85-%d8%a5%d9%86%d8%ad%d8%a8%d8%a7%d8%b3-%d8%b9%d9%82%d9%84/>

F.