

INTRODUCTION

Taming Unknowns in Sudan



Man who lives in a world of hazards is compelled to seek for security. ... The quest for certainty is a quest for a peace which is assured, an object which is unqualified by risk and the shadow of fear which action casts. For it is not uncertainty per se which men dislike, but the fact that uncertainty involves perils of evil.

John Dewey (1929: 3, 6)

‘We have no dinner tonight’, Hamda tells her children quietly. When her twelve-year-old son complains bitterly, she replies in a low, sharp voice, ‘We are avoiding eating’ (lit. avoiding the food, *nataḡannab al-’akl*). Hamda’s food reserves are running low. To ‘avoid eating’ means eating less, and skipping some meals to delay the complete exhaustion of food supplies. It is a strategy of rationing that people such as Hamda, who usually have food, employ. It thus differs from hunger (*ḡiŕ*), which is a constant companion of the poor. Hamda does not know whether her supplies will run out completely this time. If God wills, they will eat. Now they are forgoing a meal. For how long they must do so is unknown. What next? How long can this situation last before the consequences become serious?

Anxiety increases as staples decrease. Running out of food is an existential situation experienced by many Rashaida women in a small settlement in the Lower Atbara area of north-eastern Sudan. In 2009 and 2010, the main period covered by this book, men were often absent due to labour migration

or gold mining in nearby wadis. What should a woman do as her flour stock runs low? Will her husband return from gold mining soon and, most importantly, will he return with money? Or will he return empty-handed, and perhaps even with debts? How do women deal with such uncertainties? And how do they provide food for their children?

Uncertainty is a universal phenomenon, a lived experience, an unease about acting in view of an unpredictable future. Uncertainty is a rendering of realities, which can lead to innovations and creative solutions, but also can debilitate people through fear or unease, impairing their ability to act. Conceived broadly, uncertainty is logically an element of all action, because outcomes are always unknown and indeterminate. While uncertainty is inextricably present in all human enterprises, plans and aspirations, it is not evenly distributed across time and space. It is not a uniform property of action; rather, how it is perceived, experienced and dealt with varies.

This treatise had its genesis in my observation that the daily affairs of Rashaida in Sudan occur within a strikingly limited range of predictability. I often sensed an enormous uncertainty about what was going to happen next, a pervasive anxiety about the future. Perhaps this made a particular impression on me because I had come from Germany, where people often take for granted that the outcomes of actions are more or less predictable, and where state institutions still to a large extent produce a sense of security by issuing relatively reliable prognoses and insuring people against misfortunes such as unemployment, disability or debilitating old age.¹

This study examines how Rashaida in a marginal area of Sudan experienced various unknowns and how they dealt with such situations. Reference to 'Rashaida' in the Sudanese discourse denotes pastoral people who migrated to north-eastern Sudan in the mid-nineteenth century from the Gulf States and were classified by colonial administrators as a landless settler tribe (MacMichael 1922: 345; W. Young 1996: 101–6; Bushra 2005: 277–78; Pantuliano 2005: 12). In view of their difficulty in accessing not only grazing land but also land for rain-fed farming and settlement, and their reliance on agreements with landowning groups (Pantuliano 2005: 15, 16; W. Young 2008), settlement is still a fairly recent phenomenon among Rashaida in Sudan. It gained impetus as from the 1970s and 1980s many gradually began to move away from a pastoral economy to other sources of income, such as farming, labour migration to the Gulf, trade and, most recently, gold mining.

In the Lower Atbara area of north-eastern Sudan, the overall circumstances of Rashaida appear dismal and precarious. Many Rashaida have more or less settled there in the past decade. They mostly live in tents or newly erected huts or adobe houses on the parched hinterlands, the fruitful agricultural land near the river Atbara already occupied by sedentary farming communities. Resources are scarce, infrastructure (electricity, roads, deep

wells, etc.) and public services are lacking. While artisanal gold mining offers new income opportunities and some have literally found a gold vein, it also exposes people to new uncertainties about their livelihoods. Drawing on my fieldwork among Rashaida in the Lower Atbara area in the northern River Nile State and the observed limited predictability of daily life, this study analyses different kinds of uncertainty and how they relate to agency.

Uncertainty refers to the limited ability to predict even the immediate future – that is, to engage it prudently and with foresight in a more calculative mode and to enact certain visions of what will happen. I show that the degree of reflexive enquiry with which people in Sudan act is decisive for the perception and management of situational unknowns. Reflexivity here denotes critical probing about premises and grounds of interpretations and actions. It involves self-awareness when attention shifts from doing something to the conditions under which it is done. It concerns how people conceive of and evaluate relationships between objects out there (reality) and representations (images). For example, reflexivity may be low when people view the representation of something as faithful to their own experience, but they may also stumble upon a distance between representations and their experience, triggering increased reflexivity. I do not see reflexivity as solely constituting an irritating problem for knowledge claims but also as an opportunity, a way of engaging with the world that enables one to refine what is known and generates new forms of knowledge (Woolgar 1988).

Differentiating between engagements with varying degrees of reflexivity thus allows me to qualify subtypes of uncertainty – from a situation where uncertainty is bracketed and the existence of a reality is taken for granted without sceptical examination, to one where there is radical uncertainty about all entrenched things. Relevant questions for the discussion thus arise. What allows people to take social norms or organizational forms for granted most of the time as a common basis for interactions? When do they become aware that what recently was accepted as a given is no longer so, and begin to question the validity of social arrangements and associated mores?

The short vignette that opened this chapter provides a glimpse into this complex field by highlighting a source of existential uncertainty and pointing to seemingly converging but also contradictory ways of engaging it. In the above situation, Hamda avoids preparing some meals in order to conserve the flour stock for as long as possible. It is a pressing problem and she does not question its premises reflexively. She invokes ideas of a divine will and preordination, which delegate responsibility for events to an all-knowing, inscrutable Islamic God. At the same time, Hamda actively, self-reliantly and pragmatically engages the uncertainty through reciprocal exchanges with other women in the settlement (see chapter 4). Sometimes she also consults a fortune-teller, who lays out cowrie shells to predict when Hamda's

husband will send money from Kuwait or whether one of her sons-in-law will return with money from the gold mines – a practice that her brother-in-law, the sheik and local imam, condemns as spiritistic and backward. This indicates that uncertainties are not always passively endured – Hamda and other Rashaida actively and versatily engage and process daily unknowns so typical of life in rural Sudan.

In this book I explore how people experience incertitudes – from gruelling everyday uncertainties to life-threatening dangers – and how this relates to situational needs to cooperate and survive. I use the ethnographic data presented in my four empirical chapters to qualify (sub)types of uncertainty and the ways in which individual people manage them. As a contribution to an anthropology of uncertainty, I theorize how lacking knowledge about the present and the future is processed in relation to different degrees of confidence in reality and varying needs for action. To that end, I examine situations and the configuring relationships between uncertainty, reflexivity and forms (i.e., rules, conventions, lists, agreements, norms, etc.), the latter utilized as supports for action and coordination. The stability of forms – their ability to hold together – hinges on how they are invoked, used and taken for granted, or doubted, critiqued and challenged in interaction.

Mary Douglas's work on the perception of dangers/risks is a good starting point for conceptualizing an anthropology of uncertainty. Thinking along these lines means elaborating various everyday practices, methods and non-/probabilistic techniques through which people address and seek to exert control over the uncertainties of life – individually and collectively. It also means outlining those things which ordinary people take for granted in their management of everyday unknowns and those moments in which once self-evident things are critically appraised to renegotiate a broader range of options. A basic assumption is that uncertainties need to be processed and that people thereby 'invest in forms' (Thévenot 1984): they seek to establish certain elements as binding orientations for actions, that is, as something they can refer to when interacting and when disputes arise. In my theoretical discussion below, I show that all forms are to some extent selective and arbitrary, which makes them vulnerable to denunciation. The indeterminacy of being cannot be tamed entirely. Yet, extreme kinds of uncertainty, where all epistemic foundations are lost or distrusted, can be translated into something more manageable, such as insecurities or risks, where at least some points of reference are assumed to be stable.

To provide the reader with an overview of how this book addresses gaps in knowledge and the establishment of forms, or the more established theoretical terms of contingency and agency, this introductory chapter first presents an overview of the different types of uncertainty and forms encountered in the

ensuing empirical chapters. Then, I present the contexts that situate and qualify the experience of existential unknowns in Sudan.

The Argument

This study focuses on the creation, confirmation or critique of forms as semantic devices to deal with uncertainties. I am inspired by the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey and his approach to problems and problem-solving through experimentation. In his famous 1896 text, 'The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology', Dewey criticized those psychologists of his day who conceived of action mechanistically – that is, as a series of separate events. He provided a typical example of such compartmentalization of action: a child sees a bright candle, reaches for it with a hand, feels the pain caused by the hot flame, and consequently withdraws the hand. Dewey argued that the differentiation of different phases of action can only result from exercising reflexivity after the act, because people lack a complete conception of the end until they have a complete grasp of the course of action that will take them there. In other words, when people experience something as problematic, they are already outlining what is problematic and thus are beginning to articulate a path to a solution. Applying this to my study means that uncertainty cannot be disassociated from the forms developed to address it nor from the ends in view, because as people test whether forms work, they are simultaneously enquiring whether an action can clear up the uncertainty or whether the problem itself, or some of its aspects, have to be reformulated, whether new questions have to be posed and whether new scenarios have to be developed.

Conceiving of action as testing and experimenting as Dewey did means accounting for the principal openness of outcomes; I adopt such a point of departure for this study of how uncertainties are managed. I have not only adopted a pragmatist paradigm from which I argue but also have devised a special form for the book, which I hope the reader will find at least suggestive and somewhat innovative for what could otherwise have been a classical anthropological study. My method of presentation is one of progressive contextualization: context is not behind or beyond a situation, but is in the situation itself. Although I do set the stage and prepare an argument about marginalization and uncertainty in Sudan, I purposely do not primarily provide the cultural context to explain how people live elsewhere, nor do I describe who Rashaida are, what they believe, what their institutions, organizational structures and norms are, and what their history is. Rather, in this account of uncertainty, I delve into practices in various situations and then untangle what was taken for granted in actions and to which institutions or moral understandings people deferred. I try to give only as much background

as is needed to understand what is happening in the situations under scrutiny, to avoid the impression that certain effects were caused directly by this or that factor. This enables me to retain some uncertainty in the text.

I begin by analysing a delimited event that occurred on a single day (chapter 2), then move on to an income-generating activity (chapter 3), and then to broader concerns of everyday life – hunger and sickness (chapters 4 and 5). I consider various kinds of forms and explore how people mobilize and reflect on them, and thereby I intend to create a novel kind of ethnography, an ethnography of experience and uncertainty that gradually takes its shape as readers follow along through different situations and contexts that comprise people's lives in this part of the world.

Overall, this book articulates its concern over how uncertainties are processed in a situation marked by scarcity, transformations and ruptures in Sudan in seven chapters: an introduction, a theoretical road map, four empirical chapters and concluding reflections. The empirical chapters cover disparate spatial and temporal horizons and focus on the relationships between the main actors: to wit, a charity, the sheikhs and the entire settlement, gold miners and detector users, neighbouring women, and sick family members and their extended kin. The focus on how the various main actors manage indeterminacies also draws attention to other principles of sociality in the different chapters: interactions at a communal level between sheikh and villagers (chapter 2), patron–client and other professional relationships among male gold miners working outside the settlement (chapter 3), reciprocity in the immediate neighbourhood among women, and normative expectations of kin solidarity in caring for the sick (chapters 4 and 5). The chapters are organized to give a topical overview of existential unknowns typical of daily life in this part of Sudan – health and illness, food supply and hunger, uncertainties of income, and a controversy about the distribution of incoming aid – and to outline people's means of managing them. However, I have selected the concrete situations and occurrences – the ethnographic core of each empirical chapter – based on a method of theoretical sampling: they relate and respond to my theoretical propositions concerning the relationships between uncertainty, reflexivity and the stability of forms.

This book should therefore perhaps not be judged as a conventional ethnography. It neither aims at a systematic presentation of the lives, social forms and historical circumstances of Rashaïda in the Lower Atbara area of north-eastern Sudan, nor is it primarily a contribution to regional studies, working out the hidden logics and peculiar dynamics of certain remote places in Sudan. This book is about a problem, and it is rooted in the problem, not in the people or the place. To some extent I am writing within a long-established tradition of anthropological scholarship by focusing on a 'small place' – that is, a small settlement and its surroundings in the hinterlands of

the Lower Atbara area of north-eastern Sudan – but the ongoing concern at the heart of my investigation is a fundamental issue: a universal dimension of the human condition, namely, the uncertainty of human existence. While I locate this at a specific site and at a historical moment, the topic resonates and articulates with comparable sites where people are struggling with hunger, poverty, disease and insecurity at the margins of dysfunctional states without working welfare structures; it serves as a reminder of human vulnerability and a common humanity. My main contribution thus is to the social study of uncertainty by way of an ethnographic study in Sudan.

This approach seeks to capture a broad spectrum of situations – between a situation where vexing qualms about priorities and values emerge, which can mount a challenge to existing orders, and a situation where uncertainty is bracketed and actions presume a shared interpretation of reality. I contend that the degree of reflexive enquiry is relevant in interpreting and acting upon situational unknowns. Subtypes of uncertainty and the responses they elicit can be differentiated based upon the degree of reflexivity with which the knowledge in the situation itself is questioned. The burden of my argument is to demonstrate the way in which a focus on how forms are engaged in situations, whether they are reflexively interrogated or taken as unquestioned elements of reality, makes things visible that other theoretical approaches and propositions may take for granted.

Figure 0.1 depicts an abstract relational model to capture, approximately, these connections. The array consists of two axes: the Y-axis stands for reflexivity, the X-axis for uncertainty. Moving up the axes means increasing either uncertainty or reflexivity. The diagonal from bottom left to top right indicates the stability of forms and represents an ideal typical correlation between uncertainty and reflexivity: when both are high, forms are very unstable, whereas low or zero uncertainty and reflexivity imply a high stability of forms. The diagonal extends between a bracketing of uncertainties and a consensus on knowing one version of reality at the lower left, and controversies, that is, people's realization that their interpretations of reality differ, at the upper right. These connections are explored in this study. Radical uncertainty in this model denotes that differences and doubts are allowed to surface to such an extent that they destabilize and deconstruct 'reality' and its sense of objectivity and open up a situation to renegotiation. Here is where we can locate a revolutionary potential.

I must introduce a caveat here. Examining the figure may imply that uncertainty and reflexivity can be measured or are in a necessary correlation. This, of course, is not the case. With this visualization I do not present a mathematical model that can measure the intensity of the experience of uncertainty; rather, my thinking is relational. My goal is to draw attention to the relationship between uncertainty, reflexivity and the stability of forms.

The four large circles in the figures highlight specific configurations of these three analytical categories and explore their ability to confirm or challenge orders; investigating these connections is at the heart of the different empirical chapters. However, the location on the figure is not meant to suggest that certain phenomena inflict more or less stress upon people. When a risk is understood as life-threatening, most Rashaida would find it more vexing than a radical unknown. Extreme uncertainty due to the lack of knowledge about what is actually at stake produces disorientation, whereas conceiving something as existential danger produces orientation for actions.

Figure 0.2 situates the empirical chapters of the book (chapters 2–5) in the relational model. Chapter 2 (charity) covers the emergence of the most radical – that is, revolutionary – forms of uncertainty in the book. Suddenly, during a distribution of aid by a charity, villagers cease to cooperate with

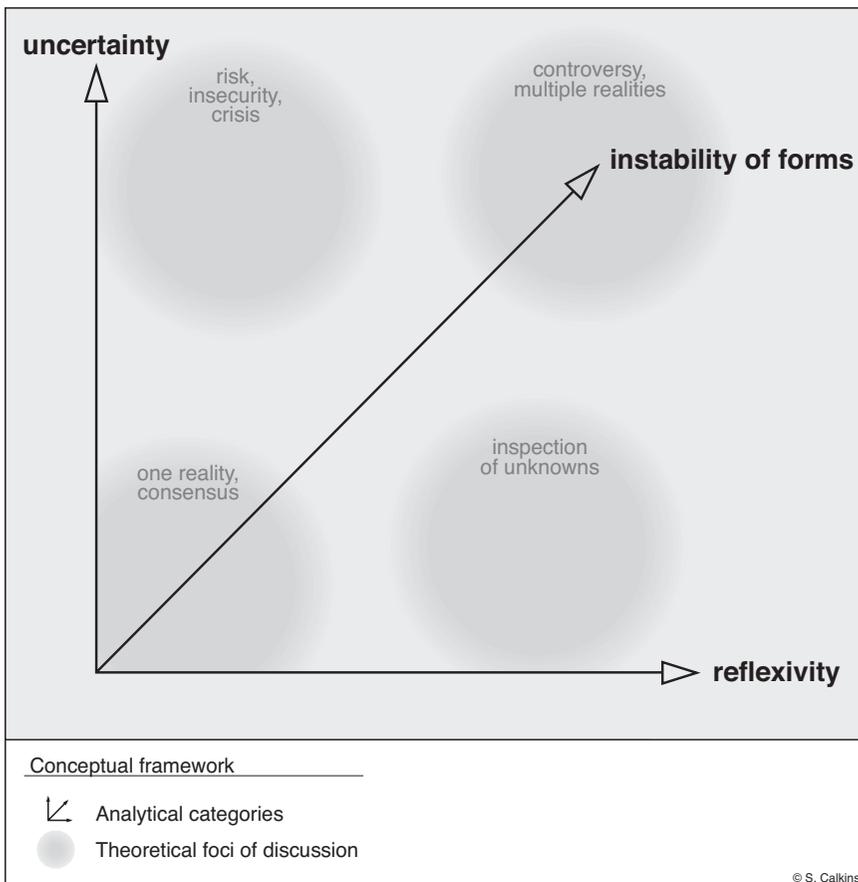


Figure 0.1 Uncertainty, reflexivity and forms: a relational model

the sheikhs and reflexively question forms (social categories, lists, rules of distribution, etc.), openly criticizing what is taking place. This shift from lower to higher reflexivity and uncertainty in the ethnographic narrative is marked by an arrow in the figure; and an increasing fussiness and instability of the form. The situation results in chaos and a challenge to the established order. In contrast to the controversies dealt with in chapter 2, chapter 3, on gold mining, deals with agreement. It details how multiple existential uncertainties in gold mining are limited and pushed aside by an insistence on consensus and the rightness of forms. Reflexivity is low and established organizational forms (shifts, rules of revenue distribution, etc.), and the orders they support, are confirmed as miners focus on the tasks at hand.

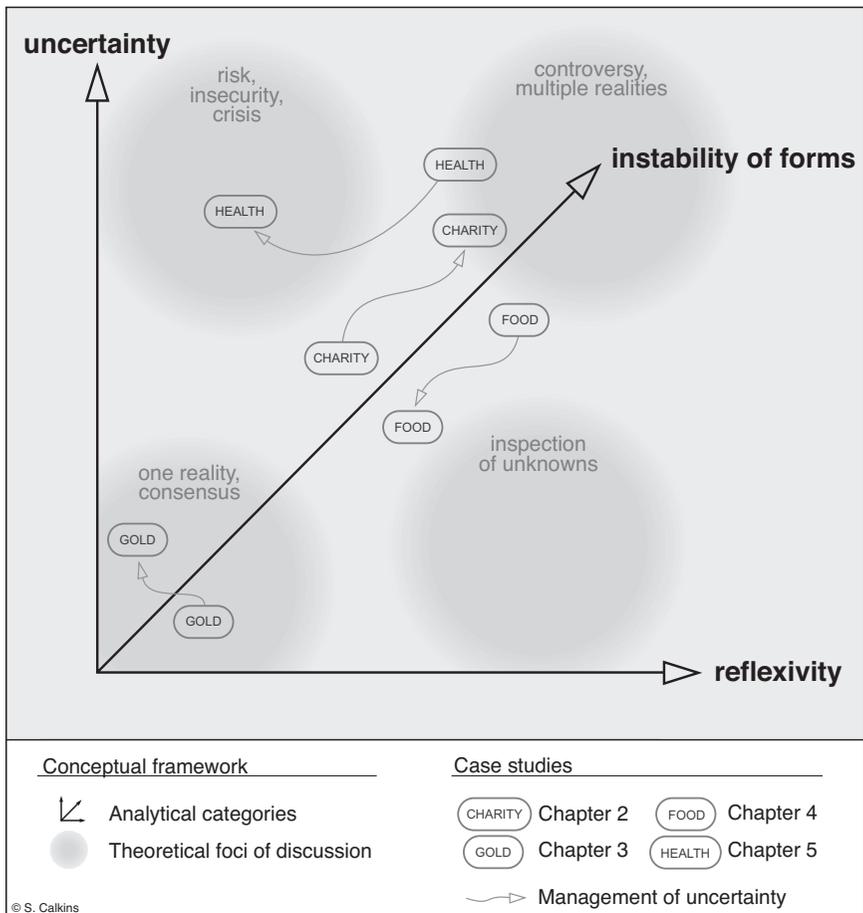


Figure 0.2 Situating the chapters in the relational model

The other empirical chapters do not fit into the neat correlation between reflexivity and uncertainty, but they allow us to explore other important dimensions of the relationship between reflexivity, instability and forms. Chapter 4 (food) details how existential unknowns are processed with regard to the mundane, though no less serious, problems of daily life. It deals with the gnawing uncertainty of running out of food supplies. I investigate how this existential incertitude is displaced through the establishment of a certain form – standards of exchange – to increase predictability in exchanges and guarantee equivalence; here in Figure 0.2 the form gains stability. The circle at the top left implies that different types of uncertainty have already been given a form, namely, as risk, insecurity or crisis, and along with this definition, ways of dealing with them are being outlined: reflexivity is low and uncertainty is high but limited by knowledge that the forms embody. Chapter 5 (health) explores troubling uncertainties of ill health and how these are managed by investing in forms (serious sickness, crisis, etc.). As ill health is translated into sickness, the proper course of action is more circumscribed and reflexivity about epistemic foundations and premises is reduced and must be subordinated to the necessity of preserving lives.

One circle in the model is empty. None of the empirical chapters addresses this way of managing uncertainty and there is a good reason for this. Rashaida, as far as I was able to observe, engage uncertainties pragmatically, making ends meet, doing something with what is at hand in the situation. According to the figure, in the empty circle reflexivity is high, while uncertainty is comparatively low and forms are fairly stable. An example for this would be intellectualizing serious problems of life, addressing them by means of reason and reflection without great fear or anxiety. I would suggest that this rational management of uncertainties, especially the preoccupation with calculating futures and making them predictable, is characteristic of ‘modern’ government, a type of government linked to a loss of metaphysical foundations: ‘the discovery that the world is not deterministic’ and the invention of statistical laws (Hacking 1990: 1). Modern government in this sense has not been fully institutionalized in Sudan.

Theorist Michel Foucault studied the historical rise of modern institutions in Europe from the sixteenth century.² A crucial feature of a modern configuration is a concern with rendering futures readable and predictable. According to Foucault, a shift to modern government came about when both new dangers and new possibilities to accumulate wealth arose. Security was problematized and techniques of security developed, linked to the emergence of ‘population’ as a new subject to be managed in nineteenth-century Europe; normalcy was invented as ‘society became statistical’ (Hacking 1990: 1, 4; Lemke 2011: 42, 43). The government of life and its calculation were novelties, enabled by a liberal conception of freedom and anchored onto an

indeterminate future, which is a prerequisite for all attempts at engineering certain outcomes (O'Malley 2004: 173). The Foucaultian term 'biopolitics' designates state politics, the administration and regulation of population and of the material conditions of its existence, for instance, by implementing programmes for education, health, sanitation and so on.³ The identification of statistical regularities is a key feature of such a modern figuration and enabled a new obsession, expressed in an avalanche of numbers: 'the taming of chance' through the invention of numerical and classificatory technologies, which contribute to 'making up people' (Hacking 1990: 2, 3).

Effective biopolitics depends upon an intricately developed art of governance, including fully-fledged statistical and calculative apparatuses, which generate knowledge, anticipate futures, identify dangers and calculate risks in order to regulate, secure and control the population. This results in a situation, as is the case in European welfare states, in which life is seen as something that individuals and collectives rationally organize and seek to improve. Today, most areas of EuroAmerica at least appear to be governed by risk-based routines for which 'great bodies of data are turned into predictive formulae ... to make objective, standardized and exact predictions to replace subjective expectations based on such non-quantitative modes of calculation as rules of thumb, experience, foresight, estimation and professional judgment' (O'Malley 2004: 1), i.e., preventive diagnostic testing, dietary and exercise regimes.

Foucault's argument about security and the calculative tasks of government is helpful when engaging with uncertainty and the in/stability of forms. The practice of biopolitics presupposes and creates a high stability of forms. To enable calculations, systems of classification need to be invented and institutionalized, a number of uncertainties have to be translated into quantifiable probabilities, and regularities have to be discovered and explained. Emerging numbers, statistics and categorizations not only describe a reality but actually make it, forming the epistemic basis for biopolitical interventions such as legal acts, regulations or disciplinary measures, but also for how individuals make sense of the world. The absence, or rather very selective practice, of biopolitics in Sudan is part of the problem and explains why uncertainties can reach such an existential level. The prevalence of pragmatics in managing uncertainties in the Lower Atbara area of Sudan from this perspective points to the absence of strong central institutions to secure the population against the greatest harms.

Political Practices and Uncertainty in Sudan

Uncertainty is a universal phenomenon, something which is constitutive of human experience and life. It permeates all actions to some extent. Nonetheless, there are significant differences in one's experience of

uncertainty depending on where one lives. We can hardly claim that the uncertainties experienced daily by Rashaida in north-eastern Sudan are the same uncertainties that people experience elsewhere when engaging in highly risky activities, for instance, at the London Stock Exchange. Rashaida I got to know have to process unknowns in a precarious setting where actions may have life-and-death consequences. Unknowns and the limited predictability of everyday life are existential matters.

The specific quality of uncertainty experienced by Rashaida in the hinterlands of the Lower Atbara area is framed by processes of marginalization on various scales. The state is controlled by an elite, who have translated global patterns of in/exclusion into national politics that marginalize communities religiously, culturally and economically. This section discusses some aspects of how this affects the situation of Rashaida in the Lower Atbara area. Furthermore, I explore how incertitudes in Sudan may be enmeshed with what many observers have described as an emerging global social order and mechanisms of in/exclusion. Attention then is shifted to state practices, but I view them from the perspective of the marginalized. I contend that discourses on marginalization raise normative expectations among people of what a state should do. This understanding is linked to a model of the state that is circulating but unrealized. This affects how people make sense of the unpredictability of being and leads to dissatisfaction with governmental practices.

Margins and Marginalization

But what does the metaphor of the margins mean? Margins are not geographical, anchored in Euclidean space; rather, they are always relational concepts.⁴ Margins refer to a centre, and to an unfavourable or extreme position with respect to the centre. In the social sciences, margins and the making of margins, that is, marginalization, are often applied to state–society relations, referring to a voluntary or enforced distancing of groups from the state’s reach and means of security.⁵ Reflecting on margins and the state, Das and Poole (2004: 4) argue that ‘margins are a necessary entailment of the state, much as the exception is a necessary component of the rule’. They further posit that while margins may be territorial, ‘they are also, and perhaps more importantly, sites of practice on which law and other state practices are colonized by other forms of regulation that emanate from the pressing needs of populations to secure political and economic survival’ (ibid.: 8). Understanding margins as a site of practice is useful when attempting to make sense of Sudan, where state institutions are exploited by a narrowly focused ruling party and fail to redistribute resources to the peripheries. People thus mainly have to secure their survival through their own efforts and

to negotiate their own norms for coordination, which partially disregard and violate state law.

In Sudan the concept of marginalization is articulated on various levels with different connotations. Firstly, it is used as a heuristic by scholars dealing with Sudan, such as in the present attempt to situate my work within Sudan ethnography. Secondly, on the ground in Sudan, it is above all a political claim and refers to a lack of socio-economic and political recognition by the central governmental. Marginalization is a concept that is used by armed opposition groups to justify their resistance to the government – and is also used by Rashaida. Thirdly, this discourse has circulated and become a common language for everyday actors to describe their position vis-à-vis the state.

In scholarly analyses, the term ‘marginalization’ refers to interlinking socio-economic and sociocultural processes, to wit, how elites have monopolized the state apparatus in postcolonial Sudan (Rottenburg 2002: 10–12), enriching themselves and enshrining their power while delivering ‘tangible development benefits for key constituencies’ only (Jok 2007: 275–76; Large and Patey 2011: 181). Lesch (1998: 15) summarizes the situation: ‘Muslim Arabs from the Nile Valley have dominated the political, economic, and cultural life of Sudan. They hold the main government posts in the capital city, the majority of seats in all the parliaments, and the senior positions in the armed forces. They lead the educational institutions, trade unions, industries, and businesses’. This discriminatory distribution of resources between the centre and peripheries is also backed by a number of developmental statistics. To give one example from a multitude of reports and NGO papers, the calculated national poverty rate of 46.2 per cent shows broad regional disparities, such as 26 per cent in Khartoum and 60 per cent in peripheral states including the Red Sea, South Kordofan and North Darfur (World Bank 2013).

Heather Sharkey (2008: 33–37) analysed the historical background against which the marginalization of vast areas and populations has unfolded. She points to the problematic processes of nation building after independence (1956), which replaced British colonial rule with an internal colonialism: the hegemonic rule of a small number of northern riverine Arabs over the rest of the vast country. This has produced peripheries in the south, east and west, and ‘a post-colonial political and economic culture of Arabs-take-all’ (ibid.: 42). Arabization and Islamization are the pillars of national unification programmes, but this compulsive politics of homogenization marginalizes communities on religious and cultural grounds (for instance, Hutchinson 1996: 4; Holt and Daly 2000: 153–54, 187–89; Johnson 2003: 138; Jok 2007: 212–14, 221; Komey 2010: 90–93). Echoing Mamdani’s influential work, one scholar noted with regard to the discriminatory Sudanese politics

that ‘those who are considered Arabs by the racialized state are treated as citizens, ... and those who are perceived as non-Arabs are treated as subjects’ (Idris, in Sharkey 2008: 42).

But what does this mean for Rashaida in north-eastern Sudan? They are in a paradoxical situation. As Muslims with an uncontested Arab pedigree, many Rashaida nonetheless articulated a sense of being both socioculturally and economically marginalized by the very government that championed Arabization and Islamization policies. This relates to other axes of marginalization. The neglect of rural communities in governmental economic planning, especially via a rural-urban divide and an occupational marginalization, is an established scholarly theme. Postcolonial nationalization policies in Sudan promoted the marginalization of rural communities by disbanding customary land tenure and abolishing the Native Administration in the early 1970s. The Unregistered Land Act notoriously converted all non-registered land into government land, annulling customary communal claims to land and enabling urban capitalist farmers to expand their businesses (Kibreab 2002: 456). This enabled the encroachment of mechanized, export-oriented agriculture on former pasture and rain-fed farming land – an ongoing process that has recently accelerated with the financialization of agribusiness as well as the financial and food crises (Gertel et al. 2014; cf. Tetzlaff and Wohlmuth 1980; O’Brien 1986).⁶ This increasing competition for land has affected rural populations across Sudan. Along with other factors, it has contributed to a demise of pastoral production among Rashaida in the Lower Atbara area and their impoverishment since the 1980s (Calkins 2014).

The marginalization of Rashaida can also be linked to their occupation. Even if Rashaida from the Lower Atbara area barely engage in pastoral production anymore, but rather depend heavily on labour migration to the Gulf and artisanal gold mining, they still are classified as herders and thus suffer the consequences of marginalization. The prejudice that nomadic pastoralists are prone to excessive and irrational behaviour – overexploiting pastures and resisting change – was and still appears to be widespread among government officials in Sudan (Ahmed 1980: 39, 49; Manger 1996: 26; cf. Rao and Casimir 2002). In spite of their important contributions to the economy, pastoral nomads in Sudan and those with a background in livestock herding ‘are enduring multiple marginalization processes, exacerbated by strict land laws and misguided development plans promulgated by the state’ (Casciarri and Ahmed 2009: 11, 12).⁷

Different kinds of marginalization also intersect. Guma Kunda Komey (2010: 73–77) described how the postcolonial state in Sudan has systematically excluded Nuba populations from their own land allegedly for national economic interests and has marginalized them socioculturally, all the

while promoting large-scale mechanized farming in South Kordofan. Similar to Sharkey, Komey (2010: 2–6) sees marginalization as a sort of continuity from British colonial rule, which divided the country into a core centre, where economic and sociocultural development occurs, and underdeveloped peripheries, where resources are extracted.⁸

In political claims margins and marginalization (Ar. *tahmīs*) also feature prominently. These claims are commonly connected to demands of socio-economic and political recognition by the central government and the elite along the Nile.⁹ Jok (2007: 14, 15) connects the rise of political discourses of marginalization to John Garang, a leader of the SPLA, who interpreted the second civil war (1983–2005) ‘as being more about cultural, economic, and political marginalization of the peripheries than race and religion’, from where the discourse travelled to Darfur and other peripheries, such as Abyei, Blue Nile and South Kordofan. John Young (2007a: 11) indicates a longer historical trajectory, namely, that marginalization as a term was already employed during the political rallying for the Beja Congress since its foundation in 1958. ‘Marginalization’ and ‘marginalized areas’ reverberate in the political programmes of opposition parties, such as the Beja Congress, the Justice and Equality Movement and the Rashaida Free Lions (RFL).¹⁰ It has been a main justification for taking up arms. Many Rashaida with whom I talked in the Lower Atbara area have been sympathetic with the political goals of the RFL for a long time, even if few actually joined the armed insurgency in eastern Sudan.

Eastern Sudan is often characterized as one of Sudan’s most marginalized regions (Pantuliano 2005; J. Young 2007a), referring mainly to the poverty of its inhabitants. In this context, Leif Manger (1996) speaks of a ‘marginal environment’, that is, an environment marked by scarcity of resources and ‘human adaptations’ in the form of pastoral production, rain-fed farming, lumbering and charcoal production. People in eastern Sudan have not received a share of the oil wealth, even though the pipelines cut across the area to transport the oil to Port Sudan. Benefits have been siphoned off elsewhere. Young (2007a: 11) writes that marginalization in eastern Sudan meant and ‘continues to mean the overwhelming poverty of the region, the government in Khartoum refusing to pursue development, or even provide basic services such as health and education in the east, and the government undermining local economies and traditional authorities’.¹¹ This regional setting of scarcity is important to understand the existential aspects of uncertainty that weigh upon Rashaida in the Lower Atbara area.

In eastern Sudan, Rashaida had already rallied against their marginalization in the 1990s. As nomadic pastoralists, many felt disadvantaged by Sudanese land laws, which continue to be based on colonial classifications of groups, conferring upon them a status as landless newcomer tribe. This had

profound political implications: Rashaida lacked settlement land and were administratively subjected to a rival group, namely Hadendowa, a customary landowning group with its own tribal territory (*dār*) and an independent Native Administration. After a severe drought had decimated livestock, strict anti-smuggling measures in eastern Sudan in the 1990s curtailed cross-border trade with Eritrea, a lucrative source of income for many (Pantuliano 2005: 15, 16; J. Young 2007a: 21). Some began to organize resistance to the Sudanese government. They accused the government of launching hostilities aimed at undermining the livelihoods of Rashaida. Mabrouk Mubarak Salim, a former DUP member and wealthy trader, enrolled people in opposition to the marginalization of the Rashaida, and founded the Rashaida Free Lions political party in the late 1990s (J. Young 2007a: 21; Calkins 2014: 194–95).¹² A considerable number of young men were mobilized and joined the armed opposition in eastern Sudan and Eritrea (mid-1990s–2006). Hence, overall, the Rashaida Free Lions developed the same goals as the Beja Congress (BC),¹³ the long-standing ethnic opposition party of eastern Sudan, namely, to bring an end to their marginalization.

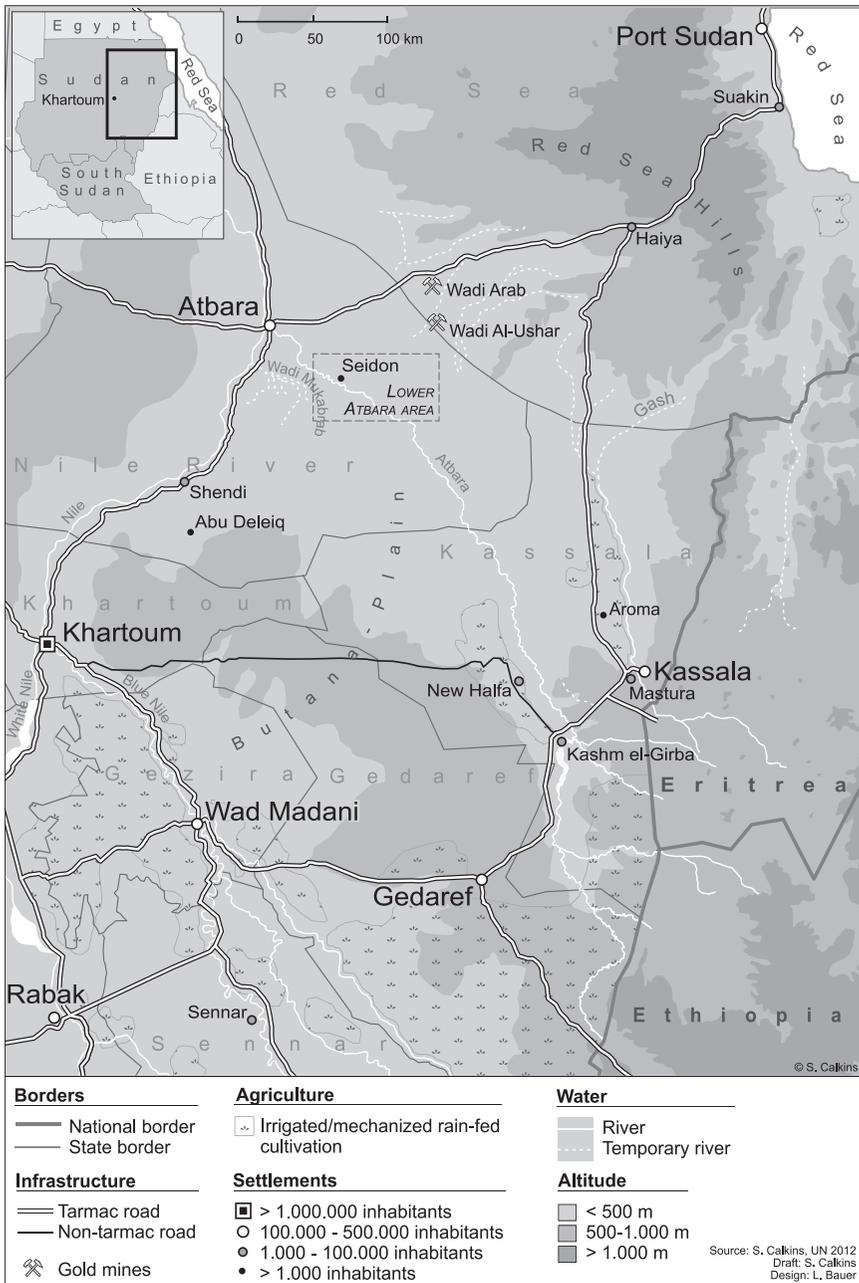
The Lower Atbara area was somewhat disconnected from these developments, however. Only three men who were living in Um Futeima in 2010 had joined the fighting in Eritrea, although many more people expressed their disdain of the government that did nothing for them and continually praised Mabrouk for his courage and manliness.¹⁴ Yet, like their kinsmen in eastern Sudan, Rashaida in the Lower Atbara area are classified as landless nomadic herders, although few own stock today. Pastoral production in this area has been in decline since the great drought of the mid-1980s, but customary ownership of land is still firmly in the hands of Bishariyn and Ja'aliyn. Gaining access to land for settlement – something that Rashaida in different parts of Sudan increasingly desire – and rain-fed cultivation thus depend significantly on personal relationships with local landowning groups, to the dismay of many (Calkins 2014).

Political claims of marginalization, therefore, are not only made within the national political sphere and mirrored by scholarly discourses, but have entered everyday discourses in Sudan. Rashaida in the rural Lower Atbara area where I conducted my study often articulated a sense of being neglected and marginalized by the central government. In light of people's disgruntled attitude towards the government, the state is viewed as remote and disinterested, and yet still potentially threatening to people inhabiting this area. Individuals complained about the lack of access to health and veterinary services, education, electricity and a permanent water source, but also cited sociocultural marginalization.¹⁵ Some sheikhs and clan leaders reinforced the ongoing process of marginalization by referring to their constituency's *taballuf* as nomadic pastoralists – that is, being backward, slow-witted and

filthy ('we are dirty') – when compared with the more urban, riverine and purportedly purer Islamic lifestyle among settled people along the Nile. In Um Futeima, the settlement where I spent most of my time, settling down was seen as an important step in catching up and becoming civilized, modern and educated in a purer Islam. The settlement's first building was a mosque, and soon afterwards the imam started teaching the Quran to children. A school was soon to follow; however, neither school nor mosque was funded by the government but instead by charities after certain individuals had expended much time and energy to mobilize funds. People often maintained that this was necessary, since Rashaida were uneducated, sitting in the desert and running after camels, but that their children should become doctors in order to help their communities and have better lives.

This feeling of inferiority, caused by their pastoral and 'unclean' background, was the explicit reason why some sheikhs in Um Futeima, where I carried out most of my research, felt they had to hold closely to orthodox Islamic interpretations. During my stay, the urban educated sheikh and imam in the settlement worked hard to eradicate 'false' folk-Islamic practices among fellow Rashaida, such as divination, the wearing of amulets and other lucky charms, and fortune-telling, which were more widespread among mobile Rashaida I encountered in Kassala. He preached against such practices and condemned them as un-Islamic, demanding a turn to a purer Islam as found among the Arabs along the Nile. The Arab-Muslim identity project thus affected how my interlocutors engaged with the lack of assurance concerning the future and seems to have marginalized certain practices as un-Islamic. This is relevant for how people process uncertainties and may explain why such practices have declined or at least have become less acceptable in public.

Margins can also refer to a territorial dimension, as can be seen when viewing the relative distance of my field site in the Lower Atbara area of north-eastern Sudan from the nation's centre around Khartoum (see Map 1). The Lower Atbara area appears to be so marginal and uninteresting that it is even peripheral to Sudan's conflicts – in stark contrast to South Kordofan, for instance, an area rich in agricultural land and oil reserves. Whereas parts of South Kordofan, Blue Nile State and Darfur reinstigated war against the government in 2011, the Lower Atbara area has remained peaceful. As a longtime pastoral region, it has seen no strategic governmental investments in agriculture, oil or other industries, and hardly any infrastructural services have been established for its rural settlements. The region's marginality, however, may soon be over. Concession agreements with foreign investors for gold mining were signed in 2010, for an area which included the artisanal mines in the Lower Atbara area (Calkins and Ille 2014).¹⁶ The area has suddenly been mapped as worthy of exploitation but without the concomitant promise of



Map 1 Lower Atbara area in North-eastern Sudan

tangible benefits for the inhabitants. Margins are multidimensional: centres of resource extraction for some and a site of exclusion for others.

To sum up, ideas of margins, marginality and marginalization situate this study. They are notions to describe how people in Sudan experience their position vis-à-vis the Sudanese government and make sense of their exclusion from essential resources. They express the understanding that the government is not living up to expectations of what a good government should do, namely, to protect its citizens from the most threatening perils of existence. The ongoing discussions about marginalization indicate that people in the study area perceive themselves as being at the margins of the state's distribution of resources and its strategic interests. This shapes people's understandings of *al-hukūma* (the government), its intentions and their opinions concerning what to expect – if anything – from such a distant, detached state apparatus: certainly, nothing good. This ethnography details the disorienting effects of interlacing processes of marginalization, the unpredictability of the future and the way in which situations are experienced where survival is at stake. It shows how people deal with the constant uncertainties that overshadow their lives when the state does not provide security but rather evokes feelings of being ignored.

Global Ordering and In/Exclusion

The notion of the margins is trickier in international relations, where a clear centre is missing. The historian Ali A. Mazrui in 1968 referred to Sudan's position vis-à-vis both the Middle East and Africa as 'multiple marginality' (Sharkey et al. 2015: 2). And when we follow Manuel Castells's (2004) assertion that a new global social structure has arisen – the network society, which connects places through technically mediated flows of information and communication, enhancing people's communicative and interactive options – then Sudan would certainly qualify as a country situated at the margins of these global communication networks, perhaps best known instead for its devastating wars in Darfur and South Kordofan and for having the first ruling president to be indicted by the International Criminal Court. Otherwise it is little reported on, except when it makes the news with ever fresh examples of sickening cruelty, which generate moral sentiments in the recipients, a type of 'distant suffering' (Boltanski 1999). The crucial point for this discussion is that the uncertainties with which Rashaida grapple in Sudan do not result from an inherent backwardness or their delayed arrival in modernity. Rather, I draw on authors who enable me to argue that the marginal position of many in Sudan and in the world relates to contemporary neoliberal processes of ordering, which systematically produce excluded populations – that is, 'black holes' – in global society, while tightly

integrating small productive and extractive enclaves (Stichweh 2005: 59). Developing this argument is important because I will discuss below theorists for whom risks are markers of modernity. They would not classify Sudan as modern, but would assent to an unproblematic link between uncertainty/premodernity and risk/modernity, a view I seek to undercut. Rather, I assert that the particular uncertainties Rashaida experience are strongly linked with contemporary globalizing orders.

In view of the superabundance of literature, I need to limit the discussion to a few central aspects for my argument. Since the 1980s studies have proliferated that theorize novel transnational processes. The acceleration of information and communication technologies, new forms of global connectivity, the deregulation – or rather, neoliberal regulation – of markets, the devolution of state powers, commodification and privatization, new mobilities and new experiences of space-time compressions, are often subsumed by buzzwords that imply an increasing streamlining of life worlds, such as neoliberalization or globalization (Castells 2004; Harvey 2005; see Knöbl 2007). The new and the global seem to go hand in hand. Wallerstein (1974) had already posited a connection between modernity and global systemic integration. A similar point that anthropologists like to stress is that small places can no longer be understood without paying attention to the large issues (Eriksen 2001), the dynamics of integration into globalizing economics, politics, arts, media and legal structures.¹⁷ Furthermore, in Sudan selected economic sectors – above all the resource extractive industries – are strongly integrated into transnational flows of capital and knowledge. Sudan has been a source of foreign resource exploitation for a long time, dating back to ancient pharaonic invasions to plunder gold, and in the ninth century, Arab invaders' quest for gold, ivory and slaves (Ḥasan 2005: 56). Mineral extraction and export-oriented large-scale agriculture were initiated under colonial Anglo-Egyptian rule and have drawn major investors from Western states, the Gulf States and most recently Asian countries (Large and Patey 2011; Verhoeven 2012; Linke 2014; Umbadda 2014). But this integration concentrates on small extractive or productive enclaves, which bypass most people in Sudan and do not deliver any benefits to them; these enterprises instead often figure as a source of insecurity that drives rural people from their land (Komey 2010).

Every inclusion entails exclusion. Rudolf Stichweh's notion of world society and Manuel Castells's global information network both work with the metaphor of black holes (see Rottenburg 2002).¹⁸ Stichweh (2005: 59) argues that black holes – as the impenetrable gaps that suck up everything which comes near them and from where hardly anything can ever extricate itself – are a fitting physical analogy for the chaotic, obscure margins in the unfolding global tapestry. Apart from the included islands of global capitalist

extraction, Sudan can be seen as a marginal country, or black hole, in the world society. This is an arresting point when compared to earlier Sudan ethnography. A number of studies had highlighted the gradual breakdown of ‘barriers of exchange’ and the involvement of local communities in more global economic exchange, their appropriation and mixing of capitalistic practices with socially established ideas of morality, and the emergence of an indigenous ‘peripheral capitalism’ (Duffield 1981; Omer 1985; Rottenburg 1991; see Barth 1967 for spheres of exchange). One might suggest that the near-complete marginalization and exclusion of many Sudanese livelihoods marks a gradual shift away from a colonial and postcolonial process of integration into a globalizing social and economic order, from exploitation to total exclusion. Today global integration concentrates on productive enclaves – typically in terms of mineral extraction (Ferguson 2006: 194).¹⁹

Many scholars aver that there is a novel quality about how people relate to each other and to things, whereby ‘the global’ is often seen the main marker of a new modern period. I follow Latour’s (1993) thesis, *We Have Never Been Modern*, as it resolves the problem of ‘othering’ that inevitably accompanies the occidental periodization of modernity (Rottenburg 2008a: 405). Based on a clear divide between nature and culture, Latour argues that the modern person is deceived and believes herself to be different from other cultures.²⁰ This represents an important contrast to authors who inspired my conceptualization of uncertainty, such as Foucault, Luhmann, Beck and Boltanski. They all agree that there is modern/premodern, based on the rise and differentiation of central institutions (science, medicine and so on) since the eighteenth century, which secure, organize and regulate populations against anticipated harms. From these perspectives Sudan – distinct from Europe – is not modern and never has been. In contrast, when modernity is defined as self-deception as Latour would have it, nobody has ever been modern, but this does not rule out the existence of substantial differences among various places.

James Ferguson (2006: 185) maintains that the coevalness of African societies, their alternative modernities, is out of sync with how many Africans – still inspired by the dreams that modernization theory holds out, the promise of a brighter future, of catching up through development – think about modernity. Nonetheless, the disbanding of modernity as a uniform cultural object has been an important contribution of theorists who do not venture from the assumption of one modernity, but plural, alternative or entangled ones.²¹ This also implied a break with an evolutionist understanding of history as progress. There are many ways of being modern; many paths lead to modernity but they do so in different ways. Modernities therefore should always be considered in the plural (Knöbl 2007: 60). But what then are the common criteria that justify calling them modern? And what do we get if we

assume that Sudan is in fact modern but only differently so? Ferguson has drawn attention to a blind spot of such approaches, particularly prevalent among anthropologists, who often mistake deplorable circumstances for happy bricolages, creative adaptations and syncretisms. This runs the danger of 'evading the question of a rapidly worsening global inequality ... the enduring axis of hierarchy, exclusion, and abjection, and the pressing political struggle for recognition and membership in the emerging social reality we call "the global"' (Ferguson 2006: 192–93).

But a non-modern stance is equally unable to address power asymmetries between different places and institutional contexts (Rottenburg 2008a: 422). Being modern/non-modern does not present itself simply as a choice. While the moderns may take off their distorting spectacles to glance at modernity as a type of reality construction, the non-moderns may have no comparable way of becoming modern. Rashaida in Sudan would probably prefer the security of being modern because it implies not only self-deception but also the existence of strong institutions that can provide secure references for acting and achieving a noticeable predictability. If I assert that no one has ever been modern – in the end, so what? The important point is that moderns managed to create a situation of predictability, regularity and security that is fundamentally different from the existential uncertainty experienced on a daily basis by Rashaida in north-eastern Sudan.

Having confined modernity to a specific, powerful reality construction – certainly underwritten with relatively stable material-semiotic arrangements to which many Africans aspire (Ferguson 2006) and which feed imaginations of good life as well as expectations and critiques of government – I can connect modernity to real circumstances in Sudan without promulgating the latter's alterity or their participation in a different modernity. Rather, it is the circulation of modern ideas in the sway of neoliberal processes that allows people in Africa to notice gaps between 'sweet dreams ... [and] an insomnia full of nightmares of "being left behind" – of missing the train, or falling out of the window of a fast accelerating vehicle' (Bauman 2007: 11; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Mbembe 2002). In combining the insights of Stichweh and Castells, the production of black holes appears as an inevitable characteristic of globalizing social orders, patterned by discursive and material mechanisms of in/exclusion. The selective economic inclusion of productive and extractive enclaves means more generalized exclusion. Rottenburg (2002) argues that Sudan's exclusion from global society is translated into an exclusionary discourse of Arab-Islamic autochthony, which is used to violently suppress non-Arab, non-Islamic communities. Following this argument allows directly linking processes of marginalization and the acuteness of survival in Sudan to the emergence of black holes. In Sudan, most of the population tends to fall into black holes, struggling for survival on

the margins, whereas crucial resources (oil, gold, etc.) are extracted through globally integrated and foreign-dominated enterprises, which are largely disconnected from national political and social developments in Sudan. Global patterns of in/exclusion thus at least co-produce multiple processes of marginalization in Sudan and, together with the lack of governmental securing mechanisms, produce a situation where survival is at stake for many.

Biopolitical Projects in Sudan

Marginalization is an effect of political practices in Sudan, and it is reflected in the understanding of some people with regard to what the government is failing to provide for them and is thus at the root of opposition to the government in Sudan. There have been intermittent violent conflicts between governments and citizens since independence. Civil wars between north and south shook the country from 1955 to 1972 and from 1983 to 2005, and during the 1980s and 1990s conflicts also flared between the government of Sudan and other armed groups in South Kordofan, Blue Nile State, Eastern Sudan and Darfur (Johnson 2003). In 2011 war escalated again in South Kordofan, Blue Nile State and Darfur, as many had predicted in light of unresolved political grievances (Komey 2010; Rottenburg et al. 2011). What I wish to stress in this section is that the quality of uncertainty in the north-eastern Sudanese hinterlands is entangled with Sudanese politics, which is not devoted to regulating and securing the entire citizenry but rather pursues discriminatory and assimilationist policies.

Many Sudanese live in abject poverty, with infrastructural services such as clean water, sanitation, roads, hospitals and schools lacking. Disease and hunger are endemic. Yet Sudan experienced some of the highest rates of economic growth on the African continent since the onset of oil production in 1999 and has received significant direct foreign investment (Large and Patey 2011). This paradox between high revenues from oil and the persistence of hunger and poverty raises troubling questions about the state and stateness in Sudan. Recent scholarship has highlighted that the state should not be taken for granted as an entity existing above and separate from society, wielding power over citizens; rather, the pertinent analysis is to demonstrate how a situation arises in which a state is represented as a unified and cohesive entity (Gupta 2012). In anthropology there has been an impetus to investigate how 'the state' is being produced through mundane bureaucratic practices in institutions, locales, offices, bureaus and so on (see, for example, Ferguson and Gupta 2005: 118, 105; Gupta 2012: 46; Bierschenk and De Sardan 2013). Or, similarly, a call has been issued to study sovereignty not only through the legal texts and norms but also as a practised 'right over life (to protect or to kill with impunity)' (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 296).

Drawing inspiration from such scholarship, the relevant questions become: how it is that Rashaida experience the state as a marginalizing entity, as something that is up there, and potentially hostile, distant and uncaring? What practices construct these images and ideas of the state and how do they affect the experience of uncertainty?

Practices of government are brought to bear on Rashaida in the Lower Atbara area in ways that marginalize them, especially economically and socioculturally. Ruling elites in Sudan have used their political power for private accumulation and self-preservation, while ignoring most of the populace. For most people the state is a source of insecurity, something that needs to be coped with rather than relied upon (Hutchinson 1996). There seems to be scholarly consensus that the development of modern institutions, which can protect citizens from harm and formulate common goods, failed in Sudan (Lesch 1996; Battahani 2000; Rottenburg 2008b).²² But based on what conception of modern institutions does this evaluation of failure often occur? What are these modern institutions?

Debates on modernity and the state are wide ranging, and attempting to do them justice lies beyond my attempt to understand how political practices in Sudan are intertwined with uncertainty. I stand on the shoulder of a giant, namely, Michel Foucault.²³ Although pertaining to historical dynamics in Europe since the sixteenth century, Foucault's work can be utilized to make sense of the situation in Sudan. He provided crucial impetus to debates about modern government, control and power by linking the historical rise of modern institutions to a new need for security and to the emergence of population as a new object of government. Risks to population and its subgroups had to be identified and managed, and knowledge about population had to be generated. This led to the creation of statistics, which would define regularities and calculate probabilities. Soon statistical regularities started to define what is normal and what deviates from it. The task of government is accordingly to normalize the most deviant cases, to regulate them by devising measures and policies that push the deviant closer to the normal curve (Foucault 2007: 62, 63). In this type of governance, futures became manageable based on statistical predictions.

The absence of such an inclusive biopolitics was experienced as a deficiency by some of my interlocutors, as is perhaps more frequently the case in African countries: 'Biopolitics calls here forth not threat and loathing, but nostalgia and desire' (Geissler et. al. 2012: 13). This point is supported by historical research on care, which has criticized the fact that the coziness of kin-based care is often overestimated in scholarly analyses, while the merits of public welfare systems tend to be underestimated (Horden and Smith 2009: 1, 2). Rashaida in the rural Lower Atbara area have expectations of what a state government should be and of the various redistributive and securing functions

it should assume. A model of statehood or modern state institutions, quite similar to that which Foucault saw rising in the late eighteenth century, has long been disseminated. It raises expectations of good governance centred on the welfare of the population, which are by no means met by the present Sudanese government.

Biopolitics in Sudan is practised in an exclusionary way; it is more accurate to speak of biopolitical projects of limited range and duration. These are not oriented towards securing the population and discovering risks but rather seek to mould citizens of a certain cultural, economic and religious kind – Arab-Muslim – and thereby produce considerable margins, and furthermore ignore the people inhabiting them. The contours of a Foucaultian concern for the well-being, security and health of a population can be retraced mainly among a spatially limited constituency along the Nile. Diagnoses of the state of affairs often point to this missed chance of building institutions after national independence that could arbitrate between competing and often conflicting interests with a view of the welfare of all citizens (Rottenburg 2008b: viii, ix; Calkins et al. 2015a; Calkins et al. 2015b). The lack of socio-economic development and infrastructure (roads, electricity, schools, health facilities, etc.), together with widespread poverty, hunger and the spread of diseases are problems that either people are left to struggle with on their own or are delegated to NGOs.

An important critique of the analytical concept of biopolitics is that it takes the nation-state as its basis and assumes a unified, centralized and purposeful state apparatus (Gupta 2012: 44–46). It has long been emphasized that various transnational processes reconfigure the sovereign power of the nation-state, delegating some state functions to international organizations and agencies. In order to integrate into the global economy, governments are pressed to adopt neoliberal norms and practices at least partially in their management of population. Modes of government through foreign-imposed disciplinary and regulatory measures, such as structural adjustment programmes promoted by the International Monetary Fund, can be understood as a sort of ‘transnational governmentality’ (Ferguson and Gupta 2005: 115). Development aid in particular has been interpreted as a crucial liberal technology in an unfolding global system of governance, assembling donors, NGOs, companies, military organizations and UN agencies (Duffield 2002: 1050), which has led to an outsourcing of state functions. Biopolitics in Sudan – the care for population, its health and well-being – has likewise to a large extent been handed over to international NGOs and UN organizations (*ibid.*: 8–10). Often the government offices have been reduced to offering a platform for coordination among international NGOs and allotting them areas in which to work, while complicating or barring their access to other areas (FMOH 2004).

The present government in Sudan (1989–today and preceding ones as well) does not organize a population-wide redistribution of wealth and resources, but rather translates global patterns of in/exclusion religiously and socioculturally. Biopolitics in Sudan is pursued through a discriminatory vision of society: the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) has a hegemonic and narrow vision of who constitutes the nation and defines Arab-Muslim identity as its basic building block, ruling out multiculturalism and religious diversity (Lesch 1998: 21). After its coup, the ruling party (first the National Islamic Front, then the NCP) has called itself a salvation regime (*‘inqāḍ*) and refers to its ideological identity project as a civilization project (*maṣrūf ḥaḍari*). The management and regulation of population was thoroughly influenced by transnational Islamist discourses, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood. The explicit goal was to restore society to its Islamic roots, to reinstate Islamic law and to save the country from its corruption by a Western-educated elite, ‘to “depose and remove” those “infidel rulers” who had allowed the destruction of Islamic traditional laws, customs and institutions’ (Burr and Collins 2003: 4, 5).

A central figure in formulating this Islamist ideology was Hassan al-Turabi, an intellectual and religious adviser, who has close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. He promoted the pan-Islamic idea of uniting all Muslims with God in a divine community (*‘umma*) based on the Quran and sharia (Turabi 1987: 2, 3; Burr and Collins 2003: 6). Biopolitics, as pursued in Sudan, was therefore aimed at producing an Islamic nation. To that end, it converted the administrative and educational apparatus across Sudan into Arabic (Lesch 1998: 22). It further introduced an Islamic system of law (Warburg 1988: 155 ff). These measures coerced people to either adhere to Islamic ideas of proper behaviour or be excluded or even punished. The educational apparatus enforced the idea that people have to learn Arabic in order to be included in society and to regard themselves as citizens. Among the most significant biopolitical projects in Sudan were orchestrated attempts to produce a uniform population – religiously, legally and morally – one that claims to be part of an Arab-Muslim civilization. This homogenizing project was halted temporarily by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, signed on 9 January 2005. However, the short transitory phase during which multiculturalism and religious diversity were recognized ended with the secession of South Sudan in July 2011. Since the succession, Bashir and other party leaders have endorsed, in a number of public speeches, a return to a strict Islamic path. This governmental blueprint fails to accommodate the dreams and aspirations of a significant portion of the populace. It tends to promote the instability of forms and the unpredictability of futures in Sudan.

Arabization and Islamization should not be mistaken for a return to an Islamic premodernity or Stone Age. Rather, the ruling elite seeks to push Sudan

into a new era of prosperity. Narratives of development and modernization have influenced policies. Since the inception of the Gezira Scheme (among the world's largest irrigation projects) under Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule, one idea has persisted, namely, that agricultural export production was the only possible path to develop Sudan's rural potential – at times this was represented as the only way forward for the entire country (Barnett 1977). Plans for agricultural intensification were launched in unison with hydro-dam projects. Verhoeven (2012) refers to the latter as 'new modernist temples', signifiers of progress and development. These ideas were revived in the framework of the so-called breadbasket strategies of the 1970s, which depicted Sudan as a granary for investors from the Gulf States (Tetzlaff and Wohlmuth 1980). The plan was to turn Sudan into a food-exporting country – not an importer – by initiating capital-intensive agricultural production, financed by investors from the Gulf States. According to the theoretical assumptions of the time – firmly rooted in modernization theory – this should have led to a trickle-down effect on other economic sectors. But these grand developmental schemes failed. Nonetheless, a modernist vision for the agriculture-based development of Sudan survived and was imbued with new vigour in the context of the recent Sudanese Agricultural Revival Programme (for further details, see Verhoeven 2011, 2012).

Foreign investments in Sudan's agricultural land have soared recently (Umbadda 2014). They form part of the desperate measures undertaken to gain foreign currency after the recession related to the loss of most oil resources to South Sudan in mid-2011. This modernist economic vision, which builds on capital-intensive mechanized agriculture to achieve self-sufficiency in food supply, is bolstered by legislation in support of capitalist enterprises and transnational corporations. It marginalizes certain occupations and customary types of land usage. Small farmers and pastoralists have been evicted from their territories, as these have been reserved for dam construction, mining, or zones for intensive agriculture (Gertel et al. 2014). Governmental practices have been unable to resolve such conflicts peacefully and to protect common goods in Sudan.

This discussion has highlighted certain dynamics of governance, which affect the means by which people in marginalized areas of Sudan can deal with uncertainties. I argue that the limited scope and vision of biopolitical projects in Sudan shapes economic, political and sociocultural/religious margins and marginalized people. Important aspects of care for the population are outsourced to NGOs and UN agencies, which are compartmentalized into specific areas and tend to focus on specific services and priority groups. There is no comprehensive system in place to provide health care and economic security for the entire population. In the Lower Atbara area, a pastoral hinterland, uncertainty about the future is enormous. Achieving security

appears to be an unattainable goal, as people have to fend for their survival; they seem focused instead on increasing the daily range of predictability for their actions. Before I enter into anthropological debates on uncertainty, I will next outline my methodology, present the challenges of doing research on uncertainty, and discuss some of the settings and dynamics that moulded my research topic and interest.

Methodological Reflections

Choosing uncertainty as my object of analysis necessarily entails reflexivity, a questioning of premises and foundations, and this needs to include my own. In his classic essay on objectivity, Max Weber (1922) posited that there can be no empirical observation without value judgements; the choices regarding what to study and the selection and definition of the study's object are always connected to what the researcher holds dear. As Niklas Luhmann (1984) pointed out, there is no way around this, no grounds from which to claim objectivity. Every observation has its blind spot and needs subsequent observation to pinpoint the blind spot, which again produces a new blind spot. Haraway (1991) made a related point by stressing that all knowledge is situated, positioned and partial. The implications of practising a reflexive approach to social science are far-reaching and cannot be condensed into a few remarks in a methods section (Burawoy 1998). Rather, it affects the way in which ethnography is written. For me it means writing in such a way that the positional and partial perspective of observation forms part of the narrative flow. I show in every chapter how my position and my methodology situated me and try to show how this qualifies the emerging piece of knowledge. Therefore this section is rather brief, but nonetheless raises important issues that help the reader to situate the ethnographic findings in this book and show how the methodology therein is intertwined with my research experience, observations and conclusions, and even with my selection of the theoretical framework of uncertainty.

Studying Existential Situations

This section discusses the notion of survival and its applicability to existential situations in Sudan as well as three theoretical approaches formulated in development studies on poverty. In the Lower Atbara area of north-eastern Sudan, poverty and uncertainties quickly take on an existential flavour, literally becoming matters of life and death.²⁴ While survival is an analytical term, I see it as being close to the ways in which many Rashaida understand their precarious situations: avoiding eating, being hungry, exhausted, often

on the verge of wasting away or actually dying. In north-eastern Sudan, in a settlement of mainly Rashaida where I did my fieldwork, food supplies ran short and meals were often skipped. Sicknesses often went untreated, leading to death, especially among infants and children, in nearly every family. Condolence visits to mourning parents and kin were common. Thus, I was doing research in a challenging existential setting, in which such basic human needs as food, (clean) water, clothing and medication were inadequately met and often required urgent action.²⁵

Survival is hopeful.²⁶ This notion focuses on the goal of continuing to live in spite of adversity and bleak prospects. It has gained currency as an analytical term in the past decades and seems to have gradually crowded out the notion of living (Schmieder 2012). The French, Spanish and German terms *survivre*, *sobrevivir* and *überleben* literally denote something more than or beyond (*sur-*, *sobre-* or *über-*) merely living. Survival is a strange and paradoxical word because it 'implies that an entity, which is dead or should be dead, is still alive' (Lyotard 1994, in Schmieder 2012: 15, my translation). As Schmieder (2012: 15) suggests, the notion of survival denotes a caesura, an existential danger or encounter with death, and a continuity of the past in the present, which preconditions the caesura. The notion of survival conjures up people who should be dead, near-dead, or the living dead. It is therefore no surprise that the terms survival and survivor abound in the literature on the Shoah, referring to the devastating psychological and cultural consequences of Nazi wartime crimes, particularly the experience of surviving concentration and extermination camps.

Das and Poole (2004) connect survival to the margins of the state: sovereignty not only concerns territories but life and death, being ultimately exercised over bodies. This is most apparent in the conflict-ridden regions of Sudan, where atrocities of various sorts threaten the survival of certain population categories, particularly those who resist the dominant Arab-Muslim identity project (cf. Hutchinson 1996; Rottenburg 2002; James 2007; Mamadani 2009).²⁷ This study, however, does not encompass such extreme devastation and the havoc of war, instead having been carried out in a peaceful rural area of north-eastern Sudan. Survival in this book therefore refers to the daily struggle of getting by when little is at hand to actually make a living and receive one's bread.

Three theoretical approaches formulated in the past offered conceptual tools to study the activities of people with such uncertain livelihoods: survival economies, vulnerability²⁸ and sustainable livelihoods. These three approaches provided a valuable foil against which I developed my research. What unites them is their realist understanding of risks or dangers, which are diagnosed by researchers, attributed to people, possibly translated into developmental programmes, and may result in concrete interventions. People

who are considered vulnerable are portrayed as mostly rational agents in pursuit of a single goal – securing their livelihoods. I saw this as a limitation, because people’s everyday understandings of uncertainty and their ways of dealing with it were largely irrelevant to such programmes.

Nonetheless, I am sympathetic to the survival economy approach, which emerged by way of Hans-Dieter Evers in the 1980s, concerning how people manage to cooperate, particularly in urgent situations.²⁹ This approach criticized economic models that assumed that people’s primary interest lay in the maximization of profits; such models ignored the fact that the so-called group of the insecure need first and foremost to secure their livelihoods and that therefore households opt to spread risks rather than maximize profits, developing new mechanisms of solidarity and building strong personal networks (Elwert et al. 1983; Evers 1986). While I support in principle the direction of this critique, the approach supplanted a rationality of economic maximization and replaced it with another rationality – safety first.

A focus on sustainability has been an important contribution of the sustainable livelihoods framework that also informs this study: it is about anticipating the future and security of livelihoods.³⁰ At the heart of the livelihoods approach is the analysis of the scopes of action according to which people secure their livelihoods, based on their entitlement to livelihood assets, resources or capital. In this view, a livelihood is sustainable when it devises strategies to cope with and recover from shocks and stresses without damaging its assets or its natural resources (Chambers and Conway 1991: 6; Carney 1998: 4). I share the concern for the concrete ways in which people secure or fail to secure their incomes, but with an important extension: the role of social institutions in organizing livelihoods has been too long neglected. SL approaches focused on how resources combine to allow strategies to be pursued and different outcomes to be achieved, concentrating solely on easily measurable economic variables (Scoones 1998: 11, 12; Gertel 2007: 18).³¹

The gap in the developmentalist literature regarding institutional mediation was a starting point for my research, which I first carried out in a project on livelihood security among pastoralists. The guiding question posed for that field research concerned people’s institutional coverage in the context of a war-torn state such as Sudan. I took to the field on the lookout for institutions and institutional regulation, to an extent taking their existence and a certain stability of orders for granted. But staying with people in their homes and sharing their lives in a setting of scarce resources, I quickly began to feel disconcerted and puzzled by what I experienced as an impression of emergence, instability, manifold fragile agreements and very limited predictability. I was a party to situations in which people adjusted with surprising speed to new exigencies, drawing elements and arguments in support of their convictions from various sources or inventing ways of

cooperating and sharing, whereby what they took for granted and what they questioned seemed negotiable. I slowly began to see through their eyes, noticing their momentary bewilderment about the fleeting nature of arrangements that were taken for granted yesterday, about new promises of prosperity and new uncertainties, as well as the obvious onslaught of social change that transformed a pastoral into a mining economy with unpredictable outcomes. I challenged my own assumptions. The focus on institutions alone laid too much emphasis on the permanence of orders and appeared too static and restrictive to capture the ongoing situational negotiation of norms of cooperation. My interest thus shifted to a level that was sociologically deeper, preceding that of institutional regulation, namely, to the fundamental uncertainty of coordination and the problem of how to produce commonality in situations that appear open and indeterminate, especially in view of their often existential character.

Entering the Field

Here I show how the location of 'the field' and my own biography are entangled with the discussion of uncertainty.³² I did nearly a year of ethnographic research in north-eastern Sudan, in several shorter periods between December 2007 and May 2010. I mainly stayed with Rashaida in the hinterlands of the rural Lower Atbara area in the River Nile State.³³ I visited the area for the first time in December 2007 when most people I later met again in the village were still living in tents and had some small stock, moving in a small annual radius between the river in the dry season and the higher grounds in the rainy season. These first visits to the region and encounters with people were important. I doubt whether the rapid transformations that occurred between 2007 and 2009 would have struck me as much if I had not witnessed them but only learned about them through hearsay. When I returned for further research in early 2009, many people had meanwhile settled and were building houses. What had been a tiny hamlet of a few houses around a mosque in the nomadic hinterlands had turned into a settlement of more than two hundred people with a school, a (inoperative) small health centre, clay houses, huts and tents. The most dramatic transformation, however, concerned people's sources of livelihood.

Upon my return in autumn 2009, most people had deserted pastoralism or small farming to become artisanal gold miners. Gold was discovered in a wadi some dozens of kilometres from the settlement. The discovery drew thousands of people into the region, some of them into the village, spawning new building activity. It also led to traffic of water tankers and public transport through the settlement. A new branch of gold mining elicited much excitement during my stay – work with metal detectors. In view of

the novelty of gold mining, the indeterminate absence of men due to this new work, and more permanent settlement as well as the influx of people from different areas, things seemed to be very much in flux with few stable references for action. This situates the discussed ethnographic material – it is about dealing with the wobbliness of orientations and foundations. Being able to track some of the rapid transformations from one visit to the next provided me with a deeper context to interpret my findings, particularly those obtained during the last nearly nine months of research in 2009 and 2010.

My fieldwork occurred during the so-called interim period (2005–2011) after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005, which was signed by the National Congress Party and the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M), and more importantly the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA) of 2006, where Rashaida Free Lions as members of the Eastern Front were a signatory party, ending their political marginalization at least in eastern Sudan (Kassala, Gedarf, Red Sea State) (Calkins 2014). This time of peace, hope and suspense stirred anticipation that a new era of sociocultural diversity and the development of marginal areas had dawned.

This period was decisive for colleagues working ethnographically in former war zones, such as South Kordofan, Darfur and Blue Nile State, as these regions were plunged into war once again in 2011 and the fighting is still ongoing at the time of writing. This book, in contrast, deals with a region that appears so marginal that it is even marginal to Sudan's conflicts. Between 2007 and 2010, when I did my study, the Lower Atbara area was barely connected to the political processes in other parts of the country. In contrast to other regions of Sudan, there were virtually no security hurdles that had to be passed to do research in this area. The state was largely uninterested in or unsuspecting of activities in this marginal area.³⁴ Most people in the Lower Atbara area were struggling to meet their daily needs through subsistence rain-fed cultivation, herding and most recently various activities in and around gold mining. In the hinterlands, where new pastoral settlements had begun to emerge, there was no electricity, the coverage of telecommunications was weak and faltering, there were only dirt tracks, no paved roads, and poverty was abject; I have no reason to assume that the situation is much different today. Food supplies were scarce and the lack of ritual hospitality, which I had experienced while travelling in other areas of Sudan, especially among Rashaida, was striking. I became interested in how people in this part of the world experience existential situations and master them. Working in a peripheral region of Sudan thus strongly situated my fieldwork. I conducted participant observation of mundane daily life and its challenges, not of grandiose and memorable events, political acts or specific rituals. The hardships and uncertainties of life in this area of the world

were important topics of conversation as Rashaida sought to increase the predictability of everyday life in rural north-eastern Sudan. They became a central concern of this work.

It is important to stress what enabled my awareness of unpredictability: I came from a different background, having a different experience of the past in Germany. I also came to Sudan with more or less fixed plans for the immediate and more distant future: finishing fieldwork, writing my thesis, getting a degree (PhD) that would enable me to find a good job in order to grant me a comfortable life, having a baby at some later point and so on. My interlocutors did not think like this about their futures; they did not have such a long horizon of expectation. People in the home where I stayed, with whom I was most intimately acquainted, often talked about changes, what the past as nomadic pastoralists used to be like, how life had been easier, food more readily available. It seemed that many – especially the older people – were confused because their past experience no longer offered secure orientations for how to act under new circumstances.

A further factor that situates my results in important ways is my gender. Arriving alone as a woman in rural north-eastern Sudan, I was integrated into a Rashaida household. My host mother was Hamda, whose husband was on labour migration in Kuwait. Hamda lived in a separate one-room adobe house and an attached wood and straw hut with her son (12), her unmarried daughters (15 and 7), her married daughter (19), her toddling grandson and her granddaughter (4). Two other married daughters lived in adjacent houses with their husbands and children. I participated in the daily activities of the women and children. Part of a woman's day was spent in the sizzling heat of their wood and straw huts, sitting next to the smoke and fire of the hearth, making coffee and tea or baking bread for breakfast and lunch, sending children out on errands, getting water from the wells or firewood (usually the task of girls). Another part was reserved for relaxing with neighbouring women, lying around, dozing, chatting, laying out cowrie shells for entertainment, sewing, working on embroidery, joking and storytelling. By being in the midst of their conversations, I learned much about the joys and worries, affection and friendship among neighbouring women but also about quarrels and falling outs, which I allude to in several chapters.

Sharing the lives and houses of people in Um Futeima meant an absence of privacy for my hosts and myself. Women went through my belongings, unpacking my backpack. They told me what is appropriate for a woman and what not, correcting where I was allowed to sit and where not, how to go to the toilet and how not, even trying to influence who I should talk to and who not. I learned that the radius of female activities is largely confined to their houses and those of neighbouring women. Women depend on male providers. Men only dropped by houses occasionally, for meals or to sleep.

Most came and went to the gold mines. When they were in the settlement, they met friends and sat in the shade in front of the mosque, a room built for men, or one of the shops in the settlement. In view of this intimate acquaintance with women, particularly Hamda, her daughters and their associates, my account tends to privilege the perspectives of women.

Uncertainties of Exploring Uncertainty

Uncertainty is not the sole object of my study, since investigating how people deal with uncertainties is itself rife with uncertainties of various kinds. Not least of these is relating to how such volatile things can be studied – experiences that perhaps cannot be fully enunciated, indeterminacies, qualms about acting that are dealt with differently, lived through, entangled with affectivity, anticipation and the plethora of ways of grappling with such experiences and making sense of them.

My main method of knowing and producing knowledge was ethnography, a research method that privileges experience.³⁵ Uncertainties as lived experiences can be empirically investigated by following situations of controversy when, for instance, the very definition of the situation and its stakes are in question. The expression of uncertainty – particularly its subtler kinds – can be verbal, but it need not lead to utterances at all. The focus on experience makes the problematic of ethnographic knowledge production all the more visible, namely, that its goal is revealing social relations and formations while relying on them as a medium of investigation, turning research into a critical, inexact and open-ended process. It stimulates reflection, uncertainty. This has been addressed in a large body of literature in anthropology, especially since the 1980s, which problematized the distinctively anthropological modes of knowledge production, the writing of ethnographies, and the way in which the relationship between anthropologist and others had often been effaced from earlier ethnographic accounts.³⁶

Still, when I think of what method should do I agree with Haraway (1991: 187) that it should enable us to tell at least somewhat ‘faithful accounts of a “real” world’ while acknowledging the situatedness and partiality of all knowledge. This implies ongoing reflexive and critical reviewing of ‘own “semiotic technologies” for making meanings’ (ibid.: 187).³⁷ Participant observation means producing knowledge through long-term intimate personal experiences and serendipity, the success of which cannot be measured solely in time or by a certain research methodology. Fieldwork is vulnerable to charges of impropriety or violation of research ethics – it is unpredictable and duly bound up with uncertainty. But does the source of uncertainty lie with the analyst or in the research participants?

Here lies the crux of the matter. Uncertainty as defined above is a part of all actions to different degrees, depending upon the extent of reflexivity with which a situation is engaged. It is thus part of doing research. At the same time it is the experience of Rashaida in this area of Sudan, an experience that I came to share with them, turning fieldwork itself into a lived experience. Thus I was using my own experiences of uncertainty concerning the situation in which I was involved to try to understand the uncertainties that other people experience. This is a difficult task. Uncertainty is multiplied.

I often thought longingly about the time I could leave this place of poverty and sickness again and wondered how people deal with these enormous hardships when they have no way of exiting, not even a means of knowing whether current dire straits will end. This sensitized me to the experiences of other people and drew my attention to the uncertainties of existence. I therefore stress not only the role of knowing uncertainty by observing how other people deal with it, but also highlight participatory, empathetic aspects related to my own engagements. This implies letting my reader know how I came to know uncertainty by experiencing situations together with other people, feeling sensations, talking about them: heat, dust, the lack of water to clean, the dullness of food, its pollution with dirt, its scarcity, and hunger; the fighting among members of the household for scarce food; what it means to be sick in this rural hinterland; the anxiety, discomfort and hardships of travelling to town with fever and in pain; what being a woman can mean in this part of the world, when children need care or supplies run out. This enabled the observations and analyses of how individuals engage with 'what is', their ways of creating some coherence, some predictability for their lives.

Taking uncertainty seriously also means acknowledging that the production of ethnographic texts is never a passive and neutral process that can be accurately presented and contextualized. Rather, it means letting reflexivity be the ethnographer of the text (Woolgar 1988: 29), interrogating concepts and categories while furnishing representations of field events. Some uncertainty should be sustained and recovered in the final account. But how to do this practically?

An important critique of anthropology issued in the 1980s concerned temporality and periodization in ethnographic writings. Fabian (1983) contended that anthropologists tend to be in the here and now, while locking their interlocutors in the 'there and then' through their texts, constructing and relegating the other to a time that is not coeval with the anthropologist. The so-called ethnographic present was particularly problematized, as it suggested that research findings are immutable timeless truths, which ignores the fact that they arise from a dialogue between researcher and research participants. Anna Tsing (1993: xiv) has beautifully summarized some of the dilemmas involved in taking this insight into account and still writing

about a marginal place: ‘The use of the “ethnographic present” is tied to a conceptualization of culture as a coherent and persistent whole ... turning ethnographic subjects into exotic creatures (Fabian 1983); their time is not the time of civilized history’. Nonetheless, she chose to switch back and forth between past and present tense, because she also sensed a danger in the tendency of many anthropologists to switch to a past tense in order to avoid the issue altogether: ‘Yet, here too, there are problems in describing an out-of-the-way place. ... To many readers, using the past tense about an out-of-the-way place suggests not that people “have” history but that they *are* history in the colloquial sense’ (Tsing 1993: xiv, xv).

This also applies to my study. I do not want to suggest that my interlocutors are history and I am facing a particular challenge: I am dealing with uncertainty and with how people jointly develop orientations and anchors for acting in situations of low predictability. Putting this into the past tense might create the impression that in the time that has elapsed since the event the uncertainty has been overcome, or perhaps the reader will feel assured by the writer’s calm narration of past events and begin to doubt whether there was any uncertainty at all. I am thus re-creating an uncertainty and openness of outcomes by using the ethnographic present sometimes, because I do not know what became of many of my interlocutors. I also move back and forth between present and past tenses because I am not making a claim about Rashaida in Sudan or uncertainties in general; rather, I am writing about a specific time and a specific place. This account could and would be different at a different time and place; it even would be different at the same place at a different time.

Since Weber’s groundbreaking insight into the impossibility of a value-free social science, researchers have stressed that the construction of interests, objects and questions is inextricably linked to political and historical contexts. This short section aimed to underscore how my topic began to emerge: by engaging in earlier scholarship, taking up a funding opportunity for research in Sudan based on certain assumptions about institutional social security mechanisms, and by undergoing experiences in the Lower Atbara area of Sudan. When and where I did my study has substantially affected what I studied. I focus neither on urban middle classes nor urban squatters in Khartoum, nor on survival issues in Sudan’s war-torn areas. Rather, my study explores the more subtle gruelling uncertainties of everyday life in a rural area of north-eastern Sudan, such as the lack of food, clean water and health services – situations that result from the discriminatory resource politics of the central government but that receive little or no scholarly or media attention. My own situatedness has also affected my discussion of uncertainty by drawing my attention predominantly to the experiences of women and to the struggle of achieving some predictability, of having something that holds

together to which future action can refer. This I will explore in the following chapters.

The Chapters

My investigation is concerned with how the experience of uncertainty, reflexivity in acting and stability of forms are articulated in actual practices; this is the red thread running through the various chapters. They trace how Rashaida in a newly settled community of north-eastern Sudan establish forms situationally to manage uncertainties, as well as how old and new elements are interwoven in this form-giving process. Four empirical chapters substantiate my theoretical argument.

Chapter 2 deals with a situation in a small nomadic settlement in the Lower Atbara area. On a day in March 2010, a Kuwaiti welfare organization arrived to distribute goods to the poor and a controversy emerged in the settlement. It was about how people who suffer a dearth of resources make sense of a distribution's fairness. In the situation doubts were raised about what is, what counts and how one can be sure about what one knows. People based their claims on various forms, in this case specifically established organizational elements such as rules, lists and procedures, and social categories such as 'the poor', 'the sheiks', 'the migrants'. The situation resulted in a chaotic scramble for the meat of a slaughtered camel, followed by accusations of unfair seizure, pertaining mainly to one of the sheiks. These ethnographic insights are used to theorize connections between cooperation and uncertainty and outline a code-switch from a practical to a reflexive moment. To cooperate in practical moments, people have to be oriented towards specific goals and assume one 'metacode' that captures reality, which enables the passing over of divergent interpretations of reality to a certain degree and limiting themselves to a number of questions (Rottenburg 2005a). In reflexive moments, people become aware of their divergent interpretations and contractions. In the above situation this ushered in a radical uncertainty, in which the fairness of resource allocations and therewith the representation of reality was questioned.

Cooperation is likewise essential in order to participate in a new livelihood activity. Chapter 3 portrays a dramatic livelihood configuration in northern Sudan – the burgeoning of artisanal (illegal) gold prospecting. It analyses the management of uncertainties in this male social world. I qualify how artisanal gold miners from the settlement experienced four types of uncertainty (with the terminology I develop below): economic uncertainty, the insecurity of governmental suppression, the threat of crimes, and health problems. My main focus, however, is on economic uncertainty. I discuss how a novel

extractive technology was introduced to deal with this uncertainty – metal detectors that electromagnetically prospect the terrain according to the ability to distinguish metal from non-metal. Inscribed with various functions and programmes, metal detectors were ‘de-scripted’ and associated with an overarching imaginary of a divine ordination that dictated success or failure with regard to gold finds. This translation of the technology to Sudan reinforced an unequal distribution of resources and wealth in society. Instead of raising doubts about the fairness of what was going on, miners passed over uncertainties by confirming fixed organizational forms, such as existing rules, procedures, modes of cooperation and distributive orders. This rhetorical insistence on forms pushed aside elements that would have led to a reflexive enquiry, which might disrupt much needed cooperation in extracting the precious metal; it thus can be connected to the substantial fears with which men live while searching for gold.

Chapter 4 continues the debate concerning how to act in desperate situations, focusing on the mundane need for food. How do women deal with the exhaustion of food supplies? The perpetual interruptions in the food supply related to the burgeoning of artisanal gold mining in the northern Sudanese desert. Thousands of men streamed to the gold mines, leaving their families behind for indeterminate periods. Here uncertainty appears from a novel angle, pertaining to the everyday, the mundane, and women had to digest it. They did so by building cooperative relationships with neighbours to whom they could lend and from whom they could borrow food when supplies ran out. The chapter connects to debates on contingency/agency by showing how women sought to establish standards of exchange – the main form encountered – and to produce knowledge about the exchange by employing simple techniques of measurement. Two exchange circles among Rashaida women in the settlement are identified and associated with disparate principles of coordination: staples and cooked food. The food exchanges were not means of supporting the poor, whose food supplies were always precarious, but rather were used to fill in supply gaps among women in a similar situation. Women sought predictability through standards concerning their most vital food needs, while relegating generosity and the social ties it engenders to a less essential kind of food exchange.

Finally I address situations that turn desperate; that is, when the normal is momentarily suspended by the fear of death. Here collective agency is mobilized to procure treatment for serious sicknesses. Chapter 5 traces how Rashaida go about determining whether something is a sickness. How do they know that it needs treatment? How do they represent this knowledge to others? And, conversely, when is ill health ignored as an unpleasant but minor thorn in one’s side, an ailment that poor people simply have to endure? I dwell upon the uncertainty of qualifying ill health, the uncertainty of others’

evaluations, uncertain boundaries between chronic and urgent cases, and the bracketing of uncertainty when something is established as a crisis. The chapter thus focuses on situations in which there is an urgency about action but uncertainty regarding the proper course of action. How is acting possible in the face of a lack of knowledge about one's condition, the severity of ill health and the dread of deadly outcomes? Rashaida distinguished between different types of health-related uncertainty, namely everyday infirmities, chronic illness and acute health crises, which entailed different obligations of carers and kin. I suggest a link between a family's material situation and the moment when sickness was established as a form to generate curative actions: the poorer the family, the later the category of 'sickness' was applied. Death needed to be lurking for others to act. The more exceptional and surprising the health problem, the more likely it was to move people to donate money. 'Sickness' in this understanding emerged as any physical ailment worth treating, but what and who is worthy of treatment was negotiated according to asymmetrical relationships between people and to situational dynamics. Nagging uncertainties of ill health among poor people were often unnoticed, muted and ignored.

Preceding the empirical heart of this study, chapter 1 provides a dense theoretical roadmap for the exploration of uncertainty. It discusses anthropological approaches to uncertainty and develops a theoretical argument from two disparate bodies of literature – a more developmental literature on poverty and livelihoods, and risk theories with recourse to pragmatist thought, particularly Dewey and Boltanski. The final section of chapter 1 deals with the processing of uncertainty: inspired by Simmel and Thévenot, it proposes forms as an appropriate analytical tool to straddle the relationship between contingency and agency.

Notes

1. But theorists such as Ulrich Beck et al. (2003) have emphasized people's increasing awareness that complete control and predictability of actions is no more than a chimera—a characteristic of what he calls 'reflexive modernization'.
2. Foucault (2007) relates the beginning of these processes to the emergence of market towns and an increased circulation of goods from the sixteenth century onwards. A new configuration of power then manifested itself by the end of 'the eighteenth century from an art of government to political science, from a regime dominated by structures of sovereignty to one ruled by techniques of government' (Foucault 1991: 101).
3. Foucault (1980: 139) calls the power exerted over human beings 'biopower', meaning both the discipline applied to individual bodies and the regulation of population.

Governmentality is seen as a type of power exercised in and through 'the conduct of conduct', that is, all attempts to align behaviour with norms and rationalities (Dean 1999: 10, 11). Lemke (2011: 20) notes that 'government refers to more or less systematized, regulated, and reflected modes of power (a "technology") that go beyond the spontaneous exercise of power over others, following a specific forms of reasoning (a "rationality") that defines the objective ("telos") of action and the adequate means to achieve it'. Among them are state agencies, who seek to govern the population. The population is thereby at once constituted and administered, giving way to new social realities and new subjectivities. Governmentality as the mentality of government to govern the mentality of population is also called biopolitics. Biopolitics is exercised through "security dispositifs" conceived as heterogeneous assemblage of techniques, mechanisms, institutions, discourses and so on, used to define reality and to govern, defend and secure populations, their welfare and health (Foucault 1991: 101–103; 2007: 59, 60; cf. Deleuze 1991; Hubig 2000). Security dispositifs imply a difference in the ways in which power is yielded, when compared to the Westphalian model of state politics, which surmises that sovereignty denotes a bounded territory and a particular sovereign actor that is able to control and administer territory and resources independently of others (Elden 2005: 8). A concern for the safety of the sovereign was replaced with a concern for the security of the population: 'We see the emergence of a completely different problem that is no longer that of fixing and demarcating the territory, but of allowing circulations to take place, of controlling them, sifting the good and the bad, ensuring that things are always in movement, constantly moving around, continually going from one point to another, but in such a way that the inherent dangers of this circulation are canceled out' (Foucault 2007: 65).

4. See Massey 2005 for a general discussion on space.
5. With regard to pastoralists, see Azarya 1996.
6. This development contributed to overgrazing, competition for land, famines, and the eruption of farmer–herder conflicts as well as a gradual reintroduction of Native Administration in the 1990s (cf. Duffield 1990; De Waal 1997; Kibreab 2002; C. Miller 2005).
7. See also Ahmed (1980: 40, 41) and Osman and Schlee (2014) for cases from the Blue Nile, and Azarya (1996) for a more general case.
8. Ille's study (2013) underscores the deep structural roots of this inequality in South Kordofan. Based on an example of water supply systems, his study shows how recent development projects undertaken during the short period of peace (2005–2011) reinforced these patterns of marginalization.
9. This has promoted the application of the centre–periphery model to the analysis of state–citizen relations in Sudan, according to which exploitative state institutions have extracted resources from the periphery and monopolized them around Khartoum (cf. Harir and Tvedt 1994; C. Miller 2005).
10. In addition, a nationwide opposition movement was temporarily formed under the name Union of the Marginalized Majority (Flint and De Waal 2005: 94; Pantuliano 2005: 14, 15).
11. In addition to land access and counter-smuggling measures, the formation of Rashaida tribal politics was fuelled by other political developments: the National Islamic Front (NIF) takeover in 1989, and its subsequent promotion of a single Arabic culture and its fundamentalist version of Islam, resulted in the consolidation of diverse Sudanese opposition groups, uniting under the umbrella of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Asmara in 1991. From its inception, the NDA was nurtured by the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments and soon embraced the SPLM/A; in 1993 the Beja Congress

- joined the NDA (J. Young 2007b: 27–29). The front in eastern Sudan never turned into a fully-fledged war, like the wars in Southern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains or the southern Blue Nile. Rather, military operations in eastern Sudan took the form of a low-level insurgency with occasional strikes on oil pipelines, roads and mechanized farming schemes (Johnson 2003: 138; J. Young 2007a: 39, 44, 45). The defeat of the Eritrean army in the Eritrean–Ethiopian war (1998–2000) led to the loss of bases and material supplies in Eritrea, weakening the NDA, which further disintegrated with the SPLA/M’s withdrawal after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005, leaving eastern Sudanese groups alone in their struggle (Johnson 2003: 138–39). Consequently, the Beja Congress abandoned an ethnic rationale in favour of a regional one, allying diverse local opposition groups, above all the Rashaida Free Lions and the Beni Amer, to form the Eastern Front in early 2005 (J. Young 2007a: 11, 12).
12. The Rashaida Free Lions work closely with an ethnically oriented charity (the Kuwaiti welfare organization for Rashaida), which in some localities has provided critical public services for communities and distributed goods to disadvantaged groups.
 13. The Beja Congress has been dominated by the Hadendowa, the largest group that identify as Beja, who are traditionally linked to the Ansar order. Other Beja groups are said to follow the Khatmiyya Sufi order. Morton (1989: 63, 70) points out that the allegiance to an order tends to coincide with identity issues.
 14. Overlooked by these comments was the fact that the Rashaida Free Lions had meanwhile allied itself with the government.
 15. This type of marginalization was, of course, even more central to north–south dimensions of the conflict in Sudan. See earlier complaints of Nuer in Hutchinson (1996: 33).
 16. This is based on interviews with officials and on concession maps I was shown at the Ministry of Energy in Mining in May 2010.
 17. In systems theory, for instance, functional differentiation of society at some point is thought of as becoming world-encompassing, ignoring national borders (Knöbl 2007: 45). In his later work, Luhmann recognizes that there is an area of exclusion from functional differentiation (Knöbl 2007: 46).
 18. See Knöbl (2007) for a detailed and differentiated analysis of various attempts to frame modernities. He remarks that Stichweh’s world society is based on the Luhmannian premise that communication implies order, which forecloses some of the more interesting sociological questions. He suggests that Luhmann is too quick to deduce the existence of order from acts of communication and thus fails to see how different forms of order emerge at various levels with different degrees of stability (Knöbl 2007: 49, 50).
 19. Zygmunt Bauman (2007: 29, 30) refers to people excluded from neoliberal processes of globalization as ‘wasted humans’ – that is, humans who are classified as useless to the emerging global social disorder.
 20. Latour (1993) argues that the Western separation between political and scientific representations is based on their fundamental mixing in translation practices and what he calls a move of purification, which obscures and denies this heterogeneity. He traces this back to the compartmentalization of domains between science and politics and the attribution of responsibility for non-humans/humans respectively.
 21. For more on multiple modernities, see Eisenstadt 2002; for alternative modernities, see Gaonkar 2001; for entangled modernities, see Conrad and Randeria 2002.
 22. The case of the contested oil-rich border region now between Sudan and South Sudan is a well-known example. According to the CPA of 2005, a referendum among the people of Abyei should decide its destiny – whether it should remain in Sudan or become part of South Sudan (Johnson 2010, 2011). The Sudanese government obstructed and

- postponed the referendum time and again, and the question of who will have the right to vote is still an issue of fierce contention. The government has also subverted attempts at arbitration through its tactics of postponement and the simultaneous creation of new facts on the ground through violent displacements of the local Dinka population (Johnson 2007; 2010: 10, 11; Calkins and Komey 2011: 30–32). In early 2011 the Sudanese Armed Forces occupied the region (Johnson 2011: 1–5). Instead of concerning itself with different population categories, their modes of production and the dangers they face, regulating and insuring them, the Sudanese government focused only on the control of territory and the right to confer contractual legality upon foreign investors, thereby making the land amenable for oil extraction (Linke 2014; Johnson 2010: 10).
23. I draw upon ideas presented in Foucault's lecture series from 1978 and 1979 at the Collège de France, published in English as *Security, Territory, Population* (2007) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008).
 24. Offering an inspiring account of uncertainty and its management, Jenkins, Jessen and Steffen (2005: 9) write: 'Matters of life and death are self-evidently at the heart of human existence. When [something] calls into question that existence we are confronted with the uncertainties of life'. I nonetheless contend that the above expression 'confront' is misguided. Uncertainties are nothing reified, outside of the human body and isolated from human action; rather, they are an inseparable part of all human endeavours, they are experienced and felt; of course, this is what Jenkins et al. also mean to denote with 'managing uncertainty'. I thus talk of how Rashaida process, manage or directly deal with uncertainties.
 25. In chapters 2 and 4 I show how this survival setting also led to tensions between research participants and myself.
 26. Referring to a similar situation in the Red Sea Hills of Sudan, Leif Manger (1996) talks of 'survival on meagre resources'. In a somewhat similar situation of scarcity, Gerd Spittler (1989: 198) describes the consciousness of camel and goat herders from Niger as existing close to death: 'the living are those who have escaped from death ... to live is a treasure' (my translation).
 27. For instance, Wendy James's (2007) recent ethnography of Uduk, who survived the civil war, documents the ravages of war and suffering.
 28. One notable contribution to studying poverty was made by Chambers and others at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in Sussex. They proposed a distinction between vulnerability and poverty, explicitly addressing the exposure of different groups to possible adversities. The IDS school criticized the fact that poverty had become a catch-all, void of analytical value and applied to a smorgasbord of situations, treating the poor as an unclassifiable, homogeneous mass. Their studies emphasized that the poorest people are not necessarily the same as those who are the most vulnerable to certain shocks and stresses. Vulnerability was understood as a condition that resulted from diverse layers of deprivation and that impaired the ability to cope with crises; while vulnerability was a category used by experts, it took no account of the affected people's own understandings of their situations.
 29. The survival economy approach focused on the informal sector, the interconnectedness of market and subsistence production and the income activities in developmental contexts. It was premised upon the contention that underdevelopment results from the incorporation of Third World countries into the capitalistic world system (Bierschenk 2002).
 30. The sustainable livelihoods (SL) approach/framework was elaborated by scholars and development practitioners from IDS and the Department for International Development

- (DFID) in the 1990s (see Chambers and Conway 1991; Scoones 1998; Carney 1998, 2002).
31. To address this lacuna, some have suggested being more reflexive about epistemological assumptions and methods by shifting attention to institutions as the locus of mediation and negotiation (Scoones 1998: 12; Prowse 2010).
 32. In recent decades, debates in anthropology have revolved around the whatness and whereabouts of 'the field', disbanding entrenched methodological commitments of studies localized in small-scale communities. Suggestions include tracking issues through various sites, along multiple strands, or extending cases on variant spatial and temporal scales (see Marcus 1995; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 2003).
 33. A prior consideration for my research was linguistic. I was intent on working with Arabic-speaking people, because I was fluent in Arabic after four years of Arabic classes at the University of Leipzig and studying Arabic for seven months at the University of Damascus.
 34. In contrast, when I planned to start my research in the thriving pastoral area and market town of Kassala, on the border with Eritrea, the state was very much present. The Sudanese security service did not allow me to travel and work in this border zone. The state's lack of interest in the Lower Atbara area is matched by scholarly disinterest. Apart from a baseline study by Hassan Abdel Ati (1985) and a few consultancy papers, there is no literature on this area.
 35. To gain a better understanding of the tapestry of conditions of life in this region, I visited my hosts' and friends' relatives and kin for certain occasions, such as mourning periods, weddings or name-giving feasts for newborns, in the broader surroundings of the river Atbara. I also conducted a range of interviews when I felt that I needed to gain information that I could not gather through participant observation: semi-structured interviews with gold miners from Um Futeima; with officials in the locality's administration in Edamer, where I was shown a number of maps and statistics, indicating governmental knowledge of the region; with representatives of the Kuwaiti charity in Edamer, which transferred various goods and services to Um Futeima; with tribal representatives in Khartoum and Kassala; and with officials and geologists at the Ministry of Energy and Mining (now Ministry of Mining) in Khartoum.
 36. There is an ocean of reflexive literature on anthropological knowledge production. I here merely refer the reader to some influential works, which have critically interrogated the anthropologist's texts, person, voice and position (Asad 1973; Fabian 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986; cf. Latour 2005: 39). However, the more forthright challenge to claims of scientific objectivity came from the field of science studies, which studied the fabrication, selection and political agendas in scientific practices, raising questions about the legitimacy and authority of researchers and their 'unavoidable complicity in reality-making' (Law 2004: 153; cf. Haraway 1991; Harding 1993; Clarke and Star 2008).
 37. Powdermaker (1966) considered the anthropologist as a 'human instrument' in studying other human beings, subverting scientific ideas about methods in anthropology and drawing attention to the particularity of encounters in the field. As Rottenburg (2005b: 44) points out, there is a tension between the aim to produce knowledge that is at least somewhat robust and 'the anthropologist's intimate participation in the research process, ... [which] by definition possesses no definitively verifiable criteria'. A similar approach was propounded in scholarship highlighting the role of doubt in the research process, and how doubt serves as 'engine of abductions' in the Peircian sense, opening up the work of theorizing to the imaginative, the unanticipated and surprising (Locke et al. 2008).