

*Introduction*

# **Multidimensional Change in Sudan (1989–2011)**

Insights from Fieldwork

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The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) period (2005–11) witnessed the development and proliferation of research and analysis focused on the former Sudan. For any observer who had previously been familiar with Sudan, it became almost banal to remark on the rapid transformation that affected the country during these years. Important changes were visible at multiple levels: the reshaping of landscapes, rural as well as urban, and the redefinition of their relationships; changes in forms of livelihood and ways of producing and reproducing economic and social life, in terms of new actors and settings, class articulation, and patterns of life and consumption; the growing complexity of the political arena and its subjects, strategies, alliances and legitimating discourses; the rise of ‘new’ conflicts and the evolution of ‘old’ conflicts with their local, national and international entanglements; a spiral in identity claims with their shifting boundaries and wider implications; and the simultaneous and growing intervention of outside forces in all their varieties – humanitarian aid, businessmen, ‘peace builders’ and ‘developers’. The perspective shared by the contributors to this volume is located within this particular context: the recent historical conjuncture prior to the separation of South Sudan after the 2011 referendum, an event whose radical impact on both countries is undeniable. This perspective takes into account dynamics that were observed in Sudan during the first decade of the twenty-first century, and is mainly based on fieldwork carried out between 2006 and 2011. In this framework, we talk about ‘Sudan’ and mainly use the historical present to refer to the context of the late unified Sudan in the period that

preceded the separation of the two states in July 2011. Given the reconfigurations produced by the two epochal events of 2011 (i.e., the referendum vote in January and the secession in July), the authors of this volume consider it a useful contribution for understanding today's Sudans to take a step backwards. This focuses scholars' attention on the situation that the authors observed during the final years of the former Sudan, with a particular insight into and emphasis on the multilevel changes that marked this period. Put differently, the volume does not seek to address or to follow the development of events in the two countries during the postsecession period.

### **Too Many Changes in Too Short a Time: How to Grasp Change in the CPA's Sudan?**

The multiplication, depth and rapidity of changes in Sudan may be unanimously agreed upon by observers of the country's dynamics. However, once we have agreed on this focus on 'recent changes', a much more difficult task is to retrieve a leitmotiv, a guiding thread with some valuable, updated categories and theoretical approaches, that would allow us to identify a solid link for the explanation of such dynamics and to avoid the risk of perpetuating a fragmented vision of this multifaceted and complex reality. The challenge should thus be to make sense of this conjuncture beyond a simple juxtaposition of the 'striking changes' that are before us. Thus, if we concur with the general statement of some scholars who analyse the relevant dynamics that affect the continent – saying, for example, that 'something big was happening in Africa during the early years of the twenty-first century' (Melber and Southall 2009: xix) – and accept the challenge of interpreting the complex process of change that affected Sudanese society in the past few years, we need to take into account other parallel questions evolving around the notion of change.

The first major difficulty, as we evoke the relevant dynamics of transformation, is to agree on the 'turning point' – if there is one – in this process of change. This would require us to identify more clearly the factors and actors of a possible *before* and *after*. The political (macroscale) dimension is often chosen as the dominant perspective in establishing periods and turning points, even if this approach may be misleading. From the perspective of national political events, 1989 seems to emerge as a turning point, as the beginning of a new regime. This regime, labelled Islamic and authoritarian, worked for the restructuring of the state and its forms of governance, and (despite the initial prophecies of a short life) represented the longest period of stability for independent Sudan. Moreover, this tem-

poral marker may also echo the international turn of the so-called 'new world order' after the end of the Cold War. The dominant macropolitical perspective would later overwhelm other processes and *longue durée* approaches by assuming 2005 (the end of the civil war between north and south) as another 'starting point' and too hastily claiming the entry of Sudan into a postconflict era. However, this emphasis on the political dimension – and actually on its *événementiel* aspect – hinders the aim of properly identifying the levels and processes of change.<sup>1</sup> Thus, although it is important, the political domain should be comprehended at a multiscale level and in connection with other spheres of a more complex social reality (including economic, sociocultural and ideological realities), according to the variety of its rhythms and dynamics. Furthermore, changes would be better analysed and understood in terms of processes, and by enquiry into the deep past roots of the present, rather than as a clear-cut beginning of the 'new'. The same could be said of the aftermath of the outcome of the 2011 referendum and the independence of South Sudan. Undoubtedly this event was a radical change, but if we are to gain an understanding of the contemporary and future social configurations of the two countries, we will need to shed light on the dynamics of the 'many Sudans' (Ryle and Willis 2011) that existed before, transversally and independently from the formal political and territorial separation sealed by the vote of 9 January 2011. Regardless of the disciplinary backgrounds of its contributors, this volume asserts the importance of a basic political approach to social dynamics, but it refuses a conception of 'politics' that is limited to its macropolitical and *événementiel* dimensions.

A second element that risks muddling our efforts to understand recent changes in Sudan and their links and roots is the widespread use of the label 'globalization'. This term, which is presumably attractive as a resource for fixing the idea of a multilevel and planetary change in a single dense and powerful word, has become a blanket notion. Yet the word is misleading, given the ambiguous use often made of it without better defining the crucial elements that it covers in different times, spaces and contexts. The polarization of scholarly (and political) debate between, on the one hand, advocates who exalt the coming and generalization of a new era of democracy, civil society empowerment, poverty eradication and world cultural homogenization and, on the other hand, naysayers who deny every relevant change in the early dynamics of (uneven) North-South relations,<sup>2</sup> increasing exploitation, developing injustice and exclusion, and persistent underdevelopment has sometimes blocked the progress of an analysis of contemporary global and local transformations and has nurtured the unclear and overly widespread use of the globalization paradigm. Some approaches have tried to balance these two poles, for example, by referring

to theories of dependency or uneven exchange. They attempt to capture the 'new' character of the socioeconomic configurations of recent decades but without identifying an absolute turning point and preferring to talk of the '*development of globalization*' (Amin 1995). They argue that 'globalization is not new' and should be conceived of as a process intrinsically linked to the expansion of a world capitalist system from its first centuries onwards (Wallerstein 2002). This view does not imply an absence of novelties, at the quantitative as well as the qualitative level, in what is regarded as the late and most contemporary phase of globalization. Others have widened the perspective to the shifting international relations of force in what has been labelled 'subaltern globalization' (Marchal 2008). This approach stresses the role of the political and economic actors of the South, such as China. Other researchers have preferred to talk about 'globalizations' (Perrot and Malaquais 2009) to underline the plurality of dynamics that the North-focused attention directed at this notion often fails to appreciate. In any case, for those who refuse the optimistic (and in some degree ideologically driven) vision of globalization as a new age of planetary interdependence and integration (Friedman 2000), the idea of contemporary Southern exclusion and subordination has to be conceived as an ambivalent one (Duffield 2001).

We feel that we cannot simply ignore the dilemma in relation to the total rejection or the cautious adoption of the notion of globalization as a tool able to provide a useful framework for the analysis of contemporary transformations for the Sudanese context as well as for others. This intellectual uneasiness can be relieved, albeit not solved, if we resort to categories that, in the aftermath of the post-Cold War criticism of 'grand theories' and the supremacy of a neoliberal *pensée unique*, have been stigmatized as unfashionable. So, could an enquiry into the forms and effects of (global) capitalist penetration in Africa, freed from every form of dogmatic orthodoxy,<sup>3</sup> be a valuable 'guiding perspective' for understanding contemporary multiple transformations in contemporary Sudan? If we assume as a basic quality of 'millennial capitalism' (a capitalism whose 'second coming' could be neutrally and euphemistically defined as globalization) the capacity of a neoliberal triumphant economy to reshape at the planetary level access to wealth and power, patterns of social exclusion and inclusion, and identities and ideologies 'in ways both strange and familiar' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), we may obtain a general framework to analyse some of the dynamics of change (and their interconnections). To accept the coexistence of strangeness (the 'new' forms and categories) with familiarity (the 'old' forms and categories) can allow us to interrogate the specific forms of present processes and their interrelationships without rejecting entirely and uncritically – as would be the case in

postmodernist thought, in tune with the ideology of globalization – some basic lines of analysis drawn from previous paradigms. These paradigms have focused on the complex product of relations of domination (*between* North and South as well as *within* the South itself). Although the notion is far from uncontested, recent works evoking a ‘new scramble’ for Africa (Olutayo and Omobowale 2007; Southall and Melber 2009) lead us to envisage that the puzzling multiplicity of present processes of change cannot be fully understood, whatever our ideological or theoretical approach, without a basic assumption. The assumption is that, even if in much more articulated and reshaped forms than in previous decades, the processes of capital penetration and multilevel exploitation have remained up to the present day a relevant framework for reading situations of conflict and subordination in peripheral countries like Sudan. The task is particularly tough, as a sort of unexpected convergence seems to be at work between the visions of the ‘architects of neoliberalism’ and of the allegedly ‘alternative’ theorists, resulting in a shared ‘normalization of inequality’ (Gledhill 2005) and ‘depoliticization of poverty’ (Manji 2008) in the analysis of the social processes of change. In such a perspective, we believe that: first, it is crucial to retrieve a critical approach based on the social sciences that places at its core the issue of contradictions and inequalities through an insight going beyond the fragmentation of social processes (and knowledge); and second, it is important to root this reflection in deep, field-based and localized research, allowing us, in the passage from the local to the global, to rethink categories, to reveal marks of perpetuity and of discontinuity, and to recover at least a part of this sense that remains hidden when we are lost in the multiplicity of the contemporary mutations. Although social science analysis in recent decades has ‘often appeared to take neoliberalism’s premises for granted as they celebrated global “flows”, fragmentation, the “indigenous” grass-root organization and cultural difference’ (Edelman and Haugerud 2005: 22), the issue at stake is to shift the focus again from ‘interdependence’ to ‘dependence’ processes at work in the context of globalization. Sudan in the first decade of the twenty-first century appears to be an appropriate laboratory to test the validity of this approach and to refine tools of analysis, to find a sense of the ongoing ‘great transformation’ and its linkages with global capitalism and neoliberalization in Africa (Satgar 2009) as well as with a ‘global governance’ system where international financial institutions, private companies, donor governments, UN agencies, NGOs and development organizations coexist and interact as essential actors in the dynamics of local change (Duffield 2001).

A third issue might be raised, building on the themes discussed above: the question of what could be defined as the ‘domains’ and ‘scales’ of the

processes of transformation. Without denying the articulation of social totality in various domains (and the disciplinary specialization of researchers that often fosters it), we feel that one of the most problematic obstacles to a critical grasp of social reality (especially when faced with the complexity of changing contexts) is the separation of what appear to be specific spheres with their relative processes and categories. Thus, political phenomena are viewed in a dominant politically based approach – and, as we said, mainly focusing on macropolitics, formal political institutions and short-term events as markers – while national and international strategic interests reinforce the prior role of politics as an explanatory perspective for the whole. The same could be said concerning the alleged autonomy of the economic sphere (and also, as above, the reasons supporting its claim to be a dominant perspective), which, with the power of its figures coupled with the implicit support of mainstream liberal discourse on the momentous transformations brought by globalization, tends to make invisible or marginal noneconomic relations and processes. Finally, even if it is possible to find links between the two previous domains, the analysis of what is imperfectly labelled the ‘sociocultural’ domain is even more inadequate. This domain is sometimes seen as ‘all the rest’ – that which is neither politics nor economics – a categorization that surely fosters the current depoliticization of a wide range of social phenomena. Similar observations should be made concerning the separation of scales, which means the trend of choosing to focus either on large-scale units and actors or on small-scale phenomena and communities.<sup>4</sup> Once again, if each scale certainly needs specific insights, when we pass to a higher level of understanding, the macroscale (whether international or national) cannot be properly grasped without enquiring into the microlevel parallel dynamics that in turn need to be rooted in a wider context. We would like to go beyond such a doubly fragmented vision of social reality, at the level of scales and domains of social totality, and identify how they intertwine, with the aim of achieving a critical minimalist but also global grasp of the processes of change in Sudan.<sup>5</sup> The ambition of this book and the assumption of its editors and contributors converge in stating that social dynamics and social totality need a holistic approach that stresses the interplay of the various levels of phenomena. Although all of the contributors, depending on their disciplinary background and empirical data, focus on specific actors and factors of this multilevel change in the Sudanese society of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, we wish to propose a transversal reading of the chapters, aiming to reveal a final recomposition and interlocking of the various scales and domains of such transformational processes.

## The Structure of the Volume and Its Contributions

The chapters in this volume are an attempt to provide insight into the patterns of change affecting Sudan in the framework of the global complexity outlined above. It argues for a general dynamic, interdisciplinary and empirically based approach. All of the chapters are based on recent fieldwork on various topics and in different regional contexts in the country. We want to insist on the importance of the accurate and original ethnographic work that is at the base of each individual contribution, inasmuch as we believe that the rethinking of categories and of theoretical approaches – particularly in rapidly changing contexts – can be supported only by a sound underlying and contextualized set of empirical data. Disciplinary variety (anthropology, sociology, geography, geopolitics, politics, history, linguistics and development studies) has also been a major objective of this work, based on the idea that disciplinary fragmentation is a hindrance to the wider understanding of processes of change. At the same time, the variety of scales, ranging from the microanalysis of small communities up to the meso- or macroscales of national and international dynamics, is conceived as a necessary perspective to reach, if not a total, at least a better understanding of actual phenomena. Although each article has a certain autonomy in terms of its disciplinary approach, regional case study and topic (and the authors do not claim a unique theoretical reference), our common aim is to contribute to the clarification of the deeper roots of the past in present processes and of the significant links between apparently local and isolated realities. A common underlying link is the attention paid by each contribution, from its specific perspective, to the general issue of resources access and management,<sup>6</sup> conceiving resources in a wider sense as natural and social, material and immaterial. Without aspiring to offer an exhaustive panorama of the dynamics of Sudanese society on the eve of the independence of South Sudan, this work has two aims. First, it is intended to put at the reader's disposal recent and original empirical data on a variety of domains (as captured by a plurality of disciplinary approaches) concerning social dynamics that were visible in the analysis of Sudan in the context of the CPA. Second, the volume seeks to provide a modest contribution for escaping mainstream ideological approaches, which at best push the acceptance of a vision of the present as a completely new configuration (whose fragmentation and individualization have to be accepted as dogma). At worst, such approaches ignore the deep sense of apparent contradictions and conceive them merely as a sign of the chaotic, ungovernable situation of African countries that can be rescued only by the promises of the 'new world order'. Like social dy-

namics, this written work also has its own history; its value has thus to be grasped within the dimension that we mentioned at the beginning of the introduction, as an effort towards the understanding of social phenomena at large that interlocked in the recent history of Sudan before the radical breaking point of the separation of 2011. If readers will not find 'current news' about the most recent situation of the two Sudans in this volume, we believe in the need to root the present in the *longue durée* of processes, and we hope that they will appreciate the crosscut of suggestions stemming from these contributions for a better contextualization of the present. The issues raised in the chapters do not claim to be exhaustive, either in terms of the disciplinary approaches or of the selected regional cases and themes. Nonetheless, we think that the effort of reading transversally, across a variety of contributions, and the emergence of common questions could be a support for widening the understanding of some aspects of the processes of transformation in the contemporary Sudans.

The volume is articulated in four parts. Although a common aim is to underline the interconnection of specific topics and domains and to favour transversal reading, we have gathered in each part the contributions dealing with the same dominant issue. The first part focuses on land issues. Recent dynamics show that access to land, whether for productive or nonproductive uses, remains a crucial element for understanding socioeconomic and political configurations in Sudan at the present time. Still the main source of labour and subsistence for most Sudanese communities, land appropriation is seriously affected by ongoing transformations, becoming the focus of growing competition (between local groups, with the state and vis-à-vis private actors) and contributing to the reshaping of territories, uses, users and their rights. In the present Sudanese context, following its accelerated demographic and economic expansion, Greater Khartoum has become a privileged place to observe the dynamics of land grabbing and the results of the encounter between 'old-timers' and 'new-comers'. This is particularly true in some areas at the former edges of the capital, where new middle classes looking for land face the claims of older local groups who dexterously mix tribal identity and state representation to assert their dominant role (Assal). In the real geographical centre of the capital, Tuti Island and Abū Se'īd, the definition of 'urban' and 'rural' spaces is also questioned by the persistent presence of land devoted to agricultural uses, whose status is increasingly threatened by the impact of oil incomes and the interests of a developing bourgeoisie (Franck). The situation of some periurban areas of Greater Khartoum underlines the unaccomplished 'modernization' of peripheral quarters, and the strategies of new migrants coping with a precarious socioeconomic environment and forced to replace missing 'ethnotribal' solidarities with newly built net-



works illustrate the complexity of such recent reconfigurations of space in the capital city (Ireton). Finally, the link between land issues, ethnicity, competition over scarce resources and state policies needs to be further questioned regarding its role in the alleged 'tribal' conflicts ravaging some peripheral areas like Darfur (Abdal-Kareem and Abdul-Jalil).

The second part gathers contributions about another crucial resource: water. A historical insight into the hydropolitics of the Nile Valley is fundamental to understanding at the macropolitical level the role played by the main water resource of the country in its relationship with state policies and other African neighbours as well as with internal political dimensions, including the forms of local resistance by populations affected by renewed policies of 'great hydroprojects' (Verhoeven). An insight into a central popular quarter of the capital, Deim, allows us to raise questions on the different forms of social cohesion, and the role that water can play as a 'social medium' in an urban environment where the framework is quite different from the rural context. Thus, the popular multiethnic composition of the quarter suggests the presence of strong links of solidarity and forms of implicit resilience to privatization that challenge the assumption of dominant individual practices in urban settlements (Arango). More focused on empirical quantitative data, a case study of some North Kordofan villages illustrates how small-scale rural communities cope with water scarcity in one of the most disadvantaged regions in terms of natural resources and the supply of modern services (Makki). Concluding this review of 'water issues', the situation of pastoral groups (a persistent component of Sudanese society despite attempts to dismantle their socio-economic systems) shows that the communal management of water can function as a pivot of social cohesion and as a palliative to poverty and stratification. In a period when global capitalism and the neoliberal restructuring of the state covet this primary resource, the reaction of local communities may be a sign of 'resistance', and of the embeddedness of the economy in a society in which water is a core element (Casciarri).

The third part focuses on what can be conceived as some new actors (resources, social groups or institutions) whose presence has played a significant role in reshaping livelihoods, forms and conflicts during the span of time that is the focus of the volume. Primary attention is devoted to oil, an old resource whose full exploitation has been possible only with the ending of the civil war. The turmoil in and growth of the national economy, the redefinition of the country's geopolitical status in international settings, the appearance of new foreign investors and their competition, the reshaping of a Sudanese bourgeoisie and territorial conflicts compete for attention with the increasing presence in Sudan of China and India. It is interesting to cover in more precise detail the economic role of these

powerful actors from the South, which is sometimes older than would normally be thought (Panozzo). Yet the issue of oil causes us to shift from the macroeconomic dimension to the microscale of the local people whose livelihood has recently been severely affected by the competition over this crucial resource. The situation of pastoral groups, namely, the Dinka and the Missiriya, in the transitional area of South Kordofan can be grasped only by this interlocking of past relations and new conflicts (Saeed). Understanding the present socioeconomic configuration is not only achieved through focusing on new resources and new economic actors; it is also essential to look at some of the social groups whose presence has been progressively consolidated during recent decades. The ill-defined category of IDP raises more and more questions. The confrontation between an increased number of displaced people in the capital, growing competition on (urban) land and the ambiguity of state policies opens up an analysis of the strategies of this population and the spaces accessible to them to assure their livelihood (de Geoffroy). Finally, an original critical insight into the Darfur crisis, a 'new' Sudanese conflict of the 2000s that has been the issue most covered by the (Western) media in recent years as far as Sudan is concerned, concludes this part by unveiling the political and electoral interests that underlay the intervention by international diplomacy and the great powers in the management of this crisis and the modes of construction in the United States and Europe of a dubious large-scale mobilization to 'save Darfur' (Gabrielsen Jumbert).

The fourth and final part focuses on various manifestations of identity and ideology within these transformations. In relation to this second term, which risks masking the complexity of reality, we stress the relevance of discourses that various actors (social groups, the state, political parties, education systems and international public opinion) build in order to cope with the changing global environment. In the period covered by this volume (1989–2011), religion played a crucial role in the reshaping of ideological constructions. The analysis of the changing strategies of the Islamic movement gives an essential insight into the political influence of religion during the last two decades of Sudan's history (Musso). The issue of religious identity has been historically (and ambiguously) linked to ethnic identity in Sudan. From early times the question of linguistic policies has been fundamental to the Sudanese multiethnic nation. In particular, after the peace agreement, and given the continuing implications of the issue of Arabization, a review of recent decades is needed to understand other levels of the country's political dynamics during the CPA period (Abdelhay, Abu Manga and Miller). The Nuba Mountains, situated in a 'transitional area' that was emerging from decades of armed conflict during the relatively short peaceful period before 2011, are an ideal place to discover how

vernacular languages can be used as a political resource by local people in transition. The manipulation of ethnic identities by means of linguistic affiliation is clearly shown to be a major space for (re)building solidarities but also for fuelling sentiments and divisions (Manfredi). In addition to language, the education system is another important tool for enforcing state (or dominant group) ideology. This role can be analysed by looking at the latest changes within the Sudanese school system and focusing on the teaching of disciplines whose ideological content is particularly relevant. An analysis of the notions of 'colonialism' and 'globalization' in school texts allows us to uncover some of the interesting issues at stake (Seri-Hersch). Finally, rather than merely reiterating a synthesis of the sixteen chapters, the epilogue concluding this volume provides a thorough analysis of state dynamics (namely, the evolution of the Islamists and the NCP) from the beginning of the Inqādh regime up to the recent events that have shaken the country, stressing the crisis and the failures of the project that began in 1989 (Marchal).

This volume has been issued at a moment when, once again, crucial political national events (mainly the 2011 separation of the country into two states and its continuing dramatic effects) risk overwhelming other, wider perspectives of analysis. Instead of reducing the complex reality of Sudan and following the focus imposed by (state) national and international debates, this work is intended to be a contribution to an integrated, contemporary but deep-rooted analysis of the interrelated dynamics that have developed in Sudan in recent years within the international context, but with constant reference to microscale, fieldwork-grounded materials. There is no doubt that defining the span covered in this volume with the term 'contemporary' would risk being to a certain degree ambiguous and questionable. Yet we stress again that most of the fieldwork data and general trend in our analysis converge in considering the period between the very end of the 1980s and the first decades of this century as a period of striking, deep and wide-ranging transformations to which we might have applied the category of 'contemporary' had it not been for the radical events of 2011 and their introduction of new dynamics of change. In addition, if the lack of contributions specifically focusing on South Sudan might suggest (especially in light of the 2011 secession) that the volume is a book on 'North Sudan' – in other words, today's Republic of the Sudan – we nevertheless believe that many of its contributions illustrate the interconnection of dynamics and processes that concern both of the present-day countries, which confirms the unavoidable need to deal with the formerly unified Sudan to understand the past and present of both current states regardless of their recently created state boundaries. Finally, all of the contributors to the volume have been marked by the fact of carrying