

ARTICLES

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Ethnic diversity and its impact on group identification in Darfur

Abstract

This study addresses historical and cultural problems of man's identity and ethnic origin in the Darfur region, famous for its cultural role throughout history. This subject deserves particular academic attention in order to understand the structure and identity of the Darfurian cultural features, their dimensions and characteristics viewed from different perspectives. The article explores the rich and complex centuries-old history of the Darfur region, including the rise and fall of various kingdoms and political entities, as well as the impact of external influences such as Arab immigration and the spread of Islam, besides studying the habitats of different ethnic groups, their culture, language, traditions, and the relationships between them. It shows that the cultural differences and identity based on being a member of a certain tribe are the key factors in shaping history and the complicated situation of Darfur today.

Keywords: Darfur, tribe, Sudan, Fur, Baggara, Dajo, Rizeigat, Tunjur, Zaghawa, Masalit

1. Introduction

This article aims at presenting basic factors related to tribal¹ diversity in Darfur which has influenced the political history and the contemporary situation in the region. Some crucial aspects of the history of civilization and political entities in Darfur are discussed through the lens of characteristics and the role of its people. It is an attempt to organise information on Darfur groups who describe the units of their social and political structures as “tribes” (Arab. *qabīla*²). The civilizations established by them and the cultures that have developed in the area since ancient times contributed to the creation of specific features distinguishing the region. Nowadays, this is reflected in the social and political situation, including conflicts. The authors of the article try to present the background of the ethnic and cultural situation and its political consequences, all the more so that we assume that the fact of diversity itself has an impact on human life and social interaction. We ask questions concerning the interaction between social structures and the development of the societies, including the interaction with the state. As a result of the history of the research on Darfur, a number of problems have been discussed which are common to the whole continent, among them the question of a sense of belonging to a community transcending tribal affiliations (e.g. as a citizen) and whether a process of such a development in the region is possible at all.

The social and cultural diversity as such is characteristic for the whole continent, thus the questions on the situation in Darfur are relevant also for different parts of Africa, the more so that specifically in the region a whole range of diversity occurs: language diversity, identity based on mythical origin, different attitude towards land and resources, towards livelihood security, etc. This makes Darfur a good example and area for conducting research on the subject. The scholarly literature in Arabic on the topic covers different perspectives to those offered by the literature in European languages. This article aims at analyses of these perspectives, confronting them with other scientific findings and attempts to present a broadened view on the subject.

¹ The authors use the term “tribe” with full awareness of its complicated history and the discussion it aroused. An attempt to address the question of tribe is made further in the text.

² In the article anglicised spelling was adopted for names of tribes, geographical places, some persons and other items which are commonly found in literature in these forms, while scientific transcription of Arabic language was used for everything else.

In terms of scholarly interest in the subject the literature is rather limited in number. The researchers dealing with Darfurian peoples and cultures focus on geographical and environmental conditions, social life, as well as economic and political issues both in terms of the current situation and the historical outline. Among the crucial works are volumes by MacMichael in which important information about the situation in Darfur in the beginning of the 20th century is collected. *A history of the Arabs in Sudan: And some account of the people who preceded them and of the tribes inhabiting Dárfūr* was first published in 1922. It reports the results of an ethnological research and provides detailed histories of the origins, movements, and degrees of relation between the indigenous groups in Sudan, based on oral histories collected from the interviews with local people, and on Sudanese genealogical records known in Arabic as *nisba* ('relation'). In MacMichael's *Brands used by the chief camel-owning tribes of Kordofán (a supplement to 'The tribes of northern and central Kordofán')*, first published in 1913, the history of the province is presented based mostly on genealogical information collected during interviews MacMichael conducted with local people during his long tenure in Kordofan. The ethnography's focus on local history and the history of different ethnic groups in Kordofan remains the primary source for the province's local history.

Among the contemporary studies O'Fahey's *The Darfur Sultanate: A history*, published in 2008, delves into Darfur's history until 1916. Also the works by de Waal (2005) and Flint & de Waal (2008) are of importance.

It is worth mentioning the work of the well-known Sudanese researcher Muḥammad Sulaymān (2010), and his book *Sudan: The war of resources and identity* in Arabic. The book provides highly accurate information about Darfur, including its geographical location, demographic composition, ethnic groups, and the intersecting relations between them, as well as the nature of the climate. Muhammad dedicates a significant portion of his book to ecological transformations in the region, the environmental degradation, and their connection to the increasing frequency of conflicts in the area, illustrated with explanatory charts. He explores social environment of the ethnic groups, their ecological classification, nomadic paths and movement, and the specific locations witnessing higher rates of conflict over time and place. Another noteworthy publications dealing with the subject are those by Zābek (i.a. 1998), which are based on the author's own field research.

According to the experts, there are about three thousand peoples and tribes on the African continent, and each of them possesses a remarkable richness in its own local cultures, customs, and traditions (Martin 2011). In addition, according

to Nketia, a Ghanaian ethnomusicologist and composer, also the language situation in the whole continent is very complex (Nketia 1968: 157-171). Language groups form their own divisions, sometimes coinciding with the accepted ethnic divisions, sometimes forming different kind of entities. Societies and civilizations experience non-stop processes of change and it is not different in Africa, including in the Darfur region. Beyond any doubt, the era of colonisation brought extra triggers for the exchange of social and cultural values. However, even though African customs and traditions have been influenced by different factors and processes occurring in the world, tribal affiliation, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, remains an important factor as well as a source of pride for the people of the continent (Ismā'il 2023: 306-307).

2. The question of tribe

It is beyond the aim of this article to discuss the complicated problem of the terminology applied to the social divisions in Darfurian societies. However, some clarification is needed.

Specific characteristics distinguish African numerous social and political groups, which by the Africans and the researchers are called "ethnic groups", "peoples" and/or "tribes"³. Such unlimited diversity and multiculturalism rarely exist in other continents. Discussing the situation in Africa in general, and in Darfur in particular, the researchers face problems with terminology. Among different terms "tribe" is a controversial one, and also difficult to define. As Sangmpam in his illuminating considerations writes: "The term 'tribe' is generally contested and rejected, often mildly in the Americas and Asia and more vociferously in Africa. In its eight-volume *General history of Africa*, UNESCO prohibited the use of the term 'tribe'" (Sangmpam 2017: 8). However, what he proposes in conclusion of his book is that both concepts – of the tribe and ethnicity – are important in Africa, as they differ and none of them should be dropped in scholarly discussions. Moreover, he claims that "the literature fails to explain the particularity of tribal allegiance and its saliency. This failure cries out for an alternative effort to develop a social theory of the high saliency of tribal allegiance in SSA [Sub-Saharan Africa]" (Sangmpam 2017: 91).

In Africa, the term "tribe" is important and often in use, and what is essential to these considerations, this term is the key word in Africa and is applied when the

³ For the discussion of the complicated use of the terms, including different perspectives deriving from British and French scholarly experience and attitude, see Vorbrich (2012).

question about group's or one's identity is posed. This term is associated with extreme connotations – with African pride and at the same time with pejorative view on African peoples (Wiley 2013). Apart from the term “tribe”, in contemporary literature on Africa there are many references to “tribalism” which is perceived mostly as a destructive factor, be it in processes of democratisation or state-building.

The term “tribe” expresses two different areas or dimensions, even if there seems to be a degree of connection between them. On the one hand, anthropologists applied the term to characterize a type of traditional human society associated with man since the beginning of his first precursors, prior to more complex political entities or states. Thus the term “tribe” in some narrations indicates that it distinguishes a specific phase of the systems of human societies. This resulted in the understanding of the term as a description of something connected with the past and/or the earlier stage of development. Undoubtedly, the tribe constitutes a substantial brick of bricks of the first human society. Its intertwined customs and traditions were associated with the idea of the first tribe, its members and its tribal heritage, with all its complexities and accumulations throughout history (Uld Šayḥ 2013: 15). In this understanding of the term the idea of continuation as well as historical and cultural roots is well integrated.

The groups living in Darfur speak Arabic, in which the term *qabiḷa* is being used, meaning ‘the unit’ of the group identification. This Arabic term has been customarily translated in the English-language literature as “tribe”. What is also relevant in these considerations, the term has religious connotations as it is used in al-Qur’ān. Thus, it is perceived as the solely legitimate term (both in its Arabic and English version) for the purpose in question.

In order to understand the value of the tribes in the Arabic and Muslim vision, al-Qur’ān in Sūrat al-Ḥuḡūrāt is saying: “O people, indeed We created you from a male and a female, we made you into nations and tribes, so that you might know each other. Indeed, the most honorable of you in the sight of God is the most righteous” (al-Ḥuḡūrāt: 13). That shows positive connotation of the term “tribe” in Islam. It is also necessary to be aware of the changes which occurred in the meaning of the term in the pre-Islam and Islam eras, as well as contemporarily. However, the topic being fascinating by itself is too broad to be discussed in this article. Also, it needs to be stressed that the term in the Arabic sources is applied with positive meaning. Many Arab writers applied it within the titles of their books. Hence, special branch of traditional research was developed, which concentrates on Arabic tribes, called “Arabic Genealogy” (Ismā’īl 2023).