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THE NUBA IN SUDAN:

A PEOPLE PUSHED TO THE MARGINS

The war in the Nuba Mountains raises the most profound question about the identity and destiny of the Sudanese nation. Whereas the war in the South is increasingly concerned with the issue of whether the South should be part of a single state, or separate, the war in the Nuba Mountains raises the question of the basic premise on which the state exists in the North itself.

The current government in Khartoum has an ambitious project for remoulding Sudan as a homogenous, Arabised, extremist Islamic state. According to all democratic principles, the Nuba should be entitled to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, religion and choosing their own political representation. But, for the Nuba to obtain recognition as a legitimate, indigenous group of peoples with their own identities and religions (including tolerant Islam) would be a challenge to the very foundations of the present government's project.

WHO ARE THE NUBA?

The Nuba Mountains lie in the geographical centre of Sudan, covering an area of about 30,000 square miles in South Kordofan. This area lies north of the internal North-South frontier. Although the SPLA has recently spoken of the possibility of the Nuba Mountains joining the South as a separate state, this is not countenanced by any Northern political parties, and is a highly controversial proposal among the Nuba themselves. The Nuba have become integrated into the Sudanese state—socially, economically and politically. That

integration has been on very adverse terms, which is the reason for the war.

The Nuba as a people have had their identity defined by outsiders. They are themselves a cluster of more than fifty different ethnic groups, thrown together by a common experience of oppression and discrimination by outsiders, notably the ruling elite of Sudan. The Nuba share South Kordofan with Sudanese Arabs, cattle herders such as the Misiriya Zurug and Hawazma (collectively known as "Baggara"—which means simply "cattle people"), and some camel herders such as the Hamar and Shanabla. Some Nuba groups historically developed close relations with the Baggara while others were isolated from them, but the relationship was always one of underlying suspicion. The advent of the Baggara was one main factor in driving the Nuba to the mountains. A second category of Arabs includes Jellaba traders from Khartoum and the Northern Nile valley, and Arab soldiers and administrators. These urban Arabs represent the power of the Sudanese state, and the basic reason for their presence in the Nuba Mountains was—and is—to bring the area and its peoples under the writ of central government.

The central theme of Nuba history is the tension between political incorporation into the state of Sudan and the maintenance of local identity. There is an irony here. Local, tribal identities are strong. But, until recently, many Nuba villagers had no conception of the wider community of the Nuba as a whole. They had little reason to travel to other Nuba areas; if they left their villages, it was to travel to towns, or outside the region altogether. Only in towns would a sense of Nuba identity as such emerge, when the Nuba saw how they were treated by the urban elites. It is this common experience of discrimination and repression that has created a unified Nuba identity.

The very word "Nuba" itself is not indigenous in any Nuba language. Essentially, "Nuba" was used by Egyptians and Northern Sudanese from the Nile to refer to black people to their south, whom they considered enslavable. The names given to the Nuba tribes are often themselves the work of Arab outsiders—and reflect racist attitudes. The indigenous name for one tribe, Legalege, was replaced with the Arabic *Kawalib*—literally, "dogs." The name *Ghulfan* means "uncircumcised." *Mesakin* translates as "poor," "harmless" or

"miserable" and it groups together two unrelated tribes, the Mesakin Tuwal ("Tall Mesakin") and Mesakin Qisar ("Short Mesakin"). Some place names are also offensive or degrading. Among intellectuals in the SPLA, there is now an attempt to return to traditional Nuba names for places and tribes.

Geography and Population

The geography of the region is central to its history. The Nuba hills themselves rise sharply from the plains, sometimes in long ranges, sometimes as isolated massifs or single crags. They rise some 500-1000 metres from the surrounding plains. The mountains are rocky, with cultivable hillslopes and valleys. Though they dominate the landscape, the area covered by the hills themselves is less than a third of the total area of the Nuba Mountains; the remainder of the land is extensive clay plains, some forested, some farmed. It is some of the most fertile land in Sudan—a fact that is both a blessing and a curse to the Nuba. While drought-induced famine is almost unknown in the Nuba Mountains, the fertile soils have also attracted the attention of outsiders.

The total number of Nuba is not known. The 1955/6 census was the only systematic attempt to enumerate Sudan's different ethnic groups, and found 572,935 Nuba, 61% of the population of South Kordofan. But by that stage there was already large-scale labour migration, so at least another five per cent must be added to the figure. On the basis of subsequent censuses and population growth statistics, it can be estimated that by the time the war intensified in 1989, the Nuba population was more than 1.3 million, plus migrants. Since then, the number in the Nuba Mountains has probably decreased, due to deaths, fewer births, and mass outmigration to Khartoum. There has also been massive population movement within the Nuba Mountains, with hundreds of thousands forcibly displaced to government towns and "peace camps", and a large number living as internal refugees in the areas secured by the SPLA. Currently, the best estimate for the population under the administration of the SPLA is about 200,000 people; those under government control number about one million.

Most of the people in the Nuba Mountains belong to the myriad Nuba tribes. But the presence of other groups indigenous to the area must not be overlooked. Perhaps one quarter of the inhabitants of the the region are Arabs, mainly pastoralists, traders and civil servants. There are also non-Arab groups, principally the Daju (an offshoot of a Darfur tribe, living south of Lagowa) and Fellata communities spread throughout the area. The Fellata are descendants of West African immigrants to Sudan, and are farmers, herders and traders.

A "Bewildering Complexity" of Cultures

The Nuba peoples possess extraordinarily rich and varied cultures and traditions. Sometimes it is said that they live on "ninety-nine hills". A measure of the variety of Nuba cultures can be obtained by looking at the linguistic variety, as summarised by an early anthropologist of the Nuba, Siegfried Nadel:

It has been said that there are as many Nuba languages as there are hills. This is but a slight exaggeration. Students of the Nuba languages have reduced this bewildering complexity to certain comprehensive categories...¹

More recently, the noted linguist of the Nuba, Roland Stevenson, classified more than fifty Nuba languages and dialect clusters into ten separate groups.² There is thus more linguistic diversity within the Nuba Mountains than the entire rest of Sudan, and indeed as much diversity as the whole of Africa south of the Equator. To give one illustration: the Katla language is linguistically closer to Shona and Ndebele than it is to the Nyima³ language, whose speakers live on the next range of hills. (Nyima belongs to the Nilo-Saharan language group, along with Dinka, Acholi and others, whereas Katla, like the majority of Nuba languages, is in the Niger-Kordofanian group, which includes Bantu languages.)

¹ S. F. Nadel, *The Nuba: An Anthropological Study of the Hill Tribes of Kordofan*, Oxford University Press, 1947, p. 2.

² R. C. Stevenson, *The Nuba People of Kordofan Province*, Khartoum, University of Khartoum Graduate College Publications, 1984.

³ Also known as Nyimang.

Cultural diversity is equally marked. The common elements in traditional Nuba culture essentially reflect the way in which dissimilar groups have adjusted to living in similar conditions. One of these common elements is the farming system. The Nuba are largely farmers, cultivating fields in the hills, at the foot of the hills, and in the plains. The hill farms (sometimes called "near farms") can be elaborately terraced, or gardens divided into small plots by lines of stones, and sometimes they are irrigated. Farms in the clay plains (sometimes called "far farms") are generally larger and more productive. The main crops are sorghum, beans and sesame, grown during a single rainy season that lasts from May-June until September. The harvest is gathered during November-January. All smallholder cultivation is by hand.

Dependence on the rain has contributed to many rituals around rainfall in many Nuba tribes, with ceremonies to encourage the rain.

The need for social and political relations between different Nuba tribes has also contributed to the emergence of similar political and judicial institutions in many groups. Tribes may share the institutions of "ambassadors" and judicial methods for resolving disputes. Over the last century, with an administration in common, and the use of Arabic as a *lingua franca*, much more of a common culture has developed.

In all other respects, one Nuba tribe can differ hugely from another in its music or dance, or its forms of social organization, or the corpus of beliefs in its traditional religion. Some tribes, mainly in the south-eastern jebels, are well-known for their body art, specialising in body painting and elaborate scarification. Some are famous for wrestling, or other sports such as stick fighting or bracelet fighting (the latter have long been discouraged because of the serious physical injuries that often occur). The photographer George Rodgers, the film-maker Leni Riefenstahl, and the ethnographer James Faris have made these aspects of Nuba culture well-known to western audiences. (It is precisely these same qualities that attracted the embarrassment and displeasure of the Sudanese authorities.) Universal among the Nuba is a love of music and dancing, though the

styles are again extremely varied. The musicologist Gerd Baumann describes the role of music and dancing among the Miri:⁴

Music and dance are not the preserve of specialists or even professionals, but a normal part of every individual's life experience.... In a village of upwards of 450 people, such as Miri Bara, there is no person, whether hard of hearing, crippled, or insane, that does not engage in music or dance on a number of occasions each month, and there is not a day when music or dance are not performed in one compound or another, in a field that is being cultivated, or in the village square. Far from being an occasional diversion, music and dance form an intrinsic part of social life.

The Nuba have adapted and incorporated other musical styles. The Northern Sudanese love-song genre *daluka* has been widely adopted (and sometimes adapted) by Nuba singers, who have developed their own expertise in performance. Nuba tribes have also adopted some of the dances of their Arab neighbours, notably the Baggara, which are performed for entertainment and variety.

A Brief History

Recorded history refers to only a handful of Nuba groups, but it is possible to reconstruct the general historical processes that moulded the Nuba peoples. Most probably, the Nuba represent the remnants of indigenous populations that once lived far more widely across Sudan. Over the centuries, powerful states raided the black populations of Sudan for slaves. From the treaty of Baqt in AD 652 for six hundred years, Christian Nubia (along the Nile) had to pay a tribute of 360 slaves, which came from Fazughli and the Nuba Mountains. Later, powerful states developed in the Funj (on the Nile) and Dar Fur (to the west), which continued to raid for slaves in Kordofan. The groups that were attacked and raided retreated to places of refuge, where they would be hard to find and could defend themselves.

⁴ Gerd Baumann, *National Integration and Local Integrity: The Miri of the Nuba Mountains in the Sudan*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 28-9.

In the sixteenth century, Arab pastoralists began to penetrate South Kordofan from both east and west. They moved with their livestock on the plains, also taking slaves, both on their own behalf and for sale to commercial interests in Khartoum and further north.

A recent Nuba arrival is the Shatt, a group whose history is almost certainly characteristic of many other Nuba tribes. The Shatt migrated from the west, probably in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. They were driven from South Darfur by the attacks of the Dar Fur slavers and the encroachment of the Rizeigat Arab cattle-herders, and moved to a cluster of hills south of what is now Kadugli. Like others before them, they became Nuba, while retaining their own language and many of their customs.

Most Nuba groups were small, numbering (at the turn of the century) anything from a few hundred to twenty thousand in each tribe. Almost all tribes had no chiefs or chiefly institutions, but governed themselves on the basis of custom and consent. Only one or two Nuba states existed. The Kingdom of Tegali, in the far north-eastern part of the Nuba Mountains, was the most prominent Nuba state for over three centuries. From its foundation in 1530 to its demise at the time of the Mahdi in the 1880s, Tegali was a Moslem state, itself involved as an intermediary in the slave trade—a compromise between the demands of the powers to the north and east, and the requirements of its Nuba inhabitants.

As with much of Northern Sudan, the Mahdist period (1883-98) was a time of massive upheaval and turmoil. The Nuba suffered doubly. In the early stages of his campaign, the Mahdi himself resided for a while in the northern mountains, and fought campaigns there, resisting the attacks of the Turko-Egyptian armies. Later, some Nuba tribes refused to submit to the Mahdist state and provide the tribute that was demanded. The Mahdi's successor, the Khalifa Abdullahi (a Baggara Arab from Darfur) sent several military expeditions against different Nuba tribes. Though resistance was not crushed, there was widespread bloodshed and destruction in the Nuba Mountains.

The Nuba resisted the British vigorously. Between 1900 and 1945 there were over thirty uprisings and rebellions in the Nuba Mountains, including a major revolt in Nyimang in 1908, a revolt involving the Miri and their neighbours (including some Misiriya

Arabs) in 1915, a widespread revolt in the western jebels in 1926, and prolonged resistance in Jebel Tullishi during the Second World War.⁵ A legacy of the Mahdist period, the Nuba were estimated to possess some twenty thousand rifles in 1930, and in the 1926 rebellion the Julud and Tima forces fielded one thousand soldiers with four hundred rifles. As well as having the advantage of familiar and rugged terrain, an older generation of Nuba soldiers had received professional training as slave soldiers in the armies of the Turco-Egyptian regime and the Mahdist forces.

INTEGRATION—ON WHOSE TERMS?

The British never resolved the dilemma of whether the Nuba as a whole should be "preserved" and isolated from Arab influence, or assimilated (on unequal terms) with the North. A policy of isolation was enforced, for a while.

The Closed Districts Ordinance of 1922 imposed a state of isolation on the Nuba, at the same time as creating a Nuba Mountains district separate from Kordofan. Arab traders, preachers and others needed special permits to enter the district. The principle enunciated by the most enlightened British administrators was that this was a temporary measure, which would enable the Nuba to "discover" themselves and decide on what terms they should be integrated into the rest of Sudan. In a much-quoted memorandum in 1931, the then-Governor of Kordofan, J. A. Gillan asked:

Can we evolve a structure or series of structures, to fit all these different cultures and stages of civilisation? Can we at the same time preserve all that is best in the Nuba side by side with an Arab civilisation?⁶

⁵ Ahmed Uthman Muhammed Ibrahim, *The Dilemma of British Rule in the Nuba Mountains, 1898-1947*, Khartoum, University of Khartoum Graduate College Publications, 1985.

⁶ J. A. Gillan, "Some aspects of Nuba administration," Khartoum, Sudan Government Memorandum No. 1, 1931, pp. 6-7.

To protect the Nuba "while they learn to stand on their feet" (in Gillan's patronising language) would have required a programme of social and economic development. In reality, this was restricted to encouraging small-scale cotton cultivation, and a handful of mission schools. Lack of economic opportunities meant that many Nuba men began to migrate to the Northern towns and the Gezira scheme to look for work, as agricultural labourers, casual workers, servants and soldiers—the Closed Districts Ordinance did not prevent migration *out*, and colonial labour policies actually encouraged it.⁷ This had the ironic effect of promoting Arabic and Islam among the Nuba far more effectively than if the Mountains had been open to Northern Sudanese. But in the North, Nuba migrants always had an inferior status.

In 1937, the Nuba Mountains District was abolished and the area was absorbed back into Kordofan. Ten years later, a long-running debate about what language of instruction should be used in Nuba schools was resolved in favour of Arabic. By default, the Nuba were integrated into the Northern social and political system. But, because of lack of education, economic development and political access, the Nuba were no better prepared for playing an active role in Sudanese politics in 1947 than in 1922.

Since then, the "mainstream" culture of Northern Sudan has been actively promoted in the Nuba Mountains. Partly this has been done by government fiat. In the early 1970s, the government tried to enforce wearing clothes, by forbidding traders to sell goods to anyone who was not "properly" clothed and banning naked and semi-naked people from entering towns. There were also campaigns against pigs. Among the Nuba Moslems, pressure to conform more closely to Northern culture was especially strong. The agents of this pressure were more likely to be Nuba Moslems who had lived in towns, rather than traders or preachers from the Nile Valley. The same process, sometimes called "Sudanisation", has been described among non-Arab Moslem peoples in neighbouring Darfur:

Over a period of five years, the author has witnessed the virtual disappearance of tribal dancing and a growing polarisation within

⁷ African Rights, *Sudan's Invisible Citizens: The Policy of Abuse against Displaced People in the North*, February 1995, pp. 7-9.

communities. This polarisation is concerned with opinions as to the proper way to live as a Muslim. The different ethnic groups in the area have lost a great deal of their original cultural identity over recent decades. This change represents the conversion from what is considered an increasingly irrelevant, narrow ethnic ethos and worldview to a new, prestigious and powerful ideology and praxis. While splitting some local communities, 'Sudanisation' simultaneously strengthens certain class and national identifications.⁸

Many aspects of Northern Sudanese culture have now become so deeply entrenched in Nuba society that they can never be reversed. The prime case of this is clothing: two generations ago, public nudity or semi-nudity was the norm for many Nuba. Clothing was adopted through social pressures, but today all Nuba have accepted that being fully clothed is an absolute requirement of modernity, and almost all people feel ashamed to appear in public without "proper" clothing. This was well-expressed by an elderly Achiron lady, Kaka Zubri.⁹

In the past when I was younger we had a lot of beads and no clothes. We didn't feel ashamed when we came down the mountain. But then clothes came and people said, 'You have to wear clothes to be a civilised woman.' When the Arabs were here, we had clothes, salt, sugar, everything. But when the SPLA came and liberated the area, the Arabs left with all the things they had brought. The clothes stopped. But now we feel ashamed to go back to traditional dress.

The current dire shortage of clothes in SPLA-controlled parts of the Nuba Mountains has become a major hindrance on people's participation in social events. Some women were reluctant to meet with African Rights' representatives because they did not consider themselves to have adequate clothes. One forty-year-old woman, Amal, said, "We have many problems. My children are completely naked. We cannot go to occasions like the dances that are celebrating SPLA day because we have no clothes, so we just stay at home."¹⁰

⁸ Paul Doornbos, "On becoming Sudanese," in T. Barnett and A. Abdelkarim (eds.) *Sudan: State, Capital and Transformation*, London, Croom Helm, 1988, p. 99.

⁹ Interviewed by the BBC in Achiron, 13 May 1995.

¹⁰ Interviewed in Um Dulu, 17 May 1995. SPLA day is 16 May.

For a while, and for some Nuba peoples, it appeared that "Sudanisation" could be achieved without losing what was valuable in traditional cultures. During the hopeful decade of the 1970s, this was the case for the Miri, as argued by the anthropologist Gerd Baumann: "To the first observer of these processes, it may often appear that Miri villagers are determined to cast off their heritage as Nuba and to see themselves as primarily Sudanese. Yet Miri villagers do not recognise such a conflict of identities."¹¹

This was optimistic. Baumann also noted that, "What is common to virtually all Nuba groups, is a history of enmity and strife with precisely those populations to whom 'integration' is now expected to tie them."¹² The reality was that national integration could only be achieved on highly unequal terms—another subjugation, this time losing local integrity in the process. The realities of exploitation, expropriation and discrimination became so harsh that many Nuba ultimately resorted to arms.

Integration into the Sudanese state came through four main means: (1) political administration, especially the imposition of chieftancy; (2) education; (3) labour migration and (4) Islam. The first three are discussed here; the religious question is left for Chapter IV.

DIVIDE AND RULE

The Nuba presented many problems to the British administration, which responded with force, guile and patience. Certain groups (Tira el Akhdar, Tullishi) were compelled to move down from the mountains to settle in the plains, where they could be policed more easily. Punitive expeditions were mounted, including the first use of aerial bombardment (Tima and Julud were bombed on 4 February 1926). Most significant, however, was the British decision to institute "indirect rule", which began to be implemented in the 1920s. The theory was that the colonial authorities would rule through a "native administration" of chiefs, who would combine local legitimacy with responsiveness to the demands of "modern" government.

¹¹ Baumann, 1987, p. 63.

¹² Baumann, 1987, p. 9.

Nuba Chiefs

However, with just a handful of exceptions, there were no chiefs in the Nuba Mountains. One exception was the Dilling tribe, who had been ruled by a Sultan for as long as oral history could recall. Another was Tegali, where the ruler had historically traced his ancestry to an Arab stranger. But, the big men (sometimes calling themselves "chief" or "sultan") who existed in other places were at best temporary, opportunistic war leaders—often the very people who led resistance against the British.

Communal cohesion among Nuba groups was traditionally not provided by chiefs, but by a variety of means, including traditional priests ("kujurs") and age sets (organisations of age-mates). Many Nuba groups were "stateless societies", ruling by custom, consent and consultation. But the British needed chiefs, and so they set about both creating the institutions of chieftanship, and appointing the chiefs (or vetting the candidates for popular election). This *imposition* of chieftanship is a fact of fundamental importance, and its impact is felt today.

Sometimes, the chieftanship was created simply from scratch, for example among the Nyima or Tullishi. In Otoro and Kawalib, an indigenous chieftanship was beginning to emerge in the early twentieth century, but the government chiefs bore little resemblance to those who had emerged. Nadel observed the process: "To study [Otoro chieftanship] is to watch it emerge from a chiefless society. Heiban still represents this chiefless state, save for the superstructure of modern Government chieftanship."¹³ In Korongo Angolo and Mesakin, there were offices of "ambassadors" who negotiated between different tribes, but held little or no power within them, and the titles for chiefs and sometimes the individuals themselves were grafted onto government chieftanship. In Moro and Tira, the institution of "big men" or (in Nadel's words) "pseudo-chiefs" served as a model.

The Nuba peoples had been subjugated, often violently. The people they preferred for chiefs were not the real loci of authority—

¹³ Nadel, 1947, p. 146.

the rain-makers, traditional priests and others—but people who had been migrants, soldiers or civil servants, who knew the ways of the government. Often, the spheres of traditional authority and government liaison were kept deliberately separate, so that one man was prevented from holding the two different kinds of position. Nadel describes the process of selection:

In electing their modern chiefs or sub-chiefs, the people look for qualifications of a new kind: knowledge of Arabic, acquaintance with the ways of the *Hakuma* [government], an energetic temperament, and suitable age for undertaking the new tasks of office, like tax-collection, recruiting labour for road work, &c.¹⁴

The government provided a salary, status, authority in a court and control over a few local policemen, and perks such as education for the chief's sons. In return they demanded absolute loyalty and obedience. A chief could be summarily dismissed for failing to collect the taxes or subdue the people, and many were. The Nuba chief was not a representative of his people (though some of them evolved to be close to that over the decades), but a civil servant. Old habits die hard: today, a chief's first, almost instinctive loyalty, is to his superiors. After the experience of some of the early rebellions, which were led by chiefs appointed or approved by the government, the British were also keen to restrict the powers of the chiefs.

The British introduced a three tier system of chieftancy. The lowest level were sheikhs, one for each village (or ward of a large village). Several sheikhs were put under one omda (a word and institution imported from Egypt). The highest level was the mek (a version of the Arabic *melik*, "king").

In the later colonial period, the administration was relatively benign, and the institution of chieftancy became more widely accepted. Some sheikhs, omdas and meks even became popular with their people, and were respected by both villagers and government. This situation persisted unevenly after independence in 1956, notably in Sudan's "development decade" of the 1970s, that false dawn of economic progress and social integration. But, even when the institution of chieftancy was at its most popular, it was kept at a

¹⁴ Nadel, 1947, pp. 164-5.

distance from the true loyalties of the people. In the 1970s, among the Miri, the separation of traditional priestly offices and chieftancy was strictly enforced.¹⁵

The "native administration" system was abolished in 1971 and replaced with a system of "people's councils." This was less of a disruption than it might have appeared, because of the real status of chiefs as government servants. In reality, moreover, the chiefs continued to exercise their influence, often by taking senior positions in the people's councils. As the new system of local government ground to a halt, due in part to lack of finance, the provincial authorities *de facto* reinstated the chiefs and used them for their familiar purposes. After the 1989 coup, chiefs were formally reinstated, and the current government is following a policy that in many respects closely resembles their British predecessors.

Nuba-Arab Relations

One of the deepest tragedies of the Nuba Mountains is that the Baggara Arabs who have implemented so much of the government's policies against the Nuba, are themselves an impoverished and marginalised group in Sudan. The Baggara are mostly poor, and despite close links to powerful political forces such as the Umma Party of Sadiq el Mahdi, there has been little economic development or provision of social services in the Baggara areas. However, for historical reasons, the Baggara Arabs have been unwilling to make common political cause with their Nuba neighbours.

In the western jebels, in Lagowa area, colonial and independent governments faced the most acute manifestation of the widespread problem of how Nuba-Baggara Arab relations should be managed. In this area, the geographical separation between the Arabs, the seven Nuba tribes and the Daju was simply an impossibility, and the population was split in such a way that no group formed a natural majority. But the British insisted on creating a tribally-based administration nonetheless. They experimented with a system of political federation, and also toyed with separating the district from the remainder of the Nuba Mountains and allowing it to become

¹⁵ Baumann, 1987, p. 81.

"Arabised." But the colonial authorities failed to resolve on any one strategy. This left the best-organised group, the Misiriya Zurug, in the dominant position. The Nazir¹⁶ of the Misiriya Zurug had authority over the Nuba tribes and the Daju, who were represented only by wakils (deputies). It was only in the 1980s, after prolonged complaints by the Nuba tribes and the Daju, that the Kordofan Regional Government agreed to appoint senior chiefs from the Nuba and Daju.

Another point of contention was the question of who owned the town of Lagowa itself. Historically it is a Kamda area, but when it became a district headquarters, it came to be dominated by the Misiriya Zurug.

By default rather than design, British policies ended up favouring the Arabs, by giving them better education, more economic opportunities, and better representation in the centres of power. This relentlessly fed through into systematic discrimination in favour of the Arabs in post-independence local government. Hassan Osman Kuku is a teacher from the western jebels. He described some of the components of institutional discrimination in favour of the Arabs in the area.¹⁷

Before the war, the relation with the Arabs was generally one of brotherhood. But there were some disagreements, for example over bringing cattle onto farms, and discrimination and segregation.

A second problem was education. If the Tima took their children to school, they were not encouraged to go ahead.... [see below for more discussion of this issue].

A third problem concerned the co-operative shop and the distribution of essential commodities. The distribution was not done properly. Even though the Tima area had a larger population than the Misiriya area, the treatment was not equal. We were given two bags of sugar for distribution per month, so that one family would get only one quarter of a pound. The other Misiriya places, even though they were less in number, would get a bigger quantity.

¹⁶ The paramount chief of an Arab tribe.

¹⁷ Interviewed in Tira Limon, 23 May 1995.

It was in response to this unequal treatment that the Nuba began to agitate for stronger representation in the administration. They did meet with some success, in the early 1980s.

Another big problem was farming schemes. Sometimes the government created agricultural schemes for the people. They would call the people together and demarcate the area. But we would find that when the allocation of schemes is made, all the leaseholders are Arabs. In Subakha in the 1970s, Fadallah Hamad, who is a big Misiriya politician, controlled the distribution of land in the scheme. At least Subakha was on virgin land. The same thing happened with Um Dorota in the 1980s, and that scheme took land away from the Tima farmers. There was no compensation, and the farmers who had lost [land] were forced to find new land. The farmers protested and even took the case to court, but the judge refused to accept the case.

One dispute was at Khor al Far, especially at Rimti. The Misiriya went to the government to try to get gardens in that place. They even went as far as Khartoum, and the scheme was given a name: the Rimti scheme. The Khartoum government people discussed the matter and said, 'Okay, if the people of the area agree.' Then the government people came and found that only Misiriya were planning it, and stopped the scheme.

At a village level, relations between Nuba farmers and Baggara herders were usually cordial. When there was no political dispute, and no reason such as drought for violent competition for water or grazing, the two groups were very amicable. As the Nuba colonised the plains from the 1920s onwards, they began to become cattle owners, and by the 1950s and '60s, many Nuba were large cattle herders in their own right. Meanwhile, many Baggara also started farms. Relations varied from village to village: in some places they were very good. Ahmed Sayed Nur, a nurse from Delami, said:¹⁸

In the past, we were living with our Arab neighbours, the Ayatigha and Awlad Ghabbush. The relationship was good, though there was no intermarriage. There was trade. We grazed our cattle together. Sometimes a Nuba would entrust his cattle to an Arab to take them

¹⁸ Interviewed in Tira Limon, 20 May 1995.

to pastures for the dry season, and sometimes an Arab would settle with us for farming. We would have just minor clashes over grazing.

At the time there was considerable interest among scholars in the "Baggarisation" of the Nuba and the "sedenterisation" of the nomads: it was expected that the two groups would become gradually integrated.

In the 1980s, friendly relations broke down. In the western jebels, the local balance of power shifted decisively in favour of the Misiriya. This was due to the policy of the Transitional Military Council, that took power in April 1985 during the Popular Uprising against President Nimeiri, to arm the two sections of the Misiriya—Humr and Zurug—as a militia to fight the SPLA. This is discussed in Chapter II.

Bias in Dispute Resolution

One major type of dispute occurs in the Nuba Mountains with predictable regularity: pastoralists bringing their animals onto farms before harvesting is complete. The colonial records are filled with such cases. Until the early 1980s, such disputes were generally settled equitably. But then the balance tilted decisively in favour of the Arabs, and Nuba litigants lost any confidence that they would obtain a fair hearing in courts. Many Nuba police officers, magistrates and administrative officers were transferred out of the Nuba Mountains in the 1980s. Nuba communities discovered that the government would almost always support the Arab cause in the case of an inter-tribal dispute.

A characteristic incident is reported by one farmer from Korongo Abdalla:

Before the war we had problems over farmland. The nomadic Arabs brought their cattle onto our farms. In our area they were Misiriya Zurug—Jubrat and Salamat. The army armed the Baggara, who then caused trouble. Whenever we wrote a petition they would say, 'These are nomadic routes.' These problems began in 1983-84.

There was one incident in June 1984. Some Baggara took our cows, and when we pursued them to the police post at Juheilat, the

police came out, armed, and sent us back. The Arabs then wrote a petition accusing us of taking their cows. Our own chief, Omda Anja Tutu, was bribed to give witness against us. So, in February [1985], the police arrested and tied up four of our boys—they tied them up in trees and lit fires under them to torture them with heat and smoke. We have two of the names: Saraf Tiya and Hassan Ab Shok. Then a Nuba soldier with the government army cocked his rifle and threatened to shoot unless the men were released. They were. But the Arabs kept pursuing the affair, until the SPLA arrived and they dropped it.¹⁹

There were innumerable such cases. One obstacle that the Nuba side consistently faced was the perfidy of their own chiefs: as government servants, accustomed to handsome payment for their work, they were frequently ready to accept bribes to support the Arab side in a dispute. A farmer from Kufa village in the Miri jebels described some of the problems they faced:

Our Arab neighbours used to be Misiriya Zurug, Humr, and Awlad Muman. At one time we had peaceful settlement of disputes. I recall one case in 1978 when the Awlad Muman killed one Miri man, Zeidan Ibrahim Kafi. *Diya* [bloodmoney] was negotiated but they refused to pay. Then the government made a conference and the matter was settled. They paid.

From about 1980 we had more problems resolving our cases. There was one community health worker, Abdel Gadir Tiya, who was seriously wounded in 1981, speared by an Arab. Despite our attempts, the case was never settled. The Arabs were paying the Miri negotiators to stop the case going ahead.

Another case was in 1985. The Arabs came to the village of el Akhwal, they attacked it and occupied it. They didn't kill anyone. The people just ran away. One man, Taj el Sir—he later died in the SPLA—complained to the mek, Mohamed el Zaki, who took the case to Kadugli. Ten days passed before anyone responsible came to visit the place. We saw no sign of any police for ten days. The case was settled by the police and the mek, but we weren't happy.

¹⁹ Jaafar al Fadl, interviewed in Um Dulu, 17 May 1995.

The accused were let go free because there was no-one to witness against them. Mek Mohamed el Zaki was responsible for this.²⁰

Frustration with the betrayal by their chiefs was an important reason why many Nuba youths and farmers turned to the SPLA.

A particularly important dispute occurred in early 1987, in the Shatt area south of Kadugli. It started with a minor incident, but rapidly developed into a national political issue, that reveals many components of the unfolding crisis. An issue of particular sensitivity that was raised was the value, in terms of *diya*, of a Nuba life *vis-à-vis* an Arab life.

Kuku Idris al Izerig Kafi is now an SPLA officer. In 1987, he was one of the educated members of the Shatt Damam community who was asked to represent the Shatt side in negotiations. He recounted the background to the incident:²¹

Our neighbours at Shatt Damam are Misiriya Zurug and Fellata Hausa (mostly merchants), as well as the Kadugli people. Before the war, we would see the Misiriya after the rains, when they would come from the north and make their *farigs* [nomadic camps] outside our villages. They would share our water and come to seek boys to work with them as cowherds. Our contact was limited.

On 2 February 1987 a serious problem started. The Misiriya came as usual the previous November and December, and found that our people had gathered the harvest, which remains in the farms in heaps until March. But on that day some of them released their cows onto the stored sorghum in the farms. Two farmers were present, guarding their crops. They came to chase the cattle away. The Arab was armed and shot at them. One was injured and his brother who came after him was killed.

There are several different versions of what happened next. Some witnesses claim that the Misiriya attacked the following day, with three lorry-loads of gunmen, and killed between four and six Shatt farmers, for the loss of one or two lives among the Arabs. However, Kuku Idris is even-handed in his allocation of responsibility for the fighting that followed.

²⁰ Musa Kuwa Jabir Tiya, interviewed in Um Dulu, 17 May 1995.

²¹ Interviewed in Tira Limon, 20 May 1995.

People ran and told their relatives. The Arabs at that moment were encamped between Shatt Damam and Shatt Safiya. We made a *faza* [war cry]. Both groups of Shatt people mobilised and attacked the Arab camps. Two Arabs were killed that night. The Shatt people took 435 Arab cows, and the Arabs ran with their children. The cattle were too many to eat, but the people slaughtered them all, anyway.

For five days there was fighting. At that time I had just come from Khartoum. I met with the police commander, Abdel Gadir Darjol (a Ghulfan [Nuba]) and the military commander, Major al Sir Khalifa, and I tried to see about stopping the fighting. We went to Shatt Safiya, and found the fighting continuing. We were accompanied by the riot police, and we succeeded in stopping the fighting and forming a reconciliation committee. The committee had fifteen members: five Misiriya, five Nuba and five from the government.

The committee agreed that before any final settlement is reached, during an interim period, any aggressive Nuba or Arab will be punished with a fine of LS [Sudanese pounds] 5 thousand million [a huge and symbolic sum]. This was signed by all groups on 25 February.

The day after the ceasefire, the Misiriya Arabs mobilised and attacked Genaya. They came with their lorries. They looted crops, both sorghum and sesame, and burned. They didn't raid any cattle, but they loaded their lorries with looted crops. They killed one man and wounded four.

Hamad Tutu Dabah is a farmer from Shatt Safiya who was nearby when the incident occurred. He told African Rights:²²

The Arabs returned to Genaya and shot randomly. But there was no-one there—all the people had run to Jebel Kuwa the day before. The Arabs looked for cows to steal but they found none. So they burned 77 houses.

The administrators of the area went to Kadugli to report to the government there. The Government sent a delegation and evaluated the amount of losses, and we formed a committee. We demanded *diya* for the people killed on our side, who were eight.

²² Interviewed in Um Dulu, 17 May 1995.

Kuku Idris was one of those who went to Kadugli to report on the incident.

We went to the garrison and reported what had happened. The army came to Shatt Safiya and decided to call for a big conference in Kadugli, *Muatimir al Ajawid* [Conference of Mediation]. This conference opened on 6 March.

The conference was enlarged to include twelve from each side and twelve from the government—who were going to be members of the political parties. But those who were represented were the northern political parties, Umma and DUP, six—six. The Sudan National Party [which is Nuba-dominated] was not represented. We protested, arguing that all the five political parties in Kadugli should be represented.²³ We objected. The government refused. The conference went ahead. It was chaired by the Governor of Kordofan, Mohamed Ali el Mardi. We repeated our objection, and the government refused again.

The conference made no resolutions. It was derailed by the comments of the Governor himself. He himself said, 'The Nuba are mistaken. They have cultivated on land which is supposed to be a cattle route for the Arabs.' We disagreed: 'We don't have any nomadic routes in Shatt.' Our evidence was first that sugar is given by the Ministry of Supply to nomads in areas where they have registered livestock routes, and we had never received any such sugar for the nomads. Secondly, in the Council itself there was a map with the nomadic routes marked on it, and none were marked at Shatt.

The Governor also said that the Shatt people had got drunk on *merissa* [sorghum beer] and attacked the Arabs. We argued that even if people were drinking *merissa*, who is mistaken, the person who drinks *merissa* in his house or the person who invades another person's farm?

At last the conference was adjourned. The Governor said, 'I will communicate with the Prime Minister [Sadiq el Mahdi] and decide, and fix another date.'

The delegation then began to raise another issue: compensation, and ran into another layer of delays and obstructions.

²³ The other two were the Baath Party and the Sudan Communist Party.

We asked for assistance for the people whose houses were destroyed. We were called to el Obeid. I went with a delegation. The Governor asked us to come to Khartoum, so we went to Khartoum. We were four: Mohamed Mojo Shelali, Musa Kafi, el Amin Kuwa, and me. We met the Governor in the presence of the Prime Minister. They said, 'Let's meet again in el Obeid.' We continued arguing, 'It's not necessary to return to el Obeid. When the SPLA attacked el Azraq Murahaliin camp in 1985, you immediately provided relief, and took the Murahaliin to Kadugli and created a residential area for them called Salamat. Why are we different?' They insisted. The Governor went by aeroplane to el Obeid and we followed by road.

We met the Governor again in el Obeid. There was still no date fixed for the conference. We insisted on assistance, citing el Azraq again. We said, 'After that incident, Fadallah Burma went, saw and provided arms to the Arabs. Why are we not assisted and why are we not armed?' We felt he was deceiving us.

We returned to Khartoum and made our protest public through the newspapers. We made it clear that if there was no government protection or assistance, we would protect ourselves. After seeing this in the newspaper, Sadiq's government began accusing us of following the methods of Yousif Kuwa against the Governor of Kordofan.

By the end of March, we saw that things were getting too difficult. Security had been following us from the start, with the intention of framing charges. Mojo and I left to join the SPLA, and the other two left for Saudi Arabia.

The departure of the Shatt delegation handed the advantage to the Misiriya and their allies in the government: there were now no educated people to represent the Shatt case or to campaign publicly. Kuku Idris said, "After we left, pressure was put on our people." Hamad Tutu Dabah was one of those who now had to deal with the negotiations:

The Arabs demanded 435 head of cows taken by the Nuba during the fighting, and 36 sheep. They also demanded *diya* for one man killed. We demanded *diya* for eight dead and compensation for the houses burned and property destroyed. The Arabs then demanded a *diya* of sixty cows for each Arab, but said they could pay only 31

for each Nuba dead.²⁴ We went to the Commissioner to complain and say that the *diya* should be equal for Arabs and Nuba. The Commissioner agreed but he was secretly supporting the Arab side.

Each side wanted the other side to pay first. The Commissioner was leaning on us. We paid the 435 cows, including healthy cows and young cows. The Arabs divided the cows. They owed us 248 for *diya*; they chose the old and sick cows and gave them. We refused: we wanted a proper mixture of cows.

The estimate for the loss of the burning in Shatt Safiya was LS 138,000. We demanded this; they refused. While we paid all what we owed, they stalled. We went to the Commissioner's office. He went round and obtained some voluntary contributions from the Arabs in the town and added to it from the Government's own funds. They gave us LS 52,000. We gathered the people who had lost properties and gave them what we could, and said, 'Wait, we will try to get you the remainder.' But when we returned to the Commissioner, we were refused.

This continued for some months. In June, we held a conference with the Deputy Commissioner in Shatt Safiya to discuss the same case. The Arabs and the Government were still refusing to pay what was due.

Before that time, the Government was arming the Arabs. They continued to arm them. When we returned, the Commissioner said, 'We have made peace between the Nuba and the Arabs, but you are demanding more and also continuing to fight. If you want, go and fight with them. But you know they are armed and you are not.'

So we left it at that, saying that God will help.

The Shatt case was not helped by the fact that the mek showed more loyalty to the government than his people. The Shatt people expected little else from a government chief, but it was a betrayal nonetheless. Kuku Idris explained what he heard about the subsequent progress of the negotiations:

The same committee took over implementing the payment of *diya* and compensation. The Nuba were to pay 435 cows: this was enforced. They insisted that the *diya* for an Arab should be twice as much as for a Nuba. If the *diya* for a Nuba was fifteen cows, for an

²⁴ In colonial days, the British decreed that the *diya* for an Arab was twice as high as for a Nuba.

Arab it was to be 31. If it was thirty for a Nuba, for an Arab it should be 61. Our Mek, Kafi Tayara el Bedin, was part of this. A formal agreement was reached that made the *diyya* equal, but practically the government and Arabs made sure that we paid double. Some of the *diyya* was collected and paid by October 1988, but they were still collecting the second part when the SPLA entered on 24 March 1989. There was a fierce battle at Fama. Then the whole committee ran from Shatt Damam and abandoned the plan. From then on, no-one has talked about payment.

The strategy of formally agreeing to equal treatment for both sides, but in practice working towards enforcing terms advantageous to one side, was something the Nuba had become familiar with. Meanwhile, further disputes erupted in Shatt Damam; at the end of 1987, Arab militiamen killed five villagers after the burning of the house of Fellata merchant who was suspected of selling the area's sugar ration for personal profit. The authorities in Kadugli called for another conference to settle the issue, to which the Shatt responded with scepticism. The time for negotiation had passed.

Favoured Tribes

The British policy of divide and rule had another important component: dividing the Nuba tribes against each other. One tribe, the Nyima, who live at the northern extremity of the Nuba Mountains west of Dilling, came to play a prominent role in this strategy. They still do.

In the colonial days, the Nyima were the Nuba tribe most exposed to the influence of the new government. At first, the Nyima chiefs and kujurs resisted the British, with a major uprising in 1908. After this, the British imposed chiefs on the Nyima, most of whom were former soldiers or civil servants. They recognised the value of education for their children, and when Anglican missionaries chose a Nyima village, Salara, to be the site of one of its first mission stations and schools in the Nuba Mountains, they eagerly embraced education. Since then, the Nyima have provided a disproportionately high number of educated Nuba. They are both Moslems and Christians: many migrated for work in Dilling or the cities of the

North, and became Moslem, and many others were educated in Salara mission school.

The colonial government played a game of divide and rule within the Nuba Mountains. It encouraged the Nyima to play a role as the elite, and then co-opted them as a "Nuba" leadership that could represent, and control, the other Nuba tribes. Educational and employment opportunities were never extended to other Nuba areas to a comparable extent. The tendency of the Nyima elite to cooperate with the government remains strong to this day.

A SECOND-CLASS EDUCATION

Another legacy of British rule was education. Throughout the colonial period, educational policy was marked by ambiguity. Mission stations were opened in Heiban, Abri, Tabanya, Kauda, Salara and Katcha, and Nuba children were given an opportunity of an education in all these places. Several of the Nuba languages were written down (in Roman script) for the first time. There were also government schools, in Kadugli, Talodi and Dilling, but for a long while Nuba children were excluded. This was because the education was in Arabic, and at the time colonial policy was to isolate the Nuba from Arab influence. The colonial authorities wrung their hands over whether the Nuba should have a separate educational policy (as in the South), or whether it should be integrated into the Northern, Arabic system.

In 1947, the decision was made to use Arabic as the medium of instruction in the Nuba Mountains. From the outset, the Nuba were at a disadvantage—they had fewer teachers and fewer schools. They were merely inserted into a national educational system as a minority without the linguistic skills or political weight to obtain fair treatment. They have suffered accordingly.

From their earliest days at school, Nuba boys and girls were—and are—made to feel that their futures lie as servants and labourers, not as professionals or leaders. Teachers passed on such attitudes with striking success and consistency. Even the Nuba teachers have often transmitted these attitudes to their pupils, consciously or unconsciously. Frustration at discrimination in education was a major factor why many youths joined the SPLA.

Hassan Osman, a teacher, described some of the elements that discouraged Tima children from proceeding with their education:

If the Tima took their children to school, they were not encouraged to go ahead. Some were even chased from the schools—they were told by the teachers and their Arab schoolmates just to go and look after animals. The headmaster of the intermediate school in Lagowa, Gadim Jabar, a Misiriya who was born in the Tima area, was particularly aggressive in this respect. After the exam to graduate from primary to intermediate school, the boys who pass should be admitted. But then the problem is how to stay. The Arab children were given all the boarding places, or they had relatives in town and could put up with them. But the Nuba children had no place to stay in town, and so they found it difficult to stay in school.²⁵

Kokani Musa Mudir, from Tura village in Tira el Akhdar, joined the SPLA in 1988 at age twelve. Like many Nuba, the petty discrimination that appeared to be destroying his chance of a future drove him into rebellion. After seven years in the SPLA, six of them as a soldier, the yearning for education is still strong.

I spent four years at Kauda primary school. Six months after I left, the school was closed because all the teachers left, fearing the SPLA.

The school was not functioning well at the time. We were not getting a good education. We were being frustrated. For example, there used to be a Tilly lamp so we could study after sunset; we used to contribute money for the gas. We paid the money. But the teachers refused to teach us in the daytime, and then at night they took the Tilly lamp so that they could play cards. Most of the teachers were Shanabla Arabs.

The food at the school was also not good. So we organised a strike. We wanted better food, and we refused to pay for the gas for the Tilly lamp unless we were able to use it in the evenings.

In the morning assembly and inspection on the day of our strike, the teachers told us, 'Teaching you is a waste of time. We are hearing that the SPLA is here. It is useless to teach you as you will just go and join the rebels.'

²⁵ Interviewed in Tira Limon, 23 May 1995.

So most of the students decided to join the SPLA, and lose their education. We thought we may get a better education if 'the land is out' [i.e. liberated], instead of paying for education that was not being provided anyway. We were paying school fees of LS 6 per year for each student, and what for?

That was in 1988. So I decided to join the SPLA. There were 36 of us from Kauda who went together. I was the youngest, I was twelve years old. We assembled in Karkar. Our commander was Juma Kabbi, and when we reached a total of four hundred, we all went together to Ethiopia...

Education is still a vital concern for Kokani:

I have a little spare time, and I try to read. But I really need to study in a class. I want to go back to school, even before freedom is achieved. I don't mind what subject. I am still ignorant. Education will make me more aware of my environment, so I can make others more aware too. If I can't get these things, then we will have achieved nothing. My plan is to write to the Governor [Yousif Kuwa] and propose that there should be schools for those of us who are in the army.²⁶

Elyas Ismail Gorab, a Moro student from Um Dulu, joined the SPLA at the age of seventeen. Changes in educational policies were a key factor that drove him to take up arms.

I joined the SPLA in 1987. I was at school in Um Sirdiba, in second year intermediate (grade eight). The school was still open, it had just closed for the normal school holidays. But it wasn't functioning properly. There were many rumours at that time about the SPLA entering the Nuba Mountains. Because of those rumours, the teachers began to suspect the students, that they were Anyanya [i.e. SPLA].

Our school was eighty students, with just three teachers. The head teacher and one other were Nuba, and the administrator was an Arab. The Nuba teachers were sympathetic, but the policy was dictated from above.

The teachers implemented a new policy, that if you fail two subjects, you are not allowed to repeat—you have to leave the

²⁶ Interviewed in Tira Limon, 20 May 1995.

school. We saw this as a strategy for denying us. They also made Islam a compulsory subject. An Islamic teacher was brought for the first time. His name was Farah and he came from North Kordofan, from Bara. He came to the class and when the Christians asked permission to leave, he said that no-one should leave, and we must study Islam. We complained but no-one listened. In our class, the majority were Christians.

Also, in May 1987 a militia centre was set up in Aggab that started attacking the Moro people. That month, they burned Um Dulu. Only when the SPLA reached Achiron was the militia camp withdrawn. We saw that the Arab policy was to wipe out the Moro. Lupa was the first village to be burned, in April, also by the militia. Um Dulu was the second. But the Moro had been assembling guns, and resisted.

We left for the SPLA in a group of seven.²⁷

As the war intensified, it set in motion a vicious spiral of denying educational opportunities to those suspected of sympathising with the SPLA—i.e. almost all Nuba youths. The schools, though officially open, were no longer centres of learning. It was this that drove another schoolboy, William Samuel Musa, from Kanbara village in Otoro, to join the SPLA in 1989. He was fifteen at the time.

I completed up to grade four in school, in Heiban. We felt the teachers were not teaching us properly. We saw this in the exam results—the Arab boys are always given better marks by the teachers. Simply because they had the money and we didn't. The SPLA was in our area at that time, and there were a lot of arrests in Heiban. The teachers were frightened and they were not teaching. Some pupils left the school to join the SPLA. This created fear. That also persuaded me to go to Khartoum. Even though the school was open, I felt that it was unofficially closed—it was closed but we had not been told that it was closed. Some of the parents who had means were taking their children away. We who remained became few. My parents were poor. So I opted for Khartoum.

I decided to join the SPLA when I was in Khartoum. While I was there I felt that I had nothing—no clothes, no education, sometimes even no job. The basic problem was that I had no

²⁷ Interviewed in Tira Limon, 21 May 1995.

freedom. When I learned about the struggle, I volunteered. Many colleagues from my school and my village went to the SPLA.²⁸

The importance of discrimination in education cannot be underestimated, not least because a large proportion of the recruits to the SPLA are frustrated students. An earlier generation of disappointed students had simply opted to become migrant labourers in Khartoum or other Northern cities; the generation that was in school when the war broke out had more direct ways of channelling their anger at a system that appeared set up to deny them.

WHO OWNS THE NUBA MOUNTAINS?

The single biggest issue of contention in the Nuba Mountains on the outbreak of war was land ownership. The issue of land reform remains one of the biggest unspoken questions in Sudan, protected by a conspiracy of silence that can be attributed to the fact that all the leading Northern families, whatever their political colour, are major landowners, and the failure of the SPLA to develop a policy on land reform.

Since the "pacification" of the Nuba Mountains by the British, Nuba farmers were encouraged (and sometimes forced) to leave their mountains and live and farm in the plains. Smallholdings spread out from the slopes of the hills, so that large areas of the plains were cultivated. According to customary law, unoccupied land is available to whoever cuts the trees and bushes and plants his crops. Though not formally registered, these farms were not a primitive or reckless "slash and burn" form of agriculture. Farmers often developed systems of rotational cropping, alternating sorghum with groundnuts or sesame, and long fallow periods to enable the soil to regain its fertility.

The growth of mechanised farming shattered the viability of Nuba smallholder farming. It also destroyed amicable relations with the Arab pastoralists. This took a while to become evident. The encouragement of semi-mechanised cotton production (reaching a total of 63 small schemes in the 1970s) brought extra income to

²⁸ Interviewed in Tira Limon, 21 May 1995.

wealthier smallholders, at the cost of hardly any loss of land. But government high-handedness, and manipulation of the system by Arab traders and government officials were clear from the start. One Miri villager reported:

From 1973, mechanised farms started in the Miri area. They were all for cultivating cotton: Lima, Mashisha, Kanga, Abu Sunun, Kufa, Kadi and Keiga. We were told in advance that the Government had plans for schemes, and we had to go and clear the land in advance. First we were told that we would cultivate, and that we could grow any crops we liked. Later, when the schemes were surveyed, they told us we would have to plant cotton. Their plan involved rotating the cultivation—some land was left fallow. So we tried to plant sorghum on the fallow land. This led to problems with the government. At the end, we were forced to accept cotton, and look for land to plant sorghum elsewhere.

These schemes were all on new land. No-one lost land to them. But the new owners included people from outside, including Fellata and Arabs from Kadugli. We were not happy with this. Some lands were reserved for the Arabs before the schemes were started. For example, Mubarak Zaroug [first foreign minister of Sudan, 1956]. He was granted the area from Gallab village to Keiga, and used tractors to grow cotton. This was in fact the first scheme in our area. After Mubarak died in the 1960s, the area was re-surveyed and was supposed to be granted to the local people, but most of it was taken by the Jellaba.²⁹

The collapse of cotton prices in the 1970s meant that many of the schemes were not profitable, and they began to close in the late 1970s.

It was the introduction of large-scale mechanised sorghum farms that brought disaster. The Mechanised Farming Corporation was established in 1968. Its first and largest scheme in the Nuba Mountains was at Habila, between Dilling and Delami. In the 1970s it established nine more schemes. Equally importantly, the MFC demarcated areas and gave 25-year leases on schemes of one thousand or 1500 *feddans*³⁰ to private merchant farmers. In theory,

²⁹ Musa Kuwa Jabir Tiya, interviewed in Um Dulu, 17 May 1995.

³⁰ One feddan equals 1.038 acres or 0.42 hectares.

farming experience was a requirement for obtaining a lease; in practice any wealthy or well-connected merchant, civil servant or army officer could obtain a lease. Contrary to the MFC's stated policy, very few leaseholders were local "small farmers." According to a 1975 agreement, half the finance for the expansion of private mechanised farming was provided by the World Bank.

The MFC legally based its operations on the Land Registration Act of 1925, amended in 1961. This amendment awarded unregistered land to the government, subject to the approval of the Registrar of Lands, who recognised limited customary title to land. But the key legal instrument is the remarkable Section 380 of the Sudan Penal Code of 1974, which concerned trespassing:

Whoever enters into or upon property in the possession of another with intention to commit an offence or intimidate, insult or annoy any person in possession of such property, or, having lawfully entered into or upon such property, unlawfully remains there, with the intent thereby to intimidate, insult or annoy such a person, or with the intent to commit an offence, is said to commit criminal trespass.

The second part of this section means that any farmer whose land, owned in accordance with customary law, was expropriated, was guilty of criminal trespass if he or she should remain there with the intention of so much as "annoying" the new owner. The MFC was aggressive in using the law to intimidate such smallholders. This section was retained in the subsequent 1983 and 1990 acts.

Habila had two hundred schemes. Four were leased to local co-operatives, one was leased to a consortium of local merchants, and four individually to local merchants. The remaining 191 were leased to absentee landlords, mainly merchants, government officials and retired army officers from the north.³¹ This was typical of the land ownership pattern that became established. From a registered area of two million hectares in 1968, mechanised farms expanded to cover over eight million hectares in 1986. One quarter of this area was in

³¹ Mohamed Suleiman, "Tanks and Tractors Against the Nuba," London, Institute for African Alternatives, 1995.

South Kordofan.³² The worst-affected areas were the most northerly jebels (from east to west: the Rahad area, Kawalib, Kaduru, Ghulfan, Nyimang and Abu Januq) and the eastern side (Tira el Akhdar), but the MFC had plans to develop a belt of mechanised farms right across the southern jebels as well. The land problem became acute in many localities in the early 1980s. A community leader from Korongo Abdalla told African Rights:³³

Land is a big problem. In 1984 the government began to talk about a scheme at Abu Shanab. The land there was already prepared by the local people, but the government brought its tractor and began to prepare cultivation. We asked them to go to another side. They refused. We went to our kujur, who made a spell, and the tractor got stuck. It did not move again.

The government demarcated the area, for one hundred farms. They told us that any civilian can take a lease in the scheme, but a certain proportion of the harvest will go to the government. But in fact only merchants from Kadugli and other people from outside were involved. We only found this out when they started cultivating the scheme. The government people then said to us, 'Your land is in the hills. This land is free.' They were wanting our lands.

In May 1986, the Arabs bribed our omda, Anja Tutu, to petition against fifteen men, including two teachers, who they said were anti-government and were preventing the agricultural schemes of the government from going ahead. They were arrested and taken to Kadugli and fined.

The Government was telling us, 'We can benefit from the Arabs but not from you.'

The disaster of mechanised farming was in fact evident to agricultural experts and economists by the time this scheme was planned. A well-known Sudanese economist published a critique of the whole policy in 1980. He found that mechanised farms were

³² M. A. Mohamed Salih, "Political Coercion and the Limits of State Intervention," in Anders Hjord af Ornäs and M. A. Mohamed Sahih (eds.), *Ecology and Politics: Environmental Stress and Security in Africa*, Uppsala, Scandanavian Institute for African Affairs, 1989, p. 107.

³³ Jaafar al Fadl, interviewed in the Nuba Mountains, 17 May 1995.

costly and unproductive, and questioned the rationale for supporting them:

[First], the production efficiency of agricultural mechanisation is questionable in comparison with the traditional agriculture practised in the region, second, the pattern of income distribution has worsened and income inequalities among different groups have widened as a result of the commercialisation of agriculture, and third, the conventional idea of replacing labour by machine is irrelevant in the savannah situation since it suits only some operations, i.e., labour remains the main factor in production.³⁴

This soon became accepted wisdom. As the Ministry of Finance began to prepare its recovery programme after the famine of 1984-5, it strongly recommended that mechanised farming should play no part:

Plans for further extension [of] large mechanised farming should be rejected as such projects are detrimental to long term use of the soil for agricultural purposes and create little opportunities for migrants who wish to establish themselves as independent cultivators or livestock herders.³⁵

But there were powerful forces behind mechanised farming: it was returning huge profits for the merchants who were investing, especially during a period of high grain prices. The Islamic banks that were behind the merchants also saw a good return on their investment. While the brake was put on the MFC, a massive expansion took place in privately-owned mechanised farming. It has become extremely difficult to keep track of the amount of land under cultivation in such schemes, because often the true areas of land are under-registered. By 1984, perhaps half of the total area of mechanised farmland in Southern Kordofan was in such private

³⁴ M. H. Saeed, "Economic effects of agricultural mechanisation in rural Sudan: The case of Habila, Southern Kordofan," in G. Haaland, *Problems of Savanna Development: The Sudan Case*, University of Bergen, Department of Social Anthropology, Occasional Paper No. 19. 1980, pp. 182-3.

³⁵ Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, "Project Rehabilitation Kordofan and Darfur", 1985, p. 3.

schemes. Two residents of Delami described how mechanised farms continued to spread during the 1980s:

There are a lot of mechanised farms in Delami county. There is a big part of the Habila scheme, including Amara and Ginei in our area. Other schemes include Abrini, Fayo, Gardud el Basham and Sinarla. All of them involved taking land from the natives. Most people tried to protest. They complained to the government. In 1987, this issue was discussed in the Kadugli conference hall between the government, the merchants and the people. The issue was not resolved. I remember one remark, from an Arab, 'The Nuba have no land. They should only throw a stone from the mountain—where the stone falls, that is the limit of their land.'³⁶ Another one said, 'As for the cows, we will continue taking [stealing] them. The Nuba should drink pig's milk.'

Some people who were active in protesting against the farms were arrested, but I can't think of anyone who was killed. One of the things that people did was they burned the barrels of diesel belonging to the merchants on the schemes. The merchants came with tractors and ploughed right on top of people's cultivation. They could do this because anyone who objected would be arrested. Jeli al Amin is one prominent scheme owner. Adam Kurmiti is another. Musa Osman is one Nuba merchant who was very big—he is with the SPLA now. Others are Fadl Hamad, Hamad Abu Sudur, Jurham Kodi, Merkazu Kuku, Mohamed Merkazu. Many of them have now joined in the *Nafir el Sha'abi* ["Popular Mobilisation"—see Chapter III].³⁷

The presence of a number of local Nuba men among the scheme leaseholders demands comment. Some were part of a small but prominent local business elite. Others were richer smallholders. Under its conditions for obtaining finance from the World Bank, the MFC ran what was misleadingly called a "small farmer" project, which meant providing leases of smaller areas—fifty, a hundred or two hundred *feddans*—to the wealthiest among the local farmers. In

³⁶ This remark was often made, by both local Arabs and government officials.

³⁷ Ahmed Sayed Nur and El Amin Omer Gardud, interviewed in the Nuba Mountains, 20 May 1995.

practice, the allocation of these leases was simply a form of bribery. The influential men of the village were persuaded to support the scheme by being given a small stake in it. Today, the Sudan Government uses the allocation of land leases as one of its major forms of political patronage.

A Sudanese scholar conducted research in four of the villages of this area, Fayo, Kortala, Delami and el Faïd (the latter is an Arab village). He found that socio-economic polarisation was most advanced in Fayo.

In Fayo... in 1981 the entire village was encircled by the establishment of a large-scale scheme, and all the villagers—about 500 families—were reported to have lost their initial [former] plots. In the early 1970s, some of the households started to migrate, while the majority put up a struggle against the MFC plan, and took the matter to the central government offices at Khartoum. Later, the authorities of the MFC allocated nine schemes to the villagers in Fayo. Six of these, with an area of 1000 feddans each, were allocated to the whole village, distributed on the basis of household size and number of dependants. The remaining three schemes, with an area of 1500 feddans each, were allotted to some [45] prominent rich peasants, referred to officially as 'small farmers.' The most obvious and immediate effect of this encroachment is to limit the land available to the peasant households, disrupting their farming system. The households lost access to their previous rotational areas. All the village land has been affected. Indeed it has been taken away as a result of these changes. Although the peasants have been compensated with new plots within the planned area, their overall position has deteriorated because: (i) the land which was taken away was clean and clear of trees and bushes, whereas the compensation plots were not cleared and incurred clearance costs for which no compensation was given; (ii) the bulk of the peasants lost land due to its reallocation to capitalist farmers. The newly granted plots are far smaller than those which were previously cultivated.³⁸

³⁸ Abdalla Mohammed Elhassan "The encroachment of large-scale mechanised agriculture: Elements of differentiation among the peasantry," in T. Barnett and A. Abdelkarim (eds.) *Sudan: State, Capital and Transformation*, London, Croom Helm, 1988, pp. 163-4.

He also detailed some of the other losses to the people. They were forced to abandon their rotational system and hence over-exploited the land; they could no longer obtain forest products such as honey, leaves for baskets and mats, building wood and firewood; and they could no longer graze their animals freely.

Not all influential local men were bought off. One was Mek Hussein Karbus el Ehemier, of Sabat.³⁹

I was elected mek in 1977. My father was mek before me. I am responsible for the whole of the southern part of Delami. Under the Sudan Government my tasks included collecting taxes, administration and holding the courts. I also participated in inter-tribal conferences. For example in 1986 there was a conflict between the Nuba and the Arabs of Dar Faid. This was related to one Nuba man who was killed by the Arabs while collecting gum Arabic. This became a big issue, and we had a major reconciliation and payment of *diyya* [bloodmoney] of LS 33,000. The spirit of the inter-tribal meetings was not good. It was not fair to the Nuba side. What matters is finance, how much you can pay. The Nuba are poor, and the Arabs consider us to be inferior. The administration always supported the Arabs, who were obstinate and had money.

Most Nuba judicial officers used to deny their roots and behave like the Arabs. I felt they were not helpful. Only in rare cases did they assist us. For example there was Deldum el Khatim Asghar, a lawyer in el Obeid. Most of the educated Nuba in our area were inclined to the Arabs.

Land is the big question. The government decided to make agricultural schemes. I felt that the people of Delami were not given their fair share. But when we complained, our boys in the administration sided with the Arabs. Their names were on the list to receive agricultural schemes.

For that reason I spent 65 days in prison. I was arrested in May 1978.

There was an agricultural scheme being made at Hadaba Sinnar, in our area. Each farm in the scheme was 1,500 feddans, as usual. There were five Nuba men from Delami who were taking land in that scheme. We were not consulted. The Government came and said it would distribute the leases. Our Nuba boys agreed with

³⁹ Interviewed in Um Dulu, 16 May 1995.

the Jellaba over the cultivation plan. The five who were taking leases were Hamad Abu Sudur, al Hadi Sayed, Nasir Salim, Jurham Omer and Merkazu Kuku. They went and agreed with the director of the MFC. They agreed that it was all undemarcated land. But we villagers had been using the land for cultivation. So when they came to start their scheme they were evicting us.

I went and complained to the manager of the MFC in Habila. They sent me to Dilling. I went and met the manager of the MFC in Dilling. There I was arrested. I was not charged, but I was told to sign a bond that I would not interfere with the agricultural scheme. I refused. I only accepted to sign that bond after 65 days in prison.

After I signed and came out, a merchant came with his tractor to the scheme to begin cultivation. He was Ali Haroun, a Fellata. He was attacked by villagers and his tractor was destroyed. Another merchant, Izz el Din Suraj, had the same experience. Our people were arrested, so [that] the merchants could continue their farming. They continued until the SPLA came, when the schemes were closed. That was in September 1987. The SPLA arrested Izz el Din and others, including his brother Kamil and another merchant.

At that time the villagers also felt insecure so they left the place. It is abandoned up to now.⁴⁰

Mek Hussein went on to detail another aspect of the land question: disputes with Baggara herders.

We also had problems with the local Arabs. They are Ayatigha and Toghiya. They were always creating problems, especially concerning water. When they came with cows, we would assign them wells so that the cows could drink. But once they had been assigned a well they would capture it for themselves and refuse the villagers access to come and drink.

Another problem was that the Arabs would always enter the farms with their cattle. When the crops were still growing they would come and let their cows graze. If someone complains, the Arab will say, 'What is your farm? Let the cows eat.' And when the people are harvesting they will come and destroy the heaps of crops.

⁴⁰ He was released from captivity in Ethiopia after negotiations between the SPLA and the National Alliance in 1988.

As mek, I would hear the complaints, convene a court and pass judgement. I could impose fines and send people to prison. When I discovered that the Arabs were ready to pay any fine without being worried, I began to send them to prison in Delami. Many were released when they appealed to Dilling, so they never spent the terms of their sentence inside. I would sentence up to my maximum power of six months but they never spent longer than two or at most three months in prison.

There were several reasons for the increase in the number and violence of farmer-nomad disputes in the early and mid-1980s: one of them was the spread of mechanised farming itself. The mechanised farms were a disaster for the nomads, who lost their pastures and their migration routes, losses that became particularly disastrous during times of drought, such as 1983-4, 1987 and 1990. One Sudanese scholar who has studied the Nuba Mountains writes:⁴¹

The same awkward situation applies to the nomads who lost their traditional grazing lands, water points and animal routes to the schemes. It is estimated that 80 per cent of the 350,000 pastoralists and agro-pastoralists of Southern Kordofan province are seriously affected by the expansion of large-scale mechanized schemes. This is mainly because the owners of the schemes do not abide by the agricultural practices devised by the Mechanised Farming Corporation. They have in many cases cultivated even the animal tracks (width two kilometres) specified by the Corporation. [There is] continuous conflict between the owners of the large-scale mechanized schemes and the pastoralists... pastoral nomads are driven out of the best areas of their traditional pasture to places which are not favourable to their herd growth, and agropastoralists are being subjected to various socio-economic pressures to abandon one of the two activities and change over to agricultural labourers with lower standards of living.

⁴¹ M. A. Mohamed Salih, "The tractor and the plough: The sociological dimension," in M. A. Mohamed Salih (ed.) *Agrarian Change in the Central Rangelands: Sudan, A Socio-economic Analysis*, Uppsala, Scandanavian Institute of African Studies, 1987, pp. 112-13.

For nomads, mechanised farming also spelled major disruption to the entire cycle of pastoralism. Freedom of the range is essential to livestock rearing in dry climates. In South Kordofan, cattle-herders normally move north in June and south in September-October. They used to follow the routes with the greenest pasture and most plentiful water. Now, the nomadic herds must move rapidly and under tight control down narrow corridors—a labour-intensive operation. In the hot, dry season of February-May, every acre of grassland becomes precious, and the survival of an entire herd—the livelihood of many families—can depend upon finding grass or fodder on the right day. In the dry season of a dry year, Baggara herders were under acute stress.

Mechanised farms are well-defended: the penalties for intrusion are severe. Smallholdings are not. Pastoralists and their cattle increasingly pushed onto smallholdings. This was no small factor in the explosion of disputes over land that began in the 1980s.

Nuba farmers resisted the merchant farmers and their tractors. Many burned the barrels of diesel, others threatened the labourers. Ultimately, many turned to the SPLA. Yagoub Osman Kaloka described the confrontation in Tira el Akhdar:⁴²

In the Tira area, our big problem in the late 1970s and early '80s was the Government of Sudan policy of taking fertile land for mechanised farms. They drove the local people off. This happened at Karandel, el Azraq and Um Lubiya, a total of three projects. The government people came and said, 'Go back to your mountains.' The leaseholders of the schemes were all Arabs and Nuba from the north. People lost their farms and were driven to go to the mountains. But they also had a big problem of where to graze their animals. The policy on the schemes was very strict. If a single cow passes into the farm, the fine can be one sack of sorghum or the equivalent in money—or even the cow itself.

When our youth in Khartoum and the northern towns saw these things, they began to know that the Sudan Government is not our government. The people became hostile. Even Moslem elders abandoned Islam for Christianity or traditional religion. They said, 'If all Moslems are brothers, then we are not their brothers. We are

⁴² Interviewed in Tira Limon, 23 May 1995.

not Arabs, and not even brother Moslems. It is better not to be slave Moslems.'

So we began to organise. Some youth contacted Anyanya II in Ethiopia during 1980-82. Some Anyanya II groups came to the mechanised farms, pretending to be workers, to recruit people there. This was before the SPLA. The Anyanya II cadres even came into the village at night and recruited youth. The youth in our area took a position against the government. But there were also some government spies, and the administration in Heiban focused its attention on Tira el Akhdar.

In 1983, I came on holiday to Lubi [my village]. At that time the Governor of Kadugli visited Lubi. The people raised their problems with him. They said, 'We are Nuba Tira. We only want the government to leave our land, and leave us to cultivate and graze our animals in peace. If the government does not solve our problem, we Tira will solve the problem by ourselves.' So the Governor became worried. He said he would send a committee to solve our problems. But nothing happened.

The mechanised farms were not keen on hiring local workers. They brought their labourers from Dilling and Rahad by lorry. This made the Tira people unhappy. So they came *en masse* with their spears, carbines and knives and so on and threatened the workers. That was in June 1983. The workers took the threat and left. Then—it was the beginning of the rainy season—the locals came with their seeds and began to plant their sorghum and sesame. There was no problem that season. We cultivated and harvested.

The government did not let this challenge pass without reprisals. The fate of the Tira people was to bear the brunt of one of the government's first big offensives in the Nuba Mountains, which is described in Chapter II.

During the brief multi-party period of 1985-9, a few politicians began to take up the issue of land, and try to defend the interests of smallholders. This was one of the concerns of the General Union of the Nuba Mountains, whose political charter stated its intention "to implement a land reform policy for the benefit of the indigenous farmers of the Nuba Mountains and to eradicate the feudalistic land policies and relations of production [and] all forms of exploitation."⁴³

⁴³ Quoted in M. A. Mohamed Salih, 1989, p. 109.

Unfortunately, this debate did not progress far, and was completely silenced by the 1989 coup.

The present military government has been far more draconian in its land policies than any of its predecessors. The expropriation of land for mechanised farming has accelerated, based upon legislation that gives the government almost unlimited power over land allocation. The 1990 amendment to the Civil Transactions Act has swept away *all* customary title to land. The first provision of the amendment states that "All non-registered land should be considered as if registered in the name of the State." It also decreed that all land cases before the courts were to be struck off, and prohibited judicial recourse against land allocation decisions made by the government. In a single legal act, the Sudan Government took legal hold of all smallholders' land, not only in the Nuba Mountains, but throughout Sudan. Combined with the law against "criminal trespass," this is the legal foundation for the dispossession of the Nuba.

SERVANTS AND LABOURERS

One of the commonest experiences of Nuba men is working as a migrant labourer in Khartoum, the Northern towns, or on the big agricultural schemes of central and eastern Sudan. By the 1970s, as many as half of the adult men of some Nuba tribes were migrant labourers. It was in these towns that much Nuba political consciousness was moulded. Nuba migrants experienced discrimination at first hand. In the North, "Nuba" does not refer to the rich variety of proud cultures to be found in the Nuba Mountains, but to the second-class citizens who sweep the streets and clean the latrines.

The formative role of labour migration is made clear in the following account, provided by an SPLA soldier, explaining his reasons for taking up arms. Tom Suleiman Umbele is 33. He is from Eri, in Otoro, and joined the SPLA at the age of 25—older than most of his comrades. He first left the Nuba Mountains in the 1970s:⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Interviewed in Tira Limon, 21 May 1995.

I was a student in primary school in Kauda. I was in third form when I left to Khartoum to stay with my uncle. That was during the school holidays. I was hoping to get a better education in Khartoum. I found that my uncle had no resources to put me through school, but I decided it was better to continue in Khartoum. Even I had no money for transport back to Kauda.

I immediately worked as a casual labourer in Wad Medani. While we were working, we had many disputes with our employers, mostly because of the deductions from our pay for daily allowances. It was a textile company, and we felt it ought to have regulations, rather than being run in that way. So I went to Gedaref and worked as an agricultural labourer. In Gedaref, I cut sesame. But the same situation came up again. At the end of the contract, when we had finished, again they gave us less money than we had agreed. When we complained, they said, 'You do not have the right to complain as you are rebels.' Being in the bush, those merchants had the means to eliminate us without trace.⁴⁵ So we submitted. We moved to the Kenana sugar factory to cut sugar cane. But the same situation continued in the sugar plantations. Also they told us, 'We have to reduce your pay from what we agreed because we have to give a portion to the Sudan army to fight against the rebels, because you black people have rebelled. This will be your contribution to the army.'

This made me and the others decide that the best thing to do is to go and join the SPLA and get freedom, so at least our children can have a brighter future than us. A group of four of us, all Nuba, left Kenana in June 1987. We moved from Chukur in August 1987, and met up with a group of 480 at Achiron. We were students, farmers, workers, teachers. Our commander was Telefon Kuku [Abu Jelha]. From there we went for training at Bilfam in Ethiopia. We returned here in 1989.

Innumerable Nuba migrant workers have had similar experiences. Racism pervades their lives in the North. Osman Nyatembe Jarad, an Otoro from Kauda aged 27, had been subjected to the same pattern of humiliation and hopelessness. He spent seven years as a migrant worker in Khartoum:⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Killing of Nuba and Southern labourers in Gedaref was not uncommon in the late 1980s.

⁴⁶ Interviewed in Tira Limon, 21 May 1995.

I was always approached to become a servant, though I am a grown-up person. Sometimes you are just walking on the street, and you are arrested for no reason. This happened to me many times. I worked as a casual labourer. I also worked two years as a servant, employed by an Arab family, washing clothes, ironing, going on errands to the market.

Discrimination has affected Nuba in all positions. Najib Musa Berdo, aged 38 is now a judge in the central court of Lagowa, having been demobilised by the SPLA and asked to train as a lawyer.⁴⁷

I joined the SPLA in 1990. Before that I was in the military HQ in Khartoum. Our people in Khartoum were always being tortured. I used to see them being tortured; even I was asked to come and participate. Even for us, who continued to work with them, we were not given a fair chance for training or promotion. In short we were doing the dirty jobs.

I have my brother who was a soldier in the [government] army and who was killed in the South. He left a wife and two children. One of the sad incidents was in the rains [floods] of 1988. Sahafa was affected and their house, just one room, was destroyed. The woman went to the local authorities for assistance. She was refused. She went to the army as the wife of a martyr. Also she was not assisted. Then she came home and decided to make *merissa* [sorghum beer] to get some money to rebuild her house. She was arrested and taken to prison. At that time she had a very small child who died in prison. She continued in prison, while her other children stayed alone in the house. I was moving between the prison and the house. I was very unhappy.

Because I was bitter I went to the General HQ and complained. I was militarily disciplined and accused of being a fifth columnist [SPLA sympathiser]. I was due to go to the military college—a big chance for NCOs—but my name was cancelled and I was put under surveillance. When the surveillance became tight and I felt they were going to harm me, I left my family and my brother's family behind and came to the SPLA.

I reported to the SPLA at Julud, in Dilling county.

⁴⁷ Interviewed in Achiron, 7 May 1995. See Chapter V for a discussion of the administration of justice under the SPLA.

Such discrimination was intensified during the war, caused by the government's suspicion that Nuba people had sympathies with the SPLA. But it was built upon a longer, deeper history of systematic denial of opportunities to Nuba. It was only when the first generation of educated Nuba began to obtain jobs that the realities of discrimination became clear, and resistance began to be organised. Commander Ismail Khamis Jellab explained part of the background to his own reasons for joining the SPLA:⁴⁸

Historically, there were relations between some Nuba tribes and some Misiriya clans. For example, we the Tima had good relations with the Duhreymat, Awlad Salim, Eyeinat and Awlad Serer; the Tullishi had good relations with the Awlad Kudu. My name Ismail was given to me because we had an Arab who was a good friend of the family who had that name.

There were many incidents of difference or dispute but we always succeeded to settle them peacefully. The main incidents were farm issues, such as nomads bringing cattle on to farms. Sometimes there were cases of homicide. By the 1980s we didn't feel serious political differences with them, but that was because of a lack of political awareness. We had few educated people.

Our generation is the first group of educated people in the area. We realised there was oppression and exploitation. We found that education was dominated by the Misiriya and Jellaba. Even the lower jobs, the Nuba never got them. We felt this deeply, that there was a policy for the Nuba tribes in our area, to stop their education at the level of intermediate school.

Even the few educated people, when they come back to the area, they are harassed and not given any opportunities in the area. The lucky ones who have a position, the moment they have any differences with the Misiriya or Jellaba, they are alleged to be agitators and are immediately transferred away.

⁴⁸ Interviewed in Um Dulu, 19 May 1995.

POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

Nuba politicians were active as members of various different political parties during the 1950s but the first Nuba political party was organised in 1963, under the name General Union of the Nuba Mountains (GUN). Father Philip Abbas Ghabboush was one of the founding members, and has continued to play an influential role in both Nuba and national politics ever since. In the 1965 general elections which followed the October 1964 popular uprising against the military government, GUN won eight seats in South Kordofan. Fr. Philip was the leader of the party. He was active in the parliament, and tried to build a coalition with MPs from other marginal areas of Sudan including Darfur and the Beja Hills.

But the promise of democracy was betrayed. During the 1965-9 parliamentary period, there was no resolution to the war in the South and no political enfranchisement of the marginal areas of the North. Politics remained dominated by a cartel of Northern families. There was discontent among Nuba army officers, some of whom spoke with Southerners about the possibilities of joint military action.

In Sudan, plans for military take-over instigated by Nuba and Southerners are invariably referred to as "racist coup plots". Fr. Philip himself was involved in a coup plot, scheduled for 28 May 1969. This was forestalled by Colonel Jaafar Nimeiri by a matter of days, and Fr. Philip and other leading Nuba politicians either went into exile or became politically inactive. There was another attempted coup, centred among Nuba and Southerners in the garrison in Juba, in 1976, which was betrayed to the government just hours before it was planned to go ahead.⁴⁹

Fr Philip and other former GUN politicians returned to Sudan with the policy of "national reconciliation" in 1978. Fr Philip became a member of the National Assembly. He was arrested in 1983 for allegedly a "racial coup", along with some Southern and Nuba

⁴⁹ One of the leading plotters, Yousif Karra Haroun, is now an SPLA commander in the Nuba Mountains. Another, Yunis Domi Kallo, is now a civilian, and Secretary General of the Nuba Relief, Rehabilitation and Development Society (NRRDS).

military officers including Yunis Abu Sudur.⁵⁰ They were amnestied in 1984.

For two decades, Yousif Kuwa Mekki has had a profound influence on the politics of the Nuba Mountains. In 1977, he was among a group of Nuba at the University of Khartoum who took the lead in rejecting what they saw as the bankrupt politics of the older generation of Nuba politicians, and instead founded a Nuba political movement upon the new generation. They felt that the GUN and its leaders had failed them, while the Sudan Socialist Union (the sole legal party at the time) was dominated by Baggara and Jellaba. A basic principle of the movement was a return to the cultural roots of the Nuba. Clandestine from the outset, the organization was given the name "Komolo", a word that in the Miri and Kadugli languages means "youth".

Yousif Kuwa was the first president of Komolo. Other important members included Telefon Kuku Abu Jelha⁵¹, Daniel Kodi,⁵² and Abdel Aziz al Hilu⁵³ all of whom later joined the SPLA. In the elections to the National Assembly, Daniel Kodi won a seat. Komolo made approaches to Southern political organisations, but was rebuffed. In 1980, Yousif Kuwa returned to Kadugli as a schoolteacher. He took the opportunity to begin organising Komolo in the town.

In 1981, President Nimeiri embarked upon a policy of regionalisation, which involved creating a Regional Government for Kordofan in el Obeid. Elections to the Regional Assembly were held, and despite his lack of resources to finance a campaign, Yousif Kuwa won a seat.

Regionalisation should have been an opportunity for marginal groups such as the Nuba. In fact, it became another obstacle to their

⁵⁰ Yunis Abu Sudur later joined the SPLA, and died in 1994 in suspicious circumstances (see Chapter V). Ismail Khamis Jellab was also briefly detained in connection with this alleged coup.

⁵¹ An SPLA commander in the Nuba Mountains, currently under detention and charged with mutiny.

⁵² Currently SPLM Minister of Tourism, resident in Cairo.

⁵³ An SPLA commander, currently head of logistics at SPLA headquarters. His ancestors originally came from Dar Masalit, in Darfur, but he has fully assimilated to the Nuba.

political advancement. The Kordofan Regional Government was dominated from the outset by powerful Arab interests—a coalition of North Kordofan interests with South Kordofan Baggara and Jellaba—who were ruthless in distributing largesse to their local supporters. Perhaps most importantly, the Regional Ministry of Agriculture distributed land leases on its own behalf, putting more distance between the leaseholders and the regulations theoretically enforced by the MFC—and increasing the leeway for abuse. Bias in the allocation of rationed commodities such as sugar and wheat became more marked.

The Nuba members in the Regional Parliament also felt that the entire electoral process was also against them. From a total 55 seats in the Regional Assembly, only four were won by the Nuba. They argued that this represented a deliberate bias in the allocation of seats—North Kordofan had more than South Kordofan. This in fact can be explained by the higher population of North Kordofan. The scarcity of Nuba members of the assembly was more closely related to their problems in organising a political front within a single-party system and the lack of finance for campaigning costs. Another complaint from the Nuba members was the appointment to positions in the Regional Government, by the Governor, Fatih Bushara. Members from North Kordofan took most of the senior positions, and the highest given to a Nuba member was deputy. Yousif Kuwa was appointed Deputy Speaker in the assembly, and repeatedly clashed with the Governor on this and other issues.

Komolo and its leaders also had a problem of rivalry with the former GUN politicians such Fr. Philip Ghabboush. The question arose of whether it should be a regional or a racial movement. Fr. Philip preferred to form a regional movement, with a significant Baggara representation. Komolo, on the other hand, was fiercely Nuba in its identity. Splits in the Nuba movement were becoming more evident by 1984. Yousif Kuwa opted to join the SPLA.

After the 1985 Popular Uprising, Fr Philip formed the Sudan National Party (SNP). It was a feverish and hopeful time, with the Transitional Military Council of General Abdel Rahman Suwar el Dahab and Prime Minister Gizouli Dafallah promising democracy. But the commitment to pluralistic democracy did not run deep. In October 1985, Prime Minister Gizouli claimed to have uncovered a

"racial coup" led by Philip Abbas Ghabboush and some Southerners to overthrow the government. Fr Philip was arrested along with many Nuba soldiers and civilians. Three months later the civilian detainees were released without charge, but the soldiers remained in prison for up to four years after conviction in a court martial that was a mockery of justice—no witnesses nor documentary evidence were produced.

The SNP quickly emerged as the principal Nuba party. The high status of Fr Philip Ghabboush ensured that it would garner most of the Nuba votes. It organised not only in the Nuba Mountains, but also among Nuba communities in Khartoum, Gedaref and Port Sudan. Even before the elections, scheduled for April 1986, the Nuba began to show their electoral muscle. In Port Sudan, the Nuba formed part of an electoral coalition against the National Islamic Front, which was strongly represented by the Beni Amer. In a violent riot in February 1986, the Nuba played the leading role in expelling the Beni Amer from a ward of Port Sudan. A number of lives were lost on the Beni Amer side.

A second Nuba party was also formed, that used the name General Union of the Nuba Mountains (GUN). Led by Professor el Amin Hamoda, it represented younger Nuba intellectuals. Although it failed to make headway amongst ordinary voters, it exercised influence through the trade union movement. While GUN shared with Komolo the agenda of forging a specifically Nuba identity, the SNP had aspirations to be a national party. But this did not prevent co-operation. In July 1985, both SNP and GUN were instrumental in creating a coalition known as Rural Solidarity, that embraced political organisations from all the marginalised areas of Sudan, including the South, Darfur, Southern Blue Nile and the Beja Hills. Meanwhile, Komolo continued its underground activities in Khartoum and Kadugli.

Strong Nuba representation in Khartoum and active campaigning by the Rural Solidarity coalition made two seats in the capital virtually safe for the SNP: Umbadda South and Haj Yousif. But internal politics within the SNP undermined the chances for success. Fr Philip was chairman of the SNP when the decision was taken of how to distribute the constituencies. The party had decided that Mohamed Hamad Kuwa should contest the Nuba-dominated

Umbadda South while Fr Philip's deputy, Hassan al Mahi, who is a Misiriya, should contest a safe seat in Kordofan. But Fr Philip decided unilaterally to nominate Hassan al Mahi for Umbadda South, at a stroke making it a marginal seat. Mohamed Hamad Kuwa was transferred to Mayo, a seat dominated by the NIF. Neither won.

In April 1986, Fr Philip won his seat in Haj Yousif: the first time that any non-Arab had won a constituency in Greater Khartoum. It came as a shock to the political elites.

In parliament, the SNP joined with Southern parties to form the Union of Sudan African Parties (USAP). Fr Philip was the Chairman, Eliaba James Surur was his deputy (and acting chairman when Fr Philip was abroad for medical treatment in 1988-9). The main activities of USAP were campaigning for the repeal of the 1983 "September" Islamic laws, pushing for a peaceful settlement to the war and calling for a constitutional conference to determine a more equitable distribution of wealth and power in Sudan.

However, Nuba parliamentary politics continued to be divisive, concerned with personal ambition and power games as much as representation of the people's interests. Many Nuba became increasingly frustrated, not only with the direction of Sudan's democracy under Prime Minister Sadiq el Mahdi, but also the manner in which the Nuba political leadership, especially the SNP, seemed unable to challenge this effectively. This scepticism about parliamentary politics was intensified when, in 1988, one of the SNP MPs, Haroun Kafi, was arrested and detained in defiance of his parliamentary immunity, as part of a deepening crackdown against the Nuba leadership.