GLOBAL CITIZENS AND SUDANESE SUBJECTS: READING MAMDANI’S SAVIOURS AND SURVIVORS

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MAHMOOD MAMDANI’S NEW BOOK, *Saviours and Survivors: Darfur, politics, and the War on Terror*\(^1\) follows the recent flurry of popular and academic attention given to the politics of the Sudan–Darfur conflict\(^2\) and has generated a substantial reaction. Criticisms of the book aired during recent televised discussions\(^3\) have ranged from accusations that the author is a stooge of the Sudanese regime to condemnations of the book’s failure to evoke the tragic suffering of Darfurians (a feat achieved eloquently elsewhere).\(^4\) Mamdani’s book has been criticized for exploiting the humanitarian crisis in Darfur in order to perpetuate an obsolete, anti-colonial, anti-imperial and anti-Western agenda. It was in this vein that Nicholas Kristof recently described *Saviours and Survivors*’ tone as ‘dyspeptic’.\(^5\) While this level of hostility can be understood given the controversial nature of the topic, it does not
acknowledge the comprehensive empirical and analytical scaffolding used in *Saviours and Survivors* to support an important argument about a complex issue.

There are three reasons why this book’s perspective on the Sudan–Darfur conflict may be of considerable value to readers interested in African politics and international relations. First, *Saviours and Survivors* is unique in that it presents an African-centred perspective on the Sudan–Darfur crisis in the context of the study of international relations, geopolitics, and the War on Terror. Scholars will find in *Saviours and Survivors* a critical exposition of an African case study (the Sudan), which (like Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti, Serbia, and other internationally classified ‘collapsed’ states) provides an important vehicle for debating the controversial ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P) doctrine and other new North–South initiatives for global governance and security.

A key strategy in the book for exploring these themes is the critique of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Save Darfur movement. Mamdani pulls no punches in this regard. His language is not so much dyspeptic as incisive and lucid; he refers, for example, to the ICC’s prosecution process (which led to the issuing of an arrest warrant for Sudanese President Omar Bashir in April 2009) as having relied upon a ‘mono-causal, one-dimensional version of Sudanese history’ which serves to deliberately ‘demonize’ Bashir and describes the intervention in the Sudan as the ‘recolonization’ of Africa. Indeed he sets his sights on the Save Darfur movement in the book’s first sentence. He sees them as ‘human rights fundamentalists’ who intentionally utilize the concept of genocide – describing the conflict as a ‘racial killing’ – in Darfur to justify the external military and legal intervention in the Sudan.

In Mamdani’s analysis the actions of the ICC and the Save Darfur movement are closely related. For example, he sees the ICC’s indictment of an African leader as a consequence of the Save Darfur movement’s success in globalizing the conflict in Darfur. Mamdani attributes the ICC’s indictment of President Bashir to the international community’s frequently expressed desire to protect Africa’s victims, presumably from the violence perpetrated by the continent’s leaders. In effect he claims that the ICC has been politicized and has a tendency to pursue America’s enemies and ignore the crimes committed by America’s friends. But to what extent is Mamdani justified in his criticism of this UN organization? Mamdani reflects the legitimate concerns of African leaders (and many in their constituencies) who sense a

7. Ibid., p. 300.
8. Ibid., p. 286.
10. Ibid., p. 273.
degree of duplicity in the ICC because of its unwillingness to punish more powerful perpetrators of essentially similar counterinsurgency crimes outside Africa (for example in Chechnya, Iraq or Burma). The law deployed by the ICC is being applied selectively. Mamdani also rightly criticizes the ICC for its myopic focus on recent (post-2003) events in Darfur, which disconnects contemporary violence from its many ultimate causes: the colonial legacy (in particular in relation to access to land) and the impact of the cold war, which led to a militarization of Darfur and war in the 1980s. But the argument is about more than getting the history right. Mamdani’s point is that the ICC strategy focuses on revenge, not reconciliation. Only the latter, he argues, will bring a durable peace to Darfur.

The book also provides a trenchant critique of the Save Darfur movement, whose slogan ‘Out of Iraq; Into Darfur’ is indicative of their association with a doctrine of liberal intervention – better understood as the new liberal imperialism in Africa. Mamdani’s willingness to criticize a human rights organization (whose sole explicit objective has been to alert the world to the suffering of one of Africa’s most marginalized and persecuted communities in order to mobilize a humanitarian response) is of course a risky undertaking, which proves once again that Mahmood Mamdani is not a scholar to shy away from controversy. I welcome his choice not to do so. He is a public intellectual and he justifiably uses his new book to engage in the current international polemic about ‘genocide’ in the Sudan. Mamdani commends the Save Darfur movement for having successfully organized one of the world’s largest and most consequential transnational humanitarian campaigns, but admonishes it for its desire to justify military and other interventions by relying on moral certainty rather than on knowledge. His argument is soundly supported with evidence throughout the book. For example, it is obvious to even the casual observer of this conflict that the Save Darfur movement has bungled the basic classification of the conflict in the Sudan by labelling it ‘genocide’. Mamdani says that Rwanda was the site of genocide; Darfur, he writes, is not. This position is not so radical in so far as it follows the report of the United Nations fact-finding mission in Darfur in 2006, which concluded that ‘heinous crimes against humanity’ had been perpetrated by individuals (state and rebels) in Darfur but that it was not genocide. Likewise, Mamdani chronicles the African Union (AU) stance on the conflict, which also condemns the government of Sudan for its counterinsurgency strategy in Darfur, but labels the conflict a civil war. The AU argues that this civil war has emerged from the country’s inability to

resolve its deep social divisions: this is why the AU sees Darfur’s resolution in terms of political reconciliation. The Save Darfur movement ignores these conclusions and continues to describe the conflict as ‘genocide’. The book’s critique of the Save Darfur movement raises justifiable questions about how such an unaccountable, unrepresentative, external social movement can influence what happens in contemporary Africa.

The second aspect of Saviours and Survivors that is of particular value is that it draws attention to African regional, epistemological, and ideological perspectives on the crisis in Darfur. In particular it seeks to draw attention to the work of the AU. Unlike other books on the subject, Saviours and Survivors uses post-structural discourse analysis to re-represent the Sudan conflict. It eschews the simplistic and exoticized conceptual frameworks and signifiers so commonly used in mainstream discourses on Africa. Unlike Hagen and Richmond, for example, who begin their analysis with the presumption that genocide is indeed taking place in the Sudan, Mamdani problematizes the concept’s application to the Darfur case. Thus, Saviours and Survivors provides us with an insight into the complexity of the AU’s position on the conflict as well as an understanding of the AU’s peace initiatives and of the conflict resolution mechanisms it supports, which are devised and operated by African leaders. Flint and de Waal’s latest version of their account of the war in Darfur also claims to be ‘African-centred’ and appropriately classifies the conflict as a ‘war’ – not as genocide. Yet curiously the authors’ African-centred perspective relies on one-sided conceptual frameworks that reinforce the Arab versus African identity fissure. One comes away from that book concluding that Arab racism is the cause of the war in Darfur; and that the Janjaweed – and the Sudanese regime – who are characterized as Arab, are the primary perpetrators of the violence that leads to the full-blown conflict by 2004.

In contrast Mamdani’s African-centred approach deconstructs presumed racial, religious, and ethnic identities in the Sudan and Darfur. His recent field research in Sudan was carried out while acting as a consultant for a year for the AU’s Darfur–Darfur Dialogue Consultation (DDDC). The DDDC held consultations with different sections of Darfuri society in the three states of Darfur, which involved meetings with traditional leaders (chiefs, etc.), representatives of political parties, community-based organizations, women’s groups, internally displaced people, and intellectuals from the three universities in Darfur. As a result, the book can meaningfully claim not only to have a privileged insight into that process, but also to contribute to ‘African solutions to African problems’. For those who argue that Africa

15. Hagen and Rymond-Richmond, Darfur and the Crime of Genocide.
is often misrepresented in the contemporary era, *Saviours and Survivors* is an important read because it subjects the complex themes of the Sudanese conflict to rigorous scholarly scrutiny, draws attention to intersections of the local, national, and global to explain the causes of conflict, reveals contradictions in the way international policy is implemented in Africa, and unearth deeply seated historical patterns to explain the construction of identities within the conflict.

The third reason that the book is useful is that it tackles that bogeyman of African politics – the national-ethnic question in the context of cultural pluralism. Mamdani presents another opportunity for us all to examine questions of the cultural politics of identity and the prospects of transforming post-colonial citizenship in one of Africa’s most ethnically and religiously divided nation states. Hidden in the middle of *Saviours and Survivors*’ controversial thesis critiquing international interventionism is Mamdani’s scholarly genius. The book scrutinizes, critically analyzes, deconstructs and reconstructs the deep historical transformations that constitute the underbelly of the continent’s post-colonial citizenship structures. For example, it provides a fascinating historiography of the genealogy of Sudanese Muslim and ethnic identities. I learned that the so-called northern ‘Arab’ identities have roots in Sudan that predate the Arab settlement of Northern Africa. Northern Sudanese are culturally Arabic, claims Mamdani, but they are not racially Arabic – nor are they mixed. *Saviours and Survivors* devotes a single section to Darfurian identity, a topic covered at much greater length in Sean O’Fahey’s 2008 book, *The Darfur Sultanate*, which chronicles a history of Darfur.

By engaging in this kind of excavation and reconstruction of history, Mamdani, who is a political anthropologist, exposes the book to legitimate criticism from the likes of O’Fahey and other historians of Darfur such as Martin Daly, who feel that the book has factual historical errors and may have used wide interpretive latitude in its account of Sudanese and Darfurian history. Significantly, Daly has taken issue with the application of Mamdani’s settler–native thesis to Darfur, while O’Fahey has described Mamdani’s argument that the British retribalized a previously ‘detribalized’ Darfuri Sultanate through changes to the Hakura landowning system as suspect. However, Daly’s criticism is made less persuasive if one considers the constructivist framework that Mamdani uses to support his own historical account of the Darfurian state and identity formation. For example, Mamdani relies on the work of an historian, Jay Spaulding, who has applied a similar critique of Arab settlement to explain the forging of the

17. O’Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate*.
Egyptian nation state.\textsuperscript{19} O’Fahey’s critique of Mamdani’s rendition of history may also be seen as circumstantial since O’Fahey himself admits that it is simply impossible to know what some of the facts of the period were.\textsuperscript{20} Alternatively, Mamdani suggests that it is possible to know this era through interpretation and theoretical induction. Specifically, in \textit{Saviours and Survivors} Mamdani argues that the change in direction of British policy lay in the colonial regime’s mode of rule. The British colonial policy of retribalization occurs as a result of the regime’s shift from direct rule to indirect rule whereby the colonial regime relied on native authorities to by-pass the elites in the Sultanate who had previously been relied upon during direct rule. In doing so, British colonial policy re-established tribal identities, ignoring a process of ‘de-tribalization’ that had already been initiated by the Darfuri Sultanates.

Mamdani deploys \textit{Saviours and Survivors} to reconstruct the received colonial history of Darfur in order to examine how shifts in British colonial governance inscribed ‘racialized’ and ‘retribalized’ identities into the Sudanese colonial and post-colonial state. To my mind, Mamdani’s insights (as a comparative political anthropologist who engages in constructivism to examine Africa’s political history in relation to its current affairs) provide an important vehicle for examining new ways of explaining conflicts in the continent that are not as fruitfully explored in Sean O’Fahey or Martin Daly’s analyses. Mamdani is more concerned than these historians with the mis-representation of race in discussions of Sudanese identities by the international community and his analysis seeks to tease out the complexity of the racialized and religious identities of the ‘Zuriga’ (Black Muslims) in the historic kingdom of Darfur in order to consider their relevance to contemporary debates. Mamdani indicts British colonialism for constructing these false racialized identities and he condemns the post-colonial Sudanese state for not being able to transcend them.

Mamdani follows the late Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) leader, John Garang in arguing for the importance of finding solutions for Sudan’s crisis within the country and not from outside it.\textsuperscript{21} But he also recognizes that previous historical attempts to find a national accord have provided contradictory contexts, which have fostered the current Darfuri insurgency. The two main Darfuri rebel movements – the Sudan Liberation Army (SLM) inspired by the African secularism of John Garang and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) inspired by the African Islamism of Hassan-al-Turabi – emerged in response to the ‘New Sudan’ deliberations and dialogues in 2004. In highlighting the complexity of Sudan’s

\textsuperscript{19} Mamdani, \textit{Saviours and Survivors}, pp. 118–19.
\textsuperscript{21} Mamdani, \textit{Saviours and Survivors}, p. 203.
identity crisis in this way, *Saviours and Survivors* places the Darfur conflict in its proper perspective and wrestles the analysis away from the simplistic and false frameworks used by the international media and the transnational human rights community.

*Saviours and Survivors* is not without shortcomings. By targeting the Save Darfur movement’s justification of a new moral international humanitarian interventionism in Africa and the ICC’s duplicitous inclination to target the weak states of Africa, *Saviours and Survivors* may have missed an important opportunity to persuasively articulate a viable alternative resolution strategy for the protracted Sudan–Darfur conflict. Whilst a significant part of the final chapter is given over to a speculative proposal for finding reconciliation within Darfur, more detail would have made it more convincing. This alternative conflict-resolution strategy would emphasize the role of regional African leaders and would balance meaningful political and diplomatic solutions with practical reconciliation initiatives. Hence, I only wish that *Saviours and Survivors* had taken Garang’s ‘New Sudan’ and the African Union’s democratic nationalism as sub-theses of its central theme, and had played down the critique of international relations. Doing so might have more effectively advocated a continent’s desire to challenge the world on what it justifiably considers to be an affront to African sovereignty.