COMMENTARY

MAMDANI’S ‘SETTLERS’, ‘NATIVES’, AND THE WAR ON TERROR

DOUGLAS H. JOHNSON

Mahmood Mamdani’s latest contribution as a public intellectual has produced more controversy than any other book on the Darfur conflict. This is largely because his book is not primarily about Darfur; it is about America. Readers who would like to follow the detailed critique of Mamdani’s book, and his defence, can go to the blogspot, ‘Making sense of Darfur’. I do not wish to repeat in detail the criticisms of historians such as Martin Daly and Sean O’Faheey, but will confine myself to a brief comment on three aspects of Mamdani’s argument: that it was the British who ‘racialized’ Darfur by identifying its inhabitants as either ‘settlers’ or ‘natives’; that there is no direct connection between the war in Darfur and the civil war between Khartoum and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) that ended in 2005; and the role of the War against Terror in the international response to Darfur.

The ‘colonial settler–native’ paradigm

Mamdani extends his South African paradigm, first proposed in his award-winning Citizen and Subject and further elaborated in When Victims Become Killers, to Sudan, whereby the colonial power is said to have imposed a divide between ‘settlers’ and ‘natives’ on the indigenous people, and identified the people of Sudan ‘as members of different races, termed “Arab” and “Zurga” (“black”) earlier and “Arab” and “African” more...
recently’. This rather assumes that the peoples of Sudan are a *tabula rasa* on which external powers can inscribe their own vision. The reality of the colonial encounter in the Nile valley suggests otherwise, that the colonial power adopted indigenous categories and terms to describe the peoples it governed.

The Nile valley has a long history of indigenous state building, going back to pharaonic times, and those states have left a legacy not only of social stratification, but of perceptions of race, ethnicity, and social status, and idioms for expressing them. The Axumite inscription of around 350 AD proclaiming the victory of King Ezana over the Black and Red ‘Noba’ indicates how far back the idiom of colour was being used to distinguish different – and possibly enemy or subject – populations. The distinction between ‘black’ (Zurga or Sudani) and ‘red’ is applied right along the Nile valley, even among so-called Arab peoples such as the Misseriya, often expressing the historical ambiguities of power and status – free, servile and unfree – in relation to a succession of expansive and predatory states. As O’Fahey states in relation to the history of Sudan in general, but Darfur in particular, ‘raiding and slaving gave rise to an elaborate racially pejorative vocabulary, to assumptions of inferiority and superiority, assumptions reinforced by religion, and assumed descent’. Certainly in the northern Nile valley the terms ‘Nubi’ (Nubian), ‘Nubawi’ (Nuba) and ‘Sudani’ (Sudanese) entered colloquial Arabic as synonymous with ‘slave’, and have a very old, pre-nineteenth-century pedigree; while being wholly free was increasingly linked to professing Islam in addition to claiming Arab descent.

These terms were in use when the British occupied Sudan; they were not invented or imposed by the imperial power. They are still in use, with varying degrees of pejorative overtones. If the northern Sudanese intellectuals Mamdani consulted for his introduction to the country have ‘bought into’ these colonial stereotypes, it is because the colonial power ‘bought into’ indigenous classifications. And contrary to Mamdani’s claim, the distinctions between ‘Arab’ and ‘African’, ‘settler’ and ‘native’, were not adopted as the primary classifications for the first independence census of 1955/6. Rather, linguistic and regional definitions were given to the various ‘races’ enumerated by the census, and Sudan’s tribes and sub-tribes were categorized


6. Ezana classified a number of his own subjects and those along his border as ‘red’ or ‘black’: see Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands: Essays in regional history from ancient times to the end of the eighteenth century* (Red Sea Press, Lawrenceville, NJ, 1997), pp. 27, 32.


variously as Arab, Beja, Nubiyan, Central Southerners, Eastern Southerners, Western Southerners, Westerners, Nuba, Foreigners (with Sudanese Status), Foreigners (with non-Sudanese Status), and Miscellaneous. Racial categories in Sudan are more a state of mind than of skin colour, and never a clear-cut distinction between black and white (or black and red). While Anglo-American perceptions of race might be misleading when applied to Sudan, perceptions of race and descent still do matter, still do influence how individuals and groups deal with each other, and are still used in the political mobilization of segments of the population. Mamdani’s attempt to dismiss this does not help us understand the continuing complexity of Sudan’s civil conflicts.

Connections to the civil war of 1983–2005

Mamdani sees the Darfur conflict as independent of the broader Sudanese civil war and declares that ‘there is no linear connection between the counterinsurgency in southern Sudan and that in Darfur’. It is misleading to try to compartmentalize Sudanese politics in this way. There are a number of ways in which Sudan’s multiple civil wars have fed into the Darfur conflict. First it is important to dispute Mamdani’s characterization of the SPLM/A’s war as being confined to southern Sudan. This is a common misperception. The SPLM/A enunciated a political philosophy of fighting on behalf of the ‘marginalized peoples’ of Sudan, which is why they were able to open up fronts outside of the south in the Blue Nile and Nuba Mountains as early as 1986, and eventually even the eastern Sudan. The common thread between these regions was the issue of land, and the way in which governments in Khartoum from Nimeiri to Bashir had progressively stripped both agriculturalists and pastoralists of their customary rights of access and use and had alienated large tracts of land to lease to agricultural capitalists for mechanized farming. Such alienation also affected areas of southern and western Darfur and contributed to the outbreak of conflict in those areas.

Counterinsurgency techniques that were later adopted in Darfur originated in the southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains. The government first raised and supported ‘tribal’ militias at the end of Nimeiri’s reign, as proxy forces that attacked the livelihoods of the civilian populations seen

9. A. O. Ishag, ‘A codified list of Sudanese tribes and future action required’ in The Population of Sudan. Report of the Sixth Annual Conference (Khartoum, 1958), p. 66. The term ‘race’ has had numerous meanings and Ishag reported that its use ‘caused considerable misunderstandings. People just would not understand that “race” does not mean race. A search has been made to find a more suitable description of the highest grouping of tribes and at Professor Kenneth Little’s suggestion, Department of Anthropology, University of Khartoum, the word people has been adopted for the purposes of subsequent publications’ (p. 67).
10. Mamdani, Saviours and Survivors, p. 69.
to be the political base of the SPLA. These militias increased in importance during the premiership of Sadiq al-Mahdi in the late 1980s, and were formalized under Bashir, who, as garrison commander in Mankien, liaised with a number of militias operating in the oil region of Upper Nile. The Rizeigat had already been armed as a Murahalin militia by Khartoum when they turned their guns on the Masalit in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, when Khartoum was able to use its oil income to increase its arsenal, the strategy of using combined air support and militia attacks to clear whole populations from areas opened up for oil exploitation was developed. This strategy was immediately transferred to Darfur when the conflict there escalated in 2003. The religious justification for fighting other Muslims, and in fact declaring other Muslims to be unbelievers who can be killed, was also a strategy developed by the current Islamist government in its war in the south and the Nuba Mountains. In fact, in order to understand how the war in Darfur developed it is particularly important to study the precedents established in the war in the Nuba Mountains, not only in the political-religious ideology adopted, but in the segregating of civilian populations into displaced camps.

But perhaps most important in understanding the timing of the escalation of the Darfur conflict is the timing of the peace negotiations addressing the main civil war. Darfur groups had joined the National Democratic Alliance, an umbrella group of opposition parties and the SPLM/A formed after the Bashir coup. Darfur leaders also petitioned to be included in the peace talks between Khartoum and the SPLM/A that began in 2002, but their petition was denied. The peace talks in Kenya had just begun addressing the issue of the areas outside the southern Sudan (Blue Nile, Nuba Mountains, Abyei) in early 2003 when the Sudan Liberation Movement launched its attack in Jebel Marra. The grievances of the peoples of the Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains were very similar to those of the people of Darfur. Those grievances were unaddressed by the provision for southern Sudanese self-determination in the Machakos Protocol which had become the framework document for the peace talks. Khartoum was resisting conceding any greater regional devolution to these non-southern areas, and one reason behind Khartoum’s extreme response to the escalation in Darfur was to avoid setting a precedent for further concessions in a ‘northern’ Muslim region that might be applied to those ‘northern’ areas already in rebellion.

I do not want to be side-tracked into a discussion of the geometry of what is meant by a ‘linear connection’. But that there are many threads connecting Darfur to Sudan’s main civil war cannot be denied. The same persons in

charge of Khartoum’s war in the south, Blue Nile, Nuba Mountains and eastern Sudan were in charge of Khartoum’s war in Darfur.

*The role of the war on terror*

Mamdani draws attention to the regional context of the Darfur conflict as well as its local context. ‘I put Darfur as well as Rwanda in a national, African and global context’, he writes, ‘which over the past century has been one of colonialism, the Cold War and the War on Terror. . . . The regional dynamic was set in motion by the Cold War and is currently being reinforced by the attempt to insert Africa into the War on Terror’ 13

That Sudan’s internal politics are influenced by international events is neither a new nor startling statement, as important as it is to keep in mind. Sudan is surrounded by nine other nations (ten, if you count Saudi Arabia across the Red Sea), and there has been a reciprocal impact between it and its neighbours since before independence. But to elevate external causes in this way is akin to the old ‘outside agitator’ excuse American segregationists used to dismiss the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. People cannot be forced to rebel if they have nothing to rebel about, and in rebelling will look for external aid and resources if they don’t have their own.

In this case linking the Save Darfur movement to the War on Terror is aiming at the wrong target. It is the Islamists in the Khartoum government who have been using the War on Terror to their advantage. Khartoum was collaborating with the US security agencies before 9/11, and increased its collaboration afterwards. The head of Sudan’s State Security, Saleh Gosh, has publicly proclaimed that this protected Sudan from military intervention by the United States.14 And however dubious the value of the intelligence Khartoum has supplied, Saleh Gosh, one of the architects of Khartoum’s Darfur strategy, has certainly secured his personal protection through this collaboration: he has been flown on a private jet to Langley, Virginia; he has met with US and UK intelligence officials while on a ‘medical’ visit to the UK; the US had his name removed from the list of suspects the UN Security Council handed on to the ICC for investigation. US policy towards Sudan has been hamstrung by this ambivalence, of public denunciation and secret collaboration, the sort of ‘tough talk and bad policy’ that Obama denounced during the presidential campaign. It remains to be seen whether

the new US administration will be able to free itself from this ambiguous policy.

Mamdani has accused the Save Darfur movement of being ignorant of both fact and context. When his critics have pointed out his errors and omissions of fact, he has riposted that they do not understand the broader context. The context, in this case, seems to be Mamdani’s own general theoretical construct, and the facts must be made to fit that context no matter how uncomfortably. I agree with Mamdani on at least one point: facts do not speak for themselves. But they do matter.