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**Local Politics in the Time of Turabi's Revolution:  
Gender, Class and Ethnicity in Western Sudan**

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Even though, according to the present custom, politics, culture and press of our nation, a single village is in no way of the slightest account, nevertheless the essential kernel of the social organization of this land and the essential arena for any judgement concerning its

civilization is, in any case, precisely these scattered villages...

Al-e Ahmad, *Owrazan*<sup>i</sup>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the village of Bireka in central Kordofan in western Sudan, as elsewhere, the political actions of persons at the 'capillaries' of power, and their 'ordinary' village-level competitions over resources, are enmeshed in discursive struggles over the meanings of representations of gender, ethnicity, class and community. People understand the power of these notions, and they understand how actions, practices and words constitute and transform representations. They do not hesitate to use representations to legitimate, justify and naturalize particular interests.

Analyzing political relations, then, involves viewing politics as a process where contestations over representations are central events. In a prescient discussion, Cohen (1969:224) succinctly summed up this approach:  
Some action theorists take the rules of the game, i.e. the symbols governing social behavior, as given and as being outside the 'arena' in which the struggle for power takes place, when in fact these symbols are dramatically involved in the whole process at every one of its stages.

Local and national discourses of gender, ethnicity and class are mobilized to reshape the framework and rules that regulate political actions and determine access to resources (Berry 1993; Watts 1988; and Moore 1994). Gendered roles in public and conjugal spaces are often key battlefields where access is disputed. For example, Carney and Watts (1990) show how the Gambian state gave men control over irrigated rice plots that were formerly controlled by women. New irrigation technology entailed an intensification of work. The struggles

brought about by these changes were played out on one 'terrain' of gender- what it meant to be a husband/wife in a Mandinka household, and what comprised their respective rights and obligations. Men and women use the full range of dominant and subversive gender ideologies in the process of struggles, not just within households, or between men and women, but also in confounding and influencing struggles involving other social identities and relationships (Di Leonardo 1991; Moore 1992).

Most analyses of political processes in Sudan, however, tend to ignore the centrality of these gender, ethnic and class representations.<sup>11</sup> The problem of maintaining national unity in northern Sudan, for instance, is seen as a problem of political sectarianism, elite action, and foreign intervention. Warburg's (1985:237; see also, Warburg 1993) assertion is typical of this approach to Sudanese politics:

With Ansari followers concentrated in the western regions of Kordofan and Dar Fur, in close proximity to an unpredictable ruler like Qadhafi, the very precarious unity of this vast Sudanese state could be threatened.

The analysis- basically of passive peasant 'followers' waiting for the call from 'unpredictable' rulers- is belied by the absence of a textured analysis of local politics of the 'followers'.

This is important because analysts are overlooking what we believe might be a central paradox of popular conceptions of contemporary Sudan. The military regime and the National Islamic Front (NIF), who took power in 1989 under the rubric of the 'National Salvation Revolution', are attempting to manipulate local processes in order to acquire legitimacy. The domination of discourses and defining of identities is an integral element of what El-Affendi (1991) and

others have called 'Turabi's Revolution', after the NIF leader Hassan al-Turabi. The appearance of the first automatic rifle in a village neighboring Bireka in the spring of 1992 symbolized what the regime hoped to achieve in its program to transform rural 'tradition'. The rifle belonged to a young man, Jaabir, who had led a militia for three months in the nearby Nuba Mountains, fighting with government forces against the local insurrection. He had travelled to Chad and Darfur as part of a delegation recruiting for a nationalist Islamic youth organization known as 'The Nation's Youth' or *Shabab al-Watun*. His rhetoric was explicitly anti-local. He interpreted events and ideas through the lens of national politics. He thought of himself as a citizen of a modern, Islamic nation.

The paradox is that the regime's attempts to 'create' more Jaabirs may be leading many Sudanese to embrace discourses, symbols and practices that contradict the NIF program, and which undermine their goal of creating legitimacy 'from below'. We illustrate this point with a discussion of a second conflict in Bireka, over the regulation of a roadside market. There, women in Bireka who joined the *Shabab al-Watun* used their membership as a rhetorical weapon in their fight against policies implemented by local agents of the government. Beating local history to the rhythm of Khartoum, by recruiting and training people like Jaabir, could well exacerbate an already well-established trend towards civil breakdown.

This paper marks a first step toward understanding the micro-politics of this civil breakdown. We focus particular attention on examining two central conflicts in the village of Bireka during the three years between 1989 and 1992. In one conflict over the administration of a women's grain bank, some wealthy

Arab villagers raised the issue of the proper public behavior of women. Poorer villagers and villagers from 'marginalized' ethnic groups opposed what they saw as an attempt by wealthy families to preserve and extend their power by wresting away control of valuable grain. They entangled the conflict in more general issues of ethnic marginalization and class solidarity. In a second conflict over the participation of women in market activity along a roadside, villagers again mobilized representations of class, gender and ethnicity. Some villagers argued that the roadside was an inappropriate work environment for women tea sellers. The closure of the stands was seen by others as marking the definitive ascendance of 'Arab' villagers over their Hausa and Burgo neighbors. Other villagers appreciated the role played by competition for economic advantage; even some wealthy villagers declared that the motive driving the obstructionists was that they hoped to eliminate competitors and muscle their way into the lucrative market activity.

These conflict situations revealed the critical role played by the military regime and the NIF as their policies and rhetoric were applied and manipulated to fit local contexts. The delegation of authority to agents and descendants of the former Native Administration determined the outcome of the second conflict. Women stopped selling tea after the local *omda* ordered them whipped. His decisiveness in the action was facilitated in part by the regime's ambiguous message about the role of women in public life. Leaders of the regime encouraged more female participation, but actions were taken- such as enforcing prohibitions against beer-brewing in rural areas- that undermined women's livelihoods. The regime has had a similarly ambivalent attitude towards ethnic issues. It offered an inclusive ideology based on Islam, 'transcending' ethnicity, but excluded

social groups that did not advocate the orthodox version of Islam promoted by the NIF. The regime demanded that villagers place their identity as 'Sudanese' above local considerations, but defined 'Sudanese' in ways that are at odds with many of the diacritical marks of local identity. In short, the regime had not altered the basic exclusionary nature of centralized political rule in Sudan. Villagers in Bireka incorporated and manipulated this exclusionary rhetoric and policy.

The paper is organized as follows. Section Two summarizes the national context of economic decline and a military regime intent on transforming certain aspects of social life and politics. Section Three describes the norms and representations that form the political framework of the village, paralleling them with national policy and rhetoric. The village study is based on fieldwork conducted during late 1989 through late 1990, and with a follow-up visit in late 1992. Section Four analyzes two conflicts in Bireka that illustrate how national representations intermix with the multiple layers of meaning that underlie local politics. Finally, we conclude by returning to the paradoxical outcome of increasing civil breakdown and change raised in this introduction.

## **2. STATE REPRESENTATIONS AND POLICIES**

Nearly all commentators agree that in the ten years since the publication of Ali Abdel Gadir Ali's The Sudanese Economy in Disarray the Sudanese economy has gone from disarray to almost total collapse. Gross National Product per capita stagnated after the mid-1970s oil crisis, and declined steadily through the 1980s. The industrial sector has exhibited almost no new investment. Yields on major agricultural schemes have fallen to extraordinarily low levels. This

collapse has been particularly evident in Kordofan province. Riely (1991) has documented the growing poverty (and feminization of poverty) among settled nomads in North Kordofan. Ahmed (1987) traces the increasing marginalization of herders and farmers in *dar* Hamr in western Kordofan. Manger (1981) and Abdalla (1985) have presented evidence on ecological deterioration.

The proximate causes of this collapse are civil war, drought, refugees, adverse international sanctions, and national mismanagement. Rainfall has been declining since the 1960s for most of northern Sudan. The ongoing civil war has prevented successive governments from managing the economy in the interests of 'development'. The government's investment budget is sorely taxed by the war; in 1989/90 almost one quarter of all government spending went to the military (Mohamed 1993). Numerous sources indicate an escalation in military spending since then. The war has displaced millions of southern Sudanese. Many have set up squatter camps outside of major northern cities, further taxing limited state resources. Sudan also hosted several hundred thousand refugees from neighboring conflicts.

The influx of foreign aid that financed state-led investment in the 1970s, and provided relief during the droughts and refugee crises of the 1980s, has been cut off since the coup of 1989. The IMF and World Bank have treated Sudan as an international pariah, taking the country further along the path to expulsion than any other recalcitrant debtor. Capital flows from private banking and financial sources are paltry. Only the large flow of remittances from workers in the Gulf States, Iraq, and Libya has kept the economy afloat. Even so, the remittances have proved a mixed blessing. Brown (1992) argues that confusion over the management of remittances by both the government and



international agencies, and the resulting distortions in prices and policies, contributed heavily to the mismanagement of the macroeconomy.

From a political economy perspective, the collapse of the Sudanese economy may be seen as the inevitable outcome of processes of disarticulation and dependency, of peripheral incorporation into the global market economy (Sultan 1993; Suliman 1992; Mohamed 1989; Ahmed 1987; El Mekki 1986; Tully 1988; and Prendergast 1991). Privileged classes, including the military, have transformed the colonial legacy of a relatively strong state into an instrument for 'accumulation from above'. The organization African Rights (1994) goes so far as to argue that the civil war is perpetuated by the rent-seekers who benefit from the distortions justified in the name of wartime exigencies. The use of the state to transform property relations, especially in the mechanized farming areas, manipulate markets for agricultural goods, and regulate labor relations on the large-scale irrigated schemes, usually to the detriment of migrants from the west, have precipitated a process of differentiation and deterioration in the more peripheral rural areas.

In this context of increasing vulnerability and marginalization, the Revolutionary Command Council of the military regime that assumed power in the June 1989 coup, and its ally the National Islamic Front, have vigorously pursued a program of transforming both rural and national politics.<sup>iii</sup> Because of the lack of any significant power base in the country, the process has been top-down, rather than grass-roots. We focus here on three of the more salient transformations emanating from Khartoum and affecting rural areas: the return to Native Administration; changes in the rhetoric about the proper behavior of women; and a subtle transformation in representations of being 'Sudanese'.

*i. The Return to Native Administration*

One of the most significant changes made by the Khartoum government has been to return authority to adjudicate local disputes and collect taxes to 'traditional' leaders. These leaders, the sheikh at the village level, *omda* at the district level, and *nazir* or *makk* at the 'tribal' level, were given a great deal of power during the Condominium period of 'joint' British-Egyptian rule. The British moved towards Native Administration or Indirect Rule in order to save money on administration and minimize the influence of a nascent *effendi* class of bureaucrats (Voll 1971).<sup>iv</sup> The power of traditional leaders continued throughout the colonial period, as they came to dominate the rural councils that were eventually supposed to replace Native Administration. After independence the military regime of General Abboud sought the support of traditional leaders and deliberately appointed them to the councils.

The first serious challenge to the sheikhs came in the late 1960's (Howell 1973; Nyquist 1966). The civilian government that followed the October uprising against General Abboud attempted to eliminate completely any legitimacy associated with a traditional title, partially because leftist and urban politicians felt that traditional leadership was too conservative. These initial attempts at reform were unsuccessful, but Jaafar Nimeiri moved decisively after assuming power in the 1969 coup. The People's Local Government Act of 1971 formally ended any nationally-sanctioned authority for traditional leaders and explicitly prevented them from joining the new People's Councils. Centrally appointed judges and administrators (*dabit*) were to take over the judicial, development, and taxation responsibilities. Even this definitive attempt to exclude and transform was not entirely successful. Harir (1983) describes how

in one local council in eastern Sudan traditional leaders continued to exercise considerable authority, often remaining as members of the People's Councils and courts that had formally replaced them.

The enduring power of traditional leaders, as a class, is due the wealth they have been able to accumulate through the privileges of office. They benefitted from access to education, and their children have often moved into positions in local bureaucracies, consolidating their influence over local affairs. Many leaders transformed this wealth and influence into patronage networks that maintained a solid core of loyal followers. They have drawn upon a reservoir of religious, ethnic and kinship solidarities to legitimize their leadership role.

The military government and NIF restored the authority of the traditional leaders during the early 1990's presumably for the same reasons that had motivated the British. They disempowered the educated, 'secular' administrators and justices, saved money on administration, and created a class of political actors with a strong stake in the regime. Some of the legitimacy of tribal leaders 'rubbed off' on the national regime, which had very little legitimacy given the inability to resolve the economic and military problems that were the ostensible factors motivating the takeover.

From the regime's point of view, investing traditional leaders with power could be seen as reestablishing Islamic governance. Many traditional leaders are intimately linked to the Sufi *tariga* that have been an important part of political life at the national level. The local populace feels that descendants of the holy men who founded some villages inherit their *baraka*, their grace. This grace may be transformed into a direct political asset. El Hassan (1980)

describes this complex and contingent process in Um Dubban, a village in northern Sudan, where the descendants of a Sufi holy man continued running his school for Koranic studies. These descendants gradually began to define themselves as a separate ethnic group, and were successful in monopolizing the positions of *omda* and sheikh. This phenomenon of simultaneous religious and political leadership is probably more prevalent in eastern than in western Sudan; this remains an interesting and open question for comparative research within Sudan.

*ii. The Status of Women*

Being a Muslim is a defining feature of women's lives: women pray five times a day, observe Ramadan, give aid to those in need, and some even have made the *hajj* to Mecca. The national regime has used the language of Islam to manage an ongoing and sometimes contradictory evolution of public norms and practices surrounding the role of men and women in public life. Islam has of course always been used in negotiating these gendered roles. Local gender divisions of labor, conjugal contracts, and formal segregation in public spaces are believed to be based on Islamic ideas. Economic necessity, however, has forced poorer rural (and urban) women to work and interact in public spheres (El Bakri and Kameir 1990). Riely (1991) illustrates how permanent drought and migration of men has resulted in a feminization of poverty in the northern part of Kordofan province. Most women have income-generating enterprises; they either work on their own agricultural plots, market foodstuffs, or brew beer.

An analogous economic process- the migration of men to the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia- has led to a reconceptualizing of the role of women in many parts of Sudan. Boddy (1989), for example, concludes her discussion of the full and

changing complexity of local representations and practices of womanhood in the context of a riverain village in Northern Sudan (1989:344), by observing that: It is undeniable that women's behavior is more rigorously controlled than men's. Moreover, women are under considerable pressure to conform to the rather specific ideals of their sex... they are jural minors all their lives and subject to notable constraints throughout their reproductive years. And this situation, if the fundamentalist repercussions of men's Arabian labor experience and the recent (1983) declaration of shari'a law are any indication, is currently intensifying.

These evolving and sometimes unacknowledged changes in norms and practices set the context for regime policy. The NIF has rejected the 'traditional' attitudes towards women. According to El-Affendi (1991:174): ... the stance which is more in line with Islamic principles would be to accept full participation of women in public life, subject to reasonable safeguards and provisions allowed for in Shariah. Whatever the potential damage that may arise from free mixing of the sexes, this should not be used as an argument to deprive women of the actual and undisputable benefits of participation in public life...

In terms of specific policies, the NIF claims to have encouraged the participation of women in political and public life. Hassan al-Turabi, in Lowrie (1993:46-7), argued that the appointment of around thirty women to the national parliament, and equal (though segregated at some levels) access to education, was evidence that "the issue of women in the Sudan is no longer a topical issue."

Many women, primarily from the middle and upper urban educated class, would agree with this position. They have had increased access to political participation and have actively taken part in and benefitted from the 'Islamisation' process. They have not resented, and indeed many welcome, the requirements that women wear less-revealing garb when in the streets. They raised no cry against the Ministry of the Interior when it established a 'People's

Police' to 'ensure the strict application of shari'a in the streets and in daily life', despite knowing that a primary activity of such a People's Police would be the harassment of women whose clothing was not up to standard.<sup>v</sup>

This position is a tacit denial of the discriminatory economic effects of the dress policy, against poorer women who must invest in new clothing, and against female office workers who choose not to abide by the regulations. Other government decrees have discriminatory and negative consequences. Beer brewing, a traditional source of income for many rural women, is being prohibited with renewed vigor. Women working outside of the house after sunset are regarded as suspect, and punished for their 'loose ways'.

The result is an ambiguous government ideology encouraging the comparative luxury of political participation but discouraging the necessity of working outside the home, by promoting an image of the Sudanese woman devoted to home and family life. This, at a time when economic crisis has effectively forced many women to search for alternative 'public' employment. While the national government has largely not tried to forcibly implement its decrees, local powers in various parts of Sudan have tried to enforce these decrees by shutting down market activities and intervening in beer brewing.

### *iii. Being 'Sudanese'*

If the new Sudanese woman stays at home, the new Sudanese man wears a 'fundamentalist' beard. The cynic says that the 'beard brings the bread', but even in jest the new representation is thus acknowledged. The present regime is refining the nationalist notion that unified and rallied the forces that fought the British, and provided common ground for regime transitions after

independence. 'Being Sudanese' is being made equivalent to 'being a particular kind of Muslim'.

Nationalist representations have been a prominent feature of national-level Sudanese politics since the Mahdiyya. This discourse takes on a particular importance because of the prolonged North-South conflict and the problem of competing Afro-Arab identities.<sup>vi</sup> A voluminous literature contends that Sudanese nationalism is an answer to the North-South problem. Inclusive nationalism- a lip balm to heal angry sentiments of supposed cultural oppression- was the rhetorical norm for most of the post-independence period.<sup>vii</sup> The rhetoric could be used to practical effect; Bechtold (1976:158, 195) observes that the revised 1957 Sudanese Nationality Ordinance allowed the Umma party to grant citizenship to and register loyal Hausa and other West Africans.

The NIF has been explicit about equating 'being Sudanese' with a particular Islamic orthodoxy. Hale (1992) quotes Wisal al-Mahdi, the wife of Hassan al-Turabi and an NIF activist:

We want Islam to judge our cases; we want Islam to judge our economical activities... We want Islam to be practiced in everyday life, not just inside the house...we don't want it to be only in a corner of the life of the family. We want it to be the core of life...[for] the whole society and the whole Sudan and the whole Muslim world. That is the only difference between the NIF and the [rest of] Sudanese society as it has existed since independence.

Hassan al-Turabi has voiced similar sentiments about the Sudanese nation: So there is an attempt, now, to contain the whole Sudan, the *Salafis*, the *Sufis*, the *Ansar*, the *Khatmiya*, even the smaller sects, religious sects, and the small groups in society, and the professions, and the artisans; everybody is there. (Lowrie, 1993:45)

The nobility of the sentiment expressed is betrayed by the glaring omission of a third of the population. Non-Muslim southern Sudanese are immediately put

out of the picture- not only the objects of a *jihad*, they might not be even second-class citizens in the northern half of the 'Islamic Republic'. The exclusionary emphasis, paradoxically phrased as inclusion, directly affects Muslim residents of northern Sudan. The government sees the various religious brotherhoods, the *tariga*, as closer or further to their definition of the proper 'Sudanese' norm. Late in 1993 a number of Khatmiya, Ansar and Ansar Sunna mosques were closed.<sup>viii</sup> It may well be that the government is simply continuing a local process of redefinition. Doornbos (1988:99) noted the existence of a 'growing polarisation within communities... as to the proper way to live as a Muslim.' This polarisation has now been harnessed by the government and attached to nationalist notions. As Simone (1994:84) puts it: 'By emphasizing its role as both the purveyor of radical difference and the restorer of an essential identity, the Islamic movement can legitimate its claims to state power without ever having to substantiate an economic program...'

This rhetoric also influences local representations of ethnicity. It is ironic that much of the original work on the fluidity and mutability of ethnic identity was once carried out in western Sudan (Barth 1969). Where in the 1970's this nuanced and textured approach to ethnicity seemed to facilitate the tolerance of diversity, the regime has twisted the language of tolerance into a rhetoric of inclusion, going so far as to deny the very legitimacy of ethnic sentiment. Hassan al-Turabi declared (in Lowrie 1993:35-36, 63) that in Sudan there is no such thing as ethnicity, that ethnicity is incompatible with Islam ('Muslims don't know ethnic minorities.'), and that ethnic minorities will 'disappear'. This ambivalence is profoundly disturbing to members of ethnic groups, like the Nuba, Beja, Nubians, Hausa and Burgo, who have long argued that



members of northern riverain culture have monopolized power and discriminated against them. A further source of concern is the regime's reliance on informal militias, organized along tribal or ethnic lines, to fight as proxies in the civil war (De Waal 1993). The arming of tribal militias escalates the stakes in inter-ethnic conflict, which makes them all the more difficult to resolve peacefully.

### 3. POLITICAL POWER AND REPRESENTATIONS IN BIREKA VILLAGE

The new national-level representations described above were inserted into the evolution of intra-village social relations in Bireka, a small village of approximately sixty households in Kordofan province.<sup>ix</sup> Authority was devolved to the *omda*, away from the civil judge and regional administrator (*dabit*). Villagers participated in regional conferences on Islamic administration. The granting and withholding of visas, travel permits, identity cards- all important benefits of citizenship- were interpreted in terms of identity. Villagers accused each other of not following 'proper' Islamic codes of behavior. They held conflicting interpretations of the ambiguous new rhetoric on the role of women in society. This section provides a broad overview of village politics and representations in this context of changing national policy and rhetoric. The following section then concentrates on showing how changes were manifested and manipulated in two village conflicts.

For Bireka devolution of official authority to the *omda* had been the object of considerable discussion. Formal political authority in the village had until then been invested in the village sheikh and the village representatives to the district People's Committee. The sheikh was nominally responsible for

maintaining village order, resolving disputes and collecting the animal tax. The district *omda*, the traditional leader of about fifty village sheikhs in the Sheikan area of *dar* Bederiya (the home area of the Bederiya tribe under the British system of Native Administration) also lived in Bireka. He and his two brothers were very active in village politics and the resolution of disputes, as the sheikh was rather ineffectual. Both the sheikh and *omda* were nominally hereditary positions, though in practice over the past century genealogical links were rather tenuous.

The village members of the People's Committee represented the village to the regional government in El Obeid, and were responsible for the collection and distribution of rationed commodities like sugar, tea, soap and grain. Committee members were supposed to be elected, but in Bireka as elsewhere were more often selected through consensus, with holders of political power agreeing amongst themselves who the representatives should be.

These holders of formal political power were members of ethnic groups that shared a loose identity as Arabs, in contra-distinction with groups whose origins lay further west- primarily Hausa and Burgo.<sup>x</sup> The Arabs were divided into different groups- Tumam, Beni Fadl (a sub-section of the Bederiya), Mima and Jellaba. Arab ethnicity was sensitive in Bireka because of the association of the Tumam with Nuba origins. Thus for some Tumam and Bederiya were 'like brothers- same tribe', while others went out of their way to explain the differences. There were strong relations of marriage among the Tumam and Beni Fadl.

The *omda* was from the Tumam. Many villagers feared that he would exercise his newly acquired authority in new ways. The *omda* was a strong personality;

informants predicted that he would not hesitate to use his power. He would have policemen with guns. He would be able to whip those who committed misdemeanors. He could send to El Obeid those suspected of greater crimes. His word alone would adjudicate land disputes, animal trespasses, divorces, drunkenness, theft, and all the other small crimes of the district.<sup>xi</sup>

Part of the reason why the devolution of authority to the *omda* was important in Bireka was that four wealthy households from the Tumam and Beni Fadl groups already commanded substantial economic power. The four families were also joined through marriage ties. In one family, a young man had migrated to Saudi Arabia and worked for many years as a teacher. Upon his return the family bought a lorry and started a large irrigated vegetable garden with a diesel pump. Another wealthy family was that of the *omda*. His sons and his brothers' sons worked as teachers, government officials, and operated a small local bakery and irrigated garden. Their daughters were married to prominent and wealthy villagers from surrounding villages. The head of a third family was the People's Committee representative for the village.

While economic and political power was concentrated in Arab hands, numerical strength lay with the two-thirds of Bireka residents who called themselves Hausa.<sup>xii</sup> Though they were the majority, Hausa status as immigrants had prevented them from holding overt political power. Many Hausa, even those born in Sudan, were not citizens. Nationality laws have been fairly strict since Independence. Citizenship has been crucial for securing possession of land, being able to emigrate to Libya and the Gulf States, and obtaining government positions.

The older Hausa men and women settled in Bireka on their return from pilgrimages to Mecca in the 1930's and 40's. While most men and younger women were fluent in Arabic, they continued to speak Hausa at home, and retained a strong sense of their Nigerian identity. They did not intermarry with Arabs or Burgo.<sup>xiii</sup> The Hausa practiced a more ascetic, mystic and ritualized form of Islam. Married women were more strictly secluded than women of other groups, but unmarried girls had few restrictions on their movements. One primary signifier of difference between Hausa and the other groups in Bireka was that Hausa women did not work in agriculture.<sup>xiv</sup> Unmarried girls worked in the fields with their fathers and brothers, but more frequently they took to market processed food products that their older female relatives had prepared.<sup>xv</sup> Another difference between Hausa and other groups was that Hausa women were not circumcised. Although many urban Hausa girls were being circumcised in the process of 'becoming Sudanese', these rural dwellers held fast to this representation of their Hausa identity.

This local culture is perhaps best seen as part of the process of constructing a local Hausa identity. The Hausa in Bireka were actually of quite different origins: some would distinguish their Sokoto or Kano background; others were Fulani; others bore the distinct facial scars of the Borno from Damagara. O'Brien (1986) suggests that local animosity has caused many West African immigrants in Sudan to emphasize differences between them and local people, and play down intra-group differences. Migrants have deliberately created separate ethnic identities; 'In defensive adaptation to circumstances of discrimination and lumping together by others... these diverse cultural groups have drawn on

commonalities of their past heritage and contemporary circumstances to forge a more or less coherent ethnic identity' (O'Brien, 1986:902).<sup>xvi</sup>

While the Hausa in Bireka constituted themselves as a distinct ethnic group, there were sharp internal divisions within the group based on wealth. They were divided into two quarters, one consisting predominantly of poorer households, the other of the wealthier families. The wealthier families represented the Hausa community in village meetings, and acted as leaders in internal disputes and debates. They had followed patterns of accumulation similar to the wealthy Arab families: sons had migrated to Libya, one family had purchased a lorry, another had established a store on the roadside (described in more detail below), and two had established small irrigated gardens.

The first large community to settle in Bireka were Burgo from the Chad border areas. Most had since moved to an entirely Burgo village further to the south, and in 1989 there were only a few Burgo left in Bireka. Nevertheless, they played an important role in village politics because they often sided with the Arabs; together the two minority groups almost matched (in the numerical sense) the Hausa. The Burgo were much more closely integrated with the Arabs than with the Hausa. In the span of one generation, Arabic had become their primary language; many of the younger children did not speak or understand the Burgo language. Because the Burgo in Bireka had adopted Arab cultural values, many people called them 'Burgowia Arab'. This contrasted quite strongly with the Hausa who were normally called, and occasionally called themselves, 'Fallata'.<sup>xvii</sup>

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Burgo households was the relative independence of Burgo women, who were involved in two profitable sources

of income-generation: brewing sorghum beer, which was sold and drunk in their homes, and operating road-side tea and food stands. Young unmarried Burgo women dominated this roadside commerce. Only Burgo permitted young unmarried women to work in these public tea shops. The income derived from the tea shops far exceeded the daily return from other activities, both male and female.<sup>xviii</sup> For this reason, in several families these young women were the primary bread-winners. This economic strength allowed many Burgo women to expand their comparatively large level of personal autonomy. For example, most married and unmarried Burgo women did not directly pool their income with the male household head. These young unmarried tea sellers followed this trend, not sharing their income with their fathers, but controlling it and even investing it in productive enterprises. One young women rented a plot of land and hired laborers to farm it. This independence in the economic sphere did not necessarily translate into liberty in other personal spheres. A young Burgo woman was told one evening that the next day she was to be married to a man from El Obeid.

The common norms associated with Islam were of course important in defining the role and actions of women. Changing national representations were felt in the village. Two younger women who had attended secondary school in El Obeid wore the *hijab* in the village; several uneducated young women who worked selling tea along the road also adopted this 'Islamic' dress. More importantly, the brewing of local sorghum beer became the object of heightened police interest. This beer, *merissa*, was the primary source of income for six Burgo and Arab women in the village. After a raid by the police, four of them stopped brewing the beer.<sup>xix</sup> Their economic situation deteriorated markedly. This persecution of the beer brewers and drinkers was not new; after Nimeiri imposed the shari'a

laws in 1983 one of the Burgo women had been whipped. She had returned to brewing, but in 1990 she stopped again 'for the duration'.

The regime's vigorous promotion of particular Islamic orthodoxies was felt in other realms of village life. The government tried to dominate local religious ritual. Late in 1990 the government ordered villages to organize Islamic rain prayers (*salat al istisqa*). While serving an exemplary and absolutely necessary purpose, given the widespread drought and crop failure, the prayers also conveniently served to generate implicit public displays of the legitimacy of the regime. Some neighboring villages had already initiated rain prayers and fasting and *karama*, communal meals with prayer, on their own.<sup>xx</sup> In Bireka all the villagers- Hausa, Burgo and Arab- were to pray together (normally in the village they each prayed in their own mosques, only praying together on Fridays at the large mosque in the market village). In a highly political act, one Burgo man, a respected/feared *faqih*, refused to participate in the prayers. His argument at the time was that the government could not determine the method and rituals of prayer- doing so violated the whole spirit of prayer.

The changing role of Islam in public life especially affected the Hausa, who were, as we will see more clearly below, caught in a dialectic of incorporation and separateness. As many of them were not officially recognized citizens, the benefits from incorporation were great. At the same time, maintenance of Hausa identity was important in the struggles over control of village politics. New connotations of Islam and 'being Sudanese' were a significant source of anxiety in casual conversation, and several Hausa men had taken the initiative of regularly attending evening 'classes' given by the *imam* in the neighboring market village. A visiting religious guide (a *murshid*)

visited the village, and the Hausa enthusiastically agreed to participate in the setting up of a program for religious education of boys. A Hausa man was appointed to be *faqih* and lead the boys in reciting the Koran every evening. Arab boys participated in the first week, but then their parents decided they should no longer attend.

Finally, lest the reader think that life in Bireka was nothing more than stratagems and spoils<sup>xxi</sup>, we should note that everyday politics was constrained by a shared awareness of the crucial nature of language about community. Throughout most of our stay in Bireka, the standard answer to questions about village politics was: 'There are no problems here, we live together peacefully.'

But this solidarity was tempered by the sharp gradations of wealth within the village, and quite articulate notions of class consciousness within the village. As noted above, there were several Arab and Hausa families who were significantly wealthier than others, with large livestock holdings, irrigated gardens, lorries or trading capital, and relatives who had migrated to Iraq, Libya and the Gulf States. They contrasted with the one-third of households which had male or female members who worked as daily laborers, and whose household assets typically consisted of their hut, a few goats, and simple household furnishings. These differences did not result in any overt class conflict, at least not in 1989 or early 1990. Labor relations were cordial, with an active, competitive, and decentralized market for hiring spot labor. Laborers were not enmeshed in debt relations with their employers. Indeed, there was almost no intra-village debt at all. Nevertheless, poor villagers would often note the structural differences in the village, and how those differences translated into different interpretations of community interests. Wealthy villagers were



selected as members of the People's Committee, in charge of securing and distributing rationed commodities, and the weekly distributions were the sites of numerous arguments. There were frequent muttered complaints of corruption and favoritism, both in Bireka and in the larger market villages.

Village unity was also undermined by the ethnic differences described above. Hausa, Burgo and Arab all prayed in their own small village mosques. They did not share in the breaking of Ramadan fasting together, each small group held their own evening meal. They did not usually attend each others labor parties. Derisive remarks and stereotyping of the other groups were not infrequent. There was no inter-marrying. At large public events like weddings, naming days, and the *karama* meals that marked the return of migrants or other events of good fortune, groups would show up together along ethnic lines: first a large group of Arabs, then a group of Hausa, and they would usually sit apart.<sup>xxii</sup>

#### 4. THE DYNAMICS OF VILLAGE POLITICAL STRUGGLES

In Bireka, class, gender, ethnicity and community were interrelated social constructs that, together with the political institutions such as the village sheikh and *omda* and the People's Committee, constituted the structures within which individual political action was embedded. Gender politics and ethnic loyalties in particular confounded simple class and corporate community approaches to politics. Hausa, Arab, and Burgo identities shaped political interaction, and these ethnic identities were also significant components of the intra-household politics that reproduced divisions of gender. Shared notions of gender roles in turn also shaped village politics, which was after all not solely determined by men.

We shall see this quite clearly in this section, where we describe and analyze the micro-dynamics of local politics in two situations of conflict where the role of women in public and economic life figured prominently. The first conflict was over control of a woman's grain cooperative, the second over the permissibility of women working along the roadside.

#### *4.1 'Cooperative Conflict'? Drought and Community Struggles over Access to Resources*

We will tear down the grain store with our bear hands, and leave the rubble in the street for lorries to run over it, so that everyone can see how the rich tried to destroy the cooperative.

Bireka villager, 1990

In 1989 the Regional Ministry of Cooperatives and UNICEF organized a grain bank project among the women of Bireka in 1989. The villagers contributed to the building of a storehouse, and UNICEF provided a large quantity of grain as start-up capital for the bank. Only the Arab and Burgo women in the village participated. Several Hausa men claimed that Hausa women could not participate because it was not possible for them to be present at public functions or to participate in public work.

After the grain arrived, the Burgo and Arab women promptly distributed it, deposited the proceeds from the sale with the Ministry of Cooperatives, and waited for the next allocation. This was not quite the theory of the grain storage project. In principle, they should have waited until the rainy season to distribute the grain, when grain prices were highest and cheap grain would alleviate the cash constraint on agricultural production. The women however displayed an alacrity the project organizers had not counted on. Village women

knew that the quicker they disbursed the subsidized grain the quicker they could petition for a new shipment.

Grain prices rose sharply in 1990 as the prospects for a good rainy season diminished, and this precipitated a serious struggle within the village over the cooperative. Hassan, one of the prominent Arab men in the village, a supporter of the National Islamic Front<sup>xxiii</sup>, and a relative of both the *omda* and sheikh, began to attend and attempt to control the meetings. He expressed dissatisfaction with Khadija, the Burgo woman who was the president of the cooperative. She was highhanded and put on airs, he argued. She was corrupt and was personally benefitting from the project.

Initially, the conflict could easily have been characterized as the result of individual animosities and personality clashes. Khadija, whose husband had left her and remarried, relished her role as village spokeswoman and leader for development projects. She travelled alone to El Obeid frequently; an anomaly in a village where many women had never travelled the forty kilometers to the city. Khadija had close social ties with the Cooperative extension agent, and she may have known that he would refuse to let the villagers revoke her position as President. There may well have been petty graft or unacknowledged perquisites. Khadija's brother was a village trouble-maker. In the past, when the family was wealthier and there were more Burgo in the village, he held considerable power. In 1990 he was no longer wealthy, but still played the role of spoiler and political gadfly.

Hassan, on the other hand, was a strong supporter of the ideology of the NIF. He thought that women should not be active in public spheres. He was unafraid to bring up for discussion issues of public and personal conduct. He

could afford the derision this sometimes occasioned from other villagers, because he was the wealthiest man in Bireka.

Hassan organized the sending of a letter signed by slightly fewer than half of the women in the cooperative, requesting that the Ministry remove the president and hold new elections. His wife was put forward as an alternative candidate. The Cooperative officer from El Obeid would not allow them to replace the president; the rules of the charter would not permit it, he declared. If the members could not agree, he would have to shut the cooperative project down. The officer made it clear that a shipment of grain would be provided only if the cooperative could resolve its problems.

Instead, in a series of meetings over the summer, the conflict escalated. On several occasions, Hassan was asked to leave cooperative meetings, both by the members and by the cooperative officer. He refused to do so. He was supported by other wealthy Arab villagers who did not like a powerful woman from the Burgo ethnic group controlling the cooperative; they would rather disband the cooperative and block the villagers access to cheap grain than have Khadija remain as president. Privately, some of the other Arab families admitted that they did not believe Khadija was corrupt, but felt compelled to support Hassan, the wealthiest and most powerful man in the village.

Hassan's involvement caused other village men to join the fray. Their conflicting interests brought the idioms of class and ethnicity into the struggle. The poorer villagers from Arab families articulated the struggle as between the wealthy Arab families and the poorer Arab and Burgo families. 'The rich do not want us to eat,' one farmer put it. A Burgo man claimed that the

poor would tear down the mud storehouse and leave it in the road, for all to see how the rich had 'destroyed' the cooperative.

Idioms of gender roles were used extensively; the Burgo woman was a female household head, and some men argued that they should have more control and influence in the 'women's' cooperative. Many women shouted them down; men had no role in this women's cooperative.

Tensions reached a fever pitch when Khadija, in a desperate bid to retain control of the women members, trumped her wealthy Arab opponents by inviting the Hausa women to become members. Hausa men had originally been satisfied with Hausa women's non-participation, claiming that it would undermine the status of women to be seen engaging in the various manual activities of the cooperative. But with the rise in the price of grain and the shift in the rhetoric, the Hausa men were faced with a strong incentive to renegotiate their opposition to female participation. Moreover, the issue of ethnic rights in the village became central. Some Arab and Burgo men claimed that the village was 'their' village and hence the project was 'theirs'; Hausa women were, after all, outsiders to the village, and thus could not join the cooperative.

The additional members would dilute the available grain that the Cooperative Ministry claimed was forthcoming. The Arab and Burgo families would receive less. Nevertheless, the majority of the poorer villagers who sided with Khadija apparently determined that the smaller shares were worth the retention of control over the cooperative. The maneuver succeeded; Hausa leaders, many of them wealthy themselves, and a majority of poorer men and women, made it clear that they would fight further attempt to remove Khadija. Khadija retained her position and the grain was delivered. Shortly after that a more general relief

distribution began (unforseen at the time), with households receiving substantial quantities of grain, and rendered the conflict moot.

The triple idioms of ethnicity, class and gender were invoked in a struggle over access to resources; resources that were fundamental in alleviating the crisis faced by poorer villagers. The Burgo president did not allow powerful men in the village to undermine her control. She actively sought the backing of other Burgo women and the administration of the 'women's' project. In development discourse, she was an independent, self-starting women, and therefore a perfect project leader. The powerful Arab men wanted to control the project, pitched at empowering village women, once it became apparent that proceeds were more substantial than the usual weaved baskets and embroidery of most women-based development efforts. They used the discourse of proper public behavior of women to justify their interest. When Hassan, the wealthy Arab, put forth his wife as a potential president, he contrasted her, a quiet, modest, pleasant young mother, with Khadija. Khadija was a divorced, independent, brash woman, potentially corrupt. Her brother was frequently called upon to 'control' her. She was, in dominant male village discourse, disrespectable and an inappropriate project leader.

A conflict that was initially phrased in terms of the role of men and women in public life was basically about competing claims to power in the village, and was ultimately resolved when the idiom of ethnicity was invoked. It was perhaps ironic that Hausa men were confronted with a similar rhetoric of exclusion that they used on women. In assessing the relative merits of the claims, they decided that Hausa identity depended less on the seclusion of women and more on an assertion of rights to participate in village institutions.

During this period, the military regime in Khartoum was transmitting and implementing its own representations and principles of conflict. As they filtered down to the village level, they shaped new relations of power and new discourses. With the next case study, we illustrate how these changes transformed village relations and, in part, engendered a new crisis over the role of women's work.

#### 4.2 'Petty Crimes'? Conflict Over Women's Work at the Roadside

To whip someone for a crime? Yes. This is not new. It has existed since colonial times. For petty things, instead of sending someone to prison, they are whipped.

Ahmed Abdallah Idriss  
Sudan Minister of Justice, 1993

...the police came and wanted to beat us, but we said we were the government and we would be beating them before too long.

Bireka villager, 1992

Changes in the power and dominance of representations about gender and ethnicity came into play in 1991 when government officials from El Obeid ordered closed the roadside stands at Um Belda, a truck and bus stop a few minutes walk away from Bireka. Many women from Bireka operated *gahawi*- small tea stands and restaurants. Most of these were younger unmarried Burgo women, but two older (and poor) Arab women also had stands. Young Hausa girls sold sesame candies, roasted groundnuts and cowpea falafel, known as *tami'a*, that their mothers or older relatives made in the village.

Men also worked at the roadside. One Hausa household of three brothers operated a stand, often hiring young Arab and Burgo men from Bireka. The sons of a wealthy merchant from the market village operated a large tea stand. Two Hausa men from a neighboring village sold *kebab* at night. Young men often set

up small stands in front of the *gahawi* and sold vegetables and cigarettes brought from El Obeid. Farmers sold watermelons. The stands were supplied by a Hausa man from Bireka who operated a fairly large store (also selling black market cigarettes and gasoline to lorry drivers and travellers), and an Um Belda man with a small tin shack, a *kushk*. A Hausa butcher slaughtered sheep, goats and occasionally cows every morning. An Arab from Bireka supplied the stands with bread from his small wood-fired bakery. Young men from all ethnic groups were hired to build straw shelters, *rakuba*, and larger mud structures. In 1990 the roadside was the most dynamic sector of the local economy.

Conflict was present. The income earned by the young Burgo girls was extraordinarily high. This sometimes led to conflicts within Burgo households. For example, in one family, the daughter had hired agricultural laborers with her earnings from her tea-shop. She expected to control the crop income even though her parents considered the fields to be family agriculture. These intra-household conflicts over shares and control of income were managed and kept under control because the size of the pie was large and expanding; perceptions were that participation in the roadside economy was a positive sum game.

These perceptions were shattered in the spring of 1991, when the sheikh received a letter from the governor's office in El Obeid ordering the *gahawi* closed. The official explanation was that the site would be surveyed and permits issued for 'proper' buildings. Operators would have to pay a much larger fee for operating licenses.

Few believed that this was simply a case of 'public improvement'. There were numerous stories about why the governor's office had closed the site. One was that during a celebration of the opening of a regional grain storehouse the



driver of the bus transporting a party of government officials had gotten drunk at Um Belda. Another was that jealous merchants who did not have *gahawi* wanted the government to raze the existing ones so they could take over the area and build larger structures. Some of the local National Islamic Front supporters alleged that the girls working at the *gahawi* were prostitutes. Most people were convinced that Hausa-Burgo-Arab ethnic rivalries played a decisive role in the closing; people were sure that numerous letters had been sent to the governor's office alleging misbehavior by one group or another. Larger political structures of regional administration were also supposedly involved; the next village down the road saw almost none of the trucks stopping, and the regional rural council president was from that village.

The stands remained closed for almost a year. During that time a new organization started recruiting young people in the area. Called *Shabab al-watan*, 'The Nation's Youth', the organization was supposed to agitate on behalf of the Sudanese nation by mobilizing rural populations and by providing community services. Members received identification cards, worked occasionally building schools, cleaning villages and towns, and held meetings. In the El Obeid area, the leaders of the organization were sympathetic to the NIF. They organized military training for chapters and fought alongside militias in southern Kordofan.

For many young people in Bireka, the organization provided a sanctioned forum for social activities. One of the first acts of the local chapter was to build a small 'meeting house' on the outskirts of the village. Many Burgo girls who worked at the *gahawi* were eager participants. It was through their involvement with the *Shabab al-watan* that they decided that the government's

closure of the tea stands was no longer valid. They had I.D. cards. They were 'members' of the Sudanese state. How could working be a crime?

After the rainy season many of the young women began to work again at the truck stop. After a few months the police came. According to one young woman: About ten girls were taken away, and spent the whole day in the 'prison' yard next to the police station. They were taken to El Obeid, and held outside the court. The police did not take them in, because they knew that they had no reason to close the *gahawi* in the first place. They brought the girls back.

The women were emboldened by their victory, for they promptly reopened the *gahawi*.

A few months later, the *omda* finally received his formal authority from the government. One of his first actions was to order the stands closed. They were causing too much disruption, he argued, and the government had ordered that they be closed until proper procedures were established. The benefits to his intervention were high and the costs relatively low. Many Arab women resented the profits of Hausa and Burgo women and girls. By using his authority to keep the tea stands closed, he acquired prestige and support from NIF supporters, merchants from neighboring villages, and his governmental superiors.

For several months the stands remained closed. Then some of the girls decided that strictly speaking the government and the *omda* had closed the stands, but had not prohibited working, and so they started making tea under the trees near the road. The police came again. As one young woman put it:

They took the girls to court and said they would fine them LS 300 or one month in prison. How could people pay that much? A delegation of women went to protest at the district offices and made a lot of noise. The girls said they would not pay, they would go to prison. But the police brought them out. They were afraid to take them to the court in El Obeid. They gave twenty-five lashes to five girls.

The whipping was the end of women working at the roadside. By late 1992 all the stands were closed and overgrown; some of the mud walls had been torn down. The two stores were open, but with very few customers. Most lorries and buses simply drove past the roadside without stopping. Everyone was poorer.

This conflict was symbolically framed around the issue of what work was appropriate for women. Many villagers attributed the initial closing of the stands to alleged beer-brewing and an inappropriate work environment for young women. The *omda*, though, was clearly less concerned about the issue of the morality of young women (the primary concern of the national government) than he was about preventing dissension and disrespect. He and his wealthy supporters may have seen a threat to the economic power that underwrote, in part, their political power. Moreover, national policy had forced him to act, by conflating his legitimacy with enforcement of a particular idea about how 'Sudanese' women should act.

While this conflict was nominally about a principle of conduct issue, power and control over access to resources were at the root. The disruption of the closing of the tea stands caused many villagers to experience large drops in income, but some wealthy villagers were unapologetic. As one villager noted, "If I'm sick and go to the doctor, I have to pay; now the poor complain about their problems, but they should have known better than to get sick." In other words, the poor should know better than to challenge the rich. It was not an accident that the divisions between the whippers and the whipped were the same gender, ethnic and class lines that had previously demarcated and crosscut village battlefields.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Struggles over resources in rural Kordofan are intensifying. The increasingly interconnected national economy holds out, with equal possibility, the promise of greater resilience and the threat of market-mediated entitlements crises. The continuing mismanagement of the macro-economy, concomitant inflation, and internationally-engineered economic sanctions adds to this uncertainty. This environment of economic and ecological instability has led not just to conflicts over resources but struggles over the meanings and representations that are crucial in the allocation of resources.

The cooperative conflict illustrates this point. Wealthy men attempted to seize control of the women's grain cooperative because the grain had become extraordinarily valuable and important to village affairs. They deployed a well-understood debate on the role of women in public life. They asked: What kind of woman should be president?; A divorced woman from a poor family? These objections were transparently selective: no one had questioned the woman who headed the adult literacy program, or Khadija's organization of a tree nursery planting for another development project. The issue at hand was not really about what type of woman could head a project, but what group in the village would control power.

The importance of the resources at stake propelled Hausa men and women to renegotiate their representation of women's participation in public spheres. Hausa women joined the cooperative, not to assert their rights as women, but because both Hausa women and men wanted to assert their rights to be 'Sudanese', to be fully-fledged members of the village community.

These village-level discussions of what it meant to be 'Sudanese', or what it meant to be a woman active in public spheres, must also be placed in the context of larger economic and political changes in Sudan. Villagers refracted national rhetoric and policy through local representations of gender, class and ethnicity; they were neither passive recipients of state policies and rhetoric nor stubborn resisters to outside influence, closed off from national discourses.

The devolution of authority to the *omda* illustrated this point. He used his power to implement an important platform of the regime- a stricter regulation of women's public activities. Just like Jaabir and his rifle and his membership in the *Shabab al-Watun*, the actions of the *omda* in closing the tea stands symbolized the government ideal of what it meant to 'become Sudanese'. But the *omda* also embodied the multiple contradictions of the regime's manipulation of local representations and power structures. One of his first acts was to appoint as assistant the grandson of an early colonial *makk* of the Tumam. A Bireka villager argued that despite the young 'son of the *makk*' being less than a wise and seasoned leader, he conferred legitimacy on the *omda*: 'The *makk* has history. He and his family have been here a long, long time. This land is their land.'

The appointment represents an interesting inversion of Kapteijns (1985) argument about Mahdist revolts in far western Sudan. There villagers on the periphery apparently rallied around Mahdist leaders who invoked religion to legitimize their violent uprisings against an *ancien régime* that legitimized its rule by the principle of inheritance. In 1992, the Khartoum government monopolized the discourse of Islam in its favor. We do not know whether the government appreciated the irony of having traditional, 'tribal' leaders wield authority in the new and modern Islamic state, but villagers on the periphery

certainly did. The *omda* was quick to invoke the discourse of inheritance, 'royal blood' and history to justify his invigorated authority. He understood all too well the anomaly of his position of power; the very opposite of the regime's intended effort to transform rural villagers into 'Sudanese'. He understood in particular the immediate practical implications of devolution, which was to fracture a multi-ethnic village by further excluding Hausa and Burgo from the levers of formal authority.

Other villagers appreciated and refracted government rhetoric in like fashion. The young, unmarried Burgo woman who operated a tea shop and also belonged to the *Shabab al-Watun* had interpreted government rhetoric in an anti-authoritarian and explicitly local manner. For her there was no contradiction in being a Sudanese woman, a good Muslim, and working in a tea stand at a truck stop. In the end she was whipped for her interpretations, not by representatives of the national government, but by the local 'traditional' powers recently delegated formal authority by the national government.

The conflicts we have analyzed in this paper are examples of an intensification of processes of immiseration and civil breakdown. In late 1992 there were clear markers of these processes. Very few women earned income in public activities. Only one or two women brewed sorghum beer. The tea stands along the roadside were closed. No Hausa girls sold their mothers' products there. The closure of the roadside may have prompted many Burgo men to migrate from the village: stories of unimaginable hardship were told of their crossing the desert to work in Libya. Only a few Hausa men could travel, because most were not 'citizens' and did not have passports or identity cards. The

increased numbers of women left alone to manage their households confronted a hostile official world and became increasingly marginalized.

In 1992, the senior Hausa leader was resigned to bitter conflict with the Arab leadership. The People's Committee had lost all legitimacy with the appointment of a poor, broken *merissa* drinker as the representative of the Arabs. The Arabs bypassed many respected community members who were Hausa. After the death of the sheikh, the Arabs appointed his clearly incapable son as the new sheikh. The principle of heredity had to be sustained in order to preserve Arab dominance, even if it meant rewarding an incompetent man. They did not, however, undertake the process of an official investiture. All recognized this cynical undermining of the legitimacy of the institution.

We began this paper by discussing a possible paradox in contemporary discussions of Sudanese politics: that by ascribing heterogeneous outcomes to the Khartoum agenda we may be obscuring the complex processes of transformations at the local level. It is unclear whether these transformations will filter up to affect regional or national politics. The presence of Jaabir's rifle, and of ethnic, gender and class conflict in Bireka, is of course no indication that what Prendergast (1991:49) calls 'a descent into Lebanon-like anarchy' is imminent. Just a few hundred kilometers away, though, in southern Kordofan, the region had exploded into warfare during the late 1980's, and the actions of the Sudanese army and militias drew international headlines. H.B. Ibrahim (1988) argues that the violence was not simply the result of an expanding Sudan People's Liberation Army (the main rebel group in southern Sudan opposing the Khartoum government) but rather had its roots in what he calls a local 'legitimation

crisis', brought about by the differentiating effects of agricultural development projects and out-migration to Khartoum.

Much more comparative work would have to be done before we could determine and explain, with any confidence, how local processes contribute to the construction of widespread consent to nationalism and central authority. Or how they undermine state power and lead to civil disintegration. Before a story like that of Jaabir and the tea women and the *Shabab al-Watun* could be considered an adequate metaphor for local political processes, we would need comparable village-level analyses from other parts of northern Sudan, as well as intimate analyses of urban local politics at the grass-roots level.



## Footnotes

\*This paper was inspired by the senior Hausa man in the village of Bireka use of the proverb, 'When with dwarves, it is best to stay on your knees', to describe the village political relations between Hausa and Arabs. The general meaning was clear: when confronted with people who do not see things your way, you should be careful to pretend to see things their way, lest they resent your presumptuousness. The context in which he used the proverb will become apparent in the text. He and many other villagers in Bireka endeavored to teach us the basic principles of local politics, and the many inadequacies of this paper are a reflection of our inability to grasp all that was taught. In the United States, Tom Bassett, Misty Bastian, Jeremy King and Shaun Malarney provided extensive comments. We are also grateful to three anonymous referees for critical comments that led to a substantial rewriting of the paper.

i. Cited in Mottahedeh (1985:294-5).

ii. Several recent analyses of Sudanese society have approached the national-local nexus of class, religious, ethnic and gender representations; see Baumann (1987), Doorbos (1988), Bernal (1994), and Simone 1994. Only Simone (1994), however, devotes explicit attention to how Sudanese deploy these representations in political conflicts.

iii. Warburg (1985:227) describes a similar breadth in the strategies and programs of Nimeiri to transform Sudanese society.

iv. The re-ascendance of traditional leaders was by no means assured; Daly (1986; 1991) has carefully documented the internal disputes within the British administration that led to the formal adoption of Native Administration discussing how the Khartoum administration did not really devote many resources to strengthening, formalizing and curbing the excesses of the institution of traditional leadership.

v. Indian Ocean Newsletter (1 August 1993).

vi. National leaders regularly visit Sheikan, the battle-site where the Mahdi defeated Hicks Pasha, in order to renew their nationalist credentials.

vii. Though as Fluehr-Lobban (1990) points out, this nationalism was rarely secular, most political parties in the north were quite explicit in advocating the dominant role of Islamic ideas in the national domain.

viii. Africa Research Bulletin (Vol. 30, No. 6). For an interesting discussion of the original Mahdi's attempts to curb variegated Islamic practices in Sudan, and impose a single expression of Islam, see Voll (1979).

ix. The name of the village, and all personal names, are fictitious.

x. We are by no means trying to 'create' oppositional identities in this paper- the central focus is not how the character or nature of these identities motivates actors, but rather how they use these identities as vocabulary in political discourse. See Spaulding and Kapteijns (1991) and A.A. Ibrahim (1988).

xi. Interestingly, one of the first things the *omda* did, after power was officially transferred to him and the local court was abolished, was to hire the former court clerk as his assistant.

xii. According to the 1955 census, Hausa made up almost 18% of the population of *dar Bedeiria*, the district that then surrounded El Obeid. See Born (1965:115).

xiii. One exception- an older Hausa man marrying a very young Burgo girl who was pregnant, and their subsequent divorce- proved the rule. In some larger neighboring villages there were numerous examples of marriages crossing ethnic boundaries.

xiv. The symbolic representations of Hausa women as secluded and submissive were, of course, confronted with harsh economic realities. One poor Hausa woman said that while Hausa women could not work in agricultural production, she cultivated because she was poor. A few other poorer and older women also farmed individuals plots, although they did not work on the family agriculture.

xv. Hausa women also hand-pounded their grain into flour rather than taking it to town to be ground by the mill. This was a point of pride for both the men and women. Many Hausa indicated that their porridge was superior to that of the other ethnic groups because it was 'pounded by the strong arms of Hausa women'.

xvi. On the other hand, O'Brien argues that in eastern Kordofan some West Africans have 'assimilated' Joama Arab identity because of specific influences of national and regional labor markets. In these labor markets, the Joama are reputed to be good cotton pickers. West Africans benefit from adopting the Joama identity, and local Joama have accepted migrants into the group because the migrants are an additional source of labor for their own fields.

xvii. In other villages there were 'Fallata Arab'. For a discussion of the meanings of 'Fallata', see Duffield (1988). The term was used extensively by Arabs and Burgo, often in the presence of Hausa.

xviii. Some reported, in 1990, making profits of from LS 30 on a bad day up to LS 100 on a good day, a time when the average daily wage for agricultural labor was around LS 30. Most participated in a revolving savings fund with the other tea women. One woman with three shares in the fund took home LS 3600 in savings every two months.

xix. The raids were recounted with considerable hilarity, because the only person caught was the brother of one of the policemen. Being a poor man unable or unwilling to pay the fine, his brother had to loan him the money to avoid being whipped.

xx. Abdalla (1985) reports that rain prayers were held in *dar Hamar* villages in

the early 1980's.

xxi.(Bailey 1980)

xxii. There was a direct correlation between age and wealth and the extent to which these ethnic differences were maintained. Poor and young men interacted more freely.

xxiii. Using the word 'fundamentalist' would be simpler but the term is now too connotative of disapproval and discourse about an 'Islamic threat' to western 'national security'. During our stay in western Sudan we never heard another word used locally to describe 'fundamentalists'. Many times people would say "so-and-so is *Jabha*" referring to the National Islamic Front, or they might say "so-and-so is an *akh* Muslim", a member of the Muslim Brothers, or finally they might not say anything and just stroke their chins, with a knowing look, indicating that so-and-so's political/religious views were like those of prominent Islamic Front members who wore beards.



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