The Politicization of Religious Identity in Sudan, with Special Reference to Oral Histories of the Sudanese Diaspora in America

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THE POLITICIZATION OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN SUDAN, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ORAL HISTORIES OF THE SUDANESE DIASPORA IN AMERICA[1]

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Introduction

Since independence, Sudan has experienced two civil wars that have devastated entire regions and caused untold human suffering. The first began in 1955 and was settled in 1972. The second war, often considered a continuation of the first, started in 1983 and lasted until a peace agreement was reached in January 2005. Recent estimates suggest that the second civil war alone exacted a penalty of more than two million deaths and uprooted the lives of over four million people.[2] Widespread violence, destruction, and displacement have stretched state, social, and economic structures to the breaking point.

In most popular accounts, the cause of the fighting is characterized as a conflict between the Muslim north and the Christian south.[3] Such a

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[1] A preliminary version of this essay was presented at the "Conference on Religion and Religious Identities in Africa and the African Diaspora" at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA, 9–12 October 2008. I also wish to thank Alice Kustenbauder, David Bargueño, Michael Mahoney, Rebecca Lorins, Carol Gallo, Dianna English, and Mircea Raianu for their criticisms and suggestions.

[2] Ali Abdel Gadir Ali, Ibrahim A. Elbadawi, and Atta El-Batahani, "Sudan's Civil War: Why has it Prevailed for so Long?" in *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis*, ed. Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2005), 193.

[3] Recent examples of popular accounts of the long history of civil war in Sudan include books and films, most of which were produced following the arrival to the United States of some 3,800 so-called "Lost Boys," that is, Sudanese refugees who were orphaned and/ or displaced by the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005). After the terrorist attacks on New York City and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the resettlement program was suspended due to security concerns. Films intended for popular consumption situated the story of Sudanese immigration to the United States within the framework of a clash between Islam and the West. Megan Mylan and Jon Shenk, directors, *Lost Boys of Sudan* (Actual Films/ Principe Productions, 2003), DVD, open their documentary with these words: "Civil war has ravaged Sudan . . . the Islamic fundamentalist government is waging war on the Christian and Animist South." Christopher Quinn, director, *God Grew Tired of Us* (Newmarket Films, 2006), DVD, offers a slightly more sophisticated telling of

stereotype renders a complex local conflict into basic universal terms, one in which the hostilities in Sudan are reflective of a global clash of cultures, pitting Islam against the West. It points toward religion and religious identity as fundamental sources of conflict throughout the history of the world.[4] Scholars whose work focuses on Sudan, however, have generally looked to a more historically contingent combination of political, environmental, and economic factors. During the colonial era, British officials recruited Arabic-speaking northerners, who became a bourgeois class of petty bureaucrats charged with running the colonial administration. Policies of indirect rule, which were applied more vigorously after the 1920s to combat nationalist stirrings, culminated in the 1930 "Southern Policy," which isolated peripheral areas of Sudan—especially the south—leaving them undeveloped and thus unprepared for political independence.[5] In addition, there has always existed competition, especially between the northern and southern regions, for scarce resources, including: labor, prime agricultural and grazing land, the Nile waters, and rich mineral and oil reserves. These and other sources of conflict in Sudan suggest that the issue of religion is but one factor among many.[6]

Sudan's history, which acknowledges a legacy of British colonialism that divided north and south, but in the end describes the principal cleavage as a religious one. More recently, Jen Marlowe, director, *Rebuilding Hope: Sudan's Lost Boys Return Home* (Cinema Libre Studio, 2009), DVD, follows the journey of three "Lost Boys" who, now in their twenties, return to South Sudan "to discover whether their homes and families had survived, what the current situation is in South Sudan, and how they can help their community rebuild after devastating civil war." A number of popular books written by or with Sudanese refugees about their experiences also implicate religion as a primary cause of conflict in Sudan. Some examples of these include: Francis Bok, *Escape from Slavery: The True Story of My Ten Years in Captivity—And My Journey to Freedom in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003); Mende Nazer, *Slave* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003); Mark Bixler, *The Lost Boys of Sudan: An American Story of the Refugee Experience* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); Benson Deng, et al., *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky: The True Story of Three Lost Boys from Sudan* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005); Dave Eggers, *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2006); John Bul Dau, *God Grew Tired of Us* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2007); Ayuel Leek Deng, Beny Ngor Chol, and Barbara Youree, *Courageous Journey: Walking the Lost Boys' Path from the Sudan to America* (Far Hills: New Horizon Press, 2008); and Aher Arop Bol, *The Lost Boy* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2009), which differs from most of the other published accounts by Sudanese resettled in America in that it tells the story of Bol's flight from Sudan to South Africa.

  [4] Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

  [5] One of the best accounts of Sudan's colonial past and its legacies is Heather Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

  [6] Whereas the political and economic forces fueling the conflict have been analyzed from a wide variety of perspectives, this essay focuses on the religious dimensions of what

This chapter draws upon interviews with members of the Sudanese diaspora living in the United States to explore the question of religion's role in the conflict. Of the estimated five million Sudanese displaced by war, a small percentage has managed to gain resettlement placements in countries beyond those that border Sudan. North America and Australia have become key destinations, with over 20,000 Sudanese refugees resettled in the United States since the early 1990s.[7] As a people on the move, Sudanese in the diaspora offer a unique window into the lived experience of globalization and the linkages with those who remain in Africa. To what extent do they identify religion as a major factor in the war, and how might their own position as members of a transnational diaspora shape their religious identity and influence their telling of Sudan's history and its future trajectory? The findings reveal that, on the surface, there is agreement within the Sudanese diaspora—despite their different faiths—regarding the precise function of religious identity in Sudan's wars: namely, all those interviewed hold the position that religion is not the root cause of the hostilities, but political elites have deployed religious rhetoric opportunistically as a weapon and a defensive shield in what is first and foremost a struggle for political control. Nevertheless, conversations were delimited by a certain discursive paradigm that relied on binary categories to explain Sudan's post-independence history: Muslim-Christian, Arab-African, and north-south.

This chapter argues that the language of politicized religion operates as part of a hegemonic narrative about the local conflict in Sudan, a conflict that has become globalized as opposing northern and southern factions reached out to foreign actors for material, ideological, and diplomatic support. It also considers the ways in which the terms of this globalized discourse have shaped Sudanese identity, and how Sudanese living

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has become one of the world's longest surviving and most lethal civil wars. Significant publications on the social, economic, and political causes of conflict include: M. W. Daly and Ahmed A. Sikainga, *Civil War in the Sudan* (London: British Academic Press, 1993); Katsuyoshi Fukui and John Markakis, *Ethnicity and Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Oxford: James Curry, 1994); Sharon Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); David Keen, "A Rational Kind of Madness," *Oxford Development Studies* 25, no. 1 (1997); Peter Adwok Nyaba, *The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider's View* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1997); Human Rights Watch, *Famine in Sudan, 1998: The Human Rights Causes* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), and *Sudan, Oil, and Human Rights* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2000); Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

[7] Dianna J. Shandy, "Nuer Christians in America," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 2 (2002): 213.

outside Sudan have adopted its language—in their oral testimonies, religious rituals, cultural practices, political activism, and relief efforts—to understand the conflict and their place in it. Assessments of Sudan's past and present by refugees and political asylum seekers living in America incorporate into the historical record diasporic voices that shed light on the interconnected processes and socio-political dynamics at work in the globalization of religious identities, the construction and maintenance of communities across national borders, the entrenchment of conflicts, and even the birth of new nations.

Each of the nine Sudanese with whom I spoke came to the United States as a result of displacement by war, or in order to escape political persecution. Three came from the north and identified themselves as Muslim; six were southern Christians.[8] There are obvious limitations to such a small sample size. Given their location in university towns on the northeast coast of the United States, their views may reflect a level of educational attainment, class status, or social outlook that is unrepresentative of the Sudanese diaspora in the United States or elsewhere. While such shortcomings are valid and should be kept in mind, they do not pose a significant problem for the arguments developed below. This is because the interviews are read alongside an already rich repository of first-hand written accounts and secondary literature, all of which illustrate how the dynamics of religious identity formation are linked to processes of globalization at the national and interregional level. Indeed, one of the reasons to include these voices from the diaspora is that their individual stories may be understood as oral performances, a way for Sudanese living in America to actively construct their identity, imagine themselves as members of a collective life rooted in Sudan, and act as individual agents capable of providing material and political assistance.[9]

One recurrent theme in the interviews was the manipulation of religion by both Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in order to mobilize popular support at home and win political allies abroad. Many scholars have noted the politicization of religion as a tactical maneuver in Sudan's wars, especially with regard to the north.[10] This

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[8] The "Sources" section at the end of this chapter provides details about each informant. To protect their privacy, however, I have changed all personal names, drawing from names common in Sudan.

[9] See Felicia McMahon, *Not Just Child's Play: Emerging Tradition and the Lost Boys of Sudan* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

[10] See Einas Ahmed, "Political Islam in Sudan: Islamists and the Challenge of State Power," in *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, ed. Benjamin F. Soares and Rene Otayek,

is to be expected, since the Sudanese Islamist party, the National Islamic Front (NIF), came to power in 1989 with the explicit project of establishing a nationwide Islamic political order.[11] Yet few studies have devoted significant attention to understanding how Christianity and Christianization became an identity of resistance, and therefore a political tool in the SPLA's struggle against Khartoum. One exception is Francis Deng, who has noted how, through a dialogical process, a strikingly similar set of logics, language, and practices of politicized religion in the south came to mirror those in the north. Deng writes, "What they (the Northerners) do not realize is that traditional identity and Christian Western influence have combined to consolidate and strengthen a modern southern identity of resistance against Islamization and Arabization. Forced assimilation is no longer possible, if it ever was."[12] In this sense, southern Sudan's identification with Christianity, and the deployment of that identity to garner international support and fight a war against a Muslim-dominated government, is a story that requires more attention, especially now with the creation of an independent southern state.[13]

While it is easy to accuse political rivals or cultural "others" of manipulating religious sentiments, it is far more difficult to recognize the ways

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(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Jean-Philippe Platteau, "Political Instrumentalization of Islam and the Risk of Obscurantist Deadlock," *World Development*, 39, no. 2 (2011); Heather Sharkey, "Arab Identity and Ideology in Sudan: The Politics of Language, Ethnicity, and Race," *African Affairs* 107, no. 426 (2008).

[11] Since Sudan's independence, a series of military rulers turned politicians have negotiated for political control with the National Islamic Front, headed by the revered cleric Hassan al-Turabi. Although the National Congress Party (NCP) has been the official governing party of Sudan since Omar al-Bashir seized power in a military coup on 30 June 1989, many consider the NCP to have been a legal cover for the NIF and credit al-Turabi with institutionalizing *sharia* law at a national level and mobilizing the war effort against the south in the 1990s.

[12] Francis M. Deng, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1995), 205. See also Amir H. Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[13] The Republic of South Sudan officially became an independent country in July 2011. After nearly 99 percent of southerners voted to secede in a January 2011 referendum, President Omar al-Bashir pledged his support, saying, "Secession has become a reality...we will support the new southern state...we are neighbors and will remain friends." Khaled Abdelaziz, "Sudan's Bashir pledges support for independent south," *Reuters*, 25 January 2011. For recent works on the future of Sudan, see Francis M. Deng, ed. *New Sudan in the Making? Essays on a Nation in Painful Search of Itself* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 2010); Alan Schwartz, *Scenarios for Sudan Avoiding Political Violence Through 2011* (United States Institute of Peace Special Report, 2009); Edward Thomas, *Against the Gathering Storm Securing Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2009); Andrew S. Natsios and Michael Abramowitz, "Sudan's Secession Crisis: Can the South Part from the North without War?" *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (2011).

in which one's own religious identity has been shaped by local political projects (i.e., construction of a separate southern Sudanese identity). Such projects and the forms of belonging they invoke have their own logic of inevitable exclusion of the "other," even if they are an inadvertent consequence of the community's struggle for survival.[14] One way to get at these social dynamics that function at the level of individual consciousness is through the analysis of oral histories, which actively work out notions of personhood and its relationship to wider communities—such as national, religious, ethnic or class groupings—through narrative construction. In the case of southern Sudanese informants, for instance, their testimonies provide evidence of the politicization of Christianity in the south, which has functioned as a means of military resistance, political mobilization, and social control. It is a good example of what Elizabeth Tonkin has referred to as "being witnesses in spite of themselves."[15] Those interviewed didn't intend to raise the issue of religion's politicization to serve the SPLA's objectives, but this important information emerged in their oral performances. Equally clear was the extent to which politicized religious identities and competing visions of the nation have been shaped, solidified, and exported through global diasporic connections.

Khartoum and the Islamist State

Sudan's conflicted history, narrated by Sudanese living in the United States, emerges as a story of the manipulation of religious identity by the northern government for political purposes. Chol Alier, a Sudanese immigrant from southern Sudan educated at Michigan State, the University of San Diego, and Yale, argues that the conflict in Sudan is fundamentally about politics. "The problem that lies at the heart of the conflict in Sudan is the issue of governance . . . more than race or even religion."[16] Summarizing a list of grievances voiced by each of the other southerners interviewed,

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[14] For a discussion on political processes of exclusion and belonging, see Peter Geschiere and F. Nyamnjoh, "Capitalism and Autochthony: The Seesaw of Mobility and Belonging," *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000); Peter Geschiere, "Autochthony and Citizenship: New Modes in the Struggle for Belonging and Exclusion in Africa," *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy* 18 (2005); Peter Geschiere and S. Jackson, "Autochthony and the Crisis of Citizenship: Democratization, Decentralization, and the Politics of Belonging," *African Studies Review* 49, no. 2 (2006).

[15] Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 83f.

[16] Peter Chol Alier, interview by author, 19 November 2007.

Chol points out that Sudan's political history since the colonial period has been characterized by the marginalization of non-Arabs, the partition of north and south, unequal development, the extraction of resources, and the concentration of political power among elites in Khartoum. This perspective is one we might expect from someone displaced by the war.

However, criticism of Khartoum's exclusionary politics was not unique to southern Sudanese. A northern Sudanese Arab and former journalist, Mutasim Allah, now runs a small pan-African mutual assistance association in New Haven, Connecticut, called African Community Development Council. He too blames the Government of Sudan (GoS) for perpetuating an unrepresentative system of governance, failing to develop outlying regions while channeling resources directly to Khartoum, and using religion as a pressure mechanism to perpetuate an unjust and oppressive regime. "The issue of religion has been heavily politicized [sic] in Sudan…that is problematic because it is the government that is to blame, not Islam as a religion."[17] A devout Muslim, Mutasim worries that the northern government's tactics not only divide the country, but also bring dishonor to Islam.

These statements by Chol Alier and Mutasim Allah challenge the popular account of Sudan's wars as a clash of cultures, arguing instead that the conflict is fundamentally about political control. Yet, in their discussion of the conflict and in their own sympathies, they reinforce the bipolar image of a war between Sudan's Arab and Muslim north, and African and Christian south. This is hard to avoid, especially given the dominance of a narrative focused on the north-south national cleavage and the fact that Chol and Mutasim identify themselves as belonging to each of the dominant opposing communities. Nevertheless, there are many other groups within Sudan whose local struggle does not fit neatly within the pattern of a cultural clash. One well-known example is Darfur.[18]

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[17] Mutasim Allah, interview by author, 5 December 2007.

[18] Darfur is a predominantly Muslim area located in western Sudan and historically considered, at least politically, part of the north. Nevertheless, Darfuris have long suffered marginalization under Khartoum's rule. See Mahmood Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009); Salah M. Hassan and Carina E. Ray, eds., *Darfur and the Crisis of Governance in Sudan: A Critical Reader* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, *Darfur: A New History of a Long War* (New York: Zed Books, 2008); Gérard Prunier, *Darfur: A 21st Century Genocide* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); and Alex de Waal, "Who are the Darfurians? Arab and African Identities, Violence and External Engagement," *African Affairs* 101, no. 415 (2005). Myriad dissenting factions have struggled for a political voice in Sudan. On marginalized groups in the north see Ahmed, "Political Islam in Sudan: Islamists and the Challenge

Interviews with Darfur refugees make it clear that Muslim-Christian antagonism need not be present in order for elites to deploy religious ideology as a means of suppressing political opposition, exerting social control, and justifying the use of force to broadcast state power. Yasir Hamata, a Sudanese Muslim from Darfur who, like Mutasim Allah, came to the United States seeking political asylum, points out that even in Darfur, where all inhabitants are Muslim, the government still uses Islam as a tool of social and political control. "The current regime in Sudan practices a separate and rule policy . . . religious divisions are a smokescreen for the larger political issue—Khartoum takes and does not give, people are alienated from their power."[19] Alamaldin Tajir, another Darfuri, explains that because Islam is so malleable, it has been used by the government to prevent people from organizing political opposition to Khartoum. "For example, according to the religion, alcohol is haraam, but we've always had traditional alcohol in Darfur until the government came in with a 'new' Islam, which was an excuse to harass people . . . now most of Darfur is burning."[20] There is no disputing the fact that the GoS has been unwilling to develop Darfur or to give Darfuris equal political say. The only sign of progress they observe are the pipelines that carry oil across

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of State Power." In southern Sudan the Dinka-dominated SPLA has not escaped factional splits and dissention either. See Douglas H. Johnston, "The Sudan People's Liberation Army and the Problem of Factionalism," in *African Guerillas*, ed. Christopher Clapham (Oxford: James Curry, 1998); and Sharon Hutchinson, "Nuer Ethnicity Militarized," *Anthropology Today* 16, no. 3 (2000). The Nuba, meanwhile, who occupy an "ethno-cultural transitional zone along the south-north political dichotomy," suffer doubly from marginalization by Khartoum's policies of Islamization and Arabization and exclusion from Dinka-dominated SPLA politics. See Guma Kunda Komey, "Land Factor in Wars and Conflicts in Africa: The Case of the Nuba Struggle in Sudan," in *War and Peace in Africa*, ed. Toyin Falola and Raphael Chijioke Njoku (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2010), 360.

[19] Yasir Hamata, interview by author, 30 November 2007.

[20] Alamaldin Tajir, interview by author, 30 November 2007. By his repeated references to a "new Islam" encroaching on village life, Alamaldin seems to be referring to a form of Islamic fundamentalism. There is a long debate about whether the word "fundamentalist" is accurate in discussing political Islam. Many scholars prefer the term "Islamist" to describe contemporary political Islamic movements. On the local dynamics of Islamist movements in Sudan, see Victoria Bernal, "Gender, Culture, and Capitalism: Women and the Remaking of Islamic Tradition in a Sudanese Village," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36 (1994), and "Islam, Transnational Culture, and Modernity in Rural Sudan," in *Gendered Encounters: Challenging Cultural Boundaries and Social Hierarchies in Africa*, ed. M. Grosz-Ngate and O. Kokole (New York: Routledge, 1997), 131–51. Bernal offers insight into how "Islamist" movements work in transforming local understandings of culture, and, in contrast to Alamaldin Tajir's description, points out that Islamic reform while encouraged by the government, frequently emerges at the grassroots through the initiative of local agents.

the barren landscape to Khartoum, meanwhile Darfuris have been systematically excluded from government ministries.[21]

The situation in Darfur has not escaped the attention of southerners, either, many of whom view the fighting in Darfur as an extension of the southern struggle for a new Sudan. "At long last, [the people of Darfur] understand what the northern government is doing, they have finally woken up in 2003 to fight for their rights," explains Ajak Mapak, a southern Sudanese studying accounting at Bentley College in Boston. "Religion was used for a long time to divide Africans, but now they have understood they were being manipulated."[22] Ajak's sentiments were echoed by the other southern Sudanese Christians interviewed; they saw themselves as standing in solidarity with all peoples in the marginalized regions of Sudan—regardless of religion, race, or culture—who seek more fair political representation.[23]

Taken together, these oral histories highlight the exclusionary dimension of Khartoum's postcolonial rule, which hardened already-existing divisions and accelerated divergent processes of identity formation in Sudan. Yasir Hamata's characterization of these policies as those of "separate and rule" also point toward the way in which the Islamist state-building project in Sudan represents (for many ordinary people on the ground) the extension of colonial practices, ideologies, and structures of governance by a cadre of metropolitan elites. When independence came in 1956, external colonizers Britain and Egypt handed over the reins of government to British-educated, Arab bureaucrats—"the colonizers within"—whose vision of a modern Sudanese nation-state invoked, as a

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[21] Yasir Hamata, interview by author, 30 November 2007; Mutasim Allah, interview by author, 5 December 2007. See also Aleksi Ylönen, "Grievances and the Roots of Insurgencies: Southern Sudan and Darfur," *Peace, Conflict and Development: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 7 (July 2005): 109.

[22] Abraham Ajak Mapak, interview by author, 25 November 2007.

[23] Peter Bok, "Sudan: A Future Beyond Genocide," lecture given at Yale University, New Haven, CT, 7 November 2007; Atem Ajak, interview by author, 2 December 2007; Peter Chol Alier, interview by author, 19 November 2007; Diing Ayuel, interview by author, 2 December 2007; Deng Bol, interview by author, 2 December 2007. In this regard, my informants exhibit an ecumenism born out of a desire for social justice in Sudan. On the observation that John Garang and the SPLA framed the southern cause to include anyone who was marginalized by and stood against Khartoum, see Rebecca Lorins, "Inheritance: Kinship and the Performance of Sudanese Identities" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2007). Her chapter on the Kwoto Cultural Center, especially, shows how displaced southerners in the north rehearsed various versions of "southernness" in order to intervene in historical debates over what it means to be southern and in contemporary contests over the shape of an aspired southern state.

parallel to the European *mission civilisatrice*, the idea of spreading Arab civilization and Islamic religion.[24] Indeed, there is good evidence that the GoS pursued a policy of Islamization for the country almost from the moment of independence. Since at least 1971, civil courts in Sudan were required to use *sharia* law as a source of their decisions, in the absence of other legislation. In 1983, the infamous September laws were passed, including the Basic Judgments Act requiring civil courts to apply *sharia* law, notwithstanding other legislative provisions. This effectively marked the Islamization of all laws in Sudan and their application to all citizens, regardless of religious, ethnic, or regional affiliation.[25] One scholar has called this the "crisis of postcolonial citizenship" in Sudan, emblematic of the failure of so many postcolonial African states to construct a cosmopolitan and plural national identity.[26] Instead, Sudan attempted to impose a "single vision of the nation" through homogenizing policies of Arabization and Islamization, and, when these failed, through a series of wars against its own citizens.

If the problem in Sudan is political at its core, what is the origin of its historical account as religious incitement? And why has it retained such influence in the telling of Sudanese history, particularly in the United States? One answer is that it emanated from within Sudan itself. "The religious narrative that has always been put as the definition of the conflict in Sudan," suggests Chol Alier, "came from Khartoum as a way of belittling the SPLM/A [Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army] as a separatist group interested in dividing the country . . . inciting fear in the public and . . . chang[ing] Arab and Islamic identity and culture."[27] Religion was used as a tactic to discredit those the government perceived to be its

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[24] See Eve M. Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Heather Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism*.

[25] The 1983 September Laws were tantamount to the GoS tearing up the 1972 Addis Ababa peace agreement, which ended the First Sudanese Civil War by creating a Southern Sudan Autonomous Region exempt from Islamic law. President Numeiri's 1983 declaration of all Sudan as an Islamic state foisted *sharia* on the south and revoked it's automony. This is cited by southerners as the primary reason for the formation of the SPLM/A and a return to war. See Hasan and Gray, *Religion and Conflict in Sudan*, 80–81. See also Ahmed, "Political Islam in Sudan: Islamists and the Challenge of State Power"; Sharkey, "Arab Identity and Ideology in Sudan: The Politics of Language, Ethnicity, and Race"; and Platteau, "Political Instrumentalization of Islam and the Risk of Obscurantist Deadlock."

[26] Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan*, 3, 4, 18, 109.

[27] Peter Chol Alier, interview by author, 19 November 2007.

enemies, on the one hand, and to mobilize support for the government's policies, on the other.

In this regard, fostering a popular narrative that the war with southern Sudan was a "war of religions" benefited the GoS in several ways. First, it attracted external support from Muslims in other Islamic countries, who saw it as their duty to help Khartoum defend and expand the boundaries of Islam. Indeed, as early as 1966, during the First Sudanese Civil War, the country's leadership attempted to enlist the support of other Muslim countries in establishing political control over the South, reminding them: "The failure of Islam in the Southern Sudan would be the failure of . . . the international Islamic cause. Islam has a holy mission in Africa, and Southern Sudan is the beginning of that mission."[28]

Second, such a narrative consolidated and activated political support for Khartoum among Muslims residing within Sudan. As Chol points out, "Those in power . . . know very well that southern [Sudan] is only one third of the country . . . and for the most part Christian. So if you portray their resistance as a war of religion against Islam, then you are guaranteed to get one hundred percent support from two-thirds of the country; that is, the northern part."[29] In other words, categorizing the conflict in terms of religious identity gave Muslims in Sudan a common enemy and an incentive to support Khartoum despite their grievances with the government. Given the increased incidence of unrest throughout Sudan among Muslims following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the end of the civil war has made it ever more difficult for the government to unite and manage the country's diverse Muslim population. No longer compelled to rally behind national leaders in order to preserve Islamic solidarity, fissures within and between Muslim communities are erupting.[30]

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[28] Al-Sadiq al-Mahdi, head of the Umma Party, quoted in Yusuf Fadl Hasan and Richard Gray, eds., *Religion and Conflict in Sudan: Papers from an International Conference at Yale, May 1999* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2002), 37.

[29] Peter Chol Alier, interview by author, 19 November 2007. His comment that Khartoum's politicization of religion gave the GoS full support in their war against the south is an exaggeration. It characterizes the north as an undifferentiated monolith and ignores the extent to which government power has been contested in order to accentuate the position of the southerners as underdogs. It should be remembered that John Garang and the SPLA had the support of Mansour Khalid, a northerner who served in Numeiri's government until resigning after the 1983 September Laws, which introduced *sharia* law and Islamic punishments as part of the penal code across all Sudan.

[30] On the issue of riots and protests by Darfuris and other northern malcontents, see Khalid Mustafa Medani, "Black Monday: The Political and Economic Dimensions of

Third, by characterizing the conflict as a religious one, Khartoum was able to recruit the military support required to wage war in the south. In November 1989, the GoS created the Popular Defense Forces (PDF) to supplement the army's strength in the field. Mutasim Allah is forthright about the ways in which Khartoum used the rhetoric of *jihad* to recruit youth into the PDF and wreak havoc in southern Sudan. "The northern government recruited from the north and from the south … unfortunately recruiting young people from colleges and high schools under the name of Islam … saying, 'Look, we are fighting the non-Muslim enemy, we are declaring *jihad*!' "[31] Struggling to carry out its objectives against the SPLA using its conventional army, the government stoked religious fanaticism in order to recruit civilians into its security forces. Although PDF participation was voluntary, it was heavily promoted in schools, mosques, and through the media as the duty of virtuous Muslims. In 1992, the government declared the war to be a *jihad*. In June 2000, Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir gave the eleventh anniversary speech to the Popular Defense Forces, underlining the seriousness of their sacrifice to the future of an Islamic state: "Sudanese youth are fighting in the war zone, while other youths in the world are busy with discos and parties. We thank God that we have prepared these youths as the future of Sudan. God is Great."[32] Yet the future for many of these youths would be less than great. Trained for only several months, given AK-47s, and sent to the south in "*Jihad* Convoys" to fight on the front lines, thousands of PDF recruits lost their lives.[33]

Common threads run through the oral history accounts of Sudanese in the diaspora. One-dimensional narratives of religious incitement and ancient hatreds—a standard explanation for African conflicts in popular

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Sudan's Urban Riots," *Middle East Report Online*, 9 August 2005, about urban riots in Khartoum after the death of John Garang in 2005. It confirms Yasir Hamata's comments regarding the disaffection felt by many Sudanese toward the ruling government.

[31] Mutasim Allah, interview by author, 5 December 2007.

[32] Jago Salmon, *A Paramilitary Revolution: The Popular Defense Forces* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2007), 9.

[33] Mutasim Allah, interview by author, 5 December 2007, claims that as many as 80 percent of those recruited were killed fighting in the name of Islam. Unfortunately, there are no reliable numbers for PDF recruits. Reserve forces may be estimated at 75,000 between 1992 and 2006, although active forces are estimated to have averaged 15,000 during that time with a spike in 1993 to 40,000. Even less is known about casualties, however it is generally agreed that government campaigns against southern SPLA strongholds in 1992–93 and 1995 resulted in massive casualties among the poorly trained PDF. See Salmon, *A Paramilitary Revolution*, 18, 19, 22, 26.

accounts by the Western media—are downplayed in favor of more nuanced narratives of longstanding socioeconomic inequalities and political manipulation implicating the Government of Sudan. Furthermore, the GoS itself is seen to be the architect of the standard characterization of the civil war as a religious and ethnic conflict. This first-hand assertion supports the scholarly observation that, "except when it is used as a pressure mechanism for achieving other objectives," religion is not the central issue in Sudan's conflict.[34] Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that Khartoum's nationalist project to fashion Sudan as a unified Islamist state meant the *de facto* politicization of religion, and therefore placed religious ideology and rhetoric at the heart of the struggle. Not surprisingly then, the language of resistance to Khartoum's "neocolonialism" by rebel groups—especially those in the south—mirrored the government's methods of control.[35]

The SPLA, Christianity, and the Making of South Sudan

Southern leaders also seized upon religion as a "pressure mechanism" in their struggle. At first, arguments for Christian religious freedom were marshaled to fight for a single pluralist state. Later on, however, such arguments were used in order to justify southern demands for political self-determination and independence.

Most striking was the way in which my informants criticized the manipulation of religious identity, yet these Sudanese—living in a plural American society—seemed unable to extricate themselves from the politicized language of religious difference. Instead, to varying degrees, they cast themselves as participants in the conflict using the same binary distinctions they understood to be used by Khartoum in its wars. There are several possible reasons why binaries were so frequently employed by those interviewed, especially southern Sudanese: First, many came to the US through church-based relief agencies and have a strong reason to identify with Christianity. Second, their identity as persecuted Christians provides access to material resources as well as a kind of cultural capital, especially in the American context where the framework of a cultural

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[34] Hasan and Gray, *Religion and Conflict in Sudan*, 47.
[35] See Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 24.

clash between Islam and the West dominates. Third, most southern Sudanese informants are young and less experienced, with the exception of Chol Alier, who is most resistant to simplistic explanations of the conflict. And fourth, since they have suffered because of their identity as southerners, it is a source of pride they intend to defend at all costs.

This raises important questions about how dyadic constructions of discourse may predetermine the kinds of historical production—and by extension, future social imaginaries—available to southern Sudanese. Binaries such as Muslim versus Christian, north versus south, and Arab versus African reinforce a particular set of interpretations and representations of Sudan's past, foreclosing historical debate and resisting problematization. Is it possible that the paradigmatic opposition of an Arab Muslim north fighting against an African Christian south constitutes a form of discourse so hegemonic that even Sudanese living in exile are unable to avoid it? When Sudanese engage in personal performances that recall their past utilizing these binaries, do they inadvertently suppress or distort historical truth by obscuring other cleavages that exist (such as intra-southern conflict) or rule out alternative explanations (such as the politicized use of Christianity by southern leaders)? Is the oppositional binary such a compelling model that it shunts the personal memories of Sudanese refugees—with all the varied languages, diverse experiences, and conflicting logics—into a single master narrative? Whatever the case, silences within the testimony of southern Sudanese about the possible manipulation of their own Christian identity require further scrutiny.[36]

A frequent topic of discussion within the diaspora is a "crisis of identity"—the lack of consensus on what it means to be Sudanese, and the resultant contests over the shape of an aspired southern state.[37] Peter

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[36] On the problems related to binary distinctions within historical interpretation, see Heidi Gengenbach, "Truth-telling and the Politics of Women's Life History Research in Africa: A Reply to Kirk Hoppe," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 27, no. 3 (1994): 619–27; and David Cohen, *The Combing of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 55, 95. On how exploring silences in historical memory can help recover the past, especially in the context of public commemorations and collective memory-making, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

[37] The "crisis of identity" idea is a prominent theme that emerges across the spectrum of scholarship on the Sudan. See Deng, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan*; Paul Doornbos, "On Becoming Sudanese," in *Sudan: State, Capital, and Transformation*, ed. Tony Barnett and Abbas Abdelkarim (New York: Croom Helm, 1988); Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan*; and Jok Madut Jok, *Sudan: Race, Religion and Violence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007). For a good overview of Sudan's identification with the Arab world and the ideological function of notions of "blackness," see Al-Baqir Al-Afif Mukhtar, "The

Bok, for instance, identifies the lack of a shared national identity as the reason behind the civil wars: "The war occurred because there is a crisis of identity in Sudan, we do not have a common definition we can agree upon."[38] Processes of identity formation—whether one defines this in terms of ethnic, regional, racial, religious or national affiliations (among the most pertinent to Sudan)—are always historically contingent and socially contested. Identity is both asserted and assigned, a socially constructed garb that one can don, or that is thrust upon one by others. Liisa Malkki elaborates on this idea: "Identity is always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories...a creolized aggregate."[39] In this sense, southern Sudanese have drawn upon individual memories of the past, reenactments of historical events (songs, rituals, or collective story-telling), and the promise of security in a "New Sudan" in order to shape an identity for themselves. At the same time, they have grappled with how to sometimes accept and often refashion the descriptions others have assigned to them: refugee, rebel, victim, second-class citizen, foreigner, backward, and threat to the nation. The following vignettes demonstrate how historical production is closely bound up with processes of cultural preservation and identity formation.[40]

A wispy elder in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya delivers his final charge to those leaving for the United States. He leads a group of youth in a responsorial that fuses their religious identity with the history of southern Sudan: "Jesus Christ in my hand! SPLA in my hand!" A trusted custodian of the oral historical archive, he summarizes the past in one sentence: "We've been fighting Arabs with guns and it has no end." Then, in a double move that connects present events to the past, while looking to shape the future, he declares in raspy timbre, "Now our Lost Boys are

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Crisis of Identity in Northern Sudan: A Dilemma of a Black People with a White Culture," a paper presented at the CODESRIA African Humanities Institute, Northwestern University, Evanston, 2007, and "Beyond Darfur: Identity and Conflict in Sudan," n.p.

[38] Peter Bok, "Sudan: A Future Beyond Genocide," lecture given at Yale University, New Haven, CT, 7 November 2007.

[39] Liisa Malkki, "National Geographic: Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 37.

[40] The extent to which immigrant communities, generally, are concerned about cultural preservation is illustrated in a project summary by IRIS, *Global Traditions: Preserving and Sharing Traditions of Refugees and Immigrants in New Haven* (New Haven: Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services, n.d.).

going to America because you are the future of Sudan."[41] It is significant that the old man's charge began with an activation of the boys' identity. The scene represents daily rituals in the camps that fuse Christianity and the SPLA struggle, rituals shaped by the historical memory of marginalization, resistance, and exile. "Remember us back home...remember that you are the future of new Sudan," urge those who remain in the camp. The admonition to remember the past creates a strong connection between the Sudanese diaspora and the southern political vision of a "New Sudan," here tightly bound up with their Christian identity.

The SPLA's political and military struggle, together with the language and rituals of Christianity, are also intertwined in commemorations of history by Sudanese living in the United States.[42] All of the southern Sudanese interviewed freely identified themselves as Christians, and they mentioned commemorative holidays as a central means of preserving their distinct cultural identity and maintaining connections to family and friends at home. The three most important holidays include May 16, January 9, and December 25. That Christmas Day is named as a commemorative holiday, credited with fostering a sense of shared identity among southern Sudanese, is significant, especially since the other two holidays are specific to historical events of the second civil war. January 9 was described as a happy event—including processions in the streets, parties, food, and speeches by leaders in the community—to mark the signing of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which ended the fighting and established a power-sharing arrangement between the government in Khartoum and the SPLA.

The most frequently mentioned commemoration, however, was Southern Sudan Liberation Day, which celebrates the founding of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement on May 16, 1983. Atem Ajak, Deng Bol, and Diing Ayuel, three southern Sudanese studying at the University of Vermont in Burlington, enumerated the essential elements of this day: prayers, songs, traditional dances, drums, happiness, and many long speeches about the history of the struggle and the current political situation in Sudan.[43] Most often, these events are held in church halls. Their

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[41] Megan Mylan and Jon Shenk, directors, *Lost Boys of Sudan* (Actual Films/Principe Productions, 2003), DVD.

[42] For more on the impact of commemorations as part of the process of constituting historical knowledge, see David Cohen, *The Combing of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 242–43.

[43] Atem Ajak, interview by author, 2 December 2007; Deng Bol, interview by author, 2 December 2007; Diing Ayuel, interview by author, 2 December 2007.

description matches a scene from the popular documentary, *Lost Boys of Sudan*, in which members of the diaspora have gathered to commemorate Southern Sudan Liberation Day. A Sudanese pastor opens the gathering with prayers, then delivers a message exhorting the young men to remember that they are the future of Sudan. The meeting culminates in war songs: "We're marching on Khartoum! Prepare yourself Numeiri, we shall kill you with our AK-47s!"[44] Shocking perhaps to some viewers, the combination of prayers invoking the Christian God and war songs promising the murder of Jafaar al-Numeiri, President of Sudan when the war erupted, signals the subordination of Christian ethics to the politics of southern Sudanese nationalism. A powerful symbol of defiance against Khartoum's vision of an Islamist state, Christianity has been taken up as a defensive weapon; it simultaneously inspires southern Sudanese militarism and represents a threatened cultural and religious existence that Christians everywhere are called upon to defend.

Such memorialization rituals point to the importance of diasporic linkages and the function of religion in creating and sustaining what Benedict Anderson has famously called an "imagined community"—in this case, a southern national identity shaped by the common experience of oppression, warfare, and displacement.[45] While many southern groups, like the Dinka or the Nuer, have used migration as a means of survival since before recorded history, the alternatives they may pursue in the modern era as international refugees is unparalleled. Refugees in the United States, for instance, remain linked to kith and kin back home in a number of ways. Mobile phones, news media, and airplanes connect seemingly isolated villages and refugee camps to the wider world system. Because many of these migrants were selected by their families to resettle in the United States, they are expected to reciprocate by writing letters, making phone calls, sending remittances, completing paperwork to help other family members migrate, and returning to Sudan to visit and marry.[46] The production and rehearsal of historical narratives around Christian persecution also maintains a psychological tie with those still in Sudan, while simultaneously strengthening bonds of solidarity within the diaspora

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[44] Megan Mylan and Jon Shenk, directors, *Lost Boys of Sudan* (Actual Films/Principe Productions, 2003), DVD.

[45] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

[46] Dianna J. Shandy, *Nuer-American Passages: Globalizing Sudanese Migration* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 160.

community. For many southern Sudanese, assimilating into American culture carries the risk of letting their families down and their enemies win.[47] Commemorations of events in Sudan's history that draw upon and reinforce the Muslim-Christian dichotomy have reminded southern Sudanese that their struggle will not end until a religiously-plural Sudanese state is established or, as recent history now bears witness, South Sudan gains independence.

For those who remained in southern Sudan, identification with Christianity was also a tactical move.[48] For civilians caught in the crossfire during the war, Christianity offered a source of spiritual inspiration and protection. For rebel leaders, Christianity came to symbolize the possibility of political equality, community development, and self-determination. Many of the elite who headed the SPLM, the SPLA's political wing, had previously adopted Christianity; like so many African leaders they received their education in mission schools. A number of early SPLA commanders were also self-professed Christians, who in their eagerness to galvanize southern resistance actively encouraged Christian conversion.[49] In contrast to Khartoum's Islamist state-building project, which failed to incorporate religious and cultural others within its vision of the state, Christianity in the hands of the SPLA became a powerful tool for forging a pan-southern identity. Overtures to the Christian West, appeals to and through its diaspora, and rhetoric of martyrdom, oppression, and human rights were also important strategies that helped the SPLA connect its struggle to the wider world of geopolitics. It has been argued that Christianity and Islam can be understood as two competing "social imaginaries," which "in the wake of the reconfiguration of African states" provide meaning and allow local practitioners to develop transnational connections and generate support.[50] The recent independence of South Sudan demonstrates the SPLA's success in mobilizing these networks and making its case to the world. While it represents the attainment of legitimacy for the south

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[47] On the dangers of assimilation, see Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 202–10.

[48] For comparative discussions of the wartime turn to Christianity among southern Sudanese, see Andrew Wheeler, ed., *Land of Promise: Church Growth in a Sudan at War* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 1997).

[49] Hasan and Gray, *Religion and Conflict in Sudan*, 148.

[50] Brian Larkin and Birgit Meyer, "Pentecostalism, Islam and Culture: New Religious Movements in West Africa," in *Themes in West Africa's History*, ed. Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 286–87.

as a sovereign nation, it also represents the reconfiguration of discursive boundaries and their inscription on the geopolitical map, with a concrete dividing line separating two Sudans—one Christian, marked by a struggle for justice and committed to pluralism, the other Islamic, marked by a strident Arab nationalism.

Another factor that influenced the mobilization of Christian identity by southern Sudanese is support from American evangelicals. There are at least two dimensions to this story. The first relates to the Sudanese diaspora in America and the prevalence of religious institutions acting as refugee resettlement agencies in the United States. This is especially the case for the resettlement of minors. Organizations such as Lutheran Social Services, Catholic Charities USA, and Episcopal Migration Ministries have facilitated their integration into American society upon their arrival, usually placing them with individual churches that offer moral and material support. The identity of Sudanese refugees as persecuted Christians played an important role in their social reconstruction—most American churches were eager to assist with the costs of their initial adjustment, and many provided ongoing support for education and travel.[51]

The second aspect of American evangelical support is the influence it had on forms of political mobilization, ideological legitimacy, and military, financial, and logistical support that were instrumental in achieving southern Sudanese independence. The identification of Christianity with the south became more important after the Cold War ended, an Islamist regime came to power in Sudan, and linkages with American churches translated into increased awareness among the American public about the war and international political pressure on Khartoum to end it.[52] Sarah Washburne, who has analyzed rebel leader John Garang's speeches broadcast over *Radio SPLA*, notes that the issue of religion, ignored initially, appeared more frequently after 1989. Once Sadiq al-Mahdi's pro-American

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[51] On southern Sudan as a symbol of contemporary Christian martyrdom in American churches, see Bixler, *The Lost Boys of Sudan*; Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars*; and Shandy, *Nuer-American Passages*, 105–08.

[52] On the connections between the Sudanese diaspora, American evangelicals, and Washington's role in pushing for a peace agreement that would allow for an independent South Sudan, see Shandy, *Nuer-American Passages*, and "Nuer Christians in America"; Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, "Southern Sudanese: A Community in Exile," in *Wanderings: Sudanese Migrants and Exiles in North America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 49–71; and Sarah Lykes Washburne, "Opportunistic Identities? Discursive Trends of Legitimation within the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA)," in *War and Peace in Africa*, ed. Toyin Falola and Raphael Chijioke Njoku (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2010), 394–95.

regime was replaced with an Islamist-oriented one in the NIF-backed coup in June of 1989, Garang turned up the heat on their Islamist credentials. He highlighted the "grim atmosphere of terror" in Sudan "unleashed by the fundamentalist Islamic junta," calling the NIF an "apartheid regime," with "delusions of grandeur."[53] This kind of rhetoric was especially useful after the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, since it enabled Garang to portray the SPLA as a bulwark against Islamic forces and ally his movement with America's "War on Terror." But even before 9/11, the specter of Christian martyrdom and genocide grabbed the attention of US officials. Not long after taking office in January 2000, President George W. Bush signaled America's resolve to broker a peace deal in Sudan, saying: "There is perhaps no greater tragedy on the face of the Earth today." US Secretary of State Colin Powell, meanwhile, called southern Sudan "a disaster area for all human rights."[54]

There are those who doubt that the SPLA's Christian identification gained it international support, but, considering the growing influence of the "Christian Right" in American politics and the media's characterization that a "countrywide grass-roots mobilization...on church and college campuses...propelled Sudan to the top of the new [Bush] administration's Africa agenda," it clearly had some effect on US policy decisions. Garang may never have claimed that the SPLA was a Christian organization; however, he renounced unequivocally the brand of Islamism espoused by Khartoum. In many respects, this approach—of asserting their Christian religious identity while insisting on a pluralist political position—made the SPLA's rhetoric even more effective in the world of international relations, as they were able to appeal to American evangelicals, humanitarians, liberals, and neoconservatives all at the same time. Especially after 9/11, the White House showed a keen interest in the peace process, and it put pressure on both sides to sign the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), in which the idea of independence became a key feature.[55] The nearly 8,800 Sudanese expatriates living in the United States who cast their votes in the January 2011 referendum on South Sudan are a vivid demonstration of the convergent connections

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[53] Washburne, "Opportunistic Identities? Discursive Trends of Legitimation within the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA)," 389, 394.

[54] Jim Lobe, "Politics-US: Fight Brewing on Sudan Policy," *Inter Press Service*, 1 June 2001.

[55] Washburn, "Opportunistic Identities? Discursive Trends of Legitimation within the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA)," 394–97.

between the Sudanese diaspora, American evangelicals, and Washington's foreign policy priorities.[56]

Ironically, the material and political advantages of southerners' Christian identity were first pointed out to me by Muslims from Darfur. When asked why the war in South Sudan received so much attention in the United States while the Darfur conflict is rarely publicized, Yasir Hamata opined, "Southern Christians have connections in the West because of Christianity . . . the people of Darfur are Muslims, they do not have [these] connections."[57] His observation was correct. Many American evangelicals aided southerners in their struggle against Khartoum because they saw themselves as helping "fellow Christians who are being persecuted," and not just by any enemy, such as Marxist ideology or an authoritarian dictator, but by a religious rival, Islam. Central to the solidification of Christian identity among southern Sudanese is the knowledge that shared faith provides a ready connection to global sources of assistance, along with the expectation to help. Deng Bol recognized that the SPLA used religious affinity networks to mobilize support during the conflict, but he also believes it played a crucial role in achieving peace. "The CPA was signed as a result of pressure from evangelicals here in the USA. . . . my family members are high-ranking SPLA members involved in the peace process . . . . the SPLA was aware that evangelicals were lobbying US officials, who in turn pressured Khartoum."[58]

Identities are often defined in opposition to the "other." In the case of southern Sudanese, much of their identity has been defined in opposition to efforts at Islamization and Arabization, which emanated from the northern power center in Khartoum. When the fighting began, the government took over the few schools that remained in the south, imposing Arabic and turning them into centers for radical Islamic teaching.[59] In the face of Khartoum's propaganda, which tended to portray the south as a region dominated by tribal rivalries and indigenous religions, and badly in need of civilizing, Christianity offered a more sturdy ideological opponent, as one of the three "religions of the book" recognized by Islam. As part of their strategy to unify southerners under one common

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[56] Kim Severson, "Sudanese Expatriates Across the U.S. Cast Their Votes," *The New York Times*, 9 January 2011.

[57] Yasir Hamata, interview by author, 30 November 2007.

[58] Deng Bol, interview by author, 2 December 2007.

[59] Lauren Servin, director, *New Sudan Education Initiative* (Lauren Servin Productions, 2007), DVD; Mutasim Allah, interview by author, 5 December 2007; Diing Ayuel, interview by author, 2 December 2007.

identity, SPLA leaders simultaneously promoted Christian conversion and described the armed struggle as a war to free southern Sudanese Christians from the unjust imposition of Islamic laws.[60] This resonates with Diing Ayuel's assessment that a major cause of the war was the imposition of *sharia* law in the south.[61]

In the case of southern Sudan, the imposition of Islamic law by Khartoum gave southern leaders both the opportunity and the means necessary to mount a successful independence movement. By defining themselves in opposition to the Islamicist policies, southern Sudanese constructed an ethnoreligious Christian identity that allowed them to: first, contest northern claims for the superiority of Islamic civilization; second, unify the people of southern Sudan under a common banner; and third, use the solidarity resulting from a shared identity and a common enemy to reach out to foreign governments with Christian sympathies for support in their military and political struggle for autonomy.

Conclusion

The politicization of religion in Sudan has been bound together with processes of globalization in at least two important ways. First, from the perspective of local actors, the conflict's religious dimensions helped the northern government and southern rebels generate greater support, both within the region and from powerful nations and interest groups abroad. By invoking universal principles of Islam and Christianity, and appealing for foreign assistance through the language of *jihad*, martyrdom, and brotherly solidarity, Khartoum and the SPLA aligned themselves respectively with the Muslim world and the Christian West. Such appeals had the double effect of entrenching the conflict between north and south and, at the same time, creating larger blocs of affiliation capable of transcending ethnic or class divisions. The idea of South Sudan may have been conceived in the colonial era, but Khartoum's wars gave birth to its reality. Second, Sudanese living in the diaspora have played an important role as emissaries of the new Sudan. Their perspectives have been shaped by their migration, and they have incubated an alternative vision of the nation, one that is independent from Khartoum's control.

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[60] Bixler, *The Lost Boys of Sudan*, 53.
[61] Diing Ayuel, interview by author, 2 December 2007.

It is evident from interviews with members of the Sudanese diaspora, as well as publications and films on the topic, that violence has left an indelible mark on the history of Sudan. Religion and religious rhetoric, central to mobilization and resistance efforts, have had an equally pervasive influence. Although religious identity is just one form of self-understanding, it has served as a particularly powerful mobilizing force in cutting across other markers, such as gender, class, and race. The potential for religion to divide as well as unify challenges any monocausal understanding of its role in warfare and state formation. This chapter has attempted to understand the production and dissemination of a discourse that places religious opposition at the center of the Sudanese conflict, sketching out ways in which religion has been mobilized locally to form unified blocs capable of transcending internal divisions and enlisting the support of powerful international allies.

What emerges from oral histories of the Sudanese diaspora is not a story of war as the inevitable consequence of two proselytizing religions at loggerheads, but a contingent history characterized by the manipulation of religion by ruling elites for political ends. That said, all the Sudanese interviewed—Muslim and Christian, northerner and southerner, Arab and African—acknowledged that the northern government in Khartoum as well as the SPLA in the south have used religion as a polarizing rhetorical device, emphasizing religious duty in order to mobilize popular support for warfare and advance their competing political visions for the future.

Now that a two-state solution to has become reality, it remains to be seen whether either government will be able to move beyond the model of ethnoreligious nationalism, with its exclusionary and homogenizing tendencies. Troubles in Darfur illustrate rather tragically how this is an ongoing challenge in the northern case. In South Sudan, as the SPLM settles into the day-to-day work of governing an independent state, its success and legitimacy will depend on its ability to resist corruption, deliver basic services, improve infrastructure, and balance competing ethnic groups and interests. Ruling elites will need to avoid the temptation to use military force against their political competition. Nor can the SPLM make exclusive claims on the title "liberator of the people," for the vision of a new Sudan was born out of the struggle by Sudanese in many regions and of different faiths, nurtured in a global diaspora stretching from refugee camps in Kenya to cities in America. If South Sudan is to succeed, it will have to embrace a vision of the nation in which all citizens participate

freely in civic life. Such a vision reflects the *longue durée* of Sudan's history, which has more often than not been characterized by the cosmopolitan co-existence of a convergence of languages, religions, and cultures.

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Mapak, Abraham Ajak. Interview by Matthew Kustenbauder, New Haven, CT, 25 November 2007. Ajak, a Christian, is an ethnic Dinka from Lake State, South Sudan who settled

in New Haven, CT in 2001 as part of the International Rescue Committee program after being displaced by the civil war. He earned his associate's degree at Gateway Community College while working at Yale Bookstore, after which he moved to Boston where he now studies accounting at Bentley College.

Tajir, Alamaldin. Interview by Matthew Kustenbauder, New Haven, CT, 30 November 2007. Alamaldin, a Muslim, is an ethnic Zaghawa from eastern Darfur who immigrated to the United States in 2002 through the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program, which issues 50,000 permanent resident visas annually. He lives in West Haven, is studying for his MBA at the University of New Haven, and is an active member of the Darfur People's Association of NYC, which raises awareness about the conflict in Darfur.

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