The Nuba Mountains of Sudan: Resource access, violent conflict, and identity

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From: **Cultivating Peace**
Conflict and Collaboration in Natural Resource Management
edited by Daniel Buckles
IDRC/World Bank 1999, ISBN 0-88936-899-6, $35

Since 1987, a violent conflict between the Nuba people of southern Kordofan and government forces supported by indigenous Arab Baggara has been raging in the Nuba Mountains. The armed conflict has brought great misery to the inhabitants of the mountains, especially the Nuba and has had a severe impact on relations between the Nuba and Baggara, who have shared the mountains in uneasy peace and guarded cooperation for the last 200 years. The government persuaded the Baggara to join its crusade against the Nuba by giving them arms and promising them Nuba lands after a quick victory. The Baggara, intoxicated by military power and greed, rejected all calls for peace with the Nuba. The war continued unabated for years. The Baggara lost some of their traditional lands, many people, and animals. Their trade with the Nuba collapsed. Losses forced the Baggara in several areas to negotiate peace with the Nuba. This chapter attempts to explain the complex web of cooperation and conflict that binds the Nuba and the Baggara. It also documents three peace agreements reached between the two warring groups.

The conventional assumption that violent conflicts in Africa emanate from ethnic, religious, or cultural differences is limited and misleading. In the Sudan, scarcity resulting from denying or limiting access to natural resources and from growing environmental degradation stands out as probably the most important factor behind conflict among the peoples of the country. However, ethnic, religious, and cultural dichotomies are strong in people s minds, and the longer a conflict persists, the more these factors come into play. In a prolonged conflict, when the initial causes have faded away, abstract, ideological ethnicity can become a material and social force, and change from consequence to apparent cause of such conflicts.

Ecological degradation can act as a cause or catalyst of violent conflict (Beachler 1993; Homer-Dixon 1994). However, the focus on degradation of the natural resource base tends to limit conflict resolution to tackling its specific causes land-use, human and animal population growth, and climatic variations. Proposed resolution mechanisms are thus more technical than economic, political, or cultural: better water management, soil conservation, reforestation, family planning, etc. The crucial issues of the economy, the state, politics, and identity are inadvertently pushed aside. Persistent inequity in resource allocation, which is inherently political and economic, and the role of the beneficiaries and perpetrators of the status quo are thus taken out of the limelight. However, in all the group conflicts we scrutinized in the Sudan, access to natural and social resources expressed in terms of justice, fairness, equitable sharing, and equal development, was the primary concern of the people in arms.

Fragile ecology, fragile social peace

In the Sudan, as in most other parts of the continent, human and animal life depends on the delicate balance of soil, climate, water, and flora. Since the mid-1970s this equilibrium has been upset, particularly in the vast arid and semi-arid areas of the northern half of the country. Not only the persistent drought, but also the unsustainable methods of land use, such as large-scale mechanized rain-fed farming and overgrazing in marginal lands, are destroying the Sudano-Sahelian ecozone, where 70% of the population lives. Millions of people have been forced to abandon their homelands and have become displaced; so many in fact that the Sudan has the highest proportion of internally displaced people in the world one in every six.

The slow processes of natural wear and tear on the environment have been accelerated enormously by the unprecedented exploitation of natural resources. This is being carried out by members of the northern Sudanese traditional merchant class (the Jellaba), prompted by their integration into the world market in the

restricted role of extractors of primary resources. In addition, loan conditions imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have considerably boosted the restructuring of Sudan s resource use away from local needs and the local market toward the demands of the international market (Suliman 1993).

This situation has been compounded by a steady decline in international terms of trade, brought about by the collapse of primary commodity prices, which had an effect on the local market, where terms of trade have also worsened. To maintain their living standards, peasants and pastoralists have had to produce more from a shrinking resource base. If they fail to do this, they have no option but to join the millions of dispossessed and assetless poor.

In the past, those in distress simply moved to a richer ecozone nearby. However, this option is increasingly hampered by an expanding population, large-scale mechanized farming, political and ethnic tensions, and the general worsening of the environmental situation. As central-government control of law and order in the countryside is weakened, physical security is becoming increasingly important in the decisions of people to abandon their homelands and move to urban centres where food is in greater abundance and physical security is relatively better maintained.

The movement of people and herds from one affected ecozone to another that is already occupied by a different ethnic group is a recipe for tension and hostility. Conditional agreements used to be reached when the need for sharing land was occasional, but now that this need is for prolonged periods (or even for permanent sharing), the strain is much greater. These difficulties are particularly prevalent in the south and in the drought-stricken areas of Darfur and Kordofan. They are one of the causes of the armed conflict raging in the Nuba Mountains of southern Kordofan (Suliman and Osman 1994).

The people of the Nuba Mountains

The Nuba Mountains lie in southern Kordofan, covering an area of 50 000 km² almost exactly in the geographic centre of the Sudan (Figure 1). The Nuba hills rise sharply to some 500 to 1 000 m above the plains. The area is classed as a subhumid region. The rainy season extends from mid-May to mid-October, and annual rainfall ranges from 400 to 800 mm, allowing grazing and seasonal rain-fed agriculture.

Figure 1. The Nuba Mountains in central Sudan.

The term Nuba is often used to refer to the inhabitants of the Nuba Mountains; they number 1.5 million. The various Nuba people make up some 90% of the population of the area. The other 10% are Baggara (cattle herders) mainly Hawazma and Misiriya Arabs. The Baggara moved into the mountains from the west and north in about 1800. There is also a smaller minority of Arab traders, the so-called Jellaba.

The Nuba

The term Nuba refers to a bewildering complexity of ethnic groups (Nadel 1947). Stevenson (1984) identified more than 50 languages and dialect clusters, falling into 10 groups.[1] Many authors have argued that the term Nuba was originally an alien label used to group together all peoples living in the hills area who were seen as black Africans, as opposed to the Baggara Arabs (Nadel 1947; Baumann 1987). When the Nuba use the term to describe themselves, it has is not always consistently applied. Nadel (1947) commented that

The people of a certain tribe will describe all similar groups of which they know or with which they come in contact as being their race but would be uncertain into which category to place other groups outside their kin ... . In the opinion of a Korongo man all the surrounding tribes were Nuba, but not the people of Dilling, whom he believed to be Arab.

Despite the problem involved in using the term, one can reasonably assume that the ethnic type presented by the Nuba today was widespread in the Sudan but was forced to retreat by Arabs coming into the mountains, where they found adequate water and easy defence. As MacMichel (1912) wrote,

In the earliest days and for thousands of subsequent years the ancestors of the Nuba probably held the greater part of this country (i.e., what is now known as Kordofan) except the northern-most deserts. Beaten back by other races that ruled the Nile banks in successive generations, by tribes from the interior, and finally by the nomad Arabs, the Nuba have now retired to the mountains of southern Kordofan.

In spite of the previous difficulty in using the term Nuba for all non-Arab inhabitants of the mountains,

successive calamities have imposed a common destiny on these peoples and have been conducive to the development of a loose unity and a growing feeling of a common Nubaness among them. Their common historical experiences the slave raids, the Turkish and British invasions, and Jellaba domination as well as the existence of something akin to a common Nuba culture, permit commentators now to speak of one Nuba people.

This classification is also justified by the identification of the Nuba by others and the consequent implications of this identification on individual Nuba in relation to non-Nuba and among themselves. Thus, in a sense, a common ethnicity has been forced on these diverse peoples by the actions and definitions of other more powerful groups. The Nuba identity is, therefore, subjectively defined in contrast to the Baggara Arabs of Kordofan and Darfur regions (what the Nuba are not) and objectively determined by shared space, comparable cultural values, and similar economic activities (what the Nuba are).

Because they have no written language, the distant history of the Nuba peoples has largely been forgotten. As Nadel (1947) noted,

The traditions and memories of the peoples themselves yield sparse information. It often seems as if historical traditions had been cut short by the overpowering experience of the Mahdist regime (1881 1898).

Of all Nuba peoples, those of Tegali have the best historical records because of the strong links they had with the Funj Kingdom of Sennar. The more recent history of the Nuba goes back to the early 16th century, at the point when large groups of Juhaina pastoral tribes began to move southwestward into the plains of northern Kordofan, ultimately confining the Nuba to the region now known as the Nuba Mountains. This great movement coincided with the establishment of the Kingdom of Sennar by Umara Dungas around 1504.

In spite of the lack of certainty about the Nuba s distant past, most authors seem content to assume that the Nuba have lived in the area they now occupy for a very long time. Some of Nadel s (1947) informants seem to attest to this. When asked about previous places of settlement, the people replied, We have always lived here. It is also possible to assume that during most of their recent history, the Nuba have been farmers living mainly on the plains.

The Baggara enter the mountains

In about 1800, the Baggara tribes, which had previously roamed the plains of Kordofan and Darfur, began to move into the valleys of the Nuba Mountains in search of water and pasture for their growing herds. The Baggara are said to have divided the plains among themselves and driven the Nuba uphill. A large part of the Nuba area fell to the Hawazma (a Baggara tribe). The advent of the Baggara in the mountains coincided with the beginning of slave raiding. The fact that Nuba people were sturdy soldiers worked in a curious way to their disadvantage, because it encouraged continuous attacks from slave raiders who were looking for potential soldiers.

Driven into the hills, the Nuba turned to terrace farming of the relatively barren hill soil. Gradually barter-trade relations began to unite the two communities in a strong reciprocal, albeit asymmetric, relationship. Sargar (1922) mentions relations of cooperation, which stretch across the Nuba Baggara divide: Each sub-tribe of Baggara protected, as far as possible, the hills of its own zone, in return for supplies of grain and slaves.

These local Baggara Nuba relations frequently created inter-Baggara rivalries, when a Baggara subtribe defended their Nuba from the machinations of another Baggara group. In some areas, Baggara Nuba relations were even closer than the protection agreements indicated: some Baggara assuming titles and positions in Nuba tribes. Intermarriages were also recorded (Suleiman 1993). However, the extent and limits of these cross-cutting ties varied greatly from one area to another.

These sporadic good relations should not obscure the fact that the most prominent feature of Baggara Nuba relations was the slave raids by the Baggara on the harassed Nuba communities. These raids were especially widespread during the Turkish rule (the Turkiyya), which began with the conquest of the Sudan by Egypt in 1821. The Turkish governors of Kordofan led many expeditions into the Nuba Mountains in search of gold and slaves but never made serious attempts to govern the area directly. As Stevenson (1984) noted, With this strange mixture of trade and enslavement, the Nuba people continued through, and endured the Turkiyya.

The Mahdiyya and its consequences

The rise of the Mahdist movement in the 1880s brought fresh trouble to the peoples of the mountains. Some supported the Mahdi (a person believed to be the one who would lead Muslims to salvation); others resisted him. This difference in attitude toward the Mahdi was to be characteristic of Nuba relations with central governments in the future, dividing them into rebellious and government-friendly Nuba. After the death of the Mahdi, his successor, Khalifa Abullahi, sent a force under Hamdan abu Anja and al-Nur Muhammed Anqara to subdue the Nuba. More than 10 000 Nuba perished and even more were enslaved.

Brutal harassment of the Nuba people continued after the defeat of the Mahdist state by the allied forces of Egypt and Britain at the battle of Omdourman in 1898. In spite of their devastating experience during the Mahdiyya, the Nuba did not welcome the new colonial administration. As Stevenson (1984) remarked, Hills which had managed to beat off the Mahdists at different times thought themselves impregnable to attack, notably Dair, Nyimang, Katla, Fanda and parts of Koalib. It took almost 30 years to subdue the various Nuba peoples and bring them in line with the rest of the country. With state authority at last established in all the Nuba Mountains, intercommunal raiding was minimized and community leaders were empowered by state appointment. Friendly Nuba were recruited to pacify Nuba rebels.

During this period of peace, many Nuba began to come down from the protection of the hills to farm and even live in the plains. This natural adaptation to peaceful times was supported by the desire of the central government to bring the Nuba down to the accessible plains for the purpose of effective administration and control by the state, which grew weary of the stubborn resistance of the Nuba to the new regime in Khartoum.

The new regime brought about far-reaching changes in the Nuba Mountains over a relatively short period, which transformed, in many respects irreversibly, the way the Nuba lived. One such change was the introduction of modern agricultural practices, with cotton as a cash crop. The success of large-scale mechanized production of cotton brought the mountains to the attention of international companies and, subsequently, to the attention of the Sudanese Jellaba. Another major change was the introduction of modern school education, although the Nuba had to wait until 1940 before the government introduced large-scale modern schooling into their area. The emergence of an educated Nuba elite was to have far greater implications for the subsequent history of the Nuba people than any single event or process. Education would later emerge as one of the strongest unifying factors, a pillar on which to build the edifice of a unified Nuba people.

The postindependence period

Independence, established in 1956, accelerated the opening up of the mountains to all the winds of change and catalyzed movement of the Nuba people toward the urban centres of the Sudan and foreign countries. The Nuba Mountains were also now open to economic and social intrusion by national and international agents of trade and politics and to cultural exchange. Going out to meet the world meant coming home to understand one s own identity. Many Nuba discovered their Nubaness in the towns of the Sudan, where their cultural diversity was reduced to a single Nuba identity.

Economy of the region

The Nuba practice a range of productive activities, including animal husbandry, hunting, and foraging; however, agriculture is the mainstay of their economy. It is fairly widespread throughout Nuba communities and is certainly one of the elements that distinguish the Nuba from some of their neighbours.

The basic farming unit is generally the nuclear family. Its members farm land that is, according to tradition, individually or family owned. Farmland is divided into three basic types based on its location: house, hillside, and far farms. These usually determine the choice of the crops grown and the family members responsible for their care. House farms are generally within a village, are used to grow a variety of early maturing crops (maize, bulrush, and millet), and are the responsibility of the women. Hillside farms (terraced plots on the hillside) are planted with later maturing grains. Far farms are situated on the clay plains that have been used by the Nuba since pacification of the area under Anglo-Egyptian rule and are worked traditionally by men. Land holdings are thus fragmented. This means that a large amount of time is spent traveling between home and the various plots, and the use of modern agricultural machinery is impractical for any one farm. The advantage is that the spread of plots tends to spread the risk of all crops failing in any one year.

The Nuba practice a form of shifting agriculture. Land is planted with a selection of crops and farmed until a new plot is needed. As a result, the regular demand for new land is an integral part of the farming system. This demand and the need to allow used land to regenerate is upheld in the traditional Nuba land laws. In any given area, the Nuba recognize three types of land: individually owned land, vacant land that is recognized as being communally owned by a village or hill community, and vacant land that does not belong to anyone. Any, usually male, member of a village community has the right of access to communal lands. All he or she has to do is to clear and cultivate the land to make it his or her own.

The patterns in Nuba agricultural production reveal several risk-spreading factors. For example, a range of crops grown on a range of plots relieves the land from the pressures of monoculture. Harvesting times are staggered to allow for lean times. Families try to produce a range of crops to cover most of their subsistence needs. Leaving large tracts of land unused gives herders room for grazing without interfering with crop production. However, now that the practice of large-scale mechanized farming is spreading, this integrated system is being eroded. The ability of Nuba farmers to respond to erratic rainfall and climate change has been severely limited by the expansion of mechanized farming. As is the case in many areas in the Sudan where mechanized farming has displaced traditional farming, the mere subsistence of millions of people is severely affected.

Sources of the current conflict

Current Nuba society is an excellent example of what Chevalier and Buckles (this volume) call a heterocultural society. The Nuba have never been a monocultural group. They are generally aware of the common destiny and other values that unite them, but they are also conscious of differences among them. After 200 years of sharing the mountains with the Nuba, the Baggara exhibit similar heterocultural features. This intragroup diversity has arisen out of Baggara Nuba interdependence and the relative isolation of the two groups in their fairly secluded hill clusters. Nuba and Baggara cultures have permeated each other. However politically improper it may sound today, every Baggara embodies dynamic elements of Nuba culture and vice versa. Nuba Baggara relations, be they cooperative or conflictual, have been instrumental in shaping their heterocultural societies; because these relations are in constant flux, Nubaness and Baggaraness are dynamic identities, impossible to solidify in monocultural or multicultural casts. War in such a society is particularly tragic, because it cuts deep wounds where the two groups have intermingled, amalgamated, and enriched each other.

In the past, problems arising from land and water disputes were resolved at an annual conference of Nuba Mekks and Arab Sheikhs. These meetings usually took place on neutral ground, both sides abided by the agreements reached, and the Nuba Mountains enjoyed decades of peace and relative prosperity. Recently, however, forces have conspired to bring the two groups into direct violent conflict. The major causes of the armed conflict are

- Allocation of the best lands to absentee Jellaba landlords; and
- The drought, which has brought large numbers of Baggara and their animals to the mountains.

Land ownership

The single most important issue behind the outbreak of the conflict in the Nuba Mountains is the encroachment of mechanized agriculture in an area of Nuba smallholder farming. This devastated the economic and social life of the Nuba and ultimately destroyed friendly relations with the Baggara.

In 1968, the Mechanized Farming Corporation, which was established with credit from the World Bank, supervised the introduction of large-scale mechanized farming at Habila, between Dilling and Delami. Of 200 mechanized farms supported by the State Agricultural Bank in the Habila area, 4 were local cooperatives, 1 was leased to a group of Habila merchants, 4 were leased to individual local merchants, and the rest (191) were leased to absentee Jellaba landlords, mainly merchants, government officials, and retired generals from the north (Suleiman 1993). A community leader from Korongo Abdalla told *African Rights* (1995) that

Land is a big problem. At Abu Shanab, the local people prepared the land, but the government brought its tractors and began to prepare cultivation. We asked them to go to another side. They refused.

Two witnesses from Delami described the spread of mechanized farming: The merchants came with tractors and ploughed right on top of people s cultivation. They could do this, because anyone who objected will be arrested (African Rights 1995). A leading Nuba civil servant (who must remain anonymous) provided me with the following testimony:

The mechanized farming problem has two ways of taking our land: the government planned mechanized farming schemes which are given from Khartoum, from the Ministry of Agriculture and regardless of the reality of the area, land is just allotted to certain people, who are mainly retired army generals or civil servants, or wealthy merchants from northern Sudan, or to local Jellaba who have been living in the area for a long time and here accumulated wealth. They have links with Khartoum and the central Sudanese government, because they originally come from the north. These people acquire land and then go and tell their relatives that they too can acquire land through the ministry. They join forces together and acquire more land.

Because the Nuba are not wealthy only a small number of them are involved in this distribution of land. The government just demarcates land regardless of the realities of the area. They do not care if there are villages in this land or not. In the area of Habila, mechanized farms have circled many villages. There is no more land for the Nuba, no land for farming and no land for the animals to graze ... . The Nuba are squeezed and have to choose between two options: either leave the area to work for the government as soldiers, or become workers in a mechanized farming scheme. This phenomenon is becoming massive.

Besides the planned mechanized farms, there is the unplanned land acquisition. Here you have somebody who is powerful and wealthy, who just comes in and cleans up a piece of land, which is actually owned by the community. But because he is powerful he just cleans it and brings in his tractors and his workers and begins to farm. And then, if any resistance happens, he will go to the authorities to protest and ask them to protect him. Because he can bribe the authorities, he can pay and do whatever he likes. Otherwise, he has a politician friend, or an army officer, who is powerful and can send an order down here, so his friend can get the land. There are also other ways of getting land, for example burning down a village and forcing its inhabitants to move on.

You can find no intention of keeping some of the land for the Nuba. The land is either taken by the Arab nomads for grazing, or taken by the wealthy landlords who come from the North. What remains for the Nuba is to fight back against these things. The Nuba have to find a way to protect themselves. They have already started to build their own political organizations or activate old ones.

The drought

Since 1967 rainfall in western Sudan has been less than half the annual average. As a result, Arab nomads, not local to the area, are seeking long-term or permanent shelter in the wet hills. Coupled with large increases in human and livestock populations, the persistent drought is a major cause of tensions.

The Jellaba mechanized farmers and the Baggara pastoralists have forged a temporary alliance to dislodge the indigenous people and take over their land. It remains to be seen whether this marriage of convenience can endure the conflicting interests of its partners, all seeking to eat the same cake. There are already signs that the powerful Jellaba will use the Baggara to secure their objectives, then deny them access to the best lands.

Escalation to violence

The scissors effect created by the drought and the incursion of mechanized farming alerted the Nuba people to the possibility of being squeezed out of their best farming lands. Thus, when civil war broke out in the south in 1983, the Nuba were generally sympathetic with the proclaimed aims of the Sudanese People s Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Sudanese People s Liberation Army (SPLA), and individual Nuba even moved into liberated areas and joined the movement.

The SPLA made its first incursion into the Nuba Mountains in July 1985. In response, the government began

to arm the Baggara as a militia. *African Rights* (1995) reported that

[It is] one of the deepest tragedies that the Baggara Arabs, who have implemented so much of the government s policies against the Nuba, are themselves an impoverished and marginalised group in the Sudan.

Almost at the same time (June July 1985), the Khartoum government decided to arm the Baggara, namely the Misiriya Zurug and Humur. This mission was entrusted to the then minister of defence, Fadllala Burma Nasir, who was a Misiriya Zurug. He created the Misiriya militia, known as the Murahaliin, which spread terror throughout the mountains.

Although the Murahaliin militia had been created as a progovernment force against the SPLA, the Baggara groups had their own agenda. They immediately began raiding Nuba communities, increasing Nuba distrust of the Baggara, the central government, and the Arab north as a whole. The mistrust was reflected in substantial support for the Sudan National Party, a Nuba party headed by the Reverend Philip Ghaboush. As the government became aware of this change in the Nuba political situation it began to replace Nuba administrative and security officials with non-Nuba people, mostly Arabs.

In 1985, a Nuba militia group attacked the Baggara in the El Gerdud region. Rumour had it that the Nuba leader, Yusuf Kuwa, led the attack. The rumour was false, but Baggara girls lamented the breakdown of traditional friendship between the Nuba and the Baggara, singing Yusuf Kuwa has forsaken our brotherhood and entered el Gerdud by force. A marked escalation of the war occurred in 1989, when an SPLA unit (the New Kush Battalion, headed by Commander Yusuf Kuwa Mekke) entered the region to establish a base in the eastern part of the Nuba Mountains and take the guerrilla war into Kordofan. The SPLA quickly occupied the area around Talodi and began recruiting Nuba youths.

The response of the Khartoum government

The response of the ruling Umma government to the turbulence in the mountains was highly irresponsible. Without authorization from the Constituent Assembly, it reorganized the Misiriya militia as a paramilitary force, the Popular Defence Force (PDF) and coordinated its actions with the army. By 1988, systematic killing of Nuba civilians by the army, the military intelligence, and the PDF had begun. This pattern of violence elimination by attrition became well established in the following years, which saw the SPLA advance close to Kadugli, the administrative centre of the Nuba Mountains.

The new regime of the National Islamic Front (NIF) offered no respite to the Nuba. In October 1989, it passed the *Popular Defence Act*, which had not been formally promulgated by the previous government. In effect the new Islamic regime had legitimized the Murahaliin militia. *Africa Watch* (1992) documented an upsurge in violence against Nuba civilians by the army and the military intelligence, the main targets of which seemed to be young educated Nuba men. Some Nuba believe that the army had drawn up lists of all educated people, whom it planned to kill.

In 1992, massive human rights violations against the Nuba were recorded. The Kordofan state government declared *Jihad* or holy war to implement a final solution to the Nuba problem. A *fatwa* (an authoritative ruling on a religious matter) was issued in 1993 by a group of Muslim leaders supporting the *Jihad*. In its report, Eradicating the Nuba, *Africa Watch* described a litany of killings, destruction of villages, and forced removals of Nuba people (Africa Watch 1992). In addition to the burning of villages and the disappearance of civilians, a large-scale plan of forcible relocation began to be implemented. Tens of thousands of Nuba are now scattered in small camps all over northern Kordofan. Many other thousands were taken hundreds of miles from home and abandoned. The scale of the killings and relocations reached the level of genocide.

In October 1993, First Lieutenant Khalid Abdel Karim Salih, who was in charge of security in Kordofan and was a personal bodyguard to the Governor of Kordofan (who is also his brother) from May 1992 to February 1993, made a statement in a press conference in Bern, Switzerland. He announced that, during a 7-month period, the army and the PDF had killed 60 000 70 000 Nuba. He stressed that these ethnic-cleansing operations made no distinction between Muslims and Christians. Churches and mosques, missionary centres and Quranic schools were all shelled indiscriminately.

Resolving the conflict

Since its inception in 1956 Sudan has been a Jellaba state; thus, government troops have always been fighting Jellaba wars by proxy. Earlier attempts at conflict resolution in the south and west focused almost entirely on sharing political power, often maintaining the economic status quo a state of affairs most welcome to its beneficiaries, the Jellaba elite.

Given the complex relations between the Nuba, the Jellaba, and the Baggara, two independent approaches to conflict management and resolution can be proposed. First, the only way to resolve the relationship between the Nuba and the Jellaba is to stop the incursion of large-scale mechanized farming into the Nuba Mountains and return all stolen lands to their original owners, the Nuba. Second, in terms of the relationship between the Nuba and Baggara, there is a need for some sort of a temporary and equitable sharing of the available resources, mainly land and water. This should not be difficult, as the two groups have had working agreements in the past that have secured an uneasy peace in the mountains for almost 200 years. Cooperation is in the long-term interests of both groups.

Peace agreements between the Nuba and the Arabs

Since 1993 several peace agreements have been reached between the Nuba and the Baggara: the Buram agreement (1993), the Regifi agreement (1995), and the Kain agreement (1996). A precarious peace is still holding. During negotiations, several reasons were cited for the necessity of establishing peace notable among these are the following:

- The Baggara lamented that they have lost many men and animals and some were forced to abandon their homes;
- The Baggara admitted that the government deceived them (it told them that the war against the rebels would only take a month or two, whereas it is now more than 10 years old);
- The Baggara said that they need trade with the Nuba (they want to trade their consumer goods for cereals grown by Nuba peasants);
- The Baggara told the Nuba that their politicians (for example, El-Mahdi, the leader of the Umma party) have already left the Sudan and are working with the SPLM against the NIF regime;
- The Nuba emphasized the fact that they are fighting against the government, never against the Baggara; and
- The Nuba said that they also need to trade with the Baggara (they especially need to exchange cereals and animals for clothes, salt, and other industrial goods that the Baggara bring from Khartoum).

Both sides emphasized that

- They had been living together in peace for 200 years;
- They intermingled through marriage and sharing of cultural and religious values;
- Most of the Nuba and the Baggara fighters have been poor;
- Outsiders, mainly rich Jellaba, seem to be the only beneficiaries of the war;
- Both sides have lost many people and animals for no good reason; and
- The outsiders come and go, but the people indigenous to the mountains will stay and have to find ways to live together in peace.

Nuba leaders are well aware of the need to win over the Baggara in the war against the government. In March 1989, Commander Yusuf Kuwa entered the mountains with six well-armed battalions. In an interview, he indicated that he was aware that the Baggara were assembled at Lake Abiad, and that his troops intentionally avoided them. However, the Baggara followed their trail and attacked the Nuba at Hafir Nigeria, unaware of how strong the Nuba fighting force was. The Baggara suffered huge losses and many were taken prisoner. A few days later, all prisoners were freed and given letters from Yusuf Kuwa to their sheihks asking them to either join the struggle or refrain from siding with the government. He recalled the case of a Baggara trader

called Abdulla who carried his message to Baggara sheihks that the SPLA is not at war with them.

Several Baggara groups responded positively (including Sheikh Sanad). They kept open the dialogue with the Nuba leadership through letters and emissaries. The farsighted decisions of the Nuba leadership not to retaliate, to refrain from attacks of revenge, and to seek talks with the Baggara have at last yielded good results. Even so, it took 6 years, from 1987 to 1993, for the first peace agreement between the Baggara and the Nuba to materialize.

The Buram agreement

The first peace negotiations between the Baggara and the Nuba took place in February 1993 in Buram in the southern Nuba Mountains. The initiative came from the Misiriya in response to written appeals from Yusuf Kuwa. This agreement spelled out conditions and commitments for peace that have been echoed in all future agreements:

- Both sides will immediately stop all military actions against each other;
- Both sides have the right to move freely in the other s territory;
- In case of dispute or violation of the peace, a joint committee will intervene to settle the matter;
- All animals stolen will be returned, and the thieves will be punished;
- Killings will be investigated, and those responsible will be punished;
- Trade will be safeguarded;
- Information, especially of military relevance, will be exchanged; and
- Travelers to either side will have safe passage and, when necessary, will be assisted to reach their destination.

This peace agreement opened up a trade route into Buram and adjacent areas. The Misiriya traders brought in essential goods, such as salt, matches, clothes, and medicine, and the Buram trade flourished until the end of 1993 when government troops overran Nuba positions in the area and stopped it. Although sporadic trade still goes on and an uneasy peace still holds in the area, the government has succeeded in weakening the accord that began so well. Disheartened, a group of Nuba rebels joined the government and were used by its security forces to attack the Baggara and rekindle the feuds between them and the SPLA. However, it is also important to note that a number of Baggara fought with the Nuba troops against the government in Buram and continue to honour their agreement with the Nuba rebels.

The Regifi agreement

The Buram agreement gained a new lease on life in the 11-point Regifi accord signed on 15 November 1995, which reiterated pervious commitments to peaceful cooperation and mutual assistance. The Baggara delegation was keen to distance itself from the Khartoum government. Again, they told of their great losses in men, animals, and trade. Both sides agreed that peace is crucial for their existence in the precarious situation in the mountains.

The government did all it could to sabotage the agreement. It targeted the leaders of the Baggara who signed it: Abdalla, the Misiriya leader at the negotiations, was shot dead; others were assassinated or imprisoned. A few were bribed and skilfully used by the government to undermine the spirit of trust and cooperation between the Baggara and the Nuba, which had begun to spread in the region.

The Kain agreement

In June 1996, the Nuba took the initiative toward peaceful cooperation with the Rawawga Baggara. A delegation of five sought the Rawawga on neutral ground in Zangura, west of Tima, Lagowa region, and invited them to move their market close to a liberated area. The Baggara traders accepted the invitation and met with a Nuba delegation headed by Ismail El-Nur Galab. The accord reached was almost identical to the previous ones. However, a special trade committee was established this time to oversee the fairness and safety of mutual trade. It is remarkable to note that

- The Rawawga were so confident in the stability of the agreement that they began to bring in ammunition and army uniforms to sell to the Nuba;
- The Baggara traders began to come unarmed to the markets and were gradually accompanied by women and children; and
- The first test of the agreement came shortly after signing it, when an Arab attacked a Nuba, took his weapon, and left him for dead: the Baggara brought the weapon back, paid for treatment for the victim, and promised to deliver the attacker to the Nuba authority.

Once again, the government began to sabotage the agreement through murder, imprisonment, and bribery. Government spies began to appear in the marketplaces. The Nuba leadership became alarmed at the implications for military security and ordered the closure of the markets. A Nuba official told me that the markets would only be reopened when they could be supervised properly. Peace is still holding.

Lessons learned and final outcomes

Issues troubling the Nuba Baggara peace accords

A number of obstacles have affected all the peace agreements signed so far. The most serious problems are the following:

- The government sabotaged the agreements, targeting the leaders on both sides for murder, imprisonment, and bribery. Especially vulnerable are the leaders of the Baggara. In one known case, government officials offered a would-be assassin 4 million Sudanese pounds and a licence for a mill in return for killing a leading Nuba signatory to the agreement (in 1999, 2 576 Sudanese pounds [SDP] = 1 United States dollar]).
- The government s propaganda and indoctrination machinery have influenced people on both sides to rally behind its Islamization and Arabization programs against peace and reconciliation in the region.
- Not all Baggara and Nuba recognized the peace accords. Many Nuba have been fighting with the government in the PDF. In fact, one of the biggest offensives against the Nuba rebels (the 1997 dry-season offensive) was commanded by a Nuba officer, Brigadier Mohamed Ismail Kakum, nicknamed Amsah (the Eraser) for his brutality.
- Difficulty in communication among the troops scattered all over the southern and western mountains resulted in clashes between armed groups unaware of the peace agreements.
- Security and financial interests occasionally dominated the actions of some Baggara traders. On one hand, they traded with the Nuba and even sold them ammunition; on the other, they supplied the government with information about rebel troops.
- Landlocked and cut of from the main SPLA forces in southern Sudan, the Nuba rebellion has been fairly isolated, nationally and internationally. This made both the Nuba and Baggara vulnerable to government pressures and atrocities.
- Old animosities die slowly. The Nuba have not forgotten the role of the Baggara in the slave trade, nor how arrogantly and abusively they behaved toward them, when the El-Mahdi s government armed the Baggara in 1986 and left the Nuba open to their blackmail.

Nubaness: from perception to cause of conflict

Before the onset of violent conflict in the Nuba Mountains, the diverse Nuba people were fully aware only of their clan affiliations. They neither perceived themselves as a Nuba nation nor actively sought to be one. Their relations with their Arab neighbours, the Hawazma and Misiriya, were tolerable. They exchanged goods and services, and intermarriage was an acceptable practice especially among Arabs and Muslim Nuba. At the beginning of the conflict, many Nuba even sided with the government, because they perceived the conflict to be a political discord, rather than an ethnic or economic strife.

Along with other factors, the war has been crucial in bringing out and solidifying the awareness of the Nuba as members of a united and quasi-homogeneous ethnic group. As a result, the conflict is increasingly being

perceived by many Nuba as an ethnic conflict. There is even a small core of angry Nuba, who believe that all Arabs should be thrown out of the Nuba territory in a final, radical solution! For this group, ethnicity has already crossed the threshold from perception to cause of violent conflict. And the longer the war continues, the greater the probability that more Nuba people will join the ranks of those who fight for the ethnic cause. One hopeful sign that the current differences might not build an insurmountable ethnic divide between the Baggara and the Nuba is the unanimous agreement among all the Nuba leaders I interviewed that peace and long-term cooperation between the two groups are fundamental for them all.

Most violent conflicts are over material resources actual or perceived. However, with the passage of time, ethnic, cultural, and religious affiliations seem to undergo transformation from abstract ideological categories into concrete social forces. In a wider sense, they themselves become contestable material social resources and, hence, possible objects of group strife and violent conflict. Although usually by-products of fresh conflicts, ethnic, cultural, and spiritual dichotomies can invert, with the progress of a conflict, to become intrinsic causes and, in the process, increase its complexity thereby reduce the possibility of managing, resolving, and ultimately transforming it. The Nuba armed conflict is a living proof of this transformation.

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[1] This section on the history of the Nuba people draws extensively on Stevenson s (1984) book.