

‘LAND OF SPEARS’¹
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‘Icon -a sign or representation that stands for its object by virtue of a resemblance or analogy to it; the 82nd Airborne Division is an icon of US military might’.

First, I would like to welcome everybody to the seminar, *Darfur Assessing the Assessments*. We are a gathering of scholars of Darfur, and especially from Darfur, plus a leavening of professionals from the world of humanitarian practice, grappling with the problem of Darfur. So what is the problem? A Chadian acquaintance once, when we spoke of Darfur, shrugged his shoulders and said, ‘*dar hanna harba*’; which literally means ‘a land of spears’ or, in other words, ‘a land of war.’ Let me introduce Darfur, which will bring us to icons and the burden of assessing assessments.

Sudan is Africa’s largest country, roughly the size of Western Europe. It is geostrategically significant especially to an imperial US: due to location, it is the backdoor to the Middle East; due to size, it has the potential to be a dominant power in the African continent; and due to its oil, it has what advanced capitalist economies crave the most. Darfur, approximately the size of France, is the westernmost province of Sudan. It was long a place of Sudanic states, with Daju and Tunjur kingdoms preceding that of Darfur (founded circa 1630). A small sultanate of Masalit emerged in the west in the 19th century.

Most of Darfur is plateau about 650 to 1000 meters above sea-level. Four distinct geographic areas are in the plateau. Three of these are placed in a north to south banding. The first band in the north is the Sahara, which accounts for roughly a third

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of the province's landmass. Immediately south of the desert is a transitional band between desert and savannah, of sub-desert and sahel. Here the annual rainfall, which is highly erratic, varies between 200mm in the north and 400mm in the south. Soils are sandy. South of the sahel the third, savannah band begins. Here the annual rainfall is regularly in the range of 600 or 700 mm.. Especially towards the border with Chad in Dar Masalit are some of the richest agricultural lands. Major watercourses, notably the Wadi Zum, leave their floodwaters on alluvial soil ideal for agriculture. These lands have among the highest population density in Darfur. There is a fourth geographic zone a bit south of the centre of Darfur. This is the Jebel Marra extinct volcano, mountain range, roughly 70 miles long and 30 miles wide. At the main crater in the southwest corner is among the lushest vegetation in Sudan. Rainfall is heavy. Here temperate crops –apples, grapes, strawberries, and oranges- can grow. A number of wadi's drain from the western side of the Jebel Marra. These provide a steady water supply. Like Dar Masalit this is an area of intensive farming, and higher population density.

Roughly three sorts of livelihoods are found in this geography. In the north, in the sahel and sahara, are found peoples who are for the most part camel (*Abbala*) pastoralists, who raise some sheep and goats, with some horticulture on the side. Important among these, to the west, are the Zaghawa; and to the east various Arab groups. In the savannah and Jebel Marra are peoples who are permanent farmers, for the most part cultivating sorghums and millets. Important among these people are the Fur, Daju, Tunjur, and the Masalit. Towards the southern part of the savannah are a large number cattle pastoralists. Many of these are Arab, generically lumped together as *baggara* (cattle) Arabs. However, there are a fair number of Fulbe.

Darfur was one of the final places in the world to experience Western colonization; which began at the turn of the 20th century. Political power both in colonial and post-colonial times has emanated from Khartoum and Khartoum tended to neglect its westernmost border. One area that the British did not neglect was land-tenure. In pre-colonial times the sultans allocated land to persons who used it for their followers. Such land grants were called *hakura* (*hawakir*, pl.). Under the British the land was no longer granted to individuals, but to ethnic groups. Tribal groups granted land were said to have *dars*. Fur and Masalit benefited from such allocations, which formed a basis for their prominence in Darfur in the post-colonial period.

In 1994, the central government divided the state of Darfur into three smaller states – North, West, and South Darfur. Fur power in North and South Darfur was greatly diminished. A year later, the central government appointed 8 Arab emirs in West Darfur. This directly threatened Masalit authority in their West Darfurian heartland. Darfur was moving swiftly into being ‘*dar al-harba*’, a ‘land of war’

Additionally, the years since the 1970s have been ones of scarce rainfall in Darfur. There were droughts in 1972, 1973, 1977, 1983, and 1984. The drought of 1983-1984 was particularly severe, provoking famine, especially in Northern Darfur. Decreasing precipitation led to increasing migration of northern peoples, many of whom were Arabs, towards more southerly regions, especially in the Jebel Marra and Dar Masalit. The mingling of large numbers of northerners in southerners’ lands put extreme pressure on the land tenure system. During the decade between 1989 and 1999, what had begun as small localized quarrels grew to be larger regional conflict into which

the Khartoum regime increasingly sought to intervene to augment its own authority. Khartoum's manipulation of land tenure problems on the side of Arabs provoked the Arab-Fur (1987-1989) and Arab-Masalit (1995-1999) Wars. Arabs began to form militias as early as the middle 1980s and, during the Arab-Masalit conflict, an Arab militia called Janjawid emerged (Flint and de Waal 2009: 63). In response, in 2001 Fur, Masalit, and the Zaghawa organized their own militias. The Sudan liberation Army (SLA) announced its existence and published its manifesto in February of 2003. A month later the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), the second major the southern militia announced its organization. There was talk of Darfur's succession. Thereafter, the pace of events quickened.

In April 2003, southern rebels attacked the central government's airbase at El Fasher, followed in May by attacks on Kutum, Mellit, and Tina. From Khartoum's perspective it now had a major rebellion on its hands, adding to its difficulties because it already committed a large force to fighting the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA) in Southern Sudan in a campaign that was stalemated. In June Janjawid militia mobilized in earnest and in July a counter offensive commenced in North Darfur, pitting the central government and their Arab allies against the SLA and JEM. This warring raged throughout the remainder of 2003 and 2004, thereafter it diminished. It was fighting of the cruellest sort. The Sudanese government would first bomb and strafe villages from airplanes, and then send in the Janjawid to utterly finish the job. Of course, Khartoum was using tactics developed by the British, who pioneered aerial attacks on villages at Winston Churchill's orders to crush rebellion in colonial Iraq in the 1920s. Nearly two million persons fled Darfur, many into Chad. Dar Fur had become a grim *dar hanna harba*.

And at this juncture, something curious happens, the conflict metamorphoses. It becomes something else; something not even Darfurian. Darfur becomes not only war of weapons, but a war of representations; that is the physical violence is re-presented in innumerable narratives, which narratives become weapons to carry out different individuals' and groups' political desires. Most of these are liberal narratives, girded in sturdy conceptual undergarments of human rights, articulated by actors in advanced capitalist states. Some, like Save Darfur, label Arabs and the Sudanese government as evil, and demand Western intervention. The American government calls Darfur 'genocide'. In these narratives Darfur became iconic of terrorism in the developing world. Of course, there is a counter-narrative, which worries that those calling for military intervention in Sudan are humanitarian imperialists; more interested in satisfying the needs of an imperial capitalism than the lives of Darfurians. Besides, those in this counter-narrative ask: What is really iconic in the global landscape of the early 21st century? Is it the million or so civilians killed by US warring in Iraq and Afghanistan? Can we not talk of dueling icons –Darfur and the janjawid, America and its 82nd Airborne division.

Now we can get to assessing assessments. Representations are assessments.

It seems to me that a sensible chore should be to explore how to consider the different representations of what has happened in Darfur to know as truthfully as possible their accuracy. This is not an aesthetic exercise. It is a condition of exercising moral and practical judgment. If you do not know what happened with some accuracy, you have no right to make moral judgments, and any actions you undertake come out of a fog of ignorance. My own sense is that such assessing will involve connecting the icons.

