Identity Politics in Contemporary Ethiopia and Sudan

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Gouvernement et politiques identitaires en Éthiopie et au Soudan contemporains. Entretien avec Günther Schlee par Francesco Staro

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Günther Schlee has been director at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology for 20 years, and head of the Department Integration and Conflict. As an emeritus he has taken up a professorship for social anthropology at the Arba Minch University, Ethiopia. His work is an essential contribution to the understanding of interethnic clan relations and ethnic identity dynamics in the Horn of Africa. He conducted extensive fieldwork among mobile pastoralists, as these groups show how ethnic identities evolve over time, and adapt permanently to changing social and ecological environment. He analyzed from a historical perspective the process of ethnogenesis in Northern Kenya and Sudan, and described the importance of migration dynamics and exchange networks in cross-border regions of the Horn and beyond. In his research, the fluidity of ethnic boundaries reflects the coexistence between different identity categories and tribal alliances, as ethnic classifications overlap with memberships to clans and subclans (Diallo & Schlee 2002; Schlee 2008; Schlee & Horstmann 2018).

The issue of identity dynamics is all the more relevant as ethnicity turns out to be an important criterion governing new forms of citizenship and the selection of beneficiaries of international aid. In this interview, we focus on the cases of Sudan and Ethiopia, where Schlee has been doing fieldwork over the past 30 years.

Francesco Staro

In countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan, different strategies of State-led ethnic categorization have been implemented. In Ethiopia, the project of "ethnic federalism" was supposed to frame sociocultural diversity into a process of national identity building. Looking at the case of Sudan, some steps have been done towards the construction of a more inclusive "Sudanese identity:" I think,

for example, of the visit of the Sudanese Prime Minister to rebels' stronghold in Nuba mountains in January 2020. Beyond these symbolic moves, what are the possible scenarios for the post-revolution Sudan, in a context where identity dynamics have been dominated or at least influenced for almost 30 years by the ideology of Arab-Islamic civilization put forward by the previous regime?

Günther Schlee

I think that post-1991 Ethiopia, in the way its administrative order reflects ethnic categories, differs more from pre-1991 Ethiopia than from Sudan in any period. The old provincial boundaries in Ethiopia were parallel to the lines of communication. What was in reach of a center belonged to that center. Ethnic belonging did not count, ethnic groups were not to be stabilized by giving them territorial boundaries and a status as administrative units. They were meant to disappear. Policy aimed at assimilating people to the Christian, Amharic-speaking dominant culture.

In contrast to that, the post-1991 administrative map reflects ethnic groups, with boundaries at all levels from the districts to the federal states often drawn along linguistic lines. Boundaries have many bends and bulges, enclaves and exclaves, so that as many people as possible live in the same administrative unit as those who speak the same language or a similar language. Historical linguistics and language classification have become hot topics. The new boundaries often combined people who were divided by deep gorges or high mountain ranges and had a hard time if they tried to meet, but which were considered co-ethnics or linguistically related.

In Sudan, there have been no such dramatic changes from one extreme to the other in giving ethnicity a role in the formation of an administrative order or not. Repeatedly, *idara ahaliyya,* Native Administration, was abolished and re-introduced, but the two principles of belonging to a region or district, or belonging to a tribe and its *sheikhs* have always coexisted. People speak of "geographical chiefs," whose powers end at the confines of a circumscribed area, and tribal chiefs, who represent a genealogically related group (including chosen or as-if relationships) and all its members wherever they are. The boundaries of traditional homelands *(dar)* play a great role in land disputes and contested jurisdiction and political representation. Patrilineal descent is not the only form of collective identification. In Khartoum, regional origins play a great role. People identify and maintain links with their *balad,* their homeland, and their genealogies reflect a tendency to regional rather than tribal endogamy. But patrilineal descent at all levels, from local lineages to meso- and macro-groups comprising millions of members has never lost its importance for political loyalty and as a means of mobilization. From colonial

times, when the British throughout Africa used Indirect Rule as a cheap form of administration of all regions which they did not claim for White settlement, the Sudan could always be looked at as a mosaic of tribal and ethnic groups. Truly uniform and equal citizenship, where people first of all are "Sudanese," is now propagated, not for the first time, but in reality has never had a chance.

The urban protest movements of 2018-2019, the SPLA-North, which controls parts of Blue Nile State and South Kordofan, and the armed groups in Darfur have all contributed to the fall of Al-Bechir and could consider themselves as part of the same revolution. Their aim could be to create one just, unified order for everybody. Instead, they now negotiate the allocation of state powers to regional units and different degrees of autonomy, with special rights for special people. The center and the periphery (or peripheries) are trying to strike a new deal. That is a basic pattern which has not changed with the fall of Al-Bechir. And people in the periphery have very good historical reasons for mistrusting the center.

Francesco Staro

In both countries, the nomadic and pastoral component is important. How do you consider the role of these groups in these processes of national identity building, given pastoralists' mobility over territorial and ethnic boundaries?

Günther Schlee

Ethiopia follows two ideologies, which, in certain contexts, are hard to combine: ethnic self-determination and "development." Ethnic self-determination implies that people have a right to develop their own languages and cultures and live according to their own norms and values. "Development," on the other hand, is defined by the government. In the name of development, huge areas of land have been taken from their earlier users and dedicated to large-scale capitalist cash crop production. Also, the parts of agriculture remaining in the hands of smallholders are interfered with. If the government decides that the farmers have to use mineral fertilizer, all those who do not buy mineral fertilizer are classified as anti-government and "backwards." The accusation of being "backwards" overrides the values of ethnic self-determination, which is then limited to language and a folklorized version of "culture." As a result, Ethiopians now have the right to speak their own languages and perform their own rituals on their own land, but they are not allowed to till it the way they want. High modernity is replacing traditional ways of food production at the expense of sustainability and biodiversity. Pastoralism, i.e. all forms of mobile animal husbandry, are denounced as backwards. Abiy continues the policies of his predecessor. Also under Abiy, pastoralists in the Lower Omo area have been

deprived of access to their pastures, forcefully "villagized," beaten, tortured and castrated.

It still remains to be seen whether Abiy, who was made Prime Minister to mollify the Oromo opposition, will be able and willing to introduce true ethnic federalism by also giving the "backward" peoples a voice and respecting their rights, or whether he will just be able to shift the power balance among the dominant groups, the Tigray, now marginalized, the Amhara and the Oromo, part of whom are his fervent supporters while others are his worst enemies.

High modernity also has made inroads in Sudan. With Chinese engineering, labor and money, huge infrastructural projects have been carried out, among them the heightening of the dam on the Blue Nile at Roseires. There have been plans to extend irrigated agriculture below the dam, from Roseires right to the Jezira, using gravity. Due to a number of factors, comprising incompetence, corruption, and political instability, these plans have not yet been implemented. This gives a new lease of life to rain-fed agriculture, here at its climatic margins, and pastoralists to use these lands seasonally, by force or by striking deals with the farmers.

Other lands which are "developed" both in Ethiopia and in Sudan become open rangelands again because large scale capitalist cash crop production has a tendency to fail. The investors go and pastoralists move back in. Some investors have never been seriously interested in agriculture. They were just after the tax benefits. They import agricultural machinery without paying import tax and then trade with machinery. This occasionally gives pastoralists some room, but this is an effect which is not intended by the government.

Both Ethiopia and the Sudan are far from implementing the recommendations of the African Union that pastoralists should be allowed to cross regional and even international boundaries and that their way of life, which uses seasonally and regionally dispersed resources, to a large extent located in semi-arid and arid lands which cannot be used otherwise, should be maintained. Urban elites do not seem to be aware that a large proportion of the meat they eat has been produced by pastoralists.

Francesco Staro

The Sudanese revolution seems grounded on the rejection of Al-Bechir's regime as much as on an opening to global audiences and the political mobilization of the Sudanese diaspora beyond national borders. What are the risks of reproducing socioeconomic inequalities if access to these different political arenas is unevenly distributed?

Günther Schlee

Also, Al-Bechir has tried to induce the United States to lift the sanctions imposed on Sudan as a "sponsor of terrorism." Even before the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, Sudan offered the US evidence on the whereabouts of Usama bin Laden, but the information was rejected because the US did not want to cooperate with rogue states. Later, in the Global War On Terror (GWOT), Al-Bechir toed the American line, and in preventing migrants from reaching Europe, he cooperated with the EU. Al-Bechir was a pro-Western dictator rejected by the West. In the Cold War, he would have been embraced by the West in spite of his poor human rights record, but unfortunately for him, his coming to power coincided with the end of the Cold War. In the last years of his regime, there was a lot of talk about ending the sanctions, but they were never lifted. Reasons for this may comprise the need to please the religious right in America (not unfittingly described as "crusaders" in Sudan) and the arrest warrant by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for human rights violations in Darfur.

The present transitional government continues the policy of opening the country to the West (in addition, of course, to the country being already dependent on China), in spite of the poor record of economic "liberalism" for the welfare of ordinary people in Africa.

Before the world ground to a halt because of the corona crisis, there have been some positive signs. Being a German, examples from Germany are the first to come to my mind. Our president has visited Sudan, where a parade of old Volkswagen beetles was organized for him, and our minister for economic cooperation has stressed the need to support the transition in Sudan. But all this has come ten months after the fall of Al-Bechir and it may already have been too late. The country was in a severe economic crisis, with long queues at petrol stations and in front of bakeries which sold bread. And then traffic, trade and international relations were largely frozen.

The future is hard to predict. The present crisis caused by the spread of the coronavirus and the measures taken to contain it may turn out to be a game changer. Many African countries are emulating the containment measures taken by Western states, although they do not have the financial reserves to compensate for the loss of revenue caused by these measures. In some cases, these measures may also turn out to have been not necessary, because the climatic conditions are not conducive to the transmission of the virus. In Sudan, there have been a number of persons positively tested for coronavirus, typically with an infection history outside the country. People are waiting for the phase of exponential growth of this number, but for many weeks now it has not set in. The reproduction rate of the virus in Sudan may turn out to be below 1.

By the time we know this for sure, irreparable damage may have been done to the Sudanese economy and to many economies and societies across Africa. The political actors we have discussed in this interview will have been blown away and all our problems may have become obsolete. This is, of course, only one possible scenario. It may also be that in five years, coronavirus will be a matter of the past.

Francesco Staro

How has the religious divide between Wahhabism and other Islamic traditions (I think in particular of Sufism) affected the organization of political mobilization which led to the revolution?

Günther Schlee

Ever since Al-Bechir's regime has turned out to be a cleptocracy, it has been rejected by many Muslims, ordinary Muslims as well as politically minded "Islamists." Theft is considered a sin in Islam. But the dominant voices in the present revolution seem to be secularist. They are not irreligious, but stress the shared elements of several or all religions. This combines reasonably well with Sufism, which in recent decades has shed the exclusivist and militant character it had in the 19th and early 20th century.

This development is, however, watched with skepticism by Wahhabi or Salafi groups. Especially, the intended normalization of relationships with Israel has raised their concern. In the Sudanese Islamist discourse, the West and Israel have both been demonized for decades and at the latest during the war in Syria, Iran and Shiites in general have joined them as equally evil in the Friday sermons which I have attended.

Francesco Staro

Sudan represents an interesting case study to analyze the complex relations between Islam and Arab identities in Africa. During the past 30 years, Omar Al-Bechir's military government attempted to impose its own conception of Sudanese national identity based on Islamity and Arabness. The Sudanese revolution could be considered as a move towards a more inclusive understanding of what "to be Sudanese" means. In this context, global audiences and political mobilization beyond national borders seem to play a key role. At the same time, other forms of inclusion and exclusion may be emerging at local level, and new socioeconomic inequalities can arise. What are your observations at this regard? How Muslim and Arab identities and social belongings are being reconfigured in the Sudan post-revolution, and what is the impact on ethnic identity dynamics?

Günther Schlee

We need to distinguish between "Arab-Islamic civilization" (the slogan of Al-Bechir's regime) and racialism. That distinction is needed for analytical purposes, although (or because) in the observed reality, the two are inextricably interwoven. Both pre-date Al-Bechir's regime, but have appeared during that regime in particularly virulent forms.

In Sudanese Arabic, you have a rich terminology to describe all sorts of hues and shades of human skin color, and color is linked to status. The two are sometimes even convertible into each other, like Bourdieu's kinds of capital. A dark-skinned man may manage to marry a lighter-skinned bride if he holds a PhD or a good position. In the times of slavery, light-skinned Ethiopian women fetched the highest prices, not the ones from what is now South Sudan. The fact that the value of a person and the pigmentation of her or his skin are negatively correlated can be illustrated from all periods of Sudanese history, not just Al-Bechir's period.

This racialism combines uneasily with the pride in an Islamic tradition. To a significant extent, Sudan has been Islamized from the West, and Islamic scholarship in Darfur can point to a longer tradition than many places in the Nile Valley which was ruled by Christian kingdoms until the 16th century. Still, the "Arab-Islamic civilization" was used by the Al-Bechir's regime as an ideological instrument of the "Arab" Muslim elites of the Nile Valley against all others. It was an instrument of exclusion, an aspect which can also be criticized from a Muslim perspective, and it led first to the separation of what is now South Sudan and then affected the South of the North, the whole half circle from Darfur via South Kordofan to Blue Nile State and Eastern Sudan. The Sudan has not been capable of integrating its southern periphery. It first lost its outer layer and was about to lose the next one. Whether the present transitional government will be able to stop this process remains to be seen. Prospects do not look too good.

Francesco StaroThe "Ethiopian model" gains international consensus, and the country is more and more attractive for foreign investors thanks to positive indicators of economic development. In 2019, the Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed won the Nobel Prize, in part for "forging a durable peace in the Horn of Africa," by making peace with Eritrea. More recently, national political elections were suspended following the Covid-19 crisis, and this legitimized even more the power of the central State. Nevertheless, the revival of political claims based on ethnicity alongside regional borders can be considered as a reaction to a development model which reproduces inequalities, at the detriment of peripheral regions. What are your observations at this regard, and

how would you describe the impact of these long-term processes on nomadic and pastoral societies you have been studying?

Günther Schlee

Ethiopia has indeed undergone rapid changes. Addis Ababa is hard to recognize for anyone who has been away for a while. New buildings have shot up every time. Chinese companies carry out huge infrastructure projects from the tram in Addis Ababa to the Millennium Dam on the Blue Nile. With the caveat that we do not know the impact of the current corona crisis, yet we can state that Ethiopia has experienced quite an impressive economic growth of just under 10 % per year over the last decade. What makes one worry is the possible long-term economic and political dependence caused by this debt-financed development.

Abiy received the Nobel Prize for Peace for reconciling with Eritrea and for opening the boundary with that country. Little later (and long before coronavirus), that boundary was closed again and people who had visited their relatives for the first time in twenty years got stuck on the wrong side. Abiy is facing stiff and violent opposition from parts of the Oromo Liberation Front, i.e. his own co-ethnics, in Wollega. The Tigray feel betrayed by him and may obstruct any agreement he might reach with Eritrea. After all, it is them who speak the same language as many Eritreans and who, along with the Amhara and Afar regions, border Eritrea, and it was their leader, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who fought a bitter war with Eritrea in 1999-2000. So they are in the perfect position to repair or to spoil relations with Eritrea, depending on their political needs.

What is needed is a national deal which not only involves rival elites but also takes into account the periphery, the people excluded from the political arena for being "backwards." Even without the new disruptions which can be expected as results of the corona crisis, this is a long way to go.

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ABSTRACT

In Sudan and Ethiopia, different strategies have been implemented to frame cultural diversity and ethnic identities into the nation-building process. We discuss it here with Günther Schlee, who has been conducting field surveys in these countries over the past 30 years. We focus on the case of nomadic and pastoral populations, their changing identity affiliations and social belongings.

Keywords: Sudan, Ethiopia, ethnic identity dynamics, pastoralism.

RÉSUMÉ

Gouvernement et politiques identitaires en Éthiopie et au Soudan contemporains. Entretien avec Günther Schlee par Francesco Staro. — Au Soudan et en Éthiopie, différentes stratégies ont été mises en place pour incorporer la diversité culturelle et les dynamiques des identités ethniques dans le processus de construction nationale. Nous en discutons ici avec Günther Schlee, qui conduit des enquêtes de terrain dans ces deux pays depuis 30 ans, en prêtant une attention particulière au cas des populations nomades et pastorales et au caractère mouvant de leurs affiliations identitaires.

Mots-clés : Soudan, Éthiopie, identités ethniques, sociétés nomades et pastorales.