

Book Review: African Rights, Facing Genocide: The Nuba of Sudan. London: African Rights

Samuel Totten

Abstract.

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Book Review

African Rights, *Facing Genocide: The Nuba of Sudan*. London: African Rights, 1995. Pp. 252, paper. US\$14.95.

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It is unusual to review a book that is more than two or three years old, but *Facing Genocide: The Nuba of Sudan* is, unfortunately, timely in its own way. Despite the significant differences between the attacks by the government of Sudan (GoS) against the Nuba in South Kordofan from 1985 through the 1990s and those against black Africans in Darfur in the early 2000s, there are many stunning similarities. That said, whereas international attention has focused on the ongoing crisis in Darfur, the genocidal action in the Nuba Mountains was largely ignored—not least because the GoS systematically and calculatingly sealed off the Nuba Mountains from the outside world for some six years.

Facing Genocide: The Nuba of Sudan constitutes the first detailed study of the genocidal activities of the GoS in the Nuba Mountains—a study that the authors assert is “the first exposure of the crimes being committed there by the Sudan Government: all-out assault on the rural Nuba” (v). The investigation carried out by African Rights produced clear and abundant evidence that the GoS was intent on wiping out Nuba society and culture.

Facing Genocide is composed of the following parts: “Summary” which (includes a section titled “Components of Genocide in the Nuba Mountains”); “The Nuba in Sudan: A People Pushed to the Margins”; “War in the Nuba Mountains”; “The Nuba Today: Genocide by Attrition”; “Attack on Christianity; Attack on Islam”; “The SPLA Record”; and “Conclusions.” The book provides a solid overview of the history of the war in the Nuba Mountains and, in doing so, offers a cogent analysis of the causes of the war; the actions of the GoS, including its scorched-earth policy, which is similar in many ways to its later actions in Darfur; the actions and reactions of the Nuba; and the ramifications of the war.

The civil war in the Nuba Mountains, which began during the summer of 1985, resulted from two related events. First, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) carried out a raid on a cattle camp of Baggara Arab nomads, located near the north–south “internal boundary.” In response, the Sudanese government hired the Baggara as a militia to help fight the SPLA and to punish any civilians believed to be “sympathetic” to the SPLA. The authors assert that,

while the SPLA was not present in force [in the Nuba Mountains] until 1989, militia attacks became routine and an army crackdown became intense... The first stage of the war was marked by militia raids, to loot cattle, kill and occasionally to burn villages. In areas where SPLA units penetrated, the army also undertook mass reprisals, always targeted at villages and civilians... The war intensified with the arrival of the SPLA ... in 1989. It quickly overran large areas of the Nuba Mountains and unleashed a ferocious response from the militia and army. Between 1989 and 1991 scores of villages were burned and thousands of villagers killed in joint army and militia assaults. (7)

It is important to understand—and the authors do an excellent job of emphasizing this point—that “the Nuba” do not constitute a monolithic group. In fact, the Nuba comprise more than fifty tribal groups that reside in the Nuba Mountains. It is thought that the Nuba may “represent the remnants of indigenous populations that once lived far more widely across Sudan” (15). Furthermore, as the authors point out, “the term ‘Nuba’ refers to two very different sets of connotations” (5). First, for the Nuba people themselves, the term “refers to the myriad cultures and traditions of the more than fifty different tribal groups in the Nuba Mountains” (5). Second, “for the dominant class in Sudan, and in particular the ruling National Islamic Front, ‘Nuba’ refers to second class citizens—‘primitive’ black people, servants and labourers” (5). If this sounds familiar to those conversant with the current crisis in Darfur, it is for good reason; in fact, most, if not all, of those living in the so-called peripheries of Sudan (that is, outside the riverine valley where the elites reside and rule) are considered second-class citizens, or worse—that is, they are perceived by the powers that be as lesser beings, inferior culturally, educationally, and in just about every other way. In this respect, the Nuba were perceived and treated in much the same way as the black Africans of Darfur are treated today. To put it another way, both the Nuba and the black Africans of Darfur, along with the “Southerners of Sudan, are the victims of a racism that pervades life in Northern Sudan” (5).

Like any case of genocide, the genocide of the Nuba is complicated. Among the many factors at work in this case were an extremist Islamic agenda; systemic racism; ongoing discrimination against the Nuba in the realms of the economy, education, health, and political representation; and a struggle over land and natural resources.

In contrast to Darfur, where the vast majority of the people—perpetrators and victims alike—are Muslim, the Nuba Mountains were, and are, home to both Christians and Muslims. Tellingly, both groups were targeted for attack. Even before the war in the Nuba Mountains began, Christians began to be attacked by GoS security forces, largely as a result of “a polarized political context, with Islamic extremism in the ascendant” (281). Churches were desecrated or burned down; Christians were harassed, vilified, beaten, tortured, and even killed by GoS troops and their proxies. Muslims in the area were told that the Christians were godless and were out to destroy Sudan.

When Muslims in the Nuba Mountains did not support the government’s actions against the Christians and refused to take part in the desecration and destruction of the churches, they too were targeted, and their places of worship were attacked. In addition, those Muslims who did not adhere to the more extremist version of Islam were also targeted as infidels. Furthermore,

despite the fact that the SPLA forces in the Nuba Mountains have been very largely led by Moslems, successive governments have portrayed the guerrillas as fighting against Islam. In order to do so they have withdrawn the legitimacy of Islam in the SPLA held areas, in effect declaring all Moslems who are not with them to be infidels, and thus the legitimate target for a *Jihad*. (288)

Part and parcel of the attacks on the Nuba was a systematic effort to wipe out both the educated classes and the leadership of the Nuba. The authors report that “hundreds of chiefs, teachers merchants, civil servants, priests, lawyers, health workers—in fact anyone with an education who might be a spokesman for the people—have been killed” (2).

Once the government troops and militias had looted and destroyed Nuba villages, the perpetrators abducted the people and forced them into so-called peace camps. In this way, the government depopulated the rural areas, controlled the actions and movement of civilians, deprived the Sudanese Liberation Movement of potential assistance, and undertook an effort to alter the Nuba way of life in fundamental ways. The “peace camps” were also places of great abuse, where victims were beaten, raped, and deprived of food. The authors record that

the innocuously named “peace camps” are concentration camps in the true sense of the word. They are where the rural population is forcibly concentrated so they can be controlled and their political and cultural identity can be changed. Peace camps are the location of mass and systematic rape of women. They are where children are separated from their parents and “educated” to become extremist Moslems in the mold of the ruling Nationalist Islamic Front, in a process of forced acculturation. (3)

Perhaps the most telling indication that the GoS intended to commit genocide in the Nuba Mountains is this statement by Khalid Abdel Karim Saleh, former head of security in the Office of the Governor of Kordofan, quoted on page 137:

The ongoing order given to the troops is to kill anything that is alive, that is to say to kill anybody, to destroy the area, to implement a scorched earth policy, to destroy everything, to burn the area, so that nothing can exist there.

There is clear evidence that the government was largely successful in its mission: not only as a result of the large number of villages its troops utterly destroyed but the famine they created by destroying crops and stealing and burning foodstuffs stored by the people for the year to come; the indiscriminate and sporadic killing of civilians; the forced conversions; the abduction of children and their re-education and enculturation to a different way of thinking and way of life; and the mass rapes of women and girls. With respect to the latter, the authors cogently argue that

rape destroys the very basis of the community. It breaks the fundamental bond of the family, the relationship between husband and wife, and breaks down the trust, confidence and sense of identity not just of the woman who has been raped, but the family and community. When women bear children as a result of rape, they do not have a known, legitimate patrilineage—and so they lack an acceptable social identity. (222)

An especially strong and valuable aspect of this book is the inclusion of scores of excerpts from first-person testimony by victims. These passages, interspersed throughout the book, address every facet of the war against the Nuba, the genocidal actions of the GoS, and the profound ramifications for Nuba society and culture.

Numerous and significant messages for genocide scholars and anti-genocide activists are inherent in the case of the Nuba. First, once a regime has a taste of genocide and gets away with it, it is likely to be prepared to carry it out again. In other words, impunity for major violations of human rights (whether crimes against humanity or genocide) must not continue unabated. Second, when a nation closes off an area (as the Khmer Rouge did between 1975 and 1979 while undertaking the genocide of their own people, as the GoS did while carrying out its genocide by attrition against the Nuba, and as, to a certain and significant extent, the GoS has operated during its genocidal attacks on the black Africans of Darfur), there cannot be a much clearer early warning signal that something grossly wrong is taking place within that area. Third, there is a need for some sort of international convention and law dealing

with regimes that seal off parts of their countries. Granted, this is much easier said than done, as it impinges directly on state sovereignty; but it also brings to the fore the concept of the Responsibility to Protect, and what this concept means in *reality* rather than in theory—particularly for the people on the ground who are destined to be victimized by such a sealing off.