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Cultural Identity, Diversity Management Policies and Conflicts in Sudan

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing war in Sudan has been qualified as the biggest humanitarian crisis in the world. Unfortunately, this conflict is the last one of a long and cruel series of civil wars. Among the several factors behind these conflicts, a very relevant one is the mismanagement of the cultural diversity of the country. While some scholars had analysed how ethnic relations in Sudan had an impact on the political problems, this study explores the opposite direction and outlines, with special focus on the educational policies of the XX and the XXI centuries, how the politics of imposing an identity on culturally diverse populations has tensioned the relation between the centre and the peripheries in the last decades. This tension also plays a paramount role in the ongoing civil war started on April 15, 2023. The attempt to build the national identity on the pillars of Arab culture and political Islam failed to create a shared cultural identity. The article analyzes that attempt in the framework of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity created by Bennet, the classification of policies to deal with cultural management defined by Kymlicka and the concept of cultural identity as defined by Stuart Hall. Finnally, it proposes an intercultural approach to transform cultural heritage and education into an instrument of reconciliation and integration, and the multicultural reality of the country into a platform for a dialogue that produces a shared concept of identity and sustainable peace.

Keywords: Intercultural Education; Conflict; Sudan; Cultural Heritage; Identity Policies; Diversity Management

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1. Introduction

Sudan has gone through two long civil wars between the North and the South of the country (1955–1972 and 1983–2005) and other armed conflicts in regions like Darfur, located in the West (2003–2020), South Kordofan (South West) or Blue Nile State (South East).

The First Civil War (1955–1972) led to multiple coups and shifts in power. In fact, ten prime ministers succeeded each other in that frame of time. The 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement paused the conflict and granted southern Sudan significant autonomy, including a regional assembly and an executive council. However, in 1983 the president of Sudan, Gaafar Muhammad Nimeiry searched the support of the Muslim Brotherhood to reinforce his power and imposed the Islamic Law on the whole country, including the South. He dissolved southern institutions and reformed its administrative boundaries, which reignited the conflict.

The Second Civil War (1983–2005) saw the emergence of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), led by John Garang, who managed to gather different armed groups of the South and propose an alternative political vision characterized by the separation between religion and state and the integration of cultural diversity in a united Sudan. The war culminated in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which paved the way for South Sudan's independence in 2011.

Both wars had a greater destructive impact on the South as they triggered the massive displacement of most of its population and devastated its agricultural base and the industrial sector. An indicator of the consequences of the two Civil Wars is the different position of Sudan and South Sudan in the human development index. In 2023 South Sudan occupied position 193 and Sudan position 176 [1].

Similar analysis could be done for the relation between the center of the country and the western and eastern peripheries. Different authors focus on particular factors behind their conflicts. Most of them highlight that the peoples of the peripheries felt that the central government tried to impose Arab culture and a certain vision of Islam and exploit their material resources as the main drivers of conflict [2,3]. Gore focused on "the dominant ethnic relations in Sudan and their impact on the political problems of the country" [4]. In particular, he studied factors such as sharing the same ecosystem, demography and population movements linked to temporary climatic conditions or seasons.

This study instead focuses on the opposite direction to the perspective of Gore and analyzes how national identity policies, particularly in the field of education, have had an impact on ethnic relations and conflicts including the ongoing war that started on April 15, 2023 between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF).

After this introduction, the second section of the study presents the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) created by Bennet, the classification of policies to deal with cultural management defined by Kymlicka and the concept of cultural identity as defined by Stuart Hall as its theoretical framework.

On section three, the article presents the research objective and methodology and summarizes some bibliography that aims to identify the main factors behind the most violent armed conflicts in the history of Sudan.

Section four provides a picture of the cultural diversity of the country and revises how the British colonial rule (1899–1955) and the successive independent governments managed that diversity. The same section continues relating the conflicts of the country with the policies that dealt with that cultural diversity. In particular, those policies never applied what the two more important peace agreements in the history of Sudan had pointed, that is the need of integrating the cultural diversity of the country and developing school curricula that could support that integration.

Thus, the article concludes that "intercultural education" appears as potential driver of reconciliation and sustainable peace for the country when the Third Civil War is still in progress.

2. Terminology and Theoretical Framework

The concept of "intercultural education" is quite recent as it appeared in 1983 in a conference of ministers of education of the European Union reflecting about the integration of migrant children [5]. Those students had different cultural identities where this term embraces concepts such as ethnic group, religion, language, "experience, interest,

orientation to the world, values, disposition, sensibilities, social languages and discourses" [6]. In fact, some of these concepts find very different expressions according to the cultural identity. For instance, a religion like Islam may have a common doctrine shared by believers all over the world but the ways of expressing those beliefs may vary from culture to culture and express different cultural identities.

In front of this diversity, it is possible to assume different attitudes. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) created by Bennet [7] provides the theoretical framework to this study. The model defines six stages of understanding and appreciation of cultural variance that evolve from ethnocentric orientations (denial of the difference, defense against the other, minimization the importance of the other) to ethnorelative orientations (acceptance of the importance of the other, adaptation to take the other into account, integration into a definition of share identity). The last stage, integration, would be the aim of intercultural education.

At government level, those attitudes are expressed into policies that can either harmonize or disrupt the relationship between identity and culture by influencing how cultural expressions are recognized, protected, or suppressed. Will Kymlicka [8] states that multicultural (inclusive/equitable) policies help affirm individual and collective identities, allowing diverse cultures to thrive. For example, language preservation initiatives empower communities to maintain their linguistic heritage, reinforcing cultural identity. These policies must navigate the complex dynamics between identity and culture, ensuring space for multiple narratives to coexist.

Conversely, assimilationist or exclusionary policies often imbalance this interaction. When states enforce dominant cultural norms (e.g., banning religious dress or restricting native languages), they marginalize minority identities, eroding cultural diversity. In the words of Stuart Hall they "represent a diverse people with a diverse history through a single, hegemonic 'identity'" [9]. Exclusionary policies may even lead to deny rights or access to resources based on cultural or ethnic identity.

The most violent conflicts Sudan take place between the center and the peripheries. Mohamed Jalal Hashim explains that the term center does not refer to a concrete geographical location. The center in these conflicts in Sudan refers to power and wealth. And this center has made use of Arab culture and Islamic religion as political tools to impose and deny other cultures [10].

3. Objective and Methodology

This study aims to identify the main factor behind the most violent conflicts in the recent history of Sudan, particularly from the First Civil War (1955–1972) to identify common elements among them and shape a possible way out to the ongoing Third Civil War started on April 15, 2023.

With that aim, the study carries out a revision of literature related to the identification of those factors from the point of view of an educator.

Guma Kunda Komey focuses his analysis of the factors behind conflicts in Sudan on the rights to land [11]. This hypothesis stands on the categorization according to which conflicts most often arise between groups who tend to own the same object, occupy the same space, and use the same natural resources in incompatible ways [4]. But this hypothesis does not look enough to explain country wide conflicts as the three civil wars. In fact, Assal explains that conflicts over resources in Sudan take place at community local levels, but they are often fueled by national policies and should be studied within its respective institutional framework [12].

Kuel Maluil Jok defines the two parties of the different conflicts in Sudan as the adherents to "Islamic nationalism" and the supporters of "customary secularism" [13].

Heather Sharkey focuses in the policy of Arabization as main driver of conflict in Sudan [14]. And this factor appears to her as essential when analyzing the management of cultural diversity since the colonial rule.

Therefore, as a consequence of the resistance to be assimilated by the dominant culture imposed by the center, the history of Sudan, since the independence, records two Civil Wars that opposed the North and the South and other wars that are not termed as civil in the literature. The latter ones have been considered as regionalized insurgencies, not nationwide wars.

As for the war in progress, although the fighting began as a rivalry between two factions of the Sudanese military establishment, the scale, duration, and breakdown of

national authority meet the general definition of a civil war which would be the third one of the country.

4. The Management of Cultural Diversity and Its Impact on Sudanese Cultural Heritage and Identity

4.1. Sudan and Its Cultural Diversity

Once that most authors point the management of cultural diversity in Sudan as a main driver of conflicts, it is necessary to present a picture of the multi-culturality of the country.

Before the separation of the South in 2011, Sudan hosted over 570 tribes divided into 56 ethnic groups [4] who spoke more than 400 different languages. These groups have been artificially divided into two wide blocks: Arabs and Black-Africans. The reality below those umbrellas is quite more complex and the limits between them are fluid [2]. It would also be possible to divide these ethnic groups into nomad cattle herders, agriculturalists and semi-nomads [15].

The Black-African group includes Nilotic (Nuer, Dinka, Shilluk, Bari for instance), Ubangian (Ndogo) and Central Sudanic (Madi) tribes present in what today is South Sudan and other ethnic groups of the peripheries of modern Sudan like Blue Nile State in the southeast (Ingessana), Darfur in the west (Fur, Masalit, Zaghawa) or Nuba Mountains in the southwest (Toro, Moro, Tira). Every ethnic group has its own language different to Arabic.

The Eastern part of the country is populated by some Hamitic tribes like the Beja, who speak a Cushite language, and the Beni Amar, who speak a Semitic language; and in the North you find Nubian groups related to the original inhabitants of the region before the arrival of Arab tribes into the country. These Nubians and Beja were Christians in the medieval ages, which has left some traces in their traditions. For instance, Nubians and Beja today still immerse their children in the waters of the Nile or the Red Sea keeping alive a tradition that goes back to the medieval times. Nubians also draw a cross with the blood of a lamb on their doors even if they have embraced Islam [16]. One of the Nubian groups are the Danagla who have been traditionally expert agriculturalists and traders.

Some Sudanese Arab tribes are still nomads like the Baggara, who claim to come from the Juhaynah tribe of the Arabian peninsula and is also a wide umbrella that covers many different tribes in Sudan (Rizeigat, Beni Halba, Ta'isha, Messiria for instance) and in other Sahel countries like Chad and Niger. Other self-considered Arab tribes settled around the Nile Valley and became the elite in power with the passing of time (Ja'alin and Shayqyin). The Shayqyin got great plots of land between Shendi and Khartoum from the Turkish-Egyptian government when they supported them in the revolt conducted in 1822 by the Ja'alyin that was the strongest tribe of the Valley [17].

The puzzle even includes some few pre-Islamic Arabian tribes that settled in Sudan coming from Western Arabia, although most Arabs in Sudan entered the country after the XII century.

All these groups possess a rich cultural intangible and tangible heritage. The pyramids of Al-Bagrawiya or the temples of Naqa and Musawarat for instance render testimony to the Meroitic Civilization that dominated the Nile Valley between the sixth century BC, once the capital of the Kingdom of Kush moved from Napata to Meroe, and the fourth AC. Tribes dominating the Nile valley mastered most of Sudanese territory since the antiquity with different extensions according to the period.

In the last 200 years, three riverine tribes, Ja'alin, Shayqyin and Danagla, have increased their control from their original location along the Nile River towards the rest of the country thanks to the process of centralization. This process of gradual empowerment has been accompanied by the development of a certain construct of identity based upon Arab culture and Islamic religion where those tribes considered themselves superior to and discriminating against African groups including Darfuris [18].

4.2. The British Management of Cultural Diversity and Identities in Sudan

Sudan became a pseudo-British colony in January 1899 with a very particular status. After defeating the Mahdist State, the Anglo-Egyptian army restored Egyptian rule in Sudan but as part of a condominium, or joint authority, exercised by Britain and Egypt. Particularly from 1919 the British colonial authority carried out separate policies for the North of Sudan, mainly occupied by Muslims and Arabic speakers, and the South inhabited by different Black African tribes. In every part of the country the colonial

strategy was different.

In the South, the so-called Southern Policy, in force until 1946, aimed at eliminating any kind of Arab-Islamic influence and developing local cultures [19]. The Government did not invest in education in the region until 1926 as its policy was to tolerate rather than to encourage education [20]. Thus they left the provision of education to Christian missionary societies [21] who did not use Arabic language but local vernaculars, English and Romanized Arabic. Later on, the Government "took an increasing interest in educational matters which gradually led to direct intervention by means of financial subsidies and later by provision of government schools as alternatives to mission education" [20].

In the North instead, Arabic and English were the media of instruction and the government invested in the creation of schools. Therefore, two educational systems developed, one in the North and the other in the South [22] with a very unbalanced percentage of public elementary schools in every region: 90% in the North and only 7% in the South in 1948 [23].

This educational policy reflects the general colonial perspective on both parts of the country which would contribute to the feeling of marginalization that is one of the main drivers of the First Civil War between the North and the South in 1955, one year before the independence.

The British vision of education had a top-bottom approach as their civilizing role was to be implemented through the introduction of an educational system that would "begin by teaching the sons of leading men, the heads of villages and the heads of districts" [24]. And these leading men were members of the main Northern tribes previously mentioned.

Some internal self-criticism appeared in 1936 from the British deputy under-secretary of state, Sir Lancelot Oliphant, who pointed the fact that the focus on the efficiency of the government had led to neglect the education of local people [25].

In 1946 the colonial government published a 10-Year Plan to prepare the independence of the country [24]. This meant to give up the policy of separate rule and unify administrative and educational policies. This unification, pushed by the northern elites, meant, in the educational field, the assimilation of the South by the North in terms of curricula and instruction medium. Arabic became the national language in all the schools of the country. In 1954, one year before the independence, out of eight hundred administrative posts that were left by the colonial staff and occupied by Sudanese, only six went to southerners.

Just one year after the independence, in 1956, the private schools of the South, including the missionary ones, were nationalized [26].

In this way, the non-Arab groups of the new born independent country felt to have being marginalized in terms of development, participation in the decision making process and definition of a national identity.

4.3. Arabization and Islamization after Independence

The Northern elite who formed the independent government embraced the pan-Arabic nationalism as their political ideology and launched a pro-Arabization policy throughout the country [27].

The new educational system of the independent Sudan, where Arabic had become the instruction medium, remained in force until the educational reform of the Government of Omar Al-Bashir, who issued in 1992 the General Education Organization Act [28]. The party that supported him, the National Islamic Front, was not just stressing Arabic culture. They were inspired by the Muslim Brothers of Egypt and brought in an Islamist ideology according to which it was necessary to correct the previous curriculum, as it was "too British" [29], and made it "more Sudanese" [29]. Thus the government took a step further in the policy of Arabization and Islamization of all the educational levels, as they were identified as the two main characteristics of Sudanese identity.

From the early days of Omar al-Bashir's presidency, the central government imposed an ideology that can be defined as politicised Islam or political Islam. Adherents of political Islam seek to establish a political state based on a particular interpretation of the sacred text. They "see Islam not as a mere religion, but as a political ideology which should be integrated into all aspects of society: politics, law, economy, social justice, foreign policy" [30]. Muslims who hold alternative interpretations of the sacred text or the relation between the religion and state are deemed as infidels or "less Muslims" and even subject to persecution [31].

While the elaboration of the national curriculum remained as a competence of the Federal Ministry of Education, the new system implied that State Ministries and Municipalities had to assume the rest of the tasks [32].

In 2005 the central Government of Khartoum and the Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM) that was mainly supported by the Black African inhabitants of the country, mostly located in the South, the Nuba Mountains (South Kordofan) and Blue Nile State, but also by other secularist components of the northern society, signed the so called Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). This agreement included the revision and update of the school curricula that was supposed to address "the multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious context of Sudan" [33].

This was never done and the South got its independence in 2011. The same government of Omar Al-Bashir introduced small changes to the curriculum of basic level starting from 2015–2016, few years before his fall. He was substituted in November 2019 after a Popular Uprising that brought in a Transitional Government. The new Director of National Curriculum and Research, Dr. Omar Al-Garrai, announced the introduction of another curriculum and a new ladder similar to the one previous to the government of Omar Al-Bashir. It was supposed to enter into force gradually from September 2020.

4.4. Civil Wars as Response to an Imposed Identity

The concept of heritage, "seek[s] to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past and somehow 'thickens' the existence of a nation" [34]. The problem comes when the selection of the past, values and norms is done by a part of the nation who wishes to impose that partial selection on the rest. And this selection is so important because it involves questions of identity, locality, religion and economic value [35].

This revision of literature has already mentioned the Civil Wars between the North and the South of the country. The first one started in 1955 when a group of Southern Sudanese soldiers mutinied against the Central Government of Khartoum. Some of those Southern Sudanese soldiers would become later on the Sudan People Liberation Army (SPLA). The Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM) would be the political arm.

That first civil war ended up in 1972 with the signature of a peace agreement in Addis Ababa. But the conflict was re-ignited in 1983 after the attempt to impose the Islamic Law on the South. This second phase of the conflict was much more violent and generated the displacement of more than 4 million people. About 1.8 million displaced persons moved to Khartoum by 2002 [36].

In 1989 Omar Hassan Ahmed Al-Bashir led a military coup d'état supported by the National Islamic Front, an Islamist party presided over by Hasan Al-Turabi. After his educational reform in 1992, Islamic religion became the main subject in terms of hours and weight in the national exams and the different courses were "Islamised". This means that the history of Sudan started with the "arrival of people" meaning the immigration of the Arabs as if there was nobody before them or as if the Kushite, the Meroitic or the medieval Christian Nubian kingdoms were "pre-history". The prosperity of Darfur in the XVII-XVIII centuries was also ignored. The Koran became the main text for the course of Arabic language. The history of humankind started with Adam and Eve.

The reformation of general education, that mainly affected basic and secondary school, had been preceded by the Act issued in 1990 to reform Higher Education. In tune with the Islamist ideology, the new legal framework aimed to promote Islamic culture, values and norms [34]. The instrument to operate this process was the National Center for Curriculum and Education Research that was created in 1991. The new national curriculum approved in 1992 was designed, developed and distributed by this institution throughout the country. Non-Arab Sudanese cultures, languages, religious beliefs and history were left aside in this project.

The operation also included the substitution of university teaching staff for deans, heads of departments and lecturers loyal to the Bashir's regime [37]. Moreover, the research projects on the Funj Sultanate created in the XVI century were privileged over previous periods as they represented the first Sudanese Islamic political reality.

Dr. Omar Al-Garrai, as already mentioned, was in charge of renewing the curricula after the Popular Revolution of 2019 that deposed Omar Al-Bashir. The new director of the National Center for Curriculum and Education

Research of a government which should have conducted the transition from a military-islamist regime to a civilian-democratic system, explained that all the school subjects "were filled with religious references that either counteracted learning or encouraged violent rhetoric. For many non-Muslims, the obligation to memorize religious verses at school was a burden and yet another sign of exclusivity" [38].

In fact, those policies had not just instigated the civil wars between the North and the South of the country. A parallel analysis can be conducted to explain the conflicts with the Western regions with whom tensions broke up with particular violence from 2003. Since that time the Sudanese Army and its proxy militias started targeting the villages where tribes like the Fur, Massalit and Zaghawa, classified as Black-African-Darfuri tribes, dwelt [39].

The members of the militia allied with the central government were known as *Janjaweed*, a word that could be translated into devil riding a horse. This militia was made of members of different *Baggara* tribes along with former bandits, demobilised government soldiers, common criminals and young unemployed Arab men [39].

The attackers systematically killed men, raped women and abducted children; they also targeted essential resources, destroying livestock, torching fields and villages, poisoning wells and levelling health clinics and schools [40]. According to United Nations (UN) reports, more than 300,000 Darfuri civilians were killed since 2003, and approximately 3,000,000 people were forcibly exiled [41]. These statistics do not include the impact of the last civil war started in April 2023.

The central government exploited the historical grievances of Arab tribes, mainly nomads and pastoralists, against non-Arab tribes, mainly farmers, by granting financial support and administrative positions to the members of the allied militia [42].

The feeling of oppression among the different targeted groups became the melting pot for the development of different armed groups, considered rebels by the central government: the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) linked to the Zaghawa and the Kobe tribes and the Sudan Liberation Army (SLM) that split into two: a wing led by Mirko Minawi (Zaghawa tribe) and another one by Abdel Wahid Al Nur (Fur tribe).

Rothbart and Adeeb identify two social areas in which the violence caused by the "Sudanese Arabs- Sudanese Africans" dualism occurs: the policies of the nation's education system and government-prompted practices regarding changes in the use of language [43]. A clear example of this latter issue is the exploitation of the forced displacement of local residents to change the names of the villages and cities from those given by the indigenous culture to new ones related to the geography of Saudi Arabia, land of the Prophet, and to his life. Some examples of this process are the transformation of a village named Umbala into Umkheir, which means "mother of blessing" in Arabic or the change from Fugo Kafur, "the mountain of infidels" in local language, into Jebel Moia, "the mountain of water" in Arabic [43].

This ideological division between Arabs and Africans implies a religious and a stereotypical racial hierarchy where persons with light skin have a higher status than persons with dark skin. This scale is not a new construct introduced by the Bashir regime or the Islamic Movement but finds its roots in the medieval times and the justification of the slavery of Black persons [43]. Thus, lighter-skinned Sudanese are considered pure nationals and full citizens. And this kind of Sudanese are mainly found in the riverine region of the North of the Country around the Nile and should be those entitled to rule the country [43].

During the Bashir's regime, the ideological project that deepened this vision was articulated by the Minister of Social Affairs, Ali Osman Mohammed Taha, under the title of "Civilizational Project". The aim of the project was "purifying Sudanese society and imposing strict Islamic norms, including Sharia, for all Sudanese" [37]. In this way, the religious affiliation to the Islamist movement could play a role similar to skin whitening and help a person to raise his status.

Just after the fall of Omar Al-Bashir, during the short rule of the Transitional Government, all Darfuri armed groups, previously considered as rebels, except for the Sudan Liberation Army-Abdul Wahid (SLA-AW), signed an agreement in October 2020 in Juba that integrated them into the national government [18]. The Juba Peace Agreement also included a government commitment for a quota of 20% of Darfuris in the public sector.

4.5. The Ongoing War and Its Relation to Cultural Heritage

Part of the *Janjawid* militias under the leadership of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, alias Hemeidti, a member of the camel-herding (Abbala) Northern Rizeigat tribe, one of the *Baggara* tribes, were integrated into the official Army under the name of Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in 2013 [44]. The RSF were supposed to be part of the National Intelligence and Security Service for some extraordinary operations, while during ordinary military ones were part of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Its creation aimed to combat the rebel groups that were created in Darfur region, South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, and their new legal personality was created by Bashir's regime after the attacks by a coalition of them, the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF), in April 2013. The SRF grouped the two wings of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army, the Justice and Equality Movement and the Sudan People Liberation Movement/Army-North.

After the fall of Omar El-Bashir in 2019, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) collaborated with the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) as they were also integrated in the Transitional Government. Hemeidti became vice-president of the Sovereign Council and from that privileged position he could develop his army that passed from having around 5,000–6,000 soldiers in February 2014 to more than 100,000 soldiers at the beginning of the war against SAF on April 15, 2023 [44].

It is interesting that the RSF soldiers, who mainly belong to different *Baggara* tribes, and therefore Sudanese Arabs, used similar rhetoric to speak about their marginalization by tribes of the Nile Valley (*Ja'ali*, *Shaiqi* and *Danagla*), perceived as the *center*. In fact Darfuris in general are called *Garraaba* (westerners) in a depreciative way to indicate their lower cultural level. But these RSF soldiers are not just Sudanese. Members of other *Baggara* tribes from Niger and Chad were fighting with them. Sudan's U.N. Ambassador, Al-Harith Mohamed, denounced in the UN Security Council on September 13 (9416th meeting) that the RSF were recruiting young people through religious leaders of mosques in Niger [45]. This army managed to occupy most of Khartoum State at the beginning of the war on April 15, 2023.

As a consequence of the fighting, museums, research institutes and universities, mainly present in Khartoum State, were particularly affected as if there was a plan to erase the cultural heritage that shaped the identity of the country to substitute by a new one [46].

Some remarkable buildings that were damaged by heavy artillery were the Ethnographic Museum and the old building of the Republican Palace in Khartoum. The Northern façade was partially destroyed. The palace had been built in 1830 to host the Turco-Egyptian governor. Some years later, the residence of the Governor of Northern Kordofan State had been built in El Obeid. It has been completely destroyed. The Khalifa's House in Omdurman, a museum that hosted a wonderful collection about the *mahdist* period, was completely looted.

The temples of Buhen, built by Hatshepsut in the XV century BC, and Aksha, built around 1250 BC by Ramses II, and moved to the National Museum of Khartoum in 1961, were also damaged as identified on May 18, 2023, using high-resolution satellite imagery [47]. The minaret of the Sultan Ali Dinar mosque in El Fasher was partially destroyed. Some churches were transformed into military bases by the Rapid Support Forces like the Catholic, the Episcopalian and the Coptic Cathedrals of Khartoum (St. Mary). When they become RSF military headquarters, they also become military targets for the SAF air force. Other churches were looted (Mar Girgis Coptic Church in Omdurman, Masalma Catholic Church).

The International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) [48] and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) [49] condemned these attacks against Sudanese cultural heritage. From 6 to 10 July 2023, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) co-organized a workshop in Cairo, to support Sudan's National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) that identified more than 139 at-risk heritage sites, buildings and collections—including World Heritage sites, museums and archaeological sites across Sudan [50].

On 27 August the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Sudan published a statement in its Facebook Page to describe the impact of the war on universities and research institutions [51]. A total of 104 government and private higher education institutions had been

damaged, looted and vandalised at that time. Some months later, in December 2023, RSF repeated the same operations in the University of Al-Jazira raising the number of students directly affected by the conflict to 87% of the total population. This destruction was particularly cruel in three capitals of the Darfurian region, El-Geneina, Zalengi, and Nyala, where the respective universities were "burned to ashes" [52].

In the same official Facebook Page, the Ministry published the decree of suspension of all academic activities until further notice signed on 14 August by the Minister, Professor Mohamed Hassan Dahab Ahmed. This decision left hundreds of university lecturers and researchers unemployed. Sudanese labour law provides that in the event of "force majeure", such as war, which prevents workers from attending the workplace and the institution from generating income, the contracts are considered terminated and can be reactivated after the resumption of work. This means that university lecturers of private institutions remained without salary since April 2023 until some of them managed to resume activities after October 15, once the Minister cancelled the suspension and encouraged universities to resettle in safe areas or work online.

The destruction of higher education and research infrastructures and the forced migration of hundreds of lecturers and researchers have caused a vacuum that will not be easily covered and will require years after shooting stops. Instead the Rapid Support Forces brought population from the West of the country to occupy the emptied houses of the inhabitants of the geographical center.

5. Conclusions

In their first ruling period, the British colonizers executed a policy of separate rule between the North and the South of the country that led different cultural groups to assume ethnocentric positions in relation to the other that could be classified, according to the Bennet Scale, as *denial*. From 1946 on, the colonial government started unifying administrative and educational policies around Arabic language and Islamic religion, which produced, again according to the Bennet Scale, a dynamics of *minimization* from the side of the Northern elites and *defense* from the Southern side.

In 1956, "only 39% of the Sudanese population claimed an Arab ethnic affiliation, while 51% claimed to be Arabic-speaking at home" [53].

According to World Population Review the number of Arabic speakers in Sudan reached 28,164,500 [54]. This number represents 54% of the total population. This would mean that there was not a big progress in the extension of Arabic language in spite of government efforts. But it is always difficult in Sudan to assess statistics and consider them as a faithful expression of the reality as the last census was carried out in 2009 and most statistics are based on projections, including the percentage of primary School enrollment of the World Bank which indicates a percentage of 77.77 % in 2018 [55].

Nonetheless, the fact is that after the Independence, the country has been torn out by different conflicts where the cultural element has played a paramount role. The ongoing war that broke out in 2023 has been the most devastating of all, as the so called "center" became the first battlefield in an attempt by the "peripheries" to substitute that "center".

Surely the Sudan that will emerge from this war will be different from the past one. It will be a "new Sudan". This term has very concrete connotations in the country as it is linked to the political vision of the founder of the Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM), John Garang. This development economist, politician and military leader, warned that "it is often forgotten that the Sudan is not just north and south. The Sudan is also west, east, and center, no matter what definitions you wish to attach to these labels" [56]. His vision of new Sudan implied the integration of cultural diversity and the separation between religion and state which meant to underline the concept of citizenship over the one of believer.

His efforts crystalized in the CPA signed by Omar Al-Bashir and himself on January 9, 2005 in Naivasha (Kenya). This agreement included a constitutional text for the transition to a referendum that was to allow the South to choose for secession, as it happened in 2011.

The CPA included the understanding of cultural heritage as a key for reconciliation and peace, idea that was also present in the peace agreement signed in Addis Abeba in 1972 to conclude the First Civil War. In that context, the President of Sudan at the time, Ja'far Nimeyri spoke of Sudan as an "Afro-Arab entity" [57]. The expression

aimed to integrate Sudanese diversity and was in line with the thought of a South Sudanese thinker, Francis Deng, who also pointed the finger on the challenge of building a national identity that should recognize "racial, ethnic, cultural and religious diversities" and build "on the fluidity of self-identification" [58].

The CPA implementation process proposed a vision that aimed to create a sense of common ownership and challenge the negative effects of instrumentalizing the concept of identity through the promotion of cultural heritage policies [59] that included "strengthening intercultural and inter-religious dialogue and developing protection of the national heritage" [60].

The CPA followed the principle of a single State but two systems, one for the South and another one for the North. This concept brings back the idea of the British colonial policy but in a new way. For instance, the Joint Assessment Mission for Sudan detailed cultural heritage initiatives that should contribute to the reconciliation and construction of a new national identity with which all Sudanese citizens could identify like "joint studies and discussions about the country's cultural heritage, customary law and traditional structure and […] capacity building and training, specifically […] for the conservation of the ancient cultural structures and their preservation and presentation on their original sites or in museums" [60].

In other words, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) proposed ways to lead inhabitants of the peripheries of the country towards a more ethno-relativist attitude that should have integrated the cultural diversity of the country.

In line with the CPA orientations, the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) developed a plan in 2005 that foresaw the creation of a network of museums in the country that led to the opening of some museums outside Khartoum State. Many of those museums were planned in States' capitals characterized by their violent conflicts like Nyala, Al-Janeina, Damazin, Fashoda, Kassala or Jonglei as if they were instruments of political reconciliation which could give official recognition and visibility to the different minorities. In fact, the map of the planned location of these museums showed their distribution along two thematic axes: "one axis is devoted to the development in the Northern capitals (Jebel Barkal-Karima, Dongola, Kerma, Wadi Halfa), the second axis concerns the Southern capitals (Juba, Jonglei, Fashoda) and the 'marginal' regions (Nyala, El-Damazin, Kassala)" [59].

Unfortunately the plan revealed a new form of discrimination between the museums that were to be distributed along these two axis as the first one was dedicated to the work of archaeologists and the second one to the research of anthropologists, so that "the concept of heritage is applied in the peripheries, but is not yet, qualifying any object or artefact" [59].

Moreover, the development of a Sudanese cultural heritage should not limit or reduce to elaborating a detailed map of the multiculturality of the country where museums showcase the costumes, musical instruments, traditional occupations and ways of life, handicrafts of different tribes. Furthermore, heritage cannot be used as a particular property of a local community that manipulates it as "weapon of the weak" to resist their *Sudanization*, even if their involvement is crucial. Neither can cultural heritage be used to justify the greatest *sudanity* of a certain group over others. The multicultural reality of the country should be the platform for an intercultural dialogue that produces a dynamic and shared concept of identity instead of justification for divisions and comparisons of "*sudanity*".

Claude Reilly tries to decipher Meroitic language that was the dominant language in the North of Sudan along the Nile Valley between the third BC and the fifth AC century [61]. Since there is no a Rosetta Stone to decode the language, Reilly investigates live languages that may be related to the old Meroitic. Different ethnic groups collaborated very voluntarily with him as they saw that if their language was similar to the Meroitic, they could consider themselves the original inhabitants of Sudan.

The way heritage may become source of integrative identity building is the intercultural one. This perspective implies a process that starts from discovering the multicultural nature of the country and educates through the mutual exchange of life and work to a global vision and a sense of citizenship that builds on what is shared in common and does not lead to losing one's own identity.

This means that schools become places of "initiation to the dialogue of life among young people of different religions and social backgrounds" [62] where cultural heritage are an important content of that dialogue and the potter who has shaped every interlocutor in a certain way.

According to the intercultural perspective, that clay should still be mouldable.

This intercultural approach goes beyond the concepts of relativism and assimilation.

Intercultural strategies function when they avoid separating individuals into autonomous and impermeable cultural spheres; they rather should promote encounter, dialogue and mutual transformation, so as to allow people to co-exist and deal with possible conflict [62].

In addition to this interaction, new academic curricula should include specific contents that reflect the cultural diversity of the country, including the integration of local languages, at least in basic school.

Cultural, social, religious and economic discriminations intertwine in the history of Sudan and have opened wounds that every war exacerbates and feed the desire of revenge. This latter dynamics can only be counteracted if the policies of national identity building are also accompanied by mechanisms of accountability and justice.

The sociologist Stuart Hall observed that "cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past" [9]. Therefore, the cultural identity of a population is not fixed but shaped by cultural and political forces. Thus, policies play a critical role in either enabling the evolution of cultural identity in a constructive way or constraining it through rigid norms.

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