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PERCEPTION OF DROUGHT BY THE PEOPLES OF THE SAHEL

This paper is a reflection on perception by traditional Afro-Arab peoples of ecological disaster resulting from the progressing desertification in the Sahel zone. Source material presented here was gathered by the author during field investigations in the Sudan in the years 1989 — 1991 in the Kordofan province in the area of the so-called confederation of Dar Hamid tribes.

Observations were made along with more or less official interviews on subjects most often bound up with current situation. Besides, a more formal method of investigation was the so-called guided questionnaire, previously prepared on the basis of results of observation and filled in writing in Arabic by teachers of local schools or administration officials. Fragments of the informants' statements quoted below also come from these questionnaires.

Dar Hamid tribes are regarded as Arabs and Muslims, though they are largely mixed up with African indigenous population. Hence, their close identification with Islam on the one hand, and the presence of indigenous beliefs — only adapted to the Muslim formula — on the other.

All the events of life are perceived by traditional peasants and shepherds of Kordofan through the prism of religious beliefs. Therefore, it should not be astonishing that also environmental changes and the concurring processes are perceived from the point of view of these beliefs. Most of the traditional inhabitants are deeply convinced that the recurring drought disasters and the ensuing poverty are closely connected with dissemination of secular lifestyle and departure from the old habits. Here is what the peasants of Dar Hamid villages say about the drought disaster and its causes:

"God punishes people with miseries, lack of rainfall, dusty sky, thirst, hunger, diseases..."

"People should make Karama (offering) on great feasts, particularly to feed the poor people, upon the appearance of certain stars prior to the rainy season. Today, many people think of this as useless magic."

There is a widespread conviction that it used to be better before. Although the inclination towards making the past ideal is characteristic of the majority of societies, it should be emphasized that the feelings of the inhabitants of Kordofan are expressed specially sharply in this matter. This happens not only because of desertification but also lack of adaptation to rapid commercialization and modernization.

Since the time when the rainfall decrease has become clearly visible, the problem has been gaining in importance. People have preserved in their consciousness the memory that the years of the British rule were marked by sufficient amount of rainfall. The subsequent years witnessed the recurring cyclical droughts, which slowly made people aware of the occurring climatic changes.

"There was enough rain during the British rule, gradually less and less from that time."

"Now we can see only dew on the grass during the rainy season."

However, until the drought of 1984/85, these disasters did not cause a major change in the consciousness of the inhabitants and their attitude towards the natural environment. All of them say that it was the worst drought in their entire life experience. One of the versions of the popular song reflects despair evoked by the disaster of 1984:

"When the wind brought dust instead of rain, this was nothing but treason,

Honour was dissipated, food vanished..."

The result of the drought was the occurrence of unusual pessimism with respect to the future, which caused that many people abandoned traditional farming patterns.

"After the last drought we went begging to Khartoum"

They ask us and we answer, we have nothing to hide, clear sky, clean land, no animals."

Actually, many people left their villages in 1984/85 never to return. Most of them found themselves in camps for starving refugees at Abu Zeid and El Mulah west of Omdurman. Others found jobs in Khartoum and elsewhere and decided to stay there. Many farms in the villages were abandoned. However, this justifiable pessimism was relatively rarely put in words, although the investigations were conducted in a successive dry year of 1990/1991. In my opinion, the reason for this is a cultural obligation of positive presentation of own life situation as well as an optimistic attitude towards the future.

The majority of the people interviewed (64%), asked about the future rainy season, answered that "only God knows it" thus avoiding any speculation. The reason for this seems to be the fear they might be suspected of magic practices or emphasizing — in front of a stranger — their orthodox attitude expressed in the statement *illa Allah* (only God may consider these

matters). However, 30% of the respondents answered that the coming rainy season will be good and better than the previous one, and only 6% gave pessimistic replies.

On the other hand, many of my respondents, even, those who were previously reluctant to speculate on the future weather, all the same, just for themselves, made use of traditional ways of predicting rain, especially before they decided to cultivate fields. This was usually the observation and interpretation of the stars:

"The appearance of Az Zahra (Venus) in the west signifies an abundant season. If it occurs in the east, the season will be moderate, and if it does not appear at all, it means there will be a calamity."

"If Tarik al Labana (Milky Way) appears from the north-west direction towards the south-east, there will be a good rainy season."

Besides, there are other techniques of predicting weather, though of lesser importance than the stars. Among them is the observation of animals, for example the appearance of migrating birds augurs a good rainy season.

Also the weather itself immediately preceding the rainy season is carefully observed and analyzed.

"A very hot summer and calm wind are good signs."

Irregular wind, hot time interrupted by cold periods foretell a bad rainy season."

Generally speaking, the informants pointed successively to the following weather signs foretelling heavy rain: high temperature, calm wind, lightnings, cloudy sky and much humidity. Here are some of the ways of the checking of the humidity and temperature levels:

"We weigh some sorghum in the early evening, then we put it on the plate on the roof of the hut, and we weigh it again in the morning. If the difference in the weight is large, it is a good sign."

Also, the beginning of the rainy season allows people to predict its actual course. For example, if rainfall occurs two or three times in a row, without long breaks, the rainy season will be good. Likewise:

"The rainfall occurring in the daytime and not at night, or early rainfall, even though light, gives a high level of humidity."

Most informants were also aware that the direction and kind of wind may directly affect weather conditions.

"Humid southerly wind blowing for 40 days foretells rain."

"Mild south-westerly wind brings rain."

Many people also realize that the wind is responsible for soil and plant destruction on the dunes.

"The soil carried by the wind from a distant area is clean and

hot. It burns the plants and kills the animals like the hot ash when it gets mixed with the grass."

However, climate is not the only reason for changes. People also mention the role of socio-economic factors, including the population increase in the region.

"In the past, villages were small; to hold a funeral, people from two villages were needed."

"Most of the old villages have been expanded to a great extent, some of them were subdivided into parts, and the new ones emerged, so they are countless now."

A high natural increase is obviously the cause of the population growth. But there is also a tendency to concentrate in large villages, where water supply is easier.

"In the past, you could clear the bush and start cultivation wherever you wished to; now the entire land is somebody's property."

Even the younger people say that it used to be better in the past.

"They used to cultivate only fertile land, now we are cultivating whatever is suitable."

"Children are taken by the school, they are difficult to please and they actually do not work in households. When they finish the school, they will go to Khartoum."

The reaction of state institutions to these disasters is almost always assessed negatively. But interventionism and its lack are equally criticized.

However, the elites demand state intervention to counteract progressing desertification, that is the tree planting actions, the banning of tree cutting by the newcomers and improvement of water supply.

However, the majority of traditional population in Kordofan is passive and reluctant to accept any innovation, even if it might improve their living conditions. As I have already mentioned, this fatalism is due to a widespread belief that all social and physical events are initiated, guided and controlled by God. Thus, all man can do is to be obedient to His will. Besides, it is held that truly pious people should avoid questions about the reasons why God does what He does.

"We will not interfere with God's wishes; if people are good, His blessing will return."

To be good is to observe the principles of the Muslim faith and the old tradition. If rational arguments are used, they usually answer:

"If, as you say, the rain is the result of ordinary physical processes, then why it suddenly rained after the overthrow of Nimeiri. Similarly, why did so dry year as Sadiqa al Mahdi was appear to be very wet in the middle?"

They do not accept arguments that man may alleviate the effects of drought and hamper the desertification process if this is God's intention. If

so, the only thing man can do is to ask God to give rain and observe the commandments of the faith and old customs. When there is no rainfall in the rainy season, almost all the villagers go to the fields for special prayers asking for the rain (*salat es stiska*). They are attended by people in worn out and dirty clothes, without ritual ablutions, who pray all the time in the standing position for a longer time than it is the usual practice. The point is that God should see the poverty of his people. The prayer is not preceded by the invocation (*ikkama*) and is said aloud all the time.

Drought and desertification of the region have led to the abandoning of nomadic pastoralism and the shift of the nomads to a sedentary life and agricultural activity. Extensive agriculture, on the other hand, does not bring the expected profits either, and its extension — like pastoralism — intensifies the process of desertification.

People of Dar Hamid, thanks to the activity of governmental and international organizations, are already aware that the effects of drought and desertification could be considerably limited or even reverted, should the tree cutting, overgrazing and excessive extensive cultivation in the savanna be stopped. Despite this awareness, they are unable to change their way of land cultivation, which is, unfortunately, based upon the above-mentioned destructive activity. The only fuel available for households is wood and charcoal. In the north of Dar Hamid, wood is also used for salt production through vaporization of salty water, as well as for construction of houses. The production of salt, like that of charcoal is one of the few additional sources of maintenance for the poorest people, which is so important in the event of drought.

Thus, most inhabitants of the region are passive and do not counteract desertification. Attached to their tradition and religion, they perceive any changes as experiences sent by God to check their spiritual attitude. This causes that many groups are extremely reluctant to accept any changes or positive actions. The only strategy, then, seems to be to wait for the help from outside or escape from drought-inflicted areas to large towns and live a poor life in their suburbs.

The elites are the only social groups that are already aware of causes and danger of desertification.

