

Discussing “human rights” with the displaced: The use of ‘religion’ and other discursive devices by displaced sudanese in “human rights” discourse

William J. Bajor Until relatively recently, Anthropological data on the topic of “Human Rights” had been extremely scarce when compared to the amount of literature available in fields such as Law and Political Science. Throughout the 1990’s, however, interest amongst anthropologists to engage in “Human Rights” issues appears to have risen considerably. This was clearly demonstrated at the American Anthropological Association Conference in 1994 in Atlanta, Georgia, where the annual conference’s central theme focused on “Human Rights” and the role of anthropologists in the “Human Rights” debate. Anthropologists pride themselves on the discipline’s ‘tradition’ of cultural sensitivity (Schirmer, Renteln, and Weisberg 1988:127-128). It is this ‘tradition’, I believe, which especially lends itself well to an anthropological approach to how a politically sensitive topic, such as “Human Rights”, is discussed by a particular group or individuals. In other words, because of the hands-on research methods routinely employed in their fieldwork in studying contemporary societies, especially those of the developing world, anthropologists are particularly well suited for studying “Human Rights” in general and “Human Rights” discourse in particular.

With notable exceptions, such as *Arab Voices: The Human Rights Debate in the Middle East* by Kevin Dwyer in 1991 and *Facing Genocide: The Nuba of Sudan* by Alexander de Waal and Yoanes Ajawin in 1995, “Human Rights” research has almost exclusively been concerned with the opinions of outsiders (lawyers, politicians, academic researchers, etc...); in other words, those not from the particular region studied. My presentation will look at the “Human Rights” discourse of externally displaced Sudanese and in doing so attempt to provide a somewhat alternative perspective in giving priority to the voices of those Sudanese in exile. The topic of

"Human Rights" was discussed with me by the displaced Sudanese – during fieldwork conducted in 1994 and 1995 in Egypt, Kenya, and the United Kingdom – with the aid of several 'tools' and 'devices'. This paper focuses on one – "religion". I state now that the intention of this presentation is not an attempt to essentialise a definition of "Human Rights" for all displaced Sudanese. My intention is merely to look at how the notion of "Human Rights" is discussed by displaced Sudanese in the contexts of their lives as exiles and the continuing political events in Sudan.

In all my discussions with the displaced Sudanese, no attempt was ever made by me to conceal the fact that I am an American student based in Scotland conducting research for academic purposes. Therefore, to whatever extent, my "Americanness" undoubtedly factored into the content and manner in which each discussion materialised. For example, dissatisfaction with the lack of direct American involvement in the political situation in Sudan was expressed by several interviewees opposed to the present regime in Sudan. A case in point was my meeting with *Ghaali*, a Law student at Cairo University from Southern Sudan. He and I had been discussing possible roles for the international community to play in helping end the Sudanese civil war when he threw out some comparisons with the actions and involvement of the United States in other global "trouble spots" by arguing:

"...if it is possible, the *American government* must treat all the cases in one [manner]. It agrees with those who are calling to help the Kurdish rebels in Iraq and to liberate Kuwait...invaded by Iraq; and also, to ban mass destruction, and to do [away] with all which are against the Human Rights. It must treat all these problems in the same way. As [with] us in Southern Sudan, I think it (United States) has a right (duty)."

"For me...if I'm speaking to *Clinton* now, I'll tell him not tomorrow, but from today my people are dying from all these things – catastrophes, wars, and famine and all these things. I can tell him now we can't go to [back to the] South because now I'm studying, I have no power. Even [after] I will [have] graduated, I will not have power. What can I do? I will pray to God to help me because He's the greatest power to help...solve all the problems. What can I do? I have no power!"

Ghaali's words sounded as though they were a plea for help to a nation – the United States – perceived by him to be in the best position to come to the rescue of the Southern Sudanese. 'If the United States acts as the global police force in Iraq, Kuwait, and Haiti', he asked, 'why not Sudan?'

Another example of my "Americanness" playing an obviously large role occurred when interviewing *Manut* and *Antonio*, two ardent supporters of the John Garang lead Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). When I arrived at Manut's flat in Cairo for our meeting the introductions had barely finished when Antonio began speaking as if he were a university lecturer. He started off by saying that he intended to address four issues: the historical background of Sudan; the source of the

Southern Sudan problem; the solution to the Southern Sudan problem; and the current status of the Southern Sudan problem.

Speaking on the third point, Antonio stated:

“And the world says there is something called [the] New World Order. New World Order means equality. People should be equal.”

“You should also not get surprised, you American people. The same life we are leading you have one time been in. You were [at] one time colonised, and you fight for your rights. Your rights, and you got it. And I think you (United States) should sympathise with the people who have fallen to the same problem which you...have tested. I mean oppressed. They do not have a certain limit. Oppressed is oppressed. Small or big, it is the same. If you are being oppressed, it means that you are deprived of rights. So we are being oppressed, and you were at one time being oppressed, and you got your independence, alright. And you have power at the same time. Why not to give that power to [a] person oppressed. Because you have tested it...”

For the next hour we discussed American foreign policy and the United States as a participant in the global “war of interests”. Manut and Antonio did their best to convince me that the political stabilisation and an end to civil strife in Sudan should be a top priority for the United States government; particularly because Sudan is of major geo-strategic importance. They also added that the United States should support the Southern Sudanese because the United States is a “Christian state”.

The discussions with Ghaali *and* Manut and Antonio were just two examples from the many interviews where my nationality as a citizen of the United States, the perceived global watchdog, played a particularly noticeable role.

As demonstrated by the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (June 14-25, 1993), the issue of “Human Rights” is becoming increasingly popular on the international political scene. “The Conference was marked by an unprecedented degree of participation by government delegates and the international human rights community” (United Nations 1995:1). This “unprecedented degree of participation” is a reflection of two trends, particularly since the end of the ‘Cold War’. The first, that there is a growing concern internationally for “human” suffering, notably as a result of armed conflict – for example, the tragedies of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda. This is reflected in the amount of media coverage and the fact that great efforts – by NGO’s, PVO’s, the United Nations, local and regional (such as the OAU and NATO) political organisations –have taken place to help ease situations in both countries. The second trend being that more than ever before the United Nations and individual countries are employing the notion of

"Human Rights" as a 'tool' for part of their policy agendas.¹ For example, since the military coup occurred in Sudan on 30 June 1989, countless Bills and Resolutions have been drawn up in the United States by members of the House of Representatives and Senate regarding the humanitarian situation in Sudan. Acts have been passed condemning "the Government of Sudan for its severe human rights abuses..." (United States Government 1993a:41) Recommendations have been made by the Senate urging the American president "to explore other means necessary to force the Government of Sudan to halt its war policies should the humanitarian conditions further deteriorate and the Government of Sudan continue to impede relief efforts..." (United States Government 1993c:5), and to push the United Nations Security Council "to impose an arms embargo on Sudan" (United States Government 1993c:6). This is in addition to the termination of all economic assistance to Sudan by the United States, in accordance with the provisions of a foreign assistance appropriations law (United States Government 1993b:946)², as a result of the military overthrowing the democratically elected government of Sadiq al-Mahdi. In simpler terms, the American government acts upon what it considers to be violations of "Human Rights" on the part of the government of Sudan by using Sudan's "Human Rights" record as a 'tool' in its policy agenda towards Sudan. This popular contemporary notion of "Human Rights", however, can also be utilised as a 'tool' by individuals in discussion. In other words, the notion of "Human Rights" can be used by individuals as a discursive 'device' which they in turn can employ as a 'politically oriented weapon' – such as to verbally speak out against the undemocratic policies of a particular government. Using excerpts from several recorded interviews (all but one from Egypt), I will demonstrate *one* of the ways in which the notion of "Human Rights" is discursively employed by displaced Sudanese as an anti-Sudanese government 'political weapon'.

While I interviewed well over one-hundred displaced Sudanese in Egypt, Kenya, and the United Kingdom as part of my Ph.D. fieldwork, my research focused primarily on those interviews which were audio tape recorded. Thirty-three interviews were recorded in total. While it is true that some surely discussed "Human Rights" differently – perhaps some interviewees were not honest or forthcoming – because our meeting was recorded; my primary concern was to focus on the precise spoken words of the interviewees, and when necessary,³ the conditions under which those words were spoken. By conditions, I am referring to the physical setting, the number of interviewees at any one particular meeting, and the relationship between the interviewees and myself. Regarding the forthrightness of the interviewees, I take a similar view as that expressed by

Tore Nordenstam. In his book, *Sudanese Ethics*, he states: "That informants may fail to be honest and serious is...no reason for disregarding their ideological discourse"(1968:42). My fieldwork was precisely concerned with *their* discourse.

Because the current situation for the displaced Sudanese in Egypt is dire and not well documented, I believe it most important to briefly address their circumstances; after which, I will go on to present interview excerpts dealing with the use of "religion" as a discursive 'device'.

STATUS OF DISPLACED SUDANESE IN EGYPT

Fieldwork in Egypt intimately exposed me to the situation facing Egypt's Sudanese "refugees", most of whom are denied the recognition of refugee status; thus, most are denied the minimal benefits (such as, food and shelter) they should rightly be entitled. They have come to Egypt in increasing numbers in the past few years, and it does not appear these numbers will slow down in the near future.

Southern Sudan itself borders many nations (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Zaire, and the Central African Republic), yet there are literally tens of thousands more Southern Sudanese in Egypt than any other country. The actual amount of Southern Sudanese in Egypt is unknown because accurate statistics of displaced Sudanese not recognised as refugees does not exist. An American embassy representative in Cairo concurred that the displaced Southern Sudanese population in Egypt is larger than any of the Southern Sudanese refugee communities in Uganda, Zaire, Ethiopia, and Kenya. Add this amount of Southern Sudanese to the rest of the Sudanese population in Egypt, and you have a community of Sudanese in Egypt between three and five million.⁴

The Northern Sudanese community (excluding Northern political exiles) in Egypt has always been sizeable,⁵ because of the historical and cultural ties between the Northern Sudanese and Egyptians. While it is true there are substantial cultural differences between an average Northern Sudanese "Arab" and an Egyptian "Arab" with regards to the physical and social environments they call "home" (Abbas 1952:13-14), Cairo continues to be the destination for countless Northern Sudanese, who have been known to spend years and even generations in Egypt, while still retaining their Sudanese nationality and identity. The same cannot be said for the Southern Sudanese, most of whom are relative newcomers to Egypt, who themselves have told me they would rather be at refugee camps in Kenya or Uganda if given the chance because of the hardships and racism they must

endure in Egypt. Since the coup of June 30, 1989, Sudanese have fled to Egypt by the thousands (Minority Rights Group International 1995:19), with figures peaking in 1992 (Ga-aro 1995:38). If so many Sudanese (primarily Southern and also exiled Northern) are now residing in Egypt without any source of income and completely separated from their extended families⁶, what “rights” and “freedoms” in Sudan do they feel are being denied to them? What are they better able to do in Egypt than Sudan? Is it being able to survive? Does the civil war or military government have anything to do with their change in residence? Sudanese scholar and expert on the Sudanese situation in Egypt, Festus Ufulle Ga-aro states, “there is no single reason for their flight, but it is believed that they leave their country of origin because of the current political instability in the country” (1995:1).

The overwhelming majority of Sudanese in Egypt are not recognised by the Egyptian government as refugees and are given the unofficial, but commonly understood, status of ‘second citizens’. The documents used by the government of Egypt to support this designation are the *Nile Valley (Waadi el Nil) Treaty*, signed in 1978, and the *Charter of Integration Between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the Democratic Republic of Sudan*, signed at Khartoum on October 12th, 1982. The latter is the only treaty between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the Republic of Sudan registered with the United Nations. Both documents allow for Sudanese and Egyptians to freely travel and live in either country. The Sudanese in Egypt are theoretically entitled to all of the benefits as any Egyptian, and vice versa. For many of the Sudanese I met, particularly Southerners, this has been virtually ignored in practice. Countless stories have been told to me of discrimination in employment and education (Near East Foundation/Center For Development Studies 1996:10). Sadly, the UNHCR and individual national governments respect the wishes of the Egyptian government to continue the recognition of the growing community of Sudanese refugees as ‘second citizens’.⁷ This means that very few of the Sudanese receive any kind of support whatsoever⁸, and it also means that a Sudanese is ineligible to apply from Egypt to a third country as a refugee.⁹

Thousands upon thousands of Southern Sudanese are in Egypt because they were previously displaced in the northern part of their own country (particularly in camps or shanty towns outside of the capital – Khartoum). The war in the South frequently hits the people from behind thus forcing them north, as opposed to a retreat further south. It is usually after the bad experiences (such as discrimination and impoverishment) a Southerner faces in Northern Sudan that influences him/her to come to Egypt. Historically, Kenya and Uganda were the two main destinations for Southerners seeking opportunities in education and employment (Deng 1995:85-86). From

the beginning of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium, the British administration treated the South as a separate region, intending to eventually incorporate it with the British East African colonies of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika. The British did their best to keep away the Arabic and Islamic – “Northern” – influence from the South. The point is that Egypt is so far away from Southern Sudan -geographically and culturally – in comparison with its southern neighbours, that it really does not make sense for a Southern Sudanese to be in Egypt unless there was a good reason - family, employment, university, or dare I say fleeing war and persecution. I only met one Southern Sudanese during my research who claimed he was not unhappy with life in Egypt. To be fair, however, even with all of the problems, some Southern Sudanese did express gratitude that Egypt has at least let them stay in the country. For most, there is no better alternative.

DISCUSSIONS

Because most of the displaced Sudanese I interviewed claimed to be living outside their country as a result of its internal political situation, I would like to briefly say a few words on Sudan's present government in power and Sudan's seemingly perpetual civil war. Firstly, on 30 June 1989, Brigadier (now Lieutenant-General) Omar Hassan Ahmed El-Bashir led a successful coup d'état, installing the fourth military government in Sudan since independence (1 January 1956). I was told by one Sudanese that just ten tanks, fifteen officers and forty-five enlisted soldiers were all that was necessary to mount a successful mutiny against the 'democratically' elected government of Sadiq al-Mahdi. Almost immediately, *all* forms of dissent were brutally suppressed in the capital. There were mass detentions, the banning of trade unions, the closing of the press, and the dismantling of the independent secular judiciary (Africa Watch Report 1990:1-7). The National Islamic Front (Muslim Brotherhood), led by Dr. Hassan Turabi, is viewed by most as the driving force behind the present Sudanese 'regime'. Secondly, Sudan has more or less been in a state of civil war since 1955. With notable exceptions (such as, the Nuba Mountains), armed conflict has almost exclusively taken place in Southern Sudan. From 1983 – the year generally given as marking the beginning of the second phase of the war – to 1993 alone, more than one and a half million Southern Sudanese had died as a direct consequence of the civil war (Burr and Collins 1995:1). More recently, the war has taken a different turn as parts of Eastern Sudan -particularly near Sudan's

border with Eritrea – are likewise turning into war zones. As far as the most recent events in Sudan are concerned, I must confess I am not up to date. This is due to my enrolment – since September 1997 – as a full-time post-graduate Law student at the University of Edinburgh where I have been unable to fully integrate my interest in Sudan into the program.

The Sudanese government claims they are representative of the values espoused by the majority Muslim population of Sudan. These values, they contend, allow for the protection of Sudanese peoples of all religious persuasions (Sudanese Ministry of Culture 1994). In addition, these values are said to be rooted in *Sharia* (Islamic Law). The sources of *Sharia* are the *Qur'an* – “the infallible Word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad” (Dawood 1990:1) – and *Sunna* (literally meaning “custom”) – “rule based on the Prophet’s precedent” (Kadduri 1984:242). Since *Sharia* is largely based on interpretation of the two, and given that Islam is practised in varying ways in Sudan (Trimingham 1949, Fluehr-Lobban 1987), who is to say whether the Sudanese government’s interpretation is or is not the correct one for the Sudanese people? Many of the interviewees had much to say on this issue; particularly those who are Muslim and in opposition to the version of Islam preached by the National Islamic Front (NIF) and current Sudanese government.

Mabrouk (in his mid-fifties), now living in Oxford with his wife and children, was no exception. As a leading member of a trade union, besides considered a “leftist”, Mabrouk had been particularly targeted by the current government of Sudan.¹⁰ In talking about the systematic use of harassment and torture by the present Sudanese government on its suspected opponents, Mabrouk emphasised his own personal experiences in detention totalling more than one full year. He mentioned that he was forbidden to say his prayers – as a form of torture – while in detention. Mabrouk, a Muslim, revealed, though, that it was his faith in God which provided him with the strength he needed to get through the toughest times in the “Ghost House” (secret detention centre). Upon hearing this, I gathered that Islam had an important role in his life and was curious as to how he felt the Sudanese government, labelled as “Muslim Fundamentalists” by the international press, was using Islam under the guidance of the National Islamic Front (NIF). “*What role does Islam have in the current Sudanese government?*”, I asked. Mabrouk replied:

“They (the government) are not good Muslims, and they are taking advantage of Islam to rule. Their mission is to rule; of power, of money, of everything. And as I told you...they forbid me to say my prayers. This is not Islam. The big issue which they are now trying to do [is] the application of the Sharia law. They say that now the government speaks about whipping for those who drink [alcohol], amputation

for those who steal, and so on. We are against the Muslim fundamentalists (the government) and the *Sharia* laws which they are now calling for and trying to apply in Sudan now because they are not applied properly and it's not the proper *Sharia* that we know or we want. *And they are not good Muslims in the respect that they are taking advantage of Islam to suppress people...* they scare people. If you say, "I am against this and I don't like [that]...", [the government replies] "Oh! You are against Islam." We are not against Islam. We are against the bad deeds that the Muslim fundamentalists are doing. And we are against it (the government). *Islam is something different from what they are doing now. Islam is not against democracy; Islam is not against freedom; Islam does not say to you [to] detain people and kill them in cold blood, and torture them. This is against Islam. Islam is a religion of peace;*...they (NIF) think that the government should strike them (Southern Sudanese), should launch war against them, should impose unity by force. So, they (the current government of Sudan) are against peace; and this is why we are against the Muslim fundamentalists. In a nutshell, they are not proper Muslims, and they are not good Muslims. And the recent period has confirmed this."

In discussing with me the role Islam plays in the activities of the present Sudanese government and in response to government claims that it is promoting an Islam compatible with Sudanese values and an Islam the people of Sudan desire, *Naomi*, a Muslim woman from the Nuba Mountains, explained:

"We (the Nuba) are not against anybody, but there are gross violations of the Human Rights. You see, I can be working on my farm, and then somebody comes and kills me. This is [an example of the] gross violations. I cannot keep quiet."

"There were gross Human Rights violations of the Nuba women, because according to the regime now they are the public property of the soldiers in the region. You see, there is daily rape of women, and they take them to the [military] camps to do the cooking, and all these kinds of things. Any man can rape her; any man can use her the way he wants. You see, this is in the present regime. So, I think that our politicians were not wise in the past because this thing could have been dealt [with] in a better manner. *This has nothing to do with Islam* – what is happening now. *I know it has nothing to do with Islam.*"

Tayib held a 'democratically' elected political position representing the UMMA Party in the late 1980's. As a member of a political party with its own ideology strongly influenced by Islam¹¹, I thought it especially interesting to hear his opinion on an opposing party's Islamic ideology; in particular, the party (NIF) he considers responsible for the loss of his government post and flight into exile. In regards to 'internationally recognised' standards of "Human Rights", I asked *Tayib* to give me his opinion, as a politician,...on the use of Islam by the current government of Sudan. *Tayib* answered:

"Well, *Islam does not endorse the torture of people*, whatever their political position or political standards. *Islam does not approve sacking people from their jobs simply because they are not in the*

[right political] party. Islam does not approve the killing or even the detention of political opponents. So, violations of Human Rights in this country, in Sudan, are no different from let's say Iran, from Iraq, from Kuwait. Islam is not a religion of torture, it's not a religion of coup d'états, it's not a religion of war. So, it's very strange that somebody says this (the policies of the current Sudanese government) is not a violation of Human Rights, [and] it is [these] kinds of Islamic standards being practised in the country. This is a fallacy and we (as Muslims active in the political opposition -particularly of the UMMA Party- to the current Sudanese government) believe that from an Islamic point of view there is wide ranging violations of Human Rights in the country. Those who are being tortured [by the current government in Sudan] are not Jews, they are not Christians, but they are genuine Muslims who pray five times a day, who observe their Ramadan, who go to the mosque very frequently, [and]...who do not drink...liquor or rum or whatever."

Albert (in his forties), a practising Christian originally from Bor, moved with his family throughout Southern Sudan as a child before coming to Khartoum where he completed secondary school and attended the University of Khartoum, receiving a degree in English. Albert became a civil servant before moving to Cairo in 1990 with his wife and children. His father died in 1971 as a result of the civil war and some of his uncles have been killed by in-fighting within the SPLM/A ranks; but his worst tragedy during all this time of violence has been being completely cut off from any contact with his mother for over fourteen years. In criticising the current Sudanese government's "Human Rights" record in regards to its employment of *an* Islamic ideology Albert stated:

"...the government onslaught against Human Rights in the country; ...that the government of Sudan is doing things against its own citizens that would not be acceptable to any society that believes in equality [and] justice. We (the Southern Sudanese political opposition) explained to them (international community) that the government is imposing *its Islamic ideology* on people who are either not Muslims or are *not believers* in the religious system...ruling the country."

Much of this particular conversation with Albert revolved around comparisons between "Human Rights" as defined in the United Nations and "Human Rights" as understood and practised traditionally amongst the Dinka. He had just finished explaining to me the value of human life in Dinka society and how it favourably compared with the values expressed in United Nations documents on "Human Rights" when he went on to do the same with the issue of religious freedom. Albert explained:

"Nobody in our traditional societies are described as animist [by the Southern Sudanese themselves]. Well, from our (Southern Sudanese) point of view that's an incorrect definition, because animism means worshipping objects, physical things which are not God.¹² In our societies, most of the

societies, and I am not only speaking about my tribe, people know God, and God has a name in almost all these languages."

"...the issue of *freedom of religion* comes in here. In our society, there was no common religion that tied everybody. Each family or each clan could choose to select its own middle spirit through which they could communicate with God."

"I'm using this to elaborate one of the basic principles in our Southern community. That is freedom of religion; nobody ever tries to force another person to do...religious things the way he wants; which ties in to the international value of freedom of religion which is also enshrined in the Human Rights covenant. That's the point I'm trying to make."

Albert's explanation is most interesting as he describes the Dinka as being a religiously diverse society within themselves. In this way he neatly implies a comparison with religious diversity internationally, and that "Human Rights" as understood in the United Nations is fully compatible with the traditional values espoused in Dinka society. Taking into consideration that he is currently a spokesperson for Southern Sudanese political parties, and in hopes of gaining support from the international community (United Nations, United States, European Union, etc...) to overthrow the Sudanese government in power, it makes perfect sense that he should paint Dinka society the way he did, conforming so nicely with 'international' values and standards of "Human Rights". Regarding United Nations definitions of "Human Rights", a considerable number of interviewees indeed singled out the matter of freedom of religion as one the biggest issues confronting contemporary Sudanese politics and identity.¹³

Mabrouk was detained, tortured, and denied the right to say his prayers in the infamous "Ghost House"; Naomi had had all her property (land) in the Nuba Mountains seized; Tayib was sent to prison as a member of an opposing 'Islamic' based party; and Albert has lost too many relatives – to the civil war – while attempting to resist, as he said, "the government onslaught against Human Rights". They all claim that their unfortunate experiences occurred in the name of the Sudanese government's continued imposition of an Islamic ideology not compatible with the religious beliefs of the majority of the Sudanese people – Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

While the issue of religious freedom is actually not any more a "vehicle" to trash the current 'regime' than it is an explanation of personal beliefs, it was a frequently raised matter because of the strong religious element in Sudanese politics and the civil war. It was a "vehicle" to the extent that the interviewees employed it in conversations when discussion concerned the religious orientation of the present Sudanese administration. The religious ideology of the Sudanese government is one which all of the interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with.

CONCLUSION

From my discussions with the displaced Sudanese, including those presented here, it was apparent that “Human Rights” was not discussed in a monolithic fashion. Quite the contrary, for although the ‘theme’ throughout practically every discussion centred on criticism of the present ‘regime’ in Sudan, the notion of “Human Rights” was expressed with the aid of several ‘tools’ (or ‘devices’). For my thesis, I divided these ‘tools’ into two categories – “Scripts” and “Vehicles” (Bajor 1997:304-338). “Scripts” refer to the way some of the interviewees came to the interview with a well prepared agenda or interview design of their own. This was especially true when interviewees and I had been previously acquainted. “Vehicles” refer to issues which came up in my discussions with the displaced Sudanese again and again. What I mean is that within a discussion on the subject of “Human Rights”, certain issues stuck out for the interviewees as ones useful to employ for making examples and illustrating points. As a means of criticising the present Sudanese ‘regime’, many interviewees cited the lack of democracy and religious freedom in Sudan. In other words, the topics of democracy and religious freedom in Sudan were frequently employed as “vehicles” to express a distaste for Sudan’s present government. To a much lesser extent, interviewees employed other “vehicles” such as Sudan’s ‘falling’ economy and the lack of opportunities in higher education. In this article, I have focused on the “vehicle” of “religion” because the topic of “religion” is integrally related to the questions of what is true Islam and what makes for a good Muslim. Both, as indicated by the interviewees, are at the heart of the present, and ongoing, Sudanese conflict.

In the Preface of *Arab Voices*, Kevin Dwyer states, “Most of the people I talked to placed their discussion in the context of the profound crisis their societies faced” (1991:14). It is also true that almost all of those I interviewed placed their discussions in the context of crisis. I believe, though, that the crises faced by the Sudanese are much greater than those faced by the peoples studied by Dwyer. In my opinion, the crises faced by the Sudanese in the last fifteen years is comparable with the worst crises – in human cost – in contemporary times. The first reason is the seemingly never-ending civil war and political instability in Sudan. The second is the situation of being displaced (and for many, unwelcome) in a foreign country, and not having the slightest clue of when a return back to Sudan will be possible. All of the interviewees spoke about “Human Rights” in the context of how the political situation in Sudan has affected their lives. For example, because most of the Sudanese I interviewed have been displaced from Sudan after the military coup of 30 June 1989,

most of our discussions revolved around criticising the current government of Sudan which came to power as a result of the coup. Undoubtedly, the overriding “theme” from all of the interviews, as expressed by the interviewees, was that the current government of Sudan is not the right government for the Sudanese people. In short, the interviewees discussed “Human Rights” with me in the context of both, the events going on in Sudan and their circumstances as exiles.

The displaced Sudanese are not unique in their use of “religion” in “Human Rights” discourse for Sudan is one of many nations at war over faith. One need not search too deep to see the almost universal plague of “religion” playing a central role in armed conflict. What I am in essence arguing for in this article, as evidenced by what was expressed by Mabrouk, Naomi, Tayib, and Albert is that “Human Rights” is an undefinable political tool. “Religion”, in this case, is merely the means or channel through which the notion of “Human Rights” is expressed. In the end, the only conclusion I can make from my discussions with the displaced Sudanese is that there is no such thing as a displaced Sudanese definition or version of “Human Rights”. The notion of “Human Rights” is more or less an empty “tool-box” which is filled with whatever tools (“terms” and “notions”) the interviewees feel useful to employ in our discussions. “Human Rights” is “religious freedom” for those interviewees who believe they have been denied the right to practice their religion. “Human Rights” is what Americans have for those who wish for American intervention and assistance in overthrowing the ‘regime’. “Human Rights” is “democracy”; “Human Rights” is “going home”; it is “peace”, it is “justice”, it is “dignity”, and “Human Rights” is a host of countless other words and ideas. These “tools” change from interview to interview, interviewee to interviewee, discussion to discussion, and from topic to topic. Simply put, “Human Rights” is a term devoid of meaning until someone puts something – a term or idea – into the “tool-box” and gives it meaning. Undoubtedly the major use for the term “Human Rights” here is as a ‘whip’ with which to beat on the current Sudanese ‘regime’. In other words, “religion” is a channel by which the meaning of “Human Rights” is employed as a discursive ‘device’ and ‘political weapon’ by Mabrouk, Naomi, Tayib, and Albert. In the words of James Kingston, research officer at the British Institute of International and Comparative Law:

“The content of “Human Rights”, rather than being universal and immutable, changes with time according to the socio-political environment in which we live. Perhaps “Human Rights” discourse may best be seen as the pragmatic expression of those political goals the speaker sees as most important in the environment in which he or she lives (Kingston 1994:286).”

Before closing, if I may, I would just say a few words on the debate between anthropologists who speak out on “Human Rights” matters and those that refrain from doing so. I am not going to say that speaking out is necessarily better than not, for when deciding whether or not to do so, anthropologists are frequently forced to make judgement calls; meaning that anthropologists must sometimes decide whether or not speaking out on “Human Rights” abuses is worth putting at risk their careers and research interests in a particular area. One professor I know was banned for ten years from the country of her main research interest and expertise because of her activist stance against the “Human Rights” abuses inflicted upon the ‘people’ she had been studying.

Regardless of where any of us stands on this debate we must always be sensitive; not only to the ‘peoples’ we study, but to our colleagues and peers as well. Each fieldwork is different than the next and the ones before it. Problems and obstacles are unique to each particular research project, thus reflected in each project’s unique responses and conclusions. While we all must be open to criticism from our peers, we must not allow criticism of each other to step beyond that of a constructive nature (e.g. personal attacks suggesting professional jealousy or reflecting an unwillingness to accept different opinions) because only the researcher fully understands the particulars of *their* research leading them to speak out or refrain from doing so on “Human Rights” issues.

Nonetheless, as demonstrated at the 1994 AAA Conference, it is clear that anthropologists are increasingly being called into the “Human Rights” arena on issues of particular interest over a wide range of disciplines such as female circumcision, child labour, genocide and crimes against humanity. I, for one, believe it is high time anthropologists had a role to play in the international “Human Rights” arena. For too long has International Law ignored anthropological scholarship on issues most familiar to anthropologists. Likewise, it only benefits Anthropology if anthropologists better learn the ropes of the rather narrow parameters of International Law if they truly have in mind the well-being and “Human Rights” protection of the ‘peoples’ they study.

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NOTAS

- 1 I am not assigning a value to the word 'tool'. A political 'tool' could be used to help just as it could be used to hurt.
- 2 "SEC. 508. None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available pursuant to the Act shall be obligated or expended to finance directly any assistance to any country whose duly elected Head of Government is deposed by military coup or decree: *Provided*, That assistance may be resumed to such country if the President determines and reports to the Committees on Appropriations that subsequent to the termination of assistance a democratically elected government has taken office."

The preceding passage is taken from the *Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 1994* (United States Government 1993b:946).
- 3 Description of the setting and location is very important for some interviews, but completely irrelevant for others. Description is used to the extent that it is necessary for a complete understanding of the interview excerpt.
- 4 Festus Ufulle Ga-aro, who conducted research on the displaced Sudanese community in Egypt in 1994, estimates there are 'only' 2.5 million Sudanese in Egypt, while the Egyptian government puts the figure at 5 million. The figures of 3 and 5 million used here represent the low and high end of the parameters told to me from everyone I met concerned with the issue in Egypt.
- 5 The term *Galeya* or *Galia* is frequently used to describe the Sudanese migrants who came to Egypt prior to Sudan's independence. It is also used to refer to Sudanese who are permanent residents in Egypt.
- 6 Ellen Ismail characterises "family" as "a 'reservoir' for the Sudanese, which combines economic assistance, political influence, social support and psychological security" (1985:53-54).
- 7 "Egypt and UNHCR, however, did not recognise them as refugees."

"Many Sudanese were facing severe economic hardship in Egypt. Denial of full refugee status by Egypt and UNHCR meant that the Sudanese, though "of concern" to UNHCR, were not automatically eligible for humanitarian aid or resettlement."

Both passages are taken from a recent report on refugees by the U.S. Committee for Refugees (1995:55).
- 8 Southern Sudanese rely heavily on church affiliated organisations for help (food, clothes, etc...). Many are completely separated from their families to the extent that they have even lost contact. The number of Southern Sudanese in Cairo is already so overbearing that the churches can just afford to help but a small percentage of the neediest 'refugees'.
- 9 While the general rule for Sudanese in Egypt is that they must return to Sudan if they wish to apply for refugee status in a third country, there have been exceptions to this rule with a very small number of Sudanese leaving directly from Egypt to places like the United States and Canada as recognised refugees.
- 10 "Since seizing power in a *coup d'etat* on 30 June 1989, the military government of Gen. al-Bashir has arrested hundreds of people, including doctors, academics, lawyers, teachers, workers, members of the armed forces, policemen, civil servants and politicians. Thousands have been dismissed from their jobs."

"The RCC has dissolved all trade unions and professional associations. Aware of the fact that organised labour was potentially one of the most powerful political forces that could challenge its authority, the RCC launched an attack on unions which is unprecedented in Sudanese history. The assets and bank accounts of these organisations were frozen or seized, and their offices and clubs were closed and cordoned off by military personnel. However, the government continued to deduct trade union subscriptions from the salaries of government employees. The RCC arbitrarily dismissed a substantial number of judges, policemen, workers, nurses, doctors and members of other professional groups. At least 400 police offices were dismissed."

"The RCC has announced its own plans for trade unions, according to which, trade union organisations would become instruments of the government. On 30 September the RCC issued a decree which explicitly cancelled the Trade Union Laws of 1977. This decree also created steering committees for unions, under the direct control of the government."

Although the three passages are commenting on the Sudanese government of eight years ago, they are just as relevant for today (Africa Watch 1990:4-5).

11 The UMMA Party was founded in 1945 as the political organisation of the Islamic Ansar movement. The Ansar are followers of the teachings of the Mahdi ("the awaited guide in the right path"), a ruler of Sudan in the 1880's. Sadiq al Mahdi, the Mahdi's great-grandson, is currently the leader of both, the UMMA Party and the Ansar.

12 The *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* defines *animism* as "the belief that all natural things, such as plants, animals, rocks, thunder and earthquakes, have spirits and can influence human events". See Paul Procter (editor in chief), *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, Cambridge University Press, 1995. p.46.

13 Article 18 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance".

Article 1 of the United Nations *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief* (1981) states:

1) "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have a religion or whatever belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching."

2) "No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have a religion or belief of his choice."

3) "Freedom to manifest one's religion or belief may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."

See United Nations, *The United Nations and Human Rights: 1945-1995*, The United Nations Blue Books Series, Volume VII, Department of Public Information, New York, 1995. p.291-293.

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RESUMO

A noção de “Direitos Humanos” pode ser discutida de infinitas maneiras. É uma noção altamente ‘politicizada’, sempre em mutação, e que pode ser utilizada de numerosas formas como uma ‘ferramenta’ discursiva. Este artigo enfoca o discurso sobre “Direitos Humanos” de quatro sudaneses deslocados. Seu discurso está ligado a variados fatores, inclusive sua compreensão do que está se passando no Sudão, sua experiência de sofrimento no Sudão antes do exílio e o modo como estão enfrentando a vida como sudaneses deslocados.

ABSTRACT

The notion of “Human Rights” can be discussed in an infinite variety of ways. It is a highly ‘politicised’ notion which is ever-changing and can be utilised in any number of fashions as a discursive ‘tool’. This paper focuses on the “Human Rights” discourse of four displaced Sudanese. Their discourse was intimately connected with a variety of factors; including their understanding of what is currently taking place in Sudan, their ordeal in Sudan before exile, and how they are coping with life as externally displaced Sudanese.