

THE ACCIDENTAL ANTHROPOLOGIST

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR ABDULLAHI OSMAN EL-TOM

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‘My plan when I came [to Ireland] was to stay six months, not thirty years!’

In September 2019, Dr Abdullahi Osman El-Tom retired from his post as Head of Anthropology in Maynooth University, after 30 years working in the department.¹ He spent his career as a scholar, lecturer, researcher, and political activist. As a former student of Abdullahi (as he was known to his postgraduate students), and speaking for many who have passed through the Department of Anthropology, I can say he will be sorely missed.

His approach to students was unique. His door was literally as well as figuratively always open to students. He was a good listener and a problem-solver, and many students would not have completed their course without his help at a critical moment. As a supervisor, he took on ‘hard cases’, including myself, the mature students who might lack confidence, or those who were coming to the university after a long break. Early on in my PhD he told me, ‘Anne, those who get their PhDs are not necessarily the cleverest students, but the ones who persist, so just don’t give up’. I often remembered his other words of advice when I was overwhelmed by the task of writing a thesis, ‘Whenever you get stuck, go back to those field notes, you will find inspiration there - they are the source.’ That was the best advice any student of anthropology could receive.

Introduction

During Abdullahi’s tenure in Maynooth University he has seen a great many changes in the university, in the field of anthropology, his country of birth, Sudan, and his country of residence, Ireland. Abdullahi’s research interests span a wide range of topics from medical anthropology, conflict studies, and African politics, to the collection of folklore and writing fiction. He has written six academic books, his first publication being the textbook *Globalisation: a Critical Study* (1999), followed by an exploration of Sudanese folklore traditions in the book *Proverbs of Western and Central Sudan* (2002) with A.M. Adam. His later work reflects his growing interests into the political struggle in Sudan as well as his professional interest in medical anthropology. He translated from Arabic a politically significant book about Sudan, *The Black Book: The Imbalance of Power and Wealth in Sudan* (2002). His ethnography of the success story of the Zaghawa people of Darfur, *The Zaghawa Aptitude for Commerce: Biography of Bushara Suleiman-Nour* (2007) presents an uplifting tale of pastoralists who lost everything during repetitive droughts but managed to overcome disaster by developing skills in trade and commerce. The story of one particularly successful businessman, Bushara Suleiman-Nour, demonstrates how cultural strategies were utilised to forge the links needed to prosper despite adversity. Two books followed based on his experience of the Sudanese rebel movement: *Study War No More: Military Tactics of a Sudanese Rebel Movement* (2011) and *Darfur, JEM and the Khalil Ibrahim Story* (2014). *Study War No More* describes how the rebels adapted tried-and-tested military tactics to create strategies which worked in their unique context of a guerrilla war against the state. The *Khalil*

Ibrahim Story explains the background and motivation of the founder, Khalil Ibrahim, of the rebel group 'The Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)', and the punishment meted out to the population of Darfur by the government of President Omar al-Bashir.

Abdullahi's interest in medical anthropology led to a jointly edited anthology of research on breastfeeding, *Ethnographies of Breast-Feeding: cultural contexts and confrontation* with Dr Tanya Cassidy (2015). A forthcoming book, *Moving Meals and Migrant Mothers: Culinary cultures, diasporic dishes and familial foodways*, is planned for 2021.

In addition to numerous academic articles, Abdullahi also wrote a memoir of his childhood in Darfur. As he explained in the interview, *Growing up in Darfur, Sudan* (2007) is written from a child's perspective, reflecting on the everyday routines in a child's life in a small rural community. The story is set during a moment in Sudan's history when life was peaceful and people were hopeful that independence would bring development and progress. In the memoir, he deliberately avoids emphasising deprivation and wretchedness, showing instead a loving family and happy childhood:

The book reflects on normal life routines and events, not about misery, but, about a happy childhood and a happy community lifestyle still alive in rural areas at the time. This was a hopeful time, a better future seemed to be around the corner, development seemed possible and positive, but, did not materialise. It is about normal human beings with hopes and dreams, a good life not misery, not a Peig Sayers book full of misery.²

In the 1990s, Abdullahi took on the role of Chief Editor of the *Irish Journal of Anthropology* for three years and oversaw its growth and development. He also served on the editorial board of the UK journal, *Anthropology and Medicine*. In 2007 he took over as Head of Department of Anthropology until 2012 and returned to the role again from 2017-2019. He served as a member of the Executive Board of the European Association of Anthropology from 2011 – 2015 and was one of the driving forces behind Maynooth University hosting the European Association of Social Anthropology (EASA) conference in 2011. In 2019, his contribution to the Department of Anthropology was officially acknowledged when he received the Fiona Larkin Perpetual Award. In the same year, he received an award from the Maynooth University Access Office in recognition of his support for students with disabilities and from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Early Life and Education

Abdullahi was born in the town of Broosch, Darfur, in Sudan. As he has explained,

My date of birth is a mystery as no registration of births took place, so most people estimate their birth date, so if you see a birth cert [sic] saying 1st January, it is likely to be a fake or an estimate. There were no birth registrars in the area, even the midwives/mothers would not know the date. The people do not use the Gregorian calendar, but have a traditional calendar similar to the Islamic calendar and it is cyclical, not linear so it does not count years, only months in a year.

He also explained how back then celebrations only took place after the birth of a baby and during naming ceremonies, but, in more recent times, 'birthday celebrations are becoming more common'.

Abdullahi grew up in a large family, with 21 brothers and sisters:

My father had two wives and each wife had 11 children. Both my parents were hard-working and provided well for their family. My father was a local businessman, with a shop, a flour mill and a transport business which meant he was well-off, that is by local standards. He was able to provide education for all twenty-two children and most went to university and many of them are teachers from primary to university level. We are a family of teachers! All females were educated, only one fell in love and married early. Most of the family are working; the oldest boy became an engineer.

Both his parents were interested in educating their children. His mother was the first woman to attend school in the area. Her father was the mayor of her town and committed to the education of women, so to encourage others he sent his daughter to school, where she completed four years.

It was ground-breaking at that time for a woman to be educated, as the people of the area were suspicious of educating girls, thinking they might become 'unruly' or become 'loose women' and might not listen to their parents. When they saw that the mayor's daughter behaved normally after her education, they were convinced to send their daughters. Unfortunately, there was no support for literacy, in that my mother could only use her reading skills in reading the Qur'an and writing letters to her kids, as there were no books around except the Qur'an. Literacy was a status symbol without any use for the person in everyday life. There were no newspapers nor television, only a radio.

His father had three years of primary school and he also attended Quranic school where he memorised the whole Qur'an. Abdullahi's serious interest in education was initiated by his father's threat that he would 'end up permanently working in the shop if he refused to attend school'. Abdullahi's response to this threat was to work hard at school to avoid that fate. His mother's role was even more important:

My mother encouraged me a lot, providing whatever support she could, she lit the kerosene lamp at night, prepared my clothes for school and supervised study every evening. My mother made sure we went to school on time, as father was often away for work.

In order to receive an education in 1960s Sudan, families had to place their children into boarding school. The competition to get a place was intense as there were only three secondary schools in the whole region of Darfur, with a population of three to four million. Abdullahi attended boarding schools from upper primary levels to secondary. This meant that he had to leave home from the age of nine years until his PhD. He finished secondary school in El Fashir Secondary School and was offered a place in the University of Khartoum.

I joined the Faculty of Economics and Social Studies. The faculty offered Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology and Economics. I had never heard of anthropology, in fact, there was no term for anthropology nor for economics, in the colloquial Arabic spoken in the Darfur area. As the first year progressed, I gravitated more towards anthropology as this fitted into my own interest in cultural issues. I was particularly influenced by the anthropologist E.E. Evans Pritchard and his insights into the beliefs which shaped the worldview of the people of the Sudan. As a young boy, I had collected songs, riddles, and

stories for children. This attachment to folklore was unusual compared to most people of my age. I was also interested in music but my father was furious when I bought a lute while in secondary school, as musicians were looked down upon in Sudanese society, so I didn't pursue it.

After his graduation with a Bachelor of Science Honours degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology in 1978, he applied for a position in the new University of Gezira. Even before the buildings were ready, the university were recruiting staff and organizing to send them for further education to Queen's University Belfast. Abdullahi was offered a job as Assistant Lecturer and a place on a master's degree course at Queen's University Belfast. His application to the Department of Anthropology in Queen's was immediately accepted by Professor Ladislav Holy, a Czech-British anthropologist, who had undertaken extensive fieldwork among the Berti in Sudan in the 1960s. Professor Holy had already met Abdullahi when he was invited to speak at the University of Khartoum. Abdullahi was then a student and the only one attending the seminar who had read Professor Holy's book! Professor Holy was delighted to meet someone so interested in his field and he gave Abdullahi a job as his interpreter during his visit to Sudan.

Abdullahi spent the next five years completing his masters in Queen's and his PhD in Social Anthropology in University of St Andrews, Scotland. In 1983, after completing his doctoral studies he returned to Sudan to begin teaching in the University of Gezira. He described his experience of teaching:

It was rewarding to teach in Sudan. I was able to tell students about other Sudanese groups, their languages, ethnic customs and able to connect them to the diversity of this large country. I could relate to them without stereotyping. Anthropology is a systematic way to gather data and analysis, studying your own society; you can discover lots of things.

Career in Maynooth

In 1987, while he was lecturing in the University of Gezira, an Irish Aid delegation came to the university to evaluate the work of an Irish development agency operating in Sudan. The president of the university asked Abdullahi to translate for the visitors. Dr Eileen Kane, one of the founders of the Department of Anthropology in Maynooth, was the head of the delegation. Dr Kane asked Abdullahi to accompany the delegation to the rural areas of Sudan as an interpreter. This experience proved to be a happy coincidence: in 1988, Abdullahi was invited to teach a course on medical anthropology in St Patrick's College, Maynooth.

His engagement to teach in Ireland was for six months. He was so convinced he would return to Sudan that he tried to buy a really cheap old car which would last him six months, and he kept his rented house in Sudan. When he took up his temporary post in Maynooth, what he thought was a safe position at the University of Gezira became highly insecure as political change at national level affected citizens in countless ways. Struggles in Sudan began in 1983 when the central government in Khartoum imposed Sharia Law on all Sudan, despite the diversity of interpretations of Islam throughout the nation and the numerous non-Islamic religious beliefs. A civil war ensued between Sudanese of the southern regions with Christian majorities and the central government. In 1989, a coup d'état ousted the

government of Prime Minister Sadiq-al Mahdi, and Sudan was taken over by the National Congress Party and a military leader called Omar Hassan al-Bashir became President. When the military government took over, they abolished all opposition.

While I was a temporary lecturer in Ireland, I lost my job in the Sudan with the change in government, as the new government fired the whole department to fill the posts with their own Islamic fanatics. The Ministry said this department was a dungeon for communists. Fortunately, I applied and got a post in Ireland, but it was accidental rather than by design. All my life has been based on accidents.

Ireland became his second home and is where he met his wife, Sheila, and where his daughter Nadia was born. He has managed to learn Gaeilge and continues to practise his language skills, meeting regularly with a group from Conradh na Gaeilge in a pub in Dublin.

When Abdullahi arrived in Maynooth in the 1980s:

My first impression of Ireland was that it was a poor country, not as poor as Sudan, but, it was not doing well and life was hard. I brought my own laptop and I used it for one year and when it was stolen in a house burglary, and I had to go and borrow money to buy a computer and pay the loan over two years. The people also were more relaxed, less materialistic, not rushing, not under pressure as they are now professionally and in their personal life.

Anthropology was originally taught in the Sociology Department and 'under the wing of Professor Liam Ryan, Anthropology separated from Sociology to become a new department. Because the department was small, a very collegial atmosphere developed, and the lecturers knew all the students by name'. Maynooth itself was a small university, part of St Patrick's College, the National Catholic Seminary, a Pontifical University and a branch of the National University of Ireland. Abdullahi's experience was that the two institutions co-existed amicably, but in 1997, they separated into independent institutions. He finds 'the relationship between the ecclesiastical and secular institutions continues to be cordial, Maynooth University uses the lands of St Patrick's College and the libraries are shared'.

Critiques of Anthropology and 'Development'

When Abdullahi was offered the scholarship to do his master's degree in Anthropology in Queen's University Belfast, the Dean of his faculty, Professor Ali Abdel Gadir, had one condition:

The Dean said I have to promise not to do my thesis on kinship, marriage, or witchcraft. He told me he 'didn't care if people married their mothers!' Professor Gadir believed that witchcraft study fed into the ideology of colonialism and was the reason that anthropology had been resisted in Africa in the previous twenty years. Anthropology had been stigmatised as a number of anthropological studies had supported colonial racist ideologies. Since then anthropology has contributed to the fight against racism in the West and counteracted those stereotypes. African anthropologists have also played a major role in restoring the reputation of anthropology.

In the end, Abdullah 's research for his master's degree was on the topic of traditional medicine. His interest was sparked by his personal experience of traditional healing:

My sister was badly injured in secondary school playing volleyball. The injury became infected and she developed tetanus (at least that's what the hospital said) and the doctors recommended that her leg was amputated. My dad was told by his family not to allow the amputation, it would spoil her life, so they smuggled her out of hospital (the staff would not have allowed her to leave) she was unable to walk having to be supported by my father. She was taken to a traditional healer and was healed of her injuries and infection and she recovered and able to walk again. All the healer gave her was a lotion to clean the wound – yet it gave a positive result. She is now principal of a secondary school.

After finishing his master's degree at Queen's, Abdullahi began his doctoral studies at St Andrews University, Scotland. He continued to research traditional healing, focusing on spiritual healing using Quranic verses, which he became interested in through his relationship with a Fakir, an Islamic scholar and teacher in the Quranic School. Abdullahi related the story of how he met the Fakir and how he became interested in the topic:

My older brother was in the shop one day when the Fakir appeared. The Fakir came in to borrow sugar and coffee beans as he had no money at that time. He promised he would return with the money another time, but my brother refused to lend him the items. The Fakir left and I happened to be outside in the street, so he asked me if he could borrow the money and I agreed to the loan. This started a lifelong friendship. One day shortly after that first meeting, the Fakir came to me and said he had a secret drink which he wanted me to have, it would help him with his studies. He would make this special drink using Quranic verses creating a concoction which would boost intelligence. In order to make the drink he would need a hoopoe bird, which he would kill and then swallow the heart of the bird raw, so it must be brought immediately to the Fakir. The hoopoe has symbolic meaning for people of my area, it is drawn on the regalia of the Queen of Sheba. I went hunting to find a hoopoe and finally succeeded after some days and gave it to the Fakir. From that time onward, the Fakir would regularly send a bottle of the special drink for me in intermediate school to help me with my studies. At the time I believed the drink would make me smarter, and it helped me to have confidence in my studies. This was part of the larger social belief that the Fakir had extraordinary powers which could help in diverse areas such as rain-making, and solving personal problems. These beliefs have since declined, limiting the contemporary role of the Fakir to prayers at funerals. My friendship with the Fakir continued and I visited him whenever I got home.

Research for Abdullahi 's PhD highlighted the important social role of traditional and Quranic education in giving young people knowledge of rituals and community values, which helped them when they transitioned into adulthood. Sudanese people, especially those in rural areas, practise a popular version of Islam, while the government under President al-Bashir promoted political Islam, a fundamentalist version from outside of Sudan quite different from the local practices.

Quranic school in Sudan incorporated traditional skills training, which helped young people function meaningfully in their community, understand social norms and practices, develop agricultural skills, herding goats and growing food crops. Formal school did not prepare young people for their traditional lifestyle, but for an urban lifestyle, alienated from rural life. Yet, the modern state is kept going by the rural people, it is the peasants who support the government. Normally it is elites who are driving change, but they need to understand their own people better than they do. While change is necessary, continuity was also important to maintain social cohesion, shared values and social norms.

Abdullahi's research led him to reflect on how detrimental the attitude of earlier anthropologists towards their informants was to the reputation of anthropology in Africa.

Anthropologists in the past were disconnected from the concerns of their informants and presented a negative interpretation of their societies. They have abused the hospitality and trust of their informants, gathering information which promoted themselves, gained them certificates and awards, but, the people were left out of the picture, its one way ticket. The very people who had shared their knowledge and experiences with anthropologists were not consulted about nor informed of research outcomes. Too often anthropologists never returned to their field sites, and all the benefits flowed in one direction.

Anthropologists, Abdullahi stressed, need to be committed to the welfare of the people they are studying. It is important for researchers to be truthful but also socially conscious and 'defenders of groups who are demonised or marginalised by the dominant society'.

When Abdullahi arrived in Ireland, anthropology was emerging from the aftermath of a controversy caused by the publication of the book by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland* (1979). For Abdullahi, 'the book portrayed the people Scheper-Hughes lived among in Kerry in negative terms, creating a sense that the rural people of Ireland were weird and strange and she failed to sufficiently protect the identity of informants'.

In 1980, Scheper-Hughes received the Margaret Mead Award for the book, while her informants who read her book reacted with disbelief that their private lives were revealed in print. Abdullahi was now starting an anthropological career in Ireland, a country where the insensitivity of foreign anthropologists to their informants' lives contributed to the discipline's negative image, ironically similar to what he had experienced in Africa.

Development Aid

In Ireland Abdullahi found a higher level of awareness of the problems affecting the developing world compared to other European countries:

Ireland did not see itself as very different from other countries which had experienced colonisation, only that its experience of colonisation was longer than any countries in Africa. The charitable side of the church played an important role in Irish culture and

society and also encouraged empathy towards the poor of the developing world. Many organisations started either church-based or with a strong influence of the church's social teaching, such as Trocaire, Concern. However, Ireland was also dependent on the international media for information about the global south which made people susceptible to stereotypes about the countries of the Global South being incompetent and incapable of managing their economies.

Abdullahi concedes there has been some improvement, as Irish people are travelling abroad and the international media has increased coverage of global affairs which presents alternative views which counteract those stereotypes.

In Abdullahi's analysis, non-governmental organization (NGO) fundraising campaigns often present misleading information and images of countries which are the targets of international development projects. While he believes much of the work is excellent, in the process the organisations also generate misinformation, portraying local people as helpless and incapable.

If you show that the people you want to help are doing well you won't get money, therefore it is a fundraising trap. The views of the Global South, especially African countries, are not reflected in these narratives. Africa is the fastest growing continent now in terms of economic growth. There are problems, but they are confined to a limited number of countries; there isn't a dictator in every country. Omar El-Bashir, Muammar Gaddafi and Robert Mugabe, these are exceptional cases. The fastest growing economy in the world now is Ethiopia, perhaps doing better even than China in terms of economic growth, although you could say from a lower base position.

Anthropology has an important role to play in presenting a more nuanced view of Africa. Abdullahi argues that 'contemporary anthropologists are working on presenting a more balanced picture, they are not motivated to draw on the sympathies of people and have no vested interest in the portrayal of people as helpless or lacking in agency'.

Female Genital Mutilation/Female Circumcision

Abdullahi is especially concerned with how International campaigns to end harmful traditional practices are susceptible to misinformation and fail in their objectives because they misrepresent the people involved. Abdullahi has written articles on Female Circumcision (FC)/Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and believes that, when controversies arise over cultural practices, what is needed is 'to gather knowledge which is not prejudicial, which promotes a better understanding of the context, and to start a dialogue, between activists, NGOs, and also the local people'. Abdullahi rejects the term FGM because it stigmatises the people who follow the practice. He explains:

All my family members, mother, sisters, aunties are all circumcised and they do not feel themselves genitally mutilated, so the term itself is problematic. The term was invented by the World Health Organisation in 1985 to present the practice of circumcision in the worst possible light, but this is an unfortunate term. In order to bring about change to the practice, what is needed is proper dialogue between NGOs, activists and local people with respect for the people involved. If the people who practice circumcision are

convinced through dialogue, they might follow your advice, but if you use the term FGM from the start, you disrupt the communication and rapport and you will not succeed in your campaign.

Climate Change and Resources

People in Africa are generally much more aware of climate change than countries in the Global North because it is directly impacting on their day-to-day living.

In my home village everyone can observe that the surrounding land which used to be a forest, full of trees is now like a sheet of paper, no more trees. The direct results of climate change are being felt and people are forced to continuously amend and adapt their mode of life to the changing environment in order to survive. These changes might be interpreted locally in different ways, depending on how extensive their knowledge or the level of education. Individuals might attribute the changes to a punishment from God, or to their government, not understanding that the extreme weather conditions are connected with the processes of development in Japan, Europe, the US, and China.

In general, Abdullahi considers that 'development aid is not perfect and the sooner we get rid of it the better'. His own experience of development aid is that the process of delivering aid is uncoordinated and disorganized.

As an agent of development, aid has simply failed and aid-giving generates dependency on outside systems and people. It is far better to establish local structures, which could move the countries forward rather than depending on aid workers with little understanding of the local context.

Abdullahi recognizes that humanitarian aid can be very useful in times of disaster, famine, or environmental catastrophes:

But, even more important is the work of advocacy for positive changes to the policies of the international institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Activism for environmental responsibility and just trade policies helps to improve life for everyone. This form of aid is making an important contribution to progress for all of us wherever we live in the Global North or South.

Contested African Resources

In Abdullahi 's assessment, one of the major concerns for Africa today is the contestation over resources. There is an ongoing competition between the West and China for land for growing food, minerals, and precious metals.

In the past, it was exclusively Western corporations who extracted commodities from African countries, but now the corporations are more likely to be Chinese. Unfortunately, the international institutions seem to be supportive of selling African territory and resources to investors; they see investment as a positive development. But the weakness

of institutions in some African countries means that those investments can involve corporations acquiring land from governments without the consent of their people who occupy that land, and this has resulted in millions of hectares of land being lost to African citizens in international investment deals. The issue needs to be resolved between African governments, their people, and the global institutions.

These deals are often challenged locally and land conflicts have been

a catalyst for some of the uprisings against leaders, such as South Sudan where millions of hectares have been transferred to investors for forestry and agricultural plantations without local community consent and thus has fuelled conflict in the region. In Ethiopia land taken from the people for sale in large-scale deals has exacerbated grievances and divisions between the government and various ethnic groups.

Abdullahi values the insights of the African anthropologist Professor Mohammad Salih,³ as he foregrounds the conflicts and insecurity arising from the dislocation of people from their land and livelihoods.

Activist Politics

Abdullahi's involvement in activist politics in Sudan goes back to his student days in the late 1970s. The political situation in Sudan at that time was not stable, leading to many demonstrations against the government. He recalled:

The struggles were full of hope and perhaps also a bit naïve, as the students expected much more from their government than it could provide. The young students were in a rush to see a decisive change for the better and did not understand the complexities and lengthy timeframe of the processes of political change. But the protests demonstrated the determination on the part of young people to act as partners to their government: they were not content to wait for change to be handed down! After a long period without success, during which two coup d'états took place in 1985/1989, and an oppressive one-party state ruled Sudan, the spirit of resistance faded a little.

In 2018 the demonstrations started again and this led to the recent uprising and defeat of the dictatorship of President Omar al-Bashir and his National Congress Party of Sudan.

Sudanese Colonial History

Abdullahi maintains that the Sudanese people are highly politicized compared to many other African countries, which can be attributed to the history of colonial invasion. The Sudanese repeatedly rebelled against their domination by powerful neighbours and European colonialists.

When the Ottoman empire ruled Egypt, Sudan was considered a province of Egypt from 1820-1885. In 1873, the British took control over Egypt while jointly ruling with the Ottomans. Abdullahi explained that the British and the 'Turks', as the Ottomans were called locally, were linked, so much so that when

the British came, everyone called them 'Turks' as well. The most successful uprising against both the Egyptian and British authorities was the Mahdi Revolution (1881-1898). The Mahdi regime was in power for thirteen years, however, the British forces returned with Lord Kitchener in 1898, pushing out the Ottoman competitors and making Sudan a British colony, renamed Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, until it became independent in 1956.

The Black Book

Abdullahi became an activist in Sudanese politics because of the marginalization of his home area of Darfur, and Sudan in general, by the regime of President Omar al-Bashir which put the entire country under the control of the north.

'All the money was pumped into Khartoum and the Northern regions', Abdullahi said, explaining his decision and that of many others to engage in counter-struggle. An important moment in the political process came with the publication in 2000 of a 'mysterious book' which appeared on the streets of Khartoum, called *The Black Book: Imbalance of Power and Wealth in the Sudan* (the author being anonymous). The Black Book became highly influential because it provided detailed statistical analysis showing how the three major ethnic groups from the Northern part of Sudan dominated all positions of power.

The book did not reveal any surprises for me but, for many it was a shock to see the facts of domination so clearly presented. The argument of the book was denied by those in power but the Black Book was very persuasive. It listed all the former and contemporary presidents, ministers, bank managers, professors and powerful business leaders and stated their place of origin, which was the north of Sudan, a province occupying 5% of Sudan's territory. I gave it the label of the 5/95 theory; the power and control of resources is concentrated in the hands of the 5% of the population, while the people constitute 95%. The book enlightened the country, and its thesis became generally accepted as true.

Abdullahi wrote articles about the book and translated it into English. It has been now translated into many languages and circulated around the world. The way the Black Book was distributed also deserves a mention: initially 500 copies were photocopied and given to people to distribute.

Groups of people stood outside mosques with the books, handing them out to anyone passing by. People passing by just thought the book was something about religion. From then on individuals photocopied the contents and passed it on. Even non-literate and uneducated people knew what the book was about and discussed it passionately. It was a topic of discussion at funerals and weddings. It is the envy of any writer to have a book which is sought after and distributes itself. The Black Book demonstrates that doing the research and bringing solid evidence to bear on an issue can be most productive. No politician in Sudan can act as though the Black Book had not been published. The terms used in the book, 'marginalised', 'inclusion', have now become part of political discourse.

Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)

Abdullahi is a member of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), a rebel movement started in Darfur by Dr Khalil Ibrahim after the publication of the Black Book. He has played a prominent role in JEM since he joined the organization in 2004, initially as an Advisor to the President of JEM, and currently as Secretary for International Relations. Abdullahi represents JEM in international forums, as he has English language fluency and obtaining a visa for international travel is relatively easy for him. Although JEM started in Darfur, it is not a local, but rather a national movement, its full name being the 'Sudanese Justice and Equality Movement'. While some of its leaders are from Darfur, including the Executive President, the head of Legislative Council is from Kordofan and the General Congress leader is from east Sudan, which makes JEM a national institution. He elucidated JEM's vision for Sudan: to reform the constitution to ensure that all of Sudan's regions are participating in the political decisions affecting the nation, to promote justice and equality and to fulfil the need for basic services for all citizens. JEM was one of several rebel groups engaged in a civil war with the government of Sudan in 2002. In his book about the medical doctor and founder of JEM, Dr Khalil Ibrahim, Abdullahi describes how Ibrahim started JEM in reaction to the injustices and marginalization of citizens by the Northern elite who held on to power.

After the first strike by the JEM rebels against the Khartoum government in 2004, the military responded with systematic and brutal violence against the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa ethnic groups in the Darfur region. In addition to government forces, government-armed and funded Arab militias known as Janjaweed terrorized the region, attacking villages, murdering and raping civilians, including children. Human Rights Watch compiled a report which provided evidence of ethnic cleansing in Darfur (2004) which was called a 'genocide' by the United Nations. Hundreds of thousands were killed and whole villages razed to the ground. In 2010, President al-Bashir was indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity for his actions in Darfur.

Abdullahi has represented JEM in the peace negotiations with the Sudanese government which were complex and fraught with tensions, accompanied by many setbacks and return to arms.

During the negotiations, it was obvious that the international community and the government of Sudan wanted JEM to be treated as a local Darfur movement, so that the talks would be confined to Darfur and there would be no discussion of the grievances of the rest of country. The government did not want to see the armed rebellion spreading to other areas, they were aiming to confine the conflict. Similarly, when the UN entered the negotiations the aim was to treat the issue as limited to the conflict between Darfur rebels and the government leadership. This would have ensured that the power of central government would be preserved intact. There is always a fear in the West that if you remove the government, you create a vacuum leading to instability, like what happened in Libya or Yemen. The West always follows the strategy of what is called 'soft landing' or incremental change; although Western leadership abhors the dictators, they would keep them, achieving a gradual removal, for fear of the vacuum.

Abdullahi asserts that this approach to Sudan was a misconception; Sudan is not Libya as historical events proved. Abdullahi concludes:

Sudan is vindicated now, President al-Bashir has been removed and the country has not imploded nor descended into chaos. The international strategy of the 'soft landing' and incremental change arises from an ideological position that African country leaders are not mature enough to manage democracy, that a wise benevolent dictator is best for Africa. Such a benevolent dictator is preferred by the West, which helped al-Bashir to rule for an extensive period of time, as he was seen as a better option than a political vacuum.

Abdullahi also attributes al-Bashir's lengthy rule to his cooperation with the West in the War on Terror.

Al-Bashir became a valuable ally of the West as he agreed to curb the migration of Africans into Europe for which he was rewarded by the European Union, and the Irish government is also implicated there, too. The notorious Janjaweed leaders, who committed crimes against humanity in Darfur also got money from the EU. Sudan is a pathway from Eritrea, Somalia, and other countries in Africa and the money from the EU was allocated for upgrading Al-Bashir's capability to stop the smuggling of immigrants from Sudan into Libya and Egypt. Al-Bashir was supposed to use the money to train his troops guarding the borders between Libya and Sudan and to hunt the human traffickers in Sudan. The programme and the EU donations were only suspended after he was removed.

While it is true that there were human traffickers operating, Abdullahi contends that the best way to stem emigration is to contribute to the economic development and the democratization of the countries that people are leaving. Some of the migrants are seeking economic opportunities and others are fleeing oppression. 'Guarding the borders does not work to stop the flow of people, especially in Sudan, whose borders are a desert which is inherently difficult to control.'

When asked about Western interference in African conflicts, Abdullahi dismissed the idea that the West has no right to interfere in internal conflicts within the continent. His experience is that dictators will complain when the West criticizes their lack of democracy: 'They will say it is undue interference in their affairs, while the people with serious grievances will not reject help from the West, against the governments perpetrating oppression against them'.

Abdullahi recalled the important role that women played in the rebel movement, particularly at community level assisting the rebels with essential provisions and 'keeping a watchful eye', warning the rebels of government troops approaching. A small number of women were combatants in the war with one rising to become Lieutenant General in the JEM army.

However, traditional gender care roles make it difficult for women to participate in international forums, as negotiations have open-ended timetables which are incompatible with childcare responsibilities. Women generally cannot stay away from home for indefinite periods. This has resulted in problems finding enough women representatives to attend conferences or negotiations.

21st Century: Sudan in Revolution

Sudan's fate began to change in December 2018, when street protests started the Sudanese Revolution against the government of al-Bashir. Abdullahi argues that, although change has been slow in coming to the Sudan, JEM had helped to weaken the al-Bashir regime, exposing to the world the corruption and the brutality of the regime. Their campaigning resulted with al-Bashir indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Street protests began in December 2018 and mass civil disobedience actions took place on a daily basis.

JEM members deliberately left their weapons aside and participated in the demonstrations in a spirit of peaceful protest under the slogan 'freedom, peace and justice'. The JEM leadership instructed their supporters not to retaliate even if the government was violent towards them. It was striking to see that young men and women led the demonstrations, they were in the driving seat, they were not led by any political parties. Women played a prominent role in the protests and civil disobedience announcing the details of the demonstrations through social media i.e. 'we start the demonstration at 1pm'. The women would also ululate to begin the protest. The government tried to close down social media but it was impossible to stop the message getting through, because of the diversity of media used, including phones, twitter, Facebook. One of al-Bashir's military leaders is reported as saying 'we were defeated by social media'.

By April 2019, the Sudanese military removed al-Bashir and arrested him in a coup d'état. The military formed a Transitional Military Council (TMC) and conducted a brutal campaign of suppression of the protest movement. Nevertheless, protestors continued in their struggle, forming a united coalition with the rebels and signing a charter demanding a return to civilian democracy. During the revolution, the African Union (AU) and a delegation from Ethiopia intervened to negotiate a settlement of the conflict. Abdullahi was very impressed with the negotiating team of the AU.

Their professionalism raised the AU profile and reputation within Africa and internationally. Ahmed Abye representing Ethiopia as mediator, in particular, demonstrated great diplomacy and skill. The AU were insistent that al-Bashir hand over power and this gave moral support to the revolution. When the military took over, Sudan was suspended from the African Union (AU) and its flags were lowered at the AU headquarters until the new civilian prime minister was appointed. The AU official policy is not to recognize any coup d'états as a means of changing the government. This demonstrates that the AU has redeemed its past reputation as a 'club for dictators', to become an agency capable of providing support for democratic leadership and progressive policies in African countries.

The protestors, rebel movements, and the Sudanese military finally achieved an agreement to form a transitional power-sharing government for three years, which is now governing the country. Abdullahi is glad to see the changes but warns that 'revolution is not an event but a process', and he foresees a considerable amount of work ahead to reform an authoritarian and corrupted system. The Sudanese revolution has only received muted support from West.

Initially Western countries supported the government of al-Bashir to suppress the revolution and direct pressure was exerted by the West to keep some of al-Bashir's political cronies in place. The result is that the current leadership does not have complete control.

An eleven-member Sovereignty Council performs the role of President under the three-year power-sharing agreement between the military (TMC) and a cabinet composed of the coalition of opposition groups. Most senior roles in the Sovereignty Council are held by people who were part of al-Bashir's regime, including the Chairman of the Sovereignty Council. The cabinet on the other hand is mostly composed of members of the protestor groups, with the exception of two positions, the Minister of Defence and the Minister for Internal Affairs 'who claims to have been against al-Bashir all along'. During the coalition talks,

The leaders talked about the importance of having a regional balance in the ruling council. Many people who were nominated were asked to step aside because they did not represent the previously excluded ethnic groups. The current leadership thus has a much better balance of representation from Sudan's regions and diverse ethnic groups.

Even so, Abdullahi's assessment is that a better option was to continue the protests until the government collapsed altogether and the protesters had full authority over the government.

For more than twenty years now, Abdullahi's life has consisted of struggling for justice in the Sudan. He admitted that this has involved professional and personal sacrifices.

My activism has been a distraction to my career as an anthropologist. I had to focus my energies on the problems of Sudan. This often involved travelling to meetings, writing reports and negotiating documents. Combining work and activism has not been easy, but I am glad that I have contributed, with many others to an important political transformation in Sudan. Being disconnected from my family because I was under a travel ban of the Khartoum government from 2004 was very hard, I could not visit even when my father was dying and many of my friends were killed in the war.

But there were other costs which came with his political involvement, when in 2008 JEM tried but failed to occupy Khartoum, he was placed on a 'Wanted' list by the Sudanese government. Some of his relatives were also affected; one is currently in exile in South Sudan having to change his name in order to protect his family.

He admits contemplating going to fight himself, but he says Khalil Ibrahim discouraged him, saying they had enough fighters, but what they needed were people who could advocate for the cause internationally.

When I asked him if he would return to Sudan to take up a political post, Abdullahi replied:

I would love to live in Sudan but my family, my wife and daughter are settled in Ireland and I am now one of the older generation of leaders. My generation who have ruled since independence did little to progress the development. Sudan needs to allow the younger people to run the country.

He sees his own his role as advisory rather than in the centre of political life. After his retirement he wants to continue writing novels. He has written two novels and books for children and is an avid reader of fiction.

Abdullahi has successfully juggled commitment to his work as a respected lecturer, scholar, Head of Department, and politically engaged activist. With those multiple responsibilities and demands on his time, he still manages to be a highly productive author of both academic and fiction works. Now that he is a 'free man', I believe we will soon read a lot more from Dr Abdullahi Osman Abdullahi.

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Plus numerous contributions to journals.

Notes

¹ This article is based on two interviews with Dr Abdullahi Osman El-Tom on the 27th September and the 2nd October 2019, on the occasion of his retirement from his position as Head of the Anthropology Department, Maynooth University.

² Peig Sayers is a memoir of a Gaelic-speaking woman who was a respected story-teller living on the Basket Islands, off the coast of Kerry, an impoverished region of Ireland in the 1930s. The book was published in 1936.

³ *Environmental Politics and Liberation in Contemporary Africa* (2013). The Netherlands: Springer.