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Local narratives: contextualising the founding of Kebkabiya, a town in Darfur

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Hajja surrounded by her daughters and her grandchildren. Her white tobe marks her position as a Sudanese government employee (fieldwork photo Karin Willemse, 1991-1992)

Before the British colonised Sudan in 1899, Kebkabiya had been a garrison place for the army of the Darfur Sultan Muhammad Tayrab (ruled 1752/3-1785/6), who extended the Fur Sultanate to the Nile by conquering the Funj province of Kordofan in 1787. He had brought his court from the mountainous range of Jebel Marra to the plains near Kebkabiya at the end of the eighteenth century. The ruins of Shoba some four kilometers south of the town still testify to the palace of this renowned Fur sultan. Remarkably, however, it was not him but Faqih Sinin, a religious and political leader who, a century later, became locally deified as the founder of Kebkabiya.

During my anthropological-historical research in Darfur in the 1980s and 1990s local narratives constituted an important source to understand how the history of the town was locally constructed. As Tosh indicates in his *The Pursuit of Knowledge*, local, mostly oral, historical accounts require the use of additional historical sources about the same period that these accounts refer to in order to assess their value for historical research. In addition, I maintain that the contemporary context in which the researcher collected the narratives is also of significance since narratives about the past are often instrumental to power dynamics in the present, as I learned during my fieldwork in Kebkabiya, a town in North Darfur, in the period of October 1990 – May 1992.

In this period I stayed on the compound of Hajja, an elderly widow and her two daughters and grandchildren. I taped her biographic narrative over a period of months. Hajja was the stepdaughter of Faqih Sinin who, like Hajja, was from the Tama ethnic group that had come to Darfur from Chad in the mid-nineteenth century. Faqih Sinin was a religious and political leader who ruled Kebkabiya during the Mahdiyya period (1885-1889), a time when it was a precolonial state based on Islamic principles, before British colonisation. After his death, he became revered as a saint since, as Hajja phrased it, he “even attracted lions and snakes to live in peace at his side”. He was locally also considered the founder of Kebkabiya. This last claim was striking since he was quite obviously not. So why then was Faqih Sinin locally constructed as the founder of Kebkabiya? By consulting British colonial reports, sultanic records and the medical history of Darfur, I managed to contextualize this local, seemingly misinformed, narrative.

In the period that Sinin was posted in Kebkabiya, fights between local warring factions as well as colonial powers threatened the local population with being taken hostage, enslavement, or with enforced conscription to one of the armies, a fate that many escaped by fleeing the area. Those who stayed were also in danger of contracting contagious diseases like cholera or smallpox. A whole army force led by Osman Jano, the Mahdist army leader who had

installed Faqih Sinin in Kebkabiya, had fallen victim to an epidemic. In addition, this was the period of the great famine also referred to as *Sana Jano*, the year of Jano.

In other words, the area around Kebkabiya was virtually depopulated in the period that Faqih Sinin settled in the same place. Sinin thus offered a kind of safe haven in an era of turmoil, violence and insecurity, not the least because he was accompanied by a strong Mahdist army contingent. I came to understand Sinin's importance to the re-establishment of the town but it still did not make sense that the earlier involvement of the Fur Sultans was so completely negated.

The relevance of this silence became clear to me when I considered the political context of the time I recorded these local narratives. I realized that local political and economic dynamics had changed due to the newly established Islamist state, which had come to power by a military coup in 1989, just a year before I conducted my fieldwork. It replaced the four-year-old democratic regime that had been led by UMMA party, which in Kebkabiya had mostly followers from the Fur ethnic group who had thus also gained local power. The Tama, however, supported the rival DUP party. They had constituted a majority ever since their forefather Sinin had settled in town and they had held most of the important government positions in the period before the democratic regime came to power. Though none of the Tama I met were openly supportive of the Islamist regime, the demise of the UMMA party meant that Tama could reclaim local power positions. Like the Mahdiyya, this postcolonial Islamist state brought a restoration of the proper course of history, with the Tama as the 'righteous rulers' of the town.

Thus, in order to understand why a local community constructs a past by emphasizing some historical events and silencing others, it is not sufficient for an historian to give a historical context of the period that is referred to in these local narratives. It is just as important to consider these local perspectives as discursive means to justify contemporary power relations, especially when political dynamics cannot be openly articulated or criticized.

And Hajja? She abstained from taking a position in this political strife. She was proud to wear the white *tobe*, or veil, that marked her position as a female government (*any* government) employee. She was allowed to wear this white uniform by virtue of her elevated position as a *trained* medical midwife, which she had held for several decades. She therefore stood above the ethnic parties and local political machinations though her position came with different challenges and possibilities. But that is an entirely different local narrative.

Further reading

Kapteijns, Lidwien. "Islamic Rationales for the Changing Social Roles of Women in the Western Sudan." Martin W. Daly, ed. *Modernization in the Sudan*. New York, 1985: 57-72.

O'Fahey, Rex S. *The Darfur Sultanate. A History*. London, 2008.

Tosh, John. *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History*. New York, 2015.

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