



Tunnel Vision or Kaleidoscope: Competing Concepts on Sudan Identity and National Integration

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Abstract

Characterised as a bridge between the Arab-Muslim world and Black Africa; and as a melting pot where diverse ethnic, religious and language groups were related together, Sudan continues to baffle observers and analysts by protracted conflicts and crises inflicted on its population. Amid all these, major parties to the conflict accuse each other of sowing the seeds of disintegration and disunity, and on the other hand each claims to be the only one genuinely working for unity. This article discusses conceptual foundations behind these claims and positions of major parties to conflict. Taking the ethnic-cultural make-up of Sudan, the article compares and contrasts a dominant concept of ‘unity in conformity’, endorsed since independence by Northern ruling groups, to ‘unity in diversity’, propagated by marginalised ethnic nationalities and

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underprivileged classes. After setting the context of the debate between the two different concepts, and delineating traits of both, the article argues that in view of the diversity and complexity of the social formation of Sudan, and more important, the failure of ‘unity in conformity’ to deliver on its promises, the alternative concept of ‘unity in diversity’ is more adequate in laying down foundations for credible unity and viable identity.

Introduction

Recently the call for maintaining and promoting conflict-ridden Sudan as unified entity has emerged as a central item in the agenda of most, if not all, parties to the ongoing political conflict since the 1950s. Indeed, each of the major parties to the conflict accuses the other of sowing the seeds of disintegration and disunity by what it calls for; and on the other hand each claims to be the only one genuinely concerned with, and capable of, laying down and maintaining the foundations of unity, thereby ridding the country of the dangers of disunity and strife. If anything, these accusations and counter-accusations manifest the predicament of all the parties – the elite groups that have been reigning the country since independence in 1956.

In these circumstances, it is of ultimate importance to have a clear understanding of what these different groups mean by unity and disunity. The need to examine the different concepts of unity and disunity advocated by the conflicting parties is all the more important since, in the context of Sudan (and Africa in general), concepts of integration and unity are premised on recognising the diversity(ies) of the country. In their manifestoes and charters, parties to the conflict generally begin by asserting and emphasising the diversity of Sudan before they proceed to give their account about how to deal with the question of unity. Hence, concepts of unity hereby advanced necessarily refer to relations binding various elements and parts together within a single whole. We shall consider below how some of these concepts endeavour to construct ‘unity

within diversity’ or ‘unity in differentiation.’ Certainly, it would be most useful to attempt to unravel the theoretical assumptions underlying the competing concepts.

It is not the intention here to identify the actual historical tendencies behind the emergence of these concepts. Equally, little attention will be paid to the social forces and movements at work that are capable of consummating/realising these concepts of unity.

In its present form, this paper consists of different sections. Section two defines the context of the debate between different approaches to the issue of unity/disunity. In the following sections we will confine our analysis to two concepts only. In section three, we consider one of the two major concepts ‘unity in conformity’ and how it deals with unity in differentiation and the difficulties encountered in tackling the issue of unity from this perspective. An alternative competing concept, ‘unity in diversity’, is considered in section four, with a suggestion that this alternative is believed to be more adequate than the ones which have thus far been dominant. The last section gives a general conclusion.

Elements of Sudan’s diversity

An overview of Sudan’s diversity is in order if we are to appreciate the debate on rational integration. This begins by recognising the ethnic-national element of this diversity. According to the much referred to census of 1955/ 56, the main ethnic groups are Arabs (39 %), Southerners (30%), West Darfur (9%), Beja (6%), West Africans (6%), Nuba (6%), Nubia (3%) and Funj (1.7 %) (Republic of Sudan 19621956:Table 6.8).¹ Other accounts of the ethnic composition of Sudan classify these groups

1 According to the 1955/56 Census, ethnic groups are described as follows: Arabs (39%), referring to a mixture of Semitic immigrants and indigenous Hamitic and Negroid groups; Southerners (30%) as Nilotic-Hamitic and Sudanic Negroids; West Darfurians (9%), referring to indigenous Negroids with some Hamitic and Semitic elements; Beja (6%), indigenous Hamitic; West African (6%); Nuba (6%), indigenous Negroids; Nubia (3%) Negroid mixture with Hamitic and Semitic, and Funj (1.7%) as indigenous Negroes.

in terms of 19 main nationalities (Majmoua'a Gawmiyya) and 597 ethnic groups (Majmoua'a Airgiyya) (Beshir 1988). Yet, socio-economic changes since 1956 together with natural and man-made disasters (desertification, famine and civil war) must have resulted one way or another in some significant changes in the numerical and demographic weight of these ethnic-national groups. On this, the population censuses of 1973 and 1983 remain silent. Yet no one can claim that these changes have obliterated ethnic-national diversities. In peripheral social formations, ethnic-national diversities seem to have staying power and post-colonial developments actually had the effect of maintaining them.

Ethnic-national diversities have further been sustained by cultural, linguistic, religious, social and political differences. It is reported that there are 115 dialects with 26 of them as active spoken languages, each spoken by more than 100 000 people (Ahmed 1988:7-18). About 52% of the population are Arabic-speaking while 48% speak other languages (*Al-Ayyam* 1989). Diversity also expresses itself sharply in religion, with Islam, Christianity and 'other religions' professed by different sections of the population. Both Christianity and other religions claim the support of significant sections of the population. Religious heterogeneity is further sustained by the prevalence of sectarian cleavages within Islam, the religion of the majority.

An important aspect of the complexity of the Sudanese society is the diversity marking familial connections, social structures, cultural outlooks, value systems and gender statuses. These diversities do not only affect existing possibilities for social mobility and integration, but have equally direct bearing on moral norms, legal status and notions of identities (An-Na'im 1987:71-77). Furthermore, there is a diversity of traditional political structures; and the highly centralised authoritarian structures of the colonial state and the post-colonial state added more to the already existing forms of rule.

Equally, Sudan economy is marked by a high degree of heterogeneity. It encompasses different modes and forms of production, different sectors,

different activities and different interests relating to different social categories and classes. It is our contention here that an account of the main elements of the diversities of Sudanese society is not adequate without considering the distribution of the population into various occupational categories.

In a situation like the one in Sudan (as in many African countries)² where the process of nation formation has yet to mature, these elements of diversity work much more towards disintegration than towards integration.³ In such a context then, it is only natural to ask what begets unity in a situation of diversity.⁴ Indeed, an observer might ask: how come that Sudan, given its diversities and prevalent hostilities, is still holding together (Spaulding 1987:3-4). What is it that makes the different parts of the complex totality of the Sudanese society hold together? Could it be the economic structure (mode of production) which imposes unity on society? Or is it the efficacy of the political system (the state or political community), and the monopoly of power by one group commanding unity and suppressing dissent? Or is it the existence of an accommodatory and integrative value system at the centre which makes for the sustenance of unity?

Framework for analysis

These questions and other related issues have generally shaped the debate on national integration in Sudan. Taking part in this debate, some

2 Like Sudan, many African countries are characterised by ethnic, religious, linguistic, social and economic diversities. Among these are Uganda, Ethiopia, Senegal, South Africa and Nigeria, to mention but a few countries.

3 The National Population Censuses of 1973 and 1983 have dropped the category of ethnic (tribal) designation, probably in the belief that national integration in post-independence Sudan had rendered this categorisation redundant. However, a number of studies have attempted to challenge this contention. For example, see: Umbadda 1990.

4 The issue of governability and survivability of Sudan as a state was raised on many occasions. See Woodward 1988.

historians writing about Sudan between 1898 and 1956 conceived of the country as literally:

... [a] balkanized world of arrogant and warlike little nations, strutting about belligerently or crouching in surly defensiveness behind some tropical magnet line (Spaulding 1987:3-4).

It was the colonial state then, through its centralised and bureaucratic structures, which kept peace and ensured unity. Though such conception might have served an ideological purpose for colonial powers, it has some historical and empirical relevance, a relevance which can be attested to in the post-colonial period as well.

Other observers argue that what has bestowed unity on the country and prevented it from falling apart is not the state but the efficacy of the political system at large (Woodward 1988). Yet, some still do believe that it is the capacity of the dominant culture of the dominant group which is the source of unity and its maintenance in Sudan. What concerns us here most is that in this balkanised plural perspective, the emphasis is on groups and political centres.

Later a new generation of scholars initiated a shift in the studies concerned with the unity/disunity debate; a shift of their primary focus from the 'real' or 'alleged' centres of various communities (groups) to the very boundaries that were presumed to divide them. Consequently, the historical balkanised perspective

... [w]as replaced by one of a complex network of interactions among people in which all manner of economic, political and cultural influences made themselves felt in an intricate web of reciprocal relationships. (Spaulding 1987:4).

Given this, a rough classification scheme for studies on the debate of unity/disunity of the Sudanese society is provided. With warranted simplifications, one can think of a continuum with one pole representing studies focusing on groups, centres and agents, and employing various categories of sociological analysis (such as ethnicity, religion and

culture). The other pole of the continuum represents studies focusing on social processes and structures of under-development, peripheral capitalism and state formation, and using political-economic categories of analysis. In between the poles of this continuum, a number of studies attempted, with varying degrees of success, to synthesise the perspectives of the two poles, employing various categories of analysis, i.e. class, ethnicity and state. (Ibrahim 1985; El-Battahani 1988; Shadad 1988; Khalid 1990; Umbadda 1990).

Space does not allow for consideration of these studies here, but two major perspectives emerge that form the core of this study and merit close attention: unity-in-conformity and unity-in-diversity.

Unity-in-conformity concept

This is a core concept with many variants. After briefly considering the theoretical assumption and general features of this concept-variant, this section will attempt to relate the concept-variant to the concrete situation of diversities in Sudanese Society. Concepts of unity and national integration are historically shaped by political conjunctures. But as we have already mentioned, the social determinants and historical transformations which produced this concept, important as they are, are not our prime concern here. An in depth inquiry into the nature of these transformations requires a separate treatment.

Historically, the structure of colonial capitalism enabled the centre of Sudan to firstly produce a unity-in-conformity concept, the main variants of which are Arabism and Islamism. Later, the peripheries of Sudan responded by advancing a different notion of unity (Africanism), giving a different perspective of Sudan identity and national integration. Yet, at a conceptual level, Arabism, Islamism and Africanism are all rival variants of the core concept of unity-in-conformity, and as such share the same

underlying assumptions of the concept.⁵ A theoretical sketch of this core concept is presented by considering some features of these variants; e.g. Islamism. It is believed that an elaborate exposition of one variant will, to a greater extent, reflect more clearly the underlying assumptions of the core concept. Hence what is related to Islamism necessarily applies, in essence, to both Arabism and Africanism.

With this in mind, it is our assertion that in dealing with national integration, the unity-in-conformity concept is idealist, ethnocentric, and of totalitarian-authoritative nature leaving aside for the time being its patriarchal, retrogressive and other peripheral capitalist features. We shall briefly examine how the Islamist variant reflects the traits of the core concept.

The ascendancy of the (Arab-Islamic) hegemony has been noted by many groups and perceived by them as negatively affecting their role and contribution in building a viable unity of Sudan social formation. Indeed, some subordinated groups feel that the overall thrust of the hegemony of the centre is systematically working towards nullifying their distinct cultural attributes. A former prime minister once stated that they were not willing to abandon their (Arab-Islamic) culture for a mirage (El-Mahdi 1988), referring to indigenous non-Arab-Islamic culture and the call for recognising its values and incorporating them into to Sudanese identity.⁶

For its part, the hegemonic centre believes that only by promoting its culture could unity of Sudan be maintained. Submitting to the will of the centre, or to put it in milder terms, conforming to the value-system

5 See Beshir & Salih 1984 and Mazrui 1971. According to Hurreiz (1989:79-98), this was more in line with the social fabric of Sudanese culture and identity because it enabled different groups to mix and merge wishfully, thus forming wider groups. For example, cultural process of integration (Arabisation, Islamisation and Africanisation) did take place albeit *voluntarily, gradually and irregularly*. This created the contemporary Sudan with its relative unity and inherent disunity.

6 Former Prime Minister El Sadig El-Mahdi, discussing the proposed Penal Code for 1988 in the Constituent Assembly of 1988-1989.

of the centre by different groups is taken as a prerequisite for Sudanese unity and identity. On the other hand, emphasising the particularity and cultural individuality of groups in the peripheries is perceived as a threat to the unity of Sudanese society as a whole.

What is, then, the rationale of the centre? What are the philosophical bases of the centre's belief that extending and universalising its 'superior' culture (religion) over other cultures and groups would ensure unity, while resisting this process would foment disunity? As far as the Islamic part of the variant concept is concerned, its perspective of unity-disunity is essentially derived from Islam. To be more precise, it is derived from a particular idealist (revivalist) interpretation and ideological appropriation of Islam. (Hamed 1985)

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam is a monist religion with a built-in universalist drive which conceives the human race as but a target for conversion. It is, in effect, pitched in a constant competition with other religions and cultures (Mazrui 1990)⁷ and consequently is less accommodating to other creeds and beliefs. This is more likely the case when Islamic-revivalist concepts of integration stress the need to universalise and absolutise their values as prerequisites for attaining unity and social cohesion. In other words, the argument here is that all parts of the whole must reflect and share the same essence if the unity of the whole is to be secured.

It is believed that the Islamist variant reflects, in an important way, a Hegelian idealist conception of totality. This is:

... an expressive totality, a totality all of whose parts are so many total parts each expressing the others, and each expressing the social totality that contains them, because each in itself contains in the immediate form of its expression the essence of the totality itself... (Collinicos 1976:40).

⁷ Mazrui, A., commenting on his book *Cultural Forces in World Politics* (Mazrui 1990) in the BBC World Service, Meridian Programme on 1990-07-12.

The unity produced by such a concept is immediately present in, and extricable from, each of its parts. Each part of the whole is but the expression of the essence of the whole (Collinicos 1976:40). Within this perspective, the unity of the whole suppresses the distinctness of the part and deprives it of instances (determinations) constituting it. This expression of the essence of the whole is but the will of the absolute truth, reason, or the divine. History is conceived as a process moving towards a predetermined end, the rising of the absolute to self-consciousness (Collinicos 1976:40) or the realisation of the Almighty's will on each.

It is not the intention here to discuss the theoretical or philosophical aspects of the idealist conception of history, but only to indicate that the realisation of self-consciousness by the absolute attainment of unity is hampered in reality by many distractions, albeit of temporary nature. History is the progressive unfolding of events towards the ultimate objective. Here, the role of conscious agents of history (bearers of truth) is to affirm the will and majesty of the divine on earth by transcending situations of discord and imperfections.

That these assumptions underlie the Islamists' variant of unity-in-conformity concept is not difficult to establish. The foundation of an Islamic society-state lies in the doctrine of *Tawhid*, the unity of Allah and human life (El-Turabi 1985:2). In the course of realising this unity, the *Ummah* (nation; in the broad sense) has to strictly adhere to sources of religious guidance (The Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet) and the model of Medina experience. In reality, however, many factors and historical challenges intervene to thwart the process of *Tawhid* and frustrate the *Ummah's* effort to unite and live up to its ideal and destiny. (Abdel Gabar 1985:121-134)

But how does this relate to the question of unity in Sudan? It is maintained here that in the context of diversities of Sudanese society, Islamism (the attempt to articulate a notion of unity on the bases of this perspective) is neither conducive to nor a plausible concept for workable unity. This, however, should not be taken to mean that Islam, as a repository

of values, symbols and aspirations, has no role to play in contributing to national unity. Rather, our concern here is confined to Islamism (as expressed by leaders of political Islam in Sudan): the concept-variant of unity-in-conformity, and it is this which lacks the capacity to positively contribute to a viable unity of a diverse society.

In Sudan, Islamism sanctions the Muslim endeavours to absolutise their (historically determined) values and culture as bases of unity and polity. Indeed, Sudan's unity and identity are both reduced, according to Hassan Mekki (1990:20), a leading Islamist intellectual, to nurturing and evolving Islam or, to be more precise, a particular version of Islam:

It is imperative to promote and develop the culture of the centre for it is this [Islamic] culture which unites the nation and gives it its distinct features and attributes. Without this Islamic factor Sudan would have never existed...

To reduce the objective complexity of Sudan cultural and social structures to Islam is surely to inflate one element of a diverse totality at the expense of others, if not to deny the very fact of diversity. The capacity and readiness, therefore, to accommodate different elements (for example non-Islamic, non-Arab groups) within a unified Sudanese totality is, thus, altogether undermined.

Calls to constantly maintain (Islamic) sources of unity are sometimes expressed in calls to a Jihad to defend Islam and extend its frontiers against the infidels in *dar al harab* (land of war). Attempts by different marginalised groups to press for their otherwise legitimate claims are outrightly rejected as impairing unity and publicly dubbed as racist, ethnic, 'tribal,' 'atheist,' 'secular,' 'crusader-like,' 'Zionist,' 'communist,' etc. Quite often, a conspiracy theory is invoked to explain away any attempt by internal forces to challenge this monolithic Islamist concept-variant of unity. The combined objective these enemy forces pursue is claimed to foment disunity by spoiling the creed of the Ummah. Consequently, revitalisation of sources of Islamic religion is thus proposed as a panacea to ensure unity and avoid discord.

However, in the context of a multiple Sudan, such a panacea is nothing but a call for an ethnocentrism or 'Islamocentrism'. This concept over-stresses the primary position of Arabic language and culture and regards the history of Muslims as the sole repository of values, symbols and norms in the light of which modern life of Sudanese people should be modelled. Aspects pertaining to Sudanese identity are believed not to be negotiable since they are not the product of historical processes, but a given fact of Islamic religiosity. Non-Islamic cultures are perceived as a threat to Sudanese identity, as they are informed by:

... a militant brand of secular discourse extremism. It is no wonder then (since 1955) for such discourse to express itself by raising arms, becoming involved in guerrilla activities against *the right of Islamic culture to exist in the South and to dominate in the North* (emphasis added) (Mekki 1990:10).

A corollary of this reasoning is the call for the establishment of an Islamic state and a totalitarian political system. The logic of this reasoning runs as follows: the state (which is a common affair among all believers and citizens of the Sudan) (Mekki 1989) attends to the demands of the majority; the majority are Muslims; in Islam the state deals with both private and public domains; thus an Islamic state is a guarantee for the unity of the country (National Islamic Front 1989:2; Hamid 1988). Notwithstanding provisions to safeguard minority rights, this logic expresses an eventually totalitarian concept of polity. In this polity: (1) power (legislative, executive and judiciary) is vested in an Imam, reflecting the will of the Divine more than the general will of the people, and (2) the modern concept of citizenship is lacking, or at least difficult to reconcile with the Islamic concept of polity.⁸ Fears were expressed as to the tendency to stratify the population according to creed as male Muslims, female Muslims, male non-Muslims and female non-Muslims (*Sudan Times* 1988-1989).

8 Consider the attempts by Sadig El-Mahadi, when he was at Paris, to reconcile between his concept of an Islamic State and the Modern (Secular) concept of citizenship.

Tied to this categorisation of citizens is the uneven distribution of political, economic and social goods and entitlements. Many observers believe that a version of the Islamist concept-variant of unity had been put into practice in Sudan between 1983 and 1985. During this period, social and economic differentiations were either religiously sanctioned or else not dealt with effectively. Forms of Islamic charity failed to curb social ills. Equally, attempts to structurally curb these problems and initiate socio-economic development led to a controversial situation, to say the least.⁹ Consequently, the ensuing deprivations have further consolidated an already existing schism and discord which the concept purports to transcend in theory. In a nutshell, Islamocentricism, a totalitarian political regime and economic stagnation are hardly conducive to unity.

However, this conclusion is not peculiar to the Islamist variant of the unity-in-conformity concept. Other variants (Arabism and Africanism) of the concept are equally predisposed to lead to the same dead end. Essentially then, this concept of unity-in-conformity with all its variants, is inherently antithetical to the very nature of Sudan diversities which are grounded on historical objective conditions. Instead of realistically dealing with these objective conditions (i.e. recognising and synthesising them), the concept obliterates them only to produce a monolithic concept of unity. Traced to its philosophical assumption this can be expressed in that, rather than comprehending the complexity and diversity of empirical realities, the sole interest of the concept is to discover and establish the Absolute (in Islamism, Arabism, Africanism) in:

Every element, whether of the state or of nature, and the actual subjects... come to nothing but their mere names. The world is left uncomprehended, reduced to a manifestation of the absolute (Collinicos 1976:33).

The limited capacity of this concept to offer a differentiated concept of unity can much more clearly be grasped if considered in relation to the potential of the rival concept of unity-in-diversity.

9 For an example, see Shaa el-Din & Brown 1985.

Unity-in-diversity as an alternative concept

Studies informed by this concept have, to some extent, emerged as a critique of the dominant concept of unity-in-conformity. Whilst unity-in-conformity focuses on the efficacy of cultural variables and political groups (the groups-agents pole of the continuum of our theoretical sketch), this alternative concept attempts to redress the imbalance by leaning more toward the pole of social structures and processes, without entirely neglecting socio-cultural variables (ethnicity, religion, etc.).

In order to better account for the complex unity of the Sudanese social formation, an urgent need has been felt by many researchers to synthesise the two poles of the theoretical continuum and, then, analytically integrate variables relating to both, i.e. class, ethnicity (and the state).¹⁰ Heeding this, a number of studies O'Brien (1986: 898-907), El-Battahani (1988), Ibrahim (1985), Shadad (1988) have endeavoured, with varying degree of success, to deal with this theoretical synthesis and integration. This paper is an attempt to bring out much more forcefully the theoretical framework underlying these studies, and to contribute to nominating unity-in-diversity as viable concept. In contradistinction to the features of the unity-in-conformity concept, the concept we are suggesting here as a viable alternative is characterised as realist, non-centricist and of historical and dynamic nature. Before we elaborate on these traits, however, a note on the methodological premise of this concept is in order.

A methodological premise

In view of the diversities of the Sudanese society (as indicated above), a methodological position of the alternative concept is that in peripheral

10 Professor M. O. Beshir (Beshir & Salih 1984) expressed this need when, in one of his studies on Diversity and Unity in Sudan, he stated: 'I have not tried in this paper to discuss the issue of ethnicity and class in the case of Sudan. This is not due to any rejection and the suggestion that class is relevant or to the proposal that there is no correlation between class and ethnicity in other similar cases. The relations are rather hard to handle and there is overlapping which can easily lead to confusion.'

societies patterns of ethnic stratification (cultural stratification) and class/occupational stratification and the relations between social groups are massively over-determined:

It is this over-determined complexity which constitutes the specificity of the problem requiring analysis. It does not help, here, to depress some factors of this matrix (e.g. ethnicity or class) in favour of others (e.g. culture or religion) and then, analytically to subsume the former into the latter, since it is precisely the generative specificity of each, plus the over-determined complexity of the whole, which is the problem... (Hall 1978:152-153).¹¹

This will be clarified further below. Here, suffice it to say that the overriding concern of the two competing philosophies or positions is unity in a differentiated society. Yet, issues relating to how such unity would be achieved are set within a different problematic. In the previous section, the account of unity-in-conformity concept has been considered.

As far as the unity-in-diversity concept is concerned, questions as the following are raised within this problematic. What fundamentally distributes the population of Sudan into different occupational/class categories? What, essentially, is the role of ethnicity in the distribution of these groups and the maintenance of the social order? How have these class structures evolved and what role(s) have the state and ethnicity played in this? How are we to understand the relations of these variables (class, state and ethnicity) in the totality of the whole social matrix and its stratification? How, then, is this matrix affected by what we might call the ethnic element? Or, for that matter, the religious? And given the diversities of Sudanese social formation, as indicated above, what is it that maintains the dominant structures of legitimation through this apparent complexity? What produces the structures of these societies as structure-in-dominance? Above all, what holds this society together?

¹¹ Expressing a similar proposition, Al-Hardalo (1984) cautioned Sudanese Intellectuals and Politicians not to magnify one element of Sudan complex structures at the expense of another when dealing with the intricate issue of national unity in Sudan.

Monist and unity-in-conformity analyses suggest that overall cohesion is achieved through the domination of one segment in the political institutional order; the universalisation of the centre's culture and its imposition on the constituent parts-regions of the Sudanese society. Yet, these analyses, though correct in recognising the centrality of power and the hegemonic culture of the centre, conceive questions of unity/disunity in a too limited and segmentary fashion. Imperative integration is neither achieved in Sudan exclusively through political institutionalisation nor via cultural domination. It is our argument that the unity of Sudan's social formation is not a simple, undifferentiated unity as such analysts would like us to believe. In differentiated, complex societies, we are required to account, not just for the existence of culturally distinct institutions and patterns, but also for that which secures the unity, cohesion and stability of this social order in and through (not despite) its differences (Hall 1978:152-153). This called for an introduction of a new concept of totality, a concept which should be understood in a double way: 'as simultaneously involving tendencies to unity and differentiation' (Post 1990:14). Which pole of the relationship (unity in diversity) will be dominant depends on the historically specific conditions and the social formation (Wolpe 1989:8). In a word, the unity-in-diversity concept is based on a realist concept of totality.

Relevance of the alternative concept

The idealist concept of totality, as interpreted by the unity-in-conformity analysis, acknowledges the centrality of the Absolute, the realisation of which bestows unity and suppresses the distinctness of the constituent unity as a condition for the cohesion of the whole. In contrast to this, the unity-in-diversity concept does not attribute the unity of the whole to the presence of actualisation of the Absolute nor does it consider the whole as something in, yet separable, from its parts. In the realist concept of totality:

the unity of the whole does not suppress distinctness of the determinations constituting it; rather this distinctness is the precondition of

any unity which is not the self-relation of the spirit (or the Absolute)...
(Collinicos 1976:45).

These analyses, derived here from a number of studies, assert the materiality of the world without undermining the significance of spirituality and cognition (Post 1990), the specificity of the entities constituting the world; and at the same time, (in the case of social formation) their unity within a complex structure, 'structure-in-dominance' (Collinicos 1976:45). Unity of the social formation is the function of relations of subordination and dominance obtaining between the constituent parts of the structure in dominance. To further grasp the nature of this unity, it is essential to be more specific about two terms here: complexity and structure.

The complexity of the whole depends on comprehending it as consisting of a number of distinct but interrelated instances.

In a nutshell, then, the social totality is a complex structured unity. Its complexity lies in the fact that it is a unity of distinct, relatively autonomous instances with different modes of development. Its structures lie in the fact that its unity results from the hierarchy of the instances as determined by the economy in the final analysis. In Collinicos' (1976:62) words, 'that totality is structured is as essential to its nature as that it is complex'.

Contrary to the ethnocentrism of the conformity-based perspective of unity which considers differences as antithetical to unity, this perspective recognises differences as built-in elements of its totality. A tunnel vision perspective is irrelevant here. Instead:

... the differences have to be welcomed as part of the Kaleido-scope of national life, contributing in their various ways to the national whole. If this can be achieved, we can have unity with diversity – or, as we might put: ethnicity (or multi-religiosity) and diversity without conflict... (Stevenson 1989:207).

Within such a non-ethnocentrist perspective, no culture or value system of a particular segment has the moral right to universalise its attributes over others as a condition of the unity of the whole. Different parts contribute to nurturing unity and national cohesion. Consequently, factors which are often regarded as divisive and contributing to a breaking down of indigenous culture are now factors which unify (Stevenson 1989:205-206) and help bring together different groups, cultures and individuals in a dynamic interaction to create an integrated whole. Commenting on the utility of this approach, a Sudanese intellectual (Khalid)¹² had it that:

Sudan is an Arab country, but its Arabism is not like that of Syria, Sudan is a Muslim country, but Islam in Sudan is not like Islam in Saudi Arabia, and Sudan is an African country, but its African character is not similar to that of Kenya...

From the point of view of this perspective, differences are recognised and contradictions are not written off but dealt with by the people in the course of shaping their own destiny. In Callinicos' words, it is the working out of these contradictions between instances constituting the social whole which determines its trajectory. History is not the expression of a spiritual essence, nor is it the progressive realisation of innate characteristics of a nation (Arabism) or culture (Africanism). It is a process whose development is the outcome of the relations (and contradictions) of the economic, political and ideological instances composing the social whole.

It is peripheral capitalism which defines the trajectory of Sudan's social formation, organising and determining the relations in and between its various instances (economic, political and ideological). The resulting unity is essentially of an uneven nature, with hierarchically ordered instances (and contradictions) within the social totality. It is a unity of a janus-faced character; being always simultaneously functional and contradictory, both constructive and destructive, both integrative and

¹² During an interview on SPLA/SPLM Radio.

disintegrative. Which side of the relationship will be dominant depends on the historically specific conditions and the social formation.

Obstacles to unity

In Sudan the relations within and between instances are characterised by the fact that class and union-class contradictions (ethnic, religious, cultural) overlap and are materially and ideologically mutually reinforcing. In the present conjuncture, this has tilted the relations more towards a destructive and disintegrative pole. The situations actually obtaining can be generally described as hardly conducive, in political, economic and social terms, to unity and integration. We shall elaborate on this by briefly considering the rigidity of the social structure and social mobility processes.

In Sudan, the ethnic factor intertwines with non-ethnic factors (education, wealth, occupation, status) to produce a complex, unschematic stratification matrix. This does not mean that social differentiation in Sudan is exclusively ethnic-based as some studies have tried to establish. It is our position here that the stratification system is a class-determined one in which ethnic (or religious) elements constitute a relatively more visible index of more complex structured peripheral capitalist societies, like Sudan, where class, status and ethnicity interpenetrate. The public signification of the stratification system

... is more explicit than in societies where no ethnic (religious) index exists; it is a more rigid system, since any member of the society (in particular those of the oppressed nationalities) rising in status has to negotiate more than one system of status symbolism. The calculus of social mobility is far more complex... (Hall 1978:152-153).

That is, members of marginalised ethnos, classes and social categories (e.g. women) passing upward from one position to another have to negotiate (peacefully) the public signification of the social structure along several axes.

This point can be further developed by considering social mobility as an index of efficiency and rationality of the existing social structure. An over-simplified schema is used here to divide/classify the population into three core ethnic categories: Northerners, Easterners and Southerners. The dominant classificatory scheme, which reigned in Sudanese studies for some time, was based on a Northerners-Southerners dichotomy, but this has failed to capture the complexity and diversity of the Sudanese society. As an alternative, we suggest here that a category of Westerners (not in the geographical sense) be introduced to reflect the diversity of social structure. This category of Westerners refers to ethnic groupings occupying an intermediary position between Northerners and Southerners, sharing ethnic and/or cultural affinities with the former and social/economic status with the latter. The criterion thus employed is based on a combination of ethnic, social and economic indicators. The enhanced or restricted chances for social mobility of the three core ethnos, Northerners, Westerners and Southerners, is a function of the nature of the stratification system.

The stratification system approximates a pyramid with the upper triangle dominated by Arab-Muslim ruling classes and groups, together with a tiny fraction of Westerners and Southerners who were able to assimilate or come closer to the jallaba class in economic wealth, social status, language, education and values. The jallaba rank highest on all social, economic and political aspects, with their positions and privileges protected and legitimised as such by state ideology, national chauvinism and manipulation of cultural boundaries (i.e. religion). The middle layers of the social pyramid are likewise occupied by a predominantly Arab-Muslim middle class. This did not result from numerical strength, if any, but it is rather a consequence of colonial and post-colonial transformations in education and employment. Yet, there are increasingly significant numbers of Westerners and Southerners who managed to penetrate into middle ranking positions and occupations. Peasants, artisans and urban workers in the North are congregated in the lower layers of the pyramid, but these layers are overwhelmingly dominated by nomads,

poor peasants and marginalised groups of Westerners and Southerners, for example. The latter are typically incorporated in positions with the least status and material reward in the national labour market.

This social stratification system is not legitimated by culture alone, but mainly by underlying structures of peripheral capitalism. These structures historically evolved as an outcome of the intrusion of colonial capitalism in the period of 1898-1956, and since then have been maintained by post-colonial development. Endeavours to adjust the lop-sided nature of the system and remove (ethnic-cultural) irrational barriers to social mobility were all in vain. Stagnation, rigidity and inefficiency characterised the performance of the social stratification system.

Different analyses have attempted to probe into the nature of the 'dysfunctionality' of this system and account for its rigidity and the consequent threat it poses to unity and national cohesion. As suggested above, analyses derived from the unity-in-diversity concept are much more adequate than analyses based on the unity-in-conformity concept in accounting for the stagnation and disintegration of present structures. In broad agreement with the arguments of this paper, analyses by Shadad (1988), Ali (1990) and Umbadda (1990), for example, have stressed the role of the bourgeois class nature and the hegemonic faction(s) in mismanaging the economy and society and pursuing a dead-end line of development. Hence,

... war, political instability and the resurgence of obscurantist ideology (and disunity) are all symptoms of the present crisis in the Sudan. This is a crisis of structure and crisis of development (Shadad, 1987:29).

In other words, the structure-in-dominance is in crisis, meaning that the post-colonial national integration projects, largely informed by the unity-in-conformity concept and maintained through the hegemonic Arab-Muslim domination over all features of organised social life, have failed in historically transforming Sudanese society.

Conclusion

Studies on integration in Sudan have been placed within a broad theoretical sketch of a continuum with two poles: studies on unity-in-conformity and studies on unity-in-diversity; each having its justifications and agents. These form the major dominant concepts of unity, albeit a 'unity' with different theoretical properties and reasoning. In this paper, some theoretical features of the two competing concepts on national integration have been considered together with their capacity of exploring issues of unity and diversity. Related to this, it is argued that the unity-in-diversity concept has much more analytical potential and scope than the unity-in-conformity concept. The latter, it is believed, does not provide the means for tackling intricate issues of complexities and historically evolved contradictions, since the concept is predisposed (by its philosophical idealist assumptions) to writing these complexities and contradictions off instead of recognising them as real.

As an alternative, the unity-in-diversity concept is not only capable of accounting for the structured contradictions and complexities of the Sudanese society, but is more conducive to constructing a viable project of unity in differentiation. This is so because the stagnation and disintegration characterising existing structures of Sudan are conceived as a product of socio-economic processes. Removing the rigidities of the system and its disintegrative factors does not mean wishing away objective contradictions and differences, but instead comprehending and dealing with them within a new paradigm that sets them as parts of the transformation and rebuilding process.

Though there are no guarantees in history and though the crisis-ridden situation in Sudan is open to many options, nonetheless, there are moments in Sudan's political history which point to a possibility of a way out. Armed with this unity-in-diversity perspective, forces of change would be able to thrash out an appropriate, sound political project which would, among other things, contribute to nurturing and consolidating peace, harmony and coexistence among the diverse groupings of society;

and create a stock of symbols, ideas and ideals sufficient to accommodate and contain contradictory impulses, and push forth a consistent, historical, progressive unfolding of Sudanese nation formation.

Since this is not an idealist conception, it is more plausible, for example, to conceive of differentiation in economic status and life-chances as a function of a rationally-based open system with no built-in ethnic and cultural barriers to social mobility. Therefore, a just and a fair system is all that is required for the working out of contradictions and complexities. And what is more, the potential for this, and consequently for a viable unity, is there. It is the task for further research to dig in the ethnography, social history and culture to lay bare the untapped symbols and resources that support and encourage coexistence, tolerance and accommodation. As people elsewhere, Sudanese people make their own history within conditions not entirely of their choice. Whether the Sudanese remain as one united, nation or whether they become disintegrated into many 'nations' would be the outcome of their own doing. Unlike proponents of the unity-in-conformity concept, adherents to unity-in-diversity are more in line with 'historic calling' and their choices seem to align more with progressive unfolding of Sudanese nation formation.

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