

TECHNOSOCIAL DYNAMICS OF DECOSNTRUCTING LOCAL CULTURES: EVIDENCE FROM THE CONFLICT-TORN NATIVE COMMUNITIES IN DARFUR, SUDAN

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Abstract

This study explores the extent to which the native internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Darfur, the Sudan, were undergoing cultural transformations due to the current conflict, their exposure to the international humanitarian workers and massive use of communication technology. One question was formulated to investigate these phenomena: What were the cultural transformations taking place among the IDPs and how? To this end, the article investigates how impactful the existence of the international relief workers was on triggering the ongoing cultural transformations; and how effective was the exposure of the IDPs to technology-borne cultures in the erasure of local cultures at behavioural and normative levels. The relevant data were gleaned through observation and interviews conducted with a purposive sample of IDPs living at five displacement camps. Their opinions were qualitatively analysed together with the data gathered from personal observation. The study concluded that physical exposure of the IDPs to the Darfur-based international humanitarian workers, combined with the ubiquitous use of media technologies produced three types of cultures: a globalised culture – particularly among youth – accommodative to new dress codes and behaviours; a subculture resistant to the national core culture; and revitalised ethnic-based local cultures. The emergence of these cultural transformations seemed to be associated with the suffering inflicted on the IDPs in the course of conflict.

Keywords: Darfur Native Communities, Conflict and Displacement, Communication Technology, Sudan.

1. Introduction

In today's globalised space, communication technology (CT) has an irresistible power over exposing people to new cultures, and in taking their cultures to distant people as well. Technology has become an effective tool in mediating cultural transformations among communities, within organizations and also in countries. CT can intriguingly shape, reshape or erase local and national cultures. Whether culture or technology influences the other is not a cul-de-sac process; technology can mould cultural practices (Day, 2008; Konsa, 2008; Hes et al., 2015) and culture may handicap the efficient use of technology (Zhang et al., 2014). Given that 69% of today's world population is using mobile broadband services (ICT Facts Figures, 2015), we can draw a simple syllogism: 69% of the world population is virtually exposed, at varying levels, to new cultures.

With the advent of CT, local cultures have been challenged by inevitable changes. In Sudan, and by the very virtue of longstanding coexistence between native Africans and Arabs, cultural hybridisation processes continued to exist through history. However, Arabism and Islam were propagated as inseparable ideological stances by the Arab power wielding elites (Al-Afif, 2007; Sharkey, 2008; Garri, 2015). Nevertheless, the denied Africanism surfaced in the context of the current conflict. With it, technology and the existence of thousands of international humanitarian workers had a knock-off effect in creating the ongoing cultural transformations.

2. Research problem

Since the spillover of the current conflict in 2003, the native communities in Darfur have undergone far-reaching cultural changes. Wholesale transformations began taking place against the backdrop of demographic and social changes which were climaxed by the emergence of sociopolitical factors brought about by the eruption of the conflict and massive use of digital technology and exposure of the IDPs to the outside world. Consequently, the IDPs life tempo promptly underwent a quasi-rural metamorphosis which has recently gained wide currency. This study investigates the nuances of these transformations.

3. Literature review

This section reviews the dynamics of culture construction from two perspectives: how culture is negotiated in communities; and how cultural transformations can be manifested by technology. The section also reviews some debatable issues of culture in the Sudan.

Dynamics of culture construction

Defining the concept 'culture' is not a straightforward endeavour. As Carnwath and Brown (2014, p. 34) aptly argue, difficulty in defining what 'culture is' springs from the fact that it is often contextualised in different interdisciplinary perspectives. Accordingly, myriads of definitions are tailored, ranging from economic, educational, environmental planning, organisational, marketing or policy-making (see, for example, Strinati, 1995; Du Gay et al., 1997; Hall, 1997a, 1997b; Keillor & Hult, 1999; Vintere & Malinovska, 2009; Schein, 2010; Fritsch, 2011; Ince, 2014). Suffice here to quote Konsa (2008, p. 4) who defines 'culture' as "...a unique wilderness.... a strange area of darkness, hostility and desertion; an area impossible to understand..." Such a truism signifies the difficulty in exhaustively understanding what 'culture' means without attaching it to a particular discipline in which we can contextualise (Bertsch, 2013). Given this sophistication and believing that it is unproductive in my study to forward a comprehensive definition, I would rather draw on a considerable body of literature on the interconnectivity between technology and culture-making to qualify the problem of the study.

Asking a question such as 'how culture is made' is redundancy. Yet, the question does not come out of vacuum. Makers of culture must be those who share some "... concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think of and feel about the world..." (Hall, 1997, p. 3). Constructing or deconstructing culture can occur in contexts where societies perceive cultural practices as different from how they believe their cultural values should be. Baniyadi et al. (2014) devise the term 'cultural differentiation' to exemplify such a deficit. In this regard, House et al. (2004) maintains that the higher the cultural differentiation level among communities, the higher their potentiality in bringing about social change.

The dynamics of unmaking old cultures and making new ones in communities could be boosted by globalisation under which intransigence local cultures are strongly challenged. It is given that culture is a human product, but culture also determines human disposition in negotiating the values of that culture. This two-pronged process persists, Konsa (2008, p. 5) argues, because the "... world has dramatically shrunk and mixed different cultures, thereby making groups of people define their cultural identity." In so doing, people "...are likely to see an "us" versus "them" relations existing between themselves and people of different ethnicity or religion" (Huntington, 2010, p. 8 [commas original]). Geographical and within-group factors might also facilitate or impede such bidirectional processes. Cross-cultural research holds that the geographically larger a country, the stronger the intra-country cultural differences are pronounced (Bertsch, 2013). On the other hand, as instituted in cultural difference theory, within-group cultures are produced based on the prevailing sociopolitical situations (Carlone & Johnson, 2012; Garri, 2015).

On technology and culture

With the advent of globalisation, local communities and countries are constantly becoming under the direct influence of technology. The massive development of information and communication technologies (ICT) has not only invaded almost every aspect of life – politically, socially and economically – but also in bringing changes in values of individuals, countries and even changes in human biological body (Day, 2008; Konsa, 2008; Hes et al., 2015). As an influential factor in shaping or reshaping local or global issues as this, it is argued that there is need for theoretically conceptualising technology as a powerful tool in understanding global affairs at wide (Fritsch, 2001).

Viewed from a market economics perspective, Day (2008) argues that culture generated by technology revolves at microeconomic levels whose byproduct is industrialisation; at meso level whereby change is brought about by improvements in production and; at macro level in relation to economic growth. Day (*ibid.*) further argues that historical developments reveal the pacing technological changes which can play a significant role in changing certain cultures in the long run. Such a change often leads to an artificial world, transforming today's technology-consuming communities into synthetic social constructs. Konsa's (2008, p. 2) term of 'artificialisation of culture' which he defines as "... an anthropogenic transformation of the environment that predominantly takes place under the influence of technological systems..." communicates certain texts to our understanding of technology and its role in such processes.

Media technology is the fulcrum upon which local mores can be weighed against whether or not their preservation, erasure, adaptation or change is possible. The rapid growth of technology tools, smart phones for example, can be a two-edged weapon. On the one hand, the harm they do to communities is profound, (Hes et al., 2015, p. 23) contend, as they may be responsible for "... deficit creation of values and value structures in the society." On the other hand, technology should be conceived of as an integral part of and an inherent in the global system that shapes, and in turn, itself is shaped by global politics, economics and cultures (Fritsch, 2011).

Darfur: communities, cultures and the conflict

Since 2003 up to present day, Darfur has experienced one of the most heinous conflicts in the contemporary history. In 2007, the international community was alerted by mass human right violations and, consequently, the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) was deployed to protect civilians. Over a decade-long conflict, paramilitary formations known as Janjaweed devastated whole native communities. Many UN reports claim that the conflict has claimed more than 500,000 lives, about 2000 villages were burned to ground and more than two million people were displaced from their homelands. By February 2014, the vast majority of the native communities throughout Darfur were displaced to camps around the big cities Nyala, El-Fasher, Zalingei and El-Gineina.

The overwhelming majority of the population, under this study, are characterised by ethnolinguistic vitality (Garri, 2013); hence, it is necessary to revisit the metaphors for the politics of culture and identity in the Sudan. Ideologically, imposition of Arabisation and, consequently, acquisition of Arab culture as its derivative has long been instituted in the Sudan through linguistic, cultural and social processes. The goal was to propagate Arabism and Islamism as ideologies through which the State could withstand the western cultural hegemonies (Harir, 1993). Through empowering Arabic, Arabism was also imposed to play an instrumental role in erasing the native languages and cultures (Garri, 2015).

It was against this Arabisation politics that the fight against the native languages was waged in the Sudan; and, as a result, accommodation of native cultures and languages was no longer a tolerated situation (Al-Afif, 2007). The goal of the Sudanese Arabist elites was to reduce Africanism to a mere geographical niche with diluted or no African characteristics. The fact that

the Sudan is situated in an Afro-Arab multicultural marketplace was a hardly factual stance. Although Africanism of the Sudan is more salient than its Arabism, the Arab culture and identity are nowadays the most marketable ones. As a result, the capital of native languages and their byproducts such as native cultures were not only perceived of as undervalued and primordial, but also that the Sudanese of African origins were perceived of as people without history or cultural heritage (Deng, 1973; Harir, 1993).

4. Methodology

The relevant data was collected through interviews conducted with a purposive sample of six informants who were drawn from Kalma, Otash, Sekele, Direig and Al-Salam IDPs camps located in the vicinity of Nyala town, the capital of South Darfur State. The camps hosted more than 550,400 IDPs. The informants had intimate knowledge about the conflict, its political and social developments and ramifications (see Appendix 1).

Drawing on culture practices investigation technique of House et al. (2004, p. 2), the informants were asked one question individually: “What were the cultural transformations taking place among the IDPs?” As an insider to the local communities and well acquainted with the dynamics of the ongoing cultural transformations in the study area over the last two decades, my observation was another source of the data.

The interviews were conducted in Arabic and were recorded on ‘Audacity, version 2’. Two of the informants opted to have their identities anonymous in the study. So, they were cited in the texts as “Anonymous 1 and Anonymous 2”. Finally, the recordings were scripted into Arabic, redacted as necessary, and then were translated into English.

5. Data analysis and discussion

At first glance, the unmistakable change in the present Darfur was the conflict-related demographic change whereby almost all the native communities were displaced to camps scattered around metropolitan centres. As a result, there occurred a great metamorphosis in the IDPs’ cultures, values and socioeconomic structures under miserable quasi-urban life situations. The prompt change in the IDPs’ life styles at the camps produced multifarious unprogressive transformations characteristic of wholesale behavioural changes. The impact of this change acted differently among different age groups, at cultural value levels and magnitudes. The following are the answers given by the informants to the question: “What were the cultural transformations taking place among the IDPs?”

Abdalla Abaker: “... A new generation is emerging. They revolted against traditions and became easy [susceptible] to the incoming cultures in regard to their family connections [bonds] and aspirations.”

Amidst the post-conflict situation where the IDPs suffered from trauma and disintegration, family bonds were shaken and normative parental guidance vanished. Accordingly, malleability of the IDPs was expedited by the significantly versatile life tempo at the camps, compared to the conservative village system. The elderly were helplessly clinging to old cultures, whereas the young were consciously negotiating the new ones:

Aamir Salih: “Listen to this story! Two weeks ago, we were burying a sibling who passed away... There was a young man who, instead of joining us, was putting on his headphones and gyrating.... Had that happened at the village, I would have smashed his headphones on his head.”

Aamir clearly voiced as a concern the divergence between the old cultural norms and the new ones. That is, putting ‘headphones and gyrating’ was considered an unacceptable behaviour that rendered a young boy a wrongdoer.

The revolt against the old traditions was also depicted by **Anonymous 2**:

“... one day, my mother wanted me to marry her sister’s daughter...and [but] I refused.... [She] said she would not take the pounds [money] I used to give her...and asked me to give back her ‘milk’ [of breastfeeding]. I went out [stayed in incommunicado] for thirty-five days. I saw [returned] home after she had left [relinquished].”

At the village, parents were responsible for when and who should a son or a daughter get married to without being asked for giving their consent. At the IDPs camps, however, that tradition was not only so sacrosanct to be abandoned, but also consciously defied. In **Anonymous 2**'s story, the mother's refusal of receiving neither the money nor the psychological pressure she put on him were not effective. On the contrary, it was the son who won the challenge by staying incommunicado. The scenario could be replicated among other parents and children.

Similarly, there was a change in youth personal behaviours and in their dress codes. According to my own experience, playing cards in many rural areas of Darfur was a taboo, let alone getting dressed in *jonsosah* or dating in the sense stated by **Anonymous 2**:

“On Fridays [weekends] I join my friends to play cards with them, or go to parties and mix [date] girls.... At parties, ‘jonsosah’ [smart casual] is our style....”

It was observed that playing the traditional dances were giving way to jazz and disco music; listening to local lyrics and jingles was no longer the preferred entertaining means as it was the case with the trendy concerts and festivals brought about live from around the world in TV and PlayStation show lounges at the camps. Again, the vast majority of the youth replaced the national *jallabia* and *tobe* uniforms with trousers, skirts and blouses; and the traditional bodily aesthetic value attached to lip-tattooing of young girls was being replaced by the more in vogue facial make-up. Unprecedentedly, what young girls thought of as an appropriate dress code was acted out by deceiving or challenging their parents:

Awatif Abdulrahman: *“Before the displacement, young girls never used to wear skirts or blouses; now... [they] do this, which is against our traditions.... The girls conceal this [take evasive actions] by putting on a gown to deceive their parents....”*

The existence of cultural clashes between the youth and the parents which were caused by the cultural changes was further captured by:

Anonymous 2: *Parents are always complaining of my activity [running PlayStation show lounges] because [they say] I am changing the [behaviours of] youth. Ooh [sarcastically]. They cannot stop me.... Some of them [youth] now can tell you how many goals did Messi score in the last World Cup...*

It is discernible that such cultural transformations showed how strong clashes between the conservatives and liberals were. The discrepancy between the parents' intransigence towards teaching youth who, for example, Messi was and the PlayStation show owner's positive attitude towards showing the youth to the outside world marked a crossover. It was a disproportionate clash between the old and the new, whereby the latter was desperately losing ground:

Awatif Abdurahman: *“Hair and skin highlighting by using foreign [imported] cosmetics is becoming a normal style.... Young girls nowadays know about the Lebanese and Indian celebrities more than they know about the national ones.”*

Such behavioral changes went hand in hand with other observable changes in physical outlooks among the majority of girls who used hair and skin lightening cosmetics which were unusual, if

ever, products before the displacement. The practice must have been inherited from the ubiquitous PlayStations show lounges through which the IDPs were exposed to body change technologies and the world celebrities. Again, the instrumentality of technology in embracing the incoming cultures was overlaid by the wide presence of the international relief workers. By imitation, youth acted out the physical appearance of the relief workers whose cultures might have been at odds with the local families' underlying value assumptions:

Aamir Salih: *"They are imitating women police in UNAMID and other organisations who always visit us.... Some [boys] also plait their hair like girls... some families have become lax and... our values are spoiled..."*

Unemployment and lack of adequate reintegration programmes produced very fragile socioeconomic situations among the IDPs. However, they managed to maintain several small income generating activities. As a result, the ease of accessibility to broadband internet services, TV and PlayStations show lounges physically exposed the IDPs to internal urbanite cultures as well as virtually to external cultural styles. Again, and to mitigate desperation, trauma and apathy which had descended upon them, the IDPs were excessively seeking solace through such technology tools, whereby transformation from traditional cultural codes to new ones became, as noted by **Anonymous 1**, a bare 'takeaway' business:

Anonymous 1: *"I own video watch lounges at Direig camp.... They [the IDPs] come to kill time by watching football games..., wrestling, and listening to music and songs.... Yes, the internet is a two-edged weapon, but its benefits are greater than its disadvantages."*

Whereas the youth were found to be attracted by the pacing technology-borne cultures, the elders perceived of the use of social media, which was expressed by **Anonymous 1** in terms of 'wonderers' and 'bad videos', as harmful because they believed media exposed youth to cultures not emanating from experiential processes:

Awatif Abdulrahman: *"You can see the wonders [change] at the camps; ... boys and girls are using means [social media] to lift [acquire] new cultures through bad videos... [our children and youth] belong to another world."*

Communication technology brought the IDPs to virtual worlds and rendered the acquisition of commercialised, artificial cultures inevitable. The incoming culture consumption processes were further consolidated by the physical exposure of the IDPs to thousands of UN agencies and other international relief workers who were coming from different cultural background.

Besides, through conducting capacity-building workshops and contacting with the IDPs, NGOs workers also transmitted many global cultures which were at odds with the local communities'. To the conservative IDPs, lashing a delinquent schoolboy should never be a violation to child rights as it was the case at village:

Aamir Salih: *"... we also heard of workshops organised by NGOs during which they talked about violations of child rights.... They [workshop organizers] said smacking careless [delinquent] schoolchildren is a violation to their rights..."*

The depreciation of local values created by abundance of technology and exposure to international community also engendered negative attitudes towards the core national values. The following extract depicts a stark deficit in the underlying national value of inculcating patriotism by the national anthem:

Hamid Abo: *"...one day, a high schoolboy strangely said [wondered] if the national anthem: "We are the soldiers of Allah, the soldiers of our homeland" is true.... I think his question tells*

[springs from] ... not relying on [mistrust in] the government because the displaced persons believe it did not protect them from the killing...

Questioning such core national values did not only seem to be far beyond being manifested at the 'consumption' or 'regulation' phases of Johnson's (2009) circuit of culture, but also as an established deconstructive stance against the national principles. The antipathy seemed to be associated with the controversy over the identity of the Sudanese, as well as with the suffering inflicted on the IDPs in the course of the current conflict:

Abdalla Abaker: *"The national television always brings [covers] the problems [confrontations] between the Palestinians and the Israelis, but it does not bring [cover] ours.... The reason is clear; ... the Palestinians are Arabs, but we are not..."*

Such a sociopolitical metaphor substantiates how conscious the IDPs were in questioning the worthiness of their citizenship and why their suffering did not receive media coverage in their own country. The abundance of media technology and the impact it had on the local communities could further be encapsulated by their awareness in issues such as politics of the presidential elections held in April 2015:

Anonymous 1: *"Most of my clients are laymen [illiterate], but they remembered [knew] how Barak Obama won the presidential elections. The displaced persons did not participate in [boycotted] the last presidential election. They knew it would not be as good [fair] as it was in America [the US.]"*

The repudiation of the very concepts of national value-laden principle of voting in elections was translated into an argument over whether or not the environment was conducive to vote in the elections. As such, it was no wonder that, as stated below, feeling of belongingness among the IDPs towards the relief workers substantiated their resentment against from whatever reminiscent of a national culture:

Hamid Abo: *"Their [IDPs'] feeling of ... belongingness to the relief organisations and workers is stronger than to the government.... The [humanitarian] workers are the saviors and role models..."*

The protracted piecemeal peace agreements concluded between the government and some factions of the armed movements resulted in internal, sometimes bloody, fighting among the IDPs. Consequently, recurring intra-ethnic standoffs often ensued, leading to the emergence of ethnic-oriented congregations. Almost all the camps accommodated diverse native ethnicities who shared many utilities for over a decade, but the intra-ethnic standoffs fed off the emergence of internal congregations which were, in turn, acted out by maintenance of social rituals in exclusively ethnic-bases. The decade-long coexistence at the camps did not mitigate tendencies of – though mostly noticeable among the elderly – preserving ethnic cultural peculiarities through occasional observance of rituals such as initiation ceremonies, marriage celebrations and funeral gatherings.

Conclusion

There were disparate cultural systems emerging at the IDPs camps. Firstly, the elderly were desperately resisting the overall cultural transformations. On the other hand, the vast majority of the youth were driven by an artificial technology-borne culture which impacted as a catalyst for a short-term, but characteristic of a profound cultural transformation. As argued by Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006), youth would become prone to internalising cultures emerging from the development of Western modernity marketable by advertising and, hence, they act out such articulate ideologies of identity, style and culture in local contexts.

Secondly, immediacy of the new culture appropriated its adaptability to the high aspirations of the youth who did not only act it out in their behaviors, but also consumed it so directly on

regular bases that it became an immutable life style. For the parents, however, superficiality of the new culture was seen as a dystopian situation which was playing out in the behaviors of young people to which they were forced to surrender.

Finally, that the native communities in Darfur have hardly been through history homogenous with the riverain Arab culture (Deng, 1973; Harir, 1993) factored in their resistance to the national culture. Persisting factors such as the emergence of *zurga*, meaning the worthless Black vs. Arab metaphors, which were revitalised in the current conflict also contributed to accentuating differences between the national and local cultures. The fact that almost all the IDPs are native non-Arabs also seemed to have widened the divergence between the local cultures and the gamut of the national monolithic culture. The IDPs' perception that the native communities were deliberately devastated by the Janjaweed factored into the emergence of reversing native language attitudes and revitalised ethnic congregations (Garri, 2013). As such, the national core culture with its Arabised connotations must have been something that the IDPs did not want to sacrifice for.



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Appendix 1

List of the interviewees

- [1] Abdalla Abaker, 30 years, a graduate from the University of Nyala living at Direig IDPs camp, interviewed at the University of Nyala on 27/05/2015.
- [2] Anonymous 1, 35 years old, an owner of PlayStation and Wi-Fi shop from Direig camp, interviewed Al-Khor marketplace in Nyala town on 11/05/2015.
- [3] Anonymous 2, 29 years, a Rickshaw driver, Al-Salam camp, interviewed on 08/02/2014.
- [4] Aamir Salih, 63 years, a Sheikh in Otash camp, interviewed on 13/03/2015.
- [5] Awatif Abdulrahman, 52 years, a human rights activist and a member of 'Women Protection Network' at Sekele camp, interviewed in Nyala town on 21/09/2013.
- [6] Hamid Abbo, 41 years, an owner and principal of a private primary school at Kalma camps, interviewed on 10/09/2014.