

Mountains under siege

Last year there was no war in the world.

This year there is a hard war.

They have aeroplanes, they have guns...

*The government has planes that go up,
they also have guns to blow them down.*

At dawn the youth go to war.

The woman is at home.

The bombs from far away kill the woman.

People die like flies.

The birds descend to eat the people.

Nuba song

The Nuba mountains are a scatter of granite outcrops jutting abruptly out of the plain in the central Sudanese region of South Kordofan. With the wide lowlands between them they cover an area of about 30,000 square miles. Here a group of tribes, totalling about a million people, have lived side by side for centuries, defending themselves from slave raiders and other enemies.

The Nuba are a cluster of diverse peoples, speaking more than fifty languages. 'Nuba' is a collective name given them by outsiders. ('Nubian', the name of the people living on the Egypt-Sudan border, is another form of the same word.) Yet there are common themes linking the different tribes, and

growing out of the shared conditions of their lives. One is their love for athletic contests, including wrestling, in which the young men show off their prowess. These sports are held on occasions such as harvest festivals and funerals; they also used to be times to show off the art of body decoration for both young men and girls, in which some of the tribes excelled. The religious traditions that the Nuba have inherited from their ancestors include the honouring of the dead, and respect for *Kujurs* or religious leaders who act as healers and conduct rituals to bring rain. During the twentieth century between a third and half of them have become converted to Islam, and another third to Christianity.

They are skilful farmers, working terraces on the hillside and, when conditions are peaceful enough, larger and more fertile fields down in the plain. They grow millet, groundnuts, sesame, and vegetables, and keep cattle. For a long time Nuba have also left their mountains to look for work elsewhere in Sudan, and they make up a large proportion of the army. However, they are generally treated as second class citizens, and discriminated against in education, employment and civil rights.





Ever since the 1960s the fertile plains have been taken over by huge, and hugely profitable, mechanised farming schemes, the property of the businessmen who dominate the Sudanese state. These schemes are ruinous to the environment, to the nomads who graze their herds on the plains, and to the Nuba who lose their most fertile farms. Those who refused to give up their land have been harassed, imprisoned and murdered.

It is against this background that the Nuba have become caught up in Sudan's long drawn out civil war. On the one side is a central government in Khartoum determined to impose its own vision of an Islamic State and to wipe out the cultural diversity of this vast country with its many different peoples. On the other is the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), a movement of the southern peoples, with their black African character and adherence to either Christianity or indigenous religions. The Nuba, though geographically in northern Sudan, have much in common with the peoples of the south.

Since the 1980s, the Sudan government has harassed the Nuba as suspected SPLA supporters, but it was not

until 1989 that the 'New Kush Division' of the SPLA arrived in the mountains. They won the support of the Nuba people as liberators and many of the young men joined them. They control much of the countryside, though the government holds the main towns. In retaliation, government forces destroy villages and farms, plant land mines and and seize people. The object is to induce the people to leave the SPLA-controlled areas and settle in so-called 'peace camps'. The official position is that these are inhabited by 'returnees' and are centres for relief and development. In fact, the inmates are kept against their will, or sent to work for low or no wages on the mechanised farms. Women are raped, children are taken from their parents and put into 'Islamic' schools, and men are forced to join the government militia. As one Nuba farmer put it, 'Because they have not defeated us they are burning our villages so that we will go to their towns and become their slaves.'

One strategy of the government is to use the local 'Baggara' Arab tribes, who are nomadic pastoralists ('Baggara' means 'cattle'), against the Nuba. Although the Baggara and Nuba have for generations competed over water and land, they previously found ways to limit and resolve conflict, traded together and even intermarried. But since 1989 the Baggara, who have lost their own pasture lands to commercial farms, have been armed and trained as a paramilitary 'People's Defence Force' (PDF), and encouraged to take over Nuba land. They are now joined by Nuba recruited to the PDF, often forcibly, from the peace camps or in the cities.

Since 1991, the Nuba mountains have been in a state of siege. Because of the destruction and the loss of their farms in the plains, the Nuba suffer constant famine. International relief has been prevented by the

government from reaching the SPLA areas of the mountains. Yet remarkably, without vehicles or the most basic supplies, the 400,000 or so people holding out there have set up an administration, with courts of law, schools, clinics, and a relief organisation based on self-help.

The government claims that this is a religious war against 'rebel infidels'. Those Muslim Nuba who support the SPLA are branded traitors to Islam and their mosques are burnt along with the churches of the Christians. But they are defiant; as one of their leaders said, 'I refuse their version of Islam, their Islam of looting, burning and killing. I believe we are the true Muslims'.

A new factor in the equation is oil. The huge oil fields southwest of the Nuba mountains are to be exploited by a consortium, the leading member of which is Talisman Energy of Canada, and which also includes companies from China, Malaysia, Austria, Sweden and France. If it succeeds, the profits will enable the Sudanese government to fund the war for the foreseeable future. The pipeline to carry the oil runs through the western fringes of the Nuba mountains.

Even peace in Sudan would not necessarily benefit the Nuba. If the south of Sudan should become independent, they would be left as part of the north, under a government which wishes to destroy them as a people. They fear that politicians in both northern and southern Sudan are ready to trade Nuba rights in order to achieve peace. Yet the Nuba are firm in claiming self-determination, and they call on the international community for help. Survival supports their right to decide their own future.

Background Reading

Facing Genocide: the Nuba of Sudan (1995). Available from African Rights, 11 Marshallsea Road, London SE1 1EP. Tel: 020 7717 1224

Films

Kafi's Story
Nuba Conversations
Directed by Arthur Howes. Available from Survival.

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