

Nuba

Profile

A group of 50 or more autonomous and ethnically diverse tribes, numbering some 3.7 million people, Nuba inhabit the mountainous Kordofan in central Sudan. They speak several dialects of the Cushitic group of the Hamito-Semitic languages. Some traditional religions survive but most Nuba have been converted to Islam or Christianity. These diverse peoples have found a common identity as ‘Nuba’ through their shared mountain homeland and a history of shared oppression.

Historical context

Nuba migrated to the mountains for protection or improved water sources to cultivate beans, cotton, millet and maize, and to raise cattle, goats and sheep. Their traditional rivals, the cattle herding Sudanese Arabs known as Baggara, who live in southern Kordofan, often have been allies of central power in Sudan since the nineteenth century, while Nuba were long peripheral to the main currents of Sudanese politics, neither aligned with the Arab-dominated north nor belonging to the south.

Baggara, and their militia, the *murahaliin*, were armed by the transitional government in 1985–6, then by the governing Umma Party from 1986–9 and thereafter by the government of the NIF. After the NIF took power, the Popular Defence Act of 1989 gave legal status to the *murahaliin* militia as part of the paramilitary Popular Defence Forces (PDF) – a regime-created motley assortment of religious zealots, ethnic militias and press-ganged conscripts. The PDF stepped up its raids in the south, now in conjunction with the army. While the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) raided villages for food and conscripted soldiers, violence by the army and *murahaliin* escalated.

In February 1990 some Baggara leaders negotiated a truce with the SPLA to gain access to traditional grazing lands in SPLA-controlled Dinka areas of the southern region of Bahr el Ghazal. In response, the central government intensified its efforts to inflame Baggara historical competition with the Nuba with the objective of ridding Nuba land of its Nuba inhabitants and replacing them with Baggara Arabs.

The army arrested, tortured and executed Nuba leaders and confiscated their land, evicting entire communities. In January 1992 the Provincial Governor of Kordofan declared a *jihad* in the Nuba Mountains to rout the ‘remnants’ of the SPLA.

The attempt to destroy the Nuba people and culture, and their forcible conversion to Islam, is not new. Some local authorities prohibited stick fighting, which relates to some Nuba people’s cosmology and agricultural and religious practices. Prohibition of these rituals implies an indirect obstruction to the basic cultural traits and value systems which maintain and foster Nuba ethnic identity.

The imposition of Sharia law has reinforced discrimination. The government has embarked on the ‘comprehensive call’ campaign, which aims at Islamicizing Nuba via the imposition of Islamic teaching, the intimidation of clergy, resettlement and torture. In reaction to policies from Khartoum, in particular

far-reaching land confiscation in 1984, Nuba increasingly aligned with the SPLA.

In the NIF era, the situation for Christians in the Nuba Mountains has been particularly difficult. Churches have been destroyed and meetings prohibited even in their ashes. With the creation of Islamic schools, 'peace camps' have been part of an Islamicization policy.

In the 1990s, Nuba children from the Kadugli/Tulisci areas were rounded up by the PDF and sent to Libya and the Gulf countries. The Nuba Timu group that lived in the lower lands of the mountain ranges of Tulisci near Lagaw was virtually eliminated, as all males down to the age of 6 or 7 were massacred.

Nuba deportees were forced to work in the large mechanized schemes on agricultural lands which originally belonged to them before their distribution by the government to Jellaba (a northern Muslim mercantile class operating in the south) and Baggara. Indeed, from the 1970s onwards, land dispossession was a defining feature of the conflict in the Nuba Mountains.

Justice Africa (<http://www.justiceafrica.org/>) in 2002 detailed some of the issues:

'About one quarter of Sudan's mechanized farmland is in South Kordofan. There are many cases in which Nuba farmers were driven off their ancestral lands. Some were taken to court, when they refused to give up their land and were either lashed or imprisoned ...

In 1984 in the Mugenis scheme extension, near Rashad, eighty Nuba people who refused to hand over their land to a company formed by rich merchants and government ministers, were rounded up and taken to an emergency court in Kadugli.

In 1995 a new agricultural corporation was formed in the Nuba Mountains and Nuba lands were put up for sale, and a loan from the bank was given to the buyers – who came almost entirely from central and northern Sudan.'

Another example of abuse of power is the Habila mechanized project. The lands were taken from the natives and the project ownership was given almost entirely to northern merchants and businessmen while the previous Nuba land owners had to become labourers on their own lands.'

In 2002 the humanitarian situation improved for the Nuba when the United States brokered a ceasefire. An All-Nuba Conference in December 2002 delegated to John Garang and the SPLA the negotiation of Nuba interests in the peace talks that culminated in the CPA in January 2005.

Current issues

The CPA has left the Nuba Mountains in an ambivalent position. Under a power-sharing agreement, the region was carved up 55:45 between the government and SPLM. This in itself attracted criticism from Nuba activists, who pointed out that this left 'nothing for the Nuba' (Statement, Nuba Survival Foundation, 2005, Sudan Tribune)

What will happen in the future is unclear. The CPA describes a process of 'popular consultation' to find out the views of the Nuba people on their status. But no-one seems to know what this consultation might entail, and what might happen if the Nuba express a desire to join with the south.

What is certain, however, is that the Nuba have not been given the same guarantee of self-determination, as the southerners, or a referendum on whether to stay in the north or south, as has been granted to the

people of Abyei.

As many Nuba fought alongside the SPLA during the war, there is an understandable sense of grievance at the outcome of the CPA. Many Nuba feel that they have been used as a bargaining chip between the two parties.

Furthermore, even though half the transitional period has expired, the Nuba people report seeing very little improvement in the development of their area, with a desperate lack of health and education facilities. Land rights remain a critical issue – as Nuba are calling for a fair redistribution of their traditional lands, which were forcibly seized by Khartoum or their tribal allies.