

Understanding Sudan

A Teaching and Learning Resource



Fact Sheet One: An Introduction to Oil in Sudan

Sudan is the largest country in Africa, the 10th largest country in the world. Its nearly forty million people speak over fifteen languages and one hundred dialects. In a country this diverse, there are no simple explanations. In this module we will look at the history of oil in Sudan, and the role it plays in economy, politics and society today. Oil, though, is not just a question of the present, nor is it simply a question of economics. Some of the trends we see in the current struggles around oil production have very old roots, and this fact sheet is designed to introduce them to you.

The earliest recoverable history of Sudan traces patterns that are not too dissimilar from many of the patterns we see today. The earliest states in Sudan were located on the Nile, but gained their wealth and man power from the hinterland areas surrounding them. Before the introduction of Islam in the fourteenth century, it was Christian and Pagan kingdoms that raided the peripheries for slaves and resources. Commercial contact with wandering merchants slowly led Islam to spread in the central Kingdoms along the Nile, which is where, today, it has the strongest routes. People started to legitimize themselves through Islam, though it should also be noted that some people fled the influence of these early Kingdoms and sought refuge among non-Islamic people. The nomadic Baqqara Arabs, for instance, fled south and looked for shelter among the Dinka.

These Kingdoms were invaded by Egyptians in 1820. While previous changes of kingdom had left the South relatively unaffected, the Turco-Egyptian state changed this. Its longer reach conquered Sennar, Kordofan and the Red Sea, and began to integrate these provinces and demand tribute from those now under their administration. Slave raiding on a massive scale began. Douglas Johnson, a noted historian of the Sudan, claims “the incorporation of the whole of the South as the state’s exploitable hinterland, the intensification of racial stratification, and the widespread identification of people from the South with local status” began in the Turco-Egyptian period.

The Turco-Egyptian state ended with its overthrow by the Mahdist state (1883-1898). In this pre-colonial period, we see many of the tendencies of colonial rule already established. While the Mahdist state was relatively powerless compared to the Turco-Egyptian state, it began a trend of appointing administrators who were not locals to the regions they administered. The exploitative nature of the central states relation to the hinterland, and the powerful ability for leaders to redistribute patrimonies to the peripheries, and the strength of these patrimonies in organizing support, all strengthened during the Madhist state.

This state too was overturned in the 1890's, when the Anglo-Egyptian conquest began. Now, for the first time, the south was placed under an administration. Coercive policies and the collection of tribute and soldiers extended the reach of the central state over the south. The colonial administration deepened the divide between the north and the south, by introducing a relatively extensive education system in the north, along with large scale economic development – such as the Gezira scheme which allowed Sudan to enter the international cotton market – while allowing only limited missionary education in the south and almost no economic development.

By the time an anti-colonial independence movement began in the 1950's, the South was ill placed to assert a role in regional government. Shortly before independence, in 1955, as northern leaders appeared to be backing away from a scheme which would create a federal government that would give the South some autonomy, there was a mutiny in Torit and other southern cities. While these mutinies were suppressed, survivors fled the towns and began an insurgency that would last until 1972.

The Addis Ababa agreement that ended the first civil war was not carried out, and many of the Southern claims were not addressed. A second civil war broke out in 1983. The discovery of oil shortly before intensified the conflict, and, as we shall see in later chapters, the government began to play off members of the insurgent force, the Southern People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), against each other, and use factions to clear the areas around the oil fields.

While violence continues today in Darfur and Abyei, a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005, and represents a tenuous hope for peace between the two sides. Just how tenuous can be shown by the decision the SPLM/A took on 11 October 2007 to suspend participation in the Government of National Unity created after the signing of the CPA because the National Congress Party (the party in power in the north), was not implementing important aspects of the CPA – including those relating to the production of oil and the distribution of oil revenues.

All of these issues will be developed in later facts sheets, for now, remembering everything we have learned from the first class, there are some important questions to be asked.

Further Questions

Given what we know about oil, how do you think it inserts itself with Sudanese history? The Sudanese state is very different to the model we might expect of a state when we look at America – one of the main instruments of marginalization of people in the periphery of the state has been the centre's control of resources: do you think oil differs from land, crops or livestock in this respect? When you think about oil in relationship to this state history, how might it differ from other commodities: does it require a stable internal market? Can it easily be stolen? How might it effect government given the little we know about Sudanese history?

Further Reading

Johnson, D. H. 2003. *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars*. Oxford: James Currey.

Jok, Madjut Jok. 2001. *War and Slavery in the Sudan*. University of Pennsylvania.