

REFLECTIONS ON SUDANESE LANGUAGES OF WAR AND PEACE

RICHARD A. LOBBAN, JR.

Introduction

This paper started as a casual reflection and was not especially scholarly in style, mainly following the 2009 Sudan Studies Association conference theme of war and peace.(1) It just sought to explore some linguistic concepts of war and peace in some Sudanese languages for which I had dictionaries at hand. I had no *a priori* views or hypotheses and was motivated mainly by my curiosity into Sudanese linguistics. As this survey has evolved, patterns emerged about these concepts that nudged me to look more at the context and etymology. The result is incomplete, but hopefully heuristic. A basic anthropological thought, known as the “Whorf-Sapir hypothesis,” suggests that if you do not have a word for something you can’t think of it, or conceptualize it or act upon it. While this idealist philosophy should be criticized on some epistemological, historical and material grounds it is this topic that is explored in some of the very many languages of war, peace, mediation and conflict resolution in the much conflicted Sudan.(2)

Islam in Africa

Since the fourteenth century, northern Sudanese Muslims start almost everything with first verse of the *Quran al-Karim*. This is the opening *Fataha* verse, and it accompanies most aspects of their lives as Muslims, with its injunction to God the beneficent and merciful and admonition to those who turn to anger and who have left the straight path. It is God who is the owner of judgment day. One could thereby say that Islam is truly a faith of peaceful surrender to the greatness of the one God. Islam had gradually entered Sudan from Egypt to the north, but the seven-centuries-long *baqt* or peace treaty with Nubian Christendom helped to slow this down greatly. It is odd that some people today think that Christians and Muslims are inherently incompatible. Later, Islam steadily entered into

Sudan from the west through savanna kingdoms and pilgrimage routes. Much more recently Islam came to Sudan from the east, ironically the closest point to Mecca and Medina. Islam never came to Sudan from the south for a variety of pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, administrative and political reasons.

The Muslim faith spread fairly rapidly across North Africa and into westernmost Europe for still more centuries and gradually elided into the western Sahel, but was resisted in the southern direction. Although I am freely using the modern word "Sudan", it was not the "Sudan" until Anglo-Egyptians conquered Nubia and slid 'the land of the blacks' from western to eastern Africa. Like almost all colonial borders drawn in 1884-85 in Berlin, it makes little geographical and ethnographic sense shoving some folks together who would rather be apart, while parting others who would rather be together. As for religion, one could probably not find more diversity in Africa's largest nation; there are functioning churches in the north and functioning mosques in the south.

The anthropological framework has long examined religion, particularly the way it is structured and how it functions from the ground up. This discipline also accepts official and orthodox statements about all faiths and how they are supposed to work in an ideal form. Most religions around the world have popular forms that some proselytizers like; and orthodox forms that the purists prefer. This is essentially the nature of faith. The middle-of-the-roaders in the great and minor faiths also do not mind mixing and adapting in syncretistic forms. Such are the varied cases of Islam, Christianity and other faiths in the Sudan. Sudan also had its prophetic traditions that merge with political missions of messianism, Mahdism, revitalization and revivalism, especially at times of crisis and personal and national testing. Perhaps one could argue that Mahdism led to war, but in fact it was Turco-Egyptian colonial and slave wars that really led to Mahdism. The supposed self-destruction of Mahdism needs contextualization in a policy of containment. For the rest, accommodation and equilibrium were the themes.

When the boundaries of faith are reached and the human needs are not addressed, folk Islam in Africa can venture into spirit possession and healing through the *fūqaha*, *dhikirs*, *zar* and *bori* cults and various soothsayers and coffee-cup readers. The Sufi traditions in African Islam allowed its roots to penetrate deep into the human terrain of religious brotherhoods, patron saints shrines, and *baraka*-endowed healing centers and burial places. These *turuq* in Sudan could range from the *Qadriya*, *Shadhliya*, to the *Tijaniya*, *Khatmiya* and *Sammaniya*. Folk Sufi Islam in Sudan brought popular legitimacy even when resisted by high minded

authority. These religious practices brought explanation of the unknown, social order, displaced anxiety and brought war and peace, met human needs, and calmed disturbed souls.

War and Peace in Arabic

There are at least two basic kinds of *peace* in the Arabic language with many nuances in between. The root of *slm* at the heart of Islam can mean a simple straightforward peace or calm, but it can also mean the peace of surrender. This can be your personal surrender to the greatness of God or waving a white flag when the battle is lost. Another important part of peace is the *slh* root that implies mediation, accommodation and conflict resolution. A peace-maker could be termed a *musalha*. Arabic also notes an abode of peace, *dar al-Islam* that can be contrasted by an abode of war, *dar al-Harb*. *Harb*, or war, can be a noun or a verb just as in English and likewise it can be distinguished from a raid (*ghazwa*, *razia*) or murder (*qtl*) just as in English where killing is defined by degrees of engagement and intent are defining from legal and political point of view. Arabic like English also has the feud (*shaqaq* and *tarr*). In short, English words are essentially parallel in all manner of motivations and contexts of deliberate or accidental killing.

Commonly it is projected that Muslims may not war against fellow Muslims, thus making this an inherent 'place of peace' but disputes about dynastic succession among *khulafa'* as well as fellow Muslims who are considered as 'back-sliders' and 'non-believers', *kufar*, away from the straight path, are excluded from this injunction by some extremists. Some orthodox and extreme thinking says that war may be conducted in *dar al-kufar*. English words for mediating also have their parallels in Arabic (*tawasat*) or basically 'to get in the middle' of things. This root, *wst*, is worked into mediation and mediator for conflicts or other types of negotiations. In the world of 'compensation', English etymology comes down to 'shared pain' or 'shared penalty' while the Arabic, *kafa*, shifts the meaning a bit to be 'made equal'. In the world of 'treaties, English assumes there is a common understanding or accord, however the Arabic, *mu'aheda*, shades this in the direction of 'making one' or 'making whole.'

In the famously misunderstood Arabic word for 'struggle' (*jhd*) its principle meaning is to seek improvement of oneself or community. However, it can also imply a contest or battle in the specific or metaphorical sense. Because of this, the word *jihad* is often projected as being parallel to 'crusade' in English as one can 'crusade' for a prosaic mission or for a holy one. A difference however is that a 'holy war' in

Arabic is most essentially a struggle for perceived improvement, while a holy crusade, *harb as-salibiya*, is a war for the cross (*salib*) so one may conclude that the English hold war to be more explicitly religious than the Arabs do. Crucifixion or to crucify (*salb, salab*) is easily understood in the Arabic language but again it has a root of the 'cross' that is not really a part of the deeper meaning of *jihad*.

But it is in the words that seek to describe 'terrorists' and 'martyrs' that a gulf appears between Arabic and English. Just as English makes a huge distinction between these two terms, so does Arabic, but the west often and incorrectly uses the wrong word with a very problematic result. In Arabic 'terrorism' is *irhab* and a 'terrorist' is *irhabi*. Overlooking for the moment that one man's 'terrorist' can be another man's 'freedom fighter,' if there is a terrorist attack, the negative and isolating word *irhab* should be used. Instead it is more likely that it would be *mujahideen* (or "mouj" for American soldiers in Afghanistan) or a 'struggler' this is actually a positive word in Arabic. This sends the wrong message for sure. The Arabic speaking population will not be hearing about real *irhab*, but will be hearing instead about a 'martyr' or *shaheed*. It is a *shaheed* who is 'testifying' (*yeshahd*) about his or her faith, as much as one's last 'testimony' is a 'tombstone' or *shahad*. It should be very clear that using the right or wrong word can certainly convey very different meanings other than those intended. Machiavelli taught that war is about politics, and politics is about communication, so we certainly do need the right word in the right place.

On the topic of peace, the Arabic language and practice is very rich especially in the process of making a *sulh*, *hudna* or 'atwa or the route to peace making, avoiding retribution, and paying compensation *diya*. Once matters are negotiated by a mediator and hands are shaken ('*musfaha*') the steps toward reconciliation (*musalaha*, from *sulh*) is advanced to breaking bread together (*mumalaha*). Yes, the English speaking world does have counterparts but they are just not so structured or institutionalized. To further this point, western conflict resolution features individual choices and a secular outside legal system. Arab and Islamic systems stress community process for legitimacy guided by sacred traditions and by balanced insiders such as elders for mediation. One may also say that western systems are generally more adjudicative and punitive for the wider social good, while eastern systems are generally more meditative, restorative for the smallest unit where the conflict resides. This is definitely not to judge the merits of either, but only to note that they are different

War and Peace Lexicons in Other Sudanese Languages

Consider first the case of Nubians from the north, starting with the Danagla (3) Interestingly, the Dongolawi word for 'army' is *askari*, a clear loan word from Arabic as are the Dongolawi words for 'gun' (*bundug*) as well as the words for 'destroy' or 'ruin' (*harbe*) and 'gunpowder' (*barud*). Similarly; 'judgment' is *hokum* as well as 'peace' being *salam*; 'policeman' is *askar* (Arabic) or *bolis* (European.) The list of relevant loanwords from Arabic goes on, 'jail' is *sigin*; 'rebellion' is *fitna*, 'rifle' is also *bundug* and a 'witness' is *shahid*. There can be little question that the culture of the Danagla is heavily influenced by its centuries-long relations with the Arabic speaking world, especially in regard to military and governance terms and terms that relate to war and peace. On the other hand there are many Dongolawi words not inherited from Arabic for such matters as arrows, captives, slaves, murder, and peace-making (*eggwad*, *bewar*, *bewid*) as well as quarrels, battles, and wars (*gawwe*, *tamugid*). It is equally clear that conflict certainly existed among the Danagla before the Arab arrivals, but it is also clear that Arabic influences for such matters are very strong. For other Nubians (Fadicha and Mahas) there are quite different non-Arabic, Nubian words for 'war' or 'quarrel' (*dingi*), 'army' (*kel*), 'destroy' (*troabkir*), 'reconcile' (*g'engkir*) and 'govern' (*mou'rt*). (4) These remind us of the persistence of Nubian lexicon even amidst the heavy linguistic, cultural and pedagogical infusion from Arabic.

From the South, consider the case of the Shilluk. (5) 'Peace' in Shilluk is *mer* or *mero* while 'to war' is *liny* and 'warriors' are *mac* or *pac*. Clearly these terms have no relation to Arabic or Nubian. The relatively undifferentiated nature of *liny* can also mean 'battle', 'fight', 'conflict' and a 'weapon' is '*gi liny*'. Similarly, the word *nyak* can mean 'combat' 'conflict' or 'destroy'. One is tempted to conclude that warfare among the small compact kingdom of the Shilluk *reth* has been rather limited as judged by their limited vocabulary for military and conflict relations. Yet, the Shilluk do use the following few words: 'soldiers' *alathker*; 'murder' *maut*; 'murderer' *amoti*; 'revolver' *adhaw*; and *milo* 'salt' clearly have Arabic cognates and are linguistically exogenous. By contrast, the Shilluk vocabulary for 'conciliate' *luko* or *yomo*; or 'compensation' *kogi* or *gin muj*; or 'peace-maker' *njati dwor* is rather rich and of local origin.

For the numerous and expansive Dinka who have contiguous contact with the Nuer and Shilluk and long term hostility and military interaction with Arabs there is another story to tell.(6) First of all, the Dinka language has clear words for 'peace,' *adoor* and 'war' *tonj* as well as 'pacify' *door*. Conflict in Dinka can be rooted in a siege, trespass, rage, destruction,

insult, slaughter, repression, feud, death and defeat. The Dinka vocabulary for conflict resolution is also rich with special terms for accord, agreement, acquit, admonish, blood fine, boundary, compensation, judgment, surrender and reconcile that is synonymous for pacify. Close to the Shilluk term *man* for 'loathe' the Dinka word for 'abhor' is also *maan*. Parallel to the Arabic derived *alathker* for 'soldiers' in Shilluk is the Dinka *alathker* for 'soldier.' In other contexts, the Dinka also use *alathker* for their rendering of 'cavalry,' 'barracks,' and 'deserters.' Other exogenous words from Arabic used in Dinka include *rasas* 'bullet' and *khadam* 'servant', but Dinka have their own words for 'slave' *lony*; 'warrior' *apuruk*; 'butcher' *raan ring jac wei* and 'captive' *raan ci dom* that really equals "conquered man". The Dinka's socio-political structure of segmentary opposition, plus their longstanding military traditions for raiding, have created a rich vocabulary for conflict and war making as well as peace-making. The term *agoth* covers altercations and quarrels, while *tonj*, *puot*, *apoth*, *goth*, *keek*, and *kac thok* cover various kinds of conflicts from fights and feuds to battles. Equally there are specific and different Dinka words for aggressor, adversary, belligerent, rebel and brigand. This linguistic evidence suggests that the Dinka are much experienced in making both war and peace.

Over the millennia there were Axumite Ethiopian incursions into Sudan at Meroë and Mahdist incursions into western Ethiopia and various other battles and military experience in the long expansive or imperial histories of the two lands. This section is built on the rather simple argument that one might thereby reasonably expect a richer vocabulary for the general linguistic domains of war and peace in the Amharic language since there is a long history of both.(7) What evidence is there? First of all, Amharic like Arabic with a sweeping written tradition, has a much greater lexicon than what is available in published sources in Nubian, Shilluk or Dinka so that the linguistic 'playing field' is not at all level.

Amharic has clear and contrasting words for 'war' (*ṭor*, *ṭoraennät*) and 'peace' (*sälam*). Without getting to all of the specific words in Amharic, the dictionary provides numerous words for conflict, violence and tension, including terms for: abhorrence, afflict, agitate, altercation, annihilate, assassinate, attack, avenge, battle capture, seize, conflict, conquer, incite, kill, murder, plunder, quarrel, raid, rebel, revenge, riot, and terror. This being the case, then there should also be many words conceptualizing conflict resolution and peace-making since no society can be eternally at war. In another tour through the dictionary we find words for accord, agreement, ally, amnesty, appease, apology, blood money, mediate, reconcile, reparation, restitution, respect, treaty, tribute, and truce. As expected the parallel vocabulary for conflict resolution was as rich as the

vocabulary for making conflict. Military terms in Amharic for such as army, armament, artillery, barracks, battle, bayonet, bomb, bullet, combat, enemy, headquarters, military, soldier and conscript are all based within the Amharic language suggesting their own military history of needing such lexicon. It is the rare military term in Amharic that has foreign influence such as 'canon' *mädf* (from Arabic) and 'machine gun' *mätträyyäs* (from French).

For marginal populations subjected to 'raid' (*wärrära*) as a source of slaves (*bariya*) there is an "ethnic group" *Barea* that still bears this name in the Ethio-Sudanese borderlands. The process of "othering" seems to be important in war to help make violent acts justifiable and acceptable. For Amhara to create the category of *bariya* or Arabs to make a *dar al-kufur* this lubricates violence. The Dinka called folks they raided upon as *Jur* or foreigners. Romans called people beyond their control and susceptible to slave raids as *ber-ber* ('twitterers') from which we get barbarians or Barabra as a negative term for Nubians, not to mention the Berber on the far side of the Atlas Mountains and Berbera in Somalia. The Nubians used a term *nogor* for slaves who passed through their lands and it may be that this passed into Latin-based languages as 'negro'. Certainly American slave history is generously filled with "othering" terminology that assisted acts of brutality and violence against our fellow citizens. This part of our history might not be so problematic to process centuries later if we had thought about it more at the time and had built relations of mutual respect, rather than mutual fear and bloody violence.

Some Observations

First some methodological self-criticism; this was an experiment as a thematic conference paper. Really, just a tentative hypothesis that suffers from available published evidence, but the more I investigated it the more it seems to have some substance and in the classic heuristic manner, I would conclude that it deserves further and more systematic investigation. Although this paper began with the concept of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis it is after all built around epistemological idealism in which the words have *caused* the perception and effected the action, I would say that this investigation would instead, suggest the opposite, namely that the histories of these societies especially their wars and conflicts among themselves or between adversaries have necessitated the creation of special vocabularies to describe their military interactions. Thus, my conclusion is built upon epistemological materialism (i.e. science) and the words used are an effect and not a cause. Since the question about cause or effect can be answered

by good ethno-linguistic data on a historical framework, I would invite further investigation on this point as is possible. Causes must precede effects according to the basic principles of logic. But for now without data on the historical evolution of these languages I can only point to the way ahead and not to the final destination.

In these few examples those people with weak modern military histories like Nubians have a relative poor vocabulary of war making and peace-making, for those like the Dinka who traditions include cycles of raiding (negative reciprocity) there are abundant and refined words to make conflict as well as to end conflict. Those with strong military traditions for empire building such as Arabs and Amhara have the richest vocabulary for minute aspects of conflict production and as well as conflict resolution. For those who have faced Arabs as adversaries there numerous loan words from Arabic for military structures and weapons that do not exist within their own cultural and linguistic framework.

For those interested in peace-making, there are strong local traditions and vocabulary for reducing, negotiating, preventing and mediating conflict. Since peace and conflict are the dialectical, but interacting opposites, these terms can be enhanced and brought into the dialogue of peace. The local peace-making folk traditions, religious brotherhoods and Sufi practices can be used effectively to wage a lexical counter attack on war-like traditions and vocabulary. Consciousness and perceptions are deeply rooted in language and for those interested more in peace than war this may be a very useful place to start cross-cultural understanding and discourse. If we reconstruct and reformulate conceptualizations that "other" people it might be a lot harder to be violent to fellow human beings. Besides, a bad conversation about peace may still better than a good war; it is hard to think and talk about making peace while actively trying to wage or "win" war.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of the Multi-University Research Initiative Grant # N00014-08-1-1186 and the tireless support of Adam Gerard and Erica Fontaine

Bibliography

- Armbruster, C. H. *Dongolese Nubian: a Lexicon*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965.)
- Carroll, John B., ed., *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of*

- Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956.)
- Heasty, J.A. *Shilluk-English Dictionary*. (Doleib Hill, Sudan: The American Mission, 1937.)
- Mandelbaum, David G., ed., *Selected Writings [of Edward Sapir] in Language, Culture and Personality* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1949.
- Nebel, A. *Dinka Dictionary*. (Wau, Sudan: Verona Fathers, 1954.)
- Sambaj, Yusuf. *al-Qamus al-Nubi*. (Cairo, Egypt: Maktabat al-Sharuq, 1998.)
- Zekaria, A. *Dictionary of Amharic-English/English-Amharic*. (New Delhi: Languages of the World Publications [reprint], 1993.)

Introduction

In this chapter we attempt to interrogate the construct of 'indigenous languages', which is embedded in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed between the 'south' (represented by the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement, SPLA/M) and the north (represented by the National Congress Party, NCP) in Sudan in 2005. We show that the very notion of 'indigenous languages' was an integral part of a colonial project that came to structure the south-north social relations and identities. Hence we aim to problematise the 'naturalised' status of 'indigenous languages', which accompanied the reification of the north-south divide in north and south Sudan, by revealing their colonial history. The CPA has emerged as a historical product of both the colonial and postcolonial policies to undo their effects. This chapter builds on previous research which contributes to the debate on the ways in which the language of indigenous sociolinguistics is imagined not just in Africa but also in other parts of Africa (2).

The name 'Sudan' has various etymological interpretations in the history of the region. Muslim traders and intellectuals called the region west of the Sahara 'Bilad al-Sudan' (Land of the Blacks) to refer to the vast lands from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, including the lands that are now known as Senegal and Ethiopia. The French, on the other hand, used the word 'soudan' to refer to the current Mali, while the British used the word 'Soudanese' to define the inhabitants of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in contrast with the Egyptians.(4) An analysis of the historical connotations of the term 'Sudan' points to the ways in which its diverse meanings have been imagined by various forces as a 'nation'. This chapter is a contribution to this analytic project by examining one of the