

## **The Role of Education in Sudan's Civil War**

Anders Breidlid, Oslo and Akershus University College

Contact details: anders.breidlid@lui.hio.no

### **Note on contributor:**

Anders Breidlid is Professor of International Education at Oslo and Akershus University College, Norway. He is former Dean of Faculty of Education and Rector of Bislet University College, Norway and was the Chair of the Board of the Centre for International Education (LINS), Oslo University College from 1997 until 2007. Breidlid has research experience from Sudan, South Africa, Kenya, Cuba, Chile and the US. His main professional interests are international education, education and development, the globalization of educational discourses, international politics, human rights, HIV/AIDS, indigenous knowledge, education in conflict and African literature. He has published articles and books on education and development as well as on African history and fiction. His recent books include: *HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa* (2009) (with J. Baxen) and *A Concise History of South Sudan* (2010) (with A. Androga and A.K. Breidlid). His book *Education, Indigenous Knowledges and Development. Contesting Knowledges for a Sustainable Future* is due to be published by Routledge in July/August 2012.

### **Abstract**

In this paper education's role in conflict, with specific reference to the civil war in Sudan, is discussed. It analyses the ideological basis of the Sudanese government (GoS) during the civil war, with special reference to the role of religion and ethnicity. It shows how the primary education system was based on the Islamist ideology of the GoS, with limited consideration of the various cultural and religious groups in the country. The paper, then, discusses the political discourse of the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM) and the secular curriculum produced by SPLM's Secretariat of Education during the war. It identifies discrepancies between the Islamist and the secular educational discourses as one reason why many young people in South Sudan took up arms against the Islamist government. With South Sudan now emerging as an independent nation, a dramatic improvement of the education sector is needed both to heal conflicts in South Sudan and to give people in the South hope for the future.

**Key words:** Sudan, civil war, (primary) education, curriculum, ideology, religion, ethnicity

## **Introduction**

In this paper the role of education in conflict is discussed, with specific reference to the civil war in Sudan. Education seems to play a somewhat contradictory role in conflict situations (Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Smith and Vaux 2003; Davies 2004). While (re)building schools, recruiting teachers, and returning children to classrooms may help reduce the causes of conflict (Collier, 2006; McEvoy-Levy, 2006; World Bank, 2005), schools may also, according to Vriens (2003, p. 71) be one of “the most successful instruments for the . . . dissemination of militarism.” Moreover, Sommers (2002, p. 8) states that “many who conduct modern wars are expert at using educational settings to indoctrinate and control children ” (see also Breidlid, 2010).

In the conclusions from a review of the empirical, quantitative literature on the relationship between education and civil conflict, the Centre for the Study of Civil Wars (CSCW) states that

- “Increasing educational levels overall has pacifying effects
- Rapid expansion of higher education is not a threat
- Education inequalities between groups increase conflict risk
- The content and quality of education might spur conflict...” (CSCW, 2011).

The CSCW study further underlines that “people with low education levels are more likely to be recruited to armed conflict” (CSCW, 2011).

### The civil war in Sudan

The civil war in Sudan between the North and the South lasted, with certain intermissions (e.g., the cease-fire between 1972 and 1983), from 1955 to 2005. The resistance by different Southern Sudanese liberation movements against the various Khartoum regimes was due to what was perceived by most Southerners as oppressive policies against the South. The Addis Abeba Agreement in 1972 gave hope to the South when (what was then called) Southern Sudan was established as an autonomous region. The ceasefire reached in 1972, however, came to an end in 1983 when President Nimeyri decided to introduce *Sharia* law in the South as well. This resulted in the establishment of

the SPLM/SPLA (the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/the Sudan People's Liberation Movement) whose goal was to fight Islamist<sup>1</sup> imposition, both ideologically and militarily (Jok 2001, 2007; Johnson 2007)

When Sadiq al-Mahdi won elections in the North with his Umma party in 1986, the new Sudanese government dropped Sharia and initiated peace negotiations with the SPLM/A. However, the hopes of peace were crushed when the Islamist military regime led by General Omar al-Bashir came to power through a coup in 1989. The war ended in 2005 with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (the CPA) between the National Congress Party (NCP) and the SPLM/A. (Johnson 2007, Breidlid et al, 2010)

The CPA gave expectations to a population which, for too long, had been suffering during a civil war where more than two million people had died since 1989. After an interim period of six years which ended in January 2011, elections were held in the, now, South Sudan as a fulfilment of the CPA to decide whether the Southerners wanted to remain in a union with North Sudan or whether they wanted to become a separate nation. The population in the South voted overwhelmingly for separation from the North in January 2011, and the newest state in Africa, South Sudan, gained independence on July 9, 2011.

The causes of the civil war were multiple, but were often primarily attributed to the fundamental religious and ethnic differences between the Southern, non-Arab populations and the Northern, Muslim, Arab-dominated government of the National Congress Party (NCP). Other causes included a struggle over the abundant oil resources (Jok, 2007; Johnson, 2007; Jok, 2001; Lesch, 1998), as well as the fundamentally different education systems in the North and in the South.

#### Methodology

This paper draws upon a study on cultural values and schooling in Sudan during the last part of the civil war (2002-2004). It is based on fieldwork in areas in Southern Sudan (as it was then called) under the control of the Southern People's Liberation Army/SPLA (in Yei River County) and in the internally displaced persons' (IDP) camps in Khartoum and in Khartoum

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<sup>1</sup> Islamism is a somewhat contentious term, but is used in this paper to denote a belief system, which holds that Islam is not only a religion but a political system. It is characterized by moral conservatism and argues for the enforcement of Sharia (Islamic law) as well as Islamic values throughout the society.

city, where the ministries of the government are located. For a discussion of the period after 2004 see Breidlid, 2010..

Due to the long duration of the research the team of researchers collected data from more than hundred informants altogether in the North and in the South during the civil war. Informants were picked using a purposive sampling approach to collect data from people of different ethnic groups and involved in different roles. In the South, Bari, Kakwa, and Dinka informants residing in Yei were interviewed. In the North, Southern migrants from these communities and members of the Lotuka ethnic group were interviewed. The majority of the interviewees were pupils and teachers. In the South all interviewees were Southerners, but in the North we interviewed teachers and students both from the North and the South (those living in the camps for displaced people). Moreover we interviewed members of PTAs, traditional leaders (chiefs and elders) as well as religious and political leaders in the South and the North (e.g. Muslim leaders in the NCP). The majority of the interviews were *formal interviews* with individuals oriented by interview guides containing open-ended and semi-structured questions and using an approach that emphasized “openness and flexibility, and “on-the-spot” confirmation or disconfirmation of the interviewer’s understanding or interpretation of what an interviewee stated (Kvale, 1996, p. 84, 189). All formal interviews were audio taped and transcribed. In addition, the research team also conducted some *informal interviews* as well as observations in a few classrooms in Yei and in the North.<sup>2</sup>

The first part of the paper analyses briefly the set of values upon which the Sudanese government (GoS) built during the war, with special reference to the role of religion and ethnicity. The paper, then, analyses the primary education system of the government in relation to the value universe discussed earlier and queries in particular to what extent the school system took into account the various cultural and religious groups in the country.

In the second part of the paper the curriculum (New Sudan Curriculum Committee, 1996) made by the SPLM/A’s Secretariat of Education during the war is analysed. This was intended for the schools in the SPLM/A-controlled areas in the South. While the GoS advocated an Islamist educational discourse, the SPLM/A favoured an education system which was more Western in nature.

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<sup>2</sup> In this article the year in brackets after the quote from the interviews indicates the year when the interview took place.

In order to understand the development of two fundamentally different educational discourses in the North (GoS-controlled areas) and in the South (SPLA-controlled areas), it is vital to analyse the political discourse in the two areas prior to South Sudan's independence. In the following subsection the ideological and religious foundation of the Sudanese state, and the role of Islamism, the dogmatic version of Islam, in particular, is discussed.

### **The Northern discourse during the war**

One of the most important reasons for the repeated failures of the peace talks between the GoS and SPLA was the unwillingness of the governing elite to recognise the ethnic and religious diversity of the country. It is the Muslim Arabs (a minority in the country) who since independence have had full control of the state apparatus in the North. This elite, associated with the incumbent government, had a financial foundation unrivalled in the country based on Arab investment, Sudanese expatriates in the Gulf and, not least, the oil revenues from 1999. Moreover the Sudanese Arabs was in possession of a significant cultural and ideological capital related to the dominating role of the Arabic language and the privileged status of Arabic in Islam. Furthermore, it was the National Congress Party (NCP), with strong links to fundamentalist Islamist groups, which from 1989 imposed its version of Islam (Islamism) on other Muslims and also on non-Muslim groups.

The NCP agenda was to establish an Islamist state based on *sharia* and this agenda controlled the hegemonic discourse in the country as well as most political decisions during and after the war. The NCP government maintained the traditional codes of Islam by subordinating rationality, so important in modernist discourse, to religion through the codified, ancient interpretations of Islam. This hegemonic NCP discourse interpreted the Qur'an literally, in contrast to liberal Muslims with a much less dogmatic position. Oppositional movements with a non-Islamist programme were seen as opposing the will of God. (Lesch, 1998)

NCP policy was to prioritise knowledge of Islam above all other knowledge. Nothing existed outside of Islam and thus, "everyone is potentially a Muslim. And since nothing exists outside of Islam, the mode of convergence ... is Islam" (Simone, 1994, p. 143). The Islamists insisted on the unity of all existence and the totality of Islam, but they confirmed at the same time the Quaran'ic differentiation between believers and infidels thus marginalising people of other faiths or beliefs. The totality of Islam was loathed by the Southern Sudanese who are

predominantly devout Christians or believers in traditional religions. They perceived the pervasiveness of Islam as a way of hindering space for others.

The development of the Sudan was mainly interpreted in an ideological-religious perspective meaning that scientific, economic and social principles were reformulated on this basis. Moreover, by also underlining the ontological superiority of the Muslim and Arab mind and by focusing on the decadence of the West in terms of secularism (also used to characterise the Christian South), the NCP government reversed the Orientalist interpretation of the West-East dichotomy by romanticising the East (Arabs) and demonising the West (see Said, 1978). This ideological and religious basis of the NCP also had serious implications for the educational discourse in the country prior to the CPA.

### **The Northern educational discourse**

#### Educational reform in the Sudan

President Bashir announced in 1990 that the national education system at all levels should be based on Islamist values. Therefore, new curricula and textbooks were developed at school and university levels where a compulsory course based on the Qu'ran and the Hadiths (i.e. the collective body of traditions, sayings or customs relating to Muhammed) was established. The goal was to phase out all schools not under the control of the authorities and integrate the pupils into state schools (Kenyi, 1996).

The new educational policy paralleled the reforms in the civil service and the military forces, particularly targeting the Ministry of Education by exchanging administrators and teachers with NCP sympathisers and prohibited alternative political student movements.

The new educational policy can be summed up in the following way:

The use of one national curriculum throughout the educational system; the use of Arabic as the sole medium of instruction, with English taught as a subject; the full control by the government over all schools in the country; the centralization of educational planning to be the exclusive domain of the Federal Ministry of Education; and the consolidation of religion and religiosity in, and through, the educational system (Kenyi 1996, p. 15).

The main objective was to transfer these principles, both individually and institutionally, from one generation to the next by, for example, the recitation of the Qu'ran. In principle the Khalwa (mosque) schools were compulsory in order to enrol in primary school (practice was often different), but because of the ideological importance of these schools, pupils at different age levels were accepted. The Islamist education was extended to primary education, which was eight years, and secondary schooling of three years which functioned as access to colleges and universities (see also Breidlid, 2005b).

The Sudanese education system was thus based on a discourse which defied modernity's separation between the secular and the spiritual. Education cannot, in an Islamic state, be removed, as Reagan states, "from its religious context, and it is in the Qu'ran that educational thought should be grounded" (Reagan, 1996, p. 130). Furthermore, as stated by Abdullah (1982, p. 25):

Since the Qu'ran provides the Muslim with an outlook towards life, its principles must guide Islamic education. One cannot talk about Islamic education without taking the Qu'ran as one's starting point... the Qu'ran lays down the foundation for education aims and methods. Moreover, the Muslim educator will find in the Qu'ran the guiding principles which help in selecting the content of the curriculum.

The NCP government perceived education as a tool in constructing and solidifying the nation state, and in reproducing cultural capital and the existing power relations. The NCP employed an ethnic model of the nation state which sought to homogenize a heterogeneous ethnic landscape by ignoring, and often suppressing differences based on culture, religion and language. The identity of the country was defined in terms of an Islamist understanding which, as Lesch states, "attempts to eliminate differences by defining them away and/or by instituting structures that marginalise minorities" (Lesch, 1998, pp. 213-14).

The Islamists' homogenising efforts had, however, often a negative effect by creating a fierce reaction which in many ways solidified and cemented identities along ethnic and cultural lines rather than creating an hegemonic identity.

Curricula and textbooks

The school curricula and textbooks for the primary schools in the Sudan were prepared by the National Curriculum Centre (NCCER) in Khartoum. The members of the Centre were political appointees of the government and experienced educators

As part of the normal process of the Islamisation of education, curricula and textbooks were prepared in line with the ideology of the NCP government. The members of the committee interviewed supported the universalist perception that the multicultural dimension of the curriculum was by definition taken care of given the cohesion and unity of the Islamist universe referred to above.

Since this revolution in the education system sparked controversy in many parts of Sudan, I asked one member of the National Curriculum Committee in Khartoum closely associated with the NCP during the war about the wisdom of imposing an Islamist curriculum on a culturally and religiously diverse country such as Sudan. Dismissing the question as unwarranted, the respondent insisted on the inherent unity between the South and the North and that multiculturalism was taken care of and subsumed under the umbrella of *tawhid*: “Sudan is one country based on cultural and religious unity” (2003).

The privileging of Islam was often supplemented by an Arab bias in the textbooks for the primary school produced by the curriculum centre. In an interdisciplinary subject (history, geography, civics and integrated natural science) called “Things around us” (grade 1-4) and “Man and the Universe” (grades 5-8) the emphasis on Arab history was conspicuous with hardly any information on the history of the ethnic communities. A chapter called “Man’s advent to the Sudan” focused entirely on the Arab and Muslim advent to the Sudan while neglecting that of Christianity many centuries earlier. The history of southern Sudan was more or less absent from the textbooks and the Arab slave trade into the interior of the South is not mentioned.

While Arabic as the medium of instruction in the government schools in the North was an uncontested reality, the contextualisation of the Arabic language books within a dogmatic Qur’anic value universe (the books were full of quotations from the Qur’an) was noticeable. Even in the English textbooks the pervasiveness of the Arab Islamic culture was monocultural with all the pictures in the textbooks portraying men and women in Arabic clothing and with Arabic names. For instance, Oyenak (2006), based on her analysis of 41 textbooks in English and Arabic languages for primary schools produced by the National Curriculum

Centre in Khartoum, concluded that the Arab-Muslim bias is overwhelming, and South Sudanese history, religion and culture have been almost completely left out (see also Breidlid, 2005a). While it was clearly the task of the Sudanese curriculum to construct identities in line with the dominant discourse, the identities of other Sudanese were projected as non-existing or inferior.

Our interviews with Muslim teachers confirmed the pervasiveness of Islam in the schools. As one teacher in a government school in an IDP (internally displaced persons) area in Khartoum told us: “You know, culture here is related to religion. We are Muslims. The most important subject is religious studies” (2003) The importance of schools in nation building was repeatedly stressed: “The new curriculum emphasises the identity of the Sudan.” Another teacher elaborated the issue rather apologetically: “Actually, there is something important I want to say. African writers write about the colonisers in a critical way. But now we have interaction between cultures also outside Africa. In our curriculum, for example, there is knowledge of cultures outside. The curriculum says that we must respect all human beings (2002).” Unfortunately our analysis of the curriculum in the North does not fully support such a perception. On the contrary, the educational discourse in the North was modeled on an ethnic and religious understanding of the nation state which attempted to homogenize a heterogeneous ethnic/religious landscape. Such a homogenizing enterprise sought to suppress differences based on culture, religion and language.

### **The Political Discourse in the South during the War**

While, during the war, the SPLM/A fiercely resisted the imposition of an Islamist ideology in the education system, the Secretariat of Education (SPLM’s Ministry of Education) introduced a more secular, modernist education policy in the liberated areas in the South. This policy paralleled the counter-hegemonic political discourse which was marked by opposition to the hegemonic Islamist discourse of the NCP government.

An exploration of the political terrain in the South during the civil war can thus primarily be understood and defined in relation to the Muslim and Arab North. The political and ideological climate in the South was marked by animosity against the Muslim Arabs. It seemed more or less inherited from one generation to the next and cut across tribal affiliation. This political discourse derived its meaning from and was grounded in historical oppression over decades (and even centuries) and was firmly confirmed by the Antonovs (bomber planes)

and other brutalities of the NCP regime during the civil war. Moreover, as Deng (1995, pp. 409-410) states

Southerners generally believe that the differences between them and the Arabs are genetic, cultural, and deeply embedded. They also acknowledge that their prejudices are mutual....Southern scorn for the Arabs lies in the realm of moral values, which they believe to be inherent in the genetic and cultural composition of identity.

This essentialist notion gave little or no space for ambivalence and ambiguity. The war was thus not merely a war of resistance against Islam, but racial or ethnic resistance against the dominant discourse in the North which, as has been noted, implicitly and often explicitly lay claim to being racially and culturally superior (see also Breidlid, 2006).

Despite different opinions about the SPLM/A, there was a common opinion among the Southerners we interviewed in describing the Arab North. The informants in the South attributed a specific, uncompromising and Islamist policy to the Arab North, and not only the NCP, thus creating a polarised self-Other dichotomy (see also Johnson, 2007; Jok, 2007). This animosity was voiced in this way by one of the teachers from the South:

You just have to submit to the Arabs. We feel that there is a very big gap between the Arabs and the Southerners. Their way of forcing us into their system is another form of imperialism. We need a change, for good or for bad ... As in South Africa ... our rights are based on our ethnic group (2002).

Similar attributions, like “we cannot trust the Arabs,” “they are robbing our country and our religion,” “they are not like us,” reflect deeply-ingrained perceptions of a self-Other dichotomy similar to that among Northerners, albeit in reverse. As a chief in the South explained: “The Arabs don’t want to develop the South. Arab culture does not help to make our country more developed. That is not in their interest” (2004) (see also Breidlid, 2010).

In a country where war (with certain intermissions) had been the life-long companion of everybody under 50, the singling out of war as the overarching reason for their despondency was not unexpected and certainly also influenced by the singular discourse of the SPLA propaganda. The surfacing of a common Southern discourse was repeatedly underlined by our

informants: “Many of us learned good things from other ethnic groups. We are more a nation than before ” (2003). Another informant added: “Another prominent factor that minimizes traditional education to its death is multi-culturalism or mixed ethnicity” (2003) In fact this informant was unambiguous that cultures that disunite people should be discarded “because they promote ethnic segregation.” The positive impact of more ethnic integration was underlined by another informant

The war made south Sudanese/Africans have stronger bonds and developed unity to confront the common enemy. The war made us understand the enemy better and made us more determined to fight for our human rights, dignity and total freedom. The war has already created a unity of the oppressed people of the Sudan (2003).

### **The education discourse in the South**

As is the case in other fragile states (Rose and Greeley 2006), Southern Sudanese communities supported primary schools during the war. However, the longevity of the conflict made the running of these schools very difficult, exposing a very serious situation around the turn of the century (Nicol, 2002; Brophy, 2003; JAM 2005a, 2005b; Sommers, 2005). Of the 1.4 million school-age children in Southern Sudan, less than 400,000 (around 28 per cent) were enrolled in school by the end of 2003. About 110,000 girls (or 18 per cent of all school-age girls) were in school. Less than one per cent of girls in the South completed primary education. In comparison, 61 per cent of school-age children in North Sudan attended basic school, but although the disparity between male and female enrolment was not as extreme as in the South, “gender disaggregated enrolment rates ... (showed) a difference of 7.5 percentage points” (JAM 2005b, p. 147).

The education system in the South was secular, Western, and modernist in nature. It was initially based on the curricula and textbooks from Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia but, gradually, a South Sudanese curriculum was introduced. The goal of this curriculum was to be inclusive and to build a cohesive political culture across the ethnic divides in the South, thus trying to establish a Southern Sudanese identity rather than tribal identities.

The development of a modernist, Western educational discourse contributed to a strengthening of the division/conflict between the South and the North since it contradicted the non-secular, fundamentalist policies and practices of the North. But, according to my

findings, the Southern discourse was neither anti-Arab nor anti-Islamic. Those schools which based their teaching on curricula from Kenya and Uganda learnt, however, more about the situation in those countries than about Sudan. The emerging South Sudan curriculum included North Sudan, but emphasized issues in the South Sudan as well, and South Sudan did not get their own history for schools until 2010 (Breidlid et al., 2010). While the curriculum did not essentialise the Northerners, the attitude of the common man as well as the politicians towards the Northerners was marked by hostility, suspicion and negativism.

The rejection of the Islamization of the school curriculum was accompanied by a modernist discourse where Western epistemology and science were promoted as the only knowledge system thought to be relevant for progress and liberation in the South, sometimes at the expense of indigenous epistemology and values. As one teacher stated: “Science teaches ways to get modern medicine and other ways of living. It gives people knowledge about agriculture, health, care for the environment and many other things, for a good way of living” (2003). This was reiterated in a different way by two other teachers: “With modern education you acquire scientific knowledge and positive change ... It also advocates gender balance and sensitivity” (2003).

The modernist bias was thus in clear ideological opposition to the curriculum issued by the NCP and used in the big towns in the South during the civil war. According to our informants, particularly members of the SPLM, the modernist curriculum in the liberated areas was seen as an important tool against Northern religious and political imposition. When asked about the significance of education, one SPLM representative reported:

In the movement, we regard education as number one among our priorities. It is the backbone of development. Some people think we can liberate this country by only using the gun. We need different ways and strategies to liberate the people of the Sudan – modern education is one of them ... (2002).

## Modernity

It can be claimed that it was British colonialism that introduced South Sudan to modernity. Modernity introduced southerners to both what was considered as part of modernity, Christianity and literacy, and even though colonialism in many ways denied some of the

promises of modernity, such as rapid economic change and political emancipation (which was not the focus of British colonialism in the South), it also opened the door to the same promises through, for example, modern schooling (although accessed by a minority).

(Breidlid et al, 2010)

Clearly, Christianity was interpreted on the basis of the Southerners' own cultural and historical context, and was appropriated as their own, African religion. And Christianity was used in the resistance struggle against the North and as a pathway to development and freedom. It is, for example, worth remembering that among the first leaders of the resistance movement, Anya Anya, was a Catholic priest, Father Saturnino Lohure (see Breidlid et al., 2010).

Southern Sudanese attitudes to and experiences of modernity was therefore ambivalent, premised on both denial and appropriation. But it was the promise of 'progressive' modernity which was broken when, from 1955 onwards, the North tried to impose Islamism on the Southerners. The Islamist crusade to the South was gradually felt to run counter to modernity and progress, and a nostalgia for the promises of modernity through the British was re-echoed among many of our informants. Clearly, for many informants there was a close link between modernity and Europe and the West, not unlike the perceptions in the Arab world where the concept of modernity was associated with Europe itself.

While it is often claimed that an education system is the repository, carrier and transmitter of a society's myth, the institutionalization centre for that myth's contradictions, and the locus of the ritual which reproduces and veils the disparities between myth and reality, the education system in Southern Sudan during the civil war did not fit this understanding (Odora Hoppers, 2000, p. 6).

Conceptualised within a Western or European frame of reference, the education system during the war in the liberated areas was rarely nurtured by the myths of the traditional Sudanese society, or was hardly a conveyor of these myths. Since a civil society hardly existed during the war and since schools were islands or pockets in a society marked by a patriarchal hierarchy with little experience of how modern schooling was supposed to function, schools often seemed to operate outside of, rather than embedded in, the rationalities of the traditional regional or local communities. What schooling in Southern Sudan during the war probably did was to elevate an alien knowledge system to the only system which was thought to be

relevant for progress and liberation of South Sudan. It is therefore possible to say that the modernist education system in the South during the war, as all such modernist systems tend to do, transported and solidified myths about the unique relevance of Cartesian epistemology while, if not discarding, at least neglected indigenous epistemologies.

The perception of modernity and modern education in the Southern Sudanese societies was not uniform across the board. While all our informants were part of a specific Southern Sudanese culture, this culture is neither perfectly transmitted to all members, nor is it perfectly uniform across all members. Clearly one's place within a society influences one's understanding of that particular culture, and which aspects of the culture are accessible.

In our sample, the majority of informants was from the educated part of the communities where we did our research, which clearly impacted upon how modernity and modern education were viewed. The introduction of modern schooling was, however, welcomed, not only by those with a vested interest in education, i.e. the teachers, school administrators and pupils, or others with education, but also, generally speaking, by the majority of the community leaders and the elders. "In fact what is called school is the key to the brain...If there is no education there is no life. Even if you are a farmer you need to write and read". (2003) A chief underlined the need for both home and school learning:

At seven years old, the child now belongs to the teacher at school. The teacher becomes the father or mother to take care of the child. When he is at home I give him home education but much learning he gets from school, like reading and writing. The teacher opens his eyes to the world. (2003)

There was a perception of modern schooling, however vague and unarticulated, as a vehicle for a more sustainable Southern Sudan, where the majority of our informants saw modern education as an indispensable tool in development. The population, most probably due to the imposition of Western ideology and discourse since the beginning of the twentieth century, hardly questioned the supremacy of Western education which had, so the understanding was, generated so much wealth in Europe, the West. Moreover its pro-modern, somewhat anti-Muslim bias, was welcomed in a situation where any ideological transfer from the North was resisted wholeheartedly.

### Traditional practices as anti-modern

While lack of development and change was primarily ascribed to the civil war and the Arabs, some informants attributed traditional practices as another obstacle to change. Modern education was thought to eradicate such practices. As one informant stated: “education modernizes people rather than clinging to traditional life. This is why education leads to a better life”. (2003)

During the war, the Southern educational discourse was an *inclusive* discourse because it was more in line with the religious and ethnic sentiments in the region than the Northern discourse. Given the fact that more pupils had the chance of going to school, that the curriculum was being reshaped in line with what the government of Southern Sudan considered were the new realities in the South, and where a Southern Sudanese, rather than tribal, identity was being nurtured, schools may have contributed to the facilitation of peace among the various ethnic groups.

### The modernist curriculum as exclusive

At the same time the modernist profile of the curriculum may also have been seen as exclusive in the sense that it favoured those children with an educated background and with a modernist cultural capital, and played down the indigenous heritage. There was very little focus on indigenous knowledge and indigenous cultural practices in the South during the war.

With South Sudan now emerging as a new nation, the government in the South acknowledges that there is a need for a new national narrative and a South Sudanese identity in times of peace that cuts across the various ethnic groups as well the competing knowledge systems in the South. The establishment and development of a national identity (among multiple identities) based on territorial solidarity and a common cultural heritage is a necessary glue in order for the new nation state to survive.

Since identities are constructed on the basis of multiple historical, contextual and cultural influences, a modernist education discourse, which *per definition* narrowly defines which knowledge should be celebrated and counted, undermines any attempt to establish identities that are grounded in, but not restricted to, indigenous knowledges, experience and culture. A modernist discourse thus marginalises and subalternises, through the domination of Western

science and epistemology, the very people who constitute the new nation. Recognition of indigenous knowledges and epistemologies means, as Horstemke (2004, p. 33) puts it:

reclamation of cultural or traditional heritage; decolonisation of mind and thought; recognition and acknowledgement of self-determining development; protection against further colonisation, exploitation, appropriation and/or commercialisation; legitimisation or validation of indigenous practices and world views; and condemnation of, or at least caution against, the subjugation of nature and general oppressiveness of nonindigenous rationality, science and technology.

While, even in very traditional societies, identities are not static or fixed, there is little doubt that modernity and globalization have augmented the pressure on traditional identity construction and indigenous knowledges, and more specifically a modernist educational discourse adds to that pressure. In a South Sudan context, what is the implication of an exclusion of indigenous epistemic knowledges in the official discourse in relation to a Southern Sudanese identity construction and national narrative?

During the war, a South Sudanese national identity or a Southern discourse was, as has been noted, more easily defined and nurtured in opposition to the Other. Young people in the South joined the guerilla movement because educational opportunities within a modernist framework were more or less denied, at least in terms of higher education (Salaam and de Waal, 2001).

This was also stated by both SPLM spokespeople and community leaders. When asked about why the war started in the first place, one community leader from the South said: “Denial of education is one of the main causes of the war”. (2003) The ideological basis of the education system in the NCP-controlled areas in the South was severely criticized. One politician in the South stated that southern students in the government schools suffered:

When they reach grade 8, there is the national examination. It is very difficult for them to pass. They do not speak Arabic well, they do not speak English well, and many do not speak their own language well. Many forget their culture. This is how the government treats us. Our children do not learn where they come from. They do not learn anything about our history, culture and language. There is a tiny number of

schools with English as the medium of instruction, but with the retention of the Islamic curriculum". (2003)

## **Conclusion**

As South Sudan is now emerging as a sovereign state with its own, secular, modernist education system, the challenge is to re-establish a South Sudanese identity in the absence of the Other (the North), or to minimize suspicion/animosities in relation to another Other (i.e. other ethnic groups) on South Sudan territory. The hugeness and complexity of such a challenge is seen in the many inter-ethnic clashes in the wake of the referendum in January 2011.

One goal of the new South Sudanese education system will, therefore, be to foster inter-tribal reconciliation. In the South Sudanese communities, so steeped in traditional values, the role of the education system will, in addition to the traditional learning programme in schools, be to explore the traditional value universe and epistemological orientation of the various ethnic groups, both to avoid alienation, and to stretch loyalties and recognize commonalities beyond ethnic borders.

In this context of limited resources, one should not overstate the schools' potential to play a reconciliatory role in South Sudan. With a large number of untrained and inexperienced teachers, sometimes more than 100 students in a classroom or under trees, and with almost no teaching materials, the tasks of the teachers and administrators are formidable. The low capacity of the schools is also problematic, given the increasing number of migrants and former soldiers — often traumatized — who are coming back from the battleground and are in dire need of unlearning the culture of violence acquired in the bush.

Realistically, the schools' main task for the foreseeable future will be to teach basic academic skills to the pupils, with very little time or capacity for intertribal reconciliation or peace education. There is nevertheless a sense that schools, on the basis of their very existence and proliferation, the modernist curriculum, as well as the intertribal population groups in class, can make a difference in South Sudan.

The conflictual relationship between the education discourses in the South and in the North will probably move into smoother terrain in the sense that the direct contact between the two discourses will be minimized due to the emergence of a new nation in the South. However, it is not enough for the authorities of the new South Sudan to get children back to primary or secondary school. If the authorities are not able to offer a viable alternative in higher education in terms of both quality and quantity, the young generation in the South will be another lost generation - a situation that will not be conducive in terms of peace and reconciliation in the newest nation state in Africa. Presently (February 2012, the universities in the South are not functioning in a satisfactory way. Some universities are even closed because of huge budgetary and administrative problems. If there is no improvement in the education sector in the near future and if the people of South Sudan do not experience soon that being independent means a difference in terms of peace and development, the euphoria of independence will not last long.

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