

SUDANWORKINGPAPER

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Understanding the Nuba as a
movement between epistemic territories
–between difference and sameness,
between contingency and continuity

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The programme Assisting Regional Universities in Sudan and South Sudan (ARUSS) aims to build academic bridges between Sudan and South Sudan. The overall objective is to enhance the quality and relevance of teaching and research in regional universities.

As part of the program, research is carried out on a number of topics which are deemed important for lasting peace and development within and between the two countries. Efforts are also made to influence policy debates and improve the basis for decision making in both countries as well as among international actors. ARUSS is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Translating the Nuba —a movement between epistemic territories

“Translation” is not only a process in which we make neutral meanings available between languages and between different universes of meaning, offering a “truth” about the Nuba. Translation is also a process of creating new meaning, opening new understandings by introducing new concepts and new thematic foci, thus *discovering* new meaning. Or we can engage in processes of *erasure*, in which the operation of translation can render invisible phenomena that we noticed and took for granted before (Vásquez 2011; Lutz 1990). The result of such processes, whether they are about “finding” or “erasing,” depends on how a certain phenomenon fits or does not fit the “parameters of legibility” of a certain “epistemic territory.” Such epistemic territories designate the realm where certain discourses thrive and thus define their very horizon of intelligibility. Translation brings into view the epistemic borders where a politics of visibility is at play between erasure and recognition, thus also making it into a process of struggle. There are many types of “struggle”. One belongs to the “traditional-modern” dichotomy. Narratives of imperial expansion into colonial territories can be one example in which the epistemic territory of modernity is expanded at the cost of local communities. Thus, an area such as the Nuba Mountains becomes “pre-modern” and “traditional,” the Nuba communities become “local communities” vis-à-vis a state, but the state itself becomes a “weak state” in a context of the international community. And the economic adaptations and developments we see in the area are characterised as “incomplete processes,” “incomplete modernity,” “incomplete market transitions,” and so on.

However, this is not the end of the story. Certainly there is a problem with the universalism of a Eurocentric Modernity and most researchers these days are concerned with how to handle this. But again, there are many ways of “handling” the issue. One solution that is visible in contemporary anthropological debates relates to what is termed “the ontological turn” in the discipline. Here the answer is to argue that cultures represent different ontologies and cannot be translated and compared at all. The challenge is thus not to translate but to look for alternative ontological truths based on the reality of the local cultures in focus. One of the concerns is to what extent science (through epistemology and representation) can make similar what ontologically belongs to a field of difference ? The “perspectivism” introduced by Viveiros de Castro (e.g. 1998) is the starting point for an anthropology that does not get lost in Modernity’s knowledge based, logo-centric epistemology. At times this point is made in almost fundamentalist terms, bringing back radical alterity and essentialism to the anthropological battlefield by claiming that the difference cannot be transgressed. Different cultures, the argument goes, represent ontological differences that shall never meet. The world is made up of different worlds, not by a shared humanity divided by different worldviews. And it follows that translation also goes out the window and emerges as what Viveiros de Castro calls a sort of “controlled equivocation” (1998, 2004). This is so, according to Latour (2007), because the “translation” is made before the observation itself. We enter the field with preconceived “translations” and understandings of what we are looking for, making the observed entities a reflection of what we already know. A position we see in his critique of the concept of “the social”. As Latour is against “the social”, de Castro is against “the human”. But if they are right, we have nothing more to talk about until they come with a new language in which we can talk about things we by their definition cannot grasp.

But is there no middle ground here ? I think there is, and to the extent this relates to translation I take support from Hanks and Severi (2014) who argue for the study of processes and principles of translation as a starting point. There is no one ontology nor one culture, but rather historically dynamic processes that move us in many directions. Thus translation as well must be seen as a dynamic process involving many elements, not a homogeneous movement from meaning in one context to meaning in a different context. Their argument goes somewhat like this.

People themselves translate all the time, within a culture as well as between cultures. And people have rarely been confined to their own local culture, there has always been culture contact. In such contact situations people may also be bi-lingual and thus have to translate between cultures themselves. Rather than focusing on what people can express, which is a theoretical undertaking, we should focus more on what they actually do express, which moves the focus to one of practice. Understanding what people try to express and what they do understand become the start of communication itself. And instead of operating with clear-cut categories of languages that need formal and technical translation, we can look at many factors affecting any expression, and through such a complex analysis it is possible to get closer to what the meaning is. By such a process “style” and “nuances” become as important as fixed meanings, both within and between cultures, and perhaps at the end of the day it is better to talk about “speech communities” in which many forms of translation go on all the time, rather than technical translation between total “languages” and “cultures”.

If this is the case, then translation ceases to be translation in the narrow sense of the word, and becomes part of our general analytical task of understanding similarities and differences between groups of people. Thus, ethnography is dependent on translation, all the time, through our mixing of judgments, descriptions, actions and theories, in short, it is a multidimensional process defining in the end what we can know as anthropologists. This leaves translation not only to render meaning in one language into meaning in another language, but makes translation a key operation by which we are constructing the object of study itself. And as I said – this is true for communication between cultures as much as within the same culture between different types of speech communities and different types of knowledge tied to such communities. Speaking the same language, and belonging to the same culture do not guarantee that there is no need of translation (e.g. Manger 2001). But it also brings me to my main point – differences are not ontological, blocking communication. Differences may rather become a source of further communication and interaction, even if particular and specific things cannot be translated. Clearly there is more to translation than language. We are not only exchanging words but also values, theories and evaluations, and all of these are affected by what contexts they appear in. Thus, according to Hanks and Severi, we need to translate “worlds”, more than “words”. Thus they end up in the “epistemology camp”, arguing that we need to work more on our epistemologies by which we understand these worlds rather than assume different ontologies in which such worlds do not meet.

I concur. And at this point we need to revert, not to translation, but to our total research process. And for this we need a meta-language by which we can talk about the totality of this process. Hence, it makes sense to focus on the process of the construction of arguments itself. My use of translation here will be close to the ways we deal with our academic argumentations. Through specific academic perspectives we create meaning, or rather *perspectives*, perspectives that are totally dependent on our choice of concepts, methodologies, and the questions we raise in our research. Different choices within this broader field will thus represent “epistemic territories” within which specific discourses

evolve. It is this broader field of understanding of translation I want to deal with here. So, before I get into any substantial issues, let me continue elaborating on the research process itself—as I see it, of course.

A basic issue relates to what Margaret R. Somers (1996) describes as key foci in academic work, and thus to how we define an epistemic territory, which according to Somers can correspond to “*knowing*,” “*being*,” and “*asking*.” The first concerns *epistemology*, how we know about the world and what the foundations are for our knowledge. This relates to our methodologies; i.e., the context of our justification. Significant here is the change from meta-narratives towards what John R. Hall (1999) calls a “small e-epistemology.” There are many possibilities for arguing about a matter. That is not the issue. The issue is to follow through with the argument one actually chooses. Out go our notions about a positivistic, holistic knowledge, and in come part-arguments in which specific answers belong to specific questions. But this is not doing away with rules about scientific statements, and good or bad sociology or history. We believe in “science” and work hard to improve the way in which we carry out our argumentations.

The second relates to *ontology*, which in turn relates to the nature, or character, of our focus, be it society or the social agent. Social scientists do not often make explicit ontological statements, they are better at talking about methodologies, but as we have seen, some do and are involved in building arguments that are based on ontological assumptions. I will not take this discussion further here, only conclude that at the time of writing the ontological turn does not seem to take us anywhere. In the context of that debate we need to *theorize* less and *analyze* more ! Let me move therefore to Somers’ third focus, the one that relates to the context of discovery, what the French call “*problematique*.” Rather than behaving as shamans who know the true reality of a world in which “things are what they are”, let us ask ourselves more modest questions, one of which is “what is the question being asked in our research”? If we ask such a question it will surely bring us back to our own scientific basis as well as linking our study to the historical and political field. The first issue is the historicity of our concepts. Both our questions and our methodologies are historically constituted. I sympathise with Somers’s position on “knowledge cultures,” which can be said to be the “specific range of thinking, reasoning, and institutional practices possible in a given historical time and space” (1996, 55). This is not about what is true or false, but about what frames the decisions about what is true and false; i.e., we are talking about what constitutes the boundaries of our reasoning.

This leads to the very important point of the *context of discovery* as being different from that of *justification*. Whereas our justifications are discussed all the time, whether our methodologies are correct, whether our concepts make sense and so on, all within the field of epistemology, the context of discovery, and what questions we are dealing with, are issues not raised very often, at least not in any explicit way. And even more rarely are the two brought together in order to see how they are linked. Collingwood (1939) was the first to bring this up, insisting upon a link between question and answer. In a way that is similar to what Collingwood proposed, we should try to be explicit about what we are doing. What we produce is totally dependent on what kind of questions are being asked. Hence, we should be very clear about what the questions are that we are trying to answer. In a sense, we need to be self-reflexive, in the way Gadamer (1992) wants us to be, not as a way of guaranteeing objectivity but as an antidote to positivistic hubris and our inclination to “know it all.” To Gadamer, as to us here, truth is an *event*. Truth is not, fundamentally, what can be affirmed

relative to a set of criteria but an event or experience in which we find ourselves engaged and changed.

To approach the truth Gadamer is talking about we can follow the methodology suggested by Collingwood in raising the issue of “logic of question and answer,” rather than any propositional logic. Truth “as something that belonged not to any single proposition, nor even ... to a complex of propositions taken together; but to a complex consisting of questions and answers” (Collingwood 1939, 379). I am not talking about any particular paradigm here, rather about *toolboxes*, which contain possibilities for arguing. Our argumentation is itself a practice, and should be looked upon as such. If our language is part of a practice, then language is action, and requires a look at the intentionality of the writer and the understanding of the listener, which have a historical relationship. In order to be interesting and intelligible, we need to frame the questions within the period in which they belong, and hence a question and answer provided in the 1950s will appear very different in 2014, even though we might easily agree that the version of the 1940s or 1950s was a scientific breakthrough. Think of Nadel’s book, *The Nuba* (1947), for instance. I feel my own book on the Lafofa Nuba is becoming more and more of a history book, both in terms of the ethnography as well as the conceptual premises by which that ethnography was understood (Manger 1994). Hacking calls these “styles of reasoning” within a landscape of many possible, and perfectly legitimate ways of arguing, out of which only some seem to catch the historically produced concerns of their time (Hacking 1982, 1999). This is so because they speak to what are the historically produced concerns of the readers. Hacking explains for instance how statistics was developed at a time when society and individuals were defined in new ways. Hacking’s analysis of styles of reasoning is both historical and philosophical. He makes historical claims about the emergence and development of such styles, and he advances philosophical claims concerning the implications of styles for our understanding of reason, scientific propositions, and scientific entities. Although these claims go beyond the narrow limits of epistemology, they nevertheless derive more or less directly from certain views on what it is to reason and what it is to gain knowledge. Thus epistemology is obviously the core of Hacking’s account. Hence, questions asked, epistemological ways of producing knowledge, and an ontological understanding of what constitutes society all come together to produce new thinking. And this epistemology is historical since styles of reasoning come into being, they change, and they pass. That is to say, Hacking’s analysis historicises reason, historicises what counts as a scientific proposition, and historicises what passes for a scientific entity. This explains why we need to re-write history all the time, not because what exists is wrong, but because we need to answer new questions and say things in new ways. Let us proceed by making use of this type of reasoning in “understanding” the Nuba. Not as traditional, pre-modern societies with a given ontology, but as the Nuba appear to us through the process we have argued for – a process of questions and answer, through raising questions that are historically and politically defined.

The Nuba Mountains as a “culture area”

You might remember Conrad Arensberg and his attempt to organise an ethnographic overview placing Old World People in world ethnography (1963). Nadel did this for the Nuba (1947), as did Stevenson (1984), both long before more detailed studies of specific Nuba areas came out, among which my own study from Liri. And before all of those, travelers wrote down descriptions that also affected how we regard and understand the Nuba. There

have been many different starting points. As a culture area, the Nuba have been described with reference to a subsistence base, of social and political organisations as well as socio-cultural forms. The mountains experienced intensive agriculture in a context of extensive agriculture and pastoralism on the plains. We all know how this provides us with evidence for linking a material basis to a social order. As a people, the Nuba have been presented through their bodies, showing strength in their nudity. I am sure all of you have seen Leni Riefensthal's books (1976 a, b). But the Nuba also showed cultural diversity following diverse histories of settlement by diverse tribal groups, as the different Nuba languages demonstrate. Thus, the different Nuba groups have come to be represented as various local systems of beliefs and practices, of different migration stories and with different views of themselves as belonging to different groups. But one thing seemed to bring them together: they were "the Other," from both an Arabic and Muslim perspective as well as from the perspective of a colonial, Western modernity. Concepts such as "witchcraft," "rainmaking," "ceremonial wrestling and/or bracelet-fighting," "nakedness," and so on, all testify to this "Otherness." So let me start here, and say something about "Otherness" In a way that might indicate an answer (my answer) to how we may talk about this otherness in ways that do not make the otherness into a reified ontological fact.

Theorising the "Other" and the role of "difference"—ontology or politics?

Socially and culturally the Nuba have been presented as different from the majority groups in the Sudan, in need of Arabisation, Islamisation and Sudanisation, which is a Sudanese version of modernity. British colonialists seemed to prefer seeing them in need of being "preserved" for their charming primitiveness, thus fitting into a certain style of European modernity. No matter how they have been looked upon, it seems Nuba is a type of Other that won't go away. The Nuba never seemed to end up where the power-holders, whether political or academic, thought they should be. No matter what the changes were, there was an overflow of "Nuba reality" that did not fit into the hegemonic positions, be they within the context of Arabisation, Islamisation and Sudanisation, or in the context of modernity, development and human rights.

This observation relates to the points made in Dipesh Chakrabarty's book, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial thought and historical difference* (2000), and to his discussion of modern and pre-modern history. Although we are presented with narratives about how history is moving towards new aims, defined as "modern," leaving behind something "traditional," his point is that there is no "pure" situation in which the modern is only modern and the pre-modern is forever gone. All the taken-for-granted ideas and concepts of modern history (equality, democracy, dignity) will never look only as themselves—they will always be linked to some other historical elements outside the concept. Thus, the universal concepts of political modernity encounter pre-existing concepts, categories, institutions, and practices through which they get translated, and configured differently. Hence, we need to move in two directions, by linking the so-called universal concepts of modernity to European history (see e.g., Schneider, 1984, on kinship), and showing how the same concepts travel around the world, into different ethnographic contexts. So-called analytical concepts and empirical concepts must always be seen together, as there always is what Derrida (1978) called a "trace" of the empirical and the historical also in the analytical. Thus, pre-modern does not mean that the "pre" is totally before the "modern" and that it is over now. Rather, the "pre" is

part of the “modern” as a trace, becoming contemporary as well, constantly interrupting the totalising thrusts of the modern, in whatever shape it comes.

But these processes are defined by power, and modernity is certainly hegemonic, to an extent that makes it pretty impossible to write outside of modernity. When we use concepts like citizenship, the nation-state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, public-private distinctions, the idea of the subject, democracy, sovereignty, social justice, rationality and so on, we are certainly within the epistemic territory of modernity. Using the concept of modernity entails an almost unavoidable sense of “the universal” and “the secular.” If we use this logic on modernity, in its abstract form it appears as godless, continuous, empty and homogenous. And we know from Weber that it already is disenchanted. Gods, spirits or other supernatural forces can claim no agency in our narratives of modernity. Modern time is empty because any number of events can be put into it, and because everything can be historicised. It is homogenous because it is not affected by any particular event, it exists prior to the events of which it is made up. Time rolls on, fast or slow, in cyclical or linear ways, related to domestic, work, or state contexts. Modern time thus is understood as an objective entity, part of nature more than a cultural code.

We can certainly understand from this that modernity might be seen as an ontological territory of its own. But as Chakrabarty argues, the local traditions that were overrun by various external forces are not entirely gone, nor are earlier concepts dead. They end up as Derridaean “traces.” As we know, modernity did not get rid of religion. With the recent resurgence of religiously based politics we see that we now can speak about a “post-secular” world in which there is a return to debates between religious and secular positions, and on how to fit religion into the secular. And anthropology is a discipline that is concerned with such traces; i.e., human practices that were and are external or marginal to power-holders and their ruling orders. What to do with the pre-modern that still lingers in the modern context? What to do with religion in a secular society? Can such tensions be made sense of through translation? Or are they outside of science? Do they represent phenomena that cannot be “explained” by any analysis but still have to be “accepted” in a political system ?

We are faced with the problem of alterity here, in general, and in the case of the Nuba. As I have pointed out before, wherever we look in the existing literature it seems the Nuba Mountain communities represented a different way of life, they showed us “Otherness.” The Nuba have come to be represented as a local system of beliefs and practices, as being irrational in a modern, rational and secular world, or in an Arabic, Islamised one. We, as anthropologists, have been sympathetic as well, showing that the Otherness also made sense within its own context. In our analyses we concluded that various aspects of their social system might be functional to them by helping preserve the indigenous social organisation, as the structural-functionalists would argue. Or, we found and documented metaphors we could link to basic social concerns, as in symbolic studies. Or we uncovered expressions of false consciousness, as in Marxism. Or perhaps we saw in their myths expressions of how the human mind works, as in a Levi-Strausseau structuralism.

All this is well and good. And maybe it is all true as well. Truth is a matter of representing the world as it actually is. Hence, it is about representation and epistemology. The world is complex and can be understood in many ways. Hence, different theoretical angles and skepticism and critique are not bad at all. But still, it is our own understanding. How do we represent the Nuba as agents in their own lives? Or rather, how do we let them represent themselves in a so-called “self-representation”? We have tried, of course. We can point at

several debates in anthropology in which we have struggled with this particular point—taking the otherness of the Other seriously. For instance, in the so-called rationality debates in the 1960s and 1970s, we were concerned with relating these “erroneous” beliefs and modes of thought to our “true and rational” ones. We are back to Evans-Pritchard’s (1976) story about witchcraft among the Azande and the “why me?” question that witchcraft was supposed to answer. Specifically, a lamp caused an Azande hut to catch fire and burn down. A fact that people explained through “witchcraft.” Everyone knew that it was the open fire of the lamp that made the fire start. Nonetheless, the owner of the hut asked: “Why me, and why my hut?” And to explain that event the Azande referred to witchcraft. But are the Zande doing what we do when we receive a cancer diagnosis and ask “why me?” We know what may cause cancer, just as the Zande know that a lamp may start a fire. But why? Is it God? A coincidence? Witchcraft? Through these debates it dawned on some that there might be several rationalities and that one is not superior to the other, and our job should be to understand this. Hence, a cultural relativistic epistemology emerged. A more recent debate is the one about agency and the notion of “multiple modernities.” The issue is the same. The Other must be understood as being human, as rational as us, although different, and as modern as us, although differently modern. On one level the difference between modern and pre-modern is obvious. Local adaptations are shaped by the structures of modernity in the sense of taking place within the modern nation-state; i.e., its dominant ideology, whether secular or religious, and the way in which it develops particular identity categories of insiders/outsideers with respect to citizenship and nationhood. Such a nation-state context presupposes the new kinds of social spaces that have been created by modern institutions (administrative, economic, ideological, and educational), international migration and globalisation. They are also “modern” in the use of modern techniques (e.g., new communication technologies, modern scientific forms of knowledge), and in being subjected to particular models of the self and technologies of individualisation. People can react to this in various ways. One way is through violent resistance. But there are alternatives. For instance by way of cultural and religious revival and a focus on the recovering of a cultural authenticity, not through violent resistance but through forming cultural associations promoting “tradition,” thereby creating an “alternative modernity.” Both “solutions” are available among different Nuba groups, based on different understandings of the above factors.

A third debate is the debate on the state and the role of the state in development. Here we see a reversal of the argument. The dominant view has been Weber’s tendency to see development as moving towards a de-personalised bureaucratic rationality. In that perspective, the state was seen as a modernising force, and “traditional society,” such as the Nuba, as being backward, trapped in tribalism, lineage politics, etc. Hence, nation-building assumed the withering away of such traditional elements, as is evident for instance in Fortes and Evans-Pritchard’s book, *African Political Systems* (1940). The central idea of that book was that a decline of lineages would be an essential factor in advancing the state. But things were to work out differently. The contemporary African state is rarely a modernising force, more frequently a despotic, privatised, and undemocratic one. Hope is now put on “civil society,” (the public sphere of Habermas); i.e., the popular field which is supposed to take us out of the grip of the state. No longer is the local, i.e. the Nuba, “primordial.” The focus now is on voluntary associations, grassroots initiatives, etc., in which local people work for their own interests against the state. The issue is not how to build a state, but how to get rid of the existing one. The role of the international society has also changed. The international community is now less a supporter of the state, and more a controller of the same state, through structural adjustment packages, and through the interaction of NGOs with the civil

society. The Other is now seen as a positive force, but still a force understood from within a modernistic political discourse.

Are we all equal?

We can talk about many issues here, but let me stick to the issue of difference. What these debates show us is that we may be different, but basically we are all equal. Which is a modernist assumption. Against this the ontologists argue that if we single-mindedly pursue a path that makes difference into something constructed, to be understood by the right science, and removed by the right politics, we are actually perpetuating the modernist presumption that all difference can ultimately be negotiated—and negotiated on modernist terrain, within modern science or within modern nation-states. In other words, the assumption that all differences can be dealt with in terms of simultaneous participation, creating situational and relational hybridities, will reinforce modernist claims to universal validity—those of science, technology, market, democracy, human rights, and the concept of an independent, autonomous, individual subject. From this meta-perspective, the currently prevailing focus on the social construction of bridgeable differences—i.e., on the harmless alterity implicit in multiculturalism and the hybridisation of identities—excludes in principle the possibility of unbridgeable difference—i.e., of radical alterity that allows for epistemological differences and thus for the unpredictable.

If this careful hedging of real differences is an immunisation strategy that ultimately protects universalist claims from any substantial subversion, anthropology is in trouble. If we agree that one of anthropology's most significant task has been to de-familiarise and de-center the Euro-American (or any other hegemonic universalist) worldview, we should not regard difference as something to be avoided as much as possible, but rather accept it as a precondition for being human.

But does this mean that we can have no conversation with that other world? Does it mean that anything goes? No. It probably means that more than one thing goes, in the sense that one argument is more convincing than another, not in the sense that one is absolutely true. Cogency is different from absolute logical proof. And we should not forget that local people (in spite of their “ontologies”) are debating such issues all the time, referring to themselves as their own Nuba group, or to themselves as a broader category of Nuba, being within a context of wider political realities in the Sudan. And so on and so forth. Should we conclude here that such conversations are possible only because they all occur within the same ontological framework? No! Conversations go on all the time, within the groups themselves as well as between the groups. This also means a kind of contextualisation in which different arguments carry different weight. And it means that an argument from within the cultural sphere is different from an argument within a wider political public sphere.

I shall return to this problem of how to deal with the Other in such a politicised context, but let me first illustrate further how the two key premises I mentioned, that of epistemology and that of question and answer affect our thinking. To do that, let me discuss three different perspectives on the Nuba that are all available in our anthropological literature, and which allow us to illustrate how important the perspectives are on which we base our descriptions and how both perspectives and descriptions are deeply embedded in the historical developments the Nuba have been experiencing. I shall deal with the Nuba as “an ethnic group,” in their “history of suffering” and with the Nuba as “borderlanders.”

The Nuba as “ethnic group”

As we have indicated, at a point in time there was no Nuba, only many different groups with their own tribal names and, within that, a localised understanding of who they were and of where they lived. Groups “became Nuba” by external categorisation both in terms of stigmatisation but also in terms of politico-administrative processes. And the Nuba also started to understand themselves as one group through a history of shared suffering, by shared processes of assimilation or resistance, both based on their participation in wider state systems. They all experienced their political leadership institutionalised in the Mak being overrun by centralising forces. Local traditions of self-governance, in which Nuba villages themselves sorted out their relationships with Arab pastoral camps, were no longer valid. We can mention many factors, and you all know them. Obviously the Nuba have been marginal to the great centres in the Nile Valley, both Sudanese and Egyptian state formations, or in Darfur. Later, other classifications came, for instance placing the Nuba within the context of the territorial Sudanese nation-state, colliding with the national Arabic and Islamic social order. In this national context, the Nuba became an ethnic minority. Some forces among them argue for their own territorial nation-state. Turning to the relationship between the Nuba and Arabs at the local level, the Nuba claim status as “first comers” to the area, thus being indigeneous to the area, making the concept of “autochthony” an important one. The area then, is an example of how ethnic categorisation has become the defining criterion for a cultural differentiation, the nation-state becoming the motor of a modern social order. Locally anchored life-worlds, household-based production systems and regional patterns of economic integration have been absorbed within the complex division of labor and bureaucratic control ordered by the nation-state. Censuses and statistics emerge as “scientific” methodologies with clear ethno-political consequences, favoring Arabs over Nuba.

I have myself written about Arabisation, Islamisation and Sudanisation, leading to processes of individual assimilation but also to processes of collective group resistance, and how such identities have led to inequalities of land ownership, unequal access to water, and so on. What we need to do here is to relate these assumptions to ongoing debates about ethnic groups, asking ourselves what the truth is about such groups.

Theorising “groupism”—or power and identity

The Nuba as an ethnic group are in conflict with other ethnic groups, Arab and Muslims. The Nuba embody the non-Arab and non-Muslim. By focusing on the Nuba Mountains area in general we see that this type of perspective easily presents the ethnic groups themselves as solid entities. We will be led to present the groups as “actors” in their own right. This view is further strengthened by a peace settlement that is also organised along such a group-ness, channeling resources and access to the political systems based on belonging to such perceived “groups.” At the base of all this is also a notion of citizenship in Sudan that revolves around national groups (*jinsiya*) and not the status of individuals based on their birth (*muwatana*) (see Assal 2014 for a technical discussion).

By looking at our ways of “translating” we are able to challenge this type of “groupism.” When we look at the Nuba Mountains we clearly see various processes at play, relating to ethnicity, race, nationalism, ethnic violence, identity, collective memory, migration, assimilation. Although we may think in terms of “groups,” we need to focus on categories,

schemas, encounters, identifications, stories, institutions, organisations, networks, and events. That is to say, ethnic groups must be seen as “things in the making.”

We need to refer to the various political discourses that have evolved from the complex situation in the Nuba Mountains. A complex history, a complex ethnic picture with Arabs and Nuba, a complex religious picture with Muslims and Christians and traditional Nuba religions, and a long civil war have produced a series of discourses that must be analysed. Through the analysis of some of such discourses, from a “Nuba” perspective, from an “Arab” perspective, and as discourses in a religious field of “Muslims” and “Christians,” I argue that the realities behind such labels are not “things in the world” but rather “perspectives on the world”; i.e., they are ways of seeing and interpreting more than they are “facts.”

Such a perspective does not mean that for instance ethnicity is not real and that there might not be groups organised on the basis of ethnicity. Rather, the point is that such groups are not “facts” but rather “events,” something that “happens” (Brubaker 2004). Hence, we must study group-making as a process, including the games of meaning production and of processes of metaphorisation that go into its legitimisation.

It is true that in the Nuba Mountains we see a situation in which groups labelled as Nuba and as Arabs, as Christians and as Muslims have been through a civil war. But it is also necessary to make this picture more nuanced. First of all, in the Nuba Mountains it is not so much the ethnic groups that are organised, but rather the Government of Sudan (GOS) and the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM). Through these organisations, and the machines at their disposal, people have been made to choose sides and to “appear” as having one identity or the other. Rhetoric has been heated on all sides, with claims to speak for larger groups of “Nuba,” “pure Nuba,” “Arab,” etc.

Such processes are very real and have certainly had profound effects on the ground. But the effects observed cannot be conceived as realities involving total groups. Rather, we are dealing with categories, processes and relations. And what we need to explain are the ways through which people and organisations do things with these categories and how they thereby channel specific effects, for instance on the relationship between members of so-called ethnic groups.

I also include issues of identity in this perspective. Rather than thinking of fixed identities we need to look at the processes of identification. Again, through new processes, such as the Sudanese civil war, or the new factor of diaspora communities, new collective identities might develop and form bases of new feelings among people about who they are, which again might get very real “group” consequences. We have mentioned the rhetoric of “pure” Nuba, being linked to the groups sympathising with the SPLA. But this rhetoric will leave open what “my” Nuba are, those Arabised and Islamised groups in the southern part of the mountains who, along with groups in the east, have remained within the government-controlled areas during the period of civil war. We cannot enter into any detailed discussion but we do need to be reminded that such processes are ongoing and that they will bring about new outcomes. Such outcomes should not only be taken as de-contextualised “facts.”

While doing fieldwork (late 1970s, early 1980s) among the Lafofa Nuba in Liri, I was struck by the way people presented themselves as being Muslims. Any Lafofa would claim to be Muslim, but there was no agreement among people that their neighbours actually deserved that label. Older people would talk about the old way of life they left long ago, when they

went without clothes and when they kept pigs. But today they claim to be Muslims although they still treasure the memory of those bygone days. Younger men argued strongly that the elders were still holding on to the pre-Islamic customs. They are ignorant and do not understand the modern world, the young Lafofa claimed. Groups of non-Lafofa in Liri would hardly recognise any Lafofa as being a Muslim. They recognised the fact that some of the young people were trying to leave their old ways and become Muslims, but few of them were known to pray and even fewer fasted.

This evident difficulty in agreeing on who is a Muslim, and what it entails to be one, is not something that is special for the Lafofa and the southern Nuba Mountains. In most Muslim areas there are constant debates over what is proper Islam and what is not, what behaviour is derived from proper Islamic principles and what derives from other sources. What is special in this case is that the Lafofa, as a Nuba group, are a non-Arab, non-Islamic people among whom the process of conversion is a contemporary phenomenon. The debates in Liri are thus not only between different Islamic traditions but between an Islamic tradition and a non-Islamic, “tribal” one. But the way the Lafofa participate in this discourse is not an isolated process of religious conversion. In a basic way it is a product of a people adapting to the realities of the day. Hence, the discussion must deal with wider social identities. The determination of personal identity has always been an issue in the Nuba Mountains. As a frontier region with a history of slave hunting, of exploitation of ivory and gold, and being part of the battlefield between earlier savannah states there has always been a high rate of movement, resettlement, and new groups coming together. The establishment of one’s identity within broader categories, such as Nuba–Arab, slave–freeman, Muslim–non-Muslim has always been of great importance. A single-minded focus on religion alone would be as problematic as one based on ethnicity and race.

In the Nuba Mountains region the direction of such processes has been deeply affected by the civil war. Which means that violence itself becomes a factor. Fears and threats are being constructed through narratives and cultural representations of “the Other,” demonising various groups in the process. This happened during the civil war in which the southerners were involved, as well as in the civil war in which the Nuba were on their own. Obviously, both wars will affect the process of reconstruction.

With the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of January 2005 this situation became part of the political reality in the Sudan and had to be dealt with in the process of nation-building. Unfortunately, the process of nation-building collapsed during election time and we are now in an uncertain war situation. I don’t know in which direction the future of the Nuba Mountains will develop, however, on the ground, among the people who are still in their home areas, members of the various Nuba groups must deal with their predicament, as groups and as individuals. In the midst of all the unrest, there is an ongoing process of defining and redefining what culture and ethnicity is all about, creating new solidarities between people and building a new sense of community. The issue is not so much to understand that this is so, but to understand how some versions of reality win over and replace other possible versions in these processes of transformation. Such processes must be acknowledged, also in political terms, because they will certainly affect the realism of any future political settlement. The effect actually lies in the “groupness,” in the sense that the group makes up a “constituency” for the different positions involved in the conflict, and with such a group backing the chances for that particular position to continue into the future are increased. To illustrate, the conflict in Argentina between the authoritarian leaders and the mothers of the political victims ended with victory for the grieving mothers because their position was carried further by new

individuals, related to them and the victims, making them into a kind of a constituency. The generals and earlier perpetrators had no such constituency and their arguments died with them. In the Nuba case, there are several constituencies that will all most likely see to it that their positions are carried into the future. Nuba, Arabs, and so on are identities that have shown themselves efficient in mobilising political support. I would expect future political entrepreneurs to discover the same. Thus, there will be a drift towards groupness, no matter what we academics will say. But what will change is what the groups will signify on the ground. Here the case of “pure” Nuba is an interesting contemporary example in that it is the groups who sided with the SPLA who tend to represent themselves as “pure” Nuba. Arabised and Islamised Nuba will over time become “different” and perhaps end up not being Nuba at all.

The Nuba seen through “historical suffering”

Let me move to the perspective in which the Nuba are understood through their historical suffering. Sadly, the contemporary situation of unrest is not a new experience to the people in the region. A quick glance into the history of the Nuba Mountains shows that the contemporary struggle in a general way can be said to represent a violent phase of a development that always has characterised the region’s history and the adaptation of various regional groups. Two basic themes stand out: the one of territory, and the one of identity. Both combining a constant struggle of the regional population for their sovereignty and for their right to deal with their own development. Their history goes like this: Nuba groups lived in their hills, with Arabs on the plains, not as a result of any natural situation but rather unequal strength during periods of slavery; the British colonial rulers moved the Nuba down to the plains, pacified the areas and started economic developments, the plains being exploited to grow cash crops, first through traditional technology, later through mechanised farming. These processes continued through the decades of Sudanese independence, promoted by independent governments backed by foreign development aid, the aim being to make Sudan into a “breadbasket” for the Middle East. All through these periods, the competition over territory and resources has been couched in ethnic terms, in religious terms and in racial terms, with the Nuba history as a slave population being a central underlying part of how the relationships between groups have been conceptualised. This marginalisation has resulted in the erosion of customary rights to land, erosion of pastoralist rights, and the creation of a large force of agricultural wage laborers, workers who also were displaced in the wars of the 1990s. Hence a root cause of the conflict is lack of secure land tenure, legal protection, and political entitlements.

Theorising historical injustice

Moving to a wider discussion of historical suffering, we enter a tricky area of exploitation, inequality, and violence. Looking at the history of the Nuba Mountains we need a broad-ranging framework for our thinking in which we can see the systematic types of relationships between a center and the relevant areas. Their history covers the Turkia (1821-1881, with slavery), Mahdia (1881-1898, with slavery and jihad), Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (1998-1956, with Closed Districts Ordinances), various democratic and military regimes (1956-2011), with land grabbing, Islamisation, Arabisation, the division of Sudan, with “self-determination” for the south and “popular participation” for the Nuba.

This historical perspective allows us to see the various ways in which a coercive state has made its presence felt in the area we are talking about. Over time, the state has integrated these areas into a body of politics from which the areas and its populations have always felt estranged. The processes have not been even, but the policies have always considered the strategic position of trade routes, they have contained a view of such areas as empty and with no civilization, thus in need of civilizing missions whether in their Islamic or Christian religious form, Arabic language forms as well as the historical relationships between pastoralists and cultivators, leading to a plurality of forms of territoriality.

The Nuba Mountains are therefore not only places where the nation-states end, but also areas where disorder has been internalised into the body of the sovereign states through the state of exception. It is this continuous creation of disorder that haunts the contemporary rulers of these areas and of these states. The disorder becomes internalised into the central state through practices of emergency rule, counter-insurgency operations, and outright civil war. As the taming of these border areas is key to a contemporary state's demonstration of its sovereignty, they become in fundamental ways also a challenge to the state center itself. The state of exception is thus no longer exceptional, but is just the way such (savagely, disordered) areas are being governed at the present time. The crisis is perpetual, but it has not always been understood as crisis, or something not normal. In earlier periods the rule was based on a notion of the areas being slave areas or areas of settlements of groups from the outside. Later other mechanisms of control appeared, such as land grabbing for capitalist agriculture, whether by national elites or international commercial interests. The acts were, and are, legitimised by notions of development and progress, and scientific methods such as censuses and maps provided a basis for commercialisation and the decoupling of land from tradition. Also of recent origin are the bio-political strategies of manipulating food aid in drought periods, explained by the necessity to save the areas from developing in the wrong direction. The result is a combination of processes of exclusion and emergencies as well as processes of inclusion through violent state penetration. They are all processes that go hand in hand, giving the areas the characteristics of Agamben's "territories of exception" (2005). Such policies and such effects are there, pretty much independent of regime ideology and regime type, in an ongoing clash between the state's territorialising policies and the transgressive movements of the borderlanders. The forms of these clashes vary through history. They are not only a peripheral phenomenon in the borderlands, but constitutive of the state center itself, whether as former colonial states or current nation-states.

If we try to understand the position of the international community during the more recent phases of these developments, the crisis and chaos are seen as generated by a "weak authoritarian state," necessitating continuous "humanitarian efforts" (Fassin 2012). The humanitarian imperative suggests that the only solution is that democratic states intervene, together with their NGOs, to do what a weak authoritarian state seems unable or unwilling to do. This is generally also what happens. But what should be the aim and purpose of such interventions? Over the last couple of decades, the emergence of neoliberalism as the dominant organising imperative across social and public spaces and institutions, coupled with the exceptionalism of imperial and often violent, authoritarian forms of "democracy," has fostered a rethinking of politics across a wide range of contexts. One effect of this is the argument that the interventions do not represent any positive change at all, but rather a way to bring back a feeling that colonialism is far from over, and that both humanitarianisms and democratic interventions, in their neoliberal forms, show elements of a colonial past. Hence, the international community might not have a solution as we might end up with a crisis that

does not open up for positive change but ends in much the same way as the formal decolonization and historical establishment of independent nation-states have, taking us further into new problems. So we can forget about any “quick-fix” response, based on any political solutions available among the state actors involved here. The underlying reasons for the so-called crisis, those relating to historical injustices and continuous inequalities, have not been dealt with, hence the crisis remains open-ended as we wait for the leaders’ promises to come true.

While we all wait for a better future, the most likely outcome is more violence. This is of course a reality in these areas, and as such we can claim our analysis to be true. But again, in spite of arguments from the international community that violence is an abnormality and that it must stop, we know of course that violence is “creative” and in this sense can become part of the “solution.” In the absence of peaceful consensus, violence is used to achieve certain goals, taking over where power is not defined. But through violence and war, a new consensus can be reached as the basis for a new sociopolitical organisation built on a new sovereignty. In this sense, violence and war are very creative forces. While many national leaders call for a return to an ordered state, based on respect for national institutions, the use of violence in the contemporary world also helps transform the participants, and instead of the state conquering rebels, restoring “order,” we see the emergence of a transformed state that contains both the traditional, Weberian elements based on hierarchy, and more decentralised and Deleuzian “nomadic” elements that resonate with the rebel groups. Violent action is said to be “necessary” and the sphere of violent actions is enlarged, bringing nation-states into phases of decay and new ethnic sovereignties into being. We see examples of this in the Nuba Mountains, or at least, this is what one argument states, where various groups already marginalised by an Arabic and Islamic-dominated state as non-Arabic and non-Islamic, as former slaves, and as primitive “infidels,” experience further ethnic marginalisation. This happens through a stigmatised identity, leaving them as second-class citizens; through the loss of land to capitalist agricultural schemes, turning them into cheap labor power; and increased violence, by government forces as well as Arab pastoralist groups, as their areas are close to the oil fields in the border areas between Sudan and South Sudan.

The Nuba case then, appears to be a good example of a contemporary zone in which regular citizen rights have been suspended, for the elites and international capitalist forces to exploit land for agriculture, for the state dominating elites to benefit from revenue from the oil production and for the same elites, now turned nationalist, to defend the integrity of the national territory against traitors who collaborate with foreign enemies. In such processes, governments suspend fundamental norms and such areas come close to Giorgio Agamben’s (2005) notion of exception, referring to places in which national rules are suspended and human beings can be stripped of their rights and dignity. These processes James Ferguson (2006) labeled as processes of “decay.”

But the result of this is not a state of anarchy, nor a return to a more primitive past. The new identity politics, and the new wars are not a retreat to anarchy, nor to tribalism or to historical tradition. Nor do they represent “ontological battles”. The ways in which wars are developing are part of the dynamics of globalization and represent a new politics. Perhaps, as Koselleck (2006) argues, the concept of “crisis” is a new way of talking about historical change that appeared in the late 1700s as part of the processes of modernity, and we need to ask questions about the direction of the changes because the direction is no longer God-given. The current crisis represents modern phenomena and we have to understand them in a wider context of how local communities are related to wider contexts of economy and politics and culture. In

this sense our story is secular. Certainly local people are involved, with the militarisation of local and regional elites engaging each other in mutual predatory action through which a local population is made to suffer. The failure of political elites has eroded confidence in politics, making people more inclined to listen to promises of quick fixes for people within opposing groups. The emergence of new markets, putting weapons within reach of private people, opening up smuggling as an increasingly important form of trade, with new groups of nouveau-riches becoming engaged both in the new economy and the new politics, also belong in this picture. The diaspora also plays a central role. The result is a privatisation of the state and privatisation of the violence. But within the war, the economy is going on with the warring parties controlling markets, prices and issuing “taxes.” Rather than no relationship between center and periphery, we see empirically that there were indeed systematic types of relationships. Relationships in which parts of our international community are active participants.

But the international community also contains different participants. We see a country such as Sudan being flooded by foreign NGOs, peacekeeping troops and international diplomats, all showing the extent to which the international community is an actor in its own right in the country, showing a humanitarian engagement, but also dramatising the limits of a Westphalian sovereignty. New configurations in this international engagement seem to appear and to affect the nature of citizenship in the Sudan in profound ways. Many rights that are tied to the status of citizen are now no longer under the control of the nation-state, thus showing a shift in sovereignty away from the nation-state. The international society intervenes through defining “states of exception” through which the nation state is pushed aside for a greater cause, for instance through humanitarian interventions, but also through market mechanisms allowing international capital to operate. Populations are here not targeted on the basis of their rights as national citizens, but on the basis of global principles of a general humanity and a list of human rights. People are treated as victims of an extraordinary situation, thus eligible for international protection, which often is translated into a legitimizing principle for interventions, and in the process the victims are transformed. In general we see a major change from the Cold War era, in which Western states supported allied states against “hostile states,” to a contemporary pattern in which the same Western states protect and assist “victim populations” against “failing states.” Civil wars and warlords represent one paradigmatic case of this threat. HIV and AIDS are another. Both create humanitarian emergencies that call for interventions referring to human rights making zones of emergencies into zones of exception. Perhaps colonialism is still with us, now in a new disguise?

The Nuba as “borderlanders”

Today we can talk about the areas in new ways. As before, we are picking up on historical developments and asking new questions about such developments. The Nuba area used to be at the center of the geographical area of the former Sudan, but after the secession of the South Sudan, it has become a national border area towards the newly established southern neighbour. But socially and culturally it has always been on the margin, in its relationship to a dominant Arab and Muslim state elite in the Nile Valley. Because of this, the area became involved in the civil war in Sudan, from 1983 to 2005, with areas and groups in the Nuba Mountains fighting alongside the southern forces. Other areas and some groups, it should be said, remained with the government. But with the secession of the South, the Nuba were left between a rock and a hard place. Being now also geographically on the margin, with no

chance of obtaining independence, they were constrained by a new national border to their immediate south, and a continuation of their marginalisation in the relationship to the state center in Khartoum. The sections in the Nuba Mountains that used to fight alongside the southerners have now taken up arms again. The war goes on as I write. The Nuba have now become part of “borderland populations.” In light of the new borderland situation, the center of analytical attention is not on the state but on activities and dynamics in the margins. Will the new border areas be defined by “hard borders,” reducing crossing by people and animals? Or will they be defined by “soft borders” in which the realities on the ground are accepted, with moving pastoralists having land rights on both sides of the formal border, and local trading going on all the time? The latter scenario is part of the process of *tamazuj*, or intermingling.

Theorising borderland dynamics

Although focus is now on the activities and dynamics at the margins, we must not forget that a situation such as the one in the Nuba Mountains must not be turned into a “local study.” It is important to keep the state level present, as it is to keep the dynamics of different types of capitalist relations, locally, nationally and globally in mind. To understand borderland processes we need to focus on transformations in the contemporary world in relation to state, capital, labour, consumption, and place. This historical reality has changed the spatial articulation of politics and economy, as capital is affecting the nation-state to operate on its behalf and protect its interests. We see governments making new accommodations with market forces, protecting their market interests in exploitative enclaves of free-trade zones, privatising their own government and state functions, subcontracting various tasks to the same market forces. All this undermines the nation-state and challenges traditional notions about who “we” are and who “the others” are.

Giovanni Arrighi links such processes to territoriality and has the following to say: “Central to such an understanding is the definition of ‘capitalism’ and ‘territorialism’ as opposite modes of rule or logics of power. Territorialist rulers identify power with the extent and populousness of their domains, and conceive of wealth/capital as a means or a by-product of the pursuit of territorial expansion. Capitalist rulers, in contrast, identify power with the extent of their command over scarce resources and consider territorial acquisitions as a means and a by-product of the accumulation of capital” (1994, 33). This is what David Harvey in turn called the “logic of territory” and the “logic of capital” (2001). The two logics operate in relation to each other within specific spatio-temporal context. For instance, whereas territorial control was of strategic importance during the period of colonial imperialism, it is only of tactical importance to the core countries in the contemporary situation. Hence, the question of whether the United States, as the sole remaining superpower, is developing into an American empire is of less interest, if we think of empire in a more traditional sense. What remains interesting is, as Elden (2009) reminds us, the fact that territory is still of importance, thus challenging us not only to focus on processes of globalisation and de-territorialisation, but also to understand processes of re-territorialisation.

Rather than look at processes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation in general, we shall be interested in specific types of spaces, what Eileen Scully (2001), with reference to Western colonial concessions in China, called “anomalous zones” in which government suspends fundamental norms. Such zones may be close to Giorgio Agamben’s (2005) notion of exception, referring to places in which national rules are suspended and human beings can be stripped of their rights and dignity. Agamben mentions Auschwitz and Guantanamo Bay as

examples of such “zones of exception,” with conditions so extreme that, analytically speaking, they can be described as an area in which the conditions are such that normal limitations do not apply. Such zones are of key importance in the current neoliberal era, in which the colonisation of the social by the economic has become hegemonic. Drawing again on the works of Agamben (2005) we can for instance see how a notion of “necro-capitalism” could be useful, based on Achille Mbembe’s concept of “necropolitics” which he defined as “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (Mbembe 2003, 39). I believe we can argue that some contemporary capitalist practices contribute to “the subjugation of life to the power of death” in a variety of contexts, for example in the management of global violence and the increasing use of privatised military forces in the so-called war on terror. But we see it also in more marginal cases, such as in the Nuba Mountains.

Although our starting point here is contemporary, we should note that the role of extraterritoriality and concessions was a mechanism also in the spread of global modernity in the era of colonialism and imperialism, and that this did not disappear in the era of decolonisation. Rather, the zones come back in various forms, underpinned by the economic logic of flexible capitalism, the securitising logic of post-9/11, and the cosmopolitan logic that questions the absolute sovereignty of the nation-state. One key factor is what Aihwa Ong (2000) calls “graduated sovereignty,” whereby citizens in zones that are differently articulated in global production and financial circuits are subjected to different kinds of surveillance and in practice enjoy different sets of civil, political and economic rights. Graduated sovereignty, she suggests, can strengthen state power and protections in certain areas, but not in others. In the Nuba area the systemic dynamics always relate to access to and control over various forms of strategic resources, from slaves and ivory to oil, minerals, and timber.

Linking state processes and territoriality of course leads us into the concept of “sovereignty.” This is so because the basis of a modern nation-state in the international order of states is based on territorial sovereignty, and this sovereignty is the basis for the inclusion and exclusion of many types of rights, the most basic of which is the right to citizenship. According to Stephen D. Krasner (1999) there are four general types of sovereignty: domestic sovereignty, which is about controlling one’s own territory; interdependence sovereignty, which is about the ability to control trans-border movements; international sovereignty, which entails being recognised by other states; and finally, Westphalian sovereignty, which is about the ability to exclude external actors from domestic authority configurations. For all four, a border and the ability to defend it are important. Borders thus have both territorial as well as human consequences. The new situation in the Nuba area, after the secession of the South, is a telling example.

But we should also note that to accept the way sovereignty has been understood is problematic. Sovereignty appears as a linear process that has evolved from a simple beginning in the early modern period in Europe, into a more refined type of concept in the contemporary world. I think this understanding must be challenged. A focus that sees sovereignty as a process and as a concept that has been worked and re-worked in different periods is more fruitful, as is understanding the fact that the concept has been at the base of political conflicts and of the definition of the political field itself. In one sense sovereignty relates to absolute power and authority, over territory, over people, and vis-à-vis other similar units outside of the territory. Hence, the concept is closely linked to the historical emergence of the nation-state. But a weakness in such an evolutionary conception is that it reduces politics to the implementation of a law. We need to see the history of the concept of sovereignty as a series

of re-conceptualisations, rather than a history of constant refinement towards a “perfect” end. Rather than linking it to a state-centric Western history, defined by realist and liberal International Relations (IR) type of conceptualisations, we need to take a look at how muddled this history is, organised around clusters of key terms through which various theorists have approached the subject matter, drawing on a similarly muddled empirical history. To quote Prokhovnik:

For instance, one of the keys to sovereignty for Bodin was the idea of absolute dominion, while sovereignty for Hobbes had to include the notion of supreme power. Central to Rousseau’s conception of sovereignty are the key terms of sovereignty itself, the act of association, government, the general and particular wills, general and particular laws, and the lawgiver. The important concepts in Kant’s theory of sovereignty are right, international relations, publicity, law and representation. The key concepts in Hegel’s notion of sovereignty are the state, the constitution, the Crown, sovereignty at home, sovereignty in relation to foreign states, and war. Foucault’s theory of sovereignty seeks to bring into the light of intellectual analysis what has previously been excluded and some of his key terms are the contrast between the covert and overt operations of power, the ways in which subjects are constructed, sovereignty as descending compared with disciplinary power as ascending, and the operation of sovereignty through concrete acts contrasted with the operation of disciplinary power through surveillance, normalizing sanctions and the panopticon. (2008, 4)

Rather than seeing these different definitions as an evolving understanding of sovereignty, it is more fruitful to see them as different conceptualisations of the term, leading to different empirical emphases in the analysis. They can be seen as a solution to a problem, by which stability is produced into a situation of social unrest, allowing for more stable national or international orders. Or they can be part of a problem, obscuring the use of power, through which these orders can operate to advance their own benefits. The rule of law may be applied criminally and arbitrarily, and may help victimise weaker subjects or international conventions (like the Geneva Convention). The Washington Consensus is pushing open markets and privatisation processes on weaker partners in manners that look more like plunder than legality, indicating a continuity between colonial and post-colonial times. The idea that law is autonomous and separate from society and its institutions, something we have and not them, is problematic. Law in this particular meaning looks more like a technological framework for a more efficient market, or “a plunder-friendly legal system.” One is tempted to quote the old French diplomat, Talleyrand: “There are nor principles, only events; there are no laws, only circumstances.” Thus, one gets a feeling that sovereignty does not represent a just, institutional context, but must rather be seen as a political project to bring about dominance for some, submission for others.

Hanna Arendt is certainly one voice that is raising this issue. But she is also careful to state that her criticism of sovereign power is not a critique of politics in general (Arendt [1958] 1998, 147-148). Rather, it means a different starting point for politics. The starting point should be the existing political traditions among a people. Arendt begins with the presumption not of liberal individual subjects pursuing their own interests, but of historically constituted communities and people desiring, for historically contingent reasons, the things we have come to call liberty, an equal share in public life, recognition, as well as a certain kind of order (ibid., 248, 262). What Arendt is up to in her discussion of these various “political societies” is nothing less than an attempt to create an alternative conceptual starting point for political

thought—against the radical individualisms of both liberal and anarchist thought. What is at stake in this new “state of nature” is to show that—as a matter of actual historical fact—modern people, when their states collapse, not only do not regress to a state of all against all (or recede into some kind of “natural” collective allegiances), but rather tend (quite apart from any particular ideological commitments) towards the creation of political communities (*ibid.*, 265-6), though such communities can be quite different from our modern states (*ibid.*, 278).

What is at stake for Arendt is that the theorisations of our possible political futures must begin not from theorisations of individual liberty, but rather from a shared and deeply held, but historically contingent, desire for community. This is a very particular kind of community, however, quite distinct from both the nationalist and Marxist assumptions of a thick social unity. It is, instead, the product of real people coming together, for historically specific reasons, to create the kind of community which might best ensure and protect their historically contingent conception of republican political liberty (*ibid.*, 278). This Arendt calls “ordered community” (and “ordered liberty”), an idea which must be understood as a response to both anarchism and liberalism. The point is that these spontaneous bodies are organs of a certain kind of ordered action (*ibid.*, 263), and this, at its heart, is a dual claim that people can be trusted to order themselves without sovereign leaders and that, at least in our late modern context, there is some kind of spontaneously recognised necessity of some kind of political order (a claim about which the entire revolutionary tradition becomes anxious). Of course, to Hanna Arendt, this means that such a political community must by definition be non-sovereign, to which she opposes the sovereign political communities in which we late moderns live.

What about cumulative knowledge?

Discussions such as the ones I have carried out above do not lead us back into debates about ontologies, but rather to the two issues of “epistemology” and “question and answer” – i.e. to “knowing” and “asking”. Now we can ask the question: Are these versions just different answers to different questions, driven by different historical concerns, as suggested by Collingwood? Or are they an example of a process of cumulative knowledge, in which we learn more and more about the Nuba? I am leaning towards the first possibility. For any “accumulation of knowledge” to be the case I suppose we should see new knowledge grow out of the old and existing knowledge, in a way being dependent on that earlier knowledge. This relates both to specific claims about knowledge within a certain problematique, relating to descriptive research findings and elaboration of new hypotheses, but also to the tools developed to produce that knowledge. It is interesting to note that the second does not necessarily depend on the first point. Methodology and meta-theories are as important as the existing data in promoting new paradigms or research programs (Kuhn [1962] 1970). No position can offer claims about the world that are absolutely true, it is rather about fruitfulness and about generating answers to those historically produced questions that arise at different historical times. This ability is also linked to “ontological” claims about society, but not to a reality that is as it is, but ontologies that emerge as consequences of our epistemological choices. A functionalist-inspired analysis draws on other ontological assumptions compared to a more Marxist-inspired analysis, thus promoting different meta-theoretical assumptions, leading us to look at different empirical processes and data in the analyses we carry out. To me this is neither a reified ontology nor an accumulation of knowledge, but rather an extension in the various concepts and methodologies at our disposal for dealing with such

issues. This is what I call “toolboxes.” In our research, we deal with descriptive findings, causal findings, methodologies, and meta-theoretical formulations, and I think we need to spend more time discussing the nature of knowledge accumulation. This means a discussion on cumulative research versus non-cumulative research strategies, a discussion on research aimed at uncovering causal relationships versus research aimed at uncovering meaning in social processes. Which in many ways brings us back to square one—we “know” many things about the Nuba, and this knowledge is based on research findings and substantive evidence that I don’t expect a new study will disprove. But we will likely get many attempts at defining what this substantive evidence means.

Moving on—from analysis towards solutions?

The second lesson I draw from the discussions is that if we limit ourselves to a discussion about whether, and in what ways, the Nuba can be said to represent specific ontologies, my answer would be that this is certainly a legitimate debate, but it would not take us closer to what should be the focus. The focus should be on the debates amongst the Nuba themselves. And these debates cannot be understood unless related to the political battles the Nuba find themselves in, battles with communities and “cultures” that represent different ontological premises from those of the Nuba themselves. Thus a key issue in our understanding of the Nuba is their position within the Sudanese nation-state. A fundamental question, to my mind, must be about the basics of Sudanese national politics—coming out of a long period of civil war, and entering into yet another phase of war involving several Nuba communities. This issue brings up both the question of how one can stop the violence, but also of how one can provide a basis for a longer term peaceful co-existence between the various Sudanese groups and the Sudanese state structures. And our starting point is a negative one—how can anything be done *despite* the obstacles? My discussion has uncovered several obstacles that will constrain any political process and cannot bring about any “final solution.” Looking back at what I have said I must conclude that i) if the Nuba are to continue to exist in some form relating to what we today think of as “Nuba,” the notion of otherness will remain and the differences contained in this otherness cannot, or should not, be removed by any politics. But the content of this otherness will change over time; ii) although identities and groupness are shown to be “constructed,” the political advantages in creating such groupness is likely to continue, thus leaving “groups” as important political actors, also among the Nuba themselves; iii) if the relationships between such “groups” are understood as containing historical injustices by *some* of the groups, the removal of such injustices will be a challenge to *all* the groups, thus complicating the process of reconciliation and nation-building in Sudan; and finally iv) even if one might wish for a non-sovereign politics, the nation-state is likely to continue, leaving the challenge of solving the problems within the context of that Sudanese nation-state.

The need for a new perspective —from “translation” to “appropriation”

All within the logic of the earlier discussion, and in an attempt to answer the questions raised above, my first take is that we need to be precise about what we mean by “translation.” It might seem the dynamic within this concept is taking us into an arrogant modernity in which universal norms must conquer pre-modern worlds. This must be avoided. As an alternative I have introduced Hanks and Severi’s more dynamic approach. This also opens for another concept, the one of “appropriation,” which takes us in a different direction. Here, we

appropriate what a person is getting at. In this situation we can understand new things also about ourselves, insights that we did not have before. And this can be achieved without accepting the premises of the other's statement and without denying difference. We are in a *dialogical situation*, in which we do not regard the Nuba, for instance, as a rare species of mankind, but as members of a community in which they are different and at the same time are acknowledged within a universe of rational persons. If we are able to accept that people belong to different cultural and moral universes, while being able to maintain communication across the boundaries of these universes, we are on the right track.

The need for political philosophy

This of course is taking us into a wide debate within political philosophy, which we cannot deal with here in any detail. I will refer to names such as John Rawls (1971), Jürgen Habermas (1996) and Amartya Sen (2009) to clarify what is on my mind. Not to claim completeness or to signal total agreement with their positions, but to show that the differences in their positions can open up important points in our discussion. An important issue here is the emphasis on institutional perfection in the creating of a just society versus the more empirical focus on how people live their lives and how one may pragmatically improve on that. Rawls's position is of course a classical liberal one, with a strong focus on the need for ideal institutions out of which the good society would flow. We recognise Hobbes here, with people acknowledging that unless they collaborate they are left with anarchy. Based on such rational agreements, institutions will emerge upon which democracy and fairness have been built. But Rawls has also been challenged. For instance by Sen, whose position relates to social choice theory, with less emphasis on institutions and more focus on pragmatic alternatives that can actually be realised in specific situations. It seems to me that Sen uses a language that is closer to Hanna Arendt. People are not individuals without history, who can come out with so-called "rational" solutions that take us towards a perfect world of institutions. The history of sovereignty and the history of globalisation are examples of this. Rather than rational processes towards perfection, they are "projects," containing exploitation and inequalities.

Habermas is somewhere in between, while leaning towards Rawls's positions he is also advancing on Rawls. A clear bias in Rawls is his insistence that the participants in his games of justice be within homogenous nation-states, thus closing the process to groups that need not negotiate with others. Habermas is aware of the fact that most nation-states consist of many groups and that no one group should dominate the others. Thus he sees a need for two different spheres of activities, with different ground rules. The fact that people belong to cultural groups that define their ways of life is true, and should be respected. But we also need individuals making decisions for themselves, decisions that end in agreements through which peaceful relationships between the groups can be based. Habermas links the two in an interesting way, I think. He argues that it is within the cultural field that individuals become socialised into a "culture," but not solely as individuals, says Habermas, but as individuals socialised through networks consisting of other people, of symbols and rituals and so on. By assigning a human right status to individuals, Habermas also allocates human right status to the culture carried by such individuals, making them what they are. They are not empty individuals, they are concrete individuals filled with culture. Habermas is also aware of the fact that most nation-states might have a dominant cultural group, carrier of the national culture, leaving other groups as minorities. He is thus doubtful about multi-cultural solutions in the political field. Rather, such a system of citizenship invites inequality whether such

minorities are from within the nation or from without. It is difficult to know how to solve this and thus how to avoid the problems of multi-culturalism. One way is to create two levels of action, which is also what Habermas proposes. One level is based on the cultural identity of any individual, and on this level the way of life has to be respected, no matter from which group any person originates. This we may call a “cultural sphere.” But we need a “political sphere“ as well, in which members of the different groups interact as individuals. In this sphere the basic rule of the game is not the cultural background of the participant, but the participation in a process of rational communication in which shared decisions can be arrived at. Here, then, we are looking at communication between epistemic territories. This is so because each group should also be allowed to express its views in the political field in terms of its own cultural background. Thus, within the political field, an important part of the ongoing communication must be to not insist on one’s own language, but to understand what the other person is getting at. This represents a step in the right direction for the simple reason that even if the arguments come from within the epistemic territory of any one group, they can have meaning in other epistemic territories, through reflections based on realities within a shared life-world. One territory will not be universal while others are not. This leads to inequality and oppression. By equalising the communicative playing field, both or all partners are in principle limited to a logic that is internal to itself/themselves. And all of them are faced with the challenge of developing a just discourse in which justice means equal consideration for all, and solidarity means an inclusion of each in a sphere of moral recognition (this draws of course on Habermas and his communicative theory). Thus, in principle each person belongs to a web of evolving relationships, extending into the contemporary, but also into the past and the future. Here the issue is not translating but complementing learning processes that take us beyond translation.

Dynamics in a cultural world must therefore be differentiated from the dynamics in a political world. We do not need ethnic and cultural homogeneity in order to have a functioning democracy, as the latter is a consequence not of cultural content but of a just legal system, of rules of communication, allowing personal autonomy. This political sphere must be kept separate from the cultural sphere as the communication in the political field must not be dominated by the cultural field, which is a basis for ways of life, pointing towards a multicultural set of group rights that will complicate the dynamics in the political field. But at this point Habermas starts looking like Rawls again, by privileging the public sphere, with ideal institutions, allowing for rational communications by which the participants will reach a shared understanding and an acceptance of solutions in which they create a society where all can live together in greater fairness.

This is well and good, but it is here that Sen comes in with a critical point that also is of importance to us. Sen refuses to start with ideal institutions and to assume that justice will flow from such institutions and rules. There is too much of an ideal expectation in such a setup, stifling what should be the focus—have real actors engage in communication, not to realise a perfect society but to arrive at reasonable compromises on concrete issues that will improve on the lives of the participants. As I said, this thinking draws on social choice theory and rationality theory. Not the hegemonic rational choice theory, that only deals with the individual interest of the actors making them smarter the more devious they are, but a rationality that is more reflective and that starts with the actors’ ability to make choices among different options, based on the actual information and understanding they have of the situation, not only factors that work to their own advantage but also factors that move the processes towards agreement with others. Such choices can be made, even if the ideal

institutions are lacking, and even if the choices are not optimal. The important thing here is that the “show can go on,” in the sense that agreements are not perfect but that they are agreements that everyone can live with. As Sen says in his book, *The Idea of Justice* (2009), in deciding whether to buy a painting by Picasso or Monet, the buyer does not need to decide whether Mona Lisa should be regarded as the most perfect painting in the world. People can, according to Sen, chose between alternatives and agree that one option is better than the other, without agreeing on how a perfect world should look like. It is here he finds a bias in Habermas and Rawls, in their insistence that institutions and rules are more important than actually realizable choices by actual people, even if they are not perfect.

I mentioned Gadamer (1992) before, and will again refer to his hermeneutics, in which he draws on both Plato and Aristotle. From Plato, Gadamer brings the centrality of *dialogue* as the means by which we come to understanding. Dialogue is rooted in and committed to furthering our common bond with one another to the extent that it affirms the finite nature of our human knowing and invites us to remain open to one another. It is our openness to dialogue with others that Gadamer sees as the basis for a deeper solidarity. As Aristotle, Gadamer focuses on *praxis* (human practice) and on the fact that we must not allow knowing to remain only on the conceptual level; we must remember that knowing emerges from our practical quest for meaning and significance.

From power and identity to justice and solidarity

To bring in my own view here, what I want to argue is that a combination of the positions advanced by Habermas and Sen can be used to sensibly discuss some of the challenges in the Nuba case. Following Habermas, we see that the solution to the problem of Nuba marginalisation is not in a policy based on the continued assimilation of groups such as the Nuba into the majority culture. But this does not mean that all integration is bad. Obviously there must be some shared understanding for interaction to go on, such as a shared language, shared understanding of certain “ground-rules,” etc. If such a “civic” type of integration is allowed to develop there might be some hope of holding together what remains of a Sudanese nation-state. Such an integration is, following Sen, not based on the expectation of Sudan suddenly emerging as a liberal democracy, with ideal institutions (for instance being built by the international community through their policies of institution-building) but by the acceptance of the historical reality among local Arabs and non-Arabs, pastoralists and farmers living in the same areas that various sorts of political and moral ambiguities, ambivalences and uncertainties are a normal state of affairs in such a transition zone (Okasaki 2002). And that it is possible to develop a shared understanding about this state of affairs, in which mutual respect and ethical rules constraining aggression may be allowed to develop. People can make steps in the right direction here, also without the existence of a perfect world of liberal institutions.

Let me end with a couple of examples of how tricky problems might be approached within the framework we have sketched above. To avoid being totally abstract here, let me use two examples that were discussed during the process of “popular consultations” in Kadugli in February 2011, before everything collapsed into the current state of war. I was involved in this process and picked the two topics that I was supposed to comment on. The two topics were, first, the issue of land, and, second, the issue of culture and identity, historical memory and historical injustices. The point is not to reach a final conclusion, but to indicate that if the process of popular participation had been allowed to continue on the level of local communities in the Nuba Mountains region, we could have had debates about some of the

issues I mention here. Unfortunately, as you all well know, the war is back, and we shall probably never see whether this opportunity would have taken us in the right direction.

Land

First is the issue of land. The land question is very important to all people in Sudan, including groups living in the Nuba Mountains (see also Komey 2010). It is a basic source of survival, a source of individual and tribal pride, and it is a constant source of possible conflict. Any indication that established rights will be tampered with has always brought unrest and conflict. The developments relating to the land issue in the Nuba Mountains show a somewhat special history. The Nuba have experienced loss of access to cultivable land through several types of processes. One is the outright land grabbing that is the result of expanding public and private schemes in the region, a process that has been promoted through direct government interventions. More recently the government has permitted foreign investors to come in, allowing them to operate pretty much as they like, for instance by using their own security apparatus. But land also constitutes a problem in a more local arena. The Nuba have systematically lost territory to Arab groups in the region, thus giving conflicts an ethnic dimension. And conflicts between Nuba groups are also numerous. Attempts at protesting have only shown how marginal the Nuba people are in the political set up of their region and of their country. Efforts at arguing their case in political assemblies have failed, as have many attempts at making use of public courts to challenge this process. Public courts have not been able to deal with the situation, on the contrary, in most cases Arabs have had their ownership confirmed over Nuba ownership. Conflicts with migrating Arab pastoralists (Hawazma, Messeriyya) have also added to the problem. Since the days of Sudanese independence, there has been an increase in economic and political marginalisation of the Nuba, a process that has significantly contributed to the land problems now facing people in the area.

A significant point here is that the underlying arguments in these cases relate back to the historical situation we have described. Those periods when the Nuba were living in their mountains and the Arab dominated the plains were characterised by slave raiding, which led to an extreme power difference between the groups. The Nuba were forced to live within the mountains, or at least that is what the Nuba say. The Arabs and the government instead defend the current situation and try to present it as a result of “history,” or “tradition”—arguing that the Nuba should stay in the mountains, and the Arabs should dominate the plains. A situation that also seems to be underwritten by donors and NGOs alike. Physical infrastructure investments are often based on such assumptions, thus cementing the situation, while what is probably needed is a broad-based discussion of land distribution in the area, recognising both historical facts and contemporary elements.

There is no single solution that would settle the problem once and for all. There is no bottom line, and there is no point in time in which land areas were clearly demarcated. Thus, a focus on re-establishing historical boundaries would probably be a dead end. What should be re-established is not the empirical boundaries between land areas, but rather a local system of land demarcation, a system characterised by flexibility and change. In an earlier time, there would have been many different situations in which agreements between Nuba and Arabs could take different shapes. Such local situations often appear as muddled to modern bureaucrats and politicians. A modern, developmental view, or a view from a developmentally oriented regime, is focused on establishing boundaries and borders to create clarity. In their efforts to provide this clarity, the authorities destroy the flexible system within

which different groups can negotiate and deal locally with emerging problems over contested areas.

What is erased and marginalised in the legal processes are the communal elements in land tenure, customary rights and practices that allowed a flexibility that is not present in modern formulations about boundaries and borders. And as we have seen in the area, well-meaning attempts by NGOs to clarify border issues by creating land use maps, only help to add to the confusion. The confusion is created by attempts to fix what is understood as fluid and flexible. Fixing boundaries also produced a feeling among people that they could lose something, and brought conflicts not only between Nuba and Arab groups, but within Nuba groups themselves. And “the archive” becomes critical in the case of land conflicts. Action and decision-making are moved from the acting individuals to external forces, administrators, bureaucrats and other agents of modernity’s institutions. This means that the action is removed from the field of relationships between people, relationships filled with locally defined expectations, rights and duties, and subjected to more distant rules of the game, rules and games not commanded by local people themselves, but putting them in situations of inferiority and in need of external assistance. This process in fundamental ways also brings about new power relations, or rather, redefines old power relations.

Historical injustice

Second is the issue of historical injustices. On one level we need a process of *reconciliation* between the conflicting actors in order to move beyond the atrocities. Societies emerging from civil war are typically traumatised by exceptional violence. Restoration of a modicum of confidence in the ability of society to interact in non-violent modes is a precondition for civil governance of any kind. Demonstration of a commitment to human rights is critical to create this kind of confidence. Human rights thus appear as an early and continuous priority regardless of which sequence of governance interventions is chosen. Building of “trust” and efforts to generate a sense of “reconciliation” are of central concern in post-war contexts. In a general sense, “trust” can be associated (negatively) with the absence of threats of renewed violence and human rights violations, and (positively) with confidence in the post-war order. Such confidence, in turn, depends upon a range of factors such as legitimacy of the post-war government, the relevance and effectiveness of the governance measures introduced, the pace of economic reconstruction, including visible signs of broadly distributed peace dividends, and the macro-economic framework for peace.

On the micro-level, “trust” is used mostly in connection with community relations, particularly efforts to restore or establish positive communication among communities or individuals that were previously divided by violence. “Reconciliation” can be understood to take at least three forms. At the “thin” end, the parties only co-exist peacefully; in a further development they listen and try to understand each other in the spirit of democratic reciprocity; and at the “thick” end there is a comprehensive reconstruction of social bonds between victims and perpetrators. The last phase implies forgiveness and healing. The process of moving towards the “thick” form of reconciliation is ideally seen to entail several phases:

- Recognition of the truth of past violence by giving voice to victims and creating a common memory for the future; often done through truth commissions or similar public investigations.

- Restorative justice by holding perpetrators accountable, typically through criminal justice procedures, and establishing the principle of no impunity in the future.
- Restitution by compensating for past losses and creating institutions for future reform to address needs.
- Healing, typically through public rituals, which in traditional societies usually involves rituals of cleansing and reconciliation.

But the problem of implementing such elements reflects several enduring dilemmas:

- Imbalance in capacity and resources between specialised and well-funded international agencies and a society whose administrative capacity and resources have been depleted by war, often poorly developed to start with. Most post-war reconstructions are dependent on heavy international financing.
- Demand for effective use of resources and quick results and organisational interests of aid agencies to be present and demonstrate that their programs are effective. These conditions also favour international controls.
- Tension over policy content. Donors and aid agencies typically have political agendas that suggest desirable forms of reconstruction. In the governance realm, this includes human rights, secularism, and Western forms of democratisation. These goals may conflict with those pursued by national authorities, in which case national ownership typically is sidelined.

As in the issue of land, the process is pushed away from the local populations towards external actors, well-meaning but focusing on issues that might not bring local people together. From my experience in the areas after the war, local organisations have started to engage in some useful activities, such as organising meetings in which local communities were informed about the details of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement itself. Had this been allowed to continue, local organisations could have also played a role in helping with the transition and in raising discussions and public awareness about such ongoing processes. These activities would have been necessary to develop the needed awareness of justice, and a belief in a better future. However, the whole process of popular consultation collapsed and a new war started during the elections, in many ways bringing us back to square one, meaning the situation that existed during the larger civil war.

How can people be reminded not only of the contemporary phases of civil wars, but of a longer historical sequence in which they also get a sense of the marginality that the people have been exposed to, ever since the period of slavery? Is a museum a possibility? A museum in which positive historical issues can be presented as well as peaceful co-existence between groups? Presenting historical “facts” but at the same time creating a basis for communication about the same history? How is the history of the various groups presented in schools, within existing educational systems? Are textbooks adequate in terms of treating different types of history with an equal amount of detail and respect? The same question can be asked in relation to the media, both TV and newspapers. The issue of language becomes important to answer these questions. Language is a key factor in anybody’s identity and must be taken seriously as a cultural marker. Obviously, language is about communication and in an area with a plurality of languages there is a need for a lingua franca. In any case, there should be room for the use of local languages in education, in important shared arenas and important

regional events. Again, the issue is the one of reconciliation and respect between people and between groups. Once decisions are made that are considered fair by all parties, the development must take its own course.

But how to deal with the issue of historical injustices? We have seen many countries approach this sensitive issue, both in South Africa and in South American countries. In most cases truth commissions are introduced. If not direct truth commissions, perhaps Sudan still needs what Jeffrey Olick has described as a “politics of regret,” “encompassing repatriation programs, monuments, memorials and official acts of apology and mourning, revision of state-approved history texts, and so on” (Olick 2007). Such a transformation of memory politics, in which a collective formal or informal expression of remorse or apology for gross political crimes is underlined, could represent a type of memory politics intended to reestablish a new and democratising state. Sudan then would join the list of possible fragile democracies seeking post-conflict reconciliation, between local groups and very recently warring social factions, with the state and other groups searching for a set of pragmatic actions to start the process towards the longer-term project of developing a democratic political culture where social members can approve of their own political institutions and bring about political stability. How and when this can be achieved is an open question. Should it be an immediate process, part of a transition process, as happened in South Africa? Or should it be delayed, until society is “ready for it,” as happened in Spain, where a generation passed between the end of the Franco regime and an emerging willingness to openly confront the challenges of the civil war and Fascist legacy?

The reasons for such processes of remembering are many. First among them, perhaps, is a need to avoid similar crimes from happening in the future. Thus, the remembering is not for the dead as such, but more for the living, representing a “prophylactic use of memory.” Such “never again” rituals are of course common. But we may also ask whether we need a broader base for this remembering. Pablo De Greiff (Pensky 2014) argues that the duty to remember is a duty owed to the dead themselves. In his words: “We have an obligation to remember whatever our fellow citizens cannot be expected to forget” (ibid., 311). And what they cannot be expected to forget is the unjust absence of people who once existed. Since those people are still connected to the living, their absence becomes a topic to be discussed. There is nothing to be done about this absence, but the way it is explained will play an important role in further developments of the relationship between victims and perpetrators. A complete denial will prolong the conflict. Any acknowledgement of the injustice will play a role, even if it will necessarily remain symbolic. It is the symbolic acknowledgement that is key, I believe, not necessarily material and judicial compensations. Such an acknowledgement can bring us back to the concept of appropriation and the positive effect of a dialogue in which two parties communicate as rational and equal beings, acknowledging and taking the claims made by each side seriously.

Such a dialogue would probably quickly enter into the question of historical guilt. If we hold the view that the unborn are not to share any guilt for actions carried out by their parents or grandparents, we cannot hold them guilty of any of the concrete transgressions carried out by earlier generations. In Habermas’s contribution to similar discussions about how the Germans are to deal with their Nazi past, the concept of *liability* is introduced, rather than guilt or responsibility, for the past (Pensky 2014, 316; Habermas 2014, 388-390). Unlike guilt with its panoply of psycho-religious connotations, liability or *Haftung* (in German) refers to the acceptance that there are historical facts and that people on all sides, victims and perpetrators alike, have a relationship to this history. This also means that all must be prepared to discuss

their position in light of this collective history. “Liability” means that people, for instance the Sudanese people, can reasonably expect their use and embrace of pre-national and national traditions that led to the history of suffering in the Nuba Mountains (and other areas) to be subjected to demands for contemporary and future justification. Again, whether this will emerge or not is another matter. The important point is the recognition of that possibility, since that is a symbolic acceptance of the willingness to communicate.

“Liability” is thus a procedural term, and can serve as the basis for a kind of political solidarity based less on the content of national traditions themselves, and more on the procedural expectations about the public use of reason that traditions are liable to, if they’re to be regarded as legitimate. Memory politics therefore links ethical liability with a specific form of memory politics, in which the normative significance of a shared memory comes to the foreground. Again we are returning to the concept of appropriation, to processes of communication, and to dynamics in a public sphere in which people can reach agreements across different cultural groups and epistemological territories. But we can go no further than this. The rest depends on the communication process itself and must be left to the participants themselves.

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The paper is a broad discussion focusing on the Nuba people of the Sudan. The starting point for the reflections is the issue of “translation” in which the author argues for a continued focus on epistemological work to understand more of a Nuba “reality”. This point is made in opposition to arguments within the so-called “ontological turn” in anthropology, in which the “Nuba” and their “Arab” and “Muslim” neighbors would represent different ontological realities, realities that cannot meet. Two major points are made and developed in the paper. First, by discussing three entry points for understanding Nuba history, society and culture the paper shows how the understanding of the Nuba is not limited by a single ontology, but rather evolves in a communication between concepts, questions asked, and attempts at providing answers. The three points are the Nuba as seen through the lens of ethnicity, the Nuba as seen through historical suffering, and the Nuba seen as borderland population. Taken together the Nuba emerge from these discussions as many different things, not to be reduced to a single, pre-given and reified ontology. The second move in the paper is to argue that there is a need for further political debates about the position of the Nuba in a Sudanese nation state, a debate a radical ontological position would also stifle, given the argument that different ontologies cannot meet. Based on the earlier discussion showing complexity and dynamism among the Nuba, the paper makes a strong argument for dialogue among Sudanese people as a basis for co-existence. Again, facts don’t speak for themselves. The need for political interaction is linked to a discussion of positions within political philosophy represented by Rawls, Habermas and Sen. The practical use of the discussion on theoretical possibilities is illustrated with two examples from the ongoing debates in the Sudan, on land and land tenure, and on how to deal with historical injustice, to indicate possible ways forward in the dialogue between Sudanese groups as well as between the Sudanese state and the various communities.