Voices from Darfur. Reclaiming Sudanese History

This is a summary of my PhD thesis, “Voices from Darfur. Reclaiming Sudanese History” that I have just handed in. It has taken up most of my time and explains my long absence from this blog. However, I shall be back more frequently now with updates and different pieces. Looking forward to contribute more extensively again.

This thesis focuses on how refugees from Darfur living in camps in Eastern Chad voice their experiences and produce narratives of the conflict in the Sudanese province. The work is based primarily on fieldwork and interviews conducted in 12 UNHCR-administered camps in early 2009. By listening to the voices from Darfur, the overall analytical ambition of the thesis is to explore the refugees’ modes of explanation and production of history as emerging in the circumscribed present of the camps. However restricting, the refugee camps are considered sites of production, where perceptions of the Darfur conflict, its root causes, its key players, and its possible future resolution are discussed by the very people who are at once at the centre of the crisis and utterly disempowered. The aim of the thesis is to show that the refugees’ accounts of the Darfur conflict and their attempts to reclaim their history provide an essential element in understanding wider historical developments in Sudan and the relation between the peripheries and the state.

The work fuses anthropological and historical approaches and suggests that a particular method of deep listening can be employed to explore the refugees’ modes of explanation and production of history. Among other themes, the thesis examines how Arabs are remembered by the refugees, and how the current war in Darfur must be understood as a culmination of earlier patterns of conflict in the province. A central point is that the Arab janjaweed militias were not just armed as a counterinsurgency measure against rebellious uprising in Darfur, but that the rebellion against the Khartoum government emerged as a response to patterns of militia atrocities that were already widespread. Furthermore, the thesis explores what the refugees consider to be necessary prerequisites for a return to Darfur. A central point here is that the refugees seem to have ambivalent expectations with regard to what measures can ensure a return to the areas they fled. Bodies of the international community are curiously thought of as means of nation building and of recreating a local Darfurian system of land distribution.

By analyzing the processes by which refugees try to reclaim Sudanese history, the thesis is a contribution to the study of war in the state of Sudan, arguing that the very multiplicity of voices is crucial for understanding the predicaments of the country; a clearer picture of Sudanese national history must be grounded in polyphony itself, whereby the very notion of a national history is drawn into question.