

Silver Lining

Building a Shared Sudanese Identity through Food

SUDAN IS A COUNTRY with an image problem. If you and I were to talk about food in Sudan, you might understandably expect our conversation to focus on the shortages brought on by decades of civil war or the crop failures caused by a heartless Mother Nature. In the absence of peace, reports on Sudan and food often focus on basic sustenance and security, not on celebration or the transfer of traditions. Food scarcity grabs headlines. But I would like to invite you instead to pull up a chair and partake in the bounty of Sudan.

Paradoxically, foodways now under threat in Sudan's remote regions of conflict are enjoying broad appeal in the country's urban centers, thanks to the efforts of resettled Sudanese to maintain their culinary traditions in the face of upheaval. Yet the humanitarian crises that grip the country easily eclipse reports on this new intermingling of Sudanese foodways.¹ In the dehumanizing environment of war and forced resettlement, the culinary conservatism of the often reluctant new urbanites must be understood as a mark of self-preservation.

The displaced of Sudan are disproportionately female, and many are responsible for dependents. For those settling in the capital, Khartoum, their livelihood depends on carving out ways to earn money in an urban area that is experiencing tremendous growth from the millions of recent arrivals. When confronted with the immediate need to provide for their families, women turn to a skill universally expected of them: cooking.

Khartoum is now home to a thriving microeconomy of food vendors who produce their regional dishes for hungry urbanites. By selling these dishes in the capital, they broaden the culinary horizons of the city while preserving their own food traditions. Making the best of a bad situation, these vendors—mostly women but some men—have inadvertently become culinary ambassadors. Their growing numbers provide an opportunity for regional foodways to gain wider introduction, adaptation, and, finally, adoption.

Perhaps more surprisingly, these same vendors facilitate a nascent sense of a shared Sudanese identity and nationalism.

For established Khartoum urbanites, the definition of Sudanese food (and, by extension, what it means to be Sudanese) expands as street-vendor fare moves to restaurants and becomes more widely available throughout the city. As urban Sudanese slowly overcome their preconceptions and discover a taste for regional cuisines, meals have the power to function as unofficial diplomacy during this turbulent time in Sudan's history. According to Amna Ibrahim Ahmed El Hag, a consultant with the National Council for Child Welfare, this phenomenon is the “silver lining of displacement.”²

“Among the Most Hospitable Countries on Earth”

On a sun-bleached afternoon in Khartoum, Amna and her driver, a jovial man by the name of Adel Mohammed Morsi, pick me up outside my hotel for a tasting tour of regional foods, all within the city. At the confluence of the White and Blue Nile rivers, Khartoum, like Sudan itself, is a natural crossroads. Sudan's geographic location on the African continent is historically strategic as a gateway to the Middle East. This straddled identity is evident in the people, the music, and, of course, the food. When I walk the streets of Khartoum, I can imagine myself in Cairo; turning a corner, I could be in Kampala.

We drive well beyond downtown to the neighborhood of Haj Yousif in Khartoum's Sharq Ah-Neel, or Eastern Nile, district. Haj Yousif was originally one of the many camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP), a term used to define people obliged to flee their homes within their own country's borders. It is now enveloped within Khartoum's city limits and is, for all intents and purposes, a permanent neighborhood. The original name of the former IDP camp was Al-Wehdah, “Unity” in Arabic, a choice no doubt based more on wishful thinking than on reality, given the fractured history of modern Sudan. Through unanticipated food channels, however, the original meaning may resonate more accurately today than when it was first devised.



Morsi slows our pace as we approach our destination—Al-Wehdah’s central market, where many regional food vendors work. Shiny new rickshaws with sewing machine-strength engines angle for space among passenger cars, overloaded long-distance trucks, and nimble pedestrians weaving in and out of traffic. IDP camps, and the neighborhoods evolving from their design, are defined by their expected impermanence. Personal privacy is a forgotten luxury in such crowded quarters. Living spaces that house entire families are no wider than Kobe Bryant’s armspan, with neighbors just inches away or even sharing walls. Formal street addresses are unknown, making it nearly

Above: A bakoumbah vendor prepares her fare in the Haj Yousif neighborhood of Khartoum, Sudan.

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impossible for residents in former IDP camp neighborhoods to receive mail or list a mailing address on employment applications. The unexpected longevity of these camps has sorely tested their inhabitants.

Our first stop after threading our way across the teeming thoroughfare is a female *bakoumbah* vendor, who holds court on a small corner patch of ground with sturdy little stools for customers. *Bakoumbah* is as satisfying to eat as it is to pronounce: bah-KOOM-bah. The dish, originating

in the vendor's home region of Darfur, where it is called *umjinjer* (oom-JING-ger), combines boiled millet, yogurt, custard powder (think yellow cake mix), ghee, sweetened sesame paste, sugar, and raisins. In Khartoum the dish is often made with wheat instead of millet as the base ingredient and swaps milk for the yogurt used in Darfur. "I grew up eating *umjinjer*," the vendor says. "My mother gave it to us to keep our hunger down." A decade-long drought forced her to migrate to Khartoum from Darfur in 1982, as if foreshadowing the manmade horrors that would unfold there some twenty years later and force Darfurians to resettle once again.³ Our *bakoumbah* vendor started her business in 1997 as a way to support her family. She is living proof that IDP camps have raised generations.

We scrape our kindergarten-size wooden stools closer for front-row seats. The vendor speaks to us without interrupting her routine, blending the ingredients in a large aluminum bowl to the consistency of lemon-colored rice pudding. Once the mixture is ready (the wheat is already boiled, so no cooking is required), she transfers a generous serving into a fresh metal bowl, pokes a spoon into the top, and hands it to an eager customer. "When I moved from Darfur I adjusted the ingredients," she explains. "The newer ingredients like wheat and milk are more popular in Khartoum." Served at room temperature and hovering between hot cereal and a cozy dessert, *bakoumbah* is at once nutritious and heavenly for those with a sweet tooth. The soft consistency makes the dish easy to digest and suitable for all ages. The vendor soon hands me a serving, and I taste my first rich bite. The sesame paste, fine custard powder, and generous spoonfuls of sugar create a sweetness that, after my time in Sudan, no longer comes as a shock to my system. (I teasingly tell my Sudanese colleagues that they enjoy a bit of tea with their sugar.) The boiled wheat provides welcome bulk and elevates *bakoumbah* to the status of comfort food with a purpose.

"One of the good things is that all the ingredients for *bakoumbah* are inexpensive," the vendor says. "So I can sell it for an affordable price and still make a profit." A bowl of her *bakoumbah* costs one Sudanese pound, the equivalent of fifty cents U.S. While we speak with her, business is brisk, and, despite the crowd, she responds to questions and happily talks about her trade. In a classic demonstration of Sudanese hospitality, she adamantly refuses money when I move to pay for our meal. It is no wonder that the travel writer Edward Hoagland referred to Sudan as "among the most hospitable countries on earth."⁴

An Improved Culinary Fluency

The story of relocation is deeply familiar to many Sudanese. Mass internal migration, in many cases for self-protection, presents one of the most challenging byproducts of war. In Sudan, war and natural disasters combine to create what the scholar Mark Duffield calls a "permanent emergency,"⁵ which in turn contributes to rapid urbanization. The result is a country in transition from a majority pastoralist country to one with unprecedented urbanization. Sudanese caught in conflict zones often seek out the cities or are relocated to them under government resettlement programs. According to demographic data from 2005, 40 percent of Sudanese now live in urban areas.⁶

Khartoum best exemplifies this hyperurbanization. As IDP camps have mushroomed in recent decades on its outskirts, the city's population has ballooned. Intended temporary residences have in many cases become permanent, with the result that Greater Khartoum's borders have widened as the city haphazardly absorbs the IDP camps. Because the origins of some camps reach back to the beginning of the first civil war (1955–1972), generations born and raised within these makeshift communities know no other life. According to recent population estimates, forty million people live in Sudan, with one-sixth located in metropolitan Khartoum.⁷ To fully grasp this ratio, imagine the population of metropolitan Washington, D.C., swelling from five million to a staggering fifty million.

Unfortunately, the central government has not responded to the explosive growth in Khartoum with conscientious efforts toward integration. Newer IDP camps from more recent conflicts are generally inhabited by individuals whose yearnings for home trump any interest in assimilation. Thus, as the city grows to encompass the camps, stress fractures in Sudanese urban society have emerged. Lawlessness, lack of access to basic services, alarming health indicators, and an unbroken cycle of poverty all plague IDP camps to varying degrees, even as Khartoum enjoys a reputation as one of the safest capital cities on the African continent.

Despite the absence of infrastructure and services, "informal social arrangements,"⁸ in the words of development economist William Easterly, tend to flourish in these marginalized neighborhoods. Necessity breeds inventiveness and, in turn, investment. Writing on the urbanization of Khartoum, sociologist AbdouMaliq Simone states:

Many of the so-called lacks—of amenities, infrastructure, livelihood, markets, and governance—become occasions for residents to assemble ways of working together that otherwise would not be occasioned given



Above: Citrus, goddaym berries, and carbonated drinks in Khartoum, Sudan.

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existing cultural norms, political practices and urban experiences... Despite disparate distribution patterns and impoverishment, as well as the fact that many urban residents in a given city would rather be somewhere else, city dwellers do make concerted efforts to invest in an urban existence.⁹

In Sudan, these “concerted efforts” most often manifest themselves in the preservation of foodways and culinary traditions. A desire to retain a cultural identity in the face of displacement, combined with the need to earn money, motivates immigrant populations. Because of the rubbing of shoulders necessitated by living in densely populated city environments, food vending provides a natural point of contact between Sudan’s diverse migrant population and the already-established Khartoum urbanites. The result is an improved national culinary fluency. As historian Donna Gabaccia so aptly puts it, “When people of differing foodways come together, whether cooks or merely eaters, they will almost invariably peek into one another’s kitchens.”¹⁰

“Habits of Coexistence”

Eventually, family kitchens move outdoors into neighborhood markets like Al-Wehdah. Fortified by our helpings of *bakoumbah*, Amna and I venture deeper into the market,

navigating a maze of narrow passageways that separate vendor stalls hawking everything from vehicle tires to kitchen utensils.

Amna gently steers me toward a larger food operation with a modest number of indoor seats and two outdoor grills that lure customers with the mouthwatering aroma of barbecue. A young man wielding tongs works two separate grills, each representing a distinct regional style of meat preparation. The first grilling technique, *mandee*, reveals the young man’s western Sudanese roots. Originally composed of heated rocks set into the ground, the grill in Khartoum has been transformed into a low metal apparatus that forces our host to bend deeply at the waist to check on the grilling rack of ribs. He moves between this larger grill and a tabletop model used for the grilling method called *salat*, from eastern Sudan.

Salat utilizes a punch-bowl-size trough made entirely of carved salt rock from the large saline deposits in central and eastern Sudan. When filled with river rocks interspersed with lighted charcoal, the fiercely hot surface is perfect for grilling thin slices of meat, which become infused with the salty residue of the natural receptacle. Our host quickly

points out that the salt bowl's benefit goes beyond flavoring: "The salt keeps the coals and rocks as hot as possible for as long as possible," he explains. This particular eatery offers delicious lamb and beef that has been marinated overnight in citrus juice, onion, and salt. The meat is served with slices of fresh purple onion and a wedge of lime on the side, which adds an addictive pucker.

We return to a napping Morsi. Although we are stuffed, Amna insists on one more stop. The car pitches and heaves down an uneven alleyway until we reach a quiet T-intersection. Here Amna and I get out to approach a shy *goddaym* (gah-DIE-am) berry vendor, who purées the delicate, rust-colored berries from western Sudan—no larger than immature crabapples and just as tart—into a delicious drink diluted with fresh orange juice. After processing the fruit, the vendor serves the *goddaym* juice in metal bowls with a miniature iceberg bobbing to the surface to cool the frothy beverage. Although oranges are a relatively recent Khartoum addition, *goddaym* has a long culinary history in Sudan. The berries are thought to possess antimalarial properties and to stimulate the body's natural production of hemagglutinin.

Many dishes in Khartoum undergo similar transformations as they are mixed with new ingredients. So, too, do resettled Sudanese, who are as diverse as the country is immense. A fundamental gap in the world's understanding of Sudan begins with the deficiencies of modern cartography. Sudan is the tenth largest country in the world, covering an area roughly equivalent to the entire United States east of the Mississippi. But because most maps shrink equatorial regions, the true breadth of this "enormous tumbling chunk"¹¹ of the continent is misrepresented. The sheer magnitude of Sudan, combined with its rugged terrain and relatively few paved roads,¹² means that historically the various populations have remained isolated, which complicates the creation of a national identity. "Academic studies of the Sudan are nearly as deeply affected by the divisions of the country as are Sudanese themselves," writes the historian Douglas H. Johnson in his seminal work, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars*. "Scholars often display a difficulty in recognizing the Sudan as a collection of regions."¹³ The country's regional nature is also due to the autonomy of many of Sudan's distinct populations, who speak more than one hundred dialects.

Such a rich collection of peoples, while hindering unity, leads to a wide variety of culinary traditions, and Khartoum is the nexus of this Sudanese buffet. Here Amna and I discover how regional foodways become increasingly mainstream as the economy develops. The number of

cranes crowding the skyline tells the first part of the story. New buildings climb higher than their older counterparts and often feature a mixed-use design with ground-level shops surmounted by office space or housing. As disposable income rises, the dishes that got their start as street food find new homes in restaurants.

One of these dishes is *madeedah* (ma-DEE-dah). Served by the stainless-steel bowlful, *madeedah* is a blended fruit and grain smoothie produced in variations throughout Sudan. Like many traditional foods, *madeedah* originated as restorative fare, in this case provided to postnatal women to rebuild their strength. Now, trendsetters of both genders in urban areas enjoy it. The increase in purchasing power of some Sudanese has contributed to the spike in eateries such as the one where Amna and I enjoyed *madeedah*, with its high ceilings, marble countertops, laminated menus, and throng of waiters. It stands in stark contrast to the *bakoumbah* vendor's modest solo operation. The menu here offers a cross-country culinary tour of *madeedah*. While many ingredients overlap (sugar, ghee, and honey), regional *madeedah* specialties reflect available crops. For example, *bellah* (date) *madeedah* is a specialty of the North, where dates are plentiful. I learn that *helbah* is the *madeedah* from central Sudan, whereas in the West, millet—that region's staple—is swapped for the wheat, just as it is with *bakoumbah*. Eastern Sudan's version combines wheat, bananas, heavy cream, sweet sesame paste, honey, raisins, and sugar.

Never one to turn down dates, I opt for *bellah madeedah*. Our mixologist fills his blender with hunks of date cakes made from dates that have been combined with a small amount of flour, boiled, and poured into a shallow baking pan to set. He follows the dates with generous spoonfuls of sugar, ghee, and milk, along with a scoop of yogurt thickened with wheat. After blending the concoction for a minute, he transfers it to a bowl and dresses it with shaved coconut, raisins, and delicate threads of honey. My serving is too thick to drink easily with a straw and too thin for a fork, so I raise the bowl to my lips for a satisfying slurp. The trio of natural sweeteners—dates, sugar, and honey—steals the show. Even in its gussied-up form for sophisticated Khartoum consumers, the drink still possesses the hearty components that reflect its original nutritional identity. I polish off the bowl quickly.

Amna next promises me *kisrah* (KEES-rah), a spongy pancake used as both an edible platter and a utensil for scooping stews into the mouth. This food tradition from central Sudan is a good example of how dishes are transformed when introduced to the city. *Kisrah* is traditionally made with a variety of sorghum flour called *fetareetah*

(fat-ah-REET-ah) that gives the pancake a distinctive rose-colored hue. It is cooked on a large griddle over an open flame, much like a crêpe. According to Amna, *fetareeta* is not widely available in Khartoum, so when vendors first opened small *kisrah* stands within the city, they adjusted the recipe by mixing some wheat flour in with the sorghum flour. The change was well received, because many customers in the city were wary of the original version's pinkish tint.

We travel on to the neighborhood of Bury Twon. Unlike the newer Eastern Nile district, Bury Twon is one of Khartoum's more established sections. Our destination is a small open-air market surrounded by working-class apartment buildings. There we meet Mastora Ali, who runs her open-air cafeteria with a winning smile and six aluminum cauldrons of food. Originally from Kordofan, the area of central Sudan famous for its *kisrah*, Ali has lived in Khartoum for fifteen years. She serves us heaping metal platefuls of food: generous folds of *kisrah* topped with *waykah* (WAY-kah), a translucent sauce made of okra flour. (Ali's ruddy *kisrah* is made using *fetareeta*, perhaps an example of a headstrong chef sticking to the authentic. The line waiting to be served at Ali's stand is evidence that her business is in no way suffering.)

To accompany the centerpiece dish she scoops up a serving of dark green boiled millet flour (*aseedah*) and ladles two types of *moullah*, or savory stew, over it. The first is made with *sharmut* (shar-MOOT), dried beef jerky that originated with nomadic populations in Sudan as a way to preserve meat over long periods of time. Yogurt, or *roh*, gives the second *moullah* its distinctive, tangy flavor. The meal is further enlivened by spicy *shohtah* (SHOW-tah), a yogurt condiment made with green chilies; plates of *sheeariah* (shee-ARE-ee-ah), sweet angel-hair noodles; and *gurassah* (goor-AH-sah), a flatbread similar in size and shape to an unadorned pizza crust. Amna, Morsi, and I dig in.

Between bites, Morsi tells me that at feasts in Sudan *kisrah* and *waykah* are often served after the main meal. They are such popular dishes that if they are offered earlier, people will not eat anything else. "I do not have the time to make *kisrah*, but I can just go to the market and buy it," adds Amna. "Selling food in the market has become a popular activity. Food creates an integration of cultures; it is one way that we mix together. Food breaks down barriers and we become like one person."

I ponder this unexpected benefit of the hardships the Sudanese have endured, which allows them to showcase their foodways and their famous hospitality.¹⁴ While it would be naïve to think that the introduction of distinct regional foodways in Khartoum can alone ensure a new,

shared Sudanese identity, this mingling represents an example of what philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah refers to as the "habits of coexistence."¹⁵ Even in the absence of official integration policies and efforts, cities afford residents the opportunity to live together and learn from one another—often through food—in ways that lead to a greater understanding of what it means to be Sudanese. There is no question that the decades of displacement, crumbling infrastructure, disease burden, natural disasters, lack of government transparency,¹⁶ and guerrilla militia movements repeatedly combine to sabotage efforts toward rebuilding a peaceful and well-fed Sudan.¹⁷ Yet, as Sudanese from across the country meet in Khartoum and share their food traditions, their efforts at self-preservation both honor their distinct regional identities and, at the same time, help to build a more inclusive identity for all Sudanese. 🍷

NOTES

If I were to repay with meals those who helped me bring this article to life, I would be cooking for quite some time. People deserving special mention are food writer Cheryl Sternman Rule; Vicki Aken of UMCOR-Sudan; Daniel W., Betsy, and Sarah Crofts; Samantha Bailey and Jessica Esch; Sudan expert and heavyweight Alex de Waal; Sofia Fenner for her Arabic transliteration; food historian Cindy R. Lobel; and last, but by no means least, my colleagues in Sudan: Amna Ibrahim Ahmed El Hag, Hanan Satti Ali Ibrahim, Noha Gibreel, Kawther Alaa El Din Badri, Hallo Mohamed Konso, Louis Tindil Morgan, and Sami Ahmed Mohamed. Finally, while this article represents the involvement of many people, any errors are entirely my own.

1. International media coverage of Sudan has grown substantially over the last six years, owing to reports on the violence in the western region of Sudan known as Darfur. However, two equally bloody civil wars took place within Sudan's borders over nearly the entire second half of the twentieth century, though the outside world took little notice. Both wars were waged between the North and South of Sudan and were responsible for the deaths of more than two million Sudanese. These civil wars are regarded as some of the longest in the history of the African continent. A fragile peace accord known as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was brokered in 2005. It now appears vulnerable to unraveling before scheduled national elections in 2010. The near-perpetual state of unrest in Sudan has exacted a high toll. Sparring factions have capitalized on governmental mismanagement, using food to control populations during times of war: to control food distribution is to control power. In some cases, food is leveraged as a tool of recruitment; in others, factions target food distribution channels to weaken enemy forces or to punish civilians viewed as collaborating with the enemy.

During my research for this article I created a computerized search mechanism to track news items that included the keywords "Sudan" and "food." At the time this article was written, the search had identified over one hundred articles, and all but three reported on food security as it related to war and natural disasters. Floods threatened crops in Sudan's southern region; drivers delivering food aid to relief camps in the West were killed by rebels hijacking supplies; over-extended international relief agencies cut food rations. Of the remaining three articles, one reported on an agricultural expo in Khartoum in October 2008; the second was an online recipe collection of Sudanese food; and the third was a brief announcement on a food Web site about a brand of nonalcoholic beer starting sales in Sudan.

2. Interview with Amna Ibrahim Ahmed El Hag, 1 May 2008.

3. The conflict in Darfur is not the only reason Sudan has attracted the modern media spotlight. Recent discoveries of valuable oil deposits (Sudan is now the sixth-fastest-growing economy in the world, thanks to this lucrative new export) and geopolitical negotiations around terrorism have often made Sudan the center of international attention.

4. Edward Hoagland, *African Calliope: A Journey to the Sudan* (New York: Random House, 1979), 5.

A story in a recent travel guide to Sudan attests to the unparalleled hospitality of the Sudanese. A German motorcyclist biked his way across Sudan in 2004. One day in the Nuba Mountains he spotted a Sudanese man on the horizon, running toward his campsite. When the man finally reached the motorcyclist and caught his breath, he explained that he had run ten kilometers across the searing desert in pursuit of the traveler—to invite him to dinner in his home. For those of us fortunate to have spent time in Sudan as guests, this story is not surprising. We could all likely contribute similar tales of our own, though perhaps none quite so dramatic.

5. Mark Duffield, “Urbanization and the Future of Sudan—New Perspectives,” *Making Sense of Darfur Blog*, www.src.org/blogs/darfur/category/darfur/, 14 February 2008.

6. Munzoul Asal, “Urbanization and the Future of Sudan,” *Making Sense of Darfur Blog*, www.src.org/blogs/darfur/category/darfur/, 29 January 2008.

7. U.S. Department of State, *Bureau of African Affairs: Sudan Profile*, www.state.gov. Accessed July 2008. In 2008 Sudan conducted its first official census in ten years, but results will not be fully tallied and released until later this year.

8. William Easterly, *The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 87.

9. AbdouMaliq Simone, “On the Importance of Urban Intersection, When Integration Is Not Necessarily on the Cards,” *Making Sense of Darfur Blog*, www.src.org/blogs/darfur/category/darfur/, 18 March 2008.

10. Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 6.

11. Hoagland, *African Calliope*, 6.

12. Central Intelligence Agency, “The World Factbook,” www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/. Accessed 21 August 2008.

13. Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan’s Civil Wars* (Oxford: James Curry, 2003), xxi.

14. My work in the field of global health makes for a fine collection of visa stamps in my passport. April 2008 found me heading to Sudan, my second trip to the country in three months. From the backseat of a taxi to the airport, I chatted with the driver about my upcoming itinerary. At the mention of Sudan, his eyes lit up. He explained he was originally from Ethiopia, and, like many Horn of Africa immigrants in the Seattle area, where I live, he had spent four years in Sudan after escaping the escalating violence in his homeland during the 1970s. His opinion of the Sudanese gave voice to an emotion I had experienced after my first visit to the country but felt a poverty of words to capture: “If you took the one hundred nicest people in the world and put them all into one room,” he said, “ninety-nine of them would be Sudanese.”

15. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), xix.

16. Investigative reports suggest that Sudan’s central government is directing new-found oil revenue wealth into ambitious agricultural initiatives that create swaths of emerald farmland growing crops for export that “rise out of the sand like mirages” (Jeffrey Gettleman, “Darfur Withers as Sudan Sells a Food Bonanza,” *New York Times*, 10 August 2008, A1.) While many Sudanese go hungry, the central government of Sudan heads to the bank after shipping foodstuffs out of the country at the same time as aid agencies unload international grain donations of equal volume. In a perverse logic, Sudan is achieving its food production potential but, instead of feeding its citizens, it is capitalizing on the open market as food prices soar.

17. Millions of Sudanese share the experience of losing their access to familiar means of food production, let alone having enough to eat. Scant food resources have forced generations of Sudanese to rely on international relief programs or face starvation. In the early 1990s the aid community referred to three southern Sudanese temporary settlements in Kongor, Ayod, and Yuai as the “hunger triangle” (Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan’s Civil Wars*, 116). The indignity of such circumstances is particularly painful, given the enormous extent of Sudan’s fertile farmland straddling the White and Blue Nile rivers. “Sudan could feed Africa!” Hallo Mohammed Konso, program director of the nonprofit organization Islamic Relief in Sudan’s Blue Nile State, told me with equal parts exasperation and exaggeration when we met. There is no question, however, that Sudan could feed itself and have plenty left over to share. Yet misguided agricultural policies, the sustained negative impact of civil war, catastrophic weather conditions, and government corruption undercut the ability of local subsistence farmers to feed their families.