

Book Review

The Right To Be Nuba

**Suleiman Musa Rahhal (ed) 2001
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The war in the Sudan has ravaged on for 18 years with no end in sight. The book in review shows the plight of one particular community in the Sudan. If this community is being neglected now during the war then it cannot be ignored when efforts at peace are being made. The book tells the story of a people who are fighting for their right – the right to be Nuba. With or without any prior intention by the authors, the book ultimately serves as a mouthpiece for other marginalised communities whose participation in any peace effort is vital. The book brings a tribute to the Nuba and their fight against injustice. It provides a testimony to the courage of a people bent

on preserving their culture and heritage, which is vitally important in any peace process.

The book dispels the fallacy that the war in Sudan is a bipolar war pitting only the two major factions, namely the Government of the Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, against each other. On the contrary, the war also involves numerous other communities whose rights have to be addressed. The authors contend that these communities have one voice in the Nuba. The Nuba, like these communities, are struggling to preserve their culture despite efforts by the government of the Sudan to deter them. The book in review tells many tales of looting, rape and murder of prominent Nuba figures as well as ordinary Nuba folk. As the government is increasing pressure on them, the Nuba are proving to be more resilient than ever to ensure their posterity.

The picture that dominates the front cover may easily be overlooked by the superficial reader. But to the clairvoyant reader this picture, taken by George Rodger the renowned British photographer, is a reflection of what the book is all about: the desire of the Nuba to guard their culture. This famous photograph, that finally brought the Nuba under the scrutiny of the world, shows a victorious wrestler being lifted on the shoulders of his defeated adversary. The picture itself portrays the character of the Nuba. Indeed the linguist, Professor Roland Stevenson, has described the Nuba as a 'vigorous hill people of good physique, much independence of mind, strong in traditions and fighting qualities'. These fascinating sentiments serve to emphasise that the Nuba are indeed here to stay.

The book is divided into 13 chapters, each by a different author. This tends to give a balanced view of this unique and delicate subject. Alex de Waal in the first chapter, 'The Right to be Nuba', introduces this salient subject by charting a brief historical voyage into the war in Sudan. This not only accelerates the exploring of the pervading theme, but also unearths the underlying essence that is the Nuba. By focusing on the Nuba the authors hope that a window of similarity will be accorded other communities that still continue to suffer neglect. From the title of the book one would expect to encounter a beaten down people, but one finds that for the Nuba these hardships have endeared and strengthened their resolve to live and, most importantly, to ensure the posterity of their culture.

The book is imbued with vivid and panoramic pictures. Despite the threats of religious pressurising, failed humanitarian aid and gross human rights violations, the culture of the Nuba has remained undiluted. The two

religions, Islam and Christianity, have failed to affect the Nuba way of life. These two institutions have been credited with shaping much of humanity, but in the Nuba both have met with stiffer opposition. With slave trading the Muslims tried to coax the Nuba to abandon their culture but to no avail. Indeed much to the annoyance of many, the Nuba have proved that Muslims and Christians can coexist peacefully. To the Nuba religious identity takes second place to ethnic identity.

The authors have reiterated the importance of quick but impartial humanitarian aid in conflict areas. Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham and Tom Woodhouse, in their book *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, echo the sentiments of the authors who opine that humanitarian aid if administered appropriately can alleviate much suffering. The authors therefore question the relevance of the Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) when it cannot deliver aid to the Nuba mountains because their work is hindered by the government. Citing one example of this inefficiency, one of the authors draws our attention to a particular incident when the OLS failed to administer relief to the people of the Nuba mountains. The following was the response: 'The OLS mandate does not allow us to work in the Nuba mountains or to support Sudanese institutions wishing to do so'. What then is their duty in the Sudan if the government is interfering in their work? This stalemate was finally resolved when the UN Secretary General, Mr. Kofi Annan, intervened, forcing the government of Sudan to allow the OLS into the Nuba mountains. To avoid such inefficiency, the Nuba have on their own initiated a non-governmental organisation called the Nuba Relief Rehabilitation and Development Organisation (NRRDO) that runs health, education, and agriculture programmes as well as facilitating community development. The Nuba have realised that accusations and counter accusations will not solve their problems.

Chapter 7, 'Voices from the Nuba Mountains', echoes the cries of victims of gruesome human rights violations. The old and young, men and even women have not been spared. Despite all the atrocities the Nuba still engage in their culture and perform wrestling and dancing festivals oblivious to what hardships they go through. Although the Nuba want peace, they are not ready to compromise their culture. The importance of the Nuba to the marginalised in the Sudan is summed up as follows, 'It is the Nuba, two million people in the heart of the country, who carry the flame for a brighter Sudan. If that flame is extinguished, we shall all pay the price'.