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„Establishing the House of Nationalities is a Must!“

Ambassador Philipp Obang Ojway

PREAMBLE

The ideas contained in this booklet were first discussed in a three-day seminar on governance in the South Sudan¹ held in November 2000 at the Aberdare Country Club, in Nyeri, Kenya. Chaired by Dr. Willy Mutunga, the meeting was attended by South-Sudanese across political and social divides, and later on remembered by one prominent participant as "a cornerstone in the process of the people's liberation". Under the direction of Dr. Peter Nyot Kot, the many ideas which were generated during the deliberations in Aberdare were condensed and put on paper in preparation of future discussions and of more concrete proposals on the issue of governance.

One of these ideas had been brought forward by Prof. Barri Ngagara Wanji and concerned the creation of a forum where all the nationalities found in the South Sudan could meet on a regular basis in order to discuss their problems: this is how the whole idea of founding a "House of Nationalities" was born... During intense discussions on suitable instruments of governance, the "House of Nationalities" eventually came out very strongly as an opportunity to create a space for self-expression of each and every ethnic group in the South Sudan; it was perceived as a vehicle for protecting the linguistic, religious and cultural diversities in a united country. The unity of the people of the South Sudan was thus envisaged within its diverse context.

¹ The seminar, funded by the Embassy of Switzerland in Nairobi, Kenya, was sponsored by the Horn of Africa Centre for Democracy and Development (HACDAD), the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC), the South Sudan Law Society (SSLS) and the Centre for Documentation and Advocacy (CDA).

Subsequently, the concept of the House of Nationalities was discussed as to how it could be applied in the present context of political and military divisions among South Sudanese. In view of the project's practical implementation, Dr. Peter Adwok Nyaba was asked to prepare a draft on the historical roots of existing problems and to list up all political, social and cultural arguments for a House of Nationalities; it is his draft which has become the object of a focussed discussion, and it has become the basis for this booklet. The objective of this paper is thus to broaden the genuine debate between the different social and political forces in the South Sudan.

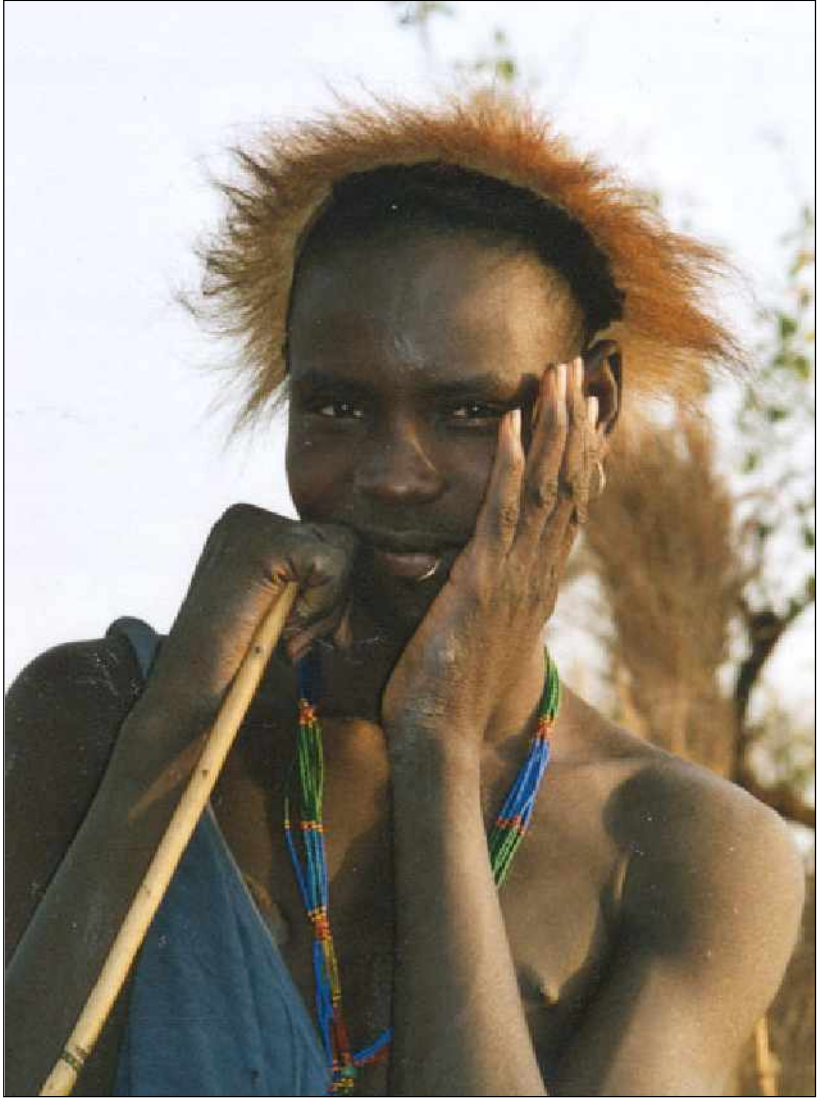
The present concept of the House of Nationalities should not be seen as a loose element of "constitutional thinking" for the South Sudan for which no framework or process has been developed to date. It is rather to be understood as a contribution to a much wider discussion on governance within which specific topics need to be further identified and debated in depth.

In its present format and content, the proposal for establishing a House of Nationalities is to be appreciated as an attempt by a few Southern Sudanese to stimulate the thinking of their compatriots and their communities at home as well as in the Diaspora: it is an idea open for debate, an invitation to explore their identity, and a tool for shaping their future.

The contents of this booklet has been presented and discussed at a workshop with diversified attendance of South Sudanese on November 27th, 2001 in Nairobi²; it is important to stress that not all the participants agreed with each and every proposal or idea developed in the text.

January 2002

² See the list of Participants of both the meetings in Aberdare and in Nairobi at the end of the publication.



FOREWORD

“All the bad things arrived with the foreigners”, Agada Akway Cam, the late King of the Anyuak people once explained, *“money, clothes and weapons”*. His comments may sound like the well-known myth about the expulsion from paradise where previously everything could be found in abundance, *“soil, water, fish and animals as far as the eye could reach”*, - until the Evil arrived from the North with all these light-skinned foreigners and their boundless greed for riches and power, for slaves, ivory, oil and water, with their useless clothes, with guns and their incredibly haughty claim to possess the only true faith. It was indeed the beginning of a long period of exploitation and cultural oppression, the start to reckless foreign rule which came to administer land and people like an estate and pursued no other aim than the mere maintenance of law and order.

The rest of the story is known as well, consists in the account of a seemingly endless liberation-war which has brought to the South Sudan years of tremendous suffering: millions of people got killed, mutilated or displaced. While the war was meant to save and to strengthen the many cultures found in the South Sudan and to defend the human dignity of each person, it has led to hatred, discord and to brutal inter-ethnic fighting. Initially, the enemy was only in the North, but at present he seems to be everywhere, in the North, in the South, in most ethnic groups and indeed in almost each individual, if educated or not. Amongst the war-victims are women and children but also fundamental cultural values, including the traditional knowledge how to overcome internal differences. *The lack of institutions which could restore the shattered cultural unity of the country had bitter consequences for the material and cultural welfare of the people.*

I am often asked to explain the reasons for the civil war in the Sudan. In the early years, I used to reply that this war was a struggle by the people of the South Sudan for their cultural values in general and for the respect for their human dignity, their right to education and development in particular. After having personally witnessed long years of suffering and misery, I still give the same answer, even though I feel that I am presently expressing rather a hope than a conviction. The liberation-war, so legitimate in its origins, appears to have turned into a fight for power and material wealth. One seems to have forgotten that the *real assets of the Sudan are neither found in petrol-fields nor watercourses but in its extraordinary cultural diversity*: the Sudan is a colourful patchwork of cultures and languages, a delicate texture showing a great variety of social systems, customs and beliefs, a hidden treasury filled up with precious human and spiritual values. But is the survival of cultures really socially significant, wouldn't it be enough to have them preserved in monographs and keep them in the dusty library of human mankind? If culture was just a luxury, why then the people of South Sudan would have stood up for it, in bold self-defence of their identity? If culture was not of an existential significance, the people of the South Sudan would not need to fight but could simply merge into another culture, forget about their traditional values and take up another identity. A discussion on culture in the context of a political and military struggle is therefore not a vain intellectual exercise, well on the contrary, it is the pre-condition to any peaceful solution to the presents conflicts, in what regards the relationship with the North in general and the relationship between the ethnic groups in the South in particular.

Sometimes it helps to look at things from a distance. The Swedes have a word called "*hemmablind*" which means "not to see (to be blind) because of lack of distance". People who are directly involved and close to current events may be prevented from seeing further and to plan for a more distant future. It is here where foreigners may help the Sudanese to take some distance to current affairs, but eventually only the people themselves may have to decide if they want to consider such advise and advocacy.

I spent many years in Central Asia. Though different in its physical shape, *Afghanistan* resembles much to the Sudan: it is one of the

most wonderful places in the world, rich in cultures and full of human beauty. Like the Sudanese, the Afghan people are proud and courageous, brave and enduring, kind and sensitive, they are poor but extremely generous and their life would be absolutely miserable if they were not so conscious of their human dignity and the spiritual essence of all aspects of their earthly existence. Why then do the Afghans fight each other so fiercely, even when the foreign oppressors have left? How is it possible that people who were able to unite for chasing a common enemy start to mutilate themselves as soon as the foreigners are chased away? There should be no reason for it, as the Afghans basically share same beliefs and very similar cultures. What then makes intellectuals and militias to stamp on the grassroots for which they had been ready to risk their life? Afghanistan consists out of high mountains which separate valleys, deserts and people, isolated places where self-conceited war-lords rule recklessly, dividing the country and exploiting the country's human and natural resources. *Afghanistan shows that oppression is not only a foreign matter but a potent drug which can also be grown locally.* It also shows that *where appropriate structures are lacking, respect for human dignity is not assured and the violent part of the human character takes the overhand and gets easily out of control.*

Afghanistan and indeed the Sudan, - how sad I am to see my friends endure so much hardship, how much I would wish that the people and indeed their leaders may soon realise that they can only survive if they respect and love themselves, if they are ready to share the beauty of their countries with others. No doubt, the future looks grim. But is the dream about peace, prosperity, solidarity and human dignity really nothing but wishful thinking? Of course, I would not write this foreword to a project on peace if I was not convinced that, in the Sudan, there is still space for dialogue, still reason to hope and to believe that the people may finally reach the understanding that only self-respect and tolerance of other cultures will allow them to survive as a cultural entity.

One year ago, a number of Sudanese intellectuals assembled in Aberdare (Kenya) to discuss about future governance. It was neither a meeting about peace nor a meeting about cultural matters, it was a meeting about appropriate *structures* which would allow peace to

survive and to resolve conflicts, possibly even before they have broken out. The meeting was not supposed to find a solution to present problems but *to initiate a process* which could pave the way to a future, hopefully not too far-distant understanding between the different ethnic groups and/or their figureheads. The participants were conscious of the necessity to create *institutions* which would bring *stability* to the country and would preserve the cultural identity of the Sudan by giving shelter, political protection and material support to *all* cultures of the country.

Personally, I found it both inspiring and extremely encouraging to witness how the participants in the Aberdare-meeting were able to discuss very sensitive matters in a sincere and open manner. There was no anger to be felt, no insults or shouting to be heard, no aggressive undertone to be discerned, - and this in spite of the fact that the participants belonged to different ethnic groups and political movements and that some of them had been feared as “living missiles”, “unguided canons” or “guns out of control”... One could argue that the dialogue remained sober, friendly and disciplined because no burning political issues were at stake and no immediate solution was looked for, but personally I prefer to believe that the participants were all deeply aware of the *urgent necessity* to find a way out of the present situation and that they were all conscious of the fact that the question of governance is the key-issue in the people’s desperate quest for stability and peace.

When looking for unity, one has to ask what could unite the people in a positive manner. In Aberdare, *the question of identity* was put on the table. What is “a South Sudanese”? I found it amazing and in fact almost amusing to see how the participants struggled to find a positive answer to this intriguing question. “Am I now a New Sudanese?”, someone asked jokingly, but this would not help to specify the identity of such a “new” person. In fact, the answer to the question was lying blank on the table, obvious to me as a foreigner but apparently hidden for all the others: *the identity of each and everybody was to share the identity of the others* while still having the identity of being a member of this or that ethnic group, of this or that region, of this or that village, of this or that clan, of being related to this or that family... A Nuer may identify himself as a *Nädh*, but being a *Nädh* he will specify his identity as being a *Lou*, and as a *Lou*

as being a *Gon* etc. In Aberdare, nobody doubted that his or her identity was to be “a South Sudanese”, even though it was initially difficult to define the positive criteria for such a common identity.

Sometimes, I said before, it helps to look at the self out of a distance. If in my home-village, it would be more difficult for me to understand my own identity than when I am outside of my country. Once I was asked to which tribe I belonged. “*We are Anyuae*”, they said, “*but what are you?*”. I did not hesitate and replied: “*I am a Püntner*”. I did not reveal that I am actually “a Swiss” but referred to my local and more sentimental origins. “*Püntner*” is not even an ethnic group but the general term for people who live in contrasting climates in the Swiss canton of “*Graubünden*”, who belong to different “tribes” (I am a “*Walser*”), speak different languages (Swiss-German, Italian and five dialects of Rumantsch) but share a strong and fiercely independent character. Within our canton, we naturally differentiate ourselves as well, each and everyone being convinced that his village is for sure the most beautiful place in the world and that its citizens are naturally much more intelligent, much more cultivated and generally of a more purely human essence than the people from the neighbouring valleys... But in spite of all local, ecological and cultural differences, all we “*Püntner*” show solidarity when it comes to defend our rights on a national level. As a poor, scarcely populated and marginalized canton, we often have to combine with other minorities and to change alliances all according to our needs. This is how we can oppose (and in fact often defeat) dominant majorities and are able to defend our own interests, our many languages and our cultural diversity. There is no “Swiss” as a physical entity, all Swiss are different, and yet all the Swiss are identical in the sense that they are part of a political coalition between members of different political, regional or professional groups. Switzerland thus may stand as quite a significant example for the way appropriate institutions can hold centrifugal forces together, protect minorities and eventually give a same political identity to members of different races and cultures.

The present Swiss system has not come overnight, it is the result of a long and not always bloodless historic process. It can and should therefore not be transplanted to other countries. People must decide what is best for themselves. Yet, it is surely urgent to initiate a pro-

cess which could lead to a consensus on future governance with institutions which could pave the way to peace, prosperity and stability, and where minorities would be helped to survive as cultural entities.

To me, the discussions held in Aberdare have led to a project of utmost significance precisely because it is not built on political, military or emotional grounds but on the very grassroots of society: the House of Nationalities would be a meeting-place of cultures and people, of ideas and dreams, a place where people could physically come closer together and share their problems, their joys, sorrows and hopes; it would provide the people of the South Sudan the opportunity to feel and to understand how much they actually share, in terms of history, human values, beliefs, customs and character, and this in spite (or because) of the country's cultural diversity! Of course, in such a House of Nationalities, not everybody would agree with all others all the time, but everybody would become conscious that this House is his or her true and only home and would therefore make sure that it will be not be burned down, neither by foreign enemies nor by angry members of the own family. Once all the people of the South Sudan are assembled under a same roof, even the neighbours may eventually wish to reconcile and to share the beautiful cultures grown in the others' blooming gardens.

I sincerely hope that the project of building a House of Nationalities will find the necessary support both by intellectuals and the so-called grassroots, and that it will soon be possible to unite the people of the South Sudan on the basis of mutual recognition and respect for the cultural identity of all groups.

*Kwacakworo!*³

³ *Note by the editor:* Kwacakworo is the Anyuak bull-name of Dr. Conradin Permer, a Swiss research-fellow in the fields of literature and anthropology. The photos in this booklet were taken by him in the countries of the Anyuak and the Jiye.

