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Translator of Nightmares

The Horrors of Darfur Defied Description, But Daoud Hari Found a Way to Tell the Story

By Nora Boustany
Washington Post Foreign Service
Tuesday, May 13, 2008; C01

Sleepless during nights of exile in Chad, Daoud Hari stared at cracks in his room's mud walls. The lines formed random shapes that reminded him of drawings from thousands of years ago -- of horned beasts, of women, men and children. He had seen them in the cool mountain caves of Darfur, where he played as a boy. They triggered an urge to sketch scenes of the savagery and starvation he had witnessed in the once-tranquil lands of his childhood.

During those uneasy nights, he picked up pencil and paper to turn his torment into tolerable numbness.

He drew the woman who had hanged herself from a tree with her shawl because she could not feed her children. Hari had found their tiny corpses around her, their skin like "delicate brown paper, so wrinkled."

He drew the story he had heard of a militiaman lowering his bayonet into the belly of a 4-year-old girl as she ran toward him, impaling her. The gunman pranced around as her blood drained down upon him.

He remembered the girl's father, his sobbing, his horror, his shock: "What was he? A man? A devil? He was painted red with my little girl's blood and he was dancing. What was he?"

His wakeful consciousness felt the pain of these images. His drawings, he says, were "stick pictures of scenes I needed to get out of my head. History. History. History. The people. The little girl. The woman," he says in his memoir, "The Translator: A Tribesman's Memoir of Darfur."

In an interview, Hari described how he wrestled with his memories. "I tried to put down on paper these evil-crossed events. . . . Like daytime nightmares, they stay with you. I would coax the pictures out. They stirred my pain, my anger. I would get emotional and question why I was alive. Then I could fall asleep -- a little."

* * *

Hari, 35, could have picked up a gun, could have joined the battles that have ripped the fabric of life in Darfur. But instead of joining his Zaghawa kinsmen to battle Sudanese troops and their viciously brutal militia proxies, known as the [Janjaweed](#), his choice fell on a different path of danger within the genocidal conflict in Darfur.

He became a guide for "khawajas," an Arabic word meaning whites or gentiles. Putting to use the English he'd learned in high school, Hari served as a guide for visiting [State Department](#) investigators, relief workers and journalists traveling through the mass graveyards and smoldering villages of his ancestral lands, leading

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them through the devastation where Darfur tribesmen and Arab nomads once had thrived, side by side, for centuries.

In becoming the eyes, ears and translator for these outsiders, Hari experienced the conflict over and over again in the stories told to him. And he narrated his journey and his life story for Megan M. McKenna, a relief worker he met in Chad, and Dennis Michael Burke, a writer, who are the co-authors of his chillingly powerful memoir. Of all the position papers, advocacy articles and State Department reports of systematic killing and ethnic cleansing, there is no account like his, from the heart of Darfur's hell and from its poetic soul.

Sitting in the District offices of literary agent Gail Ross, Hari talked for days to Burke and McKenna. "It was like turning reality on its head," McKenna says. "I hope it was cathartic. It was difficult for him and for us, just to hear that he had gone through all this. He would sometimes come close to breaking down, telling us: 'I can't talk about that right now.' "

It was especially trying when Hari spoke of his older brother, who died in 2003 during Hari's last visit to his family's village.

Hari spoke not only of death, but of tender family bonds, familiar customs and an essentially Darfurian way of a life for which he still yearns.

One of only a handful of Darfur refugees in the United States as part of a special resettlement program run by the State Department, Hari lives in Baltimore. The survivors in his family remain in Darfur. He is studying English to go to college and would like to spend a year or so here before returning to help translate the continuing Darfur story, "to give a little bit of life to my people and my land."

* * *

They hung him upside down from a tree. "Well, this is not so bad," he thought at first, until his eyes felt as if they were popping out and his head began to throb.

He was acting as a guide and translator for an American journalist, Paul Salopek, on assignment for [National Geographic](#), when rebels captured them both. He knew the rebels, who were Zaghawa like him but were fighting with Sudanese government troops. This was the hardest pill Hari had to swallow, he says: the betrayal of his own people.

When his captors prepared to kill him, he repeatedly demanded that they bring him a blindfold because he could not look them in the eye as they aimed to shoot him with the same guns used to menace and displace their own relatives. Hari had met the rebels' dispersed families in refugee camps, where whole villages from Darfur formed a maze of misery that had migrated to Chad.

The rebels did not execute Hari. Three times, they offered him the chance to escape. But he refused to leave Salopek and his driver behind. Hari took pride in always getting his khawajas safely back to Chad, across the Sudanese border, where they started.

He spent 56 days in captivity that included brutal interrogations and beatings.

Salvation came when [New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson](#) traveled to Sudan to intervene on their behalf with

[Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir](#). Salopek was from New Mexico, and Richardson intended to gain his freedom. But just as Hari had refused to abandon his companions, so, too, did Salopek. Their seal of solidarity was unbreakable.

Last month, Hari and Richardson appeared together during a book event for "The Translator" at the Finnish Embassy in the District and told how Hari's captivity ended.

"I could see the bond between the three. None was going to leave without the other," Richardson told the embassy gathering. Of Hari, he said: "This guy has a lot of dignity, he has a presence. He walks tall."

Hari beamed and told Richardson, "You have saved my life. Maybe, I would have died." His father, who had stopped eating while Hari was in captivity, died soon after his son's release.

* * *

He had traveled far and longed for the comfort of family life. He missed those carefree days of escaping the desert heat in the cool grottoes of home, and those days when he would ride Kelgi, his camel, to the town of Kutum with his father to stock up on staples and cloth. His father had 100 camels, but Kelgi was Hari's favorite. He took him grazing with other village boys. When he got lost, he often fell asleep against Kelgi's big, warm hump. "Kelgi knew the way home and I would wake up to find myself inside the house already," Hari says.

As a teen, Hari wanted to see the world beyond his small village. So after high school, he took off for points north -- Libya and [Egypt](#) -- where he earned his keep as a waiter for several years. In search of higher wages, he crossed into [Israel](#) illegally, where he landed in jail.

Finally deported, he spent several months in a Cairo prison. He feared he would be turned over to Sudanese authorities, but was instead put on a plane headed to Chad.

It was 2003, the start of the worst chapter in the Sudanese government's violence against Darfurians, and refugees had begun streaming across the border into Chad. The first thing Hari did was to travel home to check on his family.

But when he reached his village, it was bracing for an attack, and his parents, sisters and brothers had separated. His mother went in one direction with her grandchildren, and his father headed elsewhere with his livestock. His older brother remained and prepared for battle with rebels who slung their guns and swords over the backs of their camels, both man and beast bristling to fight.

On camelback, Hari and other young men helped villagers in their frenzied flight from the violence. "I found we had a lot of refugees, women, children, entire families moving into or close to Chad. They needed food and shelter and I wanted to help warn the international community about what was happening. We had a war and villages were being attacked. Huts were getting burnt," he says.

"I felt I did not have any other choices. I had to do this. I knew I would be captured or shot, but this was, this is the right thing. I knew the bad days would come, women raped and children killed. And those who are still alive are not with their families anymore, or happy like they used to be. I cannot keep silent," he says.

Back in Chad, he obtained false papers as a Chadian and went to a hotel in N'Djamena looking for reporters. He spotted a white man. The foreigner, it turned out, was looking for someone to translate Zaghawa. He was part of a team of investigators from the State Department and the [United Nations](#) trying to determine whether the Darfurian violence could be legally defined as genocide.

Thus began Hari's career as a translator -- helping to gather the stories of survivors in the refugee camps and helping U.S. researchers in their travels through Darfur.

* * *

But Hari kept wondering about his own family. He knew where his surviving brothers, his parents and two of his sisters were, but the fate of one sister and her children was unknown amid the hundreds of thousands of villagers who had come under attack.

Little boys he talked to in his older sister's village described how the bombing there had started, how the birds fluttered up from the trees and flew away. "This is the first thing we noticed," one boy told Hari. And then the villagers heard the distant rumble of helicopter gunships.

The villagers swarmed out of their dwellings and ran to refugee camps where flimsy tents flapped in the desert winds. They, too, had migrated from their nests like "birds of passage," Hari writes in the book.

In the past, news of danger or auspicious events traveled as communal code through the roll of distant drums. Hari remembers them. He had heard them echo through the rain from a haven of huts that would have taken three days and three nights to reach by foot.

Now a new code was working its way into Darfurians' instincts for survival. Riding in jeeps, he would lean out to look for telltale trails in the desert sand. Tracks from big tires meant government trucks and death, he wrote. Large numbers of fresh horse tracks meant the Janjaweed and death.

Even the terrain had changed. Trees that once provided shade had gone up in bonfires; wells were cratered and charred. The desert landscape that once was his playground now crackled and crunched with human bones. And the ever-present stench of death made him retch.

He knew how these sights and sounds could sting the souls of hardened journalists, so he never traveled without a bottle of whiskey stashed in his duffel bag to help reporters who went on these harrowing trips. He, too, would down a few shots. "It helped me forget a little, go to bed, if just for three or four hours, to have the strength to get up the next day. I still have to do that sometimes."

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