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Charles Larson - No one to tell the truth

Published: April 11, 2008

"The Translator: A Tribesman's Memoir of Darfur"

The word no one wants to hear: Genocide.

Germany and six million victims.

Rwanda, Clinton's most egregious foreign-policy failing.

Darfur – another strange-sounding name.

Always the deniers and the mantra: "never again."

Genocide: too familiar to compel us to act. (It is always safer to watch.) Genocide's perfection: no survivors, no one to tell the story about what we would prefer to ignore. No one to tell the truth.

Fortunately, truth has a habit of leaking out. As Daoud Hari states at the end of his unflinching story, "The non-Arab traditional Africans of Darfur are being systematically murdered and displaced by [President Omar Hassan al-Beshir's] government of Sudan as part of a program to remove political dissent, remove challenges to power, make way for unobstructed resource development, and turn an Arab minority into an Arab majority."

And he asks, "Can you do that in this century? Can you solve all your problems by killing everyone in your way? That is for the world to decide. Deciding if and when the traditional people of Darfur can go home will also decide if genocide works or not, and therefore whether it will happen elsewhere again in the world. It seems to me that this is a good place to stop it forever."

Daoud Hari is not only courageous but lucky, a man with nine lives. A tribal Zaghawan, he had learned both Arabic and English as a young man and once he fled the rampaging Janjaweed escaped the Sudan for the safety of Chad. From there he eventually became a translator, sneaking back into the troubled area of his people, in Darfur, repeatedly, in order to aid both NGOs and journalists. When asked by his first employers why he would even venture back into such hell, he responded that he was not safe as long as his people were not.

As a child, Daoud had grown up close to the land. He speaks reverently of his family, of his village, of camels. And then the day of his uprooting. He writes chillingly of getting lost in a desert sandstorm – the sands so shifting that without knowledge of the stars, one would not survive. "Be careful: some people die because they look to a distant mountain as their guide, but the wind moves these mountains around; you might travel in circles until your eyes close and your heart withers. It says everything about this land to know that even the mountains are not to be trusted, and that the crunching sound under your camel's hooves is usually bones, hidden and revealed as the wind pleases."

Daoud uses a pseudonym (Suleyman Abakar Moussa) and tells his employers that he is Chadian. The pseudonym is also important – along with false papers – because if he is caught inside Sudan, he knows his fate will be death. During the half a dozen trips back into Darfur, he describes the unspeakable violence, particularly against women and children. Many journalists, coming upon massacre sites become so ill that they need immediate hospitalization. And everywhere there is unbelievable horror.

If Daoud is uncompromising in his report of the mass murders by the Janjaweed (with the official blessing of the Beshir government), he is also unafraid to speculate about the causes of the terrible atrocities, especially torture.

"Torture was the popular new thing, because Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib were everywhere in the news at the time, and crazy men like this were now getting permission to be crazy."

This disturbing insight comes during his sixth trip into Darfur, with the American journalist Paul Salopek, when the two of them and their driver are captured and are about to be tortured – ironically by men of his own tribe who have changed their loyalties and joined the government forces.

A series of rapid reversals save his life but finally it is the intervention of powerful people in the American government who are able to put pressure on the Beshir government to release Paul Salopek. To the latter's credit, he refuses to be "rescued" without Daoud and their driver.

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Revealing this piece of information in no way diminishes the tension of the first-person narrative, since we know from his opening words that Daoud Hari somehow survived. Furthermore, Salopek's decision not to ignore his African companions provides an insight into what should be world's response to the unfolding crisis in Sudan. Why are so many governments (particularly of Arab countries) so silent in the face of such inhumanity? Does the détente between the West and the Muslim world also have to be fought in the villages of Sudan?

What is unclear about Daoud's question, addressed to people in the West? "Imagine if all the systems and rules that held your country together fell apart suddenly and your family members were all – every one of them – in a dangerous situation. It was like that. You cannot be thinking of yourself at such a time; you are making calculations of where your friends and family members might be, and where they might go. You are recalculating this constantly, deciding what you might do to help them."

After World War II, information slowly leaked out that the Vatican could have paid a more active role to prevent the extermination of so many Jews. While Bill Clinton slept, the genocide in Rwanda mushroomed out of control. Terry George, the director of Hotel Rwanda, has said that the genocide could have been stopped by a body as small as the District of Columbia police force. These are the lessons and the excuses of the past that few people want to confront in Darfur today.

The answer resides in the parable Daoud Hari uses at the end of his introduction to *The Translator*, his incredible plea for understanding:

"Near my village is a beautiful mountain we have always called the Village of God. Though the Muslim religion is practiced throughout our area both by indigenous Africans like me and by Arab nomads, it is also true that our people, especially our young people, have always gone up on this mountain to put offerings into the small holes of the rocks.

Meat, millet, or wildflowers may be placed in these holes, along with letters to God, thanking Him or asking Him please for some favor. These gifts and notes have been left here long before the newer religions came to us.

For a young man or woman, a letter may ask that some other young person be chosen for his or her mate. It might be a letter asking that a grandfather's illness be cured, or that the rainy season be a good one, or that a wedding be beautiful and the marriage successful. Or it might simply ask that the year ahead be good for everyone in the village below.

So here it is, God: I am up there now in my heart, and I put this book in Your mountain as an offering to You. And I praise You by all Your Names, and I praise our ancient Mother of the Earth, and all the Prophets and wise men and women and Spirits of heaven and earth who might help us now in our time of need."

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"The Translator: A Tribesman's Memoir of Darfur," by Daoud Hari, as told to Dennis Burke and Megan M. McKenna. New York: Random House, 204 pp., \$23

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