

“But They Can’t Manage to Silence Us:” Mahjoub Sharif’s Prison Poem “A Homesick Sparrow” (1990) as Resistance to Political Confinement

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This article discusses the poem “A Homesick Sparrow” by the Sudanese poet Mahjoub Sharif (1948-2014) in the frame of recent cultural policies in Sudan. The poem was written in 1990, one year after the military coup that brought the present regime to power, while the poet was imprisoned together with others regarded as oppositionists to the new Islamist government. It reflects not only a specific, critical positioning against contemporary political events, but can be read in the context of a long-term, often harsh nego-

tiation of the modalities of public appearances and utterances in Sudan. In this sense, the poetic language and the way it was brought outside the prison walls are understood here as a performative act of political resistance against governmental attempts of peripheralization vis-à-vis cultural policies aiming at homogenization and centralization through political Islam.

Keywords: Sudanese Poetry; Cultural Policy; Political Islam; Public Spaces; Political Prisoners.

Introduction¹

On 30 June 1989, a military coup in Sudan brought a regime under Omar Al-Bashir to power, which publically displayed itself as a nationalist revolution empowering Islamic state-building. However, under this umbrella the regime established structures of domination, building on an economic-political network protected by militant security forces.²

One of the first steps after the coup was the wide-ranging arrest of potential oppositionists to the new rulers. Among them was the poet and teacher Mahjoub Sharif. His imprisonment was brought to some international attention when Amnesty International, Africa Watch and BBC’s *Prisoners of Consciousness* series took up his case at the beginning of the 1990s.³ Not only for his poems, but also for his political views associated with the Sudanese Communist Party, Mahjoub Sharif was imprisoned in August 1989 and suspended from his work as a teacher in accordance with the far-reaching removal of oppositionists from public service “for the public good” (*lil-ṣāliḥ al-‘ām*), as the new regime called it.

Mahjoub Sharif was born around 1950 in a rural area of the Gezira region east of the Nile.⁴ Early in his childhood, he experienced both, rustic life during his primary school education and urban surroundings

in Omdurman, where his family engaged in petty trade. Instead of following this profession, he entered the Maridi Institute for Teachers in Khartoum and remained a primary school teacher for most of his professional career. His creative methods of teaching Arabic are among the things most remembered by those who knew him during those years. But the periods when he could be active as teacher were cut short by repeated imprisonments, which started in 1971, two years after Colonel Jaafar Nimeiri took power through a military coup, toppled only in 1985 by a popular uprising.

Mahjoub Sharif, still a young man at that point, initially hailed the coup as a possible alternative to the stagnant bickering of the old-established parties that were built on authoritarian models of religious leadership and had failed to establish a working democracy in the years before. However, the violent nature of the new regime soon caused him to change his position completely, and already in 1971 he reminded in a poem that “[b]ullets aren’t the seed of life” (qtd. in *Africa Watch*).

In the following three decades, political imprisonment became a common reaction to his poetic creations, closely connected to his social and political activism; up to 1996 he was incarcerated ten times for periods ranging between a few months

to three years. In addition, he was frequently forbidden to work in public service, both under Nimeiri and under Al-Bashir, while the latter regime restricted his mobility to the capital, Khartoum, until 1998. The performance of his poetry in public media is subject to selective censorship up to now, although some musicians continue to defiantly make the point of performing songs based on his forbidden poems in their concerts, while some poems and songs became an integral part of Sudanese popular culture.

It is this translation of political criticism and defiance against censorship into the creation, performance and distribution of poetry that is the focus of the following article. Its central argument is that the prison poetry of Mahjoub Sharif is not just an expression of a will to resist political oppression, but that the circumstances of its creation and distribution made it a performative act of political resistance and political communication. At the same time, the poetry’s aesthetic characteristics can be seen not only as a functional tool for such an act of defiance; they also carried, to its own end, emotional content that was formed by the same circumstances. This prison poetry is therefore neither merely social commentary, nor merely intentional political communication, nor merely intellectual and aesthetic

reflection of a state of mind in prison. Its subsequently rich connotations provide a fruitful entry point into a wider analysis of socio-political and cultural history, as it both reflects and reaches beyond the condition of confinement.

Several studies of prison writing have moved beyond accepting the institution “prison” as the only relevant context and focused on the relation of “inward/outward.” While an “anthropology of prisons” can attempt to engage with the inner life of this institution (Rhodes), the harsh marking of societal boundaries intended by its establishment can also be scrutinized with a look at the consequences of a failure to have the intended effect. In political imprisonment, related to the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate political action, inducing such a failure can be seen as an act of political resistance, which questions both the coercive effectiveness and the righteousness of the institution. By focusing on an incarcerated writer whose artistic work was continued, not started, in prison, this article relates to a number of works on political prison literature that combine aesthetic aspects of such literature with issues of human rights (Wu), literary documentation (Elimelekh) and intellectuals’ involvement in political conflicts (Cooke; Sakr).

In this direction, Abou-bakr noted that “[t]he political prisoner [...] is often preoccupied with continuing the struggle inside the prison and with sustaining communication with the world outside”, but the “act of communication might be blurred by the absence of a reader” (261). Furthermore, the exceptional reality of imprisonment may lead to a kind of writing “against what the audience is familiar with as characterizing mainstream discourse” (262). In the case presented here, however, the success in finding an immediate receptive audience in prison mates and even among the prison’s staff is argued to constitute an act of political resistance that includes more than the single poet himself, and subsequently also left the prison walls. Rather than just declaring the writer an “anti-hero,” who rejects a differentiation between himself and “the people” suffering outside the prison (285), performance and distribution of poetry, both oral and

A homesick sparrow,
Perches on the heart’s window;
With longing eyes,
It cranes out to glance at the houses,
At the distant skies,
Waiting for a cheerful morning,
With promises laden,

written, will be shown to place the poet into a pro-active process of political communication that does not strive for an anti-language, but, on the contrary, for colloquial intelligibility. In this sense, the poem discussed here is an example of an artistic production which took place inside a prison and directly relates behavior and relations inside this institution with the societal developments outside it.

A Homesick Sparrow⁵

When Mahjoub Sharif was arrested, his family was not officially informed about where he was taken. After two years, the family was allowed to visit him in a prison in Port Sudan. They had already learned that he spent these years in different prisons, the first of which was Kober Prison in Khartoum North, then Suakin in eastern Sudan, and finally Port Sudan on the Red Sea. Friends who had been released, and sympathetic guards who had visited the

family on their vacations provided this information.

When the family stayed in Port Sudan with relatives and friends, they heard new poems—some set to music—which Mahjoub Sharif had created during these two years, among them a poem called *Al-aṣḫūr al-ḥanīn* (“A Homesick Sparrow”), written in Suakin in 1990. Suakin, much more isolated than Khartoum North and Port Sudan, is very hot and humid, and the prison was built on an elevated spot that concentrated both the heat and humidity in the cells, added to by swarms of flies and bats. It had been previously closed for sanitary reasons, but was reopened by the new regime, whose prisoners had filled all other prisons. The prisoners were sleeping on the ground, surrounded by dust and the dirt of animals. In this situation, the poem was created in form of a letter to those outside:⁶

رك عصفور الحنين 1
في شبابيك الفؤاد 2
حنّ تاوق للبيوت 3
للسماوات البعاد 4
الصباح طالع رباح 5

To land like a turban,
 On the shoulder of the homeland.
 With each coup in a dark abyss we plunge,
 The heavy-footed junta besiege our songs,
 They agitate our inkpot, confiscate its internal peace.
 They poison the cheerful spring,
 And place their muzzles on everything.
 What a pleasant dream they disfigure,
 In the eyes of each mother.
 But they can't manage to silence us. Never.
 In their cells we sip,
 The perseverance syrup,
 To remain bold and steadfast.
 O my times in incarceration
 O my pain of longing and torment,
 If I lose touch with you,
 Who, in this time of coercion, would I be?
 If I lose touch with you I will betray
 The little ones yet to come,
 If I lose touch with you,
 Conceited and self-centered I will become.
 So long as I have a voice in my chords,
 What prison—or even death—can silence me?
 No. We will never succumb.
 They have no say
 In our destiny. No they don't.

عمه في كتف البلاد 6
 كلما عسّس بيان 7
 عسكرو حول النشيد 8
 عكرو صفو المداد 9
 سمنو النبع السعيد 10
 كمنو كل الجهات 11
 فصدو اللحم الجميل 12
 في عيون الأمهات 13
 نحن كل المستحيل 14
 يجبرونا علي السكات 15
 نشرب الصبر الجميل 16
 في زنازينهم ثبات 17
 يا مشاوير السجون 18
 يا تباريح الحنين 19
 لو شفيت منك بكون 20
 في زمان القهر مين 21
 لو شفيت منك بخون 22
 الصغار القادمين 23
 لو شفيت منك طغيت 24
 أو بقيت إنسان ضنين 25
 طالما في الحلق صوت 26
 ياتو سجن و ياتو موت 27
 لا و لا لن نستكين 28
 إنهم لا يملكون 29
 أن نكون أو لا نكون 30

We are the ones who bring life
 To the dead pores of dormancy.
 O my sweetheart,
 My life partner,
 In the high regards I will always keep you.
 O my beloved daughters,
 Nestled in the shade of the kind people.
 O the luminous space in the eye range:
 Warm me up with your peaceful greetings,
 With your letters.
 Give my greetings to my peers;
 Give my greetings to the clouds;
 Give my greetings to the earth;
 Give my greetings to the crowds;
 And to the words of romance,
 In the notebooks of the youth.

Interpretation

The addressees of this letter are related in multiple ways to its composer, both on a societal and on an individual level. The letter starts with an image (lines 1-6), a view out of the prison window that is deeply entrenched with the inner life (*fu'ād*) of the prisoner, longing for and belonging to both private dwellings (houses) and a widely shared homeland (*bilād*), for which hopes and visions are far

from being achieved ("distant skies"). In the lyrical imagery, the fulfilment of these hopes is symbolized by a "cheerful morning," whose dawn is likened to a turban, a long shawl widely used as a headgear, its end resting easily on the homeland's shoulder, a frequently used allusion to Sudan's mountains and the banks of the White and the Blue Nile.

After this image, drawn in ellipses, a we/they dichotomy is introduced, earlier in

the translation than in the original (line 14). The perpetrators in this dichotomy are shown as repeatedly striking militant force that puts limitations and obstacles to free expression, represented by singing and writing. Expressions of joy are silenced, aspirations are negated, and dreams for a better future, here seen through mothers' eyes, are diminished. This attempt at censorship and prohibition is defied by a "we," the voice of protest, confined but

نحن صناع الحياة	31
في مسامات السكون	32
يا حبيبة قلبي يا	33
يا رفيقة دربي يا	34
يا الحبيبه لما بتهون	35
يا البنيات الهناك	36
في ضرا الشعب الحنون	37
يا مساحات الضياء	38
في مسافات العيون	39
زملوني بالسلام	40
دثروني بالخطاب	41
سلمولي علي الصحاب	42
سلمولي علي السحاب	43
سلمولي علي التراب	44
سلمولي علي الزحام	45
سلمولي علي الغرام	46
في كراريس الشباب	47

patient and outspoken. As opposed to the wider content of “we” in the lines before, which encompassed all affected by the military dictatorships, the grouping seems now concentrated inside the prison, where struggle is the uniting element and “beautiful patience” (*al-ṣabr al-jamīl*), freely translated as “perseverance syrup,” is a drink shared by the inmates. At the same time, the implied close relation between political confinement inside and outside the prison dissolves and defies this difference.⁸

Rather cherishing than devaluing imprisonment, a further part (lines 18-27) addresses, after an assumed future release, the time of detention as an intrinsic part of an “I,” whose social responsibility to speak out is closely connected to it and not limited to the present generation, but also the “little ones still to come.” Mahjoub Sharif represents this period here as a moral reminder that the challenge of the right to public presence and public speech should not be seen as threatened, but confirmed and strengthened by this period.⁹

The return to the dichotomy of we/they (lines 28-32) carries the refusal not only of submission, but of any kind of leader or ownership over “our” lives by those who claim both. The stress of liveliness coming from “us” also implies, through the antag-

onistic construction, an aura of death surrounding “them.” This central invocation of an antagonistic grouping is made deliberately clear and unmasked. Being intended for wide distribution and mobilization, the avoidance of heavy symbolism and the straightforward, colloquial wording in the poem’s central parts aim to facilitate an audience that counters the deliberate attempts to limit public appearance of ‘unauthorized’ cultural productions. The rhythm of the lines is intensified here through the repeated usage of *lā* (“no”), and the latter two lines were often repeated by the poet during performances:

lā wa lā nistakīn (literally: “No, and we will not surrender”)

’innahum lā yamlikūn (literally: “They do not own/decide”)

’an nakūn aw lā nakūn (literally: “If we are or [if] we are not”)¹⁰

It is important to note that an appreciation of this aesthetic quality is not peripheral to understanding the political potential of this and similar poems.¹¹ Mahjoub Sharif’s poems cover a wide range of formats, from songs for children to elegies calling for revolution. But most poems share a poetic language that is concomitantly based on colloquial Sudanese Arabic, playfully rhythmic and associative usage of sounds and images, as well as a persis-

tent moral substructure. In this way they form a body of socially and politically engaged cultural production, which displays, as Magdi El Gizouli summarized it, an “extraordinary capacity to imagine another future in feather-light lines, suitable even for the playful entertainment of children.”

It is not surprising, though, given its context of creation, that the antagonistic terms under which the military coup of 1989 and the form of political Islam following it has taken place is reflected in the poem’s confrontational dichotomy. What is to be stressed here, however, is that the poem represents not just simple resistance against being put in prison, but a challenge to the attempt to criminalize and thereby marginalize certain forms and contents of publicized expressions. It can thus be seen as resistance to having a fundamental societal difference between legitimate and illegitimate ideas in public spaces enforced through the threat and physical removal of persons contesting centrally, ideologically defined boundaries of such legitimacy.¹²

For such resistance, active intellectual, emotional and communicational links between inside and outside the prison are of essential importance. After the statements of defiance, the letter turns to the sphere of the private—to wife and chil-

dren, who featured often in Sharif's poems as the central emotional reference point, also reminding of the impact of political violence on personal lives.¹³ His wife and children were themselves subjected to eviction from their home and exclusion from the government's food ration system. The—at this point assumed, hoped-for—solidarity shown to them by friends is translated here into the larger term *sha‘b* (“community, people”).

The strain put on personal relations through enforced distance, as well as the uncertainty about each other's situation, is an intentional element of imprisonment and was reportedly repeatedly stressed during interrogations and torture. But even a certain degree of contact constituted an intended basic element of a prisoner's existence—shared suffering being one of the anticipated emotional consequences leading to behavioral changes among sympathizers. This shows the importance of the appearance not only of those close persons in the letter, but also of them being safe among supporters, an assumption that may have had an almost therapeutic effect.¹⁴

In the last part of the letter (lines 42-47), greetings widen the view again to the social environment, the sky and the earth—resounding skies and homeland—and the crowds, the envisaged “we” of the future,

while ending on a lighter note, reminding of the beauty of expressions still exchanged between young people, in spite of the muzzles.

However, resistance against confinement was not limited to the content of the poem as an expression of the will to resist. As much as controlled fluctuation between uncertainty about and contact to the “life outside” was tried to be used to strengthen the impact of imprisonment, the ways in which Mahjoub Sharif's poems got outside the prison speak not only of the failure of the regime to completely control political and social relations, but also of transgressions beyond the roles assigned to individuals in its executive system.

One of the ways came to use when there was a spontaneous chance, such as a friend being released. Since he was not allowed to have pen and paper, Mahjoub Sharif wrote down what he had composed on the inside of his clothes (a white long gown, called *jellabiya*, or a shirt), on matchboxes or on cigarette packs.¹⁵ In this process, the help of guards, apart from other prisoners and visitors, was also essential, as they sometimes brought ball-point pen cartridges, which were hidden in the elastic band of trousers or in food. The written poems were brought outside in similar secret ways: “A Homesick Sparrow” was brought outside the prison with

a *jellabiya*, into which an imprisoned tailor had sewn it.

However, writing was always the more dangerous way of conserving poems in prison, so Mahjoub Sharif very early adopted oral ways of transfer, having already been before prison an oral poet who was able to recite most of his poems of a more than forty-year period of work. His way of composing and distributing poems started with small elements, verses, which grew over time to the whole poem. He would repeat the parts he was comfortable with loudly, in his cell, in the prison yard, or in the bathroom, so all prisoners and guards would listen to them repeatedly and memorize them. When a poem was finished, he would go around declaiming it with clapping hands and stamping feet, marking the rhythm, which always was a central element of his poems. This made them also easy to adapt as songs, which would become an essential part of cultural life in the prisons he spent time in.¹⁶

This oral way marked further the boundaries of oppression, as it allowed poems to travel through the heads of other people, be they fellow prisoners or guards. This symbolic breakdown of prison walls was also perceived by the members of the national security (National Intelligence and Security Service, NISS), and Mahjoub

Sharif was repeatedly subjected to beatings on the head—both as a physical and symbolic punishment—and confined to solitary cells. At the same time, support was extended not only by individual members of national security, but, in case of the prison in Kober, by the prison director himself, showing the permeability of the ideologically drawn boundaries and the roles by which they were attempted to be institutionalized.

Against this background, the societal vision and the moral values embedded in the poem are made more urgent through its transportation into a present “we” that is already in the position to speak as a group. Such values—love for one’s country, the beauty of solidarity and reciprocity, affectionate family relations, even the aesthetics of words and sounds—can be shared and identified with across a wide range of social actors as good values, thus creating an inclusive social space.¹⁷ A strong anti-violence and anti-censorship stance is built as the only legitimate way towards living these values, thereby converting the attempted criminalization of this cultural production into a positive value of resistance, or at least, in the eyes of those on the other side of the bars, into a moment of confusion over the contradiction between the charges against the prisoner and the values shared with him.

Contextualization

The features of Mahjoub Sharif’s poem presented here are only one of many diverse directions poetic production took in Sudan during the 20th century. Covering a wide range of classical, neo-classical, folk, religious, symbolic and surreal poetry,¹⁸ this production had varied considerably in its relation to ruling forces in the country. Sudanese poetry during colonial times, for instance, took both supportive and antagonistic stances, increasingly formulated into nationalist terms, which continued to be used after independence.¹⁹ In a wider discussion of Sudanese poetry, Soghayroon located Mahjoub Sharif’s poetry in the aftermath of political poetry born during a popular uprising in October 1964 and as part of both literary and colloquial style used to express popular discontentment with autocratic rule since the 1970s (183-87).

The detailed study necessary to analyze the social, political and emotional relationships involved here cannot be put forward in the frame of this article. What is important to note for the sake of the poem’s interpretation in view of cultural policies in Sudan after 1989, is the specific construction of a “we” that is taking place. Such a “we” is presented as an existing group with a unified stand against an oppressive rule. In fact, the mobilization of such a

group, intellectually and emotionally, can be regarded as an underlying function of this poem, especially considering its historical background in protest poetry.

Mahjoub Sharif often highlighted in his poems the need for democratic rule and respect for cultural diversity, which put him in clear opposition to autocratic one-party rule and political Islam. Even one year after his death in April 2014, members of the popular musical group *‘Igid al-Jalād* received threats from the NISS for performing songs based on his political poems. Thus, while his poems do not necessarily lead to large-scale political mobilization—though they were an audible part of the popular uprising in 1985—they are obviously perceived as potential threats to the status quo, both under previous and present autocratic regimes.

At the same time, some of his poetic expressions were used by the ruling party itself, such as “We Will Build It” (*Ḥanabnīhu*) during the 2015 National Congress Party election campaign, from a poem also included in the “Prisoner of Consciousness” campaign in the 1990s. Turning around what Magdi El Gizouli had called making Sharif’s poems “part of the politically erotic repertoire of opposition congregation,” this appropriation of poetic political language by changing its context reminds of its inevitable ambigui-

ity: it is exactly the constitution of which “we” will build which kind of state that remains violently contested.²⁰

As matters stand, this contestation has already broken Sudan apart when South Sudan separated in July 2011, a process that can serve here to provide more context to this appropriation of “we.” Northern Sudan’s President Omar Al-Bashir was greeted in Juba with waving flags proclaiming “separation” and “secession” when he visited South Sudan on 4 January 2011 (Birungi). At the same time, high-ranking politicians from the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), ruling in South Sudan, traveled the country to encourage votes for independence in the referendum on 9-15 January 2011. The referendum’s result in favor of separation sparked much enthusiasm—a citizen of Juba was quoted saying that “all South Sudanese [celebrated] every night until morning” (al-Samany)—and the official numbers of votes for independence was said to have reached nearly 99%. For different reasons, proponents of exclusionary Islamic orders in northern Sudan celebrated the result as well.

The referendum was followed by high hopes for the ‘youngest nation on earth;’ South Sudan’s first President Salva Kiir Mayardit called it “a dream that has come true” in his inaugural address on 9 July

2011. However, it soon became clear that the basic challenges of people in northern and South Sudan did not disappear with a new border line on the map, and that many of the challenges were not as different as suggested by such a line. In South Sudan, the public façade of liberation gave way to violent struggles for power, exploding into a full-scale war in December 2013.

The ruling party in northern Sudan, the National Congress Party, repeatedly announced a shift from the diversity-oriented Interim Constitution of 2005 after separation, highlighting a threat to “deviant” ways of living and talking in public. President Omar Al-Bashir did not even wait for the referendum to declare the end of cultural diversity in the country in favor of a sharia-based Arab-Muslim constitutional order. His statement responded to criticism directed at one of the few examples of related policies that reached international platforms via YouTube: namely, a police officer filming the flogging of an allegedly adulterous woman in December 2010. While challenges to the workings of a governmental system were turned here into an issue of cultural and national identity, this system was in fact criticized as an oppressive security apparatus protecting the political status quo.

Regarding South Sudan, several legal steps and public statements made a confrontational approach clear. A presidential decree on 9 June 2011 excluded all so-called Southerners from work in the northern government, extended in July to all jobs throughout the country.²¹ Dual citizenship was long denied and became in 2012, after long negotiations, part of a Four Freedoms Agreement that still awaits implementation. In South Sudan, many northern Muslims were reported to fear repression after the separation, and, indeed, general sentiments of xenophobia swept through the country about to form.

Confrontation and confusion intensified for those about to be regarded as “Southerners” and thus citizens of a different state. But apart from unresolved legal questions, the separation also posed a personal dilemma for many people living beyond the north-south dichotomy. The writer Stella Gitano, for example, born in South Sudan but living both in Khartoum and Juba and writing in Arabic, lamented political agendas forcing people to choose sides and summarized the encroachment on her “Arab-African” marriage as follows: “If I stay in the north, I will become a foreigner, and if my husband goes to the south, he will become a foreigner” (Kushkush).

In fact, these seemingly bilateral confrontations covered the complexities of inequality and struggle for emancipation that not only marked many marginalized rural areas throughout northern, western, eastern and central Sudan, but also urban dissidents resisting overbearing and discriminating rule at least since the 1989 coup brought the present regime in power. But instead of a popular uprising or broad social movements, Sudan has seen multiple forms of everyday-life resistance for some decades, whose effects can only be seen in details. While a grim economic decline, high inflation, price hikes, gaps and corruption in public finance marked the years that followed the separation, the question was left open if low-key, fragmented everyday struggles and protests, met with focused brutality by security organs, will remain, or if larger-scale movements, as envisioned in the poem, were about to emerge.

In any case, the regime continued to draw different registers of control and diversion: while it attempted to retain control over media coverage and tried to contain political action at universities and other hot-spots of mobilization, it enhanced the production of political spectacles on “enemies of the state”—the rebels, the South, the West etc. In the meantime, a contest over representation went on: Were pro-

testers and other oppositional voices only a few peripheral disgruntled individuals, maybe even instigated by “the West” or Israel or an unidentified foreign agenda? Or were these the first sparks of a public uprising, eventually growing into burning flames? Is the present central government in Khartoum the outcome of free elections in April 2010 and April 2015, showing the will of the majority? Or is it an extension of the military dictatorship which has been ruling in a way that has crippled public resistance against injustices since grasping power through a coup in June 1989, following in the footsteps of previous authoritarian rulers (General Abboud 1958-1964, Colonel Nimeiri 1969-1985)? What “we” is active here?

These questions can enter public spaces in Sudan often only under existential threats or in disguised form. In this article, such obstacles were treated as part of an ongoing negotiation of what constitutes a legitimate presence in public spaces; more specifically, what kind of ideas are allowed to be expressed or make themselves heard against attempts to prevent them from being heard. While belonging to the larger complex of political participation and modalities of social action in public spaces, the focus was here on an artistic form—the poem—as a vessel, carrying under specific conditions of distribu-

tion ideas that have been challenged in their public presence under two military rulers (Nimeiri, Bashir) by prohibition and imprisonment.

In this sense, the poem discussed here represents reclamation of public space after its occupation by political forces trying to centralize this negotiation by rendering resistance against its policies as peripheral and illegitimate. While some cultural productions have thus been claimed to take, as majority culture, precedent over peripheral minority cultures, a counter-claim is attempted to be positioned here as an integrative public space that is not less nationalist in its political visions, but argues against centralization of cultural production towards the growing integration of diversity into a Sudanese nation.

Seeing the impending separation of South Sudan as a failure in this regard, a 2011 poem expresses Mahjoub Sharif’s disappointment, but also persistent hopes for shared political causes capable of setting “fires” of political resistance across both countries. Rejecting an ethnic or regional definition of such a struggle in favor of an inclusive Sudan, this transcends political developments, from decades past and recent, and furthers both a vision of and an invitation to a “we” that fights for an alternative to divisions used as political tool:

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Mahjoub Sharif

The trees went (extract)

But whatever was,
If citizens by a mark,
If neighbors by a line:
When did you, Nile, become
A number of small streams?
Let us just warm each other, or say
Let us invite each other that day
[When] we ignite the fires.

January 2011 [translation by the author]

Notes

¹ Personal information on Mahjoub Sharif is based on conversations with him and his daughter Mariam, conducted between 2005 and 2015. I thank both for the time and openness they gave me.

² See Simone for a deeper discussion of the origins of the present regime as it is based in clientel structures built up by the National Islamic Front.

³ This was also one of the few instances where some of his poems were translated to English, and the lyrical description of an oppressive security apparatus in "Hey, buffoon! Cling tightly" has been repeatedly quoted; see, for instance, Africa Watch; Ayittey; Verney, Jerome, and Yassin. Amnesty International also mentioned Mahjoub Sharif in previous reports at the beginning of the 1980s; see also Rajab.

⁴ A more detailed biography, mostly written by the author, and further sources can be found in the English and Arabic Wikipedia articles on Mahjoub Sharif.

⁵ This poem has recently been featured in the exhibition "@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz" (September 2014 to April 2015), organized by the Chinese artist and the FOR-SITE Foundation. In the section "Stay Tuned," a voice recording by the poet could be heard while sitting in one of the former prison's cells.

⁶ The English translation was created by Adil Babikir in 2014.

⁷ There are five further lines, which were discovered only in the end of 2014 and are therefore not part of the translation.

⁸ This reminds of the description of Robben Island as "University of Struggle," which was built by prisoners' constant challenge of conditions inside and outside the prison walls, formed into poetry by Dennis Brutus (Buntman 34).

محجوب شريف
من: مرت الأشجار

لكنو مهما كان
لو بالوسم سكان
لو بالرسم جيران
متين بقيت يا نيل
عددا من الخيران
نتدفي بس او قول
نعزم بعض يوم داك
بنولع النيران

يناير 2011

→ ⁹ This focus thus differs significantly from statements of Sudanese dissidents that were mentioned by Hale: "As for their prison days, I often heard the men say that these were the best years of their lives—being among men, telling stories, sharing everything, organizing for their return for freedom" ("Memory" 435). Hale's observation rather points to the gendered experience of inside and outside the prison, and in extension of resistance in general, an aspect vaguely perceptible some lines further below.

¹⁰ This alludes to the Shakespearean wording "to be or not to be," without necessitating an awareness of this allusion for an appreciation of the rhythmic beauty of the lines.

¹¹ Ogunyemi noted about Wole Soyinka's prison poetry that "the poet shamelessly courts the public and so must state his case simply, lucidly, and captivatingly to put his opponents in the wrong" (82). It is not clear in how far "shame" should be an issue here, and the claimed immediate influence on political events in Nigeria seems to simplify historical events. However, both instances show poetry reaching actively out from confinement in a way facilitating broad intelligibility.

¹² See Elinson and Orlando for a similar, though post-prison challenge of the official discourse on the so-called Lead Years in Morocco. Thiong'o (13) spoke broadly about "the physical removal of patriots from the peoples' organized struggles" (qtd. in Abou-bakr 261).

¹³ In other poems, this aspect was center-stage, such as "Waiting For You" (Fi intizārik), written to his wife, and "Mariam and May" (Mariam wa May), written to his daughters. The extension of the personal to the societal reminds of the prison poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz (Coppola).

¹⁴ See the consideration of an emotionally stabilizing function of poetry on political violence in Reynolds et al.

¹⁵ Similarly, Whalen contains on pages xiii-xv letters of imprisoned Irish Republican Laurence McKeown on toilet and cigarette paper, sent in this form to the Irish Press.

¹⁶ See the social function of prison poetry in Sánchez-Flavian.

¹⁷ The stress of people's positive identification with social and natural beauty against an oppressive "them" may also be seen as different from the more aggressive prison poetry of, for instance, Etheridge Knight, although it has a similar communal communicative function (Hill).

¹⁸ Studies on Sudanese poetry written in English are scarce, see Shoush; Hale, "Arts;" Abdel Hai; Jayyusi 452-64; Soghayroon.

¹⁹ Compare, for instance, Muhammad, stressing female poets inciting men to fight against colonial rule, and Sharkey, highlighting poets' compliance with the rulers.

²⁰ Gready reminded in his text on political prison writing under apartheid that the "meaning of the written word, regardless of author, is an approximation, open to interpretation and appropriation" (507). The same can be said about oral communication as well.

²¹ This was legally executed through amendment of the Nationality Act in August 2011.

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