

**SUSTAINING LIVELIHOODS ACROSS THE  
RURAL- URBAN DIVIDE**

**CHANGES AND CHALLENGES FACING THE BEJA  
PASTORALISTS OF NORTH EASTERN SUDAN**

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## Glossary of key terms

### Arabic terms

<i>Amara</i>	land usufruct right given to non- <i>diwab</i> members
<i>Asl</i>	customary right over land
<i>Damar</i>	home area for mobile pastoralists
<i>Deim</i>	suburb
<i>Dhu al Hagg</i>	month of the Islamic pilgrimage
<i>Dhura</i>	sorghum
<i>Hafir</i>	water reservoir
<i>Hawliyya</i>	annual Kurbab celebration
<i>Khawaja</i>	white foreigner
<i>Khor</i>	seasonal stream
<i>Muzawri</i>	worker
<i>Nazir</i>	highest tribal officer
<i>Nazirate</i>	area and population under a Nazir
<i>Omda</i>	middle tribal officer
<i>Omodya</i>	area and population under an <i>omda</i>
<i>Rais</i>	head, chief (e.g. of the work gang on the docks)
<i>Shari'a</i>	Islamic law
<i>Shaikh</i>	lowest tribal officer
<i>Shita'</i>	winter
<i>'Ufra</i>	substance used to make perfume

## **TuBedawiye terms**

<i>Balawiet</i>	name given to non-Beja (esp. northern Sudanese) in Beja territory
<i>Bedawiêti</i>	Beja
<i>Dangeit</i>	customary animal loan arrangement to poorer household
<i>Diwab</i>	lineage, minimal tribal section
<i>Gwadab</i>	symbolic payment for use of land
<i>Kella</i>	work gang on the docks to organise tribal stevedores
<i>Lahagen</i>	gift of animals that a young man receives when he gets married
<i>Sakanab</i>	ritualised greetings used to exchange news and obtain information
<i>Silif</i>	customary law
<i>Tait</i>	gift of animals
<i>TuBedawiye</i>	Beja language
<i>Yahamot</i>	customary animal loan arrangement to poorer household

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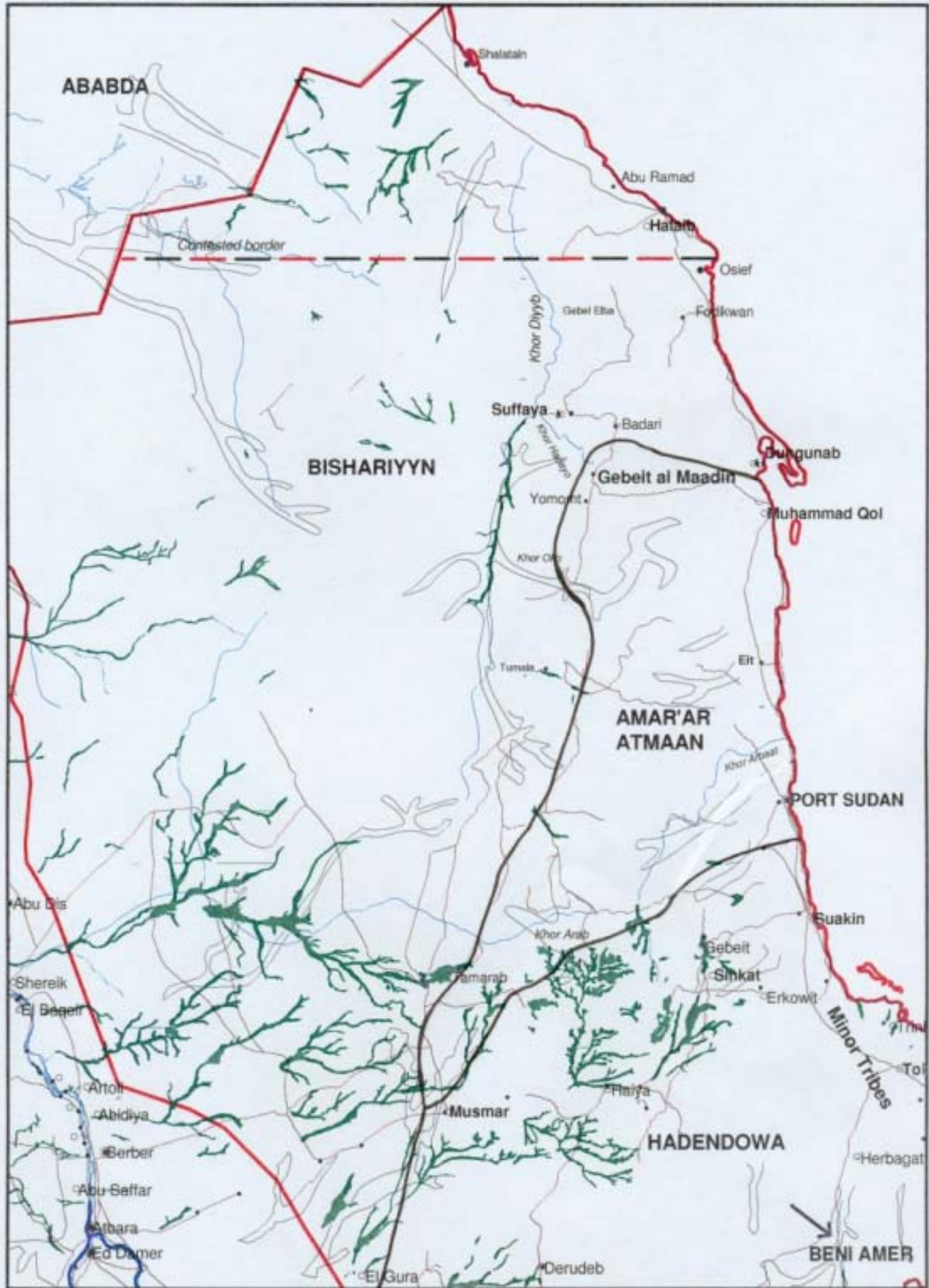
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## Introduction

The Beja are a confederation of tribes united by a common language, *Tu Bedawiye*, and a common segmentary structure, each of which is linked to a common ownership and use of land. The main tribes are the Amar'ar/Atmaan, the Bishariyyn and the Hadendowa, who mostly live in North-Eastern Sudan between the Egyptian and the Eritrean borders (see Map 1), and all speak similar versions of *Tu Bedawiye*. Other minor related groups include the Arteiga, the Kemeilab, the Halanga and the Shayaab. Collectively, the Beja refer to themselves as *TuBedawiye* speakers. *TuBedawiye* is unwritten and represents the northernmost language of the Cushitic family, one of the Semito-Hamitic linguistic groups. Although an increasing number of men (especially in Port Sudan and in the coastal area) also know Arabic, they consider it of secondary importance. The word "Beja" is used in this paper to describe *TuBedawiye* speaking groups.

This paper focuses on the Amar'ar/Atmaan and the Bishariyyn groups. They are pastoral nomads occupying the northernmost area of the Red Sea region, mainly in and around Halaib Province. Camel herding is their main activity although small-stock are increasingly being raised. Subsistence agriculture (mainly *dhura*, a type of sorghum) and fishing are also practised. The decline in productivity of pastoral related activities in the past few years, however, has forced many Bishariyyn and Amar'ar/Atmaan men to look for salaried work elsewhere. The main alternative activity, particularly for the Amar'ar/Atmaan, has been as dock workers in Port Sudan. Although the prospect of earning ready cash has attracted young Amar'ar/Atmaan men to Port Sudan since its establishment in 1909, this trend has taken on alarming proportions in recent years, hindering the ability of the Beja lineages to cope with crises over the long term.

**Map 1** Beja Tribal Territories in and around Halaib Province



This paper examines the transformation of the Beja livelihood system in recent years in response to changing external circumstances, and charts how coping mechanisms have evolved to become adaptive strategies. In particular, the paper examines the abandonment of mobility and the migration of Beja pastoralists to urban centres in Halaib Province itself and to Port Sudan, and analyses the evolution of Beja livelihoods in the city and the nature and the extent of the linkages that people maintain with the rural areas. A brief critique of international development support to Beja pastoralists after the major droughts in the 1980s is then given, followed by a presentation of a number of key policy options, arising from the analysis, which merit consideration by the development community.

The paper is based on extensive field research carried out for a PhD in north-eastern Sudan. The research aimed to demonstrate that new models of development based on an in-depth analysis of pastoralists' realities can be developed to provide a way out from the current impasse associated with pastoral development. The thesis was rooted in local level analysis of Beja pastoralists' livelihood strategies and examined the changes that have occurred over several decades in response to a combination of external factors. Particular attention was paid to the drift into town of mobile pastoralists and the dynamics between the urban and the rural settings in the Beja area. The research examined the attempts at support by outside bodies as well as the strategies that local people have adopted. The implications for policy and practice arising from the analysis of the changing Beja livelihood system were explored in detail in the research and put forward for consideration by development practitioners.



## 1. The Beja: their land, law and lineage

A major factor that structures Beja society is the link between descent and territoriality, which also provides the framework for land use regulations. Although men own and inherit land individually, they aggregate the different portions within a “*structure of segmentary patrilineal descent*” (Morton, 1989:43). As a result, land is spoken of as collectively belonging to a specific *diwab* (lineage). All lineage members have open access to pasture and water sources available on that land, and people are identified by their own lineage territory. Rights to grazing land and wells belong to the *diwab* as a unit. The importance of the *diwab* model is perpetuated outside the tribal territory. In Port Sudan, for instance, dock labour is arranged between several work gangs that often mirror the different *diwabs* of the Bishariyyin and the Amar’ar/Atmaan. Beja political organisation also reflects the importance of their *diwab* based system. The territorial leadership of the *shaikhs* is the direct expression of the segmentary lineage system and it survives in spite of the territorial administrative system (*nazirate* and *omodya*) created in colonial times that is still in place.

The life of all Beja groups is regulated by a customary law known as *silif*. Access to resources for different people (*diwab* members, other Beja people, travellers) is guided by *silif*, as are conflict resolution and major social events (birth, marriage, death). *Silif* is used to regulate access and control reciprocal use of environmental resources. The aim is to protect the environment against over-exploitation. For instance, while it would not be appropriate to cut a green tree for wood, it would be acceptable to pollard a green tree for fodder. Rules are flexible and are negotiated between the Beja through alliances and agreements within or between the different groups, clans or lineages. The *shaiks* usually constitute the “management group” which provides the institutional framework for negotiating such rules. In town *silif* plays a major role in helping to maintain and strengthen relationships between individuals

and between different Beja groups who have become urbanised in Port Sudan.

*Silif* rules also bind people through mutual support and exchange of information that could be useful. The latter is done through a very lengthy greetings ritual that the Beja call *Sakanab*. The most important news concerns rainfall and grazing, information that is crucial to the survival of Beja pastoralists (Morton, 1988:431). People rely on such information for their movements and therefore their informants are obliged by *silif* rules to provide reliable and trustworthy information. News is, for example, also exchanged during *Sakanab* about the availability of work on the Port Sudan docks, the demand for labour in the gold mines in the Red Sea hills and prices of the main staples in Port Sudan market.

Women's roles and position in the community are also defined by *silif* rules. Women are excluded from public decision making and politics, and they cannot normally have access to land and large livestock. If they do manage to gain access to such resources, they are not allowed to exercise any control over them. However, some of these restrictions are loosening up in the coastal area and in Port Sudan, where women are more exposed to outside views and their daughters have more access to education. The great majority of the Beja profess themselves to be Muslim, but the Islam they observe is far from orthodox. Where Muslim prescriptions differ from customary rules, the Beja tend to adhere to *silif*.

## **2. The Beja livelihood system under pressure**

### **Halaib Province: a non-equilibrium environment**

Halaib is the northernmost of the four provinces that make up the Red Sea State in the Sudan, the others being Port Sudan, Sinkat and Tokar. It is subdivided into four Councils: Halaib town (currently under Egyptian control), Osief, Mohammad Qol and Gebeit al Maadin. Although Halaib is the biggest of the provinces (about 50% of the whole territory), it is the least populated with only 5% of the population.<sup>1</sup>

Halaib Province can be divided into three distinct physical areas: the coastal strip, the hilly area and the flat western band. Rainfall in the Province is highly variable in quantity and distribution but two main seasonal trends can be identified on the coast and in the interior hilly area. The coastal plains receive most rainfall in winter (November to January), and heavy dew until the end of April, while the interior hills normally receive rainfall earlier in the year, between July and August. Precipitation both in the hills and on the coast can vary significantly from year to year both in terms of spatial distribution and quantity, with the degree of variability increasing to the north. The mean annual rainfall in the Province ranges between 33mm in Halaib, 40mm in Mohammad Qol and 53mm in Gebeit al Maadin, though there are significant variations from one year to another (Pantuliano, 2000:66).

The vegetational cover in the Province consists of trees, grasses and shrubs of different kinds, depending on the area. The density of the vegetation also varies significantly according to soil type, underground water availability, length of time since the last rains, etc. People met in Mohammad Qol and Gebeit al Maadin have argued that the composition of grass species in the area has significantly altered because of ecological change or human misuse.

PRA exercises have shown that at least seven species<sup>2</sup> have completely disappeared from one or both areas (although some people say the number is higher, around twenty) and there seems to be a trend towards the dominance of a greater proportion of unpalatable species, e.g. *Calotropis Procera*. These data were collected in 1996 at a time of drought. Perennial grass cover had also disappeared in the past in drought periods (1983-85, 1990-92), but reappeared later on after abundant rainfall. However, the seven grasses that were reported to have vanished from the outskirts of Gebeit al Maadin and Mohammad Qol were all last seen at the end of the 1970s. Instead, *Calotropis Procera* seems to be spreading around the two towns to the disappointment of the local pastoralists who regard it as a useless weed.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to emphasise that environmental changes are mainly taking place around the towns. Similar PRA exercises conducted in more remote areas (Badari and Yomomt) have shown that the composition of grass species has not undergone the same degree of alteration. Here, according to the discussants, all species would germinate again on the first abundant rainfall after a period of drought. On the other hand, tree cover loss does appear to be a growing problem all over the Province. A growing urban demand for charcoal and firewood coupled with the need for people to diversify their livelihoods has seen a significant increase in tree cutting over the past twenty-five years.

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<sup>1</sup> This percentage is based on the estimates of the 1993 census, which puts the population of Halaib Province (including the occupied area) at 68,017. More realistic data obtained from United Nations and NGO sources estimate that the number of people living in the territory under the control of the Sudanese government is between 17,000 and 19,000.

<sup>2</sup> These are: *Balanites aegyptica*, 'Laset' (Latin name unknown), *Hyphaene tebaica*, *Zygophilum*, *Crotalaria sudanensis*, *Salsola vercumulata*, *Seteria sp.* (for more details see Pantuliano, 2000:69).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to mention that researchers elsewhere in the Sudan have highlighted the utility of the *Calotropis Procera* in drought years, as in the case of pastoralists in Butana who started to grow it for fodder in 1983-84 (Abbas, 1997:22). In fact, although animals avoid eating its green leaves, these are sought by all livestock when dry. According to Vogt (1995:12), there is a need for education regarding the several applications of this shrub (charcoal, timber, medicines, stuffing), which is often "just looked upon as a useless pest". The main potential it has in the Sudan is to be used for rope-making (Vogt, *ibid.*).

The Beja in Halaib Province have multiple strategies to cope with the complexity and variability of their ecosystem. These strategies, which will be described in detail later in this paper, have always been flexible and dynamic. They have ensured the survival of the Beja pastoral system so far and have allowed people to recover after the frequent droughts and outbreaks of famine that have struck the Province. While there is no doubt that the effectiveness of some of these survival strategies is changing, the reasons behind these changes are debatable. Droughts have often been cited as the main culprit for the recent famines that have affected the Beja. A closer look at the story of droughts and famines in Halaib in this last century will show that climatic changes or droughts cannot be held solely responsible for the decreasing resilience of the Beja pastoral system.

Data from the period between 1953 and 1981 (Cole, 1989) and other sources (Kabbashi, 1992:159-70 quoted in Abdel Ati *et al.*, 1996:40) point to the fact that there has been a cyclical pattern of wet spells followed by dry spells of three to six years in the Red Sea area this century, with some exceptions in the hilly areas where both wet and dry spells have been shorter. In some cases these droughts have been associated with acute food shortages and have occasionally been followed by famine. Food insecurity is chronic in Beja areas because of the nature of the local environment, but famine has usually occurred as a result of a combination of ecological, political and economic factors. Table 1 below lists the major outbreaks of famine since 1890. It elaborates on that of El Siddig (1992) for the Red Sea Province (south of Halaib Province), adding detail about location within Halaib Province and local people's perceptions about the causes of famines. The table was developed through collection of historical profiles from key informants in four locations within the Province.

**Table 1 History of famines in Halaib Province**

Year	TuB. name	Meaning	Location	People's perceptions of causes of famines
1890-94	<i>Sanat sitta</i>	Year 6 of the new century in the Muslim calendar (6: Ar. <i>sitta</i> )	Throughout the Red Sea region	Severe drought combined with crop failures and locust invasion; Beja involvement in the Mahdist war
1925-27	<i>Kurbajet</i>	British authorities used the <i>kurbaj</i> (whip) to keep people in line during relief distribution	Particularly bad in Atbai	Drought combined with post-war decline in livestock prices and tax increase
1940-41	<i>Tu' Tambili</i>	The year when the Amar'ar/ Atmaan first saw cars ( <i>tambili</i> )	Amar'ar/Atm. and Halaib Bishariyyn mostly affected	Drought associated with an outbreak of camel mange
1948-50	<i>Sala Ayuk</i>	The year of the comet (1949)	Badly affected the whole province	No severe drought; famine mainly caused by post-war taxation of the colonies, cereal price inflation and deterioration in terms of trade of livestock against cereals
1952-55	<i>Indilal</i>	The year of the eclipse	Particularly bad on the coast and the eastern hills	Severe drought occurred at a time when people had not yet recovered from the preceding famine
1969-73	<i>Tawai combir or Amrikani</i>	"Cutting Acacia trees", the main coping strategy adopted; American red sorghum distributed as relief	Devastating in the whole province	Very severe drought combined with several livestock epidemics
1983-85	<i>Khawaja, Adarob or Reagan</i>	<i>Khawaja</i> : white man; <i>Adarob</i> : typical Beja name (given to gung-ho aid workers); <i>Reagan</i> : food relief distributed after George Bush visit to the Sudan during Reagan presidency	Devastating throughout the province (90% of livestock lost by the end of 1984)	Severe drought that concluded a period characterised by several small droughts, loss of livestock, high levels of inflation, rise in cereal prices and deterioration in terms of trade of livestock against cereals
1990-92	<i>Fajwa</i> (Arabic)	The "food gap" (name officially used by the government)	Whole province hit, but hills worse affected (Gebeit)	Severe drought (aggravated by high levels of inflation)
1995-96	<i>Fajwa</i> (Arabic)	The "food gap" (name officially used by the government)	Whole province hit, but hills worse affected (Gebeit)	Drought (aggravated by high levels of inflation)

The Beja have over the years applied various mechanisms to overcome frequent drought and outbreaks of famine. However, in the past three decades this system seems to have lost the capacity to secure people's livelihoods and to enable them to recover (Pantuliano, 2000: chapter 3). This trend, however, is not irreversible, but in order to understand how Beja attempts to adapt to the changing circumstances can be supported, it is important to understand the elements of their traditional survival system and the reasons behind its breakdown.

### **History of a negative policy environment**

One of the main contributory factors to the changes that have affected the Beja livelihood system in this last century has been the policies of colonial and independent governments. Where policies have been applied, they have tended to be against the interest of the Beja. The negative policy environment started as early as the Turko-Egyptian domination with the introduction of commercial agricultural schemes on pasture land in the region. This trend was considerably expanded by the British, who established large mechanised schemes to increase agricultural production, especially cotton, in the Gash Delta, alienating much of the key pasture reserves of the Hadendowa to private companies. Subsequent independent governments continued to follow this strategy. This has hindered the capacity of the Hadendowa as well as other Beja groups to fall back on these strategic areas in times of drought, thus undermining their resilience to cope with drought.

The Amar'ar/Atmaan and the Bishariyyn were affected in a different way by British colonisation. The area in which they lived was not suitable for large scale cultivation, but was rich in gold and other minerals that were exploited over a number of years . As a result many pastoralists were drawn to work in the mines while others started to leave the hills to work in Port Sudan as dock labourers or in the Delta for cotton-picking. This exodus of labour from the pastoral system greatly affected Beja traditional coping strategies.

More recently, mobility patterns and access to key resource areas have been restricted as a consequence of conflict and insecurity in the area. The seizure of Halaib town by the Egyptian army in 1994 and the broader conflict over the Halaib triangle has significantly reduced pastoralists' access to key resources.

Other external factors have contributed to the weakening of the Beja livelihood system. The British imposed their Native Administration system on the Beja which did not reflect the established internal structure of the group. The leaders were organised into a hierarchy of administrative units (*hissas*, *omodyas* and *nazirates*) that were supposed to conform to the existing tribal patterns of social organisation. However, in most cases, the units identified did not mirror the indigenous ones. The British administration created units whose size and nature suited their own administrative needs. The system was hierarchical, rigid and did not take into account the essential flexibility of Beja leadership, that had been adapted to the dynamics of pastoral life over the years. As a result, the newly introduced administrative system created profound imbalances in the power system and undermined traditional leadership and the cohesiveness of the *diwab* structure. The consequence of the British policy was the creation of an artificial ruling élite which spent more time fighting among themselves to gain control over tax revenues, land and water resources than in defending the interests of the Beja (Morton, 1989:236, Abdel Ati, 1996a:115). To a large extent, the influence of this élite dwindled following the drought years of the 1980s, as a consequence of their failure to galvanise the delivery of aid by central government and the international donor community in time to avoid the disastrous loss of human life and livestock.

Both colonial and post-independence government policies have contributed to the disruption of their traditional pastoral system. The Beja, like other pastoralists groups in the Sudan, suffered from the inherent biases of independent governments towards settled agriculture, which they perceived



as a necessary step in moving the country forward to become a truly modern nation. In the first two post-independence decades the only policy developments aimed at pastoralists were those which sought to boost livestock production and animal products whilst ensuring that numbers were controlled by steady off-take. Livestock development centres and dairy farms were established in several locations to acquaint nomads with “*proper systems of dairy husbandry and to integrate livestock into the agricultural system*” (Salih, 1990:69).

Latterly, however, it has been the delivery of emergency and development aid following the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s that have a profound impact on Beja livelihood systems. This response was largely spearheaded by international NGOs who, although well-intentioned, failed to strengthen people's livelihood strategies. This issue is further discussed in Section 4 below.

### **Mobility abandoned and changing herd size and composition**

Mobility has always been crucial to the survival of Beja pastoralists. In Halaib Province both "vertical" transhumance between the hills and the coast, and "horizontal" transhumance between the *khors* and the plains, is practised to maximise the use of local resources. Movement is combined with diversification in livestock types. This strategy allows for the use of all available feed sources and helps to minimise the spread of epidemics. However, the nature and the scope of movement of Amar'ar/Atmaan and Bishariyyin pastoralists in Halaib Province and the composition of their herds have undergone profound changes especially in the last three decades.

Although mobility patterns are not uniform for all the Beja groups and sub-groups, some trends can be identified (see Maps 2 and 3). Transhumance for camel herding takes place over three main seasons: the rainy season

(October-March), the dry season (April-June) and a period in July to September when summer rains can be found in the hills. Sheep herding follows similar patterns while goats move only between October and March to catch the winter rains on the coast. According to the Amar'ar/Atmaan and the Bishariyyin, mobility patterns were generally longer in distance and duration until the beginning of the 1970s, because the stock herded was larger and therefore required greater pasture and quantities of water.

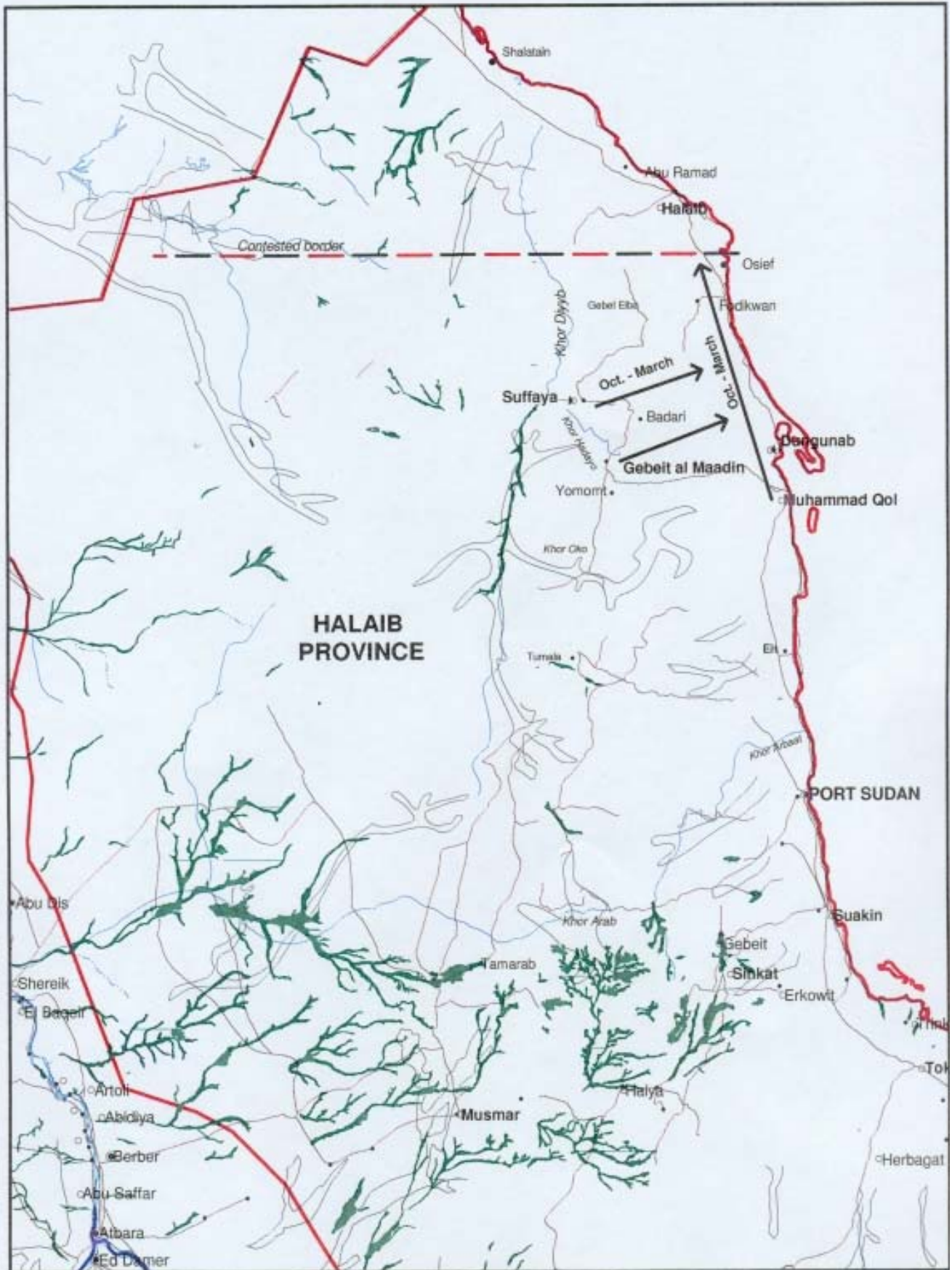
Livestock numbers in the area have been steadily decreasing over the past twenty-five years (ERGO, 1990:53). Some sources (Hjort af Ornäs and Dahl, 1991:146) claim that the downward trend started after the *TuTambili* famine of 1940-41 that particularly affected the Bishariyyin and the Amar'ar of Halaib who lost a large number of animals (especially camels) because of drought and an outbreak of mange. Unfortunately no data on stock numbers are available for the period 1940-1975 to refute or confirm this argument. However, recent fieldwork has confirmed that although many pastoral families were able to rebuild their herds after 1940-1, only a small minority of them managed to restock to pre-1940-1 levels and these were said to be those households whose pre-existing herds were large.<sup>4</sup> Several explanations were given for this failure, the main one being the increased migration to both Port Sudan and rural towns within Halaib Province to seek wage labour and the subsequent shift towards alternative livelihoods.

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<sup>4</sup> The issue of livestock mortality and herd re-growth was discussed in twenty-five group interviews held in Halaib Province and forty-two group interviews in Port Sudan (for more details see Pantuliano, 2000:78-85).



**Map 3** Transhumant movement of goats in and around Halaib Province



Figures collected by various surveys conducted in the area<sup>5</sup> have shown that there is clearly a general decline for all types of livestock in both the hills and in the coastal areas (Pantuliano, 2000: chapter 3). However, the figures of both ERGO's survey and my own show a trend of significant decrease in the number of large livestock held by the Beja and a clear tendency in both the hilly and the coastal areas to stock an increasing amount of goats as they are more drought resistant and require less tending than sheep.

The decline of the camel population among the Beja and the trend towards small ruminants had already been observed by Hjort af Ornäs and Dahl (*ibid.*:147). They also comment that at the end of the 1970s intense labour migration of young people to Saudi Arabia took many of them away from camel herding. In addition, Saudi's demand for camels was very high at the end of the 1970s and the temptation to take up this opportunity may well have had an adverse effect on the availability of breeding camels among the Beja. Later on, when people were forced to sell camels, there were categories of people outside the *diwab* who could offer better prices (Hjort af Ornäs and Dahl, *ibid.*) and who therefore took advantage of the vulnerable position of many Beja pastoralists. This group included wealthy town dwellers, amongst whom were a few wealthy urban-based Beja, as well as other pastoralist groups, such as the Rashaida (Pantuliano, 2000:88-89).

Small stock have become increasingly attractive to the majority of the Beja because they are cheaper to buy than camels, and are more easily sold. They also require less specialised shepherding, breed quickly and can be herded near the homestead. These characteristics make small ruminants a more popular option especially on the coast or in urban locations where people are increasingly shifting to alternative livelihoods.

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<sup>5</sup> Sudan Veterinary Research Administration in December 1975 and January 1976, the Environmental Research Group, Oxford - ERGO - in February-April and September-November 1989 and Pantuliano in 1996.

The combined effects of the reduction of herd size and the increase of small stock in Beja herds has resulted in a decrease in pastoral mobility throughout the Province. An increasing number of people move only in the vicinity of their *damar* (dry season camp) or do not move at all. The abandonment of mobility is affecting Beja herders' capacity to make effective use of the natural resources in the Red Sea area and has reduced resilience in time of crisis. Pastoralists have become more dependent on feed supplies that have to be purchased from the market. Since fodder and water are expensive, settled herders tend to limit the number of livestock kept because they cannot usually afford to feed a large herd. Furthermore, even if there are no signs of this at the moment, concentration of animals in small areas is likely to lead to future overgrazing. Goats in particular are usually left to graze without supervision and this means less monitoring of areas in need of protection.

### **The breakdown of silif**

*Silif* regulations constitute an essential part of Beja social and economic life. These rules include mechanisms to redistribute herds and protect the environment. As in many other pastoralist societies, animals are generally redistributed through inheritance or payment of bridewealth. Among the Beja *silif* rules also exist to encourage wealthy livestock keepers to transfer animals to poorer *diwab* members, especially during periods of drought or food insecurity. Three main practices can be identified: *lahagen*, *tait* and *dangeit* or *yahamot*. *Lahagen* is the gift of animals a young man receives when he gets married. Animals can also be donated to a new owner in absence of a marriage: this arrangement takes the name of *tait*. A *tait* gift bestows upon the new owner full authority over the animals as well as all its offspring. The third arrangement, *dangeit* or *yahamot* allows for the loan of animals, especially milking goats but also other animals such as camels, to poorer households between *diwab* members or neighbours. In the case of milking goats, the borrower only uses the milk and must return the animals and the offspring to

the original owner once the period of difficulty is over or their agreement has come to an end.

Other *silif* rules concern ownership and use of grazing and cultivable land. Beja land rights can be divided into two main categories: *asl* and *amara* rights. *Asl* describes the customary right over a certain piece of land and its natural resources inherited from the ancestors by the entire *diwab*. *Amara* refers to the usufruct right given to non-lineage members to use pasture, water or arable land on the *asl* land of another lineage against the payment of a tribute called *gwadab*. The use of all resources is regulated by strict principles which seek to preserve the environment from over-exploitation. Permission is needed by non-lineage members to dig a well or cultivate on another *diwab's* land.

Although the body of *silif* rules has not changed, the difference between traditional norms and actual behaviour has been increasing in recent years. Less and less people are today in a position to lend animals and also customs about camels exchanged as part of the bridewealth are changing. Camels that used to be bought by young grooms from other *diwab* members at 10 or 20% of the market price are now often bought at nearly the full market price. The decline of *tait* and *yahamot* arrangements has made the rebuilding of the stock more difficult. People in rural towns like Gebeit al Maadin and Mohammad Qol also used to be granted loans for household commodities or fodder by merchants or local shop-keepers who counted on the animal wealth of the borrowers and the whole *diwab* for the repayment. The *silif* livestock arrangements acted as a guarantee that the debt would be repaid even in times of crisis. The general decrease in livestock numbers and the subsequent breakdown of the borrowing mechanisms have created a vicious circle that forces people to sell small stock during the dry season and even more during droughts to meet family needs, slowing down, and at times hampering, the reconstitution of the herd.

*Silif* rules over land are also increasingly being ignored. Refusal to pay the *gwadab* is becoming more and more common and conflict over land has also intensified since there is less recognition of owner's rights. One of the worst consequences of the weakening of rules over land has been the progressive deterioration and depletion of natural resources, particularly trees. The main reasons for tree-cutting are cultivation, firewood collection and charcoal making, all of which have significantly increased since the late 1960s and early 1970s famine (English, 1987:8), with the 1983-85 famine hastening the process even further (Hjort af Ornäs and Dahl, 1991:170). This increase has been prompted by the Beja need for cash and the increase in the urban demand for fuel and building materials both from small rural towns in Halaib Province and Port Sudan. The urban population has risen by 121% from 1973 to 1993 (Abdel Ati, 1996b:56). It is also relevant to note that in Port Sudan and in rural towns in Halaib Province houses are made of wooden planks or branches.

The degradation of the tree cover in Halaib Province has generated an increase in the price of firewood and charcoal and as a consequence more people have been attracted to this activity. Although people, especially the elders, are aware of the risk of exhausting natural resources in the long term, there does not seem to be a reversal in this trend at the moment. On the contrary, there is already competition over shrinking resources between herders and fuel producers in some areas, especially over Acacia trees which are useful browse for animals. If more people are pushed out from the pastoral sector by land degradation, migration to town is likely to increase even more. Consequently, urban demand for fuel will further increase, hastening environmental degradation in the rural areas and generating a vicious circle from which there is no obvious escape.



## **Drift towards urban opportunities**

Economic diversification has always been an important strategy for the Beja to complement family income at certain times of the year or during periods of crisis. Multi-resource economies are characteristic of pastoralist societies and they imply the involvement of some members of the family in economic activities other than livestock-keeping. Some of the main complementary activities in which the Beja have for a long time been engaging are agriculture, fishing, mining, firewood collection and charcoal making and sale of rural products like milk, *ghee*, mats, baskets and leather goods. Labour migration to town, especially to Port Sudan, as cash labourers on the docks, has also been a constant feature of the Beja economy this century. However, the scope of the involvement in these non-pastoral activities has dramatically changed over the years. There seems to be a more permanent shift to alternative sources of livelihoods, particularly those offered in urban centres, as opposed to seasonal or crisis-related moves to increase family income.

The Beja, particularly the Amar'ar/Atmaan, started to move to Port Sudan in large numbers in 1931 to replace the Yemeni stevedores that had been expelled by the British administrators (Lewis, 1962:19). Since then Port Sudan has become a refuge for the Beja especially when rainfall has failed or if financial obligations had to be met. Migration was usually short and mainly involved young men in their twenties or early thirties. This kind of migration was rotational with one young man returning home and another leaving for town from the same family to make sure there was always somebody to herd the livestock in the hills.

The regularity of this pattern seems to have been profoundly altered after the two famines that struck Halaib Province in the 1940s and from 1969 to 1973. The number of young men who moved to Port Sudan during these times

increased significantly. Their visits to town also became longer and many eventually decided to stay, often bringing their families over from Halaib Province shortly afterwards. As a consequence of these changes, a decreasing number of young men were left in Halaib Province to look after the animals. In most cases the labour force consisted of women and old men who were unable to take the herds on transhumance when needed.

Port Sudan has undoubtedly contributed in the short-term to the survival of both the Amar'ar/Atmaan and the Bishariyyin. Many herders have ended up staying in town for a long time in the hope of collecting enough cash to rebuild the family herd. However, this has rarely happened and has diverted manpower from camel herding. There are a number of interlocking factors to explain the failure of labour migration in helping families to restock. The urban demand for milk and meat has encouraged the sale of livestock, particularly female stock, from the rural areas (which provide stock for urban and peri-urban dairying), hampering the proper reproduction of the herds. The sale of livestock assets has also been hastened by the worsening of living conditions in Port Sudan due to high inflation and the reduction in wage opportunities as a result of the mechanisation of the port in the 1980s.

The migration to Port Sudan has not been the only factor diverting manpower from herding activities. Opportunities for earning cash have periodically arisen in the Gebeit al Maadin gold mine as well as in fishery activities in Mohammad Qol and Dungunab. Both of these have also had a negative impact on the environment. In the former case, effluent discharges from the mine have polluted water wells and have contributed to the disappearance of the vegetational cover in and around the town. In the coast, there has been opportunistic harvesting of products such as pearls and *'ufra* (a substance extracted from shells widely used in the Sudan to make perfume) without any consideration for the sustainable utilisation of these resources.

The Beja migration to town, with subsequent integration in the market economy, and their increased involvement in non-pastoral activities, has undoubtedly been a major factor in reshaping their livelihood system in the last three decades. These changes, however, do not sufficiently explain why their livelihood systems have become increasingly precarious. The new system that has emerged after the droughts in the 1970s and 1980s is based on greater reliance on strategies that previously were used to complement livestock-keeping. These strategies were (and in some cases still are) no more than coping strategies used exclusively in periods of food stress. Today they have become *adaptive strategies* generating the major part of the household's income and absorbing most of its labour (Davies, 1996:285). The problem, however, is that these strategies do not offer a reliable alternative to the traditional livelihood system centred on pastoral related activities which has guaranteed Beja survival over the centuries. The majority of the activities that constitute the Beja's livelihood system today are precarious, fragmented and often economically and environmentally unsustainable.

Future development support to the Beja needs to have a sound understanding of this situation and, in particular, the dynamics of the rural-urban interface that characterises the new Beja livelihood system in Halaib Province and in the rest of the Red Sea region. The efforts of those Beja who still retain a pastoral lifestyle, especially in more remote hilly/*chor* areas, also require support.

### **3. The Beja rural-urban interface**

#### **The Beja in Port Sudan**

Port Sudan was founded in 1905 to replace the old port town of Suakin, which was believed to be unable to accommodate the increased volume of maritime traffic expected as a result of the expansion of agricultural schemes (especially cotton) being implemented in the south of the Red Sea region. Marsa Shaikh Barguth, a natural harbour thirty-five miles north of Suakin with no human settlement, was created *ex nihilo* into the new city of Port Sudan.

The total absence of a local settlement or adjacent community in the vicinity of the area of the new city, makes Port Sudan an unusual case in the history of colonial cities in Africa. As Perkins has argued (1993:6), this circumstance allowed the British administrators of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan total freedom in laying out the town. In implementing their decisions, they did not have to consider what impact these would have had on an indigenous urban population with its own social structures and institutions. As a result, a city was created which was shaped along strict ethnic and social divisions. This phenomenon has had significant implications for the city and its inhabitants as it has grown over the decades.

Port Sudan, which was designed by the British officials in the shape of a semi-circle (see Map 4) surrounding the harbour, was officially inaugurated in 1909. The town was sub-divided into four classes of residential area based on casual labourers working on the docks and the railways. The conditions in the social stratum and the ethnic affiliation of the inhabitants. The Beja mainly crowded in the native lodging areas (fourth class). These accommodated casual labourers working on the docks and the railways. The conditions in these areas were generally poor, people had no title to land and houses were

built of disposable materials. No private water and electricity connections were available.

The physical layout of Port Sudan remained much the same until independence in 1956. At that time the population was officially around 48,000 people, but it started to grow quickly after the departure of the British. By 1973, the population had risen to 150,000 (Second Population Census); the 1983 Population Census (corrected) estimated the population at 239,400 and the 1993 Census at 332,647. All of above figures are now believed to have been significantly underestimated. Unofficial estimates quoted in independent surveys and reports in the 1990s put the population at between 500,000 (Elradi, 1989:16), 650,000 (Forman, 1992:54) or even up to 1.2 million (van Breukelen, 1990 quoted in Forman, *ibid.*). Population figures gathered at *deim* (suburb) level through the Salvation Committees during my survey suggest that the population in 1996 was over 800,000.<sup>6</sup>

The growth in population numbers has been accompanied by a spacial expansion of the town. Planning of new areas, as well as upgrading of old unofficial ones, has taken place continuously since the 1960s. Planned growth, however, has not been able to keep pace with the number of new shanty settlements created by the continuous influx of migrants from the rural areas and Eritrean refugees who arrived mostly in the 1980s. As of 1996 the town had 29 classified *deims* and 14 “*recognised illegal settlements*” (Forman, *ibid.*:55). In addition to the 14 large shanty areas, there are a myriad of smaller squatter camps in almost all the fourth class and third class *deims*. It is estimated that more than 60% of Port Sudan’s population live in the shanties.<sup>7</sup> It is in this kind of settlements that the majority of the Beja population in Port Sudan lives.

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<sup>6</sup> Salvation Committees is the shortened name largely used in Port Sudan to refer to the Popular Committees for Salvation, political bodies that are elected at *deim* level.


<sup>7</sup> Personal communication with Gaffar Baamkar, former General Manager for Port Sudan State Council, 1996.

**Map 4 Port Sudan deims**



**KEY**

 Research Areas

 Squatter Areas

Until the 1950s the number of Beja living in Port Sudan was relatively low. The 1956 census estimated that only 10,166 Beja lived in town (i.e. 20% of the whole population). The Beja had never been encouraged by the British authorities to leave the rural areas and settle in Port Sudan in great numbers. Perkins reports that “*many government officials and private businessmen held such disparaging views of the Beja that they doubted local workers could ever constitute the nucleus of a reliable and disciplined workforce in the city*” (1993:123). For this reason Yemeni migrants and Sudanese workers from the Nile valley were offered permanent jobs on the docks, while the Beja worked almost exclusively as casual stevedores, loading or unloading vessels. The British administrators justified their policy because of the Beja tendency to return to their homes in the rural areas as soon as they had earned a sufficient sum of money, or if they could not see any immediate prospect of work (National Record Office, CRO 2/36/7217).

In the 1950s, however, an increasing number of Beja men moved to Port Sudan in the search for work to compensate for the devastating effects of the famines which hit the region between 1948 and 1955. In 1950, a process to formally register 1,000 stevedores was initiated by the Port Sudan Harbour Advisory Board and by the end of 1951 the workers were divided into around seventy different gangs which took turns to work on the docks. The Amar’ar/Atmaan managed to secure a near monopoly on the stevedoring jobs, with 80% of the gangs registered at that time being composed of Beja belonging to Amar’ar/Atmaan sub-groups (Lewis, 1962:22). Their dominance was primarily due to their geographic location, nearer to Port Sudan than all other Beja and non-Beja groups.

The Beja migration to Port Sudan increased enormously during the 1960s, since the new independent government had a more flexible attitude towards Beja immigration to the town and the Beja saw a good opportunity in the dock work to complement their pastoral income. By the end of the 1960s the Beja represented more than 50% of the whole town population. According to

discussants met in the *deim* of Halla Sharif, it was at this time that many men first came to Port Sudan from Halaib Province. Even more were pushed to town in the first half of the 1970s, after the famine of 1969-1973 and the number of Beja migrants kept increasing in the 1980s and the 1990s. In this latter period many men decided to bring their families to Port Sudan from Halaib Province as well as from the southern Red Sea region, having lost hope of rebuilding their stock and returning to the rural areas. Today it is estimated that more than 400,000 to 500,000 Beja live in town (i.e. 50-60% of the total population).<sup>8</sup>

As with most ethnic groups in Port Sudan, the Beja live in large, single tribal clusters in selected *deims*. In some of these the population is almost exclusively Beja and people from the same *diwab* tend to live close to one another. This allows them to recreate a similar social and economic environment as found in their homelands, including the tending and breeding of livestock, with the animals being left to browse freely in *deims* on the fringe of town. The tendency for the Beja to cluster together has been encouraged by the original design of Port Sudan, since the “native lodging area” of Deim al ‘Arab was designated to them. In addition, in the hope of minimising ethnic clashes, the municipal authorities accommodated the request of people from the same ethnic group or sub-group to reside next to each other by allocating up to a maximum of forty-eight adjacent plots of land in planned areas to groups of families.

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<sup>8</sup> Personal communication: Gaffar Baamkar and Taha Sidi Ahmed, former Oxfam Regional Representative in Port Sudan, 1996.



## **The Beja urban economy**

Port Sudan offers a limited variety of work opportunities. The mainstay of economic life centres around the port, which provides casual work for daily labourers and permanent jobs either as stevedores or on-shore work in the warehouse and the administrative offices. Commercial activity related to the port is controlled by a small number of businessmen of northern Sudanese, Egyptian, Indian, Syrian or Greek origin, while people of northern Sudanese origin dominate the white-collar jobs as senior civil servants, merchants and business managers. The rest of the population in Port Sudan, which is the majority, work either as wage labourers in the formal sector (port, government departments, refineries, salt production, small industries) or as self-employed workers in the informal sector (Elradi, 1989:18). Amongst the traditional trades, the poor typically work as bakers, butchers, carpenters, masons, petty traders, motor mechanics, black-smiths, shoe-polishers, cobblers, and retailers. These activities are mainly the domain of Eritrean and southern Sudanese refugees as well as of West African migrants and some Beni Amer. Apart from the selling of petty commodities (e.g. soap, tobacco, cigarettes, etc.) and charcoal or water, the Beja do not seem to be significantly involved in any of the trades listed above.

Many studies have confirmed that most Beja men in Port Sudan work as daily labourers in the port (Lewis, 1962; Milne, 1974; Hjort af Ornäs and Dahl, 1991). Information concerning women is very limited, but empirical research (Elradi, 1989, Forman, 1992) has indicated that they work either as labourers in government offices, schools and hospitals (mainly as cleaners or tea and coffee makers) or as informal sector retailers based out of their own house. The results of my survey, conducted amongst 215 households in six *deims* of Port Sudan, and of a PRA livelihood analysis indicate that female headed households (17.7% of the total sample) mainly rely on wage labour as

cleaners, in retailing or by taking in laundry. The survey findings on householders' primary economic activities are summarised in the table below.

The livelihood analysis also highlighted the fact that the main economic activity is often complemented by a range of other activities in which all the members of the household, especially the men, engage. This is because the main source of income is seldom totally reliable. Secondary activities are more frequently performed by migrants who have recently arrived in town. These activities include animal rearing, charcoal selling, water vending, portering, milk selling, coffee making and hairdressing. Among poorer households it is increasingly common to find married women working in the informal sector, although this contravenes the Beja code of conduct which prohibits women's interaction with non-related men.

**Table 2 Primary livelihood strategies of Beja households in Port Sudan**

Livelihood	Male headed households		Female headed households	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Charcoal selling	2	0.9%	5	2.3%
Clothes washing	-	-	4	1.9%
Daily labour (cleaning or other)	-	-	8	3.8%
Daily labour docks	120	55.8%	-	-
Daily labour fishery	5	2.3%	-	-
Driving	7	3.2%	-	-
Government employment	8	3.8%	-	-
Livestock herding and/or trading	8	3.8%	3	1.4%
Midwifery	-	-	2	0.9%
NGO employment	-	-	2	0.9%
Retailing	5	2.3%	12	5.6%
Retired	10	4.6%	-	-
Others (guarding, handicrafts making, tailoring, unemployed, etc.)	12	5.6%	2	0.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>82.3%</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>17.7%</b>

The exclusion of the Beja from a wider range of livelihood options in town stems in large part from their very low levels of education. The majority of the Beja are illiterate and very few have ever been able to take up any apprenticeship to gain skills in productive activities. Some of them are involved in pastoral related activities (e.g. livestock rearing and trading, milk

selling and leather processing), but on a very limited scale. Unfortunately, their efforts are not supported by either the government or development agencies in town.

## **In-ship stevedoring**

Port workers fall into two main categories: the 14,000 in-ship stevedores (mainly Amar'ar/Atmaan) and the 2,000 warehouse labourers (mainly Beni Amer), who work on-shore where the administrative offices are also located. Since 1951 the stevedoring job has been based on the *kellas*, gangs of workers affiliated by ethnic or kinship ties. The number of *kellas* has not been altered since the 1960s: there are 124 gangs, each composed of 14 workers, including a *rais*.<sup>9</sup> The gangs are almost exclusively Beja. In 1996, 98 were from the Amar'ar/Atmaan, 11 from the Hadendowa, 7 from the Beni Amer, 5 from the Arteiga, 2 from the Bishariyyin and 1 from the Kemeilab.

The members of the *kella*, including the *rais*, usually belong to the same *diwab*, with the job system within the gang being hereditary (Gubti, 1989:12). The work is not regular and it depends on the daily requests of the shipping companies. The work is assigned to the *kellas* on a rotation basis. One *kella* gets between 2 and 14 shifts per month, depending on the traffic at the port. The labourers are paid daily. In 1998 the wage for the *muzawri* (worker) was around Ls. 4,300 per shift (approx. **US\$ 1.75**) after deduction of taxes.<sup>10</sup> The rates are higher for the *rais* and the few skilled workers. When the *kella* is not assigned the job, most stevedores seek other work opportunities in town, usually in the market place as porters or on farms or at small industrial work places as casual labourers.

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<sup>9</sup> The *rais* is the gang leader.

<sup>10</sup> As point of reference, in 1998 one kilogram of meat in Port Sudan cost Ls. 3,500 and one small piece of bread Ls. 50. Milk cost Ls. 600 per pound.

Not every permanent gang member works every time the *kella* is assigned a shift. The tribal nature of the *kellas* has turned them into labour reserves for the entire *diwab*. Officially, only the 14 registered *diwab* members are supposed to work in the gang, but the *rais* often allocates work to non-registered *diwab* members who come to Port Sudan from the rural areas because they are in need of cash. The informality of the work makes this practice possible, although it is not welcomed by the port authorities. The workers usually lend their identity cards to the newcomers who do not have any problem entering the harbour since examination of the card is tokenistic.

The *kella* system constitutes an important link between Port Sudan and Halaib Province (as well as other Beja rural areas), especially for the Amar'ar/Atmaan. It has facilitated the arrival of new migrants into town over the years as well as allowing the registered gang members freedom to move between the town and their homeland or to take up temporary employment somewhere else in Port Sudan. The allocation of the work takes place on a daily basis at the orders office in the harbour, where all the *kella* members and their kin gather twice a day to obtain information about the availability of work on the docks. Newcomers also bring information about pasture, livestock, mining, fishery and other income generating opportunities in Halaib Province. This way the *kella* provides an important means of preserving the links of Beja urban dwellers with their homeland. It also reinforces the importance of the *diwab* membership outside the tribal territory and the meaning of reciprocal ties based on *silif*, which so strongly informs Beja identity.

### **Livestock keeping in town**

Livestock are still an important livelihood resource for many migrants from Halaib Province who now live in Port Sudan. Holdings vary quite significantly between the different households, although the majority own but a few small ruminants, mostly between one and three goats (see Table 3). Animals are

kept both to obtain milk for family consumption or to be sold in times of need. In some *deims* camels and cattle (the latter usually owned by Hadendowa households) are also kept. The animals normally graze in the *deim* (suburbs) of Port Sudan where the social and cultural atmosphere of the rural areas has been recreated by the migrants. In the *deim* El Wihda, Forman (1992:57) reports that in 1983 the majority Beja community declined the offer of permanent electricity arguing that any upgrading of the area might lead to infiltration by other ethnic groups and eventually objections to livestock production and trading within the *deim*.

Table 3 presents livestock holdings within the different *deims* targeted by the survey. The table only considers goats since the figures provided about holdings of sheep and camels were of very little significance in most *deims*.

**Table 3 Livestock holdings for households from Halaib Province in selected *deims*, Port Sudan**

Location	Households sampled	Goats owned	Average h/h holdings
El Wihda	22	53	2.4
Hay al Taqaddum	15	22	1.6
Deim Unguwab	9	13	1.4
Salalab Ashwai	38	43	1.1
Umm al Qura	70	70	1.0
Halla Sharif	61	29	0.5
Totals	215	232	1.1

The reliability of these data is somewhat questionable. At the time of the survey, the distribution of relief had been talked up by the government and some international NGOs and bilateral donors. Most of the people interviewed believed that the survey was for the purpose of assessing their

eligibility for support. Even given the limited reliability of the absolute figures, it is possible to draw upon them to illustrate important trends.

The survey showed that in all *deims* there are significant differences in livestock holdings between the households sampled. The majority of them, 63%, claimed they do not own any livestock in town, although 35% of this group, or 22% of the total (mainly those who are not permanently settled in Port Sudan), stated that they possess animals in Halaib Province. Among the 36% who said they have livestock in Port Sudan, 87% of the households (31% of the total) said they have between one or four goats from which they obtain milk for the family. Very few were in a position to sell surplus milk. However, many of them, especially those who had recently arrived in town, hoped to be able to rebuild the family herd through their urban earnings and return to Halaib Province in a short time. As discussed earlier, this is very unlikely since most families are forced into selling their animals to meet their normal domestic needs in what is a highly insecure and inflationary economy.

It is worth mentioning that among the migrants from Halaib Province sampled there was a small group (the remaining 5% of the total) who declared they owned large herds of shoats and camels in and around town. Part of this group was composed of urban dwellers who have been able to invest in livestock when the price was low (i.e. in time of drought), seizing large numbers of livestock from other herders, in some cases Beja from the same sub-group. They were in most cases government employees or former pastoralists who have been involved in animal trading in town for a long time. The other livestock holders were transhumant pastoralists who own large camel herds and use Port Sudan to complement their earnings with wage labour, like the 'Aliab Arfoyab met in El Wihda. At the time of the survey this group had brought most of their stock with them from Halaib Province. They were paying a young herder to take the animals to graze outside town during the day while they engaged in other activities on the docks or in the animal market.

For most Beja who have moved to town, livestock have retained their importance both in cultural (bridewealth payment), dietary (milk and meat) and economic terms (assets not eroded by inflation). The majority of them still describe themselves as pastoralists, even if they do not now own animals. From the above analysis of the survey findings, it is possible to identify three main types of “town pastoralists”. First, those whose main goal is to regain the lost viability of their pastoral household unit in Halaib Province. Second, those for whom livestock-keeping is only a subsidiary activity supporting a mainly urban-oriented unit (Hjort af Ornäs and Dahl, 1991:148). The third is the case of the ‘Aliab Arfojab. They offer an example of how pastoralists can take advantage of urban opportunities to diversify their income sources in order to strengthen the security of their livelihood system centred on livestock keeping. In this case traditional strategies founded on mobility have not been abandoned and small ruminants have not replaced the camels which are still numerous within the herd. This positive model of rural-urban interaction deserves more attention from policy makers and development planners.

### **The social and economic dimensions of rural-urban linkages**

Links between urban migrants and their homeland vary across different categories of migrants. For some, migration is permanent and sometimes involves cutting off links with the rural areas. This condition usually applies to the very few educated, wealthy or skilled people who have started a successful career in town. In most cases, they bring a wife from the rural areas to Port Sudan after they have established themselves there, or else they marry in town, often from outside the *diwab*. Relations with the rural areas are also weaker for those who were born in town, or who have permanently settled there for a considerable number of years, or whose homeland is very far from Port Sudan. In my survey, 21% of the male heads of household interviewed declared they had little or no contact with their relatives in Halaib Province. Amongst female headed households the severing

of the relations with Halaib Province is more frequent, nearly 40%, especially for those where the family head is a divorcee or a single woman.

For the majority of the migrants from Halaib Province, linkages with their homeland are still very strong, although different levels of interaction can be observed. Approximately 15% of the households sampled live permanently in Port Sudan but keep contacts with their relatives in Halaib Province by means of short visits, especially on the occasion of marriages, births or deaths and in some cases through sending remittances in cash or in kind (*dhura*, sugar or coffee). A larger number of the male headed households, more than 30% of the total, return to Halaib Province for a long period, once a year, especially in *shita'* (rainy season). Many of them say that the visit depends on the availability of rains in Halaib Province, because only if there is good rainfall can they benefit from the hospitality of their relatives and share their milk and butter. In some cases these households still have animals in the rural areas which are often herded by their kin. The migrants belonging to this category maintain very close contacts with their relatives throughout the year and habitually send remittances or host rural people who need temporary accommodation in Port Sudan.

The last category of migrants is made up of those whose migration to Port Sudan is only temporary or has not yet become permanent. This was the case for more than 25% of the sample, most of which are from male headed households.<sup>11</sup> Less than one quarter of them had their families in Port Sudan and in 10 out of the 12 cases these were very poor, stockless households who had abandoned Halaib Province to look for labour opportunities in town, and had been in town for less than a year. The remaining heads of household all had their families in Halaib Province or were not yet married. People from this category usually return home as soon as they have collected sufficient money to live on for one or two months, but they regularly send food commodities and clothing to their families through lorry drivers, NGO workers

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<sup>11</sup> Only four female headed households fell within this category.



or relatives and friends visiting home. In many cases the household heads of this group are owners of small numbers of livestock in Halaib Province which are tended by the other family members.

It is difficult to say how many of these temporary migrants will permanently settle in Port Sudan and bring their families to stay with them. This certainly seems to be the dominant trend at the moment, although most of the men met, including those who have been living in Port Sudan for some years with their families, state vigorously that it is their intention to rebuild their stock and return to Halaib Province. This hope, however, is not widely shared by their wives and daughters who find life in town less arduous and appreciate the opportunity to obtain greater exposure to public life.

The links that Beja migrants in Port Sudan maintain with their kin in Halaib Province are also differentiated by their nature, ranging from short, occasional social visits to more complex economic interactions (e.g. livestock trading). Social bonds are still very strong for most migrants, although they tend to weaken for those who have been in town for a long time or whose homeland is faraway. For the majority of the Beja living in Port Sudan, marriage still takes place within the *diwab* with a close cousin living in the rural areas, although this custom is changing since men, particularly the wealthy who can afford to pay a cash bridewealth for non-Beja or non-*diwab* women, have started to marry exogamously. Women are not allowed to marry a non-Beja and only a very few educated women have been able to challenge this rule so far.

Strong social relationships with kin from Halaib Province are maintained by support young men receive when they come temporarily to town to seek work opportunities. They are assisted by their urban-based relatives who accommodate them and help them find jobs in town, usually through the *kella* system, or if this fails, through Beja middle-men who assign labour in the market. The *kella* constitutes a collective asset that is redistributed between

the urban-based Beja and their relatives coming from the rural areas when they are in need of cash.

A two-way rural-urban economic interaction takes place among certain sections of the Amar'ar/Atmaan and the Bishariyyin , whose homeland is relatively close to Port Sudan as well as being situated near the main road that links Port Sudan to Egypt. Men from these sub-groups often sell animals and rural items on behalf of their kin in Halaib Province. These items include milk, butter, charcoal and firewood. There is no economic gain for the urban relatives on the transaction and all the money is spent on market commodities that are sent back to the rural areas with lorry drivers or visiting relatives. Some groups like the Kurbab in Halla Sharif have argued that this trade is declining since an increasing number of people in Halaib Province are selling their animals and other products to merchants who in exchange provide them with market commodities from Port Sudan. This change is not having any adverse impact on the urban-based relatives who have never benefited from these transactions in economic terms. The losers are their relatives in Halaib Province, since the merchants tend to undervalue animals and other rural items and put a surcharge on urban goods. However, merchants seem to be preferred to relatives because no time elapses between the sale of the animals and the rural products and the market goods purchased to satisfy the household's needs.

In the case of the rural based Beja, they contribute to the livelihoods of their kin in Port Sudan by herding their livestock. Among the discussants sampled in Port Sudan, 35% declared they have left animals in Halaib Province with their immediate families or close relatives. Other migrants say they send the livestock they keep in Port Sudan back to Halaib Province when there is abundant rainfall, so that they can be taken for transhumance with their relatives' herds. The relatives in the rural areas are entitled to drink and sell the milk they obtain from their kin's animals, although in some cases the money derived from this sale is sent to the owner in Port Sudan or given to his

immediate family if they live in Halaib Province. The rural relatives also have a complete say over the sale or culling of their relatives' livestock, especially in special circumstances like an epidemic. However, consultation is sought with the owners whenever possible. The livestock owners who live in Port Sudan very often buy fodder for their own animals and in some cases also for their relatives' animals for use in the dry season or in the absence of rainfall. This strategy helps minimise the need to offtake animals in times of crisis.

Rural-urban linkages are also supported through the institution of formal migrants' associations like the Beja Club, the Dabayawa Club, the Beja Area Students' Association, the Beja Women Society and the Taqaddum Community Development Centre. These associations, especially the Beja Club, serve the interests of both urban and rural Beja. The Club, for example, constitutes a meeting place for all Beja in town and also offers limited lodging facilities for newcomers. It mainly works as an information or trading post where people can be updated on news from the rural areas and collect or send goods through friends and fellow villagers. Over the years literacy classes have been run by the Club for Beja men and women who have moved to Port Sudan. Awareness raising classes about health or social issues like female circumcision and early marriage have also taken place at the Taqaddum Community Development Centre, which was built in 1978. The Centre has also been involved in other activities, including children's education, women's education and training, adult literacy classes, provision of basic health services, infrastructural improvements in the *deim* (water, electricity, asphalt roads) and activities promoting community development through the use of a mobile theatre. The different migrants' associations also engage in raising funds for members in need of medical treatment or for a loan for a particular circumstance or occasion (Hadra, 1995:5).

For the Beja in Port Sudan, the Club and the other Beja migrants' associations represent a useful mechanism for enhancing solidarity within the group. They act as systems of mutual support, primarily to ease new migrants'

arrival into town, but also to help preserve the group identity in Port Sudan. Outside Port Sudan, the associations assist by providing development oriented services like the Mohammad Badri Abu Hadiya Women's Centre in Sinkat, which is sponsored and co-ordinated by one of the founders of the Beja Club. In addition, the associations work to bring Beja needs, concerns and priorities from the rural areas to the attention of politicians and international aid workers in both Port Sudan and Khartoum.

### **Urban dynamics and cultural change: silif and Beja identity in town**

The economic and social life of Beja migrants in Port Sudan has always been centred on the mechanisms of group solidarity based on *diwab* membership, as has been seen from *diwab* based arrangements at the port or at the market and *diwab* based urban-rural relationships and economic transactions like remittances and trading. Urban residence is also mainly according to *diwab*, since in all Beja dominated *deims*, neighbouring dwellings are in most cases occupied by relatives. Intra-*diwab* marriages are still very much the norm, whether between families both of whom are town based or whether with relatives from the rural areas, although exceptions to the rule are increasingly common especially among the wealthy and the educated.

The strength of the ties between *diwab* members as well as with other Beja is rooted in the common observance of *silif* regulations. As in the rural areas, *silif* controls the economic and social arrangements of Beja people in town and obliges them to comply with mechanisms of mutual support when the need arises. The nature of this support is however changing and the traditional economic and environmental dimensions of *silif* related to livestock and rural resources are assuming a new face adapted to the urban reality. Arrangements like *yahamot* and *tait* are less and less adhered to in Port Sudan given the limited livestock holdings of most Beja people, but they have been replaced by the "loan" of a *kella* shift at the port and assisting rural

relatives when they come to town. Money contributions to *diwab* members and other Beja in difficulties both in Port Sudan and in the rural areas was common until the beginning of the 1980s according to the discussants, but the dwindling economic resource base of the Beja migrants in Port Sudan has reduced their capacity to support others in monetary terms (Hjort af Ornäs and Dahl, 1991:151).

Other studies (Vaa, 1990:172) suggest that the reduced capacity of migrant households to assist their country relatives affects the durability of urban-rural links. This does not seem to be the case for the discussants from Halaib Province. Among them, links with the rural areas appear to be weaker only for those households who have lived in Port Sudan for many years or who were born here or for female headed households where the household's head deliberately decided to cut off links with her relatives in Halaib Province. In all cases, poverty, and consequently the incapacity to provide economic support according to *silif* rules, are not the determining factor in weakening the strength of rural-urban links. On the contrary, these links appear to be quite solid for the majority of the migrants from Halaib Province, and prove to be resilient to the economic pressure which many rural and urban households endure at the moment.

The acute poverty of the majority of the Beja population in Port Sudan originating from Halaib Province, and the increased instability of port work on which most Beja rely, has also affected their capacity to gain access to credit from shop owners in Port Sudan. Credit is granted almost exclusively to people who own livestock, preferably kept in town rather than in the rural areas. This phenomenon is now taking place even among Beja shop owners, contravening the fundamental principles of group solidarity regulated by *silif*.

Although the economic dimension of *silif* is changing among urban migrants, discussants claim that people still make remarkable efforts to contribute money to celebrate weddings, child births and funerals whenever related

households are involved, especially if they belong to the same *diwab*. These social occasions appear to have assumed stronger significance for the migrants in Port Sudan than they have for the people in Halaib Province, since they constitute a means of cohesion and unity for the Beja in town. Large numbers of people are invited to these celebrations from all over Port Sudan and it is very important that everybody attends as a sign of belonging to the group.

A special celebration, the *Hawliyya*,<sup>12</sup> takes place for the Kurbab once a year in Tokur, a coastal location between Port Sudan and Mohammad Qol, near Salal Asir. Here is located the tomb of Ukhut Hawwan Or, a holy man venerated by many Beja, but mostly by the Kurbab. The celebration occurs during the month of *Dhu al Hagg* and sees people gathering together from both the rural areas and Port Sudan. The event is used by the Kurbab to discuss and make decisions about tribal matters, ranging from intra-*diwab* disputes to more strategic political alliances for the group as a whole. The importance of the *Hawliyya* has been strongly emphasised by many Kurbab migrants in Port Sudan, who regard it as a very important occasion to reunite with the rest of the group from the rural areas and reaffirm their tribal identity, which they feel is threatened in town by the presence of non-Beja groups.

The Beja consider Port Sudan to be built on their land and the Arabic speaking Sudanese as transgressors who dominate the economic life of the town and behave against Beja values with impunity (Morton, 1989:67). The discussants complained on several occasions that the *Balawiet* (this is the name given to non-Beja northern Sudanese people) do not understand the meaning and the importance of the *silif* system of rules and do not respect it. The main complaint for both men and women concerned the settlement of disputes and conflicts at the *deim* level which is usually submitted to the relevant government authorities and judged according to *shari'a* law. Conversely, among the Beja in Port Sudan conflicts are still dealt with by the

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<sup>12</sup> In *TuBedawiye*: “annually”.

traditional leaders of the different sub-groups, who are responsible for finding a solution to a given problem. Very rarely do the people involved object to their decision and resort to the police or to the judicial authorities, although this is beginning to happen among educated Beja who sometimes bypass the traditional leadership altogether. This is considered disgraceful by the large majority of the Beja since it shows disrespect for *silif* customs and therefore constitutes an insult to the Beja tribe as a whole.

The attachment to *silif* values does not seem to differ on the basis of age or gender nor does it seem to be affected by the years of permanence in Port Sudan, at least at the town level, although the elders complain that moral rules are no longer being strictly observed by the younger generations. For all the different groups it is evident that even if it has become increasingly difficult to fulfil economic obligations, the *silif* system has not lost its importance. Rather, it seems that its cultural dimension has been emphasised and *silif* has assumed a specific role in defining the identity of the Beja in the urban milieu where their weak economic position makes them feel marginalised and mistreated by other groups.

### **Return to Halaib Province: different perspectives**

The return to Halaib Province of migrants who lived in Port Sudan for several years is not unheard of, especially among older people who return home to retire, or for those who have failed to find reasonably reliable living strategies in town. According to the discussants met in Halaib Province, the number of returnees from Port Sudan has started to slightly increase in the last decade both among elder and younger migrants. This view was shared by the householders surveyed in Port Sudan.

It is important to emphasise that significantly different opinions were expressed by the urban-based discussants concerning the possibility of

returning to Halaib Province sooner or later. Points of view varied according to age or the number of years respondents had been living in Port Sudan. The sharpest contrast, however, was between women's and men's perspectives. Older people and those who had lived in Port Sudan for a relatively short period of time were generally more eager to return to Halaib Province than the youth and longer term migrants. However, the degree of preference for either the urban or the rural context was on the whole fairly balanced both between the different age sets and for longer or shorter term migrants. Conversely, the gender analysis of the return migration question highlighted that women strongly prefer to stay in Port Sudan for the rest of their lives, while most men are hoping to go back to Halaib Province at some point. The data obtained from the survey are summarised in the table below.

**Table 4**      ***Analysis of perceptions of return migration by gender***

<b>Option</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
Return to Halaib Province	50%	27.5%
Return to Halaib Province only if herd is rebuilt	28.3%	11.9%
Stay in Port Sudan	21.7%	60.6%

Reasons behind the relatively low preference among men for remaining in town are mainly related to the demanding and the irregular nature of the work available in Port Sudan compared to traditional rural activities. In addition, men feel psychologically strained by the insecurity of their employment situation in town. Although men's preference is to return to a pastoral lifestyle in Halaib Province, they are aware of the constraints of earning and saving enough money in Port Sudan to invest in livestock and rebuild their herds. Conversely, women find urban life less demanding than in the rural areas and greatly appreciate the opportunity of being more exposed to public life than they normally are in Halaib Province.



#### 4. The failure of the international response<sup>13</sup>

The increased inability of Beja pastoralists to cope with and recover from climatic crises was one of the main reasons why the drought that hit their region at the beginning of the 1980s degenerated into a famine of disastrous proportions. The incidence of the famine ushered in a new element to the Beja livelihood system: the presence of international aid organisations. Prior to this drought the Beja had only received a very limited amount of external assistance.

The Beja leadership at the time of the drought was incapable of mobilising the government until the very last minute and therefore the international agencies arrived when conditions of starvation and mass migration were already well advanced. For most of the Beja it was too late to preserve a minimum number of animals to allow for restocking once the drought and famine were over. They were doubly impaired because they were still in the process of recovering from the severe 1973 drought. The international aid agencies had to act fast in an area where they had little previous experience and where little information was available about the ecological nature of the region and the socio-economic system of its inhabitants. As a result, many mistakes were made, which further contributed to a weakening of the Beja livelihood system.

The aid distribution created a new class of “food *shaikhs*”, which brought about a modification to the existing social structure and the traditional inter-*diwab* dynamics founded on exchange of resources and reciprocity. Settlement and urban drift were also encouraged by the fact that relief centres

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<sup>13</sup> The nature, the objective and the performance of relief and development programmes carried out by international development agencies, particularly NGOs, in Eastern Sudan throughout the 1980s and the 1990s are reviewed in detail in Pantuliano, 2000: chapter 5 (‘Beja livelihoods in transition and the international NGO response: analysis of approaches and impact’).

were initially set up in town and later in major rural settlements. In addition, the involvement of Beja in Food For Work (FFW) schemes and the prolonged presence of many of them in the villages where the food distribution took place slowed down, and in some cases halted, the reconstitution of the herds of mobile pastoralists. These schemes, promoted by the World Food Programme (WFP) in collaboration with several NGOs, were almost all focused on the construction of social services (schools, health centres, latrines, *hafirs*, etc.) or on agricultural activities, and none of them bore any relation to the pastoral livelihoods of the Beja.

The shift from the relief operation to long-term development programmes saw the continuation of inappropriate interventions. The oversights of the international aid agencies were the consequence of a series of factors, ranging from agency misconceptions about pastoralist livelihoods and ill-informed pastoral planning, to the fear of repeating the negative track record of pastoral development to be found in other Sahelian countries, to the difficulty of persuading donors to invest large sums of money to reconstitute pastoralists' herd base and support them to resume mobility. In many cases NGO programmes were designed as responses to perceived needs as opposed to existing realities. For example, one major international NGO developed a programme of infrastructural and economic support in 1986 in one of Port Sudan *deims* where the Beja had crowded in the aftermath of the famine, with a particular focus on health and sanitation and urban productive activities, in the mistaken belief that the local Beja population had abandoned their pastoralist past and needed to be assisted to adapt to an urban environment (Pantuliano, 2000:159). Other factors such as the bias of national and regional policies of the Sudanese government towards settled agriculture also discouraged international aid agencies from focusing on key issues such as pastoral mobility and herd reconstitution. In addition, the inability of NGOs and other aid agencies to co-operate, share lessons and promote joint lobbying hindered possibilities for addressing the problem of Beja pastoralists at the macro level.

It is difficult to assess to what extent the international aid assistance have contributed to the worsening of the vulnerability of the Beja livelihood system. However, it can be argued that international agencies were not in any meaningful way able to support the Beja in the strengthening of their resource base, and at times they actually hampered this process as a result of their intervention. The drought and post-drought experiences offered agencies the opportunity to help Beja pastoralists retain or reconstitute a long-term secure livelihood system, but they failed in their attempts to assist people to identify and build sustainable ways forward.

## **5. Conclusions**

Increased vulnerability to drought and other external shocks is what characterises the evolution of the Beja livelihood system throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, although it is probably too late to help the Beja reconstruct their former livelihood strategies based on mobile camel rearing, much can be done to reduce their current vulnerability.

The Beja have always had to live with uncertainty, but in the past had strategies that enabled them to cope. Non-livestock related activities were almost exclusively used as a complement to livestock keeping, particularly in times of stress. Over the last three decades, however, these distress related coping strategies have assumed more and more importance such that today, for many Beja, they are no longer peripheral or occasional but are at the very core of their livelihood system. The dominant trend has been the move away from mobility, with an accompanying decline in the size and type of livestock being herded, towards more piecemeal and precarious activities which include firewood collection and charcoal making in the rural areas and migration to town where people engage in irregular employment as daily labourers. This new livelihood system does not offer a reliable alternative to the traditional livelihood system based on pastoral related activities.

Furthermore, successive governments and other actors such as development agencies, in failing to grasp and respond to the complexity and changing nature of the Beja's livelihood systems, have in many cases increased their vulnerability. In recent years, well intentioned development projects have tended to assume that the breakdown of the pastoral system was complete and that the Beja needed to develop alternative livelihoods. In rural areas, development projects focused more on agricultural than pastoral activities. This trend was more marked in town where the Beja have been treated as part of an undifferentiated mass of urban poor with no particular assets that could be built on as part of a recovery strategy.

For a new approach to succeed, policy makers and development agencies need to find ways of supporting the Beja on both sides of the rural-urban divide and pay more attention to mobile herding strategies. Successful models of urban-rural interaction need to focus on enabling pastoralists to benefit from the opportunities on offer in towns (e.g. wage labour) while ensuring that these do not undermine the productive capacity of their pastoral livelihood system (i.e. mobility, herd growth and diversification).

In rural areas the pastoral system can be revitalised among certain groups and in certain contexts. Although restocking remains a key intervention, with the example of the 'Aliab Arfoiyab providing a useful model, other potential activities promoting rural-urban links should be to be considered. These include supporting the marketing livestock and their by-products as well as newer, less exploited resources such as goods from the sea (fish, pearls, 'ufra) and productive uses of remittances (Tacoli, 1998:14).

Likewise, those who prefer to stay permanently in urban centres must be helped to undertake activities which allow them to take advantage of the skills they already possess and make use of the links they have with the rural pastoral economy. Access to credit, provision of support for marketing of

pastoral related products and skills training are of relevance for those who are based in town. Rural-urban linkages can be harnessed by prioritising urban activities which draw upon rural resources or people's skills as pastoralists (e.g. dairy marketing, leather processing). In many cases it will be impossible for many Beja to use pastoral related skills and assets and they will have to be retrained in other fields. In either case it is important that interventions are underpinned by a "*credit policies for livelihoods*" approach (Scoones, 1998:14), allowing the Beja to practice a range of livelihood strategies according to the options available and their own priorities, as opposed to inflexible credit approaches which fail to cater to a diversity of needs in their overarching drive for financial sustainability.

Finally, strengthening the capacity of the Beja themselves to engage in policy debate and to advocate for their own people is an essential part of any strategy for reversing the years of decline. As has been seen, there is considerable solidarity amongst the Beja in town which underpinned by their customary institutions. These institutions, however, need to adapt to the "modern" and urban context. The recent election of the first Beja mayor in Port Sudan presents an opportunity to promote the collective interests of both urban and rural Beja. Beja organisations can work together with partner development agencies to raise awareness and put pressure on parts of government that are more responsive. Issues of strategic importance need to be identified and worked upon. This could include the integration of customary land tenure arrangements into a formal and legally recognised system (Swift, 1994:163) which would help safeguard mobility patterns by guaranteeing access to water points and key resource sites. Access rights should be lobbied for, particularly for vital pasture reserves that have been seized to implement large scale agricultural schemes (e.g. the Gash Delta), in order to allow grazing at times of crisis on selected parts of the area currently under cultivation. Furthermore, Beja organisations and development agencies could lobby government for the provision of key services (e.g. animal and human health and education) and key infrastructure (e.g. markets). The nature of such advocacy should be to argue for the tailoring of services to meet the

particular needs of the Beja, which respects their mobile lifestyles and their cultural values. The Beja themselves also need to look at their own institutions and to modernise in certain respects, such as in the area of gender relations.

The pace and scale of change amongst the Beja of Halaib Province are considerable, and the challenges huge. Policy makers and development workers need to work in a participatory way with the Beja to construct a long-term strategy of development support which while recognising the complexity of the situation, also builds on the rural-urban dynamics that have evolved over the past thirty years.

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