On September 9, 2004, speaking in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, then US Secretary of State Colin Powell declared that genocide had been occurring in the state of Darfur, Sudan (Kessler & Lynch 2004). In the days leading up to and following Powell’s declaration, however, some analysts had already begun to point out pitfalls in any attempt to declare the Darfur conflict to be primarily about the destruction of one race (Africans) at the hands of another (Arabs) (Margolis 2004, Beaumont 2004). Yet such critiques have struggled to reach the mainstream media, and even fewer have asked how it was possible for a broad coalition of anti-genocide activists to form so rapidly in the wake of Powell’s declaration, comprising groups and individuals who otherwise held opposing political views from the far right to the far left. Mahmood Mamdani’s latest book provides us at last with exactly such an intervention, deploying the highest class of rigorous scholarly critique in a manner that nonetheless has managed to reach an impressively broad audience.

The book has three essential components. First, it examines the history of Sudan in an attempt to discover the historical roots of the conflict. Second, it situates this history in the regional and global context of both colonial and post-colonial eras. Third, it critically assesses the language and actions of the Save Darfur coalition while uncovering the consequences of their self-view as saviors of otherwise helpless Africans. Mamdani’s historical argument roots the struggle in a conflict over natural resources, principally water and land, and thus involves an intricate investigation of themes central to a burgeoning sub-discipline within geography: political ecology. In Mamdani’s analysis, the roots of violence in Darfur can be found not in ancient or “traditional” African tribal divisions and conflicts, but rather in the combination of an ecological crisis and the legacy of the British colonial policy which administered Sudan through a divide-and-conquer strategy that necessitated a strict taxonomy of Sudanese people along tribal and racial lines. This legacy of colonial administration, combined with the often chaotic consequences of the Cold War—in which regional socialist powers fought proxy wars against regional allies of the United States, France and Israel—led to a highly militarized state of Darfur largely divided between homeless, nomadic tribes and sedentary tribes with institutional rights to land.
While much of the Darfur activist coalition has identified the conflict along racial lines, pitting tribes of “Arabs” against “Africans”, Mamdani demonstrates that a division along racial lines does not easily match up with the situation on the ground in Darfur. Beginning with the Funj Sultanate and the Dar Fur Sultanate, between the early 1500s and mid 1800s, Mamdani explains how trans-tribal identities were forged along religious lines. He also sets out to disprove the thesis that Sudan originated with a division between immigrant Arab tribes and native African tribes, demonstrating that a fusion of various peoples (including West African immigrants in the case of Darfur) took place gradually. Changes in custom and society resulted not from outside Arab forces, but rather through gradual processes of transculturation, including the common practice of intermarriage. “As a group,” Mamdani then points out, “the Arabs of the Nile Valley in the Northern Sudan are native Arabs. Using today’s political vocabulary, they are African Arabs” (101).

Yet the process of Arab-African interaction was not identical in the Funj and Dar Fur Sultanates. Whereas Arabs held a privileged position in the Funj, they were marginal in Dar Fur where the Fur people assumed the position of power. Identities, therefore, coalesced not along racial lines, but according to land access determined by tribal affiliation. This leads Mamdani to the fundamental conclusion that self-described Arab and African identities in Darfur today are not racial but political, demarcated along the polity of the tribe. “To be an Arab,” he writes, “is to be a member of an Arab tribe” (108).

Under the Dar Fur sultanate, these tribal distinctions were largely submerged under a pan-Islamic banner. In order to maintain cohesion, rulers pushed Islam as a unifying identity that would allow their subjects to look beyond kin-based conflicts to their common position as Muslims. This pre-existing sense of unity in Dar Fur meant that the anti-colonial revolt against Turko-Egyptian rule in the late 1800s, known as the Mahdiyya, recruited many of its followers from Darfur—a place where people were used to thinking of themselves as a unified polity beyond tribal lines (142-144). It was precisely this sense of unification that the British colonial government sought to dismantle once they re-took control of Sudan in 1899.

The most lasting divide-and-conquer strategy of the British in Darfur involved the system of indirect rule. Lacking the necessary troops to cover all their territories throughout the world, the British were forced to rely upon a system of indirect rule. As Mamdani explains,

The political objective was to reorganize colonized populations around narrower identities. Sometimes, this involved a benign acknowledgement of existing identities, but at other times, it involved a wholesale reidentification of peoples. Never entirely arbitrary, the reidentification often involved exalting older, narrower identities as historically legitimate. At the heart of the political objective was a compact with fading elites: propping them up as “traditional” in return for recognition of colonial tutelage as “legitimate” (145).

Combined, this classificatory system and the land holding policy that divided land rights according to tribe formed a lasting underbelly of social relations in Darfur. Once agglomerated through the British tools of census, history and laws, these systems would produce “native Zurga” (Africans) and “settler Arab” tribes. When faced with an ecological crisis that began in the 1960s and intensified in the mid-1980s, Darfuris were thus divided into those tribes with historical claims and access to land, and tribes without any such recognized rights to territory.

“Arabs” and “Zurga” did not really exist outside the census, since all were organized as multiple tribes, not as discrete races...the first expression of a popular consciousness of a separate Arab identity in Darfur did not surface until 1987-89. Even when “census Arabs” and “census Negroes” (Zurga) did spring to life—decades after their invention in the census—their mobilization was still tribal. This continued to be true during all three phases of the conflict in Darfur: whether in 1987-89, in the mid 1990s, or after 2002-3. Unlike Rwanda in the 1990s, political violence in Darfur never took on a racialized dimension (170).

How is it, then, that the Save Darfur movement arrives at such a strikingly different conclusion than
that of one of the foremost experts on genocide and political conflict in Africa? The Save Darfur coalition is composed of a broad cross-section of organizations that includes a number of faith-based groups, human rights workers, and student activists. At its core are members of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the American Jewish World Service (Mamdani 2009: 23). Branching out from there, it has managed to capture the hearts of many Christians across the country, particularly the evangelical community and its multiple national and transnational institutions. This same community of Christian evangelicals is far from a neutral, peace-loving constituency, but has often worked closely with US foreign policy representatives to realize their mutually compatible strategic interests abroad (Gerhardt, 2008). Yet, as Mamdani points out, many Save Darfur activists seemed blissfully ignorant of the fact that part of the dynamics driving the contention between the United States and China in the region was that both were knee-deep in oil, the United States on the Chad side of the border and China on the Sudan side...In 2007, both Darfur and Chad became part of a new U.S. Pan Sahel initiative on counterterrorism (55).

What interests Mamdani most here is the extent to which the Save Darfur coalition was able to link moderate and conservative religious organizations with the progressive grassroots by incorporating vast numbers of students as well as African American civil rights leaders such as Congressman John Lewis, Bill Fletcher and Danny Glover, many of whom are self-proclaimed radicals, into its campaign.

Both the South Africa and Israel divestment initiatives positioned themselves against the status quo interests of governments in power and worked hard to create an alliance with other marginal groups whose visions of a better world they shared. But in the case of the grassroots activists for Darfur we see a different impulse, one that eases the guilty conscience of liberals and others for whom facing up to their government’s involvement in, say, Iraq might prove too difficult.

Perhaps Save Darfur should be credited with an even greater success: depoliticizing Americans, especially those Americans who felt the need to do something in the face of disasters perpetrated by the Bush administration. The Save Darfur Coalition was able to capture and tame a part of this potentially rebellious constituency—especially students—thereby marginalizing and overshadowing those who continued to mobilize around Iraq. This successful displacement was indeed a model campaign, a successful lesson in depoliticization (60).

In this sense, the human rights discourse that surrounds the Save Darfur movement and attracts progressive followers is one that gives all agency in this process to enlightened outsiders, the activists as saviors, rather than to the Darfuris themselves.

Whether their focus lies on the African continent, or within the broader arena of social movements and political organizing, radical geographers can therefore benefit tremendously from Mamdani’s latest intervention. *Saviors and Survivors* provides us with a timely intervention into the contemporary debates about genocide by grounding conflict in the continued legacy of colonial policies. It touches upon the broad themes of political ecology, geo-politics and critical social movement studies and arrives at a better understanding of the origins of the Darfur conflict. It contextualizes and problematizes the seemingly common-sense categories of “Arab” and “African,” and critiques the assumptions and motivations behind contemporary mobilizations by Western activists that have labeled the conflict genocide in need of US intervention. Viewing both the North-South and Darfur conflicts in Sudan as arenas of geo-political contestation between US and Chinese interests is something Mamdani touches on briefly, and therefore certainly requires further investigation. Mamdani’s framework here is quite consistent with prior projects such as his landmark investigation into the Rwandan Genocide, *When Victims Become Killers*. In that work he attempted to broaden the lens of what he saw as a potentially economistic approach to conflict in Africa in much academic research. He therefore sought to give primacy to a similar political analysis that treated the colonial deepening of an antagonistic identity formation between Hutu and Tutsi as central to any attempt to understand the genocide. Yet, as demonstrated by...
the point that Sudan provides a geo-political battle between China and the US in the race to secure natural resources, economic factors clearly still play an important role in driving the contemporary conflict. Political economists in geography should therefore seek to build off of Mamdani’s incredibly nuanced and contextualized approach that emphasizes the terrain of politics and identity formation, by expanding the scope of investigation further into the economic arena.

References


