

Pollution of the Nile River known to the “Outsider” of Watan (Homeland)

Natsuki CHUBACHI

Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University

The Nile River is polluted. Today, in the age of environmental crisis, Sudanese media outlets report how the river is contaminated by plastic waste, industrial and domestic wastewater. Famous as the longest river in the world, the Nile is essential to daily life, agriculture, fishing, and recreation in Sudan. Many Sudanese artists have created works related to this river¹ which is the symbol of this country. In the Sudanese capital Khartoum, the Nile River parts into two major tributaries: the Blue Nile and the White Nile. At the confluence of the two, there lies an island called Tuti. Pollution of the Nile is also visible here. The fishermen of Tuti Island once explained the pollution to me as a Japanese “outsider”.

One late afternoon in June 2019, I was strolling along the river on Tuti Island. I saw a man in a tank top disappear into the dense bushes along the road. There were trampled paths in the bushes, like animal trails. The road seemingly led to the riverside. Thinking I’d just check what was over there and leave, I followed the man. Out by the river, I found the tank top-clad man.

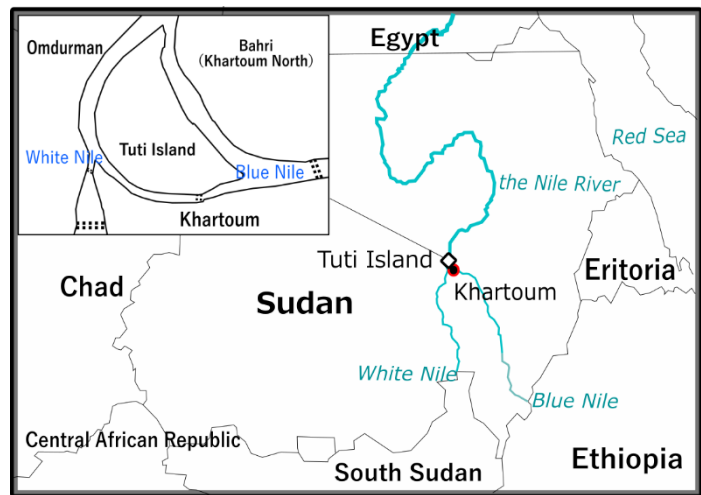


Figure 1: Location of Sudan and Tuti Island

“Welcome!”, he said with a smile. Nearby was a half-naked muscular man and a boy who appeared to be in his mid-teens.

The man in the tank top asked, "What's your name? Where are you from? Do you

¹ For example, Hasan Khalifah al-Atbarawi (1919-2007) wrote a song called “Hello, My Beloved Country (Marhabtain Baladna Hababa)”. The lyrics are from a poem by the poet Shams Deen Hasan Khalifah (1933-). My language school teacher in Khartoum used to sing this song: “Hello, my beloved country, my beloved Nile, my beloved plants and trees...”.

speak Arabic?" Bombarded with questions in rapid succession, I falteringly replied in Khartoum colloquial Arabic. Soon, I found myself being treated to a cup of Nile River water and grilled fish served on an aluminum plate. I was amazed by the delicious white meat of the fish and also by the fact that they were drinking water straight from the Nile. Usually, people in urban areas do not do so due to sanitary concerns and buy commercial bottled water. For these three men, however, drinking the Nile water might have been normal.

I was sitting on the ground, eating fish with my right hand, chatting with the three fishermen. I told them that I am Japanese, that I came to this country alone to study Arabic, that I am interested in Sudanese culture and society, and so on. The half-naked, muscular man called himself Mr. M. The man in the tank top I followed was Mr. M's brother. The brothers' mother was from Egypt. They had gray eyes and a slightly fair skin tone which were



Photo 1. The view along the Blue Nile

rarely seen in Khartoum. Nevertheless, they considered themselves Sudanese citizens and residents of Tuti Island. The boy came to Tuti Island from Darfur about a year ago and began working for Mr. M. The Darfur region is located more than 800km west of Khartoum. The three earn their living on the Nile River by taking vacationers on boat rides and by catching tilapia, a freshwater fish classified in the order Perciformes, with their fishing nets. When an Australian adventurer came to travel the length of the Nile River, Mr. M accompanied as her guide.

The fishermen said they were going to retrieve the fishing nets they had set out and invited me onto their boat which I happily boarded. The boat stopped near a float in the middle of the river. The three hauled up the fishing net. Only one fish, about 15cm long, was caught in there. It did not move an inch. Mr. M threw the fish back into the river. Then, He jumped into the water too. He swam the crawl in all directions for a few minutes before returning to the boat. Black, sticky spots were all over his body. Mr. M looked me in the eye and said, "Look at this. It's oil. ...The oil is coming from over there. ...There are factories over there that discharge oil into the river." He pointed upstream, but I did not get which plant it was nor what was being flushed down the river.

Nevertheless, I could see the rainbow-colored oil slick covering the water with black spots floating in places. I asked Mr. M, "Doesn't the government deal with it?" to which he replied, "The government won't do anything." Then he asked me, "Let me use your smartphone." I handed my phone to him. He started taking selfies – photos from the chest up, picturing him covered in both black and clear droplets. He did not look like he was joking nor having fun. He frowned and said, "Tell the world about this filth...Tell this to all the governments of the world." Then he jumped into the river again.

The sun was setting. We slowly began to make our way back to shore. Mr. M was smoking a cigarette. I could hear people bathing in the distance. I wondered why Mr. M said what he said to me, a stranger, and what I, a Japanese, could do for them. From a distance, I saw two men walking along the river. They were in camouflage fatigues and carrying rifles – possibly military personnel. Mr. M hurriedly put out his cigarette with his foot. The two



Photo 2. The fishermen collecting the fishing net

military-looking men shouted, "Give us a ride. How much?" When Mr. M gave the price, they simply left. In Sudan, I hear rumors that the secret police are tracking the movement of foreign travelers. Perhaps someone alerted the secret police to my presence. Or who knows, maybe the two were simply there for a break. Either way, it was a tense moment.

Since 1989, for almost 30 years, Sudan maintained an authoritarian regime led by the following: President Omar al-Bashir, the ruling National Congress Party, the Sudanese Armed Forces which is a quasi-national security force, police, military-related companies, and the National Intelligence and Security Service. For the people of Sudan, this means that their freedom of association, assembly, and expression has been unreasonably restricted. Should they criticize the regime, there is no guarantee of safety for themselves and their families. Even simply complaining about the pollution issue in the country can be dangerous; those on the regime's side can recognize it as criticism towards the establishment and report it to the authorities as such. The same stands for issues other than pollution. People are forced to be aware of the webs of surveillance formed by whoever it could be.

Anti-regime protests against al-Bashir's authoritarian regime had been taking place since December 2018. These initially began as protests against government-announced cuts in subsidies for wheat and fuel, the resulting bread and gasoline price increase, and the devaluation of Sudanese pounds. Gradually, the protests' aim leaned towards overthrowing the regime and became known as a "revolution". The "revolution" quickly spread throughout the country as if all the discontent under the reign of terror had exploded at once. "Freedom, Peace, Justice! The revolution is the people's choice!" People chanted the slogan everywhere, day after day. On



Photo 3. An anti-regime protest
(In Khartoum, April 2019)

April 11, 2019, al-Bashir was ousted and arrested in a military coup. The National Congress Party was also dissolved. Subsequent negotiations between the civilians and the military led to the formation of a transitional government on August 17, 2019. However, as of March 2022, the military has defied the various agreements and remains in control of the government. With the situation constantly changing, the surveillance society is still alive. It will be a long time before people will be able to sue those responsible for their plight in Sudan without fear nor restrictions.

Why did Mr. M choose to tell me about the pollution of the Nile? I guess it was because they recognized me, an "outsider," as someone free from the Sudanese surveillance society. Let's consider this from Mr. M's point of view. If he had talked about the pollution with anyone from the Sudanese society, his words would have been treated as evidence that he is critical of the state's environmental policy, and consequently of the government itself. Should he talk to members of the regime, he will put himself and his friends at risk. Even if he talks to someone who does not belong to the regime, the secret police may overhear their conversation, and those who he talked to may face imprisonment for cooperation with an anti-regimist. Either way, the more you talk, the more potential enemies you make.

Meanwhile, I am situated outside of the network that constructs the Watan/homeland of Sudan. I am also outside of the living space that surrounds Mr. M and his friends on Tuti Island; in other words, I am outside of the network of his Watan/hometown. From their perspective, I may look like someone who has links only

to the outside world with no connections to the polluters nor the victims. I am not a state-employed foreign expert working on a development project, nor am I a journalist covering human rights issues throughout Sudan. If I had strong connection to the Sudanese society, they would have had to worry about their choice of words. My encounter with the fishermen could be considered a fortuitous opportunity where they were able to confess the current situation without worrying about whether they will be excluded from or remain included in a Sudanese society bound by surveillance.

Now that I think back, Mr. M. probably did not tell me about the pollution so that he could get me to do something about it. The pollution has persisted as a fact for a long time. For the three of them, the structure of the pollution issue is obvious, and experts analyzing the composition of the pollutants will not change anything. Neither did they suggest that we start an environmental organization together. Then, why did they tell me about the pollution at all? I believe it was to reassess their own lives from an "outsider's" point of view and reconfirm the changes occurring in the Nile. As an "outsider," I ate grilled fish with relish, drank Nile River water with curiosity, and gratefully accompanied them as they retrieved their fishing nets. From the fishermen's point of view, these are parts of their ordinary, daily life. By stepping into their life, I have probably given them a chance to look at some aspects of their daily life in a new light. This, I believe, may have re-alerted them to the dangers of pollution that have merged into their day-to-day business.

Environmental issues, such as water pollution, are often discussed as issues of people-versus-nature relationships. However, the fishermen have shown us that a people-versus-people issue lies at the bottom of the problem. The surveillance network built by the authoritarian regime has made it impossible for the Sudanese people to explicitly vocalize their opinions on the Nile River's pollution. In such an extreme situation, they pointed out the issue to me because I apparently was a foreign "outsider" and a guest who would not take any kind of action. In a sense, this is trust born from the weakness of our connection. A few days after my encounter with Mr. M and his colleagues, I had to leave Sudan under my university's instructions because of the country's deteriorating situation. Although I never got to see the men again, I pledge not to waste this serendipitous encounter. The pollution of the Nile still threatens people's lives. There must be something that can be done specifically by "outsiders" who have little connection with Sudan and Tuti Island.

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==== Natsuki CHUBACHI =====

- ◇ Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University Ph.D. Student
- ◇ Education: Bachelor of Arts Degree in Languages and Area Studies - 2021 Tokyo University of Foreign Studies
- ◇ Research Interests: Area Studies, Islam and Environmental Ethics, Environmental Sociology

