

Language and ethnic Ideologies in Sudan. In Whose words?

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The role of the 'colonial encounter' in establishing ethno-linguistic categories in Africa has been widely critically addressed within both anthropological studies and Post Colonial linguistics (Irvine 2008, Makoni & Pennycook 2005). Throughout the 19th century and first part of the 20th century, the colonial "agents" (travelers, administrators, soldiers, missionaries, linguists, anthropologists) applied the scientific European methods of categorization and classification upon human groups, human languages and human societies that before had not necessarily identified themselves with such categories. Perceived and described as 'colonial invention' by post-colonial studies, these categories have not only survived decolonization and Independence but appear to gain more and more legitimacy within the civil society (Abdelhay & Makoni 2010). The paradox can be summarized as follow: whereas the traditional academic authoritative experts (the Linguists and the Anthropologists) start to deconstruct these classifications, the militants and the activists acting for the defense of the minorities tend to reproduce a rather rigid ethnolinguistic ideology (one ethnic group = one language). My presentation will discuss the case of ethnolinguistic categorizations in Sudan during the 20th and the first decade of the 21st century. It will focus on two questions. First, the construct of these categorizations which have evolved and changed according to various factors and actors. Whereas some classifications have been established on the basis of major ethno-linguistic groupings others have privileged smaller grouping. These two types of classification serve and obey different social and political objectives. The second question will deal with the degree of effectiveness of these ethnolinguistic categories as tools of individual/collective identification in a profoundly divided society. Is language really perceived as one of the key factor of ethnic identification and ethnic cohesion? By who and for whom? Based on accounts of what I could observed in Khartoum in the late 1980s, 1990s and mid 2000s in Khartoum among members of non-Arab groups I will try to describe the complexity and intricacy of race, language and origin.