

'Performing Authority at the Borders of the State: Government and Society in Condominium Darfur 1916-1956'

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Darfur is usually portrayed as a passive peripheral victim of massive long-term neglect by both colonial and postcolonial regimes. The Sudanese state in Darfur is seen as either violent and predatory or at other times distant, even absent. This view overlooks the porous nature of the local boundaries between state and society in Darfur over the *longue duree*, and evidence from the colonial period that suggests intense, if sporadic, interactions and negotiations between administrative officials and local populations, particularly in the context of chieftaincy disputes. This paper focuses on these often highly theatrical interactions to provide insights into the local construction of the colonial state. Particular spatial zones, sometimes fixed (the district headquarters, Native Court centres), sometimes mobile and fluid (the territory covered by officials on trek), were constructed as theatres within which state-society interaction was structured. Officials and chiefs performed their roles as rulers to each other and to ordinary people, and in so doing simultaneously created a zone of exchange between colonizer and colonized. Paradoxically, they also simultaneously attempted to reinforce the boundary between the state (which they both appeared to belong to in these moments of performance) and society at large. Yet the demands of ordinary people often crossed this boundary, and the deposition of many colonial chiefs in Darfur reveals the forcefulness of demands for state intervention in local politics, rather than simply suggesting the caprice of the district officer.