Migration: Causes and Effects –
The Case of Omodiat Burush, Northern Darfur, Sudan

Atta El Moula, M. E., University of Bayreuth, Institute of Geosciences, POB 101251, 8580 Bayreuth, Germany

ABSTRACT: Drought, desertification and lack of development have been the main causes of migration in the rural areas of Western Sudan. The author tackles the different migration patterns followed in the area of Omodiat Burush and the factors influencing these migrations. It is found that high preference is given to rural-rural migration either on a seasonal basis or a permanent one. The latter is directed towards Burush village which attracts the inhabitants of the surrounding villages by the relative availability of educational, health and marketing services. Seasonal migration, on the other hand, is an important coping strategy against crop failure and famine risks.

Introduction

"Julu" in Darfur means “wandering”. It denoted a devastating famine which took place throughout Darfur Region in 1913/14 and resulted in enormous mass migration. “Nitlaga” (we will meet again) is another name given to that famine. This is what people usually say to each other before they start wandering in search of food (de Waal 1989). Throughout their history the people of Darfur recognized various periods of famine. Such famines have been given different names which refer to their causes and/or effects. Drought, locusts and war are among the identified causes while the use of a specific famine food, social break down and migration are some of the effects, which people remember, years later.

Famine and associated migration in Darfur are, therefore, not new. Darfur region has witnessed at least ten famines since the beginning of this century, three of them occurred within the latest two decades. Accurate statistics about the movement of migrants due to famine or the search for work within and outside the region are scanty, but it is becoming certain that since the onset of the drought period in the last few decades, the whole Sahelian region has become a zone of migration. According to the results of the 1956 and 1973 censuses, the population losses due to migration in Kordofan and Darfur together were 73,000 and 434,000 respectively. However, the situation became worse during 1984/85 famine when about 50,000 people were displaced and settled around urban centres in N Darfur. In addition, some 230,000 displaced persons had migrated to the relatively wetter areas in the South in search of food or work (Margoluis and Mukhier 1990).

The famine induced mass-migration that occurred in Darfur in 1984/85 was a final result of drought, desertification and lack of development. Drought is obviously not a complete explanation of famine and subsequent mass-migration. Otherwise, famine would be endemic in all the world’s arid and semi-arid areas (Hag 1988). However, drought causes crop failure, erosion of value of productive assets and loss of rural wage employment. Hence, large-scale movements of whole families appear as the final solution for the people whose employment and income depend most on rainfall. Despite these adverse impacts of drought on the subsistence base of the rural poor, this cannot be seen in isolation from the overall pattern of development in the country. A central fact in the economy of modern Sudan’s economy is its dualistic nature. This dualistic economy has been seen in the creation of the large scale, relatively intensive production of a single exporting cash crop (cotton) in central and eastern Sudan. Such schemes benefit from a wide range of modern inputs including fertilizers, pesticides and new varieties of high yielding seeds. This was done almost entirely at the expense of the traditional food-producing sector. This is indicated by the low level of expenditure assigned to this sector in all development plans since independence.
During the Five Years Plan (1970–1975), the actual expenditure on agriculture amounted to LS 146.4 million, of which only an insignificant share was allocated to develop the traditional sector. Although one of the major objectives of the Six Years Plan (1977/78–1982/83) was the development and modernisation of the traditional agricultural sector, yet it was allotted only 22% of the agricultural expenditure.

The concentration of development on the modern irrigated and large-scale mechanized farming in the central and E regions has left the traditional food producing sector in the west badly under-supplied with infrastructure, deprived of government services and agro-scientific inputs. As a result, the traditional subsistence economy in the west has been replaced by a form of a market economy (Ibrahim 1991) and the peasant cultivators transformed into rural proletarians (Lofchie 1975) whose household economics depends greatly on wage labour. Now, most of the households in such areas survive at least partially on the basis of remittances from one or more of their members engaged in wage labour either in towns or in areas of more advanced of agricultural development.

In this paper an attempt is made to give an account of migrations in Omodiat Burush (W Sudan) and point out some of the factors influencing such migrations. However, a brief historical background about the area and the movement of the population seems to be important.

Migration in Omodiat Burush – a Historical Perspective

Omodiat Burush is a part of Um Kaddada Rural Council. Located E of El-Fashir, covering an area of about 1,000 qkm. According to Ibrahim (1991), it is a part of the N Sahelian zone which is the transitional zone between the semidesert and the *Acacia*-*senegal* savanna. Rainfall is low and highly variable in amount and distribution, averaging 250 mm which mostly fall during the period from late June to late September. The dominant physical features are the sandy soils of the Goz (sand dunes) and the low sandstone hills. The Goz soils have low soil fertility due to continuous millet cultivation and overgrazing. Vegetation is scanty, dominated by Acacia species mainly *Acacia mellifera* and *Acacia raddiana*.

The Omodia has a total population of about 8,500 inhabitants, of which one third is found in Burush village alone. The average household is found to be six. The rate of population growth for the whole region is estimated to be four percent (Lackner 1989). The dominant ethnic group is the Berti which constitutes more than eighty percent of the population. Some other minor groups live with them in a peaceful manner. The homeland of the Berti is Tagabo Hills (Jibal Berti) which lie about 170 km NNE of El-Fashir. Today, the Berti, together with other ethnic groups, occupy an extensive area from central N Darfur up to the border of Kordofan in the northeast (Ibrahim 1984). It is believed that the first migration of the Berti to the south took place during the eighteenth century when their homeland was hit by drought (de Waal 1989).

The second enormous mass-migration among the Berti to the south and to the northeast occurred during the 1913/14 famine which is called the "julu" famine. Their settlement in the northeast has been motivated by the availability of water resources.

Traditionally the Berti are sedentary millet cultivators on the Goz soils and also keep livestock. Millet cultivation is mainly for subsistence and there is rarely any surplus for the market. Some water-melons are cultivated for their seeds which are a good cash crop. Yields of water-melon seeds vary from year to year depending on the availability of moisture and incidence of pests and diseases. Other economic activities in the area include seasonal employment, collection and sale of firewood and fodder, small-scale industries, such as leather industry, carpet making and traditional tanning. Apart from seasonal employment, wage labour opportunities are severely limited and wages are extremely low, because virtually no development has ever been initiated in the area.

Types of Migration in Omodiat Burush

El Dawi (1975) has distinguished three types of migratory patterns in W Sudan that have taken place during the present century. These types are: (1) down-hill migration, (2) migration to employment centres and (3) external immigration from West Africa. In this paper it is intended to throw light on the second type of migration, e.g. migration to employment centres. Following El Dawi, three types of migration can be distinguished in Omodiat Burush, namely, rural-rural migration, rural-urban migration and migration to the areas of commercial agriculture (Fig 1).

Rural-Rural Migration

The rural-rural migration in the Omodia represents the recent movements motivated by hunger which is now happening in unprecedented number and scope. They have increased as a direct result of desertification and lack of development. The population faced with such circumstances are forced to move in large numbers to seek a new home away from the threat of hunger and subsequent famine.

In the Omodia the rural-rural migration dates back to the establishment of Burush village in 1934 as a centre of local administration. Since that time the village witnessed an accelerated development of services such as schools, permanent water supply, health services and a market. Such services have attracted an increasing number of people from the nearby villages. Now, there are several sites of villages in the surroundings entirely abandoned after their inhabitants had migrated to Burush. The villages which were completely abandoned are Rukon (1975–1980),