

Review of All About Darfur, documentary film produced and directed by Taghreed Elsanhoury, distributed by California Newsreel, 82 min.

By Michael Kevane, Department of Economics, Santa Clara University, May 15, 2006, mkevane@scu.edu.

The dramatic heart of this documentary, and what most viewers will remember, is an extended conversation in a roadside *gahwa* (coffeehouse) in Khartoum. Theresa, the woman who runs the coffeehouse, is a generous and smiling mother figure. The attempt at narrative in the documentary involves building up to a scene where Theresa explains how she came to Khartoum. The army, she says, came into her village looking for rebels. The villagers had fled, and the army took up residence in the village. Her father had been out fishing, she explains, and when he returned he was shot dead. Her mother went with other women to fetch water for the villagers huddled in the *khalla* (the bush), and she and other women were shot. Other villagers found the bodies. Theresa and her brother were sent to Malakal and eventually joined an uncle in Khartoum. Theresa ended up selling tea, while her brother trained in the police, was posted to Darfur, and was killed shortly after. "If you have not tasted bitterness, would you have left the land of your family?" Theresa asks rhetorically. She adds, "Everyone should do what they need to do. If I had a son, he would get a weapon and avenge me." Tears stream down her face as she tells her story; it is a powerful mix of emotion and violence.

But Theresa talks of events that happened in 1987, around 16 years before the current crisis in Darfur erupted. The title of the film, and Elsanhoury's voiceover, suggest the purpose is to explain the genocide (or genocide-like crimes) of 2003-2004 in Darfur. The film is not "All About Sudan." So how does Theresa's story help the viewer understand Darfur? Theresa was a child when her parents were killed. Where are Theresa's relatives, her uncle in particular? He could have spoken of these events with a different eye than that of Theresa. Who were the army and rebels in her village in 1987? How did her brother die? That would have been worth investigating. The filmmaker does not elaborate. We do not even know Theresa's ethnicity. (At one point a coffeehouse regular presents her as a westerner, but her facial scars suggest she may be Shilluk.)

Other interviews and group sessions that make up the documentary are similarly underdeveloped. Elsanhoury interviews one group of displaced persons in a camp outside of El Fasher. They quietly relate their misfortune. Towards the end of the interview, a young woman recounts how girls in the camp attending school had been whipped and forced to take off shirts given to them by a foreign NGO. Elsanhoury films one of the men in the group help her understand the story. He candidly admits this is hearsay, and this is all they know, what they have heard. Elsanhoury voices over: "I am haunted by the idea of young women being forced to take off their shirts." But not haunted enough, apparently, to interview camp administrators or policemen or other young women or witnesses to the event. The most basic rule of journalism-- have the version of an event confirmed by two unrelated persons who have not rehearsed their stories-- is not applied.

In several segments, Elsanhoury turns a handheld camera on her cameraman while driving around Khartoum and El Fasher. He is a regime supporter, and offers interesting and insightful commentary. At one point, he argues that the problem in Darfur indeed began through a mistake by the government (arming the militias), but was then exacerbated by America's refusal to let the mistake go. "They just want to keep on beating Sudan with a stick," he suggests. Elsanhoury asks him whether he has something against her filming in Theresa's coffeehouse. He tells her frankly that he notices she seems to be interested that the coffeehouse patrons' conversations become the dramatic heart of her documentary. They are largely not on the government side, he complains. He says he does not object, but feels she is not being balanced. At one point, he turns to her and says that Theresa's sad tale should not be taken out of context. He implies that many mothers and fathers have lost loved ones in Sudan, and not just the people of Darfur. He goes on to remind her that his brother had been held prisoner "by John Garang" for two years and then killed. His sadness, he adds, is deeper than Theresa's, but he will not cry for the camera. Moreover, Theresa's family was in a war zone, while his brother was killed in cold blood (executed, he means, as a prisoner), so not only is he sadder, he implies, but he has more right to be sadder. Elsanhoury lets him tell the story, and asks no questions. Under what circumstances was his brother captured? Does he really think that the sadness of an adult man who loses his brother is deeper than that of a child who loses both parents and then her brother?

Why does Elsanhoury seem to be reluctant to follow through in her inquiries? A strange segment is when Elsanhoury turns the camera on her own aging *habooba* in Khartoum, who tells a long, shaggy dog story about one of their ancestors who went with the British expedition to conquer Darfur in 1916, or perhaps before. It turns out the story has no point; the point has either been forgotten or obscured (the ancestor was close collaborator with Britain, the colonial master?). Elsanhoury finally asks a question, and her grandmother clams up. "That's my story," she replies tartly. Perhaps Elsanhoury filmed that segment when she first arrived in Sudan, and was traumatized by the sudden switch from engaging storyteller to defensive and hostile interviewee. (This 4-minute segment with her family is an embarrassment that should have ended up on the cutting floor.)

There are a number of other scenes that are quite interesting but further illustrate Elsanhoury's reluctance to dig deep. She asks few questions of William Ezekiel, editor at the Khartoum monitor. Ezekiel clearly enjoys provoking her, but she will not take the bait and engage. She asks few questions of a psychiatrist in Darfur who insists that in his practice he has examined only two rape victims. "But what about all the women who say they have been raped," she mildly protests. "All I can tell you is what I know," he frankly adds, "I cannot tell you if there have been hundreds, or just a handful, all I can say is that I have only treated two." She asks few questions during an out-of-context interview on rape, with Miriam Sadiq al-Mahdi.

What to make of this mish-mash of a documentary? First, Elsanhoury be praised. None of the other documentaries coming out on the issue do what Elsanhoury does: capture ordinary Sudanese in northern Sudan speaking before the camera, in long unedited sequences, in comfortable settings, about the crisis in Darfur. Activists in the United States and Europe often ask, "What do ordinary Sudanese say about the crisis?" This is a great documentary to watch to address that question. The non-Sudan specialist will learn a tremendous amount. Elsanhoury's product is obviously an amateur effort that will nevertheless be of considerable use to Sudanists interested in researching and teaching the crisis in Darfur. That is because the film, through its amateurishness and naiveté, turns out to be unbelievably complex. This complexity is not due to the filmmaker, who seems to have had the idea that to make a documentary film one simply took a camera, interviewed people for a few days, and then headed to the editing room.

The complexity of the documentary, and its utility in teaching about Sudan and Darfur, is due to how difficult it is for the critical viewer to discern what Elsanhoury is trying to say in her documentary. As tears stream down Theresa's face, the audience reflects on the brute of the regime supporter in the coffeehouse, whose insistent refrain was that people were dying everywhere in Sudan while they sat drinking coffee in their blue jeans in Khartoum. Talk of death in Darfur in that context was nothing but "sentimental talk." It was this slap to the face (metaphorical) that prompted Theresa to tell her story. Her story was not sentimental talk for her. But for the viewer? Her story can easily be interpreted as precisely the kind of "sentimental talk" that the coffeehouse regular criticized. Theresa cries, but not for the large-scale civil war of 2003-2004. She cries for her own loss, from what may well have been the small-scale localized civil violence that is pervasive in Sudan. Her story does not help us understand the crisis of 2003, only the background to the crisis. Even there, without knowing more about her story, it does not help. All Theresa ends up saying, in the *analysis* phase of the coffeehouse discussion, is that people died and are dying in Sudan. Is Elsanhoury's point that the current civil conflict is more like the previous conflict, and that America has now discovered, paraphrasing an unforgettable line of Jesse Jackson, "a text" upon which to intervene, but this "text without a context is a pretext." Or is Elsanhoury's point that to deeply understand the mentality of the regime one has to understand how they (regime and supporters) constantly reshape the discourse about Darfur in order to better belittle it (as sentimental talk?). The unfiltered, unquestioned, and "unfollowedthrough" story of the cameraman and his brother is especially troubling: Is Elsanhoury aware of the deep moral problematic of his claim? Does she think that stories like these should not be probed, because all deaths are equal? Does she really mean, in giving her cameraman the last word, to place his story as equivalent to Theresa's?

It turns out, in Elsanhoury's film, that nobody in Darfur has actually died from the current violence. At least, she cannot track down anyone who can offer direct, meaningful testimony about death in Darfur in the present (in the few days she seems to have been in Sudan). She seems, in the end, to have been an ideal regime

documentarian, constrained or unwilling to probe very deeply, or to go the extra mile to actually find the footage that would adequately present what happened and continues to happen in Darfur. This is reinforced by the choice of ending. One of the interesting themes of the documentary is Elsanhoury's inability to carefully determine how she wants to present the idea of racism in Sudan, *unsuriyya*, since it is obvious to the viewer, and anyone who has spent time in Sudan, that the word "race" as denoting significant variation in physical appearance, is largely meaningless in Darfur (or much of Sudan). As one interviewee in the film puts it, no one in Sudan, let alone Darfur, is pure anything. *Unsurriyya* is perhaps better translated as "treating people according to ethnic stereotypes based on their overall appearance or knowledge of their family history." So one household might refer to and treat a whole family as *abid*, while schoolmates or other adults encountering the family might think they were extremely respectable people. *Unsurriyya* is quite complicated in the Sudanese context.

The film ends with one of the coffeehouse regulars expressing the hope that his children will grow up to be free of *unsuriyya*. The film then consolidates this hopeful note: shots of children and smiling faces set to *Darfur baladna*, a syrupy song of optimism ("Why can't everyone just put down their guns?") by Omar Ihsas. Is this Elsanhoury's *analysis* of the conflict in Darfur? That all of her interviewees have told her that *unsuriyya* is a problem, but that Sudanese society manages to control *unsuriyya* and allow people to live in reasonable accommodation of their differences, except that the current regime has intervened and deliberately created or allowed massive destruction, and so then what has to be done is for people to sing more songs about getting along and to think wistfully about a better future? Does the conclusion follow from the premise?