

THE DARFUR ARCHIVES

I initiated the Darfur Archives in order to document the rich cultural traditions and oral history of those Darfur tribes targeted for extinction: the Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit.

In 2003, Sudanese President Omar Al Bashir and his cabal launched a merciless campaign of destruction upon the non-Arab tribes of Darfur. Al-Bashir is still in office and he is wanted by the ICC for war crimes and crime against humanity including the murder, rape and displacement of millions. Nearly 3 million survivors fled to hastily formed camps scattered across Darfur and eastern Chad.

Today, 80 to 90 percent of Darfur's villages are ashes or occupied by others, Arab tribes from Chad and from distant Niger and Mali. In one refugee camp an Oumda, (tribal leader) explained, "You know us very well. You know we are in mourning. We are suffering. We do not do these celebrations in the camps."

I made it clear that I understand that they are suffering. And that this project is born of my deepest respect for them, I know something of the atrocities they have endured and the injustices and deprivations they continue to face each day. I also respect what once was theirs; the traditions that were inseparable from their identity, which marked the most important passages in their lives and within their lost communities. The archives must exist for the children who are growing up in deplorable camps and amidst violence. It is for them and for the children of Darfur who otherwise may never know their own heritage. It is true that far too much has been lost. But so many treasures exist today, in the memories of the elderly! Only in their memories. The livelihood of the Darfurian people was once tied to the land. The Fur and the Masalit people are agriculturalists, the Zaghawa herders. Young people who know only life in the camps will not know the agricultural methods when peace finally comes and they can return to their land. Nor will they know their own rich cultural traditions. I pledged to the refugees that when, one day peace comes, there will be a museum in the middle of Darfur. A place where the young people can go to reclaim what is theirs.

I then told them I would be at a designated spot at the edge of the camp every day for a month. I will simply operate the camera—they could decide what should be preserved on film. It's for them, for the children of Darfur -and for the generations to come.

In the thousands they came each day, and they brought forth their treasures. I have filmed some 35 hours of songs and dances, celebrations of coming of age, marriage, planting, harvesting, visiting neighboring villages, children's stories, mourning and honoring the dead. The elders shared their memories and the stories told to them by their grandparents. We have gone back 300 years!

The refugees took over this project as their own-which of course it is. I spent the month of February 2009 in the Oure Cassoni camp. At the end of my stay, the refugees donated some 200 artifacts they had brought with them when they fled their villages, everyday items they had used before their lives were destroyed. The artifacts are photographed, (I can email them to anyone

who is interested) and are currently being stored at the US Embassy in Chad. And the old Oumda rewarded me bountifully when he said, “Thank you for reminding us to remember.”

The video footage and sound are of the highest quality. It is currently being edited professionally – divided into tribe.

The Darfur Archives Advisory board; Historian and Harvard Professor Alex DeWaal, *A Short History of A Long War, Famine*, Professor Sean O’Fahey (*Darfur Sultanate-2009*)

Jerome Tubiana – widely published historian and expert on the tribes of the Chad/Darfur region.

The continuing support and advice of the board has been invaluable. Alex DeWaal told me that even in the midst of brutal warfare waged by this same government against the people of southern Sudan, the leaders in the Nuba Mountains had the foresight to summon the elders; the body-painters, the storytellers, the singers and dancers – and they filmed them, so that their traditions would not be lost. It is astonishing that no one had done this for Darfur. Traditions in Darfur have been passed through the generations orally. When the ways of conveying traditions break down completely, the culture is lost.

The project has, in so many ways, exceeded my goals. I could not have anticipated such wholehearted support from the refugees. I did not suppose that it would be possible to acquire artifacts.

But at least one more trip back to the refugee camps will be necessary in order to form a more complete archive. I will need to visit other camps, in another part of eastern Chad, in order to film the people of North Darfur, where the traditions are different.

Until we can have the museum in Darfur, I would like to have everything we have filmed put on the ‘Darfur Archives’ website. The primary importance of the archive is for the Darfurians in the future, but also, at this point in advocacy, it will serve as an important tool to show the world what extraordinary people we have been talking about and how rich and meaningful their customs and traditional way of life once were. I believe seeing the ceremonies and hearing the stories will bring Darfur’s people into focus in a new, very profound way.