

# Debunking the dogma on Darfur

**M**AHMOOD Mamdani, the Ugandan political scientist and Columbia University professor, recently spoke about his latest book, *Saviours and Survivors: Darfur, Politics and the War on Terror*, which challenges much of what we've been told about the war in Darfur.

Mamdani – voted as one of the world's top 100 public intellectuals last year – began by stating that “the work of academia is to question dearly held assumptions”.

And he went on to outline the “sacrosanct assumptions” around Darfur: the labelling of the war as a “genocide” between Arabs and Africans, why Darfur rapidly grabbed global attention and the advertising campaign that drove it to prominence.

Mamdani argues that there are several drivers of the war: a land struggle and the ongoing drought and desertification which have exacerbated it; the militarisation of the region and the proliferation of deadly weapons that began with the standoff in neighbouring Chad between Colonel Muammar Gaddafi of Libya and the US, Israel and France; and the substantial oil and uranium deposits in both the Sudan and Chad.

Mamdani situates the



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present “genocide” in a historical context. He rejects the simplistic labelling of the fight as one between “fair-skinned Arabs” (settlers) against “black Africans” (natives). He dedicates the greater portion of the book to a nuanced analysis of identities at play.

He lays out the myriad issues at stake: homeland rights, native rights, regional autonomy, citizenship and religion. He argues against framing the current conflict through the lens of colonial historiographies that flatten the conflict into one between evil and innocence that pits Arab Janjaweed against African farmers.

He asserts that the Darfuris comprise many ethnicities: Furs, Massalits, Zeghawas, Misseriyas, Rizeigats, that Arabic is spoken widely, that intermarriage is widespread and that identity in Darfur, as elsewhere, is complex and cannot simply be boiled down to skin colour, religion or ethnic affiliation.

He shows how – at the outset of the War on Terror – widely divergent mortality figures with questionable evidentiary bases emanating from different humanitarian agencies were used to mobilise action against the Islamised government in Khartoum.

He argues that the battle for naming is important and that positing it as Arab vs African, coupled with the (initially overinflated) scale of the crisis allowed it to be labelled “genocide”, which gave it a global resonance.

“Killing is not what defines genocide,” he writes. “Killing happens in war ... It is killing with intent to eliminate an entire group – a race, for example – that is genocide.”

The numbers of people believed to have died in Darfur vary from 118 142 to 146 000 to 396 563. He illustrates how other African conflicts with significantly larger mortality rates haven't received the same attention as Darfur. Such as the four million people

who died in the DRC from 1998 to 2004 in a war described by the UN as “the most deadly war since World War II”. The equivalent of the Asian tsunami hitting the region every six months. Or the 300 000 people killed in the Angolan war between 1998 and 2002.

Mamdani doesn't undermine the atrocities in Darfur or deny that it was the site of mass deaths and that the perpetrators should be held accountable. But he cautions against erasing the context out of the war in Darfur.

“The numbers game is not about mathematical certainty; it's about inflating the scale of disaster to mask another agenda. African tragedies are reported on as if they happen in isolation and silence, under the cover of night. Without context, wars in Africa are presented as a contest between brutes.”

He is critical of people “substituting moral certainty for knowledge and feeling virtuous when acting on the basis of total ignorance”.

In *Saviours and Survivors* Mamdani presents persuasive counterpoints to the dogma around Darfur.

*Saviours and Survivors: Darfur, Politics and the War on Terror* is published by HSRC Press.

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