

UN MILITARY OBSERVERS AT WORK

A Case Study from Sudan

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Abstract

Military personnel are, nowadays, commonly considered to be professionals: men and women with special skills who feel responsible to the society that they serve. In line with that belief, the assumption is that military personnel are dedicated to achieving mission objectives. With that assumption, I set out to Sudan in November 2007 for a six-month-rotation as a UN military observer. Contrary to what I expected to see – a group of professionals eager to work – I met with colleagues who had little military and diplomatic skills, no commitment to the mission, and whose behavior and actions were importantly informed by personal financial objectives.

Throughout my stay in Sudan, I have recorded my experiences and observations in a diary. Upon returning from the Mission, I decided to translate my findings in an academic paper with the intention of narrating a story which is never told, but which could be very important nonetheless. This paper is a first attempt to narrate the story. It discusses my role as a 'participant observer' in Raga – an area bordering South-Darfur – on the one hand and micro organizational behavior of UN military observers in Raga on the other hand.

This paper *explicitly does not* discuss the background of the UN military observers that I worked with, *nor does it* cover my incessant ruminations about the form in which I should present my story. With respect to the background of the military observers, I found striking cultural, social, economic and national parallels. Yet, I was extremely hesitant to include those sociological features in my story, because my conclusions could be very sensitive. Since I had only observed a small part of a big system, I was unsure to what extent I am justified in even suggesting sociological parallels. As regards my contemplations about the presentation of my story, I have been struggling with the question whether to address an academic audience or a non-academic audience. Who is the story important for? I wondered if I could possibly write a 'nuanced' popular book. If I would, would I still be able to reach an academic audience? If I would decide to write an academic article – the audience that I generally prefer to address – to what extent could I draw conclusions and contribute to theory building, based on my experiences? Was I too much of an 'inside participant observer', or could I, maybe, not even be qualified as a participant observer at all? These and other questions, I hope to be getting feedback on.