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‘We do our bit in our own space’: DAL Group and the development of a curiously Sudanese enclave economy

Article (Accepted version) (Refereed)

Original citation:
Mann, Laura (2013) ‘*We do our bit in our own space’: DAL Group and the development of a curiously Sudanese enclave economy.* Journal of Modern African Studies 51, (2) pp. 279-303

DOI: 10.1017/S0022278X13000207

'We do our bit in our own space': DAL Group and the development of a curiously Sudanese Enclave Economy

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Please cite: Mann, Laura (2013) ''We Do Our Bit in Our Own Space': DAL Group and the Development of a Curiously Sudanese Enclave Economy' *Journal of Modern African Studies* 51(2)

ABSTRACT

The family firm, DAL group, is Sudan's largest and most diversified company. Its growth has concentrated on consumer goods, rather than on state concessions or exports. It has developed its own training programs, construction units, transportation networks and market research departments to manage the unstable environment outside its business walls. This paper focuses on the company's recruitment policies, demonstrating how the firm relies on its own internal family structure and a transnational network of Sudanese professionals in order to grow and prosper. Such self-reliance contributes to growing political frustration among young unemployed people. Graduates from 'marginal' areas rely more heavily on public advertisements and on information obtained from state bodies, not the private channels of *wasta* (personal intermediation) that cut through contemporary business. The paper concludes by comparing DAL with similar business networks in Ethiopia and Rwanda arguing that DAL is a unique and interesting form of 'enclave economy,' shaped by a displaced transnational elite operating in a hostile political environment. Within the wider political context of Sudan, there is a limit to what similar businesses can achieve.

INTRODUCTION: GATEWAY TO THE WEST

We have to be self-sufficient in many areas in order to be able to maintain our standards […] we try to do everything ourselves. It is not right, but it is out of necessity.
Motasim Dauod, one of the 'brothers' and managing directors of DAL

The family firm DAL group is Sudan's largest and most diversified company.2 Its units are scattered throughout Khartoum and Sudan, but its headquarters and 'Centre of Excellence' are located on the outskirts of the industrial zone of Bahri, North Khartoum. Despite its peripheral location on the edge of the Sudanese capital, DAL lies at the intersection of the international economic system and the Sudanese nation, bringing international brands, training and Sudanese expatriate expertise back into the country.

The original DAL Company, SUTRAC (Sudanese Tractor Company) was established to transfer the dealership of the American brand 'Caterpillar' from the British company Sayer and Colley to Sudanese ownership at independence. In the 1980s the company changed its name to Daoud Abdellatif Group, or 'DAL Group,' as the company expanded into other areas. Its expansion followed an internal logic. Amidst wider economic decline, the original company found itself receiving payments in the form of commodities, so it branched into commodity trading and later into consumer goods. After developing national consumer food brands, international companies began to partner with the group, seeing its infrastructure as an invaluable resource. It currently represents thirty eight international brands in Sudan, including Coca Cola, Fanta, Kraft, Unilever, Mercedes Benz, Mitsubishi, Kia, Shell and Caterpillar.

As the company continues to expand, it has been forced to create sub-units to serve its own internal functions. In construction, transportation, education and recreation, DAL has preferred to create its own construction companies, railway and road fleet, schools, training centres and recreational facilities. Most recently, the company has been approached by Saudi

Arabian investors interested in land deals in the country. For an unaffiliated company, DAL's growth is staggering.

DAL has prevailed in difficult circumstances. The deterioration of the civil service, the politically-influenced privatisation process, the imposition of US sanctions and the drastic expansion of tertiary education have all made it difficult for unaffiliated companies to compete. Economic data is sparse or non-existent while political predation over the economy is rampant. The collection of data and information about the economy, once conducted by formal state institutions (i.e. Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Labour, and Sudanese Development Corporation) now takes place through private sector, and often, within affiliated companies like the High Tech consultancy company. In other cases, no data is collected at all; the last labour survey was conducted in 1996. For job seekers and HR managers, therefore, the situation is particularly dire.

In the early 1990s, the regime embarked on an 'Education Revolution,' increasing the number of universities from four to twenty four in a seven-year period (El-Tom 2007). Class sizes grew enormous and teachers, ill equipped. Universities stopped providing work experience while government responsibility over the economy was replaced by a discourse of self-reliance and a corresponding strategy of family dependence. Qualifications lost their value in the eyes of managers while experience in the civil service no longer served as a benchmark of competence. Other kinds of information grew important and this in turn changed the transmission of information about vacancies as well. Information about jobs became increasingly private while personal connections (or *wasta*) and transnational expertise grew more and more important for both job-seekers and managers.

By examining DAL's relationship with the government and with job seekers, this paper examines the extent to which both the personal family network of the group and the international system act as 'private secure spaces' through which the general public can be filtered. I focus on three DAL businesses: Coca Cola, Sayga (DAL's flours and pasta producer) and Al Sunut construction. This paper draws on my fieldwork in DAL, using material from field notes, interviews with HR managers, DAL's own documentation and the results of a detailed recruitment survey conducted in one of DAL's largest business units. It situates DAL group in a wider pattern of economic change by drawing on material from interviews with 159 job seekers, managers and officials about the changing nature of the job search and on a 400-person questionnaire asking how employees found out about their current jobs. This survey was based on Mark Granovetter's famous survey of job information in the US labour market (Granovetter 1973; 1995).

While Mark Granovetter found that the majority of American professionals rely on 'weak ties' for information about jobs, the Khartoum survey revealed strong and strengthening social ties among job contacts. The survey also revealed that graduates from 'marginal' areas (like Darfur, Southern Sudan and Eastern Sudan) rely more heavily on public advertisements and on information obtained from state bodies, not the private channels of *wasta* (personal intermediation) that cut through contemporary business. The privatisation of opportunities in companies like DAL may therefore be indirectly contributing to growing political instability by providing opportunities to networked 'in groups' over already marginalised 'out groups'.

In the conclusion, I contrast DAL's growth with the development of similar business networks in Ethiopia and Rwanda, arguing that DAL has developed a very particular kind of 'enclave economy'. On the one hand, the company employs very exclusive recruitment policies to protect its growth; it relies on its own internal capacities and internal informational infrastructures, preferring to start companies rather than outsource work to others. On the other hand, it is focused on Sudanese consumers. I conclude by asking what this enclave growth might mean for the political future of Sudan.

‘Getting the Personal Side Out of It’

DAL Group is currently run by a board of family members. Three of the four brothers and both sisters work throughout the group, overseeing operations and coming together to form overall strategy. They keep ‘close but not too close’ (Daoud 2010 int.). As the company continues to expand, they feel they must cede some control over day-to-day activities. One of the brothers and managing directors of the company, Motasim Daoud explained how the older personalised system of HR was no longer suitable given their current size:

> In the past, it was just the general manager like myself [who] evaluated people and there was no system. We always believed in reward but we had no structure for it… We needed to get out of the personal evaluation of people, so there had to be a system (Daoud 2010 Int).

The company now employs a biannual assessment using software that stores information about staff evaluations and ties salary to performance. Additionally the company has introduced the Hay System, an international HR grading system connecting salary grades with learning and development. In all aspects of business, managers within DAL like to stress their ‘international standards’. For example, when the company went into flour, it sourced equipment from Switzerland and seeds from the Australian grain board in order to produce the highest quality flour. These international standards reach into training and development. The company has its own ‘Centre of Excellence’, which runs training for its entire 5,500 workforce. In addition, some business units have their own training programs. Other units send employees to academies in the headquarters of their foreign dealers. While sanctions limit the extent to which employees are directly able to participate in American training programs, DAL adapts material from its US partners for use in Sudan, thereby avoiding sanctions.

Due to the paucity of economic data available in Sudan, DAL Group has also developed its own sophisticated Research and Development (R&D) procedures to gauge the size and composition of the market for its consumer products. Having no quantitative data available, it relies on qualitative surveys. For example, Sayga invites bakers and housewives to the company for training and consumer research programs. Participants are shown how to use DAL's products and then questioned about their experiences and preferences (Shashati and Asvat, 2011). It now uses the same technique to gather information and market its brands of pasta. Its focus on a narrow portfolio of consumer goods with similar characteristics (sugar, powdered milk, tea, powdered drinks, etc.) allows the group to expand into the frontier markets of Sudan where wider market information is unknown or unreliable. Such an approach gives Sayga an advantage over companies with fewer resources at their disposal. Sayga has been so successful in developing these spaces of market information and coordination that multinational companies are now partnering with them. As Elias Yousif Shashati, the general manager of Sayga's Consumer Business unit describes:

> [M]ultinationals considering entering markets with poor consumer data would far better by partnering with a local company that has experience in the sector they are targeting, and has thus already acquired sufficient consumer information to devise a suitable entry strategy. When market data is not easily available, simply establishing a local distribution network is not enough (Shashati and Asvat 2011: 7).

In this sense, DAL has created an economy onto itself. It has developed its own infrastructures to grow and prosper in a seemingly hostile environment. It has 'gotten the personal side of it' by creating controlled systems that allow it to predict and manage the wider economic environment. Nevertheless, despite the formalised and very professional nature of its internal functions, outside the company, DAL employs a much more informal and personalised approach to growth and inclusion, viewing the state and national universities as unreliable partners and the national labour market as an unreliable communicative space from which to draw information about prospective employees. Instead, it relies heavily on the personal social networks of its employees and international sources of information and communication to categorise the wider community. When it does engage with universities and particularly, high scoring graduates, it brings these graduates in for training to 'supplement their know-how with very intense learning and development' (HR manager in DAL HQ #1 2010 Int.). When DAL has gotten more involved with the state, it has met resistance both from within the government and within the US State Department.

SUDAN AND SANCTIONS

Sudan has had a difficult relationship with the United States since the 1990s. Osama bin Laden lived in the country from 1991 to 1996 and used his Sudanese base to conduct insurgent activities outside of Sudan. In response to mounting pressure from Saudi Arabia, the USA and Egypt, Sudan finally expelled Bin Laden in 1996. The US however did not believe that the relationship had ended.

In 1997 President Clinton imposed comprehensive economic, trade and financial sanctions and in 1998 the US ordered the bombing the al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory in North Khartoum, claiming that it was producing chemical weapons. In fact, the factory was producing

50 per cent of Sudan's medicines and most importantly, choloroquine, the world's cheapest malaria treatment (Daum 2001). The event devastated Sudan's livestock and caused food insecurity throughout the country. Sudanese residents of Khartoum have very bitter memories about this event. In 2000 relations between the two countries improved when Sudan cooperated in counterterrorism activities. However, following the outbreak of violence in Darfur, George Bush increased sanctions and in 2005, the United Nations imposed sanctions of its own. While US sanctions were 'comprehensive,' UN sanctions were limited to an arms embargo and to the freezing of assets of individuals linked to the conflict. Nevertheless companies with interests in the US economy stopped having direct business links with Sudan and various 'divestment' campaigns sprung up throughout the United States, spurred on by the 'Save Darfur Coalition' (Mamdani 2009). While the West has closed itself off from Sudan, Asian economic powers have begun to invest in the country. There are however, as always, exceptions.

Sudan is the world's largest producer of gum Arabic, a key ingredient in many soft drinks. The gum has been at the centre of political discussions, with the Sudanese ambassador to the US once threatening to stop its exports if the US increased sanctions (the product had been exempted from previous sanctions after US manufacturers argued that they needed the gum) (Goldman 2007). Coca Cola and Pepsi have both benefited from special dispensations from the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which allow them to sell their products in Sudan. These licenses allow blacklisted countries like Sudan and Iran to buy US agricultural commodities, medicines and medical equipment. However, as part of the OFAC agreement, Coca Cola and Pepsi are not allowed to have any 'direct dealings' with the government (Heavens and Dahl 2008). DAL group and Araak group (the Sudanese distributor of Pepsi) are both politically unaffiliated family firms and therefore represent perfect channels for American products to enter the Sudanese economy. Just as informal cross border trade networks connect domestic consumers with international markets, these family firms and their extensive social networks provide the web through which Sudan becomes connected to the outside (Western) world.

While DAL demonstrates that profitable investment is viable in Sudan, it also sits awkwardly between the Sudanese state and the international community. It is a gate for Western products to enter the country and provides a gateway for Sudanese expatriates in the West and East to return home. However as it has attempted to embed itself more deeply into the country, through its collaboration with the government, its employees have been forced to reflect on their relationships with the West and to question their transnational loyalties. I first look at DAL's recruitment policies and then move on to discuss its collaboration with the Sudanese state, primarily through its construction projects.

DAL's Recruitment Within and Outside of Sudan

If you visit the DAL website, you will find these words at the top of each page: 'Our people make us what we are'. DAL pays its workers high salaries, offers intensive training within its 'Centre of Excellence,' sends employees abroad for training within the headquarters of its Western business partners and provides extremely favourable working conditions. For example DAL poached the chef from one of Khartoum's luxury hotels to run Sayga's staff cafeteria. So how does a young university graduate become one of 'its people'? This section argues that DAL's recruitment policies have been affected by three factors.

Firstly the politicisation of the civil service and private economy under the regime's policies of *tamkeen* 3 and the deterioration of salaries during the inflationary period of the early

1990s scattered Sudan's human capital abroad. Now that the economy has entered a period of economic recovery, DAL seeks to bring this human capital home and thus act as a gate for expatriate Sudanese to return 'home' and affect change in their country.

Secondly the deterioration of Sudan's educational institutions during the 'Education Revolution' led to a distrust of domestic national qualifications and a preference for Sudanese educated and trained abroad. This decline also had the effect of encouraging foreign educational institutions to open campuses in Sudan and to more aggressively advertise their programs abroad.

Thirdly the family itself has strong personal relationships with the UK and US. Daoud Abdel Latif, the firm's founder, graduated from Gordon Memorial's College (which later became the University of Khartoum). When it came to the education of his children, he sent all four sons to UK universities, while his two daughters remained in Khartoum (due to conventions about female mobility). In turn, all six of his children sent their own children to the UK for primary and secondary education.

These days the family has geographically reconfigured this tradition. In 2004 the company built its own 'Khartoum International Community School' in order to attract expatriate staff. The school is the only school in Sudan to offer the International Baccalaureate curriculum and employs predominantly American and British teachers. DAL has thus built its own internal foreign educational space immune to wider educational decline.

These three factors have crystallised into a tendency for DAL to do 'everything on its own' (Daoud 2010 int.). As the general manager of one of the key DAL companies notes, "we do our bit in our own space' (Hassan 2010 int.). DAL acts as a gate connecting the Sudanese economy to the global system but it is not a gate that opens in both directions. When it comes to recruitment, the company has been very careful about who it takes in.

In the beginning recruitment was very personal and informal. While it was still a small company many employees found their jobs directly through the founding father's family. Hani Hassan, the general manager of Al Sunut construction, is a good example.

Hani graduated from the civil engineering program at the University of Khartoum. After working for another company for a few months, he decided to start his own business with two friends from university. They did minor construction projects for friends, acquaintances and other clients. Hani knew the DAL family and they gave him some part time work. In those days DAL was still moving out of engineering and so its construction unit was just a department. Hani describes his early relationship as a matter of 'convenience':

> It was convenience, like where I used to live, they knew me, *kedda* (like this). It was not really clear that they wanted to start a business. The projects came in, more and more ... it just started to grow… As the group grew, we started building other facilities. Factories, infrastructure, showrooms... (Hassan 2010 int.).

Eventually, the company decided to form a construction and development wing. This wing has now become a fully-fledged company and is involved in two of DAL's biggest projects: the high-end business district, Al Sunut and the high-end residential development, Al Soba. Hani is a good example of a wider trend, using trusted employees as 'seeds' for new ventures. As Motasim explained:

> He is a good example of actually a lot of the leadership that exists right now- maybe their roots are fifteen years back or something like that. The financial manager of Sayga, which is a bigger company, is a guy who… I employed in 1990 when Sayga was born, so he went there. So yeah, we try to do that. Now our ad company, for example, is the newest company we have established, the dealership is people, one guy who has been with us for five years, who is highly competent and a young guy, who I am grooming for the future (Daoud 2010 int.).

For those lower in the hierarchy, managers can no longer know every employee. In 2010 DAL had 5,500 employees and hoped to double this number by 2015. In the words of Motasim, the family felt that they 'have to shrink into an owner's role and allow professional management takeover' (Daoud 2010 int.). The group now employs a consultant from the Gulf who helps family firms transition into shareholding companies. In the early 2000s DAL began to 'go outside the family' (Daoud 2010 int.) to look for new recruits.

In 2002 DAL became the sole bottler and distributor of the Coca Cola brand in Sudan. They constructed a factory and bottling plant outside its headquarters in North Khartoum. DAL headhunted 'Heba,' an HR manager from another company to manage the HR functions of the new plant. Heba was the fifth person hired. They had already handpicked the technical project manager, the production manager and 'two young ladies' (Heba 2010 int.). By the time Heba left Coca Cola six years later, she had hired over seventeen hundred employees.

For all of these positions Coca Cola used newspaper advertisements, listing the DAL brand name. They got thousands of applications. The sales advertisement received over 3,000 applications. Nevertheless Heba maintains that, in the beginning, they read through every application and employed strict testing and interviews to select suitable candidates.

Over time public advertisements grew more problematic. When it came to the warehouse positions at the plant, Heba faced problems. She could not find qualified Sudanese people with experience in warehouse management. It was a particularly frustrating part of the project due to the large numbers of irrelevant applications received. As one manager in DAL's headquarters put it:

[I]f you advertise for a job, you will interviewing a lot of people but to pick up the perfect one, the perfect choice, it is very very difficult but you might find someone you trust then you ask them, you need an employee in that region, or something like that, and then they can actually guide you through (HR manager in HQ #2 2010 int.).

DAL has responded to the decline of education and the corresponding overflow of graduate CVs in three ways. Firstly it has sought out Sudanese living outside of Sudan; secondly it has used the personal social networks of its employees to spread information about jobs and; thirdly it has engaged directly with universities in a controlled manner, bringing graduates in for training and sending them abroad to expose them to DAL 'culture'.

The HR manager of Sayga, Ashraf, listed 'Sudanisation of the workforce' as his number one priority. At the time of our interview in 2009, Ashraf estimated that sixty-two per cent of his workforce was Sudanese but was eventually aiming to reach ninety-five per cent. In such an environment, Sudanese colleagues are obliged to speak and write in English. Ashraf also stressed that even when the workforce becomes ninety-five per cent 'Sudanised,' it will still be necessary for Sudanese employees to communicate in English. If DAL becomes a 'global business', it will need people who can 'easily connect with companies and customers outside of Sudan' (Ashraf 2009 int.). English can therefore become a 'breaking point in an interview' (Ashraf 2009 int.). One central feature of the regime's 'Education Revolution' was the switch from English to Arabic. While DAL is particularly exceptional in its high level of English, managers of other companies also signalled the importance of English. In Sudan Airways, for example, all employees have mandatory English lessons (HR Manager, Sudan Airways 2010 int.).

For these reasons, a core component of Sudanisation has been the headhunting of qualified Sudanese working abroad. Sudanese expatriates are viewed as the perfect marriage of modernity and tradition. They helped transform the company, Ashraf explained, bringing a different kind of 'culture' and a different kind of 'mentality' (Ashraf 2009 int.). DAL targets them through regional newspapers, regional websites, recruitment agencies, outsourcing agencies and also ‘through connections, personal connections’ (Ashraf 2009 int.). They target both Sudanese living abroad and those that ‘have reached a level of experience and knowledge where they could be matched with an ex-pat in terms of work ethics, their abilities [and] their accountabilities’ (Ashraf 2009 int.). He estimated that thirty to thirty-five per cent of his Sudanese staff had worked abroad but increased that estimate to forty five per cent when he included those who had worked for international companies within Sudan.

In addition to their expatriate Sudanese recruitment, DAL now spreads information about vacancies primarily through internal advertisements. This is partly to allow for internal promotions but in March 2009 the group as a whole introduced a new ‘referral policy’ that explicitly encouraged employees to refer their ‘friends, relatives and others’ for new positions (HR manager in HQ #3 2010 int.). There is even a bonus for the referee if the employee successfully passes his/her probation period.

In my survey of Sayga employees, eighty per cent of employees found out about their job through a social contact and of these, eighty one per cent reported that their tie was either very strong or fairly strong (they had seen them frequently prior to the job information). Forty five per cent found out about their job through a family member and fifty two per cent had experience abroad. In response to the question, *Have you recently told anyone about a job?,* many respondents reported that they had seen positions on internal advertisements and had passed information on to people they knew outside of the company. Interestingly many of them spoke about the DAL ‘culture’ and how they felt their contacts would be suitable in this ‘environment’. In this way, while inside their business units, human resources are heavily ‘professionalised’, employing international standards, international performance evaluations and international training so as to limit the ‘personalisation of an environment like Sudan’ (Daoud 2010 int.)

outside the company has increasingly shunned public advertising in favour of internal advertising, referral schemes and ‘international filtering’ to find its workforce.

When it comes to issues of training, DAL managers express scepticism about the ‘Masters fad’ sweeping Sudan. They prefer to take in younger people and train them to suit specific company needs. DAL has created its own internal ‘schools’ within the company and structures intakes from the top universities in each discipline, targeting high performing students in specific fields. For example, one of the first areas they targeted was ‘supply chain systems’. They sought out high performing students and put them through apprenticeships. Within the scheme, students were paid salaries and then placed in different business units. In another initiative, the company selects the highest three or four students from the Sudanese high school exam and sends them to the UK for English classes. This initiative was phrased in terms of exposing them to the right ‘culture’. Motasim Daoud believed that Sudanese business suffered from a ‘cultural problem’ that could be shaped once people were brought into the ‘right environment’ (Daoud 2010 int.).

The company sought to measure this ‘environment’ by looking at rates of retention. Retention percentages are examined ‘all the time, on a monthly basis’ (HR manager in DAL HQ #3 2010 Int.). The reasons behind this preoccupation were described as both ‘moral’ and ‘strategic’: providing financial rewards based on performance creates ‘loyalty’ to the company. Given DAL’s strategy of self-reliance, it seeks to retain its employees for ‘lifetime careers,’ offering competitive salaries and working conditions (Daoud 2010 Int.). This strategy makes business sense but also distinguishes DAL from the Sudanese Islamic financial institutions of the early 1980s and 1990s, which used training in a very different way. These organisations took in graduates, trained them along Islamic financial lines and then sent them out into the economy. Their growth strategy centred on a conviction about changing the public institutionalised space of the economy as a whole: the more people were trained along their lines, the more the Islamic finance industry could grow and prosper. Their training therefore exhibited 'network effects'. Importantly these organisations also had the support of political elites within the National Islamic Front (NIF)/National Congress Party (NCP). DAL, on the other hand, seeks to bring people into its private environment and keep them inside. They do not have the resources or the support to make bigger changes within the education system, drawing a sharp contrast with the oil and geology sector, where such support is forthcoming from the regime. In the next section, I examine DAL's relationship with the government in more detail. As the company has sought to change the government and Sudanese economy more widely, it has begun to drive a wedge between itself and its Western partners.

Balancing an Uneasy Position: the Western Gate and the Sudanese State

DAL has a limited relationship with the state company Sudan Railways. It uses their tracks to transport its Australian grain from Port Sudan to its mills in North Khartoum. Despite using their tracks, DAL uses its own imported trains and maintenance systems in order to maintain its standards. Nevertheless DAL claims it 'pays all of the contracts of all the employees for Sudan Railways' (Daoud 2010 int.). DAL has also worked with Khartoum State and the National Social Insurance Fund on its gigantic construction development project, Al Mogran and also with the Forestry department on its golf course. This section primarily focuses on the Al Mogran construction project but also discusses these other collaborations to evaluate the changing relationship between DAL and the Sudanese government.

Al Mogran (also known locally simply as 'Al Sunut') is a massive 160-acre, 4.5 billion dollar construction development in the heart of downtown Khartoum. It sits at the confluence of the two Niles and hopes to attract massive investment into the country through the roll-out of a 'Central Business District' for East Africa. Businesses are encouraged to buy their own plots within the district, with Al Sunut supplying water, electricity, other infrastructure and 'pedestrian-friendly, tree lined streets' (Al Sunut website).

Despite initial optimism, Al Sunut was placed on the US list of sanctioned companies in 2007. Al Sunut had two choices: it could either buy out the government's 50-80 million dollar share or pull out of the development altogether (Mcdoom, 2007). In either case, there was no guarantee that the company would come off the sanctions list. At the time of research, the manager was unsure about the future of the project. Investors had pulled out and construction had ground to a halt. Since then construction has proceeded but only one of the proposed skyscrapers has been completed. The project sits sadly on the banks of the Nile and provides a reminder of the early enthusiastic years that followed the oil boom.4 DAL, despite its status as the 'Coca Cola' company of Sudan, has come under US sanctions.

Originally DAL maintained a strict apolitical stance towards the economy. This was due to the experience of the founding father. A famous story that does the rounds in *shamarat* (gossip) of Khartoum circles relates how Daoud Abdel Latif refused to join the NIF/NCP in the early years and how he lost an import licence in the process. The licence was awarded to a loyal party member who has since prospered under the regime's patronage. Motasim explained their current approach in relation to his father's experience:

> He was in politics. Having seen him towards the end of his life not believing in Sudanese politics and this helped us, none of us have political ambitions. We have opinions but we keep it [to] ourselves, not [to] our friends (Daoud 2010 int.).

While it is difficult to ascertain the true nature of the relationship behind closed doors, publicly the group remains politically unaffiliated. As one young entrepreneur put it to me: 'You either have to be very big or very small to survive in Khartoum these days' (Graduate Entrepreneur #1 2010 int.). It would appear that DAL's size and its strong links with the Sudanese transnational elite keep the company afloat in a hostile political environment. Nevertheless, the company's success is also partly a testament to the acquiescence of the regime. As others like Aly Verjee have argued, the NCP appears to be moving away from an ideological or loyalty based politics towards performance-based politics since the partition of the country (Verjee 2012). In the face of rising economic insecurity, high inflation and decreasing oil revenues, the NCP must demonstrate its success to its increasingly urbanised and educated electorate. The regime's tolerance and even, promotion of companies like DAL allows the regime to demonstrate development, but there is still an uneasy relationship between the regime and the company.

In a Wikileaks cable released in 2011, the current general manager of the group, Osama Daoud Abdel Latif described being deeply troubled and frustrated by the regime's management of the economy and political situation (Sudan Tribune 2011). He disclosed that he had been forced to make contributions to the Darfur conflict in 2003 along with managers of other private companies. The report added, 'government officials continue to look for support from the business community, but that he does not answer most of their requests anymore' (Sudan Tribune 2011).

Currently, DAL's main point of contention with the government comes down to its high percentage of foreign expatriate workers. Motasim estimated that among his 'top hundred employees…eighty per cent are Sudanese and twenty per cent are expatriates', stressing that this 'mix is very very important' because it allows for 'the transfer of skills' (Daoud 2010 int.). Motasim believed government's concerns were just 'political' and that were trying to stir up public opinion as ‘governments all over the world do,’ (Daoud 2010 int.) attempting to show how they are protecting Sudanese jobs from Egyptians or Filipinos. Indeed, the government itself relies heavily on the expertise and labour of its economic allies in Asia, principally Malaysia and China. In these ventures, there appears to be very minimal communication and cooperation between Sudanese and foreign workers.5 Ultimately Motasim’s frustration with the government boiled down to a strong belief that the government ‘have no plan’ (Daoud 2010 int.).

Nevertheless, as DAL has grown more powerful and more secure, it has attempted to work with the government on a number of projects. Motasim felt that, in the past, the civil service had provided training to the private sector and now it might be time for the private sector to return the favour. In such projects DAL takes the leading role. Government representatives sit on the board of directors but DAL handles project management. Only later does it hope to include them, once it has ‘create[d] the empathy for government enthusiasm’ (Daoud 2010 int.). In many cases, the relevant government body has itself been marginalised within the civil service and might therefore be more insulated from political pressures. Neither Sudan Railways nor the Forestry department is particularly important from the perspective of the regime. Sudan Railways is in a particular crisis due to its heavy reliance on American parts and the strong effect that sanctions have had on its operations. Managers of NGOs and UN bodies also expressed a preference for working with smaller, less prestigious government departments where political interference was less likely to disturb their efforts and where officials were more likely to ‘stay put’ (UNDP Employee 2010 Int.).

The project on which DAL has most actively worked with government and the project with which DAL has attempted to effect the most change within the Sudanese economy, is perhaps ironically, the one that has dragged it down. As mentioned, in light of its relationship with Khartoum State, Al Sunut was placed on the US State Department list of blacklisted Sudanese companies. Even non-American companies started ‘to reconsider whether they should develop in an area of a sanction company’ (Hassan 2010 int.). Hani Hassan, the general manager of Al Sunut, considered the sanctions to be unfair and misplaced, arguing that:

> Sanctions are the political thing. Not well thought out. They are Western oriented and you start to question the morality of Western politics. We want to build a city. I am going to change the culture of Sudan, and actually bring Western culture… They tell you not to do it, you start to question, you know?... DAL group is the Coca Cola company- how American can you get? You tell them they are wheeling dealing? What are you doing? When the sanctions came, we had Argentinean finance managers… British designers. They are the consultants… They do not even know what politics. They are not politically oriented (Hassan 2010 int.).

He said that the whole experience working on Al Sunut had made him question ‘Western’ interests. He related a story about his British educated father who had changed his opinion about the ‘West’ in recent years due to the invasion of Iraq and the US’s treatment of Sudan. He explained that he ‘used to trust the BBC… If the BBC said so, it was like an act of God’ but now he has had to admit that ‘it is not the same’, that ‘there is not ethics anymore’ (Hassan 2010 int.). Hani believed that this sentiment was even stronger among younger generations with looser ties to West, expressing the feeling that the UK and US ‘have pushed them away’ and ‘accused them wrongfully’ (Hassan 2010 int.). This sentiment was reflected in different ways throughout my fieldwork but was particularly vocal among Sudanese who had returned from abroad and especially those returning from the Gulf. While they had clearly benefitted from education and work experience abroad, they wanted to bring aspects of the international or ‘Western’ business culture into Sudan on their own terms and felt restricted by American interference.

Many reported that their decision to return to Sudan had been related to a sense of pride and of wanting to re-build Sudan and repair its image abroad. They were proud of their achievements and were frustrated that sanctions prevented them from making broader changes.

They felt sanctions further isolated Sudan from ‘Western’ culture, especially in light of Asian and Arabian companies entering the Sudanese economy. Among people in the IT community, this feeling was particularly strong given the importance of American IT certificates like Intel and Cisco in career advancement. Only the rich and well-connected could go abroad and acquire these certificates. Many DAL employees therefore found themselves caught up in politics even as the group tried to remain apolitical. Situated at the intersection of the Sudanese economy and the international economic system required them to be flexible but also encouraged them to think critically about how political sanctions impacted the wider Sudanese economy and society. They felt caught in between two unsympathetic poles.

FORMAL/INFORMAL ECONOMIES

While companies like DAL are not 'informal' in the popular understanding of the term (they are not 'marginal', 'criminal' or part of a ‘shadow’ economy) their structures share many similarities with ‘informal economies’. In particular, they are in some way 'anti-state', operating away from the state and relying on their own internal social networks as alternative forms of information transmission and regulation. Discussions of social networks in African economies tend to focus on poor and marginal communities- those associated with small scale production and trade, perhaps even criminal activities like drugs and diamonds (Hart 1973 on Ghana; Brautigam 1997 and Meagher 1995; 2007; 2010 on Nigeria; Little 2003 on Somalia and Elyachar 2002; 2005 on Egypt) or they focus on state and parastatal companies where patrimonialism thrives (Abbink 2011 on Ethiopia and Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012 on Rwanda)- but research from other parts of the world has demonstrated how informal and formal economic activities have become increasingly blurred and intertwined, with informal structures often providing a learning space for more formal arrangements to take shape (Grabher 2003; Richter 1999; Grabher and Stark 1997 on Eastern Europe; Cochran 2000 on China). DAL is an extremely interesting case study given that it mixes a system of internal transparency and formality with a policy and reputation for privacy within close-knit social networks. However, DAL is not exceptional in its relationship to the wider Sudanese graduate labour market.

The results of my wider survey of 14 Sudanese companies, ranging from hospitals, engineering companies, banks, NGOs, private companies and government offices uncovered similar practices: increasing personalisation and privatisation of opportunity, coupled with growing perceptions of exclusion. Therefore it is not just within informal economies that patterns of patronage and nepotistic relations abound. Even within the most formalised internationalised companies like DAL, communication and patterns of trust have become embedded within stronger ties and within transnational networks of skill and expertise.

In particular, three trends have disadvantaged marginal groups in Sudan. The neglect of public recruitment bodies has weakened access to ‘direct application’ for graduates. US sanctions and the growing alienation of the Sudanese state from the West have displaced Western firms from Sudan and replaced them with Asian companies that have closer relationships with the National Congress Party. Here, graduates believe that Western companies are more open in terms of their advertising and recruitment strategies, while companies like China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Malaysia’s Petronas enter Sudan through reciprocal relationships with the NCP, which entail more political involvement in recruitment decisions. Those job seekers from more ‘risky’ political backgrounds, like the Zaghawa, are particularly disadvantaged. Lastly the expansion of education has increased student numbers so intensely that many employers no longer advertise positions. Qualifications have grown increasingly dubious in the eyes of employers and they have simply given up on advertising.

Such exclusive labour market practices have political consequences. In my survey of Sudanese professionals, the statement: ‘Anyone can get a job if he tries hard enough’, revealed no discernible differences in responses among different ages, genders and professions, but exposed big differences among tribes. Excluding a handful of conservative religious responses about the will of God, the vast majority of Northern respondents replied, ‘strongly agree’ or ‘somewhat agree’, repeating the Sudanese expression: ‘if he tries hard enough, he will get his reward’. The glaring exceptions were people from Darfur, Eastern Sudan and Southern Sudan, who selected ‘strongly disagree’ and gave explanations such as:

> No- colour and where you come from strongly affect your chances, not your qualifications. (Missiriya, Darfur).
>
> No, you cannot get work without recommendation or intermediation in the majority of cases. (Musalami, White Nile/South Sudan)
>
> There are limited opportunities and these are reserved/kept safe for certain people. Advertisements are limited and not well known. Usually, managers ask employees if they know anyone from their contacts who is searching for a job so the jobs will be reserved for people who are known by employees only. (Hamar, Darfur)
>
> Trying is not enough to find a job. (Shukariya, Far East Sudan)
>
> He can't find a job no matter how hard he tries. (Daju, Darfur)

These answers do not prove that discrimination exists, but they do reveal that graduates from these regions have come to perceive and believe in discrimination as a key feature of the labour market.

While many have used the example of social networks of informal economic communities to argue that embedded cultural institutions can provide the framework for economic development and democratisation in societies deemed ‘stateless’, the case of DAL demonstrates that there is a limit to what such socially constructed markets can accomplish. If neither the regime nor the international community lend support, their growth will not spill out into wider society. There is no institutional space for collective action. For example, Heba, the former HR manager at Coca-Cola described how she felt that

> there was a missing body in our system in Sudan, a body to work as a coordinator between universities or higher education and business community, because at the level of the business community we don't receive the suitable product from the education so something is missing… [Every] meeting I go to, I push for this body (Heba 2010 int.).

She tried unsuccessfully to establish an HR association but it failed when key figures left the country. Fatima described how 'they went with their brain full of information and knowledge and people still, they miss them' (Heba 2010 int.). When I asked her if this was a common problem among associations, she replied:

> Absolutely, because there is no system in place. Even, the process of knowledge sharing and of documentation in our country is a little bit weak. For example, I look to some very good figures in Sudan and all the time I say, if this person is dead, what will be? Are we going to benefit from his thinking and his ideas? And where we can find those things? So the documentation and the knowledge sharing, I guess we have an issue here (Heba 2010 int.).

It is unclear what private companies can do without wider forms of coordination and central management. For the labour market to become more inclusive of graduates from marginal backgrounds, qualifications need to mean something again to managers. All actors need better access to information about the demand for skills. Currently, students and families are given almost no advice or information about investment in education, while managers rely on their close networks or resort to the very costly process of foreign recruitment. Universities need to play a stronger role in helping students' access relevant practical work experience. Currently, students are given letters and told to negotiate their own arrangements. This organisation means that students often take on experience in unrelated sectors while students with fewer social contacts struggle for opportunities. In other words, companies like DAL can only do so much without wider institutional support systems.

CONCLUSION: NETWORKED ECONOMIES, TROUBLED POLITICS

DAL grows. Indeed it continues to grow very quickly and very widely, but this remarkable growth has been restricted within its tall walls. In a country where it is common for individuals to have their own back-up electricity generators and where paved driveways end at gates, it is logical for individuals and organisations to want to rely on internal capacities, but what sets DAL apart is how it fuses and embeds these internal capacities into the global economic system. Unfortunately this fusion does little to affect the wider environment of Sudan. For those who do not have direct access to the world outside sanctioned Sudan, they can only consume globalisation. They cannot contribute to it nor profit from it.

Managers in successful companies like DAL have developed 'coping strategies' to manage uncertainty caused by educational decline, civil service collapse and political predation over the economy. These strategies involve moving business activities away from the state and the wider market as much as possible, by using foreign spaces and social networks to share and evaluate information about employment and by building their own reliable internal capacities. This strategy relates to wider processes in the economy, for example, the use of international legal jurisdictions to conduct corporate arbitration proceedings[6] and the use of international educational institutions to fill in deficits in human expertise.

DAL is both exceptional and characteristic of a wider trend in Africa and the Middle East. While globalisation is often construed as a process of ever-standardisation and incorporation into shared cultures, economies and capital, James Ferguson has argued that particularly in Africa, globalisation has rather entailed increasing segregation and separation of capitalist space within ‘specially administered enclaves’ (Ferguson 2005; 379). He writes that in contrast to former patterns of state ‘grid-making,’ (Scott 1998) ‘[t]hese enclaves are increasingly linked up, not in a continuous, territorial national grid, but in transnational networks that link dispersed spaces in a selective, point-to-point fashion’ (Ferguson 2005: 380). Similarly Jan Abbink writes of foreign investment in Ethiopian agriculture as a kind of ‘exogenous modernisation,’ in which foreign investors enter into partnerships with local political elites, bringing ‘their own expatriate management and export[ing] all of their produce to their countries of origin,’ all, ‘in the name of “development”’ (Abbink 2011: 519). DAL is a curious kind of enclave; it is exclusive and insular but its consumers are also the Sudanese public and its management is proudly Sudanese. It is a special kind of ‘enclave economy’.

DAL Group may represent a new model of economic growth, generated by its particular political environment. In some ways, it has supplanted political connections with transnational connections, actively recruiting displaced former elites living outside the country and creating a new kind of non-political elite within the country. It stands in sharp contrast with the affiliated High Tech business group and with other politically affiliated business networks in Africa. For example, High Tech group is a Sudanese holding company owning shares in twenty three different companies (International Crisis Group 2011). Their focus is chiefly on state concessions and large-scale government contracts in the petroleum, construction, telecommunication and transportation sectors. Its shareholders include brothers of the president and key political figures. DAL, on the other hand, has succeeded precisely because it has focused on consumer goods rather than on state concessions or exports. In a sense, DAL has been forced to develop streams of economic growth outside the channels of the state.

DAL's transnational elite is an interesting counterpoint to the case of Rwanda's. David Booth and Frederick Golooba-Mutebi (2012) have argued that the RPF's involvement in the Tri-Star Investments and Chrystal Ventures Ltd in Rwanda should be seen as a kind of pro-development patrimonialism supporting 'an incipient private sector' (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012). These enterprises grew out of companies set up during the war of 1990-4 to finance the rebel's efforts. They actively sought out support, experience and capital from the Rwandan diaspora. When the RPF took power, they were established at the heart of the economic recovery process, starting companies in strategic growth areas. Such operations benefited from 'a centralised generation and management of economic rents' (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012: 379) similar to those of the development states of Asia. They argue that their activities have created 'ice breaker effects' or 'demonstration effects'- taking big risks at the beginning in order to encourage others into the market later. In other words, there has been more 'crowding in' than 'crowding out' (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012: 396). DAL does not have such powers. It is an economy onto itself precisely because the wider economy is so inhospitable. Its presence does not create outsourcing opportunities or 'crowding in' because its model of growth depends on self-sufficiency and self-preservation.

One might say that the combination of a displaced elite and a sanctioned state appears to have created alternative pockets of economic power outside of the state. While these 'private elites' can grow within their tall walls, they struggle to establish coordination with others. They are aware of the political situation and so they try to retain an apolitical approach. It is interesting to consider what may happen when Sudan's oil revenues dwindle and the regime struggles to raise alternative patronage: will actors like DAL step into the political arena, attempt to salvage the state and re-build national structures that would allow for such coordination and communication, or will the NCP instead make accommodations and compromises in order to deliver economic growth? While the regime's coexistence with companies like DAL allows the regime to demonstrate development, its insular growth has only a limited impact on job creation and household income. A transition to a more inclusive economic and political system may therefore be difficult.

Discussions of informality in Africa often allude to the absence of the state but in the case of unemployed university graduates, the state has certainly been present in their lives. They have gone to university and expect to take part in the formal labour market. The fact that so much of the formal labour market has been removed from public sight and that opportunity is so strongly embedded in private social and international networks means that these graduates may never get to participate. These graduates can nevertheless see the perceptible signs of wealth in Khartoum: advertising, fancy cars, new houses and a pervasive café culture that is beginning to take root in residential areas. They have been fed a discourse about entrepreneurship but understand that such 'market logic' only works when one has *wasta* (connections). There is therefore tension at the heart of the regime's policies, between expanding aspirations and privatising opportunity, a tension that is potentially destabilising for the regime.

The strengthening of *wasta* is arguably one of the key factors pushing Sudanese and their Arab brothers and sisters in other parts of Africa and the Middle East towards political revolution.7 It is the shared experience of a wider more intangible corruption. Unlike older generations who accepted the model of a well-educated elite driving state development, the expansion of education throughout the Arab world has produced a generation that do not accept their exclusion from development. In the past there was an institutional explanation why certain groups dominated the government and private sector: they were the most educated and well qualified. Now that education has expanded so dramatically, individuals have a direct, personal experience of exclusion. Sudan may differ from other Arab countries like Egypt and Tunisia because of the 'tribalised' or fragmented nature of this personal experience. While Egyptian young people experience the labour market as Egyptians, Sudanese are increasingly experiencing their exclusion through a prism of political tribalism due to the wider political environment. Minority groups rely more heavily on public advertisements and on information obtained from state bodies. The privatisation of opportunity within the Sudanese labour market may therefore be contributing to growing political tribalism and instability. As the Sudanese economy continues to 'privatise itself' and the education system continues to expand, these perceptions are likely to intensify.

Since the completion of the research behind this paper, South Sudan has gained its independence. If the rest of Sudan has any chance to stay together as one people, non-ethnic explanations for the country's problems are needed. Marginal groups are cognizant of the fact that ethnic explanations for discrimination are useful. Refugees cannot seek asylum based on unfavourable labour market conditions or on broken politics. They can claim asylum if they prove their experiences stem from religious, linguistic or racial prejudices. Ethnic explanations of marginalisation have also been advantageous to regional rebel movements seeking political power. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) was effective in playing on the sensibilities of North American lobbying groups. By portraying its grievances through racial and religious prisms, it succeeded in bringing African American, Evangelical Christian and Jewish anti-genocide campaigners together behind its cause.

Ethnic explanations for exclusion allow marginal groups to lever the influence of international actors and international discourses to broker deals with the central state. Such approaches however create distance between individuals experiencing similar problems and leaves in place deeper structural problems. Young Sudanese graduates from every part of the country struggle to find jobs. The expansion of higher education and the politicization of the economy under the Islamist regime have broken the national labour market as a whole. While ethnic and racial discrimination contribute to exclusion, it is these structural changes that make ethnic labels more salient. For those that hope for a more democratic Sudan, all unemployed graduates must be brought into the picture, both figuratively and practically, for peaceful political transitions to prevail.

NOTES

1. This paper is based on a chapter from my PhD Thesis: The Retreat of the State and the Market: Liberalisation and Education Expansion in Sudan under the NCP. I must extend the warmest thanks to my Edinburgh supervisors, Sara Rich Dorman and Donald MacKenzie, in addition to Francesca Locatelli and the late Charles Jedrej. I must also thank Thomas Molony and Cherry Leonardi for their helpful comments during my viva/defence. Lastly, I must thank all the people who gave me their time during my fieldwork, and most importantly, Motasim Daoud and the rest of DAL.

2. Exact sales figures and turnover are not publicly available.

3. *Tamkeen* can be translated as 'empowerment' but typically refers to the period in the early 1990s when the Islamic regime initiated a policy of political loyalty in the allocation of civil service positions and contracts. One interviewee estimated that forty-five per cent of civil servants lost their jobs at this time.

4. The global economic downturn has also undoubtedly played a role in the lack of interest in the Al Sunut development.

5. One interviewee working in a Chinese oil company described how he felt his Chinese colleagues used their language to 'hide' information and had separate meetings for Sudanese and Chinese staff. He described how he felt like he was 'an extra on a set'.

6. A lawyer told me that the majority of foreign and bigger Sudanese companies now use foreign courts like Geneva and London for all of their arbitration, including Petroleum companies working with the government due to the political influence on Sudanese judges.

7. For examples of work on wasta in other Arab countries see, Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993; Sakijha and Kilani 2000; 2002; Mohamed and Hamdy 2008; Al-Ramhi 2008.

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Interviews

With the rare exception of some individuals whose names I have used in the text (and whose identities are clearly discerned from context), I have used pseudonyms of all my research participants to protect their anonymity. In total, I conducted 159 interviews during fieldwork. Here, I have only listed relevant and quoted sources:

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2. DAL (Head Office), HR Manager 1, Khartoum, 2009.
3. DAL (Head Office), HR Manager 2, Khartoum, 2010.
4. DAL (Head Office), HR Manager 3, Khartoum, 2010.
5. Hani Hassan, Al Sunut (DAL) General Manager, Khartoum, 2010.
6. ‘Ashraf’, Sayga (DAL), HR Manager, Khartoum, 2009.
7. ‘Heba’, Coca Cola, (DAL) Former HR Manager, Khartoum, 2010.
8. Liquid Gas, (DAL) Manager, Khartoum, 2009.
9. HR Manager, Sudan Airways, Khartoum, 2010.
10. Graduate entrepreneur, Khartoum, 2010.
11. UNDP Employee, Khartoum, 2010.