

Book Review

Creating networks of belonging

Book Review: Margret Otto (2024): Creating Networks of Belonging (Lit-Verlag)



<https://lit-verlag.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/g25101-5.jpg>

Margret Otto's book deals with neighbourhood relations in selected districts of Khartoum and Omdurman. This is very interesting for us because it describes a kind of substrate that is part of the prehistory of the Resistance Committees (RCs), and without which the depth of the revolution in Sudan would perhaps be incomprehensible. Margret Otto describes this pre-history of the RCs from a completely different perspective than, for example, Osman Abdallah, whom we [interviewed in detail in August 2024](#) about the emergence of the Revolutionary Charter.

We still think that the experience of the RCs, and also the question of their emergence, are of great importance for a discussion about the conditions for a revolutionary transformation. A comparison of the revolution in Tunis, or the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2011, with the sit-in in Khartoum in 2019 could speak volumes! A quote from Margret Otto's book highlights the importance of neighbourhoods:

The interviewees in Cairo consider family networks to be more relevant than neighbourhood networks, which tend to be seen as coming from outside and which women in particular tend to close themselves off from. This contrasts with the situation in Sudan, where it is evident that women actively establish networks between households in their respective neighbourhoods beyond their own families in order to use these as a resource. (p. 51)

The focus on women runs through the book. This has to do with the approaches that Margret Otto has found to the neighbourhoods. But it is precisely these approaches that prove to be extremely inspiring. The book is based on research conducted in the years 2014-16: after the segregation of South Sudan in 2011, which resulted in a severe economic crisis, and after the 2013 uprisings, which were apparently not talked about much in the interviews. Margret Otto's background is in peace research, not revolution research. Nevertheless, she discusses the revolution and the war in Sudan in the epilogue of her beautiful book.

1. Neighbourhood as a Process

The Sudanese neighbourhood is understood in my study as an active process, as the activity of creating neighbourhood, which is linked to the creation of networks of belonging. (p. 259)

Following on from "Locality Production" (Appadurai; but above all Lefebvre's "Social Production of Space"), Margret Otto describes neighbourhood as the "processual construction of a connection between place and belonging". It is about "what ordinary people think and how they act", about neighbourhood as practical knowledge, as an active process and as the production of belonging.

Beyond this, there are (in addition to the methodology of Grounded Theory, which is described in chapter 3 and which we will not go into here) two starting points that link the book so vividly with current discussions:

- on the one hand, the reference to urban development, illustrated by the development of the *Triangular City* since the end of the 19th century, and
- secondly, the reference to the theme of migration and the reconstruction of social coherence - a theme that is currently gaining even more significance in the situations of displacement and refugee camps.

I concentrated on old neighbourhoods that had been planned and settled under the rule of the Mahdi and shortly afterwards under the rule of the British colonial administration. The majority of the interviewees in my study were from a group whose families had come to Khartoum and Omdurman at these historical times and who, against this background, claimed their own sense of belonging and ownership in the neighbourhoods.

[...]

Existing places become places of arrival through migration and thus also become changed places for those who previously lived there, which can trigger processes of marginalisation and appropriation. Khartoum and Omdurman, the places of my research, were created through migration and continue to be shaped by it. (p. 10/11)

By linking neighbourhood research, urban sociology and migration research, Margret Otto is breaking new ground that could prove fruitful for many further discussions. (In this

context, it is worth looking again at books like Herbert G. Gutman's *Work, Culture & Society* (1975), and Carol B. Stack's *All Our Kin* (1970) - these are authors who were important for similar discussions in the 1970s).

2. Khartoum and Omdurman

Omdurman, the largest city in Sudan and part of the greater Khartoum metropolitan area, is rich in history and cultural significance. It is known for its vibrant community and strong social fabric, shaped by its unique historical, ethnic, and religious heritage. Margret Otto's book is offering a unique perspective by describing the historical development.

Omdurman rose to prominence in the late 19th century when it became the capital of the Mahdist State under Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi. It was the political and cultural hub during this period. Its historical importance is reflected in landmarks like the Mahdi's Tomb and the Khalifa's House, which are deeply tied to Sudanese national identity.

The population of Omdurman is a microcosm of Sudan's ethnic diversity, with groups such as the Nubians, Fur, Beja, and Arab tribes. This diversity contributes to a rich tapestry of traditions, languages, and practices, making Omdurman a center of Sudanese cultural life. Families play a central role in the social structure. Extended families often live together or maintain close ties, reinforcing collective responsibility and mutual support. Omdurman is characterized by tight-knit neighborhoods where communal relationships are highly valued. People often gather for social events, weddings, and religious ceremonies.

Religion is a cornerstone of community life. Omdurman is predominantly Muslim, and Islamic practices heavily influence daily life and social interactions. Sufi traditions are particularly strong, with events such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God) gatherings and the annual celebration of *Mawlid* (Prophet Muhammad's birthday) playing key roles in community cohesion. The city is home to several significant mosques and religious centers, such as the Hamed al-Nil Mosque, a site for Sufi rituals.

Like much of Sudan, Omdurman has faced challenges such as political instability, economic hardships, and rapid urbanization. Despite these challenges, the people of Omdurman exhibit resilience, maintaining their cultural practices and community bonds. Omdurman's social fabric is a blend of historical depth, cultural richness, and communal solidarity. Its residents' ability to preserve traditions while adapting to modern challenges exemplifies the strength and resilience of the community.

Margret Ortto writes,

In the entourage of the Mahdi, people from different regions of Sudan with different social status settled or were settled in Omdurman. Even under Ottoman rule, Khartoum was a trading centre where people from the surrounding regions as well as traders from countries in the eastern Mediterranean lived. The diversity of the people, who lived together as neighbours and formed a community with great diversity, is still a fundamental characteristic of Sudanese culture from the perspective of many Sudanese today. Different ways of life and religions existed and still exist side by side.

...

I will begin by describing the development of Khartoum in chronological order and Omdurman under colonial rule from around 1750 to 1956 and summarise the results. In the further period from 1956 to 2011, I discuss the migration of several million people to the capital and the emergence of a megacity. Finally, I discuss place and belonging as analytical categories in the context of urban contexts. (p. 79)

The second chapter of the book is not only about the development of the *Triangular City*, which is described in a multifaceted way and accompanied by maps, but also about the architecture of the houses and courtyards. The "window in the wall" open to the neighbours' households is of great importance for the maintenance of neighbourhoods. In some respects, it was about the relocation of village ways of life to the city. A sketch in the book illustrates this:

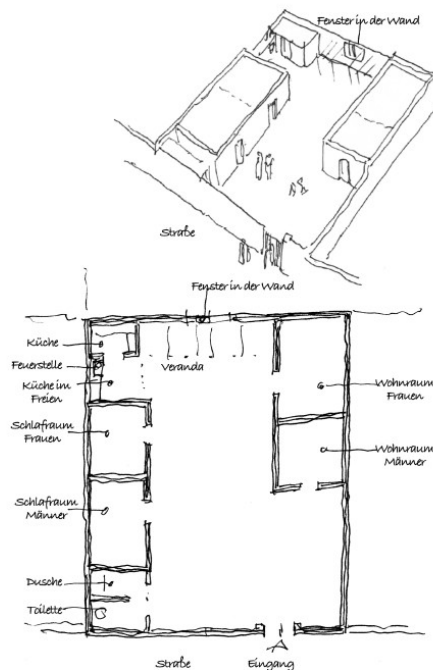


Abb. 3: Skizze des Hauses von Mayla mit dem Fenster in der Wand zum Nachbargrundstück (Zeichnung: Joergen Rasmussen).

3. Sandug and Judiya

The *Sandug* is a form of savings association that is widespread in Sudan and common in many regions of the South. They are an opportunity for the women in the neighbourhood to meet and exchange ideas. Mutual help and care are also a constant theme. The *sandugs* are also an instrument of women's economic independence from men.

All the sandugs I met in Khartoum and other Sudanese cities [...] have an exclusively female membership. Women are often members of several sandugs because they focus on different savings goals. The chairperson, who manages the treasury, i.e. the income and expenditure, is chosen from among the members. This position often rotates. The amount of the either weekly, fortnightly or monthly deposits is determined by the members, who also decide together which member receives which saved sum. (p. 154)

While the women meet in the houses, the men tend to socialise outside the home. We will come back to this later. Many go to prayer several times a day and discuss the things that are important to them there. A lot of repair work or help is organised by neighbours. Margret Otto does not forget to mention that this neighbourly care is associated with "a noticeable and considerable social control":

If every absence of others is registered and there is a claim and self-image of being able to pursue this, there is no space for individuals to act uncontrollably within the framework of neighbourly action. (S. 184).

Conflicts in the neighbourhood are usually not referred to an official body, but the *Judiya* mediation system is a common means of conflict resolution. This is described in chapter 4.4 of the book. If both sides agree, a solution is negotiated which is not about punishment, but about compensation for the damage suffered, with both sides saving face.

From the perspective of Margret Otto's interviewees, there was "*no trustworthy state legal system in Sudan that they could trust to deal reliably with conflicts*". (p. 172)

This mistrust not only affects the courts and police stations, but also the "Popular Committees", which were the lowest administrative level of the state, established during the British colonial administration and were primarily an instrument of spying and political control at the lowest level. These committees are not to be confused with the Neighbourhood- or Resistance Committees that have developed in the neighbourhoods since 2013, but especially during the 2019 sit-in.

4. Neighbourhood Committees, Cooperatives and Clubs

In the following chapter, we would like to add a few things on social structures in the neighbourhoods, which go beyond the structures and processes of mutual solidarity which Margret Otto has described so nicely.

4.1 Neighbourhood Committees

The neighbourhood committees (*Lijan Al-Muqawama*) of Sudan represent a modern evolution of grassroots activism, grounded in historical traditions of community solidarity. Their decentralized structure and resilience have redefined political engagement in Sudan, empowering ordinary citizens to play active roles in shaping their country's future.

The genealogy of these committees is deeply rooted in the country's history of grassroots political organization and popular resistance. These committees emerged as key players in mobilizing communities and sustaining civil disobedience during pivotal moments, particularly in the December 2018 Revolution, which led to the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019.

Historically, Sudanese neighbourhoods have been organized around strong community ties, often facilitated by religious institutions like mosques and social gatherings. The concept of collective responsibility and mutual aid has long been a part of Sudanese culture, forming

the foundation for organized neighbourhood action. During Sudan's post-independence era, grassroots movements played significant roles in labour strikes, student protests, and political mobilization. The 1964 October Revolution and the 1985 April Uprising were driven in part by local committees and unions, which provided a blueprint for modern resistance.

The contemporary form of neighbourhood committees arose as local units of resistance to government oppression and economic hardship during Sudan's prolonged political crises under Omar al-Bashir's regime (1989–2019), and became more organized and prominent during the December 2018 Revolution. Unlike older forms of political organization, dominated by elite figures or specific ethnic groups, the neighbourhood committees were more inclusive, drawing members from diverse social and economic backgrounds. They organized protests, disseminated information, and coordinated acts of civil disobedience. These committees were essential in navigating the severe crackdowns by security forces, ensuring decentralized leadership to sustain momentum. They operated at the neighbourhood level, making them accessible to ordinary citizens and allowing for efficient mobilization and communication. They used modern tools like social media alongside traditional word-of-mouth methods to organize protests and sit-ins.

After the revolution, these committees evolved to play broader roles: They became watchdogs over transitional government policies, ensuring accountability and transparency. They pushed for the implementation of revolutionary demands such as justice for martyrs, economic reforms, and civilian governance. In some cases, they took on roles in addressing local needs, such as water distribution, trash collection, and other municipal services neglected by the state.

Sudan's military and paramilitary forces have targeted these committees, particularly during post-revolution conflicts, attempting to undermine their influence. Transitioning from a revolutionary force to a stable community organization has posed challenges, particularly amid Sudan's ongoing political instability. The committees occasionally clashed with traditional governance systems like tribal leaders or official local councils, reflecting a tension between revolutionary ideals and entrenched power structures. Differences in ideology and objectives among committees have sometimes caused divisions.

4.2 Neighbourhood Cooperatives

These cooperatives, often referred to as "*Sanduq*" or neighbourhood cooperatives, are community-based organizations designed to provide mutual aid and social support for various events, including marriages, funerals, and other communal occasions. They overlap with the Sanduqs which Margret Otto has described in her book (*Sanduq* simply means box).

The Neighborhood Cooperatives collectively own essential items like tents, chairs, tables, and sometimes even sound systems. These are lent out to community members for events at little or no cost. Members of the community contribute a small, regular amount of money to the cooperative fund. This fund is used to purchase and maintain resources or provide financial support to families during major life events like Weddings and Funerals.

These cooperatives foster a strong sense of community and solidarity, reflecting Sudanese cultural values of helping one another during times of joy and sorrow. Typically, a small committee of trusted neighbourhood members manages the cooperative. They handle finances, maintenance, and logistics.

Another kind of neighbourhood collective effort is the practice or tradition of collecting sheep skins during *Eid al-Adha*. In Sudan, this is a long-standing practice tied to community cooperation and sustainability. It reflects the strong communal spirit and resourcefulness characteristic of Sudanese culture.

During *Eid al-Adha*, families traditionally slaughter sheep as part of the religious ritual. This generates a large number of sheep skins that would otherwise go to waste. Neighbourhood committees or cooperative groups organize the collection of these skins from households. Volunteers or hired workers go door-to-door to gather the skins or set up collection points for residents to drop them off. The main purpose of this practice is to raise funds. The collected skins are sold to local tanneries or traders who process them for leather. The proceeds are then added to the neighbourhood fund.

The funds are used to maintain community resources like tents, chairs, or other shared necessities. They may also be allocated to help vulnerable families, support communal events, or contribute to repairs and developments within the neighbourhood. There are environmental and economic benefits like reducing waste by repurposing a by-product of Eid festivities. Also, this provides an additional source of income for the community while supporting local industries, such as leather processing.

4.3 Neighbourhood Clubs

One more important community structure is Neighbourhood Clubs (commonly referred to as "*Nawadi Al- Ahyya*"). These are community hubs that serve as vital social, cultural, and sports centres within local neighbourhoods. These clubs are a cornerstone of Sudanese communal life, fostering social cohesion and providing spaces for various activities.

Some of their key features are:

Sports:

Many neighbourhood clubs are focused on promoting sports, especially football (soccer), which is immensely popular in Sudan. These clubs often have local teams that participate in friendly matches or tournaments.

Social Gatherings:

The clubs provide a space for community members to meet, socialize, and discuss local issues.

Cultural Events:

Some clubs host cultural events, poetry readings, music performances, or workshops that reflect Sudan's rich cultural heritage.

Educational Programs:

They may organize tutoring sessions, literacy programs, or vocational training, especially for youth in the community.

Community Building:

These clubs bring people together, fostering a sense of belonging and unity within the neighbourhood. They serve as platforms for collective decision-making, particularly regarding community development projects.

Youth Engagement:

Neighbourhood clubs play a significant role in engaging young people, keeping them active and involved in constructive activities, and helping to build their skills. They often act as a space for mentoring and cooperation spirit development.

These clubs are often managed by a committee of community members, and operate on contributions from members, and donations. Fundraising activities, such as tournaments or charity events, are common ways to sustain the clubs. Nevertheless these structures are facing many challenges manifested in limited resources: Many clubs struggle with funding, proper facilities, or equipment. Also maintenance issues to ensure that the premises remain functional can be challenging without consistent support. Another main challenge is the process of urbanization impacts. Rapid urban development and changes in community structures can affect their functioning.

The cultural significance of the neighbourhood clubs is that they are so much more than just recreational spaces. They are symbols of the Sudanese community spirit, emphasizing unity, collaboration, and shared responsibility.

5 Relationships, Revolution

Of course, this short review can only be a first glance into the book (chapters 2 and 4 of 7 chapters, including the epilogue). The book describes the "processual construction of a connection between place and belonging", as is said in chapter 6, very beautifully and in many facets.

We are not sure whether we want to follow Margret Otto's interpretation of neighbourhood relations as "Sudanese". Of course, there are an overwhelming number of Sudanese friends who understand their revolution in a national framing, and they need it as a medium of cohesion. Our point is rather to support the call for a new thinking about social relations. The Marxists among us are familiar with the historical materialism of "modes of production". In the transition to the immateriality of information capitalism - in other words, in our age - we think that time has come to talk about "modes of relations" as well. The [book by Bini Adamczak](#) (2017) about the Russian Revolution(s) has some valuable references to this topic, but also authors such as [Abdul Maliq Simone](#), who thinks of infrastructures as social relations rather than material transmissions, seem to be important for this. In this context, it is no longer useful to refer to a national or post-colonial "working class" or whatever national framing. The recent transformation of capitalism has produced more informal and declassed labour than ever, but this can no longer be framed as a nation thing.

A second point: nobody can live on *sandugs* alone. Margret Otto has convincingly argued that she thought it to be impolite to ask people about a slave-history of their family. Yes, we do agree, but also she avoided to ask about religion and money. But how have the families

in the neighbourhoods reacted to the crisis since 2011? There has been a transition to an informal economy on a broad basis - but what did that look like in concrete terms? We think that we need to discuss not only about "ways of relating" (and the book we are discussing here makes an important contribution to this), but also about Reproductive Economies. These are economies which follow very different paths than the "Political Economy" of nations. The latter concept dates back to the 18th century, and it is not our business. We should talk about the economies of families and communities. Quite obviously, these economies are only visible when theorised, like Chayanov did at the beginning of the last century in relation to the Russian peasants. And we think that these Reproductive Economies are transferred from the villages into the cities (and into the diaspora, and into the refugee camps) in much the same way as the neighbourhoods. Those people produce community structures, and economy at the very same time, at times this economy becomes an economy of resistance..

The lack of this aspect is certainly also caused by the sort of neighbourhoods to which Margret Otto had access. Of course, the neighbourhoods and economies of survival in the huge shanty towns, from which the 2013 uprisings also emerged, look very different from the neighbourhoods of people who see themselves as "middle class". Perhaps some researchers in Sudan might, after the war, walk in the footsteps of Margret Otto, and do their research on neighbourhoods there.

Finally, we wonder whether what Margret Otto describes is a "past", given the egregious destruction currently taking place in Sudan, and in particular in the *Triangular City*, where Margret Otto conducted her research. Even so, Margret Otto's research would be of great value, as she describes in her book the preconditions for a "revolution from the neighbourhoods". The RCs in Khartoum and Omdurman only constituted themselves on a large scale in the course of the sit-in. But this constitution would not have been possible without the pre-existing social cohesion in the neighbourhood structures. And yes, this happened to a great extent among women, whether in the form of savings associations or solidarity groups that had formed since 2013.

We think that Margret Otto's is not just describing a past which is over, but she is describing the conditions of possibility for social resistance. The big step from family to neighbourhood seems to be essential. A number of RCs are continuing their work in the Emergency Rooms and some have also migrated with the refugee movements and are maintaining their work in the refugee camps.