Creating Networks of B elonging

January 26th, 2025 - written by: Marwan Osman and Eberhard Jungfer

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

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), without which the depth of the revolution in Sudan would perhaps not be understandable. Margret Otto describes this prehistory of the RCs from a completely different perspective than, for example, Osman Abdallah, whom we about the creation of the Revolutionary Charter interviewed in detail in August 2024.

We still think that the experiences of the RCs and 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 underlines the importance of neighbourhoods:

> *The interviewees in Cairo consider family networks to be more relevant than neighbourhood networks, which are 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.* (S. 51)

The focus on women runs through the book. This has to do with the approaches that Margret Otto has found to the neighbourhoods. 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 conducted by Margret Otto. Margret Otto's background is in peace research, not revolution research. Margret Otto 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. (S.* 259)

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

In addition to the methodology of grounded theory, which is described in Chapter 3 and which we do not discuss here, there are 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 topic of migration and the reconstruction of social cohesion - a topic that is currently becoming even more important in 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 are from a group whose families had come to Khartoum and Omdurman at these historical times and who, against this background, claimed their own kind 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 exclusion and appropriation. Khartoum and Omdurman, the places of my research, were created through migration and continue to be shaped by it.* (S. 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 reading the books by Herbert G. Gutman, Work, Culture & Society (1975) or Carol B. Stack, 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 Khartoum metropolitan area, is rich in history and cultural significance. It is known for its vibrant community and strong social fabric, characterised by its unique historical, ethnic and religious heritage. Margret Otto's book offers an interesting perspective by taking the historical development as a starting point.

Omdurman gained importance in the late 19th century when it became the capital of the state under Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi. During this time, it was the political and cultural centre. Its historical significance is reflected in landmarks such as the Tomb of the Mahdi and the House of the Khalifa, which are closely linked to Sudan's national identity.

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

Religion is a cornerstone of social life. Omdurman is Muslim-majority, and Islamic practices strongly influence daily life and social interactions. Sufi traditions are particularly strong, with events such as *Dhikr* (remembrance of God) and the annual *Mawlid* celebration (birthday of the

Prophet Mohammed) playing an important role in social cohesion. The city is home to several important mosques and religious centres, such as the Hamed al-Nil Mosque, a place for Sufi rituals.

Like much of Sudan, Omdurman faced challenges such as political instability, economic difficulties and rapid urbanisation before the war. Despite these challenges, the people of Omdurman proved resilient and preserved their cultural practices and social ties. The social fabric of Omdurman was a mixture of historical depth, cultural richness and community solidarity. The ability of the inhabitants to preserve traditions while adapting to modern challenges was a testament to the strength and resilience of the community.

Margret Otto writes,

> *In the wake 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 first describe the development of Khartoum and Omdurman under colonial rule from around 1750 to 1956 in chronological order and summarise the results. In the subsequent 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.* (S. 79)

The colonial city of Khartoum was torn down during the Mahdi period and rebuilt with rectangular streets after the British victory in 1889. The centre of government and administration is still located here today, as are the districts of the upper classes. However, under the colonial administration, labour quarters were also established for previously enslaved people (a process described by Ahmad Sikaninga (2010): Slaves Into Workers, described in detail). Some of the neighbourhoods in which Margret Otto conducted her research are located in precisely these neighbourhoods.

Location of the neighbourhoods surveyed in the districts of Al-Mansura, Al-Murada, Banat, El Diem, Fitaihab, Gabra and Muhandisin

However, the second chapter of the book is not only about the development of the T*riangular City* (although Khartoum North is only mentioned in passing*)*, which is described in many different ways and illustrated with maps, but also about the architecture of the houses and courtyards where she did her research. The "window in the wall", which is open to the neighbours' homes, is of great importance for the cultivation of neighbourhoods. In a way, it was about shifting the village way of life to the city. A sketch from the book illustrates this:

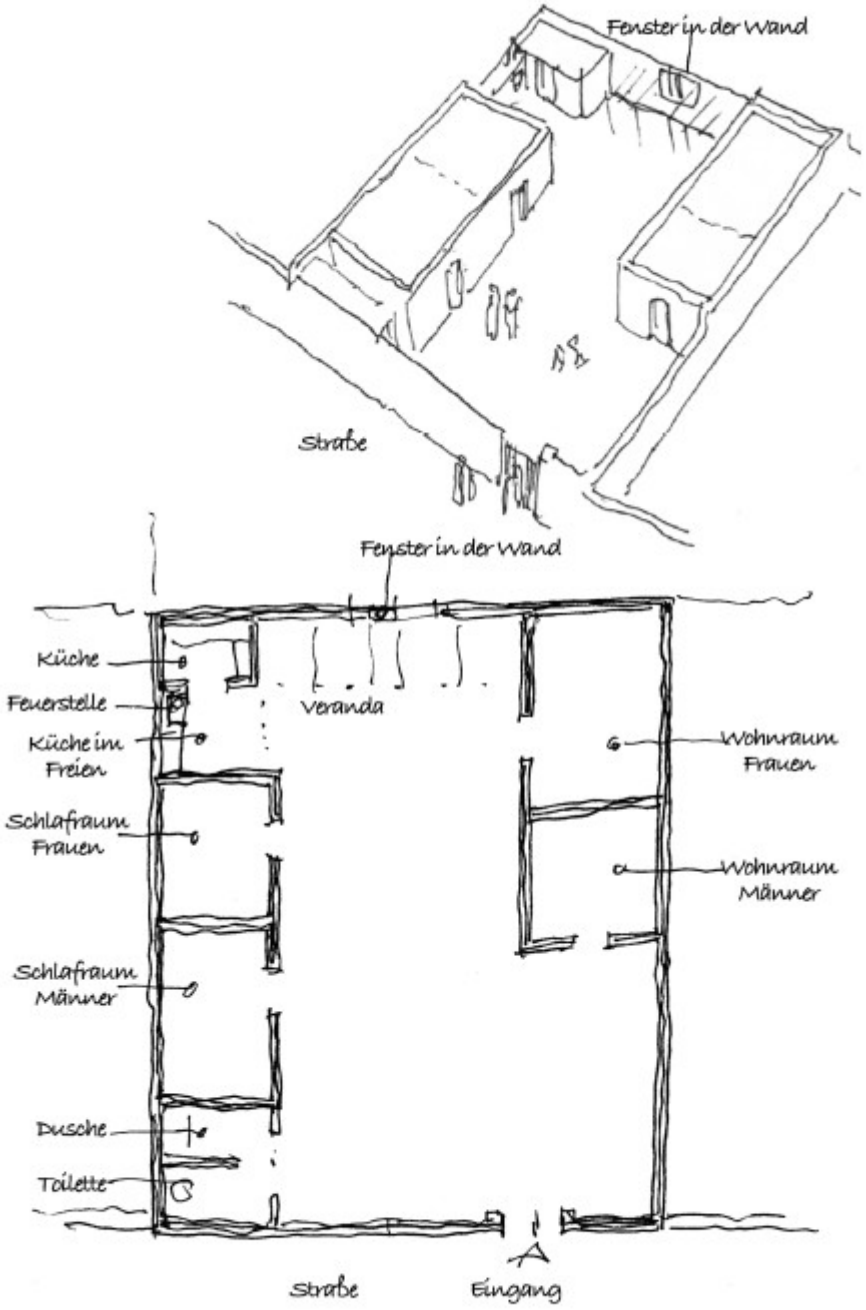


Abb. 3: Skizze des Hauses von Mayla mit dem Fenster in der Wand zum Nachbargrundstück (Zeichnung: Joergen Rasmussen).

3. S*andug* and J*udiya*

The s*andug* is a widespread form of savings association in Sudan, as it is common in many regions of the south. They are an opportunity for women in the neighbourhood to meet and exchange ideas. Mutual help and care are also a constant theme. The *sandugs* are also an instrument for 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.* (S. 154)

For the women involved, the *sandugs* are the only way they can occasionally make a major purchase. In the household economy, money is a scarce thing, especially since almost all state benefits have been cancelled since the 2011 crisis. Informal economies and mutual aid have become even more important. Who gets the money from the *sandug* and what it is spent on is always the subject of detailed discussions.

While the women meet in the houses, the men 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 in the mosque. Many public repair jobs or assistance services are voluntarily organised by neighbours and in neighbourhood cooperatives (see below). Margret Otto does not forget to mention that mosque attendance and neighbourhood help are 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 in the context of neighbourly action.* (S. 184).

Conflicts in the neighbourhood are not usually 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 that is not about punishment but about compensation for the damage suffered, with both sides saving face.

From the point of view of the people interviewed by Margret Otto, there was "*no trustworthy state legal system in Sudan that they could trust to deal reliably with conflicts*". (S. 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 Committees / Resistance Committees that have developed in the neighbourhoods since 2013, but especially during the 2019 sit-in. On the other hand, it is worth reflecting on that the RCs might not have emerged at all without the struggles with the “Popular Committees”.

4. Neighbourhood Committees, Cooperatives and Associations

In the following chapter, we would like to add some information about social structures in the neighbourhoods that go beyond the structures and processes of mutual solidarity so beautifully described by Margret Otto.

4.1 Neighbourhood Committees

The Sudanese Neighbourhood Committees (*Lijan Al-Muqawama*) represent a modern development of grassroots activism that draws on historical traditions of community solidarity. Their decentralised structure and resilience have redefined political engagement in Sudan and empowered citizens to actively shape the future of their country.

The history of these committees is deeply rooted in the history of grassroots political organisation and resistance from below. The committees played a key role in mobilising neighbourhoods and supporting civil disobedience at crucial moments, particularly during the December 2018 revolution that led to the overthrow of President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019.

Historically, Sudanese neighbourhoods have been organised on the basis of strong social ties, often fostered by religious institutions such as mosques and local gatherings. The concept of collective responsibility and mutual aid has long been part of Sudanese culture and forms the basis for organised neighbourhood action. Since Sudan's independence, grassroots movements have played an important role in workers' strikes, student protests and political mobilisation. The October Revolution of 1964 and the April Uprising of 1985 were driven in part by local committees and trade unions that provided a blueprint for modern resistance.

The current form of the Neighbourhood Committees emerged as local units of resistance against government oppression and economic hardship during the prolonged political crises in Sudan under the regime of Omar al-Bashir (1989-2019). During the revolution in December 2018, they were more organised and became widely known. Unlike older forms of political organisation that were dominated by elites or specific ethnic groups, the neighbourhood committees were more inclusive and attracted members from different social and economic backgrounds. They organised protests, disseminated information and coordinated actions of civil disobedience. These committees played an important role in building cohesion against the security crackdown and provided decentralised leadership to maintain momentum. They worked at the neighbourhood level, which made them accessible to citizens and enabled efficient mobilisation and communication. They used modern tools such as social media alongside traditional methods such as word-of-mouth to organise protests and sit-ins.

After the revolution, these committees evolved and played a greater role: they became watchdogs over the transitional government's policies and ensured 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 meeting local needs, such as water supply, waste collection and other municipal services neglected by the state.

The Sudanese military and paramilitary forces have targeted these committees, particularly during the post-revolution conflicts, in an attempt to undermine their influence. The transition from a revolutionary force to a stable grassroots organisation was fraught with challenges, especially given the ongoing political instability in Sudan. The committees occasionally clashed with traditional systems of governance such as tribal leaders or the official Popular Committees, reflecting a tension

between revolutionary ideals and entrenched power structures. Differences in the ideology and goals of the committees have sometimes led to divisions.

4.2 Neighbourhood Cooperatives

These cooperatives are community-based organisations that provide mutual aid and social support for various occasions such as weddings, funerals and other community events. They jointly own important items such as tents, chairs, tables and sometimes even sound systems. These are loaned out to members of the community for events at little or no cost. The members regularly pay a small amount of money into a fund, also known as a *sanduq* (*sanduq* means box). This money is used to purchase and maintain resources or to financially support families during important life events such as weddings and funerals. The cooperative is usually run by a small committee of trusted members from the neighbourhood who take care of finances, maintenance and logistics.

Another type of collective neighbourhood work is the collection of sheepskins during Eid al-Adha. In Sudan, this is a long-standing practice associated with community co-operation and sustainability. It reflects the strong community spirit and ingenuity that characterises Sudanese culture.

During Eid al-Adha, families traditionally slaughter sheep as part of the religious ritual. This produces a large number of sheepskins that would otherwise end up as waste. Neighbourhood committees or cooperative groups organise the collection of these skins from households. Volunteers or hired workers go door-to-door to collect the skins, or collection centres are set up where residents can drop them off. The main purpose of this practice is to raise money. The skins are sold to local tanneries or traders who process them into leather. The proceeds are then donated to the neighbourhood fund.

The funds are used for the maintenance of community resources such as tents, chairs or other shared items. They can also be allocated to help families in need, support community events or contribute to repairs and developments in the neighbourhood. There are environmental and economic benefits such as reducing waste by reusing a by-product of Eid celebrations. Also, this practice provides an additional source of income for the community while supporting local industries such as leather processing.

4.3 Neighbourhood Clubs

Another important community structure are the Neighbourhood Clubs (commonly referred to as *Nawadi Al- Ahyya*). These clubs are a colonial legacy and were originally only accessible to men. Access for women was fought for socially. The clubs were always watched with suspicion by the respective rulers and infiltrated by informers. Numerous clubs were closed under Bashir and replaced by institutions loyal to the regime.

Nevertheless, the clubs are important social, cultural and sporting centres in the neighbourhoods. They are much more than just leisure centres. They promote social cohesion and offer space for various activities.

Some of its most important activities are

Sport:

Many neighbourhood clubs focus on promoting sports, especially football, which is very popular in Sudan. These clubs often have local teams that take part in friendly matches or tournaments.

Assemblies:

The clubs provide a space for people from the neighbourhood to meet, make contacts and discuss local issues. They also serve as platforms for collective decision-making, particularly for neighbourhood development projects.

Cultural events:

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

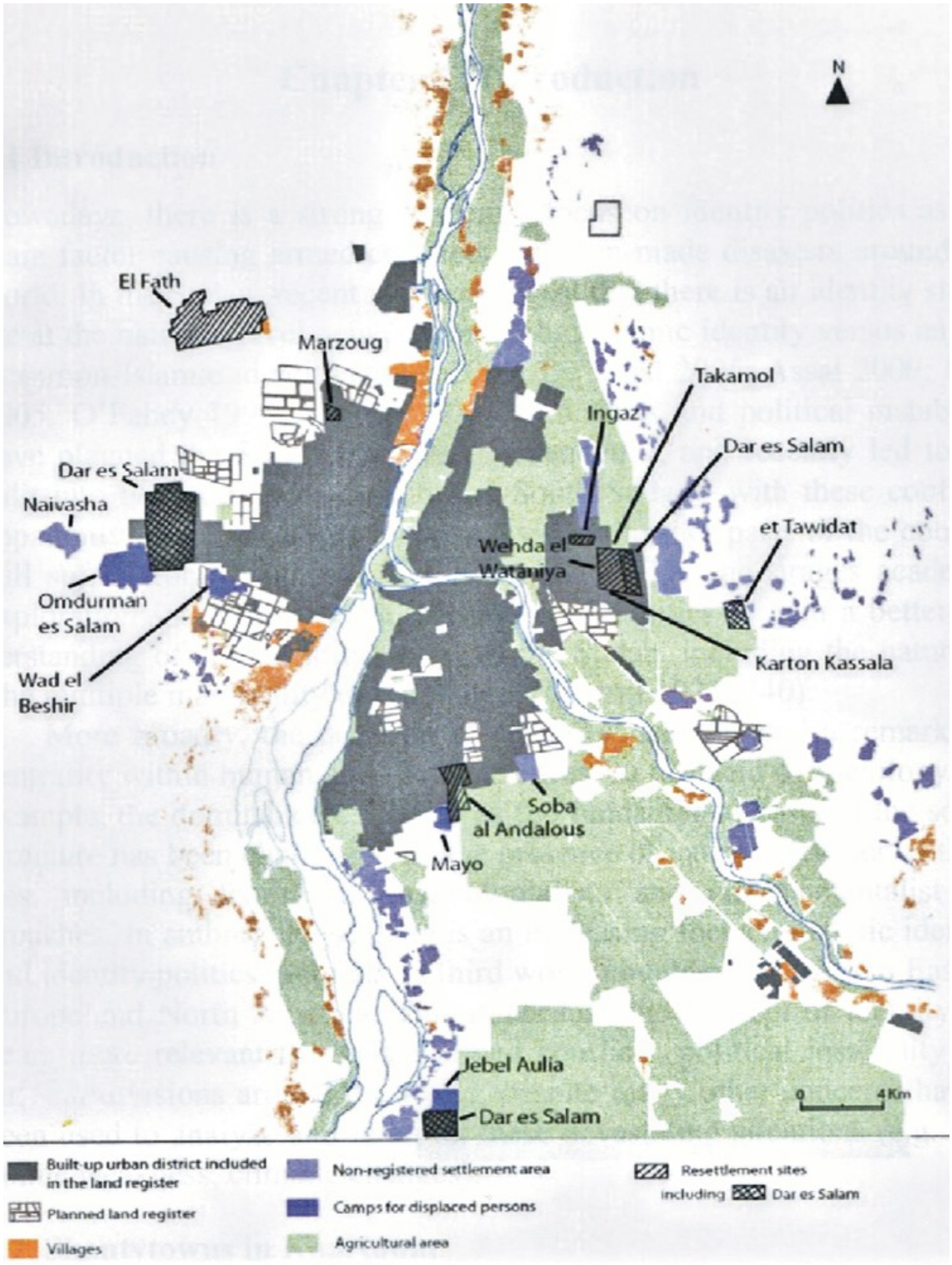
Educational programmes:

Some clubs organise tutoring sessions, literacy programmes or vocational training, especially for young people in the neighbourhood.

Commitment of young people:

Clubs play an important role in reaching out to young people, keeping them active and involved in constructive activities and helping them build their skills. They often serve as a space for mentoring and developing a sense of co-operation.

These clubs are also usually run by a committee made up of members of the neighbourhood and survive on contributions from members and donations. Fundraising activities such as tournaments or charity events are common ways of supporting the clubs. Nevertheless, these structures face many challenges that are reflected in scarce resources: many clubs have problems with funding, lack of premises or equipment. Maintenance can also be a challenge without continuous support. Added to this are the effects of urbanisation. Rapid urbanisation and changes in community structures can have an impact on the way clubs function.



Shantytowns in Khartoum, Omdurman and Bahi (2014) (p.110)

5. Relationships, Revolution

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

It seems important to us not to use the term *Sudaneseness* in a nation-state sense. Originally, this term was used disparagingly by the British. In the course of the anti-colonial movement,

Sudaneseness was given a positive connotation by the Sudanese themselves and self-confidently used as a kind of demarcation against the colonial power. The meaning did not primarily refer to a national territory, but rather to ways of life, traditions and a canon of values. The phrase "a good neighbour" contains something like this. At the same time, it was also a demarcation against the ruling classes and an infamous state. *Sudaneseness* is a way of life.

But we are also interested in thinking about social relations in a more fundamental way. The Marxists among us are familiar with the historical materialism of "modes of production". In the transition to the immateriality of information capitalism - i.e. in our age - we believe the time has come to speak of "modes of relations" in an analogy. The book by Bini Adamczak (2017) on the Russian Revolution(s) contains some valuable references on this topic, but also authors such as Abdul Maliq Simone, who speaks of infrastructures as social relations rather than material transmissions, could be important here. In this context, it is certainly no longer useful to speak of a national or postcolonial "working class" or any kind of national framing. The recent transformation of capitalism has produced more informal and declassed labour than ever before, but this is not socially constitutive and can no longer be negotiated as a national issue.

A second point: no one can live on s*anduqs* alone. In this context, it would be interesting to investigate where the money comes from and how it is multiplied in the families and neighbourhoods. How have families and neighbourhoods reacted to the crisis since 2011? What did the transition from working-class communitiesn to a broad-based informal economy look like in concrete terms? We think that we need to discuss not only "modes of relating" (and the book we are discussing here makes an important contribution to this), but also reproductive economies. These are economies that take very different paths from the "political economy" of nations. The latter concept dates back to the 18th century and is not our concern. We should be talking about the economies of families and communities. Obviously, these economies are only visible when theorised, as Chayanov did at the beginning of the last century in relation to Russian peasants. These reproductive economies, we argue, are transported from the villages to the cities (and to the diaspora, and to the refugee camps) in much the same way as neighbourhoods. In certain situations, they become an economy of migration and resistance.

It would also be interesting to know more about the neighbourhoods and economies of survival in the huge shanty towns that gave rise to the 2013 uprisings. There are undoubtedly serious differences to the neighbourhoods in which the residents see themselves as "middle class". Perhaps some researchers in Sudan will follow in Margret Otto's footsteps after the war and continue her research in the poor neighbourhoods there.

Finally, we ask ourselves whether what Margret Otto describes is gone and past, given the monstrous destruction currently taking place where Margret Otto conducted her research. Even if so, her research would be of great value, as she describes in her book the preconditions for a "revolution from the neighbourhoods". On a large scale, the RCs in Khartoum and Omdurman only constituted themselves 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 without the cohesion of the women among themselves. Now, under war conditions, many RCs are continuing their work in the *Emergency structures*. Some RCs have also migrated with the refugee movements and continue their work in the refugee camps.

We believe that Margret Otto is not just describing a past that is over, but the possible conditions for social resistance. The big step from the family to the neighbourhood seems to be essential.

[The text was revised after a discussion with the author of the book on 08/03/2014]