

South Sudan

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Introduction

“This Is Where We Came From”

On 9 July 2011 I attended South Sudan’s formal independence ceremony in Juba, an event that marked a departure for Africa. Most African countries became independent on a negotiated “transfer of power” from a colonial authority to a new national elite. South Sudan’s independence came from the directly expressed will of its people. There was a shared sense of the historical importance of the event beyond the exercise of self-determination by Africa’s newest nation. My companions that day included a Kenyan and a Ugandan, both from communities who shared languages and histories with South Sudan. “This is where we came from,” one of them commented. “This is our home.”

Watching the arrival of several African heads of state, one sensed a change in Africa as well. When the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was founded in the early 1960s, Sudan was already locked in its first civil war. South Sudan’s exile leaders, fighting what they called their own anticolonial struggle, were shunned

by the new African governments bound in solidarity to each other. South Sudanese warnings against the nascent OAU becoming a club for dictators proved all too prescient, but as John Garang, South Sudan's leader in the second civil war, later commented, "We were the pariahs of Africa," and the warnings were ignored. Yet here Africa's leaders now were lining up to watch the flag of one African Union member go down as that of a future member went up.

My own introduction to South Sudan began more than forty years earlier as a student at Makerere University College in Uganda sharing classes with South Sudanese refugee students. Sudan was then nearing a turning point in its long first civil war. Ja'afar Nimeiri's May Revolution had proclaimed that the war needed a political rather than a military solution. Southern guerilla forces, the Anyanya (named after a local poison), were finally coalescing around a unified leadership. Despite pronouncements of an imminent peace, the war continued for nearly three more years.

This was also a time of revolution in the writing and teaching of African history, moving beyond the histories of colonial pioneers and embracing the investigation of the indigenous past. The recently published *Zamani: A Survey of East African History* presented an integrated regional history based on this new research. As welcome as this was, there were still some silences. East Africa stopped at the northern borders of Uganda and Kenya. Aside from references to prehistoric "River

Lakes Nilotes” and nineteenth-century “Khartoumers,” South Sudanese history was absent. I came away from these combined experiences with the desire to write for South Sudan the type of history that now defined the field of African history.

I was fortunate to be able to begin substantive research inside South Sudan during the period of the Addis Ababa peace between 1972 and 1983, and to observe the evolution of historical research through alternating periods of peace and war. Prior to 1972 the main focus had been on the causes of civil war (e.g., Oduho and Deng 1963; Beshir 1968; Abdel-Rahim 1969; Albino 1970; Wai 1973). The outlines of South Sudan’s long colonial period were delineated in the pioneering works of Richard Gray (1961), Robert Collins (1962, 1968, 1971, 1983), and the Sandersons (1981). While virtually no one claimed as bluntly as A. J. Arkell that South Sudan had no history before 1820, the year of Egypt’s invasion of Sudan (Arkell 1961, 2), the internal histories of South Sudanese societies received little attention during the Addis Ababa peace when new fieldwork was possible. The long second civil war refocused attention on the twin tragedies of war and slavery (Wakason 1984; Hutchinson 1995; Jok 2001; Beswick 2004). The conclusion of peace in 2005 reopened South Sudan to field-based research, and a new generation of researchers has continued the work of earlier field-workers in creatively combining exploration literature, administrative records, and older ethnography with new fieldwork

(e.g., Jal 1987; Simonse 1992; Leonardi 2013a; Cormack 2014; Tuttle 2014; Stringham 2016). There is now also a serious effort to examine South Sudanese intellectual history and the ideas underpinning its nationalist ideology (Poggo 2009; Tounsel 2015), as well as detailed studies of the conduct, consequences, and aftermath of war (Schomerus and Allen 2010; LeRiche and Arnold 2012; Pinaud 2013; Badiey 2014; Grabska 2014; Falge 2016).

A new history of South Sudan thus has much to draw on. There are still many challenges, quite apart from the basic contradiction here of attempting to fit a *longue durée* history into a Short History series. There are lingering stereotypes in the earlier literature commonly referred to and promoted by South Sudanese themselves that must be confronted. Because the historiography of South Sudan has lagged behind much of the rest of Africa's, the quality of the sources and the way they have been used must be examined. For this reason there will be a running reference to historiography throughout this text. Inevitably chapters become more detailed the closer we get to the present, but they will not be detailed enough for those readers who are mainly interested in what is happening now. The purpose of a *longue durée* history is to give shape to a nation's past and not let the present define that past.

Ever since Richard Gray's characterization of southern Sudan as isolated from the great centers of power and historical trends of the continent (Gray 1961, 8–9), writers have taken the region's historical isolation as proven,

even describing the region as “cut off from the rest of the world” and “as remote an environment as can be found” (LeRiche and Arnold 2012, 4; cf. Poggo 2009, 21). But representatives of nearly every major African language group are found within its borders. One of the themes of this book is to show how South Sudan is a missing piece in the jigsaw puzzle of African history and identify both historic and recent connections between South Sudanese and communities beyond their borders. A new history for a new nation must combine the internal history of indigenous communities with a record of South Sudan’s involvement with the wider region.

Writers have also found the complex ethnic makeup of South Sudan a challenge to describe. Embarrassed by the colonial overtones of the word “tribe,” they replace it with either “ethnic group” or “clan,” implying that all South Sudanese societies are bounded by small kin-based groups. There are serious objections to using “tribe” in any context (Ehret 2002, 7), but “tribe” and “ethnic group” are not interchangeable. Anthropologists Ferguson and Whitehead make a useful distinction between tribes as “bounded and/or structured political organizations” and ethnic groups, which “are a cultural phenomenon with only latent organizational potential” (2000, 15). In South Sudan’s ethnographic and administrative literature “tribe” and “clan” have distinct meanings and are not interchangeable. Tribal organizations are recognized administrative units with their own internal political structure: the Nuer people are

organized into a number of different tribes, as are the Dinka people. Clans are kin units whose significance differs among South Sudan's many peoples: some are territorial and central to a tribe's political organization, others are nonterritorial and widely dispersed. In this book I use the word "people" to describe groups who share the same language and similar social principles or cultural practices, "tribe" when referring to specific administrative-political units, and "clan" only when appropriate for certain kin groups. The use of ethnic names in South Sudan is undergoing a change as South Sudanese intellectuals seek to replace the English terms with indigenous self-names. However, until some consensus is reached I retain the more conventional forms established in the literature: Shilluk rather than Collo or Ocolo, Nuer rather than Naath, Dinka rather than Jieng, Mandari rather than Mundari, Lotuho rather than Otuho, and so on.

Linguistic terms are sometimes applied as broad ethnic labels, and there are also popular meanings unrelated to scholarly use. The term "Nilotic" is particularly problematic. Linguists now identify three broad branches of Nilotic within the Nilo-Saharan language family: Western, Eastern, and Southern (see chapter 2). The first are found in Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Uganda; the second in South Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya; and the last in Kenya and Tanzania. Yet "Nilotic" also has different cultural and political connotations. In Ethiopia it is a general term for lowland peoples of diverse languages

and origins. In Uganda it refers to the peoples of the north associated with past dictatorial regimes, not all of whom speak a Nilotic language. It has acquired similar political overtones in South Sudan and is applied almost exclusively to the Western Nilotic-speaking Nuer, Dinka, and Shilluk, less often to the Atuot and Anuak, but not to the Mabaan, Acholi, and Pari. I use it here only in its linguistic sense. The Eastern Nilotic languages of Bari, Lotuho, Toposa, Turkana, and Maasai were at one time classed as “Nilo-Hamitic” but, as the “Hamitic hypothesis” of a race of light-skinned civiliziers in African history has been thoroughly discredited and we now recognize that there were no such people as “Hamites,” there can be no merging of Nilotes with Hamites, and the archaic label “Nilo-Hamitic” has been dropped even by linguists.

Religion is another area of confusion. Despite the existence of a large body of sophisticated ethnographic descriptions of South Sudanese spiritual beliefs, the great majority of South Sudanese are routinely dismissed as “animists” who worship spirits embedded in natural objects. The anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard explicitly stated that the Nuer “are not animists and there is no evidence that they ever have been” (1956, 158), yet journalists still write of them as praying to their “animist gods” (Purvis 1993, 46). Animism has no place in the description of African religions, for as Chris Ehret trenchantly states, “This terminology, besides failing to fit any particular African religion, does violence to

historical reality: it lumps in an amorphous mass what are in actuality immensely different sets of ideas with distinctive consequences for the history of thought and culture in different parts of the continent” (2002, 15). South Sudan has a long history of the mingling of monotheistic ideas and theistic religions, both indigenous and imported.

Terms of indigenous authority in South Sudan also vary according to ethnographic tradition, alternating between kings and chiefs. Here I follow the anthropologist Simon Simonse’s useful restatement of the distinction between the two. Kingship is not determined by the size of territory over which authority is claimed but by the exercise of sovereignty over a whole structure. A chief is a subordinate in that structure, “a local-level official whose authority depends on a long-standing connection with his subjects and on recognition by a more powerful state” (Simonse 1992, 7). By this definition there were many kingdoms in precolonial southern Sudan, but the basis on which a king exercised sovereignty differed between societies.

The sources for the study of South Sudan’s past vary in quality. The archaeological record has not got beyond the exploratory stage. Historical linguistics is providing avenues for making long-term connections between significant language groups, but a thorough analysis of Western and Eastern Nilotic is yet to be completed. For the nineteenth century there is a wealth of contemporary observations in the exploration literature, sources

of primary importance but ethnographically superficial and inaccurate (Evans-Pritchard 1971b, 145). The administrative literature of the first half of the twentieth century provides a more intimate contemporary record, especially in the local documents being assembled in the South Sudan National Archive, as it was produced by men conversant in some of the languages of South Sudan and in long-term contact with its peoples. Yet as detailed as these documents are they still provide mainly an external view of South Sudanese peoples and their societies. We are fortunate to have an extensive body of contemporary field-based ethnographic literature created by anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard, Godfrey Lienhardt, and Jean Buxton and by missionary ethnographers and linguists such as Fathers Hofmayr, Crazzolaro, and Santandrea, which helps us understand how South Sudanese peoples organized themselves, interacted with their environment and each other, and responded to internal and external events to become the peoples they are today. The writing of South Sudan's history must build on this ethnographic foundation as new fieldwork begins a more systematic collection of South Sudanese oral testimony.

African historians have developed tools for analyzing oral sources, but these have not been systematically applied in South Sudan. There is a need to establish reliable, if relative chronologies. The narratives of population migrations are told in foreshortened time, compressing multiple movements and a complex series

of attachments and separations into a single strand. The standard method of counting the generations backward from the present to a founding ancestor is unreliable because the purpose of tribal genealogies is not to measure time but to establish social and political connections. As the anthropologist Ian Cunnison warned, “Historically a tribal genealogy is, purely and simply, a falsification of the record” (1971, 189). Nuer and Dinka genealogies express both social and political distance within and between lineages rather than time depth (Evans-Pritchard 1940a, 107–8, 198–99; Lienhardt 1958, 106). Establishing any dates much beyond five generations on the basis of genealogies without first analyzing indigenous systems of time reckoning and age-sets is speculative, and recent valiant attempts to extend tribal chronologies backward into a medieval past are yet to be confirmed (e.g., Beswick 2004; Kuendit 2010).

Dynastic lists, such as those of the Zande and Shilluk kings and the Dinka spear-masters, offer another approach to chronology. Of these, the Shilluk king list has been the most studied and begins to give us semireliable dates for events along the White Nile, especially when corroborated by the dynastic lists of the Blue Nile sultanate of Sinnar. But even dynastic lists are problematic. The king lists for the Ugandan kingdoms of Buganda and Bunyoro, for instance, expanded in the twentieth century as clan ancestors and clan shrines were incorporated in the genealogies as a way of enhancing dynastic prestige through the assertion

of greater antiquity (Henige 1980). The Shilluk king lists vary between sources, many disputed kings are included, and regnal dates are calculated in different ways (Westermann 1970, 135; Hofmayr 1925, 48; Howell and Thompson 1946, 84; Crazzolara 1951, 135–38; Lwong 2013). What can be said with some certainty is that the kingdom was well established by the early to mid-seventeenth century, and that with the founding of the royal capital at Pachodo toward the end of that century, the installation of the *reths* (kings) became institutionalized and more reliable dating can proceed from that time.

In any book of the *longue durée* there is the danger of reading back into the past identities that were centuries in the making. With South Sudanese still debating their own national identity, it would be an anomaly to apply the terms South Sudan or South Sudanese to earlier periods. At the risk of offending South Sudanese readers, I will refer to southern Sudan and southern Sudanese for periods before the mid-twentieth century and to South Sudan and South Sudanese when describing the evolution of nationalist politics. I will use the administrative terms of Upper Nile, Bahr el-Ghazal, and Equatoria where convenient, even though the composition of those regions changed over time (the Zande kingdoms, for instance, at different times were part of Bahr el-Ghazal, Equatoria, and Western Equatoria).

Themes of violence and war run throughout this book, but there are other aspects of the shared

experience of South Sudanese that have promoted co-existence in the past and might be the foundation for reconstruction in the future. Ancestral southern Sudanese societies were part of a Sudanic culture with other Nile Basin communities and drew on a common pool of symbols, images, religious ideas, and patterns of authority. Modern South Sudanese societies are products of a long process of cultural assimilation and borrowing of ideas and institutions between communities.

Mobility and migration are common themes through several historical periods. South Sudan is a mosaic of settled agricultural communities, centralized states, and mobile nonstate pastoralist societies. States fostered assimilation of different peoples, often by force. Non-state societies provided an alternative to states, even for northern Muslim pastoralists who sought refuge among Nilotic border communities to escape the demands of the northern sultanates.

South Sudan has experienced an escalation of violence ever since the intrusion of external powers in the nineteenth century. New technologies of war brought new forms of military and political organization. The Turco-Egyptian conquest of Sudan radically altered relations between many southern Sudanese communities and between southern Sudanese and their northern neighbors. The wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries were greater in scale than the wars of the nineteenth not only in their levels of violence, the involvement of external powers, and their impact on

civilian communities but in their legacies of violence during subsequent periods of peace.

Warfare on an expanded scale accelerated population dispersal and the formation of new communities through the recombination of scattered peoples. The introduction of slavery and the international slave trade created the new phenomenon of south Sudanese diasporas, exported to other parts of Sudan and beyond, or combined into the military formations of multiple armies. The refugee diasporas produced by Sudan's postindependence civil wars have been scattered across the globe. They are now returning, as earlier diasporas did, with acquired experiences and skills that will have a significant impact in shaping South Sudan's future.

The experience of multiple colonialisms defined the territorial and political outlines of South Sudan and helped shape the definition of who was South Sudanese. The trade empires of the nineteenth century shifted regional connections and created networks that began to knit together the different territories of southern Sudan. The dual colonialism of the twentieth-century Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, where Sudan remained an Egyptian colony governed by Britain, left a contradictory legacy. Local administration was established by force but is remembered as benign in the creation of an administrative system based on customary law and customary institutions, though neglectful of education and economic development under the restricted terms of the Southern Policy.

The history of Sudan and South Sudan since the mid-twentieth century is a history of contested nationalisms and the failure of the politics of national unity. The power struggle between the northern nationalist parties left the southern provinces and other rural regions marginalized from the centers of economic and political power. The emergent South Sudanese political elite began to fashion a coherent nationalist ideology of its own, based mainly on opposition to the northern parties' construction of a national identity around the external ideologies of pan-Arabism and Islamism. South Sudan's struggle was and continues to be part of a wider struggle in postindependence Sudan, a struggle that remains unresolved by South Sudan's own independence referendum. The failure of the politics of national unity in Sudan has contributed to the current failure of the politics of national unity in South Sudan.

There is as yet no single comprehensive history of South Sudan, and this short history can be no more than an introduction to some basic facts, ideas, and interpretations, illustrated by vignettes of specific persons or events. It cannot name-check all the peoples of South Sudan or do justice to all their historical traditions. It is offered to stimulate conversation, debate, and further research about South Sudan's past. All historical writing is a work in progress, and this book is no more than an interim report.