



## A New History for a New Nation: The Search for South Sudan's Usable Past

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In February last year, I attended an event put on by South Sudanese in London celebrating the recently conducted independence referendum. Part of the celebration included a recitation of the history of South Sudan's liberation struggle by schoolchildren aged from six to sixteen. Their joy at the impending birth of their new nation was understandable, even if some of their historical claims could (and did) make a professional historian wince. Just five months later, on 9 July, I found myself sitting next to a Kenyan and a Ugandan watching the formal independence celebrations in Juba. This in itself 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 had come 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. 'This is where we came from', one of my companions commented; 'this is our home.'



Juba, 9 July 2011

Watching the arrival of several African heads of state—including Kenneth Kaunda, the last surviving member of the first generation of Africa's nationalist leaders—one certainly sensed a change in Africa as well. When the Organization of African Union (OAU) was founded in the early 1960s, Sudan was already locked in its first civil war and South Sudan's exiled leaders, fighting what they called their own anti-colonial 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 were today's African leaders, lining up to watch the flag of one African Union member go down as that of a future member went up.

These two events made me reflect not only on how nations fashion and present their history but how the historiography of South Sudan has been both shadowing and trailing African historiography more

generally. The recitation by South Sudan's diaspora schoolchildren—scripted, no doubt, by their parents, emphasizing the differences between the Arab and African Sudans, and celebrating the liberation of the latter from the former—was not so different from the way the birth of the American nation was presented to my generation at a similar age. We were constantly reminded of the English tyranny from which we had liberated ourselves, especially when learning the words of our national anthem. This song commemorates a minor incident in the war of 1812, some three decades after independence: a war that—despite our capital being burned, our government nearly bankrupted, and parts of our territory under foreign occupation— we were taught we had won. This emphasis on past hostility was strange: by the 1950s, Britain had been our ally in two world wars, was currently our strongest ally in NATO—while not only the then British prime minister but his most popular predecessor had been born to American mothers.

Nationalist and anti-colonial narratives were a familiar refrain some years later when I was introduced to the study of both modern African history and South Sudan as a student at Makerere University College. It was a pivotal period in East Africa's historiography as it shifted away from the study of colonial states to the study of indigenous kingdoms and societies. Our reading included both Sir Reginald Coupland's *East Africa and its Invaders*, where the emphasis was on the invaders, and *Zamani*, a new collaborative effort by African, British and American historians teaching at East African universities. By this time, both 'resistance history' and 'nation building' were displacing 'empire building' as dominant themes.

What follows here is a personal reflection based on over 40 years of research and writing on South Sudan's pre-colonial, colonial and contemporary history. Such reflection is timely, with South Sudan itself in the process of creating its own nationalist history, just as all other African nations did on winning independence. But there is a wider history to think of as well: of South Sudan as a missing piece in the jigsaw of Africa's past. It has been common to think of South Sudan as isolated from the great centres of power and historical trends of the continent. But nearly every major African language family is found within its borders—and, as Sudan's colonial administrators found to their frustration, South Sudanese peoples were too engaged with and too much a part of the surrounding region to be neatly disentangled. That same engagement later would contribute to the success of their liberation struggle. A new history for a new nation, then, must see South Sudan's involvement with the wider region as part of the story of its engagement with and then disengagement *from* the old Sudan.



South Sudanese in Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Central Equatoria, 2011

At the time I began a serious study of South Sudan, very little had been written about the history of its indigenous communities. There was certainly nothing comparable to PM Holt's *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, based as it was on the internal documents of the Mahdīa. Books on the same period in South Sudanese history, restricted to contemporary sources by outsiders, were more in the Coupland vein, i.e. examinations of the invaders rather than the invaded. It was the ethnographers, rather than the historians, who offered insights into the internal history of South Sudanese societies, their institutions, and the impact of external events upon them. My reading became grounded in the ethnography of both professional and amateur anthropologists, a necessary step towards becoming a field-working historian.

The questions I wanted to ask were still influenced by prevailing trends in African history—and resistance was an obvious topic. But what seemed obvious outside the territory became less so once in the field; and the testimony I began gathering re-directed my research. Direct engagement with the societies I was studying made me look for different things in the written sources and led me to question not only the nature of anti-colonial resistance but the anthropological certainties of segmentary opposition. Rather than assume a timelessness about the way peoples were when first described in the twentieth century ethnographies, I became interested in the *processes* of their becoming, in the trajectories and continuities between the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial pasts. I wrote about prophets—but also about the nature of prophecy, environmental history and political ecology, the social networks of slavery and the social history of armies, and colonial administration as viewed by both the colonizer and the colonized.<sup>1</sup>

Over 30 years ago, I wrote about the future of southern Sudan's past in a journal commemorating 25 years of Sudan's own independence. At that time, I was critical of a southern Sudanese historiography that lagged far behind developments in the historiography of the rest of Africa—with its fixed focus on the colonial period, its over-reliance on colonial administrative records, and its almost total exclusion of southern Sudanese from their own history. This focus on the colonial period, I wrote, 'obscured some of the broader trends in Southern Sudanese history, trends which are of great significance to the history of the rest of the Sudan'. Southern Sudanese had been presented as atavistic or inert in response to externally initiated change. 'The old interpretation of the Southern Sudan's past', I concluded, 'supported the assumption that the Southern Sudanese were incapable of meeting the challenges of the modern world.'<sup>2</sup>



South Sudanese returning from Sudan, 2011

At that time—back in 1981—I hoped that a new period of historical research, grounded on sources within southern Sudan and southern Sudanese communities, would produce a history more engaged with the internal dynamics of South Sudanese societies, and more in tune with the type of history being written about the rest of Africa. The war intervened to derail such an advance. Not only did it prevent extended fieldwork among South Sudan's many societies but it also involved the destruction of many of the local archival sources on which a new historiography could be partly based. The writing of Africa's history has continued to develop, along with debates and arguments about the writing of that history, without much reference to or input from South Sudan—and as South Sudan tries to catch up with the rest of the continent, it seems to be repeating many of the earlier stages in the development of African history.

John Lonsdale, in a celebration of the work of Terry Ranger, summarized some of the challenges Africanist historians have faced in their search for a usable past, and how these challenges have been met. In the 1960s, nationalism encouraged a focus on the 'history of self-government', African agency

and African initiative. This often promoted a 'vainglorious cultural nationalism' that was increasingly criticized as 'intellectually flabby and methodologically complacent', particularly by 'radical pessimists' who saw African agency as irrelevant, producing no real change in power relations in a neo-colonial world. Scepticism about the value of African history was reinforced from a different angle at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this time from the new humanitarians of the international aid agencies who 'felt that each new African emergency constituted yet another reason for ignoring the continent's history.' Ranger had been one of the early promoters of both resistance and nationalist history, seeing continuities between early struggles of African societies to maintain their independence and their later struggles to regain independence, but he was not one to stand still and met the challenges of the critics of African history head on. He was among those Africanists who reasserted that 'human initiative in thought and action was the vital stuff of any history worthy of the name'. The study of the African past is not just a parochial matter, he argued, for fine-grained local African case studies 'can show how "the big *why* questions" of world history actually manifest themselves to human actors in real life, and how in real lives they can, if always provisionally, be answered'.<sup>3</sup>

Where does the history of South Sudan now fit into this broader picture of African history? In many ways it resembles where African history was in the 1960s: still dominated by themes established by an older literature on colonial administration and colonial administrators or by narratives of migration history of often doubtful methodology—but beginning to be re-directed by an emerging celebratory nationalism. Unlike the 1960s, South Sudanese history is already confronted and opposed by a well-developed Afro-pessimism, now informed by donor and NGO preoccupations with 'failed states' and particularly sceptical and dismissive of South Sudanese attempts to forge a new nation. And while much more is now being published about South Sudan in academic writing and NGO gray literature than there ever was in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, the work that offers the greatest insights into South Sudan's recent and more distant past is still to be found mainly in the writings of anthropologists such as Simon Simonse, Sharon Hutchinson, Eisei Kurimoto, Jok Madut Jok, Conradin ('Kuacakuoro') Perner, and Wendy James—most if not all based on fieldwork undertaken before the war.<sup>4</sup>

This highlights one of the main differences between the research context before the war and today. In the absence of well-established research institutions in South Sudan, most research today is donor-funded and -initiated and supported by NGOs, who set the research agenda and provide the back-up and support for researchers in the field. NGOs being increasingly security-conscious and security-minded, entrenched within what Mark Duffield has termed 'fortified compounds', there are frequent formal and informal restrictions placed on researchers' movements and contacts with the communities with which they are supposed to engage. In some ways we are returning to the days of the early twentieth century, with the constricted research of the steamer-bound Seligmans—from which later anthropologists only with difficulty extracted themselves in order to engage more directly with South Sudanese peoples. Few expatriate researchers these days are familiar with the background work of earlier ethnographers and historians. Even fewer work through the medium of vernacular languages, for the reason that they have little opportunity to learn a local language. Research in South Sudan is in danger of being captured by the methods of fly-in-fly-out journalism and the hit-and-run rapid rural appraisals of NGOs. These can produce little more than snapshots, rather than extended and nuanced analyses. And there is little opportunity to change one's research questions and priorities, as I had to do, when confronted with a different set of perspectives in the field.

There is a hunger in South Sudan for a type of history that returns to a serious engagement with South Sudanese societies, peoples and individuals—as I have found out from the reception of my occasional 'Past Notes and Records' column in the Juba weekly newspaper, *The Pioneer*. There is also dissatisfaction with, even embarrassment at, the type of national history rapidly manufactured in time for Independence Day. Rather than dwell on the regressive tendencies of such history, I want to highlight some recent research that will, I hope, help to set more positive trends in South Sudanese historiography.

The study of the condominium past in South Sudan has normally focused on the personalities and idiosyncrasies of colonial administrators, with timelines for the development of policy and local government institutions. It has been much less concerned with the personalities of local actors, or the impact of local institutions on South Sudanese societies. Cherry Leonardi's forthcoming study of the trajectory of chiefs' courts in South Sudan is a departure from that norm. Begun as a document-based doctoral dissertation and carried forward in field-based research funded by NGOs—whose assumptions about 'traditional' authority and 'traditional' leaders I hope she has subverted—it is solidly based on an ethnographic understanding of the communities covered by its case studies and shows how custom and authority were transformed by interaction with a succession of invaders and governments. The themes of mobility rather than migration, of the accumulation of special knowledge, and of chiefship being constructed between the town and the rural areas, all represent a new perspective on the history of South Sudan where towns have normally been seen only as part of the history of the colonial rulers and not as part of the history of South Sudanese societies.<sup>5</sup>

There are similar themes overlapping the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where investigation could question some of our remaining assumptions about South Sudan's past. What was the impact of trade and the *zariba* network on South Sudanese communities? Was there a wholesale depopulation of the region through slave-raiding, or did whole communities become invisible from external observation by moving away from the caravan routes? What are the links and continuities between the armies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the old *zariba* sites, and the urban civilian populations of both South Sudan's *malakiyas* and northern Sudan's towns? How far did the Southern Policy of the 1930s really isolate South Sudanese societies—and has anyone examined the record of trade permits to calculate the continuing involvement of Muslim traders in South Sudan's economy at that time?

The history of South Sudan's national independence struggle is equally problematic. The fact that it is already being contested is an indication that a single party line is unlikely to dominate. At various independence celebrations both inside and outside the country, in the billboards in Juba commemorating 'Martyrs Day', many of the persons killed in the SPLA's internecine fighting are hailed as both liberators and martyrs. They are not being airbrushed out of history, though perhaps this is evidence that a seamless thread of 'liberation' is being woven into the national historical consciousness, while the sharper edges of that struggle are smoothed over. There is already a common consensus of the length and ultimate intention of that struggle: leaving aside claims that it began in 1821 with Muḥammad 'Alī's invasion of Nubia and Sennar, it is almost universally asserted that Sudan's first civil war began in 1955 and lasted 17 years, while the 11 years of the Addis Ababa peace are rapidly fading into a mere blip on the screen of history.

Recent research by Øystein Rolandsen shows why we should question that narrative.<sup>6</sup> He is not the first to draw attention to the intervening period between the brief spasm of violence in August 1955 and the beginning of a more sustained military struggle in the early 1960s, but he raises three important questions: what was the conducive environment that led to the outbreak of civil war; what were the motives of the instigators of civil war; and how did the civil war begin? However tentative or incomplete his answers, these questions were not raised by Sudan's nationalist historians. The attempt to answer them now throws new light on the nationalist struggles in both Sudans and calls into question the assumption that independence for South Sudan was the only and inevitable outcome. It opens up the possibility of a more detailed examination of the political history of the 1950s, when South Sudanese themselves offered alternatives to secession. It invites us to pose further questions: what led Fr Saturnino Lohure, a parliamentarian committed to federalism in the 1950s, to become a separatist in the 1960s; and how was Gordon Murotat transformed from a police inspector who saw his duty as preventing the 1955 disturbances from engulfing Wau to the civilian leader of a secessionist guerrilla movement?

These are welcome advances to our knowledge of South Sudanese as actors in their own history, but we ought not neglect the broader picture of where South Sudan fits into *world* history. Migration histories

have proven problematic, not only for their time depth and chronologies but in their master narratives. I never found a Nuer informant whose own ancestors had participated in the migration stories they had just told me. Examination of individual family histories, marriage ties and age-set links told a much more complex story of the construction of the Nuer-speaking communities east of the Nile in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. An even more complex picture of social, cultural and economic exchanges and borrowings is revealed by historical linguistics. The work of Chris Ehret has done much to complicate the old migration theories of African history, revealing a movement of languages and ideas not necessarily confined to or dependent on the movement of whole peoples.<sup>7</sup> Building on the broader context already supplied by the linguistic historians of Africa, applying similar research methods to the peoples of South Sudan will reveal a depth of commonality they have with each other, as well as with the wider region of North East Africa.

It has been the complaint of many South Sudanese that South Sudan was excluded in the writing of Sudanese history. What was lost by this exclusion? If we re-examine aspects of 'northern' Sudanese history we often find that 'southern' Sudanese were also there. John Garang was fascinated by the many Nilotic-sounding place names he found listed in the chapters on the ancient Nile valley in the second volume of the UNESCO General History of Africa. He was not alone. Shilluk, Dinka and Nuer all have an expression, *kar tuom*, which translates as the juncture where a branch meets a tree-trunk: a more accurate description of the confluence of the Blue and White Niles than 'elephant's trunk'. Archaeological evidence has revealed the pre-historic presence in old Khartoum of peoples of a physical type now closely associated with the Western Nilotic speakers. While I believe it is naive (and probably unprovable) to assert that the early inhabitants of the Khartoum region were a people who called themselves Collo, Jieng or Naath, it is certainly reasonable to conclude that ancestral Western Nilotic speakers lived far beyond the present disputed borders of South Sudan and that not all of them left in the grand migrations now told to explain the peopling of South Sudan. A more rigorous application of historical linguistics to the analysis of place names could reveal more about the ethnic and linguistic bedrock on which Sudan's northern populations rest.

Three of the most dramatic events of the nineteenth century—the death of General Gordon, the Battle of Omdurman, and the Fashoda Incident—also involved southern Sudanese. Gordon is usually depicted as being speared by a fanatic Muslim Arab. Yet the only eye-witness accounts that corroborate each other identify the killer as a tall black rifleman of the *jihādīa*, the slave riflemen of the Mahdist army recruited from the southern Sudan, Nuba Mountains, Dar Funj and Darfur—many of the same regions that later supplied recruits to the SPLA.<sup>8</sup> The Mahdīa might have derived its ideological strength from a jihadist theology, but its military success rested in large part on its recruitment of these riflemen into its army, as one recent history of Western Bahr al-Ghazal suggests.<sup>9</sup> These slave soldiers later played a decisive part in the overthrow of the Mahdist state as the frontline troops in the Egyptian Army on Karari plain in 1898, while the Shilluk soldiers among them were instrumental in convincing the king of the Shilluk not to commit to a French alliance at Fashoda soon afterwards.<sup>10</sup>

A more inclusive history of Sudan would not by itself have prevented the break-up of the country—but, just as I end on this reminder of what Sudan lost by the exclusion of South Sudan from its national narrative, so South Sudan will be all the poorer if its history were to be written in parochial, essentialist terms. South Sudan might no longer be part of Sudan, but both countries still are part of the Nile Basin, the region of North East Africa, and the African continent, and their histories can and should reflect those connections.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas H. Johnson, *Nuer Prophets. A History of Prophecy from the Upper Nile in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); — and David M. Anderson (eds.), *The Ecology of Survival: Case Studies from Northeast African History* (London/Boulder CO: Lester Crook Academic Publishing/Westview Press, 1988); —, 'The structure of a legacy: military slavery in northeast Africa', *Ethnohistory* 36/1 (1989), 72-88; — (ed.), *Governing the Nuer. Documents in Nuer History and Ethnography, 1922-31* (Oxford: JASO, 1993); and — (ed.), *Sudan* (British Documents on the End of Empire, Series B, Volume 5) (London: The Stationery Office, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Douglas H. Johnson, 'The future of the southern Sudan's past', *Africa Today*, 28/2 (1981), 40-41.

<sup>3</sup> John Lonsdale, 'Agency in tight corners: narrative and initiative in African history', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 13/1 (2000), 5-16.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Simonse, *Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centralism and the Scapegoat King in Southeastern Sudan* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992); Sharon Hutchinson, *The Nuer in Crisis: Coping with Money, War, and the State, 1930-1992* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995); Eisei Kurimoto and Simon Simonse (eds.), *Conflict, Age and Power in North East Africa: Age Systems in Transition* (Oxford: James Currey, 1998); Conradin Perner's multi-volume 'Living on Earth in the Sky' work-in-progress on the Anuak; Jok Madut Jok, *War and Slavery in Sudan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); —, *Sudan: Race, Religion, and Violence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007); Wendy James, *'Kwanim Pa: The Making of the Uduk People. An Ethnographic Study of Survival in the Sudan-Ethiopian Borderlands* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); and —, *War and Survival in Sudan's Frontierlands: Voices from the Blue Nile* (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Cherry Leonardi, *Dealing with Government in South Sudan: Making Histories of Chiefship, Community and State* (Woodbridge: James Currey, forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> Øystein Rolandsen, 'Civil War Society? Political Processes, Social Groups and Conflict Intensity in the Southern Sudan, 1955-2005' (PhD thesis, University of Oslo, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa: A History to 1800* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Douglas H. Johnson, 'The Death of Gordon: a Victorian myth', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 10/2 (1982), 285-310.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Thomas, *The Kafia Kingi Enclave: People, Politics and History in the North-South Boundary Zone of Western Sudan* (London: Rift Valley Institute, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Ron Lamothe, *Slaves of Fortune: Sudanese Soldiers in the River War, 1896-1898* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2011).