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978-0-521-11631-2 - A History of South Sudan: From Slavery to Independence

Øystein H. Rolandsen and M. W. Daly

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction**The land and peoples of the upper Nile***The name**

“Sudan” abbreviates *Bilad al-Sudan* or “Land of the Blacks,” the Arabic term that medieval geographers applied to the whole sub-Saharan belt. In the nineteenth century, “the Sudan” (or “Soudan”) became shorthand for the Nilotic and adjacent lands of that broad belt. The term was adopted by successive colonial regimes and the Khartoum-centered nationalist movement that engineered the country’s independence in 1956. During the civil wars that followed, various names were mooted for an imagined Southern Sudanese state; by the turn of the twenty-first century, the cacophonous but historically defensible name of “South Sudan” had won wide acceptance and is used officially in the Republic of South Sudan.

**The geographic setting**

Geography is destiny. Before the advent of modern transport, the lands of South Sudan were among the most remote on the planet. Like Amazonia, the basin of the upper Nile and its main tributary, the Bahr al-Ghazal, would seem from a first glance at a map to provide at least seasonal highways into the interior. But between those regions and the African coasts lay many hundreds of miles of difficult terrain. Until the modern era, moreover, the known resources of South Sudan, like those of the American Great Plains or the Australian outback, were insufficiently portable to excite outsiders. Deserts to the north, mountains to the east,

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and the vast forests of the Congo Basin to the west reciprocally limited the products and effects of long-distance trade. Horses, donkeys, and camels did not flourish there, and food was not easily stored beyond a season. Even today, when air travel and mobile phones mock distance, South Sudan hardly seems “on the way” to anywhere else and remains a geographical dead end.

The climate of South Sudan is tropical. The rainy season is between April/May and November. The dominant geographical feature is the White Nile and its tributaries, the most important of which are the Bahr al-Ghazal (“River of the Gazelle”) and the Sobat, each with many tributaries of its own. Seen as a whole, South Sudan resembles a titanic soup plate, tilted slightly northward; much of the interior is an enormous floodplain. (The famous *sudd* region [Arabic: barrier], in which the White Nile, like the Bahr al-Ghazal, seems to lose itself before reemerging northward, is often mistaken for a swamp, so imperceptible is the flow.) A stark result is a severe limit on habitation. Moreover there, as in other parts of South Sudan, endemic disease, notably sleeping sickness, has rendered human life extraordinarily difficult, killing people and the cattle and other animals upon which people might depend. Grasslands that seem promising of agricultural abundance to outsiders are seasonal, and therefore misleading; year-round, parklike conditions are exceptional. Abundant water has been a necessary but insufficient prerequisite for survival; transhumance as an economic system has been a strategic response to a difficult environment.

Today South Sudan borders Sudan to the north, Ethiopia to the east, Kenya and Uganda to the south, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR) to the west. The Nile watershed creates a natural boundary to the west. With Sudan there are no natural boundaries per se, but the Bahr al-Arab provides a proximate division.

### The peoples of South Sudan

Regardless of disputed statistics, even before its civil wars, South Sudan had one of the lowest population densities in the world, as little as thirteen people per square kilometer. Like many African and Asian states, it encompasses diverse peoples, some of which remain on both sides of international borders. During the modern era, the country has presented an ethnic mosaic, the result of migration, displacement, and assimilation. European ethnographers of the early twentieth century counted more than

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fifty ethnic groups, and as many or more languages or dialects, some widely spoken, others verging on extinction. Disagreement over definitions, categories, and classifications continues, but the first language of most South Sudanese is one of those belonging to the eastern or central Sudanic branch of Nilo-Saharan languages. Arabic and English are the most common second languages, and many South Sudanese speak three or four indigenous tongues. It is worth noting that some peoples mentioned in historical writing might have numbered only a few thousand even before successive disasters, and early ethnographers claimed to have discovered remnants of ethnic or linguistic groups numbering in the single digits.

Still today the people and ethnic groups of South Sudan are often loosely referred to as “tribes.” This is a remnant of the ideology that informed the territorial and hierarchical system of governance instituted during the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899–1956) that employed chiefs to administer tribal courts. Especially since independence, proponents of South Sudanese nationalism have seen this term as derogatory, but it continues to be widely used both in South Sudan and elsewhere.

Broadly related are the populous cattle-keeping Nilotes – the Dinka (or *Jieng*), Nuer (or *Nei Ti Nath*), and Shilluk (or *Chollo*) – who occupy a vast swathe of territory in and adjacent to the floodplains of the central and eastern South Sudan, and their cultural and linguistic cousins, the Bari, Latuka, Luo, Mandari, and Toposa. The remote origins of these peoples are controversial. Recent genetic studies confirm the common ancestry that linguistics suggested and may assume political significance in future nation-building. The ethnic groups and peoples of South Sudan were by and large territorial and remain so today: internal mobility has been exceptional and temporary. This is partly owed to war and instability and to the lack of integrative and diversifying infrastructure and economic institutions. Most groups have had a propensity for assimilation and for maintaining mechanisms generating cultural homogeneity within their defined territories.

In the northeastern corner of the country are various numerically small peoples, the linguistically related Berta, Ingessana, Maban and Uduk, and the Burun (Koma), which centuries ago were probably pushed eastward by in-migrating Nilotic speakers. Along the Ethiopian border, south of the Jikani and Lou Nuer, are numerically smaller groups of pastoralists, the Nilo-Saharan Anuak, and, to their west and south, the Murle. Farther south still, in the southeastern corner of the country, are the Toposa and Didinga, the Acholi (most of whom live across the border in Uganda), and others, and to their west, the Boya and Latuka. In the far south, along the

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Bahr al-Jabal (as the White Nile is called there), are the Mandari, in the Ugandan borderlands are the Bari, Madi, and Kuku, and farther west are the Fajelu, Kakwa, Makaraka, and Moru.

The southwestern corner of South Sudan (and northeastern corner of Congo) is home to the Azande, between whom and the vast Dinka bloc are other numerically small ethnic groups whose ancestors were pushed forward. The Azande, the largest population of non-Sudanic language speakers, were the last invaders and arguably the most successful: the effect, if not always the intention, of their militant rule was deeply assimilative or destructive. (An early ethnographer refers to “zande-ization.”)<sup>1</sup> Among surviving ethnic groups are to the south of Wau, the Boor-Belanda and Bongo; to the east of Wau, the Jur; and to the west, the Ndogo, Sere, Bviri-Belanda, and Shatt. Farther north, along and across the border with Congo and the CAR and extending northward to Darfur are the Feroqe, Ngbandala, Kresh, Yulu, the widely dispersed Banda, and other smaller groups up to and into what was once known as Dar Fartit. To their north and east, along the now international border with Sudan, are the Malwal, Twic, and Rueng Dinka.

By far the largest ethnic group today is the Dinka, with the Nuer a distant second, followed by the Shilluk or Bari. Among other groups, none constitutes more than 3–4 percent of the population; several number less than 1 percent. But even good-faith estimates at any point before and since the 1955–1956 census – itself convincingly subject to expert criticism – are unreliable. Analysis of the highly contested 2008 census indicates that of a total population of 8.25–9.25 million (not including millions of South Sudanese living elsewhere) about 1.5 million were Dinka, and roughly half that number Nuer. Informal estimates, often influenced by political agendas, should be treated with caution.

Statistical evidence for contemporary religious affiliation of South Sudanese is completely unreliable. Both Islam and Christianity are relative newcomers, before the advent of which the peoples of South Sudan adhered to local African religions. As elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, traders brought Islam and Arabic. During the twentieth-century colonial period, European and American missionaries played an important part in education, and the Christian minority subsequently assumed a leading political role. Estimates for the number of Christians today range between 10 percent and 50 percent of the population, and Catholics probably outnumber Protestants; a majority of the latter are Anglicans, but among

<sup>1</sup> S. Santandrea, *A Tribal History of the Western Bahr el Ghazal* (Bologna, 1964), p. 288.

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the Nuer Presbyterianism is the main denomination. In recent decades, Pentecostal churches have made inroads in some parts of the country. It is not unusual to find several religions, including Islam and one or another Christian sect, within a single nuclear family. Syncretism among nominal Muslims and Christians alike is common, and self-identity is the least problematic index of affiliation.

**Problems in the study of South Sudanese history**

An underlying issue of the late-twentieth-century civil wars was the very nature of the peoples of the South. Historical memory of the relations between them and the Northern Sudanese has been dominated by violence. Although in some marchlands and during some periods it is clear that peaceful intercourse – characterized by trade and seasonal migration – occurred, the overarching theme is of northern (Arab, Muslim) exploitation and southern (“African”) victimization. That theme permeated European writing of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and remains uncritically accepted. It is important to recognize, however, that what might be called the monopoly of memory results in part from the nature of South Sudan’s precolonial societies and the difficulties posed in understanding them.

The challenges facing historians of South Sudan are formidable. For the study of millennia of precolonial times, they have no indigenous documentary – that is to say, written – sources. Nineteenth-century European historians of the Sudan, therefore, tended literally to write off the south as having no history or, at any rate, none that was discernible. Illustrated maps had progressed from two-headed pygmies and cannibals to agnostic blank spaces; exploration filled in some of the blanks but tended to reinforce a view of societies that were as changeless as the landscape, and as undeveloped. Disdain degenerated to pity when European observers confronted the slave trade, and the dominant *motif* of the modern period emerged: the African South, immured in the Stone Age, was a defenseless hunting ground for cruelly exploitative foreign traders and slavers.

With the exception of a few reportorial European travel accounts, there was little to combat this view until the twentieth century. Then the “spade work” began – not so much by academic historians as by missionaries, administrators, ethnographers, and anthropologists, and much of it as sidelines or hobbies – which would allow contemporary and later students to begin to explore the history of the region on their own terms. Thus, for example, the nature and complexity of the slave trade could be revealed, resistance and collaboration of local people described, reactions and

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adaptations of societies observed, and Africans drawn in as actors. In light of the work of scientists – medical doctors, epidemiologists, veterinarians, hydrologists, and others – local economies, to cite another example, could be seen as evolutionary and adaptive rather than as dead ends. Working with the results of such disparate efforts, and of their own fieldwork, scholars began to piece together a historical record along “modern” lines – in which the intrusions of successive outsiders loom large, but relations between local peoples and developments within their societies form a continuous theme. That historians must use a variety of untraditional sources has ironically made African history – and not least the history of South Sudan, where much pioneering work was undertaken – a proving ground for methodologies later used elsewhere.

Historical writing about South Sudan nonetheless continues to face great challenges. A preference for written sources is not, or not only, a snobbish limitation of unimaginative Western scholarship; a written source – whether a treaty, a land charter, or a single surviving word of an inscription – has *ipso facto* a temporal definition and provides evidence that, subject to criticism, can be said to reflect its time of creation. The same is true of artifacts. Oral evidence, on the other hand, until it assumes a written form, suffers from the human propensity to intervene. The Islamic science of *hadith* recognized the primacy of *isnad* – the “supports” or “chain of authorities” – on which the reliability of a tradition must depend; modern criminology recognizes the concept of a “chain of custody,” the breaking of which renders evidence inadmissible; and the scientific method demands replication of results. Criticism of oral sources must therefore be at least as rigorous as that of written sources. When account is taken, too, of the pitfalls of translation and interpretation, historians can only be glad to have multiple – and corroborative – sources for the conclusions they reach.

In any case, a state-centered archival approach is particularly inadequate for the history of South Sudan. Even today the level of the state’s penetration of society remains limited. The state – whether colonial or since Sudan’s independence – has been seen (when it impinged upon the consciousness at all) as an intrusive and usually dangerous tool of foreign elites. But events and decisions in London, Cairo, and Khartoum – or even in Juba or Malakal – often had no discernible impact on the lives of most South Sudanese.

It follows from this analysis that for the nineteenth century and earlier, a level of generalization far wider than that to which students of the same eras of European or Islamic history are accustomed is all that can be hoped for. Historical writing must, with a few exceptional cases, take a “bottom-up”

approach. Periodization must reflect overarching themes rather than reigns (or, for this and other reasons, even dynasties), warfare rather than battles, and the long term rather than the episodic. In this, the history of South Sudan is similar to that of other African states, and many controversies remain methodological.

The unusually light footprint of governance in South Sudan influences what kind of history it is possible to write about. The peripheries of the periphery suffer most from this: places where the hand of “the government” has hardly reached. Commercial or administrative centers and their populations receive undue attention, whereas people in the countryside (the majority) tend to be known only through oral accounts. This means that we can write meaningful histories of Juba, Wau, and Malakal, but not really (or yet) of South Sudan’s historic provinces, the upper Nile, Bahr al-Ghazal, and Mongalla or Equatoria.

Certain themes nevertheless prove remarkably consistent. Successive regimes based their legitimacy, in theory, on the illegitimacy of predecessors. The Turkiyya was overthrown by the *jihad* of the Mahdi; the Mahdist State succumbed to Anglo-Egyptian arms in part ostensibly in the service of the rights of man; this foreign “Condominium” gave way to an Arab-Muslim nationalist movement formally grounded in a modern democratic ideology; and self-determination ultimately legitimized secessionism and South Sudan’s independence in 2011.

Continuities, which will be fleshed out in coming chapters, include violence; the geopolitical significance of South Sudan; the nature and scope of relations between the state and the individual; the strategies (and tactics) used by successive regimes in subduing resistance to foreigners; the establishment and growth of garrison towns and their relations with the countryside; and regional disparities and their practical and political consequences, including the problem of tribal-versus-administrative boundaries. An overarching theme of great importance is the formation of “national” identity, which connects the era of the slave trade even with the politics of the late-colonial and postindependence periods, when a “Southern” nationalist identity emerged. The issue of resource exploitation, which in much of the outside world today means “oil,” has for even longer meant “water” and, put crudely, manpower: in dealing with this issue across conventional periods, we may discern not merely a convenient rhetorical peg but also important continuity in the relations between the center (whether the colonial metropolis, or Khartoum, or even Juba) and the periphery. All of these historical “problems” are susceptible to – indeed perhaps are only comprehensible on the national level – a high level of generalization.



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**Societies without states**

An illustration of the problem of sources and the need for generalization is the process by which the upper Nile Basin was populated. For this, the main sources are linguistic, and they vary.

The Nilotic Shilluk, Nuer, and Dinka are to this day primarily cattle-keepers, and they developed distinctive institutions based upon – or correlated to the centrality of – a cattle economy. It is generally accepted that they migrated into South Sudan from the west, absorbing or pushing before them indigenous peoples, of whom little is known. The dating of these migrations, which likely (in the case of the Nilotes) occurred over centuries, is problematic. Alternate theories of *original* homelands, and of the history of migrations and eventual settlement, abound. Some theories are sophisticatedly rooted in plausible deduction from agricultural techniques and the resistance to disease of specific breeds of cattle, others derive from cultural traits, homonyms, and ethnic pride.

The geography of South Sudan has determined its economy. Hunting, gathering, subsistence agriculture, or, most commonly, a combination of strategies, characterized precolonial economies; agriculture and animal husbandry remain by far the main occupations of South Sudanese. The vagaries of flood and rain, and the partly resulting irregular alternation of glut and want, were important factors in limiting population, even in the twentieth century.

The circumstances in which migrations have taken place provide clues to the nature of the societies that undertook (or withstood) them, and thus to broad themes in their history. Agricultural and pastoral techniques in this context are, therefore, of more than passing interest, as indeed is evidence from fields as disparate as immunology and climatology. Thus armed, historians have discerned beneath the ethnic and linguistic mosaic of present-day South Sudan the earlier brushstrokes of war and peace, social and economic development, and cultural evolution. Rather than a snapshot, then, South Sudan on the eve of the nineteenth century was already a palimpsest, whose secrets are still coming to light and might help to define its identity.

The South before the nineteenth century presented a wide spectrum of political organization, from “acephalous” hunter-gatherer societies to the “divine kingship” of the Shilluk. Conquest and assimilation probably modified or extinguished institutions even as they did discrete ethnic and linguistic groups. The absence (or weakness) of political authority among



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even the numerically large Dinka and Nuer confounded Europeans, who ascribed variously to ritual experts or others powers that could not be arrogated; the “failure” of Nilotic societies to develop political hierarchies was thus mirrored by outsiders’ failure of observation. But the superficiality (and unarguable transitory nature) of successive colonial regimes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the violence they engendered, did little to forge, let alone to recommend, what we would call “the state” as other than a predator. And as late as the eve of Sudan’s independence in 1956, only at most an embryonic and elite “Southern” political identity can be discerned.

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## CHAPTER 2

*Ivory and slaves*  
*The nineteenth century*

The history of nineteenth-century South Sudan remains one of foreign encounters with indigenous peoples. This is the period of the great explorers, when the African continent was first traversed and then conquered. Starting decades earlier than the European powers' colonial race, Egypt's imperial ambitions in South Sudan were, in this initial phase, primarily focused on the slave trade and other kinds of commerce. Later, the feverish hunt for the source of the White Nile even spurred the rulers of Egypt, and eventually Egypt's designs were geared toward territorial dominance and global prestige. When Egypt was evicted by the Mahdi in the early 1880s, the ramshackle government systems around its *zaribas* (Arabic: "enclosures"), slave-and-ivory trading posts, also collapsed. Mahdist rule in the South was weak, and when the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium was established in 1899, it faced the task of reconquering South Sudan.

**Early contact**

Although the slave trade of the nineteenth century is often seen as the beginning of the South's vexed contacts with the "outside world," the origins of that trade, and an untold history of peaceful trade and migration, are much older. Trade in African slaves dates from ancient times. That the Sharia forbids enslavement of Muslims was subsequently an important factor in the African trade (as it was elsewhere on the frontiers of Islam). Demand locally, in northern Sudan, and in the Ottoman Empire, stimulated slave-raiding southward, from Kordofan and Darfur and the Blue Nile. Egyptian expansion up the White Nile was unattractive owing to its remoteness, the climate, the natural barrier of the *sudd*, and hostile relations with people living along the river.

The Sudan's other historic exports included gold, basketry and mats, ostrich feathers, gum, animals, and animal products, of which by far the most important was ivory. Estimates vary, but in the late eighteenth