

Understanding Sudan: An Introduction

Michael Kevane
Santa Clara University
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People often think that understanding a foreign country requires a detailed knowledge of actors and event. That is not true. Humans everywhere understand the past and present through narratives. Understanding a foreign country requires knowing which narratives apply to a country, and which do not.

Sudan has three narratives. One is a story of how the British colonial rulers cultivated an elite group of urban, educated civil servants, who inherited in 1956 the arrogance of power that the British displayed every day during colonial rule. This elite wanted to make a Sudan in its own image-- urban, Muslim, and Arabic-speaking. Over the almost 50 years since independence they have largely succeeded, despite internecine feuds.

A second narrative is the story of the slow and steady rise of Islamism. This word, "Islamism," is used by many academics to label a variety of social movements in the Muslim world. These movements typically use the vocabulary of Islam to challenge current regimes. They de-legitimize regimes by contrasting their own version of Islam with that of the regime. They appeal to moral values, often regarding the behavior of women and dealings with non-Muslims, and historical grievances, often embracing a view of Western oppression of the Islamic world. The movements encourage a collective remembrance of a golden age of Islam that may be regained through inner spiritual struggle and outward political mobilization. In Sudan, the Islamist movement has been led by Hasan al-Turabi, and he shared power with Islamist military leaders following a coup d'état of 1989, until a falling out in 2000. In this narrative, the rise to power of the Islamists changed the then-hopeful course of Sudanese history. The Islamists summarily executed opponents and used secret torture chambers in "ghost houses" to ensure political survival. Before this, the story goes, political conflict in Sudan was a polite game played among members of the same family (see narrative number one), always with the probability of becoming a 'civilized' nation where violence was not part of the political process. After this, the political game became more typical of Africa and the Middle East: losers died, so maintaining power or acquiescing to power was the only way to stay alive. That fiction of a special Sudanese politeness was shattered, and warlordism was no longer inconceivable. In fact, by 2004 it was easy to identify a number of warlords, in the North and South of the country.

Southern Sudan is completely absent from the first two narratives, which treat the South as an afterthought, an inconvenient problem that had to be dealt with by both regimes. Southerners were not Sudanese. They were not part of the original elite, the British-appointed inheritors of power, nor were they Islamists, the Allah-anointed rightful rulers.

The third narrative takes the perspective of the South. Colonial and pre-colonial rule in the South was not the peaceful, benevolent period imagined by international aid workers and donors. Southerners were hunted, killed and enslaved by successions of northern potentates, and then were hunted and killed by British patrols as the region was “pacified”. The British then calmly returned Southerners to their place: subservient to the Arabs of northern Sudan. Before and after independence, every promise made was broken, every resource that had value was taken. The water of southern swamps was to be channeled away by the monstrous Jonglei canal, and the oil of southern savannahs was to be siphoned away by a pipeline to Port Sudan. There was no Sudanese state actor who thought, “Leave the South alone in a social environment of peace and justice, and let Southerners decide their own economic and political future, at a pace of their own choosing.” Force has been a constant in the south, and force has generated resistance. From the first barracks mutiny of 1955, through the Nuer-Dinka slaughters of 1998, to the warlord militias of the present, the people of Southern Sudan have been struggling to attain political freedom.

One of the interesting things about these three narratives is that foreigners and foreign powers have little role. It is a curious feature of modern Sudanese history that the dynamics are all narrated as internal. Of course, there have been foreign actors. One thinks of Rolf Steiner, a German mercenary who fought for the South. He was captured and condemned in a very public trial in Khartoum in 1971. Another notable foreigner involved in Sudan was Osama bin Laden. He operated his network from a base in Khartoum for many years during the 1990s. Foreign powers have also mattered. Libya helped organize an ill-fated coup attempt in 1971. The United States was best pals with the Sudanese military dictator Gaafar Nimeiri, who ruled from 1969 to 1985. That chumminess led to a major miscalculation on Nimeiri’s part. His ouster by his second-in-command, following a wave of massive popular demonstrations, was prompted in part by Nimeiri’s agreeing to help the United States (and line his pocket, quite probably) by allowing the transport of Falasha Jews out of Ethiopia to Israel, via Sudan. Each of these events merits a documentary film of its own, but they do not negate the absence of foreign involvement in the major dynamics of Sudanese history.

Another notable absence in the narratives is the Marxist dynamic of the spread of industrial capitalism and exploitation of a property-less proletariat. Industrial enterprises in Sudan have always been small. Sudan has never come close to the Satanic Mills of the European industrial revolution, where oppression and class consciousness were forged in the same crucible. A ‘labor aristocracy’ of railroad workers did at one time wield considerable influence, but their power and cohesion was crushed by the military. Moreover, the bulk of the population continues to farm as their forefathers did. While vast areas of land were delimited for “mechanized” farming, this usually involved no more than a tractor to initially till the soil. The remainder of operations still had to be carried out by hand. A memorable shot from an earlier documentary entitled Kafi’s Story, about a young man from the Nuba Mountains seeking money to buy a dress for his bride, has Kafi walk away from his employer, down a lonely evening road as fields of sorghum sway in the wind, unharvested. Kafi in essence is a peasant, able to return to his remote village. Sometimes the wars of Sudan are interpreted as inevitable conflicts over scarce resources, in the Marxist vein. But there is little evidence to support this view.

The violence that shattered the peace of the Nuba Mountains, of Southern Sudan, and of Darfur, was incited and directed by urban elites.

For many years, Sudanese secondary school students read Cry the Beloved Country, Alan Paton's beautiful novel of redemption set in his native South Africa. The students imagined themselves to be closer to South Africa, brutalized by apartheid, than to their own country. When academics speak of nationalism and nation-building, they point to these shared personal narratives, often fictionalized in novels, that make a people an "imagined community." These tales of exodus, triumph, virtue and vice worm their way into the minds of children. An inability to collectively share the tales fuels anxiety and even rage. Every meeting of strangers is marked by the absence of common ground, and trust and understanding has to be forged anew. Three narratives, I have suggested, are competing for the imaginations of the Sudanese. Whether northerners will ever embrace a story that puts southerners at the center of the stage remains to be seen; the history of the United States, though, offers food for thought: gradual acceptance of the centrality of slavery and the uniqueness of the African-American experience in forging the country, yet little progress in bringing the Native American experience into the common heritage.

For further reading, some of the following are recommended.

1. **Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins**, [Requiem for the Sudan : war, drought, and disaster relief on the Nile](#) (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995) xiv, 385
2. **Alexander De Waal**, [Famine that kills : Darfur, Sudan, 1984-1985, Oxford studies in African affairs](#) (Oxford [England] New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1989) x, 258
3. **Francis Mading Deng**, [War of visions : conflict of identities in the Sudan](#) (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995) ix, 577
4. **Sondra Hale**, [Gender politics in Sudan : Islamism, socialism, and the state](#) (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996) xv, 294.
5. **Abd All ah Al i Ibrahim**, [Assaulting with words : popular discourse and the bridle of shariah, Series in Islam and society in Africa](#) (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1994) xiii, 208.
6. **Douglas Hamilton Johnson**, [The root causes of Sudan's civil wars, African issues](#) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) xx, 234.
7. **Jok Madut Jok**, [War and slavery in Sudan, The ethnography of political violence](#) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) 211.

8. **David Keen**, [The benefits of famine : a political economy of famine and relief in southwestern Sudan](#), 1983-1989 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994) xvi, 289.
9. **C. A. E. Lea, M. W. Daly**, [On trek in Kordofan : the diaries of a British district officer in the Sudan, 1931-1933](#), Oriental and African archives ; 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1994) ix, 304 , [12] of plates.
10. **Ann Mosely Lesch**, [The Sudan : contested national identities, Indiana series in Middle East studies](#) (Bloomington Oxford, UK: Indiana University Press ; J. Currey, 1998) xii, 299.
11. **Richard Lobban, Robert S. Kramer, and Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban**, [Historical dictionary of the Sudan, African historical dictionaries](#) ; no. 85, 3rd ed. (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2002) cviii, 396.
12. **Donald Petterson**, [Inside Sudan : Political Islam, conflict, and catastrophe](#) (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999) xiii, 209.
13. **Eve Troutt Powell**, [A different shade of colonialism Egypt, Great Britain, and the mastery of the Sudan, Colonialisms](#) ; 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) xi, 260.
14. **Jemera Rone and Human Rights Watch**, [Sudan, oil, and human rights](#) (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2003) 754.
15. **Heather J. Sharkey**, [Living with colonialism : nationalism and culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Colonialisms](#) ; 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) xiii, 232.
16. **Ahmad Alawad Sikainga**, Slaves into workers : emancipation and labor in Colonial Sudan, Modern Middle East series ; no. 18, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996) xvii, 276.
17. **A. M. Simone**, [In whose image? : political Islam and urban practices in Sudan](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) ix, 273.
18. **Jay Spaulding and Stephanie Beswick**, [White Nile, black blood : war, leadership, and ethnicity from Khartoum to Kampala](#) (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2000) xxviii, 336.
19. **Endre Stiansen and Michael Kevane**, [Kordofan invaded : peripheral incorporation and social transformation in Islamic Africa, Social, economic, and](#)

[political studies of the Middle East and Asia](#), v. 63 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 1998)
x, 303.

20. **Gabriel Warburg**, [Islam, sectarianism and politics in Sudan since the Mahdiya](#)
(London: C. Hurst, 2003) xvii, 252.