

INTRODUCTION: MAKING SENSE OF SOUTH SUDAN

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JOURNALISM AND ADVOCACY ON SOUTH SUDAN¹ are often notoriously ill-informed and simplistic. This is doubly unfortunate. Not only have policy errors in western capitals contributed to the country's predicament and the suffering of its people, but better-informed, more empirically rich and analytically rigorous research is available, which is highly relevant to understanding South Sudan's crisis. Those more academic writings are cautionary: they advise against simplistic formulae for resolving South Sudan's complicated problems.

Rita Abrahamsen's 'Letter to George Clooney'² chides the actor and his organizations, the Enough Project and its subsidiary The Sentry, for their partisan, belated and simplified coverage of South Sudan. The occasion of her critique was a much-hyped report by The Sentry, 'War Crimes Shouldn't Pay',³ which contained photographs of the lavish houses of the political and military leaders of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and Army (SPLA), pictures from their children's Facebook pages of them dressed in loud suits in the first class cabins of aircraft, and information about their business investments. The Sentry writes, 'The key catalyst of South Sudan's civil war has been competition for the grand prize—control over state assets and the country's abundant natural resources—between rival kleptocratic networks led by President Kiir and Vice President Machar.' Abrahamsen points out that *African Affairs* published scholarly papers on corruption, patronage and economic mismanagement (which The Sentry doesn't cite) over many years.

She could have added that these were also much more detailed and analytical and provided a better guide to policymaking than Clooney's far-fetched notion that putting financial sanctions on South Sudanese leaders could end the war. In a reversal of the former *Washington Post* publisher Philip Graham's adage that journalism is 'the first draft of

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¹ In this paper I use 'southern Sudan' to refer to the autonomous region and South Sudan to the independent Republic after 9 July 2011.

² Rita Abrahamsen, 'Letter to George Clooney', Centre for International Policy Studies blog, 15 September 2016 <<http://www.cips-cepi.ca/2016/09/15/letter-to-george-clooney/>> (20 September 2016).

³ The Sentry, 'War Crimes Shouldn't Pay: Stopping the looting and destruction in South Sudan,' 16 September 2016 <<https://thesentry.org/reports/warcrimeshouldntpay/>> (20 September 2016).

history': it is the scholars of South Sudan who have led the way. This introductory essay to the online selection of *African Affairs* articles documents and analyses this phenomenon.

A close association between social anthropology and policy is not new in South Sudan: successively in the colonial period, the post-colonial era of a developmental state, and the long war and associated humanitarian enterprises, Sudanese and foreign scholars have both informed and critiqued official policies. *African Affairs* has been one of their venues for publication. There is a long list of notable papers. One is Rafael Badal's account of the rise and fall of separatism in southern Sudan from the 1950s to the 1970s, written in the hopeful aftermath of the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement that ended Sudan's first civil war.⁴ Another is Ahmed Karadawi's account of the 'Operation Moses' whereby Israel extracted Ethiopian Jews from refugee camps in eastern Sudan—still the only scholarly paper on this extraordinary episode.⁵ Abdel Wahab El-Affendi's pioneering exploration of how Sudanese Islamists analyzed southern Sudan,⁶ should be read alongside Wendy James's critique of Islamist writings on southern Sudan⁷ and Heather Sharkey's analysis of the politics of race in the united Sudan.⁸ Sharkey illuminates how 'Sudanese' identity paradoxically emerged from the encounter between north and south and observes how the very notion of being 'Sudanese' was a surprising turn, because [i]n the view of high-status Muslims who regarded themselves as Arabs, being Sudanese meant being black, as the Arabic root of the term denoted, and being black, in turn, meant having low social status.⁹

Social scientists in Sudan and South Sudan have also turned their critical attention to colonial administrators,¹⁰ development and humanitarian practitioners,¹¹ lobby groups,¹² and their own discipline.¹³

⁴ R. K. Badal, 'The rise and fall of separatism in Southern Sudan,' *African Affairs* 75, 301 (1976), pp. 463-474

⁵ Ahmed Karadawi, 'The smuggling of the Ethiopian Falasha to Israel through Sudan,' *African Affairs* 90, 358 (1991), pp. 23-49

⁶ Abdel Wahab El-Affendi, 'Discovering the South': Sudanese dilemmas for Islam in Africa, *African Affairs* 89, 356 (1990), pp. 371-389.

⁷ Wendy James, 'The Sudan distorted', *African Affairs* 90, 359 (1991), pp. 299-304.

⁸ Heather J. Sharkey, 'Arab identity and ideology in Sudan: The politics of language, ethnicity, and race,' *African Affairs* 107, 426 (2008), pp. 21-43.

⁹ Ibid. p. 29.

¹⁰ Conrad Reining, *The Zande scheme: An anthropological case study of economic development in Africa* (Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 1966); Talal Asad, *Anthropology and the colonial encounter* (NY, Humanity Books, 1995).

¹¹ Alex de Waal, 'Anthropology and the aid encounter,' in Jeremy Macclancy (ed.) *Exotic no more: Anthropology on the front lines* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 251-269.

¹² David Lanz, 'Commentary: Save Darfur: A movement and its discontents,' *African Affairs* 108, 433 (2009), pp. 669-677; Alex de Waal, 'Getting away with mass murder: The SPLA and its American

Southern Sudanese voted in a referendum with the options of unity or separation on 9 January 2011. The official vote was a formidable 98.83 percent in favour of independence. There was an informal but fierce competition among localities for which would register the highest percentage of votes for secession, and indeed there are credible reports of some preliminary tallies registering well over 100 percent. Martina Santschi's analysis of the Sudanese national census of 2008 helps us explain how and why this could occur.¹⁴ The census data were to be the basis for allocating resources to local government units, and indeed also for deciding which places would qualify for different levels of administrative unit, and so the exercise in counting people became a political competition among local leaders for the numbers of people. Similarly, voting in dominant party elections (as in 2010) or in the independence referendum became exercises in competitive loyalty pledging, anticipating that rewards would follow.

This makes particular sense in the context of a highly centralized oil-based patronage system. South Sudan became independent as an oil state, with 97 percent of government revenue and 60 percent of GDP from this one source. The country's subsequent political and economic trajectory is partly explicable by this hyper-dependency. On the eve of the referendum, Luke Patey argued that while the common interests of the northern and southern Sudanese elites in keeping the oil flowing was likely to lead to a measure of stability between Sudan and South Sudan (an assumption that proved incorrect), the 'resource curse' syndrome familiar from oil producing states, including high levels of corruption, poor planning, and neglect of long-term planning, was likely to lead to poor internal governance in both countries and strong political grievances from various constituencies against their respective governments.¹⁵ Oil money had made peace in Sudan possible, but southern Sudan, Patey argued, simply did not possess the kinds of robust institutions at all levels for the resource curse to be averted.

South Sudan became independent on 9 July 2011. The new Republic's first years were eventful, including the spectacular total shut-down in oil production in January 2012 following a dispute over transit fees and related financial arrangements with northern Sudan. It was an act of reckless self-harm, setting in motion an economic 'doomsday

lobbies,' in Alex de Waal (ed.) *Advocacy in Conflict: Critical perspectives on transnational activism* (London, Zed, 2015), pp. 164-186.

¹³ Munzoul Assal, Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, Mohamed. A. M. Salih and Idris S. El-Hassan, *Anthropology in the Sudan: A reflection by Sudanese anthropologists* (Utrecht, International Books, 2003); Munzoul Assal and Musa Abdel-Jalil, M. Abdul-Jalil (eds) *Past, present and future: Fifty years of anthropology in Sudan* (Bergen, Chr. Michelsens Institute, 2015).

¹⁴ Martina Santschi, 'Briefing: Counting "New Sudan",' *African Affairs* 107, 429 (2008), pp. 631-640.

¹⁵ Luke A. Patey, 'Crude Days Ahead: Oil and the resource curse in Sudan,' *African Affairs* 109, 437 (2010), pp. 617-636.

machine' that would bring either Sudan or South Sudan to their knees—or both.¹⁶ This was followed by a border war with Sudan three months later, which led to an unprecedented unity of action by the African Union and the United Nations Security Council, and—for the first time—the United States treating South Sudan on a par with Sudan, rather than selectively condemning the latter. Economic crisis, revelations about far-reaching corruption, and a crackdown by President Salva Kiir Mayardit on rivals in government, followed. The timing of the eruption of violence may have been unpredictable but the nature of the crisis that unfolded was eminently foreseeable. Having debunked simplistic 'tribal' theories of the conflict, Douglas Johnson continued:

What, then, is really happening in South Sudan? In brief, two parallel conflicts that have been developing since 2005 have now converged, one in the governing party, the SPLM, and one in the army, the SPLA. Both have their origins in unresolved tensions following the split in the SPLA in the 1990s, and the incomplete reintegration of anti-SPLA forces into the SPLA after 2005.¹⁷

Johnson's principal focus is on the decade-long internecine strife that followed the failed coup attempt by Commander Riek Machar and several others in 1991. Indeed this is essential for understanding the dimensions of the current crisis. But there were also a number of other elements in the SPLM/A governance during the war and its aftermath that warrant attention.

In conventional international relations parlance, the SPLM/A was a 'non-state actor' or a rebel movement fighting against the Government of Sudan (GoS). In other writings, the SPLM/A is seen as a rebellion by youth against a gerontocratic political order. Cherry Leonardi unpicks these claims with her careful examination of vernacular understandings of the spheres of 'government' (*hakuma*) and 'home'.¹⁸ While 'home' consists of the strong moral claims of community and family, '*hakuma*', 'encompasses armies and the military cultures originally introduced by the Turco-Egyptian army in the 19th century, and also the literate, bureaucratic cultures of schools and government offices.'¹⁹ She continues, 'Even though they fought against the Government of Sudan, the SPLA belong to this sphere.' Leonardi finds that the moral values of the 'home' sphere remain strong and continue to exert claims on young people: rather than challenging their elders, young recruits were often following the families' dictates. She traces the complex motives whereby young

¹⁶ Alex de Waal, 'South Sudan's doomsday machine,' *New York Times*, 24 January 2012.

¹⁷ Douglas H. Johnson, 'Briefing: The crisis in South Sudan,' *African Affairs* 113, 451 (2014), pp. 300–309, p. 302.

¹⁸ Cherry Leonardi, "'Liberation" or capture: Youth in between "*hakuma*", and "home" during civil war and its aftermath in Southern Sudan,' *African Affairs* 106, 424 (2007), pp. 391–412.

¹⁹ *Ibid* p. 394.

people came to associate with the SPLA:

Some girls married soldiers to secure protection from rape by other soldiers. Youth were thus entering the military sphere to remedy their sense of disempowerment, not by their parents or older generations, but by GoS repression and increasingly by the behaviour of SPLA soldiers. In fact, family relations and considerations frequently determined the patterns of recruitment. Young men nearly always explain whether they enlisted or not on the basis of family.²⁰

Leonardi explains how southern Sudanese youth were caught in the tension between inhabiting both the *hakuma* and home spheres, and sought to retain a measure of independence from both—but especially from the violent depredations of the *hakuma* in both its GoS and SPLA manifestations. The SPLA tried to inculcate exclusive loyalty among its recruits through coercion and patronage—including teaching notorious slogans such as ‘even my father, I will give him a bullet’. But the significance of the SPLA’s brutal induction lies in its intent more than its (less than successful) outcome, and as the war continued the SPLA was compelled to turn to spiritual leaders and other traditional authorities to legitimize itself. Turning to the post-peace era, Leonardi describes the deepening resentment of young southern Sudanese against the SPLM/A elite who were monopolizing the material benefits of government.

Luka Biong Deng explores the divergent impacts of the war on the social capital of southern Sudanese communities.²¹ He finds that where the conflict was endogenous (for example in Gogrial, where the GoS counterinsurgency set Dinka groups against one another), social capital is reduced, but where the violence was exogenous (specifically in Abyei, where the GoS counterinsurgency set Arab militia on Dinka communities) social capital was actually strengthened. Violence creates new forms of social relations rather than uniformly destroying social capital. His analysis helps to explain why the frontline community of Abyei has been more cohesive and more consistently supportive of the Government of South Sudan, than others that were subjected to military fragmentation during the long liberation war.

Clemence Pinaud introduces the concept of a ‘military aristocracy’, detailing how SPLA commanders during both war and ‘peace’ used their position to amass material wealth (during the war, mainly cattle, afterwards, much bigger investments in real estate and businesses) and human capital (marrying many wives, in some cases scores, so that by the time of independence, a well-connected general could constitute a battalion from his own

²⁰ Ibid p. 401.

²¹ Luka Biong Deng, ‘Social capital and civil war: The Dinka communities in Sudan’s civil war,’ *African Affairs* 109, 435 (2010), pp. 231–250.

sons and nephews).²² She shows how the military elite has consolidated its position as a dominant class through providing gifts, notably the cattle required for their clients to marry. In one of the most insightful commentaries on the fighting that erupted in July 2016, Pinaud explores how the SPLA chief of staff, Paul Mayom, has built a powerful network of clients, and even arguably can count on President Kiir among them.²³

In my article, I synthesize these approaches in defining South Sudanese governance as a 'kleptocracy'.²⁴ By this I mean, not just 'rule of thieves' in the common parlance, but a system in which public office and political projects are subject to the laws of supply and demand.²⁵ Under this analysis, the political crisis erupted not because the South Sudanese elite was corrupt, but that its corrupt neo-patrimonial 'political market'²⁶ was so grossly mismanaged that it collapsed. My argument was that in southern Sudan from 2005 to 2011, President Kiir's corrupt neo-patrimonial 'big tent' strategy provided the practical political mechanism for solidarity among members of the country's political and military elite under the control of the SPLM/A. Widespread corruption was economically inefficient, and meant that the comparatively vast public spending available did not translate into commensurate progress on governance and development indicators. But it served the political purposes of enabling the SPLM to consolidate domestic control and minimize internal strife, while making it extremely expensive and difficult for Khartoum to sabotage Kiir's political goal of independence. However, once an independent state had been achieved, and once the money ran short, Kiir did not possess the political business skills needed to keep a centralized neo-patrimonial system of government running. It was the fact that the kleptocracy became insolvent that caused the civil war, not the kleptocracy itself.

²² Clemence Pinaud, 'South Sudan: Civil war, predation and the making of a military aristocracy', *African Affairs* 113, 451 (2014), pp. 192–211.

²³ Clemence Pinaud, 'Who's behind South Sudan's return to fighting?' *African Arguments*, 11 July 2016 <<http://africanarguments.org/2016/07/11/whos-behind-south-sudans-return-to-fighting/>> (21 September 2016). See also Naomi Pendle, "'They are now community police": Negotiating the boundaries and nature of the government in South Sudan through the identity of militarized cattle keepers,' *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 22, 3 (2015), pp. 410-434.

²⁴ Alex de Waal, 'When kleptocracy becomes insolvent: The brute causes of the civil war in South Sudan,' *African Affairs* 113, 452 (2014), pp. 347–369.

²⁵ This contrasts with the rudimentary account in The Sentry's 'War Crimes Shouldn't Pay' report, which describes the primitive accumulation and ostentatious displays of wealth of the South Sudanese political elite, noting that these same men are responsible for grievous violations of human rights, but doesn't draw any other connection between the two. The two analyses have very different implications for policy.

²⁶ Alex de Waal, *The real politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, war and the business of power* (Cambridge, Polity, 2015).

These papers all stand as a profound and subtle critique of simplistic models of state-building or conflict resolution. They echo the writings of other leading academic voices on South Sudan who have yet to publish in *African Affairs*, such as Jok Madut Jok,²⁷ Sharon Hutchinson²⁸ and Edward Thomas.²⁹

Within days of the outbreak of civil war in December 2013, the foreign ministers of the regional governments, organized under the auspices of the InterGovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) arrived in the capital city, Juba, to try to mediate a political settlement. This was the latest act in a twenty-year history of IGAD involvement in peace in Sudan and South Sudan, that over those decades has illustrated both the strengths and weaknesses of regional leadership for peace. The Declaration of Principles, adopted in 1994 by the four countries on the Sudan Peace Committee (Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda) that contained the provision for self-determination for the people of southern Sudan, is the foundational text for the Sudanese Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005. Given that one of the core principles of the Organization of African Unity is respect for the boundaries inherited from colonialism, and African states have been resolute in their collective opposition to secessionism on the continent, the IGAD Declaration of Principles is a remarkable and historic document. Without it—and without its African authorship—South Sudan would not have achieved independence.

In his article on the IGAD peace process, Abdel Wahab El-Affendi describes the twists and turns, the activism and paralysis, as the IGAD initiative became engulfed in the militarized politics of the region, becoming hostage to the same regional interdependence that was the rationale for its launch.³⁰ El-Affendi wrote his paper just before the Al-Qaida terrorist attacks that dramatically changed the international landscape. Coming on the heels of the Cheney Report on the United States' need to diversify its sources of oil, with the declaration of the 'global war on terror' the United States also gained strong material interests in what happened in Sudan. The peace process morphed considerably over the following three years. American oil companies decided that doing business in Sudan posed too great a reputational risk to follow through on their earlier interest, and the US was reluctantly obliged to walk back on its commitment to a united Sudan.

²⁷ Jok Madut Jok, *Sudan: Race, religion and violence* (London, OneWorld, 2007); Jok Madut Jok, *Breaking Sudan: The search for peace* (London, OneWorld, 201).

²⁸ Sharon Hutchinson, *Nuer dilemmas: Coping with war, money and the state* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996).

²⁹ Edward Thomas, *South Sudan: A slow liberation* (London, Zed Books, 2015).

³⁰ Abdel Wahab El-Affendi, 'The impasse in the IGAD peace process for Sudan: The limits of regional peacemaking', *African Affairs* 100, (2001), pp. 581-599.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement's provisions for Abyei—an area whose ethnic Dinka residents strongly identified with southern Sudan—was a test case for the durability of the Agreement. The text of the Abyei Agreement was written by American mediators and accepted by the two sides. Exhausted by fruitless negotiation, the ambiguities in the text and the determination by the Sudanese government to find every means to avoid implementing its recommendations turned Abyei into a crucible for conflict. This is documented by Douglas Johnson.³¹ Meanwhile, the international priority of achieving peace between the Government of Sudan and the SPLM/A overrode concerns such as democratization in both northern and southern Sudan, and resolving the newly-erupted conflict in Darfur.³² During the early period—in which the Darfur conflict might have been less difficult to resolve—the international community treated it as a strictly secondary concern. After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, it gained an extraordinary global profile, with policymakers belatedly trying to discover who indeed were these troublesome Darfurians.³³ Arguably, the neglected marginalia of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement—Abyei, Darfur and also the 'two areas' of Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile—were what doomed the agreement.

Southern Sudan's peace was politically crafted in a process of negotiation that remains still poorly documented. We lack a thorough academic analysis of the peace negotiations, in part because the IGAD mediation has not made their documents available for scrutiny by scholars.³⁴ The role of the 'frontline states' in peacemaking reflects their deep engagement in fighting the Sudanese war, supporting the SPLA as proxy guerrilla forces in retaliation for Sudanese destabilization of their own countries (most notoriously the Lord's Resistance Army) and on occasions intervening directly with their own troops.³⁵

³¹ Douglas H. Johnson, 'Why Abyei matters: The breaking point of Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement?' *African Affairs* 107, 426 (2008), pp. 1-19.

³² Sharath Srinivasan, 'Negotiating violence: Sudan's peacemakers and the war in Darfur,' *African Affairs* 113, 450 (2013), pp. 24-44; Alex de Waal, 'Briefing: Darfur, Sudan: Prospects for peace,' *African Affairs* 104, 414 (2005), pp. 127-135.

³³ Alex de Waal, 'Who are the Darfurians? Arab and African identities, violence and external engagement,' *African Affairs* 104 (2005), pp. 181-205; David Lanz, 'Commentary: Save Darfur: A movement and its discontents,' *African Affairs* 108, 433 (2009), pp. 669-677.

³⁴ The Sudan Peace Archive at the World Peace Foundation is making such documentation available to scholars for the Darfur peace talks and the negotiations over the separation of South Sudan conducted by the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel. See <<http://fletcher.tufts.edu/World-Peace-Foundation/Program/Research/Past-Projects/Sudan-Peace-Archive>>.

³⁵ Gérard Prunier, 'Rebel movements and proxy warfare: Uganda, Sudan and the Congo (1986-99),' *African Affairs* 103, 412 (2004), pp. 359-383; Alex de Waal, 'The politics of destabilization in the Horn,' in Alex de Waal (ed.) *Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa* (London, Hurst, 2004), pp. 182-230.

A scholarly account of the recent South Sudanese peace process, including the signing of the August 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan and its subsequent collapse, is an important project for scholars of the country. Nicki Kindersley and Øystein Rolandsen's briefing on the military-political landscape in the aftermath of the disintegration of the peace agreement in July 2016, and the uncertain prospects for the 'regional protection force' authorized by the UN Security Council, is an important and informative beginning. It reinforces the lessons of the compendium cited in this paper, which suggest that formula of externally-enforced power sharing, backed by external coercion and sanctions, is unlikely to do anything other than cause the South Sudanese crisis to mutate again, undoubtedly to the detriment of the long-suffering South Sudanese people.