

militarized regime for women in urban versus rural locations, and how did gender operate differently across spatial divides? For example, did the discourse of acting as ‘mothers of the country’ have different meanings for rural and urban women? More attention to these dividing lines would add complexity to the intersecting systems that Decker so capably analyses.

Through Decker’s engaging book, we are given new ways to understand the violence and supposed chaos of the Amin years. With an attentive eye to detail, a deep knowledge of Ugandan history, and a useful engagement with feminist theory, Decker tells a story of a dictator who used gendered ideology to wield power, and of women who asserted power of their own – sometimes in concert with and sometimes in opposition to their president’s ideas about gender. Amin may be long dead, but the gendered and militarized rhetoric of his era lives on in many ways. This book grapples with that history and allows us to contemplate its meaning for the future.

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Øystein H. Rolandsen and M. W. Daly, *A History of South Sudan: from slavery to independence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (hb £59.99 – 978 0 521 11631 2; pb £18.99 – 978 0 521 13325 8). 2016, xix + 171 pp.

This book offers a conventional chronological overview of South Sudan since the nineteenth century. I should declare an interest at the outset, in that I have recently published *South Sudan: a new history for a new nation* (Ohio University Press, 2016). In it, I take a very different approach from the book under review, by attempting an outline of the history of indigenous South Sudanese societies and correcting the stereotype of South Sudan isolation by reintegrating it into a wider regional history. In many ways the two books are complementary. Readers seeking to understand the current state of affairs in South Sudan will welcome Rolandsen and Daly’s tighter focus on the evolution of administration, government and politics, and their useful summaries of older studies. In adhering to conventional explanations rather than proposing new interpretations, however, there are blind spots that make this book more a history of South Sudan as a region than of South Sudanese peoples.

The ‘Land and People’ introduction does much to dismiss both the land and the people. The authors accept the stereotype of South Sudan as ‘among the most remote [lands] of the planet’, a place that ‘hardly seems “on the way” to anywhere and remains a geographical dead end’ (p. 2). This view is the perspective of someone more used to flying over South Sudan than travelling through it, and leaves unexplained how so many different languages came to be indigenous there, or how its peoples share connections with others across a wider region. The ethnographic and linguistic references are brief and not entirely accurate, justified by an essentialist dismissal of ethnic groups as ‘by and large territorial’, with little internal mobility, maintaining ‘cultural homogeneity within their defined territories’ (p. 3) (a claim flatly contradicted by many of the sources listed in the bibliography). The writing of indigenous names and places throughout the book is sometimes inconsistent and inaccurate, a product of more than just careless proofreading, and unfortunate in a book intended to introduce South Sudan to a new readership.

A tone of weary cynicism often creeps into the first three chapters where South Sudanese appear more often as the backdrop to the activities of alien rulers rather than as actors in their own history. The authors rightly assert that 'a state-centered archival' (p. 6) approach is inappropriate, but there is little engagement with indigenous accounts of the past. Even archives get short shrift when the authors declare that 'we can write meaningful histories of [the towns] Juba, Wau, and Malakal, but not really (or yet) of South Sudan's historic provinces' (p. 7). This picture is the inverse of what is contained in the records of the nascent national archive, where the bulk of the surviving colonial documents deal with rural administration rather than provincial capitals. In dismissing what *can* be known, the authors sometimes ignore what is *already* known. There were connections and innovations in the nineteenth century that survived into the twentieth but are unacknowledged here, especially in the mixing of populations, the evolution of new forms of leadership, the creation of commercial networks that linked previously unrelated parts of the country, and the survival of earlier methods of Egyptian administration in the way in which the Anglo-Egyptian condominium worked on the ground. Despite the limitations of colonial administration highlighted here, the development of customary courts and customary law are among the most enduring legacies of the condominium, as Cherry Leonardi documented in her book, *Dealing with Government in South Sudan* (James Currey, 2013).

Both the tone and the analysis improve in the remaining seven chapters, which deal with events leading up to and after independence – first of Sudan and then of South Sudan. Whereas the first three chapters incorporate little original research on South Sudan, the bulk of the book benefits from integrating Rolandsen's recent publications on the two civil wars with a broad range of other studies.

Rolandsen was not the first to reassess the period leading up to the outbreak of the first civil war, but he was the first to do so in detail. He established that 1955–62 was a period of deteriorating state–society relations, escalating violence and suppression, rather than full-scale civil war. The subsequent 1963–72 civil war has not received the attention it deserves and the authors correctly claim that 'a more coherent account of the period would explain the impact of civil war on South Sudan and the narrowing of the range of possible future relations between the region and the rest of the Sudanese polity' (p. 79) – in particular how the idea of a separate South Sudanese state, the explicit goal of armed resistance in the first civil war, outlived all later attempts to refashion a single united Sudan.

The authors offer important insights into the complex process of repeated breakdowns of civil peace and political order. Their assessment that, during the SPLA's descent into internecine violence during the 1990s, 'ethnic mobilization was a result of political contestation, not the cause' (p. 124), can also be applied to South Sudan's current civil war. While external observers speculate on whether South Sudan was born a failed state, they should recognize that independence for South Sudan, as indeed for Sudan, is 'a process rather than a single event' (p. 151), one that began some time ago and continues into the indefinite future for both nations. Any predictions should be grounded in an understanding of the past, and this book makes some thoughtful pointers in that direction.

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