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Race, Ethnicity, and Violence in South Sudan

Amir Idris



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*I dedicate this book to all those who search for a more compassionate
and humane future.*

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ABBREVIATIONS

AUCISS	African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
EDF	Equatoria Defence Force
HEC	High Executive Council
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NAS	National Salvation Front
NGOs	Nongovernmental Organizations
NIF/NCP	National Islamic Front/National Congress Party
SANU	The Sudan African National Union
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SNR	Sudan Notes and Records
SPLM-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In Opposition
SPLM-IG	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In Government
SPS	Sudan Political Service
SSDF	South Sudan Defense Force
SSLM	Southern Sudan Liberation Movement
SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defence Forces
SSTV	South Sudan Television
SWAPO	South West Africa People's Organization
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union—Patriotic Front



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The year 2011 marked a turning point in the history of Sudan, a country known for its racial and ethnic violence. In that year, as African leaders strove to renew the image of the African continent through the vision of African unity and renaissance, South Sudan seceded from Sudan.¹ The split of Sudan into two countries, thus, has been seen as a setback to the promising vision of a new Africa. The secession of South Sudan was made possible by a political agreement between the warring parties to end the longest civil war in Africa. With the help of the United States, Sudan's Government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, Army (SPLM/A) signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 to end two decades of civil war.² The agreement secured the right of self-determination to the people of Southern Sudan and enabled them to vote in a referendum for their independence from Sudan in July 2011. However,

¹See Address by Executive Deputy President of South Africa to Corporate Council on Africa, "Attracting Capital to Africa," Chantilly, Virginia, USA, April 19–22. See also his speech at the United Nations University, "The African Renaissance, South Africa and the World," April 9, 1998.

²For a detailed study on the peace process, see Hilde F. Johnson, *Waging Peace in Sudan: The Inside Story of the Negotiations that Ended Africa's Longest Civil War* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2011).

South Sudan, the newest African state, slid into civil war in December 2013,³ just two years after winning its hard-won independence.

United only with their immediate demand for independence, the political leadership of the former national liberation movement, SPLM/A, turned the promise of the national liberation struggles into humanitarian catastrophe and a security nightmare. Hundreds of thousands have been killed, and more than two million have fled the country, creating Africa's largest refugee crisis.⁴ Two peace agreements signed in 2015 and 2018, brokered by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) amid international pressure, have failed to end the conflict. The African Union Commission of Inquiry Report⁵ on South Sudan documents extreme violence, mostly against civilians, including killings, torture, mutilations, rape and even incidents of forced cannibalism perpetrated by the armed forces of the government of South Sudan and by the rebel forces, led by President Salva Kiir and the former Vice President Riek Machar, respectively.

The report also confirmed that the Nuer ethnic group, the second largest ethnicity in South Sudan, to which Machar belongs, has been subjected to systematic killings planned by the state security organs. The African Union Commission Report documented:

³Hilde F. Johnson, *South Sudan: The Untold Story from Independence to Civil War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

⁴See International Crisis Group, "South Sudan: A Civil War by Any Other Name," Africa Report, no. 217, April 10, 2014.

⁵In response to the crisis in South Sudan, the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU) mandated the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan on December 30, 2013. The Commission was tasked with investigating the human rights violations and other abuses committed during the armed conflict in South Sudan, as well as the underlying causes of these violations. Furthermore, it was responsible for making recommendation on the best ways and means to ensure accountability, reconciliation, and healing among all South Sudanese communities. The Commission issued two reports: (1) "Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan: Final Report of the African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan," Addis Ababa: African Union, October 15, 2014, and (2) A Separate Opinion authored by Mahmood Mamdani, a member of the African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan (AUCISS), October 20, 2014.

The stories and reports of the human toll of the violence and brutality have been heart-wrenching: reports of people being burnt in places of worship and hospitals, mass burials, women of all ages raped; both elderly and young, women described how they were brutally gang raped, and left unconscious and bleeding, people were not simply shot, they were subjected, for instance, to beatings before being compelled to jump into a lit fire. The Commission heard of some captured people being forced to eat human flesh or forced to drink human blood.⁶

The purpose of this book is to understand how and why “liberators” of South Sudan have become perpetrators of ethnically driven violence. The central question that frames this book is: how and why did violence happen immediately after independence in South Sudan? That question indeed raises several others: Why did “liberators” weaponize ethnic identity and choose violence to maintain their power and privilege after gaining political independence in July 2011? What factors prompted them to engage in violence against civilians.

The central argument of this book is that South Sudan’s post-independence violence has a great deal to do with the history of state formation in Sudan, shaped by ideas and arguments about civilization and savagery, and about racial and ethnic identities representing the boundaries of privilege and discrimination. These different ideas and arguments have their roots in a history of slavery, colonialism, Orientalizing⁷ cultural differences, and national liberation struggle. Though intellectual origins are considered, this study is more concerned with the constitutive functions of categories and boundaries. I am interested in how definitions of identities and systems of categorization come to operate and are used in a normalized way to divide populations into different identities. I am not devaluing the effects of ethnicity in the politics of South Sudan, but I am more interested in how to understand the logic of how it works and how it is cultivated in the political imaginations of actors so that we can better combat it in a postcolonial era.

⁶ Ibid., 117–118.

⁷ See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

RETHINKING IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE

A great deal has been written about the recent root causes of conflict and violence in South Sudan.⁸ Much of that writing seeks to emphasize the notion that the root causes of the conflict can be traced to the ethnic division and hatred among the population or the lack of state capacity to manage ethnic diversity and hostilities. The former explanation claims that the political elites planned the violence by mobilizing ethnic constituencies and sensibilities. They used the state's institutions, in particular its security apparatus, to achieve their goals. The latter claims that South Sudan has not fully developed its institutions to deal with such challenging tasks. This claim is propagated by international and non-governmental organizations, including the United Nations agencies. While the former claim reproduces the archaic colonial political framework with its ideas about non-Western societies, and Africa in particular, that are categorized as "uncivilized"—"primitive" and "tribal" societies and calls for more foreign intervention to improve the capacity of the new state by injecting Western institutional norms in dealing with its post-independence challenges. Both claims represent South Sudan as a space belonging to a "premodern" universe, lacking the necessary ingredients of a viable nation-state. But these assumptions about South Sudan's violence cannot be understood neither through the prism of Western modernity nor within the new territorial confinement of South Sudan. This study illustrates how emphasizing the long history and politics of state formation helps us to reconsider what we know about violence in South Sudan.

⁸Hilde F. Johnson, *South Sudan: the Untold Story from Independence to Civil War*, Christopher, Vaughan, Mareike Schomerus, and Lotje de Vries, eds. *The Borderlands of South Sudan: Authority and Identity in Contemporary and Historical Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Robert Gerenge, "South Sudan's December 2013 Conflict: Bolting State-Building Fault Lines with Social Capital," *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 15, no. 3 (2015): 85–109; Alex De Waal, "When Kleptocracy Becomes Insolvent: Brute Causes of the Civil War in South Sudan," *Journal of African Affairs* 113, no. 452 (2014): 347–369; Alex De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War, and the Business of Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015); Clemence Pinaud, "South Sudan: Civil War, Predation and the Making of a Military Aristocracy," *African Affairs* 113, no. 451 (2014): 192–211; Mareike Schomerus, and Tim Allen, *Southern Sudan At Odds With Itself: Dynamics of Conflict and Predicament for Peace* (London: London School of Economics, 2010), [available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28869/1/SouthernSudanAtOddsWithItself.pdf>]; Douglas H. Johnson, *South Sudan: A New History for a New Nation* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016); Oystein H. Rolandsen and M. W. Daly, *A History of South Sudan: From Slavery to Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

The history of South Sudan is intricately linked to the broader history of Sudan before the split.⁹ South Sudan's history does not begin with its independence in 2011; instead, it builds upon colonial assumptions and postcolonial narratives about race and ethnicity that shaped the earlier history of Sudan. Unfortunately, "Sudan is ill served by those who derive meaning from the past and propose solutions to present problems in terms that are best empty and irrelevant, and at worst, racist and divisive."¹⁰ It is commonly assumed that the history of Sudan can be understood through the prism of its racial and ethnic cartography. The notions of race and ethnicity have been consistently present in the writings of scholars of Sudan who have uncritically used them to make sense of Sudan's political history of violence since the colonial era. Little attention has been given to the intellectual and political history of race and ethnicity in Sudan to understand their genesis and their changing political meanings in different historical contexts. Instead, Sudan is commonly presented by colonial and postcolonial scholarship as a country solely defined by a history of violent encounters between foreign invaders—"Arabs," Turks, Egyptian, Europeans, and its diverse racial and ethnic identities. The racial categorization and the regionalization of its populations into "African" versus "Arab," and South versus North has been taken for granted.¹¹ Little effort has been made to investigate how these categories were discursively and politically produced by travelers, religious missionaries, colonial officials, nationalist leaders, and how these constructs were internalized by large segments of its population, including by those who were excluded from the nation-state.

Since independence in 1956, Sudan has struggled to accommodate the diversity of its population and to form an inclusive polity. The failure of acknowledging and addressing the legacies of its history, marked by violent experiences of slavery, slave trade, and British colonialism, led to Southern Sudan's secession. Yet, the formation of the new state of South Sudan in 2011 did not help to alter its image of the "other," and the

⁹ Johnson, *South Sudan: A New History for a New Nation*.

¹⁰ Jay Spaulding and Lidwien Kapteijns, "The Orientalist Paradigm in the Historiography of the Late Precolonial Sudan," in *Golden Ages, Dark Ages*, eds. Jay O' Brien and William Roseberry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 14.

¹¹ Amir Idris, "Rethinking Identity, Citizenship, and Violence in Sudan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 2 (2012): 324–325.

political elites of the national liberation movement seem unable to challenge the norms and the institutional constraints of their inherited nation-state, in particular its epistemological orientation. In turn, the European notion of the nation-state that includes the majority and excludes its minorities remains the guiding principle of how citizenship is defined and allocated in South Sudan. Hence, South Sudan has been portrayed by some “experts” and journalists as a failed state inhabited by an array of tribal groups accustomed to communal violence. Simultaneously, Western foreign intervention is seen as a necessity, reinforcing “White Savior” narrative with South Sudan’s independence, to march its populations toward forming a modern polity with a cohesive nation-state. This assumption has not been questioned by some scholars of South Sudan or by the former leaders of the national liberation movement.

A rich literature on the history and politics of South Sudan and Sudan already exists.¹² This book build on this literature to show how history, identity, and violence were reproduced and used for political purposes. While substantial research has examined the politics and state in South Sudan and Sudan, some of the existing literature on the history and politics of race, ethnicity, power, and violence, particularly the journalistic one, is characterized by its descriptive nature. South Sudan’s violence has been characterized as “barbaric” carried out by “African” employing “Dark Age” technology weapons. Much of the writing lacks critical analysis of historical and anthropological interpretations of state and society. With a few exceptions, such as Cherry Leonardi’s work, *Dealing with*

¹² Steven C. Roach, *South Sudan’s Fateful Struggle: Building Peace in a State of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023); Cherry Leonardi, “Liberation or Capture: Youth in Between “Hakuma” and “Home” During Civil War and Its Aftermath in Southern Sudan,” *African Affairs* 106, no. 424 (2007): 391–412; Heather Sharkey, “Arab Identity and Ideology in Sudan: The Politics of Language, Ethnicity, and Race,” *African Affairs* 107, no. 426 (2007): 21–43; Robert O. Collins, *A History of Modern Sudan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Francis Deng, “Blood Brothers: An African Reflects on Race and Ethnicity,” *Brookings Review* 13, no 3 (1995): 12–17; Francis Deng, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in The Sudan* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press, 1995); Jok Madut, *Sudan: Race, Religion, and Violence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007); Peter Adwok Nyaba, *The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider’s View* (Kampala: Fountain Press, 1997); Dustan M. Wai, ed. *The Southern Sudan: The Problem of National Integration* (London: Frank Cass 1973); Justin Willis, “The Southern Problem: Representing Sudan’s Southern Provinces to 1970,” *The Journal of African History* 56, no. 2 (2015): 281–300.

Government in South Sudan,¹³ which recognizes the agency of the people in dealing with the government, the current research on South Sudan's crisis exhibits significant analytical gaps and focuses on the state of the violence and the immediate political history of South Sudan, dating back to its political independence in July 2011. Sketchy journalistic accounts and reports compiled by non-governmental organizations exist about the recent important historical and political events in South Sudan.¹⁴ Even less is known about why the violence immediately occurred after independence. It is not enough to argue that the political elites planned the violence by tapping into their ethnic groups' cultural resources and memories of past violent encounters with others, or the state's lack of capacity made the violence possible. Rather, we need to explain why the political elites succeeded in tapping into ethnicity as an effective mobilizing political tool and why so many organized forces and armed civilians complied with the political elites' order to kill members of the opposite ethnic group.

Ethnic violence tends to be preceded by "rhetoric in which ethnic or racial categories are imagined as hierarchical strata, linked to one another in relationships that structure the entire society; the violence itself is prompted either by the subordinate group's attempt to throw off those it sees as its oppressors or the dominant group's attempt to preempt such a revolt."¹⁵ Little attention has been given to the relationship between the absence of inclusive institutions, the desire to be included by asserting difference, and the failure of South Sudan's political elites to fulfill the great expectations of the citizenry.¹⁶ This book addresses these gaps in knowledge and understanding and in so doing seeks to explain how and why liberators become perpetrators of violence, and how the intersection of the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and national liberation struggle

¹³Cherry Leonardi, *Dealing with Government in South Sudan: Histories of Chiefship, Community and State* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: James Currey, 2013).

¹⁴These journalistic accounts appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Aljazeera English*. Other reports were published by international and non-governmental organizations, such as The United Nations, Enough Project, and International Crisis Group. Much of these reports and accounts were highly descriptive but lacked an analytical perspective. These accounts and reports are available on their respective websites.

¹⁵See Jonathon Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stone: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), 16.

¹⁶For a detailed study on the relationship between the lack of inclusive institution and the failure of state, see Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Business, 2012): 368–403.