

Book review

A poisonous thorn in our hearts: Sudan and South Sudan's bitter and incomplete divorce

Copnall, James 2017

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*Reviewed by Nicodemus Minde**

Having served as the BBC Sudan correspondent from 2009 to 2012, James Copnall has compiled an insightful account of the bitter-sweet split of the two Sudans (Sudan and South Sudan) in July 2009. This updated edition is a timely contribution that further highlights the intricacies of what Copnall terms as ‘bitter and incomplete divorce’. Since the book was first published in 2014, South Sudan has descended into civil conflict or strife on two occasions – both reflective of the author’s prognosis of the split. As for Sudan, the country still reels from the aftermath of the split. The underlying unresolved tensions between Khartoum and Juba had in 2012 threatened to

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ignite an all-out war and Copnall contends that ‘the two states are still joined by conflict’ (p.4).

Copnall’s central thesis is the intractable relationship between the two states despite the split in 2011. Based on his experience in the two states, Copnall in a thematic analysis looks at the points of convergence and divergence in the two states with the aim to illustrate the overall closeness of these two once hostile enemies. His analysis of the differences of peoples and identities in the Sudans moves away from the simplistic dichotomy of African and Christian South and the Arab and Muslim North. In explaining the rich diversity of the two countries, he uses examples that indicate cultural, religious, linguistic and geographical intersections and linkages.

Building on the peoples and identities, the updated edition further draws our attention to the similarity in the politics of power consolidation in the two countries. Sudan’s President Omar Al Bashir and his South Sudan’s counterpart Salva Kiir continue to decentralise powers so as to strengthen their domestic hold on to power. While the book looks at how this has shaped the political landscape in the Sudans, it further sheds light on the binary interconnectedness of power politics and economy which continues to join the two countries by the hip. While Sudan’s Bashir consolidated his power on domestic and international fears, Kiir strengthened his ethno-political and military base leading to breaking ranks with Riek Machar, his one-time ally and Vice-President.

The book also touches on the crucial aspect of instability and insecurity in the two Sudans. The inter-ethnic rebellions which in some cases cut across the border divide have been a cause of instability both in Sudan and South Sudan. While Sudan grapples with the yet-to be resolved Darfur civil war, the two areas of South Kordofan and Blue Nile ‘show how Sudan and South Sudan’s destinies are still interwoven’ (p. 142). Rebel insurgencies around these border areas in both countries point to the insecurity challenges that still characterise the two states even after the split. This is compounded by the presence of oil reserves in the contested areas which remains a source of instability and insecurity.

Further to the analysis of this insecurity, the book details the regional and international interests in the two countries. The author highlights the differing relations with players around the world, and also mentions some of the international economic interests in the two countries. He looks at the relations between the Sudans and the US, UK, Norway (Troika countries) and China, as well as at regional interests such as those of Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Copnall manages to show how the lives and narratives of ordinary people reflect the strenuous relationship between the two Sudans. For example, he tells the love story of Garang Thomas Dhel (a Southerner from the Dinka tribe) and Hiba al Makki (a Northerner lady from an elite family). This episode is a reminder of the bitter identity struggles in Sudan. After many attempts to convince Hiba's family, Garang eventually managed to marry the love of his life. Yet despite the split in 2011, the two countries continue to grapple with outstanding issues. For South Sudan, independence did not herald a new beginning, and its descent into war in 2013 and 2016 served as a reminder that separation was not the panacea to their problems. In conclusion, Copnall gives a critical prognosis of the way forward. He argues that for the two countries to prosper, they need to quickly move away from the narrative that differentiates them to one that fosters mutual cooperation.

As an updated edition, however, the book fails to comprehensively capture the two spates of the post-independent civil wars in South Sudan. The book gives an abstract overview of the violence that broke out in December 2015 – the culmination of the ethnic and political differences between President Kiir and Riek Machar. But the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict of South Sudan (ARCSS) which was reached between the two warring factions of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement – SPLM in Government (SPLM-IG) and SPLM in opposition (SPLM-IO) led by Riek Machar – is not thoroughly examined in the updated edition. The nuances around the two civil wars and the negotiations leading to the ARCSS in August 2015 could have strengthened Copnall's central argument of the interplay between the two countries even after the divorce.

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Despite it being a journalistic account of the two Sudans, Copnall's analysis also has a fair measure of academic input. The book is drawn from a large number of interviews with party officials, rebels, religious leaders, activists, journalists and academics in both Sudan and South Sudan. This makes the book a good reference text in understanding the ethno-political situation and the confluence between politics and economy that surround the bitter-sweet divorce.

The book is a timely contribution to understanding the split of South Sudan from Sudan. It also offers an excellent social-political and economic analysis of the two Sudans from the time of the divorce in 2011. I strongly recommend the book to students and practitioners of peace and conflict in Africa.