

Fragile states: Nation-building in Sudan

by Christopher Tounsel

Was nation-building in Africa destined to fail? The question is particularly important for one of the most fragile states in the world—Sudan. Set in a period that straddles the late colonial and early independence era, Alden Young’s book addresses the auspices of postcolonial nation-building.

About: Alden Young, [Transforming Sudan: Decolonization, Economic Development, and State Formation](#) (African Studies), Cambridge University Press.

Serious analyses of Sudan have focused on a range of causes behind the country’s postcolonial civil wars; elements that include precolonial and colonial histories, nineteenth century violence, British administrative efforts in leaving the South unprepared for political independence, and continual competition for scarce resources.¹ The relationship between religion and political action in Sudanese history continues to be the stuff of great scholarly inquiry. Noah Salomon’s *For Love of the Prophet* (Princeton, 2016) examines Sudan’s lengthy experiment with Islamic statehood and the effects of Islamization on Sudanese society. Harry Verhoeven’s *Water, Civilisation and Power in Sudan* (Cambridge, 2015) explores the ways in

¹ See Lamin Sanneh, ‘Preface: Religion and Conflict in Sudan’ in *Religion and Conflict in Sudan: Papers from an International Conference at Yale*, May 1999 (Faith in Sudan, 12). Yusuf Fadl Hasan and Richard Gray (eds.). Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2002; 9-10.

which the Sudanese state's use of water and agriculture to consolidate power is partially connected to Islamist ideology.

Modern Sudan

Sudan was an Egyptian dependency before Muslim revivalist forces conquered the region in 1885. Britain helped Egypt recapture Sudan and accomplished this goal in 1898. They co-ruled Sudan until 1956, when it became independent. The division between Muslims in Northern Sudan and Southern societies that are Christian and/or adhere to indigenous beliefs has been volatile. Southerners fought two civil wars against the government, and another conflict erupted in Darfur after the black "Sudan Liberation Army" rebelled against Darfur's marginalization. An Arab militia supported by President Omar Bashir's government brutally responded, leading to violence and genocide. South Sudan seceded and became independent in 2011.² In 2018, the Fund for Peace listed Sudan 7th out of 178 countries on its Fragile States Index.³

An economic perspective

Rather than focusing exclusively on the racial and religious elements of Sudanese nationalism (which would reinforce the oft-mentioned and over-simplified division between an 'Arab Muslim North' and 'Black Christian/indigenous religious South'), Young focuses on the economics of Sudanese state formation during the late colonial and early postcolonial years. He writes that his study "demonstrates how the economic imagination of Sudan's planners expanded or constrained the visions of Sudan's politicians." (3) Individuals of note include John Carmichael (the last British permanent undersecretary of finance and financial advisory to the first three independent Sudanese governments), A.L. Chick (Deputy Financial Secretary and co-author of *The Five Year Plan for Postwar Development in Sudan: 1946-1951*), and Hamza Mirghani Hamza (the first Sudanese Permanent Under-Secretary of Finance).

Young explains in the first chapter that in the years before independence, Sudanese intellectuals took ownership of lexicon and ideas linked with development and transformed

² Kenneth Ingram, "Sudan." In *The Oxford Companion to British History*. Oxford University Press, 2015. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199677832.001.0001/acref-9780199677832-e-4077>; Tom McArthur, Jacqueline Lam-McArthur, and Lise Fontaine, "Sudan." In *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford University Press, 2018. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199661282.001.0001/acref-9780199661282-e-1177>; Christopher Riches, and Peter Stalker. "Sudan." In *A Guide to Countries of the World*. Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191803000.001.0001/acref-9780191803000-e-0198>. ['Sudan Liberation Army' taken from this source]

³ The Fund for Peace, "Fragile States Index" <http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/> [c. 2017]

them into their own national tradition. The following chapter focuses on how finance officials' thinking and their political position within the government shifted through embracing national economic planning and the budgeting and reprioritizing this entailed. Young contends that the planning process strengthened their conviction in a unified national economy. He then examines arguments within the colonial government on whether planning should be done in prose or numerically; a debate, Young posits, was critical in the journey to define the meaning of development.

In the years after Sudan achieved self-governance, "the bureaucratic elite largely overlapped with the political and economic elite, and one of the key ties between all of them was cotton." (p. 91) The Northern Sudanese elite made three misjudgments: taking the nation's singular quality for granted, believing that independence ensured political unity, and that the only requisite action was to increase the state's strength and peoples' living standards. In doing so, they neglected the role of economic development in building political and national unity "even at the expense of economic efficiency." (p. 95) Chapter Five delves into the Ibrahim Abboud era (1958-64). Policy makers became more aware of the gap between the state's wealth and that of other states when they started to evaluate economic policy according to changes in GDP over time. However, that metric made them less cognizant of wealth disparities within the country and directed their focus on accelerating economic growth at the cost of inequality. In Chapter Six, Young notes that the Abboud regime did not fall because of economic mismanagement. Still, economic policies in the early 1960s were tailored to the country's economic core but did not produce results fast enough to bind the peripheries together.

What builds a nation?

Young's main stated purpose was "to correct" Sudan scholars' de-emphasis of the late colonial and early independent state's distinctiveness "by demonstrating that the nature of the postcolonial Sudanese state was determined by policies enacted during the twenty years following World War II." (p. 6) His Conclusion challenges what he lists as the two explanations typically used to position Sudan as a failed state: that racial and religious conflicts are the primary engines of conflict, and that the country's core-periphery exploitation can be traced to the Anglo-Egyptian colonial and previous Egyptian conquest. By taking seriously questions about policy making and bureaucracy in postcolonial Africa, Young argues that his study is distinct from most literature on the African state (which, he notes, tries to trace the state's failure to its being too weak, strong, or greedy in relation to an often loosely-defined society). Young claims that to interrogate the large deviations in the structures of African political economies, work must be grounded "in a renewed intellectual history...that takes seriously the ways in which prior experiences of colonialism, revolution, war, and reconstruction have formed the distinct infrastructures in which individual political and policy elites are grounded." (p. 152)

What were the terms and goals of African nation-building? Some scholars have argued that colonial administrators sought to build future African nations through their system of indirect rule (showing Africans how modern nations should be run and one day handing the reigns over). Highlighted by James Coleman's work in Nigeria⁴, some scholars have taken the liberal position; maintaining that nationalism in Africa was able to thrive in the form of colonial schools and political parties. Others, like Heather Sharkey⁵ in the Sudanese case, have argued that schools also served to build a sense of camaraderie among its student body and forge peer-relationships and networks that would last into the independence era.

By contrast, colonial boundary-making that attempted to abrogate (or ignore) social differences made the prospects of future nationhood tenuous. Richard Dowden, Director of the Royal African Society, once noted that the 1885 Act of Berlin which set the stage for the "Scramble for Africa" carved up what were thought to have been between six to ten thousand political units. "They were then carved up," Dowden continued, "often cutting peoples in half, water tables sort of cut off from sources; it was just complete geographical madness."⁶ Africa's postcolonial states inherited artificial boundaries and, with them, the possible social disruptions that came with cultural diversity.

Transforming Sudan contributes to the scholarly conversation on African nation-building by encouraging readers to consider the following questions: can—or should—a nation be an economic reality before it is a social or cultural one? What are the terms and limits of economic policy in fashioning a successful postcolonial state? What are the risks of emphasizing economic development at the expense of promoting social equality? It is in addressing such questions, whether in the African context or elsewhere in the postcolonial world, Young's study could be a useful resource to consider.

Young provides an important lens into a nation-building agenda that was economic rather than purely cultural. Some elements could have been further explored. How was the government takeover of Southern mission schools in the 1950s-60s not just a social project but an economic one as well? What economic impact was linked with the expulsion of foreign missionaries and the decision to replace Sunday with Friday as a weekly holiday in the South? Here his archival work may have been complemented by the South Sudan National Archive.

Still, Young's study is essential for anyone seeking a comprehensive understanding of Sudanese decolonization and early independence. The book should have broader appeal for students and scholars of African economic history and decolonization. It complements David

⁴ James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1958.

⁵ Heather J. Sharkey, "Colonialism, Character, Building and the Culture of Nationalism in the Sudan, 1898," in James D. Le Sueur, ed. *The Decolonization Reader*, London & New York, Routledge, 2003, pp. 218-237.

⁶ "Africa: states of independence—the scramble for Africa" Al Jazeera (September 2, 2010) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CgzSnZidGuU&t=2007s>

Mills's *Dividing the Nile*⁷, which differs from Young's text through its primary concern with the economic plans of Egyptian actors and its focus on the forty years preceding independence. Young accomplishes the difficult task of examining an oft-studied period in a fresh way; his book is therefore an important contribution to the historiography of Sudanese history.

Reviewed: Alden Young, *Transforming Sudan: Decolonization, Economic Development, and State Formation (African Studies)*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 180 pp.

Published in *Booksandideas.net*, 25 October 2018.

⁷ David E. Mills, *Dividing the Nile. Egypt's Economic Nationalists in the Sudan. 1918-1956*, Cairo, American University in Cairo Press, 2014, p. 1 (electronic version).