

Edward Thomas' Work for a Better Understanding of South Sudan: A Review Essay of Thomas, Edward. 2015. *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation*. London: Zed Books Ltd. 336 pp., index, bibliography. ISBN: 978-1-78360-404-3

There is no shortage of books on South Sudan, but few of them present an overarching view on the social and economic history of this most recent African country, gaining independence in 2011. An exception is the book by Edward Thomas reviewed here. *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation* provides a holistic analysis treating the genesis and development of the new state in a comprehensive historical framework, paying ample attention to political, ideological, economic and cultural factors, which played and still play a role in the long struggle of (what the author calls) a “liberation process.” To a considerable degree, the book is based on what so many other books on South Sudan are lacking: data from South Sudanese sources (articles, books, statistics, dissertations) and first-hand interviews with a wide range of respondents, from politicians and government officials to villagers and citizens, old and young, women and men.

Thomas has a thorough knowledge of both Sudan and South Sudan, gained during more than ten years of research, teaching and human rights work in both countries. With its multi-layered approach, this book deserves to be considered a standard work on South Sudan for readers of various disciplines and interests. It also deserves to be summarised here because it provides insights into processes of uneven and violent development and the contradictions of “freedom struggles” and “liberation processes.” These contradictions also apply to other post-colonial African peripheries with oilfields or mines, militias and “ethnicity” concepts misused by political elites in power struggles in the capitals of erstwhile predatory and actually dysfunctional states often labelled as “fragile” or “failed” states. Meanwhile, since late 2015, when this book first appeared, Thomas has continued to publish on Sudan and South Sudan, lately through the Rift Valley Institute in London and the Catholic University of Juba, supplementary material that will also be discussed here as his book and articles form a consistent whole. The works of Thomas contribute to a better understanding of South Sudan. The reviewed book demands close and attentive reading. Thomas has to be praised in avoiding value judgments with regard to the actors or peoples who

played crucial, opposing roles in the liberation struggle, a rare achievement in the literature on South Sudan.

The author argues that South(ern) Sudan's fate is characterised by a combination of uneven economic and administrative development under the influence of global markets, political expansionism and the internal dynamics of a violent nature. In *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation*, Thomas shows that during Sudan's nineteenth and twentieth century, the country's future was decided in the periphery. In this review I will discuss why and how this came about, how it shaped the human landscape in twentyfirst-century South Sudan and, based on Thomas' analysis, what can possibly be said about its future.

Thomas takes "Jonglei," the peripheral state on the east bank of the White Nile, as the focus of study. Jonglei is not an arbitrary choice as it has long been a peripheral area, and it is the last area in the region to be penetrated by the world of markets and effective administration. Jonglei exemplifies South Sudan: it is a vast, seasonally waterlogged region, often inaccessible for armies, state institutions and development agencies. After the pre-colonial era of slave trading, the colonial army waged wars against the Murle and the Nuer, which was followed by a severe civil war (1955–1972) that began one year before the independence of Sudan as a whole. After southern autonomy was negotiated with Khartoum seventeen years later, a start was made with the construction of the 360 km long "Jonglei canal" in this area (meant to serve both Egypt and northern Sudan, not southern Sudan), bisecting the state, blocking animal migration routes and rainwater sheet flows, causing annual inundations and thus, in the words of the local population: "spoiling the land." Jonglei is also part of the region where, in the late 1970s, oil was found, leading to conflicts over borders between North and South Sudan. Khartoum's dissolution of unity of the southern region was a direct cause for the outbreak of a second civil war (1983–2005), starting with mutinies in army barracks all over Jonglei and the founding of a southern militarised liberation movement in Ethiopia. In that same region (Jonglei), in 1991, a "split" took place in the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA/M), which resulted in massacres of the civilian population, inter-militia and inter-ethnic battles causing thousands of casualties, and large-scale abductions of people and cattle.

Such was the arena from which emerged the state of South Sudan in 2011, which quickly plunged into an internal civil war (2013) with a repetition of moves of the kind mentioned above. From all periods mentioned studies exist by various generations of scholars who resided in that region and who studied its people and landscapes, among others: Evans Pritchard (1940) on the Nuer, Howell et al. (1988) on the Jonglei Canal, Arensen (1992) on the Murle, Hutchinson (1996) on the Nuer, Johnson (1993, 1994, 2003 among others) on colonial and contemporary history, Scroggins (2002) on the second civil war, Tuttle (2019) on colonial history, Perner (2016) on the Annuak, Zanen (2018) on “development” and, last but not least, Thomas (2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020) with a synthesis of political-economic development, social transformation, food economies, the oil-rents economy and centre-periphery relations.

Three (overlapping) themes are at the centre of Thomas’ treatment of South Sudan’s history: “incorporation and marginalization,” “representation and development,” and “social transformation.” Commercial, violent penetration on a large scale of the Sudan hinterlands started in the nineteenth century under Egyptian and Anglo-Egyptian rule in what was called “Turkiya” (1820–1885), a state built on the slave-trade and supported by state power. The raiding of inferior “infidels” was ideologically legitimised and served to extract vital resources from peripheral regions (manpower for northern agriculture and armies, ivory, gum-arabic and ostrich feathers for export, land for local landlords) in order to build up an economically strong Muslim North at the expense of a plural, divided, marginalised peripheral South. This policy was continued by the *Mahadiya* state (1885–1899), the *Anglo-Egyptian Condominium* (1899–1956), and post-independent Sudan, except for a brief period during one of president Nimeiri’s governments (cf. Thomas 2017). Several characteristics of such a centre-periphery policy persist today in independent South Sudan, where the riches of oil exploration remain in the capital and no economic investments take place in the various states, let alone in decentralised administrative units, such as counties and villages.

In the era of slavery, when violence compensated for the absence of a money economy, “trade” implied robbing cattle in order to pay for ivory and the services of slave-raiders. Likewise, the British introduced a tax system, also by “raiding cattle,” as the Nuer perceived it, and waged war on them trying to prevent or suppress what were seen as Nuer “rebellions.” The colonial power

invented “tribes” and “chiefs” and used ethnicity to keep tribes apart through “tribal borders,” to sow dissension and division, fearing unity and southern nationalism. Neither economic development nor education were promoted, the tribal pastoral ideology and subsistence economy were maintained. After the independence of Sudan in 1956 this strategy was gratefully followed by all Khartoum governments whose leaders were masters in “divide and rule,” implemented with the dropping of firearms to encourage “tribal” fighting. This policy continued during the civil war lasting more than twenty years waged against Khartoum by the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) which failed to transform society and postponed development until after a military victory. Since the 1991 “split” in the SPLM, *ethnicity* has become the basis of the state’s relations with the population, opening a Pandora’s box of violence on the one hand, and of an ethnic-based patronage system on the other. Thus far, both factors prevented the so much-needed *amor mundi* or love for the state and a mutual solidarity that are required for forming a national identity in the new, plural state of South Sudan.

The repressive systems referred to above have always created resistance by the periphery against the centre. The first major resistance movement led to the Mahadiya (1885–1899), a victorious popular uprising against foreign powers in the country. During the Condominium uprisings and mutinies eventually led to the independence of Sudan. In the wake of independence, the first civil war against Khartoum was fought by a southern, rural guerilla army called Anya-nya (1956–1972), which resulted in southern autonomy. The systematic racial oppression fostered by a northern political-religious system that produced division and uneven development in the south continued to shape resistance against Khartoum. The development of oil fields in the southern region, which Khartoum tried to control, was the spark that ignited southern rebellion. Just ten years after the Addis Ababa peace agreement ending the first civil war, a second civil war (1983–2005) against Khartoum erupted, which eventually resulted in the installation of the SPLM regime in independent South Sudan (2011). The centre-periphery divide did not end there, the centre now being the South Sudanese capital of Juba.

Thomas’ way of arranging data in comprehensive themes demonstrates a pattern of similar politico-economic characteristics all through Sudan’s turbulent history. The same appears when submitting the economy to a closer look. Sudanese history has shown that when profits from the periphery

start to evaporate, or when the centre faces financial crises, the peripheries become a burden and subsidies on which they depend are reduced; the peripheries always being at the mercy of the centre's fortunes. This has been the case for Southern Sudan since the Condominium rule when the south started to become expensive, and military operations to pacify "Jonglei" had to be paid for with profits from northern cotton-exports, thus weakening the northern Sudanese economy. The Southern Policy (1930–1946) limited funds for the south with budget cuts for education, proper administration and economic development. No effort was made to integrate "Jonglei" in a monetised economy, to develop urban centers, social services, a middle class, trade and industry. "Jonglei" remained purposefully what it was, an area with a mixed subsistence economy of cattle and sorghum production. This situation has, *grosso modo*, prevailed after the independence of Sudan. During the second civil war things did not change: the SPLM employed a war strategy only and no social or economic reforms took place. Through the control of international food aid by the movement (a prelude of the later control of oil rents) the ruling party became autonomous from society and alienated from the hungry population.

This situation changed dramatically in 2005 when South Sudan suddenly enjoyed a huge domestic product based on oil. Rents from oil were the government's only income (95% till 2012), and thus "rich" South Sudan remained dependent on outside forces such as Khartoum's power in controlling the oil-pipeline and the world market for oil. And still no effort was done to reform the culture or the economy. South Sudan's government spent half of its revenues on wages, and seventy percent on the army (including wages). The SPLM used the national payroll to buy loyalty from hostile "tribes" and factions. The oil-boom reinforced "ethnic representation" since, in order to keep all ethnic communities on board, the country's administration was time and again decentralised in order to create more government posts for community representatives receiving salaries from the national payroll. In this way, opposition was resolved by granting all parties a share of the national cake. But the state's creation of patron-client networks resulted in more ethnic antagonism and proved fatal for national integration. The vice-president, however, promoted this policy by saying: "having more counties is development." This statement must be judged against the national financial figures showing that (in 2012) only 17% of the country's budget went from the capital to the state level, where 90% remained in the state-capital

and of the 10% going to the countryside, about 8% was spent on salaries. When the oil boom stopped because of the closing of the oil tap in 2012, the first savings concerned money transfers to the states. Thomas concludes: "... the state has never organized its relationship with South Sudanese people around their economic interests. Instead, it has resorted to a mix of ethnically structured systems of coercion and of patronage to manage its relationships with society" (p. 278).

Moreover, the Murle in the Jonglei hinterland did not give up their independent existence, refused to be incorporated in a state and had no part in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005. Their militias based on age-sets were not incorporated into the SPLA (army), raiding continued, followed by disarmament campaigns by the army on an ethnic basis which resulted in new conflicts and clashes. In Nuer-land continuous cattle-raiding led to feuds and internal conflicts since the customary law arrangements, the checks and balances of the traditional social system, no longer functioned. In 2010 the government organised elections, but those who lost in Jonglei contested defeat and instead started mutinies. In 2009, 2010 and 2011 massive violence took place all over Jonglei, on a quasi-structural basis. Raiding cattle became a "restocking strategy" or even a "livelihood strategy" (p. 226) for both Nuer and Murle youth who formed independent *bunam* fighting groups, commanded by strong men (prophets, red chiefs), thus creating new forms of accumulation in societies at the edge of the market. "Power appears to have shifted youthwards" (p. 229). Gradually, one observes the coming into being of various dualisms in the countryside: those connected to markets and those excluded from markets; those connected to government structures and living from the government payroll and those cut off from the state, not being sufficiently educated for government's jobs, and not being able to join the army since not incorporated into the SPLA. For the youth groups raiding became an aim in itself. The rationalisation of violence in their social and economic life turned into a "raiding economy," estranged from ethnic customary law and independent from their successful urban peers.

According to Thomas the uneven economic development creates peripheries, and peripheries are chaotic. In the Jonglei periphery "food economies are shaped and reshaped by violence" (p. 239) in which cattle herding, occasional trading, queuing for relief and looting complement each other whereby arms have become incorporated into the systems of production. Crisis is the rule.

“War in Jonglei has completely reshaped society, economic life and youth aspiration, and created new groupings of armed youth, drawing them into the struggles between Juba politicians” (p. 292). Such is the social transformation, at least in the most peripheral areas, which is reshaping the Jonglei cultures today.

Less peripheral citizens of Jonglei and elsewhere (e.g., the Dinka and other South Sudanese societies who are less warlike than Lou Nuer and Murle), are also deeply affected by the war of independence and the subsequent modernisation by the oil-boom economy. In a follow-up study (2019), Thomas has focused on commodification, especially of grain. During the second civil war subsistence systems were dislodged with a lot of violence. “For several decades, armed [military and militia] actors have targeted subsistence systems through looting, displacement and dispossession [...] led by commanders pursuing new strategies of accumulation” (p. 6). “In Jonglei, in 2009, 59 per cent of the food was purchased, and only 25 per cent came from people’s own production” (Thomas 2016: 36). The payroll politics of the government in Juba gave many households access to cash, which encouraged people to purchase food from markets, particularly those who had already been separated from the land, such as a large part of the Greater Bor (Dinka) population, who have been displaced (following the massacres in 1991 and 2013) to Juba, to Lakes State and to refugee camps near the Ugandan border. Most grain on the market is imported from Uganda and Sudan, but smallholders are also inclined to sell their self-cultivated grain on the market as “they are now deeply embedded in the money system and have numerous debts” (p. 7). Thomas says that the commodification of food is tied up with the commodification of labour, of livestock, of forest goods and of land. Like the further marginalisation in the Murle and Lou Nuer hinterlands of Jonglei, commodification and commercialisation in and near towns of (quasi-) urbanised people, have affected if not subverted the cultural values that are inherent in subsistence systems. What remains at present is the ambiguity between the *logic of the tribe* and the *logic of the state and the market* (Zanen 2018: 268). Thomas observed that many South Sudanese people do not sentimentalise the kinship-based subsistence systems of the past, which, while having social and moral resonance, do not reflect contemporary aspirations and the desire to accumulate wealth through the market, although the chances of success on the market are still limited since they are dominated by the military. How exactly the shift from subsistence

to markets will unfold should be the subject of further studies, and Thomas' *Moving towards Markets* article (2019) concludes with a multi-disciplinary research agenda.

As becomes clear from this review the actual South Sudanese state is a shaky construction totally based on oil revenues and bought loyalties. Moreover, at the time of writing the Covid-19 pandemic threatens the world economy. Oil prices have dropped (in April 2020 with more than 100%). Prices will rise again but with the *greening* of economies it can hardly be expected that oil-prices will reach previous high levels. If the price of oil remains at a relatively low level, it may be feared (following the line of thinking in the book under review) that the shaky construction mentioned above becomes more ramshackle, or might even collapse altogether and plunge back into a situation in which violent peripheries take their chances in challenging the state capital.

Sjoerd Zanen^a

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a MDF Training & Consultancy-affiliate, Ede, The Netherlands; E-mail: sjoerd.zanen@gmail.com

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