

Comprehensive Anti Apartheid Act, (not Bill), and the Human Sciences (not Rights) Research Council.

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Sudan's Blood Memory: the legacy of war, ethnicity, and slavery in early south Sudan by STEPHANIE BESWICK

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In this book, Stephanie Beswick takes on the ambitious task of reconstructing the pre-colonial history of South Sudan's largest ethnic group, the Dinka. Based on interviews with approximately 200 southern Sudanese, and on written, linguistic and archaeological evidence, she gives a lucid and largely convincing account of the migrations and expansion of the Dinka, starting in the fourteenth century, as they began to 'forge out' (p. 4) of central Sudan towards the south. Driven by ecological stress and pressure from the Nubian Christian kingdom of Alwa (p. 186), they were the last of the Western Nilotes to leave central Sudan. The direction of their migrations is attributed to topography, soil types and water availability. Their success in adapting to relatively harsh environmental conditions is attributed to their possession of drought-resistant caudatum sorghum and hardy zebu cattle. Their demographic expansion was achieved principally through intermarriage with non-Dinka groups already living in the south, while their success in dominating these groups owed much to a politico-ritual system which had been formed in close contact with the ancient central Sudanese kingdoms.

Beswick's account ends in the early nineteenth century, with the beginning of the colonial era – and yet, she does not quite end it there. As the book's subtitle indicates, an important part of her purpose (even if it is only directly addressed in the last chapter) is to demonstrate the contemporary significance of certain 'historical themes' (p. 198), which can be traced back over centuries. These include the steady southward movement of the 'Nilotic frontier', which counts also as the frontier of South Sudan, and the ethnic and political expansion of the Dinka, which still causes fear and resentment amongst smaller groups in the South today. The origins of current conflicts in Sudan, therefore, must be sought much further back than in the relatively recent north–south/Arab–Christian divide that emerged under Turkish, Egyptian and British colonial rule.

This is clearly an important and original contribution to the study of the history of Sudan and of Dinka history in particular. It will also have much to offer those who bring to it a more general interest in the role of environmental change, war and population movements in the emergence of political and ethnic identities in this part of Africa. I, for one, found much that resonated with my own attempts to interpret Mursi accounts of their movement into the Lower Omo Valley in southwestern Ethiopia, and I was sent scurrying to the library to look up some of the many sources quoted by Beswick in support of her arguments. Not surprisingly, however, the impressive scope and lucidity of her account,

cutting through ‘the bewildering ethnic complexity’ (p. 66) of the oral histories of the Dinka and other southern peoples, has not been achieved without certain costs.

First, although she interviewed southern Sudanese ‘on three continents in six countries’ (p. xii), there is no discussion of how their (presumably) diverse histories, experiences and interests might have influenced the accounts they give of Dinka history. Their verbatim comments are introduced into the argument as ‘apt illustrations’, rather than treated as texts to be analysed, contextualised and interpreted.

Second, although Beswick speculates convincingly about the overall causes, direction and conditions of Dinka ‘long distance’ migrations, she does not speculate about what these movements may have looked like, ‘on the ground’. To speak of a group ‘forging’ from one place to another (a favourite expression of Beswick’s) is to suggest a relatively large group, moving in a concerted manner over a relatively long distance and over a relatively short time span. This, of course, is how migrations are usually described in oral histories, and some may indeed have occurred in this way. But I suspect most did not – that they were the result of short, unconcerted movements, made by many small groups over a long period of time. There is nothing in Beswick’s account that could not accommodate such an hypothesis. One gets the feeling, however (and it may be no more than this), that she has been too ready to accept at face value a picture of the migratory process which has been simplified, and embellished with clichés, in the telling and retelling of oral history. If so, she has not entirely succeeded here in her aim of separating out the ‘historical facts’ from the ‘literary expression’ (p. 3).

Third, and similarly, the way she writes about Dinka ethnicity gives the impression that she thinks of ‘the Dinka’ as an historically permanent ethnic entity, albeit one that has adapted to new conditions and expanded through the absorption of non-Dinka peoples. She does not explicitly explore the extent to which Dinka identity may be seen as the effect, rather than the cause, of migration, even though the wealth of material she has brought together, from oral and written sources, would have given her ample scope for this.

Finally, by identifying ‘key themes’ which link the present to the pre-colonial past, the book undoubtedly offers new and important insights into the origins of Africa’s longest civil war. But how should we judge the historical status and contemporary significance of these themes? Beswick tends to write as though they are ‘key’, simply because of their objective, historical importance. She would undoubtedly agree, however, that they must have acquired prominence in the historical record, at least partly because the past is always remembered selectively and always recounted with present interests in mind. It would have added to the strengths of her book if she had given more detailed attention to this aspect of the matter, which is so fundamental to the way in which ethnic and political identities are created and inter-group conflict sustained, made sense of and justified.

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