H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lawrence J. Zwier. *Sudan: North Against South.* Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 1999. x + 80 pp. $25.26 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8225-3559-1.

Reviewed by Abdullahi Osman El-Tom (Department of Anthropology, National University of Ireland, Maynooth Co., Kildare, Ireland)
Published on H-AfrTeach (April, 2000)

Sudan: A Nation without Peace:

Zwier's *North Against South* deserves to be read by all those who are interested in contemporary Sudanese politics. In its current length of eighty pages, it is understandable that it may be too concise for the expert. Nonetheless, it is more than adequate for young readers and others who are looking for a concise portrait of the current conflict in the Sudan.

The author lays the ground for his discussion by giving brief synopses about the country, its land, people, economy and history. Throughout these introductory notes, the author refers aptly to the historic peculiarities which have contributed to the current complexity of the conflict.

Rightly so, it is the conflict which has monopolised the attention of the author and has thus dominated the rest of the book. Full credit is certainly due the author for the lucid presentation of one of Africa's most complex problems in such a small space.

For the sake of debate, let me note a few points where I felt most challenged in the book. On page sixteen, the author narrates: "A significant cluster of traditionally non-Muslim groups, collectively called the Nuba People, live in the Nuba Mountains of central Sudan. They have cultural ties to peoples in Chad and in countries west of Sudan." The Nuba are separated from west Africa by a number of *less Arabized* ethnic groups in Darfur and Kordofan; notably the Fur, the Masalit, the Meidob, the Zaghawa, the Birgid, etc. Given the weakness of cultural ties between the Nuba and these groups, it is hard to conceive of strong connections with those further away in Chad and West Africa. If the Nuba are to be related to others, then it is to the Nubians of northern Sudan that we should be looking at first. Strong connections between the two peoples exist, corroborated by folklore, linguistic and historic evidence. The denial of this link, at least in northern Sudan, is part and parcel of the ideology which feeds into the current conflict in the Sudan.

On page 24, the books reads: "Unlike the famine in Ethiopia, Sudan's most recent famine hasn't resulted from drought alone. It's a disaster caused by people." As a matter of fact, the consensus now is that famines are human disasters and cannot be attributed to nature. This applies to recent Ethiopian famines as well as Sudan's.

Further on, the book states: "No public concerts are held in the Sudan, for example and movie theaters and dance clubs are illegal" (p. 27). This passage is hard to sustain. Concerts and movies are widely used to enhance the image of the government and to enforce its ideology. Reminiscent of Mandela's public celebrations, El-Bashir has often danced in public surrounded by his supporters, journalists and camera persons. I hasten to add that it was Nimeiri who first elevated public dance to the pinnacle of the state. In his latter years in office, dance became an important strategy of his image making and no presidential concert was complete without it.

As I alluded to earlier, the book contains an excellent summary of the history of the Sudan. I was, however, struck by certain passages: "The north had dealings with cultures that kept written records – the Egyptians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans" (P.28); "The people of Kush worshipped Egyptian Gods and adopted Egyptian ways of burying the dead ..." (P.29); "Drawings that depict everyday life in early Egypt can be found inside the pyramids in northern Sudan (p.29); and "some people speculate that the writings resembles Greek" (P.32). It is not the contents of the passages which are worrying. Rather, it is what they ultimately lead to: an appropriated history that is lacking in originality. Irrespective of the intention of the author, this approach fits well within the Eurocentric school which denies history to non-Europeans. If the descendants of the kingdom of Kush find this analysis wanting, I refer them to their fellow citizens in the south. Although they too can claim the Kingdom of Kush, the very existence of their history

is rendered problematic by the same approach. Thus, the author writes: "By contrast (to the northern Sudanese), it is not even possible to say which of the present-day southern people had ancestors living in the Sudan 1,500 or 2,000 years ago" (P.28). It is unrealistic to expect the author to cover the whole gamut of history which covers the present day northern Sudan. Nonetheless, and if conclusions affecting the present people are to be made, reference should have been made to rival schools of history. In particular, I am referring to those schools which maintain that the River Nile civilisation was the work of Nilotic black people, many of whom have since moved elsewhere. Moreover, in our search for cultural correlates regarding the present central and southern Sudanese, we should look north long before exploring linkages with those beyond the western borders of the country.

In some ways, the book has succeeded in highlighting the positive role of the international community, particularly in containing the conflict and its outcome. However, this is not matched by adequate coverage of the international dimensions of the emergence, evolution and perpetuation of the conflict. Deceptively as it may be, Sudan has often been portrayed as devoid of strategic importance. The story of its conflict might, however, indicate otherwise. The colonial history of Sudan involving the Turks, the Egyptians and the British is laden with strategies, policies and actions that contributed to the present conflict. Contemporary regional and international politics in the arena of cold war, Nile water, Christian-Islamic rivalries, etc. have all colluded in the dynamics of political co-existence in the Sudan. Careful consideration of these issues is crucial for accurate reading of the present conflict in Sudan. Exploring these issues should not, however, blind us from exposing the short-sightedness of contemporary Sudanese leaders and the dismal, if not outright negative, role they played and continue to do so in bringing peace to the country and its blighted population. I presume that the mandate of the book stipulates clarity, precision and conciseness. These are indeed virtues which can clearly be identified in the book. Those who are interested in pursuing this issue with further depth, are normally referred to other sources. It is here that the book falls short of expectations. The Selected Bibliography contains nine entries, half of which would not pass any rigorous scholastic test. Perhaps this shortcoming will be addressed in the coming editions of the work.

In general, this book is an excellent title that is useful for most readers ages 10 and up.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Abdullahi Osman El-Tom. Review of Zwier, Lawrence J., *Sudan: North Against South.* H-AfrTeach, H-Net Reviews. April, 2000.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3991

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.