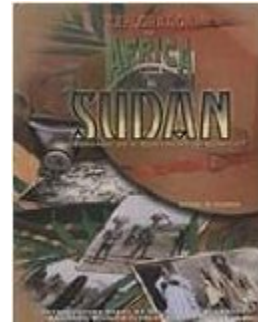


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel E. Harmon. *Sudan: Crossroads of a Continent in Conflict*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001. 144pp. Ages 12 and up. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7910-5453-6.

Reviewed by Tim Carmichael (Michigan State University)
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It is unfortunate that Chelsea House titled a book series “Explorations of Africa: the Emerging Nations.” “Explorations” conjures up images of Indiana Jones, and “Emerging Nations” makes it sound like certain countries have just recently been formed. Nevertheless, for this series Daniel Harmon has put together an interesting monograph on Sudan, including more than forty great black and white photographs culled from the Royal Geographical Society’s archives. My reactions to the book were highly mixed, as I detail below. At the end of the review I muse a bit about the publishing of Africa books for young readers, a field which seems to me to be beset with serious problems.

The preface of Harmon’s *Sudan: Crossroads of a Continent in Conflict* was penned by Dr. Richard E. Leakey, here described as Chairman of the Wildlife Clubs of Kenya Association, and titled “The Dark Continent.” It is a general essay, containing no specific references to the content of the rest of the book. Despite the preface’s unfortunate title, and Leakey’s tendency to tap into and reinforce ideas about Africa being a no-man’s land where great adventures can be undertaken, the general message for young readers is good on several levels. First, the overriding idea is that we know very little about Africa, both in the past and the present. Second, a constant effort is made to propose how a greater knowledge of Africa’s past and present is relevant and important to the rest of the world today and in the future. Third, it seems to be geared at the right level to convey moderately large ideas in a comprehensible way to young readers. Beginning a children’s book on Africa with the messages Leakey lays out is proper and long overdue. It is regrettable, however, that the preface does not specifically address the content of the rest of the book and therefore provide a

preparatory framework to launch young readers into the following story and make it easier for them to follow.

The bulk of *Sudan* is primarily straightforward political history, in which Harmon makes an admirable effort to bring out the African side of the story. Also, the apparently obligatory first chapter on geography goes beyond the usual format of environment, rivers, mountains, climate, etc. It actually links geography to history and human experiences, thereby making it relevant to the larger narrative, if not also more interesting on its own. Unfortunately, it contains language like “This desolate land provided the Egyptians with an effective barrier between their civilization and the unpredictable warrior tribes of the African interior” (p. 28). This outdated image of Africans is reinforced in numerous places throughout the book, where “native(s)” and “primitive” continually reappear.

Chapter Two, “Early Kingdoms,” provides a brief overview of the histories of Nubia, Egypt, Kush, and Funj. Then in the following chapter “The Europeans Arrive.” The scene is properly set with an introduction on Sudanese-Egyptian relations, Muhammad Ali, and the slave trade. However, the rest of the chapter relates, often through extensive quotation of nineteenth century travelers, how much many Europeans disliked Sudan and how difficult and hazardous they found life there. The next six chapters cover the battle against the slave trade; the Suez Canal; the Mahdist “revolt;” Major General Gordon; the Condominium government; the development of a “Southern Policy;” Independence and subsequent events. These chapters are generally fine.

Chapter Ten, “The People of Sudan,” starts off nicely with a reference to the great oud [1] master Hamza El

Din, then paints a probably overly-optimistic picture of Sudan's "melting pot" of peoples and cultures. However, it also includes a section on old customs with a lengthy quotation about a European breaking up an alleged human sacrifice ceremony in 1926. Harmon salvages a brief historiographical lesson from the quotation, pointing out that it "depict[s] the tension between native Africans and European interlopers" (p. 120). Nonetheless, the space he spent on this incident from seventy-five years ago, in a section subtitled "Old Customs Survive," was unnecessary. And if it had to be included, a little more contextualization about European attitudes at the time—to help students understand exactly what was going on—would have been welcome. Finally, the 11th chapter "Sudan Today" concludes the main text of the book. (Though the chapter is fine overall, it begins with the ridiculous statement that "Despite independence, life in many African nations has changed little since the mid-20th century.")

A chronology of Sudanese history is sandwiched between Harmon's story and Deirdre Shield's "World Without End," a short paean of the Royal Geographic Society. This essay's many casual references to people and places assume too much prior knowledge for young readers. Also, like Leakey's preface, it has no direct connection to the text of the book, other than its mention of the RGS's archives from which the book's numerous photographs were taken. According to an inset in the credits, most of these images are being published here for the first time.

The photos, generously distributed throughout the book, are really excellent, but they are usually not directly relevant to nearby text (the photos in the "The People of Sudan" chapter are a partial exception). These images are great historical sources, and for me were by far the most exciting and interesting aspect of the book. However, many of them are of black Southerners in the early twentieth century while the book's coverage is much broader in time, space and topic. Although there seems to have been some attempt at topical and regional variety, it is minimal, and without careful guidance the dominant theme of these images will only reinforce inaccurate Western stereotypes about "primitive" Africa.

The captions that accompany the pictures only exacerbate the problem. On page, 44 readers learn that "A tribesman's [sic] entire household possessions comprise a few gourds, some baskets and pots, and a plank bed." That may perhaps have been the case on occasion in 1904, when the photo was taken, but it is 2001 now and the entire world is a different place. More egregious is "The Nuba rank among the most primitive tribes of the Sudan,"

(accompanying another 1904 photo of a Nuba village, pg. 51) I will not list other examples, but I believe that in such books it is profoundly misleading to include photographs from the early twentieth century and to attach comments about what present-day life is like anywhere in the world, including Sudan. It should be pointed out that the photo captions do not seem to have been written by Harmon himself (and I assume he had little if anything to do with their placement throughout the book). Yet their disjuncture in mood and style from his text is notable and should have been fixed by the editor.

As with every other Africa country study book for young readers that I have seen, *Sudan's* bibliography is comprised of primarily outdated monographs, and nearly all the sources are inappropriate for the targeted age group. I wonder if, in such books, a list of articles or online materials would be more useful, and if such a bibliography would better encourage and facilitate further research by youngsters intrigued by what they had just read. Were I a 12-year old, and intrigued by this book, I imagine I would be far more likely to go to a listed web site or short article than to a volume titled *The Opening of the Nile Basin: Writings by Members of the Catholic Mission to Central Africa on the Geography and Ethnography of the Sudan, 1842-1881*. If such books must be listed, an abridged bibliography would be a good thing.

While I have highlighted some of the problems of content, I want to point out that there are definitely positive features and overall I enjoyed the book, on different levels and in different ways. The organization is fine, and Harmon includes and explains broader anthropological, geographical, economic and historical concepts that help to make better sense of the events he narrates. In other words, he does not simply tell a boring names-and-dates history (though there are plenty of those), but writes at a level that could challenge a curious and thinking young reader to work through some new ideas in his or her head. Indeed, at an "intellectual level" this is the sort of text I would like to use were I teaching 12-13 year olds. And so much could be done with the great photographs!

Harmon's *Sudan* could have been really good, so why was it not? My inclination is that I am being too hard on it because I read it as someone who teaches university students. When I have three or four classes of 30 students in the same term, like other teachers I come to have some idea of what they know and do not know. Through class discussions and assigned papers about Latin/South America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, I tap into the images and ideas they have about other parts of

the world. In the case of Africa, which is my primary research focus, students often arrive in my class thinking it is a country, not a continent. What they think beyond that is understandable, but usually wrong. This is at the college/university level.

Therefore, when I read children's books about Africa, like the one under review, I see a golden opportunity to begin to try to change the way American youngsters view and think about the rest of the world. When such books use language that in university circles is pretty much universally regarded as outdated and belittling, higher education will be made more difficult later for both teachers and students when the latter arrive in the classroom speaking that language.

When it comes to teaching about Africa, university teachers want to know what works and what does not, and teachers at other levels want to know how better to integrate Africa instruction into their curricula, and what works and what does not. My teaching experience indicates that (Africa and all other) books and articles that set out a theme or argument at the beginning, and sustain/address it throughout the remaining text, are often easier to follow and their lessons more deeply learned. Once students get the concepts, the details begin to fall into place. Books that are divided into chapters on geography, history, culture, religion, education, cuisine, women, etc., may excite readers here and there, but in the end it is often just a few (probably sensationalist) details that are remembered.

Harmon's *Sudan: Crossroads of a Continent in Conflict* is one of the better Africa books for young readers that I have seen, but there are still regrettable problems that could have easily been fixed. Since Harmon is not an Africanist (at least according to his biographical blurb and the titles of the majority of his other published books), the burden of responsibility for major flaws would seem to fall upon Chelsea House, which paid for and published the book. This raises the question of choice of author and editor.

It is my impression that many (most?) of the authors of children's books about Africa are not Africa specialists, rather professional writers who do research on a topic or country and then write the book. Perhaps contracting with professional writers rather than locating a topical specialist is easier for the Press. It seems likely to me, though, that Western and Western-based Africa specialists are also at fault because we often fail to get our knowledge of Africa out to a broader audience.

I would like to suggest that children's literature would benefit if mechanisms were put in place to link publishers and Africa specialists interested in writing or editing textbooks for younger readers. Better books would be easier to use in class, and "ideally" they would eventually help reduce America's profound ignorance about Africa.

I would also like to ask the question of whether it is possible for a Press to contract with the writers of (apparently) standard prefaces and afterwords for particular book series, so that editors are able to take the basic piece and recraft it slightly for each volume in the series. I do believe that a preface or introduction should be a lead in to a book, and an afterword should flow from it. And if a 12-year old American is interested enough (and able) to read a 140 page monograph on Sudan (or any other "far away" country), then he or she is capable of learning to expect some coherency in a book, as well as beginning to learn more about critical reading, perhaps in conjunction with a newspaper or magazine reading (or TV news watching) unit.

In the end, if *Sudan* had enjoyed the benefit of a topically more knowledgeable editor it could have been a solid resource. But I suspect editors of children's books who know a lot about Sudan or Africa are few and far between. In such cases it might be worthwhile to have an Africa or country specialist read and comment on the manuscript, with the understanding that it is geared to readers at such and such a level. Were that done in this case, many of the rough spots that marred an otherwise generally fine book could easily have been smoothed.

I invite reactions to any of the points, questions or statements I have made above. Personally, I would be interested in reading what teachers at different levels and persons in the publishing industry think. The issues surrounding Africa literature for young readers are myriad, and it seems to me that the potential scope for discussion is huge. Here, I have sought only to highlight what seem to me to be some of the most obvious and widespread problems that I have seen in this and other such books.

Notes

[1]. Ouds are musical instruments with six double-strings and a pear-shaped body. For a concise history of the instrument, see the liner notes in Hamza El Din's CD *Lily of the Nile* (Water Lily Acoustics, 1990) which I also recommend for its beautiful music.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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