

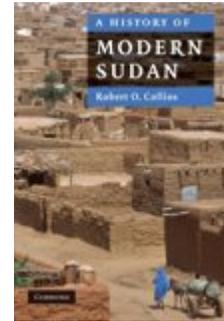
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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert O. Collins. *A History of Modern Sudan.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 331 S. \$72.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85820-5; \$27.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-67495-9.

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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (March, 2010)



R. Collins: A History of Modern Sudan

Robert O. Collins, who died on April 11, 2008, sets the following statement into the first paragraph of the preface: “Now in the twilight zone of my life I have sought to bring to fruition my search for the Sudanese past in a comprehensive and readable history for the general public in which my insights, interpretations, and anecdotes are the culmination of my many books, articles, and essays supported by a voluminous compendium of memories accumulated during a half-century of experience, inquiry, and intellectual challenge.” (p. xiii) The outcome of this seeking is an easily readable, fluent, and richly detailed narrative that introduces into the main lines of Sudan’s history after the gain of independence in 1956.

Collins structures the book into ten chapters of approximately equal length. The first two cover the pre-independence period; namely the Turkish rule (1821-1885), ousted by the ‘Mahdist Revolution’ (1885-1898), followed by British colonial rule (1899-1955). The further division into historical periods already establishes a focus of significance: The author merges the first thirteen years into one chapter; the short parliamentary phase from 1956 to 1958, the military rule of General ‘Abbud from 1958 to 1964, terminated by the ‘October Revolution’, and finally, as he titles it, “the short, unhappy lives of the transitional and second parliamentary governments” until 1969. The reign of Colonel Numayri, starting with the ‘May Revolution’ in 1969 and ending with the ‘April Revolution’ in 1985, is covered in two chapters, as Collins sees 1969-1976 as “the heroic years”, which brought an economic boom and an end to the First Civil War (1956-1972) and were followed by “the years of dismay and dis-

integration” from 1976 to 1985. Now already entering the period of the Second Civil War (1983-2005), a further chapter describes the formation and dissolution of the Transitional Military Council in 1985 and the again short-lived third parliamentary government, mostly under the leadership of Sadiq al-Mahdi. Through a further military coup led by the National Islamic Front, an ‘Islamist Revolution’ established the present government, whose rule Collins divides into two periods; the first dominated by Hassan al-Turabi (1989-1996), the second dominated by the National Congress Party elite under Lieutenant-General ‘Umar al-Bashir (1996-2006). The last chapter offers a perspective on the history and the present war in Darfur.

With this structure, the historical focus of the narrative lies on the oscillation of governing institutions between parliamentary experiments and military rule; the continuously evolving and devolving processes of nation-building; and the integration and disintegration of people living in a territory outlined as nation state by colonial, geopolitical interests of ‘others’ and now engaging in different ways to identify a ‘we’. However, in the introduction Collins aims more at the identification of “deep indigenous themes” to which every foreign invasion brought “additional layers of alien institutions [...] that have been woven into the fabric of the Sudanese past” (p. 1).

The main themes he highlights are size, diversity and cultural racism. With a geographical outline he describes the far distances of the nearly 1 million square miles,

that constitute today the Republic of Sudan, and the numerous variations in climate and vegetation that “sheltered an estimated 600 ethnic and linguistic groups” (p. 4). In order to bring this diversity into understandable categories, he proposes to divide them into Muslims and non-Muslims.

Based on broad historical lines Collins draws a mosaic of ethnic groups, whose entanglement into racist definitions of inferiority and superiority he sees as “one of the major obstacles to the search for a national identity” (p. 8), leading historically to unceasingly active systems of slavery and to concentrated dominance in political positions. While the dominant groups began only as educated elites in nationalist movements during the twentieth century to turn the pejorative ‘Sudanese’ into a positive term of identification, they excluded increasingly some historical lines like African heritage from the desirable elements of identification in favor of Arabization and Islamization. But although Collins admits identity to be “elusive” (p. 8), his attempt to give an overview of groups of identification becomes inflexible and even ahistorical by this conceptual link of religion, language and ethnicity, suggesting for instance that Islam is an entity that distinguishes by its presence all other elements of culture and that is assumed collectively and in the same way by single ethnic groups.

In light of this analytical flaw a critical aspect appears regarding the way history is told here: Collins limits the references and footnotes in the 300-page book to two pages source citation of unpublished documents, newspaper articles, and fairly known articles, extended by a list of general references, and maps and pictures mostly taken from the Sudan Archive at Durham University. Thus he bases the strength of historical evidence in this publication mainly on the professional competence he represents; in other words the authoritative voice resulting from his biography and his previous publications.

Since 1956 Robert O. Collins had been in the Sudan regularly, where he “was present when many of the events in the following narrative took place” and “personally [knew] some of the prominent political players” (p. xiii). In this way, he was both professionally and personally wedded to the Sudan, ‘obsessed’ with it, as he writes. Many books on the history of Sudan followed. Apart from his facilitation of studies and research of numerous southern Sudanese scholars, his active involvement as academic was honored with the Order of Sciences by the former Sudanese president Numayri in 1980. In later years he was also in demand as consultant for the U.S. government on its Sudan and counter-terrorism policy.

With the book “Alms for jihad”, again co-authored by J. Millard Burr, he contributed to the debate on ‘international terrorism’, providing an analysis of Islamic charities and their financial links to terror networks. Its potential influence - and the limitedness of academic power - became apparent, when the wealthy Saudi Arabian Khalid bin Mahfouz filed a libel case in Great Britain against Cambridge University Press, which complied, paid a settlement and destroyed all unsold copies in the country.

Carried by this vita and in spite of its title as ‘a’ history, the decisive tone of the narrative presents a ‘factualizing’ history, not a reflection on consciously interwoven interpretations of first-, second- and third-order observations. Collins thus neither attempts nor comes near a compromise between post-modern doubts and the classical historiographical style of certainty. Nevertheless, as intended by Collins, the book’s importance lies in the descriptive clearness and stylistic coherence of a narrative full of details and insights, that provides a widely intelligible guide of orientation in the wide landscapes of Sudanese recent history. It is as such indeed an impressive result of a lifetime of critically involved research.

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Citation: Enrico Ille. Review of Collins, Robert O., *A History of Modern Sudan*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. March, 2010.

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