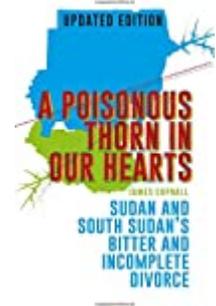


James Copnall. *A Poisonous Thorn In Our Hearts: Sudan and South Sudan's Bitter and Incomplete Divorce.* Updated edition. London: Hurst, 2017. Maps. xxix + 317 pp. \$27.50, paper, ISBN 978-1-84904-830-9.



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If I were a diplomat about to be posted in Khartoum or Juba, it would be difficult to imagine a more useful book than James Copnall's *A Poisonous Thorn in Our Hearts: Sudan and South Sudan's Bitter and Incomplete Divorce*. Copnall has a broad understanding of Africa, having served as the BBC Africa editor and the BBC Sudan correspondent from 2009 to 2012. In this book, he presents the views of politicians, scholars, artists, journalists, and other experts. He also offers creative ways to inform his reader of all aspects of Sudanese life and politics. In the second chapter, "People and Identity," for instance, he introduces short vignettes from ordinary Sudanese. For anyone who wants a more "serious" understanding of the country, these vignettes allow Sudanese to tell their own stories only lightly mediated by an outsider.

As a united state, Sudan was a large and complicated country. Experts lamented the tendency to reduce its central narrative to that of a conflict between an Arab north and Christian south. Given the country's bewildering complexity such a short-

hand was understandable. Copnall's book, however, provides a welcome and accessible introduction to these complexities. In this comprehensive examination of Sudan and South Sudan, both countries are given equal treatment in chapters titled "People and Identity," "Politics," "Economy," "Development," and "Insecurity." Two additional chapters consider the countries' relationship with the outside world ("The Sudans and the World") and the challenges of their now-separate existence ("The Sudans"). In the most recent edition of Copnall's book (first edition was published in 2004), a new preface and afterword have been added to the text.

Sudan *was* once Africa's largest country in terms of territory, but the country was fractured along many ethnic, political, and religious lines. Prior to its independence from Great Britain in 1956, Sudan experienced long periods of violence and war. The 2005 signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in the South and the military (and sometimes Islamist) regime

in Khartoum promised an end to the conflict. Following a referendum and a declaration of independence in July 2011, South Sudan seceded from the North in one of the continent's rare instances of border change. But as Copnall says, "splitting Sudan in two did not resolve its many problems" (p. 245).

Copnall observes that the war in South Sudan "mutated into a dizzying array" of local conflicts and power struggles (p. xxvi). Meanwhile, the rump state of Sudan looked ever more vulnerable, denuded as it was of substantial oil revenues and having presided over the country's dismantling. Even this "updated edition" does not include the events that led to the coup that deposed President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019. But the author correctly anticipates Bashir's imminent demise. Copnall successfully and convincingly navigates Sudan's many challenges, from identity (specifically both countries' ethnic and religious diversity) to economic matters (and most specifically the conundrum of resource exploitation). Sudan demonstrates that oil is a curse, a frustratingly irresistible source of patronage, and perhaps a route to development—if only the countries' leaders would make the right choices.

Indeed, it is difficult not to wish for better leadership in both Sudans. On two separate occasions at both ends of the book, Copnall observes that there was not a single day of peace while President Bashir was in office in Khartoum. He also documents the irony of how, having participated in South Sudan's liberation from Khartoum, members of South Sudan's opposition now "fear for [their] life" from the regime in Juba and seek refuge in Khartoum (p. 62).

On the other hand, it seems unlikely that any single individual—no matter how virtuous—can be counted on to bring peace to such complicated countries. It is easier to point to individuals (and their respective regimes) as the source of violence and instability rather than an abstraction such as the state. But the region appears to be especially

relevant in this question insofar as, as Copnall demonstrates, the secession of South Sudan has merely *reproduced* the violence rather than resolved it. South Sudanese may be grateful for their separation from Khartoum's reach but they must now contend with their own internal conflicts as well as the arrogance of their leaders. As one of my graduate students, Patrick Wight, has pointed out, the minority Nuer now regard the majority Dinka as "the new northerners."

Copnall describes the many tensions and contradictions that together comprise the realpolitik of governance in Sudan—and all the actors that a visiting diplomat or graduate student might want to be informed about: the Islamists, the hardliners, the pragmatists, the rivals within Bashir's own party, and the fractured and unstable coalitions that, consequently, will make up any regime now or in the future. On top of this, there is the geographic expanse of the country; the diversity in religious, ethnic, and cultural terms; and the wars and opportunistic rebels that pop up and multiply with every concession made or sign of weakness. Copnall observes the chauvinists in both the North and the South who regarded the British amalgamation of North and South as a historic error, as well as the nationalists who insisted that all available means should be employed to keep the country together. He regrets the tendency to centralize power as much as he worries about the centrifugal forces that still threaten to pull each country apart. The chapter titled "Development: Where Does the Money Go?" has plenty of anecdotal insights on the contradictions of corruption: the way it diverts resources from development, on the one hand, and the manner in which it remains central to the functioning and coherence of state and society, on the other. And yet Copnall concludes that peace in Sudan is a matter of choices.

Sudan's politicians at once are survivors who have successfully prevailed in ruthlessly unforgiving environments and yet make decisions that appear counterproductive to the interests of their

state and their own citizens. In Sudan, the government of Bashir was said to be “more popular” than was assumed in the West (p. 42). Yet it also squandered any international goodwill it garnered with ham-fisted counterinsurgency efforts. In South Sudan, liberation heroes now feel profoundly entitled to rule and yet are portrayed as clueless novices who “do not know how to run a state” (p. 59). When Juba chose to shut down the oil production to make a point to the regime in Khartoum, one World Bank official became convinced that the government of South Sudan “hadn’t understood the economic implications of the shutdown” (p. 98).

A Poisonous Thorn in Our Hearts claims that the two Sudans will remain reliant on each other in the future. “Half a decade after independence,” Copnall writes, “the two Sudans remain intertwined” (p. xxix). He says that this is his argument, but the book is more of a survey of Copnall’s impressive knowledge of the Sudans and the many complications and absurdities that undermine their futures as viable, peaceful, and prosperous states.

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