

Book review: Christopher Tounsel (2021). *Chosen Peoples*. Christianity and Political Imagination in South Sudan. Duke University Press. 205 p.

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Christopher Tounsel's *Chosen Peoples* analyses the changing ways in which theology has been employed as a political tool in South Sudan. Drawing on a rich set of texts gathered through extensive archival work and interviews, the book ties together lay and clerical voices from South Sudan's many Christian denominations and ethnic groups. What is lost through this approach is the kind of nuance that a study focused on a particular place or church would have allowed, yet what is gained is a remarkable and persuasive overview that adds empirically, methodologically and theoretically to the study of religion and politics in Africa. Following an Introduction that positions the book in debates about race and religion, *Chosen Peoples* works through South Sudan's history in five chapters, each with different archives as centerpieces.

Chapter One discusses ethno-religious politics in the Condominium period through the lens of the Church Missionary Society's Nugent School. The school emerged from the colonial desire to reify Southern Christian ethnic identities as a buffer against Northern Islamic influence. During this process missionaries painted ethnic strife as sinful and unbecoming of good Christians. In a welcome focus on gender, the Chapter also describes the emerging Christian identities at this time as inherently entwined with military masculinity. A story Tounsel describes - of a conflict between two mission school teachers of different ethnicity who wanted to marry the same woman - speaks beautifully to how clear-cut narratives are more entangled in real life than they are on paper.

Chapter Two discusses the August 1955 mutiny by Southern soldiers of the Equatorial Corps in Torit. Tounsel shows that dominant assessments of the mutiny under-estimate its religious undertones while overstating the South Sudanese groups' unity. While the mutiny was entangled in South Sudanese peoples' memories of Northern slave trade and subsequent anti-Arab sentiments, it was also shaped by the religious underpinnings of the Equatorial Corps, and contributed to religious revival among its propagators. The mutiny thus set a precedent for the entwining of ethnic/racial and religious narratives that has fueled later Southern Sudanese political mobilizing.

In Chapter Three, Tounsel shows how Southern Sudanese experiences of violence and persecution under the Northern government's Arabization measures were made sense of through spiritualized and Bible-inspired narratives of suffering and redemption. The Chapter sets out to confront the claim that elite concerns over land and resources and adjacent ethno-racial dispute, rather than religion, lay at the heart of the First Sudanese Civil War. Working through a breath-taking amount of archival sources, Tounsel convincingly shows how religious resources were employed in private spaces - not just as public 'covers' for political mobilization. Pausing to consider the particular contexts of some of the many cases discussed might have enabled pushing the analysis - which now focuses on the entwining of religious and racial narratives - even further, to how these narratives in turn entwined with the politics of land and resources that are now left out of the chapter's purview.

Chapter Four focuses on the *SPLM/SPLA Update*, where contributors drew inspiration from the stories of Cush, and of David and Goliath, to make sense of and engage in debate on Sudan's Second Civil War. The Chapter is indicative of a general challenge the author has faced: to unpack narratives produced in the *Update*, it is necessary both to explain geopolitical and regional shifts that shaped military operations and allegiances in Sudan; to account for international mobilization on behalf of South Sudan; to describe the institutional politics and central persona of the SPLM/SPLA; to provide background on how both Biblical and Nuer narratives have been interpreted over time; *and* to give backstories for who the writers are whose texts are being analyzed. While Tounsel's mastery of these complexities is admirable, explicitly spelling the different levels out would have made it easier for the reader to identify key content amid the abundant details.

Chapter Five utilises online media to trace the evolution of religious-political dynamics following South Sudan's independence, when the eruption of inter-ethnic violence "debunked any notion that southerners felt a sense of pan-Christian solidarity strong enough to subsume ethnicity" (p. 115). Key themes in this era were the belief that ethnic conflict was the result of sin and that only a turn to God could up-end rivalry - though writers digressed over whether Christianity put people 'beyond ethnicity', or rather, that diversity was to be celebrated. The chapter also sets out to discuss Christian churches' affinity to political power, yet its methods render the task difficult. Reliance on archives and interviews leads 'the church' to appear as cordoned off and separate from the realm of politics in a way that, at least in light of similar dynamics in neighbouring Uganda, appears somewhat illusory. I would be fascinated to hear more about the connections *between* religious and political elites; the ways in which South Sudan's religious leaders have grappled with their split commitments to clan, ethnic group, political party, international funders, ecumenical partners or diocesan cliques; or about how audiences received the calls for peace or conflict for which clerics purportedly used their pulpits. From the vantage point of Uganda, what also strikes me is how harmonious the relationships *between* denominations appears in Tounsel's telling, which leaves me wondering whether there might have been a more complex story to tell behind that of ecumenical collaboration.

The Conclusion beautifully draws together the overarching narrative and argument of the book. Tounsel takes deliberate steps to pre-empt the reader from drawing the conclusion that South Sudanese "used their weapon against the North Sudanese racial and religious Other" (139). Yet to me it seems that this is exactly - *but not exclusively* - what happened. The Conclusion could have been more effective had it tackled the paradox which to me lies at the heart of *Chosen Peoples*: that the same tradition can and has been used to fuel both great good, and tremendous evil.

Overall, *Chosen Peoples* is a fascinating and engaging book. A sprinkling of more metatext throughout the book might have helped non-specialists follow through the wealth of detail, and a timeline, list of central acronyms and institutions, and a map with key locations and distribution of ethnic groups, would have also been helpful. The book is excellent reading for scholars of Sudan, and of religion, politics and race regardless of context. By drawing comparisons and teasing out grand themes across religious, denominational and ethnic boundaries, *Chosen Peoples* inspires follow-up: both studies that zoom in to specificities

within the bigger picture, and that zoom out to regional and global patterns of connection, collaboration and conflict to which South Sudan's story connects.