
This book sketches a detailed picture of the nature of indirect colonial rule and the centrality of local systems of power and its agents in a part of the British Empire most contemporary observers saw as a backwater. It is an especially important contribution to the growing body of literature on chiefs and chieftaincies in colonial Africa.

The author makes two important arguments on the essential nature of the state in Darfur, despite its almost continuous transformations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His first claim is about the continuity of violence as a defining element in Darfur politics, employed to extract wealth from the population, to keep refractory local chiefdoms and their highly mobile populations in check, and to generally coerce people into obeying the various projects of the state. His second claim is about the ways in which political authority and its application of violence was and is legitimated in Darfur, and the local perceptions of these legitimations.

The book focuses on the colonial state but, as the introduction makes clear, it does so in an effort to demonstrate the continuities between what is known about the periods immediately before and what is known about the nature of the current political situation in Darfur since the beginning of the millennium. It is therefore a bit disappointing that the connections between the main exposé on the sultanic and condominium eras is followed by only brief descriptions of the political developments in Darfur in the new millennium, as well as on those of the preceding period of state rule under the Sudanese Republic; these receive only a paragraph in the final conclusion. Like the sultanate and the Mahdiyya periods, which Vaughan describes in some detail, the independence period and its political implications deserved a full chapter to do more justice to the author’s well-founded claims of continuity of rule in pre- and postcolonial Darfur.

Vaughan sketches the continuities in the ways in which the British use and abuse of violence in Darfur were inspired – and, in a way, even justified – by the violence they knew to have been in place prior to their arrival. Although the techniques of violence have changed – the machine gun simply made violence cheaper and more efficient than the cavalry-based armies of the sultanate ever could have been – the reasons for its deployment have remained essentially similar. The inhabitants of Darfur expected the state and its various agents to behave violently, but not too violently. The legitimacy of the higher echelons of rule rested in part on their capacity to curtail the rapaciousness of their underlings, be they princes of the sultanate or some local village shaykh. Both the common population and members of the state elite could lodge formal complaints or direct petitions against their superiors to higher echelons of power – either the sultan on the eve of colonization, or the district commissioner in colonial times, or the leaders of the umma or National Umma Party (NUP) on the eve of independence.

Vaughan’s claims are substantiated by a detailed analysis of the interactions between various layers of state policy at the local level, from the sultan and his aba diimang, abbo uumo, firsha and lower power holders, to the governor and his district commissioners and their shartays, omdas, dimlijs and shuyuck, to the local population; and from the government in Khartoum to the governor and the various insurgent and pro-government movements. These interactions are shown in the core chapters of the book, which deal with the nature of colonial violence (Chapter 3), native courts and chieftaincy disputes (Chapter 4), territorial administration and the policing of nomad society (Chapter 5) and the transfer of colonial power to the new republic (Chapter 6). These chapters describe a
host of different types of local rule and rulers in various time periods, as well as their ever-changing levels and means of authority. Unless one is as familiar with Darfur’s systems of rule as the author is, one can easily get lost between the agawids, hakims, mandubs and maqdums, despite the extensive glossary. But this murkiness is exactly the point the book makes: the adaptation of one system of rule by another and the constant tinkering characteristic of indirect local rule in those parts of the empire seen as peripheral – be it the sultanate, the British Empire or the empire on the Nile that is the Republic of Sudan – lead to a certain incoherence. This murkiness creates room for manoeuvre for local populations and power holders to shape the system of rule to their needs, and has allowed for continuities in old power games under new names. These dynamics are shown in concrete examples of disputes over leadership and their resolution.

As well as these continuities, Vaughan craftily writes of the slow and subtle changes that occurred in the nature of rule, its legitimation, its exercise and its contestation over the colonial period. Party politics, regulated taxation, the curtailment of direct physical punishment in favour of court rule and imprisonment, and the spatial reorganization of nomad land rights all helped transform the expression of violence in rule, as well as the right to claim redress against it, in the hundred years since 1916.


How do we understand and explain when and why genocide occurs? What causes states to systematically kill parts of their own populations? These are big and important questions that scholars and policymakers alike struggle to answer. If we knew which factors triggered genocide, we might be able to prevent them through early-warning systems. Scott Straus takes on this daunting task by trying to balance large-scale quantitative studies that have tended to be superficial and miss important local variables with more qualitative case-specific historical or anthropological studies that shed light on context and detail but lack explanatory power. Instead, he explores five case studies in some depth, in order, as he claims, to build theory rather than to test theory.

Often, genocide scholars compare the usual high-profile cases of genocide – Armenia, the Holocaust, Rwanda, Cambodia and Bosnia – when building theory. Straus, however, is more systematic, as he compares modern African states that, despite a number of differences, share a number of similarities. This approach makes his claims more modest but also more convincing. What makes his study even more convincing and methodologically systematic is his use of negative cases: places where one might expect a genocide to have taken place, given our knowledge of what triggers genocide, yet where genocide and other systematic violence have not occurred. His main conclusion is that ideologies and the agency of political leaders matter, and that the ‘founding narratives’ of the nation determine to a large degree whether states respond to rebel movements and other unrest with genocide or not.