

BOOK REVIEW

Winnifred Bedigen. *Indigenous Peace Building in South Sudan: Delivering Sustainable Peace through Traditional Institutions, Customs and Practices*. London: Routledge, 2023. vii + 243 pp. Figures. Introduction. Bibliography. Index. \$128.00. Hardback. ISBN: 9780367561642.

Winnifred Bedigen's book on the South Sudan civil wars is comprehensible to the first-time reader of the ongoing conflicts. It is succinct yet retains significant detail about the origins and development of the intermittent wars. Bedigen strikes a balance between narrative and analysis, empirical evidence, and theoretical framing. The book finds its niche within a rich field of restorative justice and peacebuilding in postcolonial Africa. How does Bedigen distinguish herself in this field of study? Bedigen is not entirely new in her approach. Her thesis is that neoliberal and Western-prescribed peacebuilding strategies have failed to provide sustainable peace because they appear antithetical to Indigenous goals of justice and peace (2). However, the most striking feature of this book is its emphasis on interdisciplinary analysis of indigene-centric approaches to peacebuilding. Composed of nine riveting chapters, the book draws from history, international relations, and social anthropology to explore the positionality of Indigenous strategies which she considers to be at the core of peacebuilding among the ethnic groups of Sudan known collectively as the Nilotic Lwo.

In the first chapter, Bedigen unpacks the region's history and notoriety for conflict dating as far back as the thirteenth century. Here, we get a sense that the direct causes of the conflicts are hard to pin down, but have largely been exacerbated by imperialism, cynical political ambitions as well as social and economic inequalities during the postcolonial period (16). This *longue durée* scope is accompanied by a critique of contemporary international peacebuilding strategies that have witnessed the perpetuation of war mortalities, poverty, malnourishment, and forced displacement (28).

The second chapter is theoretical and Bedigen introduces us to the optics of cultural theory which is premised on socially constructed systems that offer peace by providing satisfactory avenues for justice to conflict victims (36). Divinity and other indigene-centric socialization processes are argued to promote healing and dialogue as opposed to Western conventional systems that alienate victims from peacebuilding processes, hence creating local suspicion of international peacebuilding agendas (54–55).

Chapter Three is both theoretically and empirically grounded. It confirms the author's decolonial posture as she engages thoroughly with methodological approaches that emphasize awareness of local lexicons and conceptions of peace

and justice. Her goal in this chapter is to expose how the study engages in cultural anthropology that visits the narratives and perspectives of Indigenous people and their attempt at peace. Here she rethinks people-centred approaches and taps into how social processes of storytelling not only provide details for her study but are also a critical component of Indigenous peacebuilding processes. Indeed, pro-decolonial studies have often accused researchers of extractive research that leaves out the agency of local people. Accordingly, this book is a purposeful attempt to compose an impact-oriented study that is grounded in African social theory.


The fourth chapter emphasizes the importance of peacebuilding through socializing processes such as food sharing, which connotes the diffusion of tension. Furthermore, the nourishing and healing properties of food are presented as crucial in the processes of peacebuilding. Other articles such as animal hides and bird feathers are also represented as the materialities of peace within Indigenous peacebuilding processes. In Chapter Five, words such as coexistence, empathy, leniency, and community-hood, refer to the rehabilitating processes of Indigenous peacebuilding through socialization and the familiar socialist systems of Ujamaa in Tanzania (117). In this chapter, Bedigen stresses the non-homogeneity of ideas related to the positionality of such indigenous systems and points out that some African practitioners have considered such systems outdated and requiring adaptability and modernization (116–17).

Chapters Six and Seven discuss the role of the youth (Monyomiji) and women (Honyomiji) in peacebuilding. These groups are indispensable to the peacebuilding processes yet international strategies often place them at the periphery. The most critical insight here is that the involvement of the youths has the potential to ensure sustainable peace by equipping future generations. In the same way, the nurturing roles of women are seen as a way of fostering short- and long-term peace. As such, indigene-centric systems are inclusive systems that are preventive and curative for conflicts (138). Such approaches are thus seen as strategically positioned for establishing sustainable peace.

Chapter Eight is the final substantive chapter, and it analyzes another historically marginalized group in peacebuilding processes, migrants and refugees. People in the diaspora, although distanced from the conflict, have different roles to play in the peace-building processes of South Sudan. Chapter Nine makes recommendations, and Bedigen reiterates her point that individual, community-based grassroots indigene-centric models should spill into national peacebuilding strategies.

Overall, the book is a well-rounded, methodologically and theoretically sound book whose literature review may also benefit from a growing body of Africanist socio-legal histories that centralize the knowledge and experiences of local people and how they construct and circulate ideas about justice and peace in the postcolonial period. The interdisciplinary approach of this book which combines history, international relations, and social anthropology makes it easily identifiable with scholars of these fields. Perhaps also influenced by her role as a lecturer, the book is well-suited for the teaching environment. It would

be a useful text for undergraduate teaching in conflict and peacebuilding studies of the Global South.

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