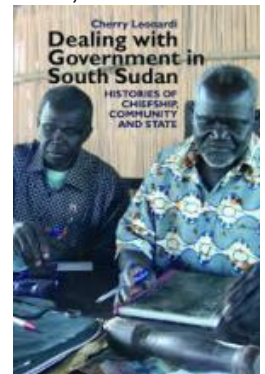


Book Review: Dealing with Government in South Sudan (2015) by Cherri Leonardi

Diana Felix da Costa argues that this book offers valuable insights into processes of state formation and state-society relations across South Sudan as well as in East Africa

Cherry Leonardi's book *Dealing with Government in South Sudan* is a detailed and rich account of the historical development of chiefship and of the state in southern Sudan. Focusing on three urban areas and their surroundings – Juba, Rumbek and Yei – Leonardi offers an authoritative account of the processes of negotiation that have paved the way to people's contemporary understandings and expectations of the state and of government. The book is divided into three sections that focus on three distinct historical periods in southern Sudan's history: from the 1840s to 1920, the 1920s to 1950s, and 1956 to 2010. While being firmly rooted in those geographical areas, the book offers valuable insights into processes of state formation and state-society relations across South Sudan as well as in East Africa, how the state is being produced and reproduced and how South Sudanese find ways to capture it. Notably, the book challenges lazy conceptions that represent South Sudan as lacking a political culture and history and offers historical nuance on a country that has often been mistakenly and problematically approached as a *tabula rasa*.



The contributions made in the book are manifold. Methodologically, Leonardi combines the extensive use of archival research with refreshingly detailed oral histories, which reflect South Sudanese voices in the making and framing of their history. But perhaps most significantly and with greatest contemporary value, through these local voices, Leonardi examines how chiefs have historically mediated and been part of crafting the state and community in southern Sudan, and importantly, it how these have been mutually constituted since the nineteenth century. Leonardi makes a compelling argument that “Just as the state might have imagined communities into political and administrative existence, so people were imagining the state as a source of protection, justice, services and resources.” She goes on to explain that “Neither imaginary was entirely fulfilled: communities remained indistinct, incoherent, fragmented and porous, while the state was largely failing to meet popular expectations,” ultimately concluding that “chiefship remained the primary means through which people sought to lever these ideals of state and community into existence” (p.198).



Photo credit: Water For South Sudan

Leonardi convincingly argues against “the idea that chiefs are simply the intermediaries between distinct, antagonistic entities of state and society”, instead suggesting these are mutually inclusive. This is an important point in understanding state formation because it recognises the agency of these individuals (and the particular set of skills they hold) in shaping the state as much as the state shapes individuals and ‘community’. Leonardi also demonstrates how the authority held by chiefs in South Sudan has never been neither ‘traditional’ nor inherited. Rather, chiefs continue to be astute individuals who possess a particular set of skills which place them as able mediators between the state and the population at large, brokering “the arbitrary forces of the state power into a source of protection for persons and property”.

Leonardi’s rich historical analysis of chiefship in South Sudan is particularly relevant to the current period. As South Sudan finds itself in a deep crisis of the state and of society, one which has deepened since the beginning of the civil war in December 2013, Leonardi’s book is encouraging in the ways it shows the resilience and adaptive nature of chiefs as legitimate community representatives and mediators with the state. The book is also valuable in how it implicitly suggests that chiefs should be fundamentally part of any future peace and reconciliation efforts as representatives of both the community and the state.

[Dealing with Government in South Sudan: Histories of Chiefship, Community and State](#). Cherry Leonardi. Boydell & Brewer. 2015.

Diana Felix da Costa ([@D_felixdacosta](#)) did her PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) where her research focused on Murle politics of identity, meanings of violence and state-society relations. She conducted long-term fieldwork with the Murle community in Boma State in South Sudan.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.