

Interview – Kon K. Madut

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Kon K. Madut is a part-time Professor at the University of Ottawa, Faculty of Social Sciences. He has taught Multiculturalism and Migration in Canada and Quebec, Comparative Politics courses at the School of Political Studies, Sociology of Work and Organizations, Ethnics and Questions of Nations, and Contemporary Analysis of Migration and Conflict and Development. He has published several peer-reviewed articles on the discourse of ethnic politics and identity issues in Canada and South Sudan. Dr. Madut was awarded a Ph.D. in Social Science by Tilburg University, The Netherlands, in association with Taos Institute, USA, in 2012; a Master's Degree in Liberal Studies (MLS) from Fort Hays State University, USA in 2007; a BA in Sociology from Alexandria University, Egypt in 1994; and is a recipient of the honour of Social Services Worker (SSW) from Algonquin College in Canada. He has over 15 years of professional experience with The City of Ottawa Municipal Government.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The scope of my current research work is based on the broader domain of Cultural Sociology and Social Ecology with a focus on ethnicity, immigration, and social exclusion. I use these approaches to examine factors that shape sociopolitical and cultural spaces, as well as the construction of human interaction within different places and in different contexts, using both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches. I adopt holistic approaches to the understanding of human vulnerability to socioeconomic, identity issues, health, and the natural environment.

I am interested in methods that go beyond perspectives to explain the social experiences of human interaction issues stemming from individual perceptions, social context, or injustice. My focus is on identifying and modeling the effects of socio-cultural, political, and environmental factors operating behind proximate or behavioral correlates. In this context, I seek to situate the concepts and determinants of socioeconomic inclusion and injustices in a broader social and environmental context to help advance the current understanding of the dynamics of social interactions within and among various social groups, thereby meaningfully contributing to an inclusive and equitable social policy.

In this respect, my research lies within the paradoxical circumstances whereby different realities increasingly mark sociocultural and political landscapes in the current era of globalization in both developed and developing regions, resulting in vast gaps between wealthy individuals and those living in grinding poverty because of unequal distribution of wealth and poor social policies.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My scholarly work has been influenced by socioeconomic, environmental, and political events that shaped my personality and character. I am a product of war, displacement, and social injustices that I experienced from my country of origin (Sudan) where I was classified, categorized, and marginalized, to my experience with migration and naturalized citizenship in a country where being Black still affects socio-cultural, political, and economic interaction and economic prosperity.

I left Sudan for Egypt in 1989, where I had my earliest experience with people who were culturally and ethnically different from me, helping me to have a sense of being in another country for the first time. I was accepted into the

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Faculty of Arts, Department of Sociology at Alexandria University in 1990. I completed my degree in May 1994, and I remained in Egypt with many other displaced refugees from my home region in Southern Sudan because of the ongoing civil war. After earning my Sociology degree in 1994 from Alexandria University in Egypt, I started writing in a daily newspaper about socioeconomic injustices and human rights abuses South Sudanese people have experienced in the former Sudan, before separation.

I came to Egypt on a scholarship in 1990 and was later followed by many Southern Sudanese who have migrated to Egypt to escape the atrocities of the civil war between North and South Sudan. As the situation with the war grew worse in Sudan, the number of migrants continued to increase, and their situation in Egypt began to deteriorate due to the lack of services and resettlement programs. As a result, most of the Western countries, including Canada, opened their doors to accept Southern Sudanese as immigrants in their countries.

Subsequently, international organizations, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in collaboration with the United Nations, intervened by accepting displaced persons from the South and North alike as internally displaced Southern Sudanese in Egypt and referred them to countries that were willing to accept them as refugees. In this process, many Sudanese, in particular, South Sudanese were admitted to countries such as Australia, the United States of America, most of the European Union, and Canada as conventional refugees.

Hence, I applied to the Canadian Embassy, which was accepting immigrants from Sudan to come to Canada as conventional refugees due to the ongoing civil war that displaced millions of Sudanese civilians to neighboring countries and abroad. My writings on social justice in a daily newspaper in Egypt, specifically about what had been happening in Sudan, my educational background, and my knowledge of English facilitated the acceptance of my effort to come to Canada as a Landed Immigrant in 1996, a category of permanent residency for people who have been granted official refugee status in Canada, classified as a “New Worker”–migrants who meet skill shortages and the requirement of being able to migrate and work in Canada. Landed Immigrant was my new identity, which I had for five years before becoming a Naturalized Canadian Citizen in 2001. These multifaceted complicated events coupled with everlasting injustices against Blacks have shaped my line of thoughts and future research work.

You have written extensively on ethnic politics in South Sudan. What was the role of ethnic politics in the formation of the state? How has ethnic politics impacted governance in South Sudan?

The experiment of ethnic politics and its impact on socio-economic and political development as well as the nation-building process started way back with claims of Arabization and Islamization of South Sudan before and after Sudan gained its independence in 1956. In sum, it is fair to conclude that South Sudan separated from Sudan because of a lack of agreed-upon coherent national identity and equitable wealth and power-sharing. The same politics adopted by the post-independence South Sudanese ethnic elites who aimed to empower their ethnic communities to assume significant roles in the new South Sudan army (SPLA), national security, and key executive positions in the country. Other marginalized ethnic groups preferred to retain their weapons due to the fear of unresolved historical, territorial, and cultural conflicts. These included mistrust among the integrated ethnic groups that had participated in the counterinsurgency campaign against the SPLA before the independence and those ethnic groups that referred to themselves as “SPLA-proper,” or those who never split from the SPLA movement until the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

In this context, the complicated unresolved cultural and political grievances between Dinkas and Nuers were particularly problematic, as they date back to the split within the SPLA movement in 1991. These included the cycle of political revenge the Fertit groups have endured in Western Bahr el Ghazal, as they were considered collaborators with the Khartoum Government against the Dinka-dominated SPLA/M during the liberation war. This mistrust led to the first massacre committed by the SPLA/M against the Fertit in 2012, as well the Nuers’ massacre in Juba in 2013, which subsequently led to the formation of the South Sudan People’s Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO), the Nuer-dominated armed resistance movement.

The competing sociocultural and political feud between the elites in the larger ethnic Dinka and Nuer communities has undermined fair representation within the new South Sudan’s army and government institutions after

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independence was declared in 2011. The Dinkas, who constitute about 26% of the population, are given the most prominent positions in the government and the army. At 24%, the Nuers came second and almost dominated the SPLA army before the 2013 conflict.

Fearing the Nuers' dominant power in the SPLA, the Dinka leadership in the governing SPLA/M party, along with their lobbying group known as the "Jieng Council of Elders" (JCE), started promoting the recruitment of informal SPLA soldiers from the Dinka stronghold of Bahr el Ghazal and the home region of South Sudan's President. These new ethnic-based armed groups include "Mathiang Anyoor"—a Dinka term, which means brown caterpillar—and "Dot Ke Beny," which means "Rescue the President." The recruitment and armament of ethnic communities have changed the dynamic of ethnic relations and peaceful coexistence that South Sudanese ethnic groups have sustained for centuries. To date, ethnic elites play double standards in politics and all aspects of advocacy and national dialogue attempt to resolve conflicts, build institutions, and a peaceful South Sudan.

What does a 'sustainable peace' in South Sudan look like? How can this be realized?

I think that a genuine quest for sustainable peace depends on prioritizing effective and inclusive security arrangements. It also entails political elites' willingness for demilitarizing ethnic militias and eliminating their manipulation as a bargaining tool for political settlements. The experiment of state-building in South Sudan will no longer bear ethnic feuds, selfish political ambitions, and recklessness. The so-called political elites should acknowledge that they are dealing with an experiment that has never been attempted before, as South Sudan has never been a sovereign country.

Further, the idea of having several nationalities (64 nationalities) who are willing to live together does not necessarily lead to a successful functional nation-state. Instead, the nation-building process would require effective leadership, compromise, tolerance, and accommodations in all aspects of sociopolitical and economic domains. Forcing diverse ethnic groups to live under oppression or imposing domination of one upon others will only lead to more violence and fragmentation.

In this discourse, security arrangements and further transformation of the security sectors are crucial in building trust and creating a safe space for settling political grievances, and for the creation of an environment conducive to social and economic development. South Sudan is in dire need of professional yet inclusive organized forces with no loyalty to political elites, regional grouping, or their ethnic communities. Most importantly, such organized security forces must be trusted by people regardless of their ethnic background, religious or regional affiliation, or political beliefs. Moreover, the country requires an organized national security organ that would effectively enforce laws, stop revenge attacks, and secure state borders from cattle theft and intercommunal disputes without being perceived as ethnically biased. The ethnopolitical elites need to approach a call for the implementation of security arrangements as a tool for socio-economic and political development in the country, rather than as a mechanism for the protection of political elites or the status quo. Further, these ethnic elites have purposely stalled the nation-building process and have hindered peaceful coexistence among different nationalities and the establishment of an inclusive system of governance in the new country.

How has the 2020 formation of the 'unity government' affected the political situation in South Sudan? Has the coalition government been successful at negotiating peace?

I think lack of political will and mistrust between the peace partners (Juba government and SPLA/M-IO) are the main obstacles to the implementation of the agreement and the formation of a functional, cohesive national unity government in the country. As mentioned earlier, these issues of mistrust are also coupled with the ethnicized politics that control political discourse aimed at ensuring socioeconomic and political domination, as observed in the role of the Jieng Council of Elders (JCE), a sociopolitical group with a mandate of empowering the Dinka to retain control over political and economic powers in the country.

In short, regardless of the challenge facing the Revitalized Agreement of the Resolution of the Conflict on South Sudan (R-ARCSS) implementation, serious application of nationally agreed-upon security reform is the way forward.

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It is high time for both ethnic and political elites holding positions of power in the country to rethink the type of nation they would like to build in South Sudan. The current model of the security arrangement and ethnic militarism may only serve short-term aims and give a sense of control of power. However, it is now evident that it cannot solve the root causes of war or avail peaceful means of conflict resolution in the country.

Further, the continuation of the tactical political approach will not build trust or address the concerns of some opposition leaders, especially those formed by ethnic minorities to defend their lands and communities from dominant ethnic groups in power. I think further delays in the R-ARCSS implementation or an alternate peaceful resolution of conflict in South Sudan, may result in a possible return to violence and inevitable disintegration of the country.

In 2022, South Sudan plans to hold their first democratic elections. What steps still need to be taken before the election takes place? What are the most significant challenges facing the transitional government?

I doubt that the South Sudan government will conduct an election in 2022 as planned because it continues to capitalize on such dire human suffering to torture, displace and uproot many of its citizens across the country. They are also aware that the international community continues to turn a blind eye to the current grave human rights abuses across South Sudan. Nonetheless, IGAD, the regional actors and beneficiaries of war in South Sudan, continue to demonstrate poor leadership over the intentional and tactical delays of the implementation of the R-ARCSS.

If anything, the government is working hard to redefine the R-ARCSS to provide for limited tribal power-sharing between the Dinka and the Nuer in an ethnic power-sharing model where the interest of the so-called ethnic majority is preserved. The R-ARCSS has become a Juba-based initiative that the warring parties would like to perceive as personal and tribal affairs, with no remorse toward the ongoing suffering of the South Sudanese people.

The construction of social and political issues based on ethnic and tribal affiliation has dominated the political arena in South Sudan since its inception. The Dinka-dominated SSPDF often takes advantage of government resources to settle the political grievances of the marginalized South Sudanese minority groups or treats them as rebels if any member of these minority groups joins or forms a rebellion against the government in Juba. Members of the SSPDF are sensitized socially, culturally, politically, and psychologically to perceive the Army and the government as belonging to the Dinkas. These lines of thinking have left many ethnic minorities in the country at an economic disadvantage, as well as marginalized and abused socially and with no room to compete politically.

Before the election, South Sudan needs a government that will protect all its citizens and secure funds to train and equip an army and a police force. The government shall build courts and jails and appoint officials who will pass and implement the laws citizens must obey. Nonetheless, the government investment should focus on recognizing and addressing the needs of citizens, providing for the public good, and aiding them in getting the resources they need. Else, any voting mechanism can be manipulated and ethnicized to serve the interest of the selected ethnic elites in power and preserve the status quo.

A lot of your work has been focused on reproductive health in South Sudan. Can you explain the programs and initiatives that you are a part of? What are the key challenges in promoting reproductive health in South Sudan?

I had an opportunity to engage in research on the South Sudan Health Action and Research Plan Project (SHARP), proposed by The Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), Amsterdam. The project aimed to increase the overall quality and accessibility of reproductive health services by empowering South Sudan's Ministry of Health to manage and deliver quality services. My engagement with health service providers influenced my recent publication about social issues pertaining to early marriage and socioeconomic and cultural norms affecting women's progress in South Sudan.

As far as challenges are concerned, I think an early marriage phenomenon and socioeconomic factors that encourage child marriage practices continue to hinder girls' social and economic progress. I also think that South

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Sudan should review its social policies to ensure that the rights of girls are protected. Indeed, some social practices directly affecting girls have started to change in villages and towns. However, polygamy (which is still considered as a signifier of wealth and economic well-being) has continued to implicate child marriage and girls' rights in the society.

At present, an acceptable discourse on girls' education is not fully recognized as human development investment and their given constitutional right. Rather, it is agreed upon that it is in the interest of the society to send both boys and girls to schools with no enforceable formal policies and legislation that will enforce girls' right to complete school before marriage.

What role have the Luo people played in socio-political developments in South Sudan?

South Sudan is known as one of the Luo's native African homes and is the place where the migrations of Luos to the east and central African countries began. South Sudan has the highest number of Luo ethnic division, sections, and clans in Africa. There are many Luo groups in Sudan, and these groups have produced national leaders who participated in politics, religious and bureaucratic institutions in former Sudan and the war of liberation that led to the independence of South Sudan. These leaders often engaged and adopted a national approach in addressing Sudan's and South Sudan's sociopolitical and ethnic problems. They never perceived themselves as servants of Luos in any of the roles they have played at national and local levels.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

I am of the view that the wave of the current world's migration crisis, conflicts, globalization, and natural disasters, along with the popularity of neoliberalism, as observed in the elimination of social and health support programs, has complicated the discourse of ethnic and identity issues in terms of social inclusion, health and contribution to socio-economic development globally. We are in dire need of approaches and methodologies that will better examine ethnic and identity issues, as well as identify the interplay between race, ethnicity, identity, and the construction of social interactions among the social groups and communities within countries of origins and elsewhere. These include the examination of human rights, discrimination, poverty, and marginalization via lenses of social justice.