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Oxford, James Currey ; Santa Fe, School of American Research Press ;
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Ben Jones



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- 1 Mark Leopold's *Inside West Nile* retells the history of the far north-west of Uganda. In particular the book describes how narratives of violence, imposed from the outside, have affected the lives of people in the region. Colonial officials, missionaries, politicians, international aid workers and, not least, anthropologists have associated the West Nile region with violence and remoteness. West Nile has been understood to be a marginal and brutal place, and *Inside West Nile* argues that this understanding has contributed to policies and actions which have themselves worked to marginalise and brutalise the place. West Nile is perhaps best known as the birthplace of Idi Amin, and since early colonial times, a reputation for violence has meant that West Nilers have been conscripted into the armed forces in large numbers (a policy which both reflected and reinforced the view that West Nilers were violent people). The marginality of the region was similarly reinforced by administrative policies with, for example, the decision, early on in the colonial period, to make the West Nile region a "closed area", forcing West Nilers south, to work on the sugar plantations of central Uganda.
- 2 In recounting the ways in which narratives of violence have translated into practices, *Inside West Nile* makes a major contribution to the historical literature on East Africa. Leopold discusses with conviction and clarity the material effects produced by the attitudes of outsiders to the region. He describes how the belief among colonial officials, that West Nilers shared in the Nubian myth, resulted in their conscription in the King's African Rifles, a pattern of military incorporation that has continued up to present. More generally, Leopold shows how a view of the West Nile as a dangerous place has helped to make the region marginal and underdeveloped (West Nilers were denied the opportunities in health, education and commercial farming made available

to other Ugandans). In more recent times, images of marginality and brutality have again re-asserted themselves, as West Nilers have had to cope with the violence of insurgent groups, the neglect of the Ugandan state and the ministrations of international aid agencies.

- 3 One comes away from *Inside West Nile* knowing a considerable amount, concisely argued, about the ways in which the narratives and imaginings of outsiders have affected the material conditions of the region. Leopold is particularly good in his historiographical analysis. He does an expert job of explaining how notions of brutality and marginality have been confirmed, not only by administrators, but also by the academic literature on the region. In chapter five of the book Leopold organises a forceful attack on earlier accounts of the “Yakan uprising”. Leopold shows how this “uprising”, dated back to 1919, and later seized upon either as an expression of the intractability of the rural population, may have been a phantasm, the product of the fertile imagination of the then District Commissioner. In returning to the source material, Leopold points to the thinness of the evidence that has substantiated later accounts, and points out how these later accounts worked to reinforce the ideas that the West Nile is a violent, marginal place. Chapter four of the book similarly demonstrates how academic work on the region has perpetuated an idea of marginality. Leopold discusses the work of the John Middleton, and though, in general, sympathetic to his work, Leopold points to the way Middleton chooses to downplay the history of labour migration, and the experience of colonial administration in the lives of the Lugbara. Earlier in *Inside West Nile* Leopold also picks his way through the racism and reductionism of many of the more popular accounts of Idi Amin’s relationship to the West Nile region. Ali Mazrui, a scholar whose reputation owes something to his work on the Uganda of the 1970s, would find chapter three of the book an uncomfortable read.
- 4 But what first strikes the reader when picking up *Inside West Nile* is the structure of the book. Leopold has chosen to write his historical account backwards, starting from the present and working back into the past. This means, for example, that it is only when we are two-thirds of the way through the book that we get to the “Yakan uprising”. And though this front-to-back approach may strike the reader as a somewhat clever device, it should be said that the patience with which Leopold collates his data and collects his arguments makes his decision to reverse the chronology of the book a largely successful choice. As Leopold suggests, going from the present to the past allows the retelling to break away from a teleological view of violence, one which would wish to explain later events in the life of West Nile region as the outgrowth of an essential aspect of West Nile society. In Leopold’s interpretation, violence and marginality can be thought of as more haphazard and circumstantial effects. By the time we reach the late nineteenth century, knowledge of what comes later allows the historical material to be treated more tentatively and with greater care than would perhaps be found in a study that followed a conventional chronology. As an historical account of the West Nile region, *Inside West Nile* is impressive, nuanced and polished.
- 5 As anthropology though, *Inside West Nile* struggles against its title. Leopold’s book seems to be much less a study of the *inside* goings on of the West Nile region, than it is an account of what has happened to, about and around the region. The majority of the chapters focus more on encounters with outsiders and outsiders’ interpretations, than on the experiences of West Nilers. Very little is said on mundane developments at the

local level. Though this concern with outside encounters can perhaps be related back to Leopold's decision to focus his own ethnographic work on the goings on of Arua town, it means that *Inside West Nile* seems to be a mistitled book (In chapter one Leopold explains that his decision to concentrate on Arua town was the result of the ongoing insecurity in the countryside. It is perhaps ironic, that the book misses the sorts of data that would have come from rural-based fieldwork, because Leopold had to contend with the realities of *actual* violence in the region).

- 6 In this sense *Inside West Nile* belongs to that shift away from studies of the local, towards a concern with the material effects of discourse, historiography, and narrative. While earlier scholars, as Leopold reminds us, may have found the marginality they sought, *Inside West Nile* finds West Nilers mostly contending with the consequences of outsiders' imaginings of the place. This means that there is a certain blankness around questions of what has been going on in the West Nile region itself, and in the lives of those who live there. The author has less to say on the changing religious landscape of the region for example, a subject which preoccupied John Middleton.
- 7 That said, I felt these absences strongly perhaps because the book is otherwise so successful in what sets out to do. As an account of how *outsiders* have described, categorised and engaged with the history of the region, *Inside West Nile* provides one of the most significant contributions to the scholarly literature on East Africa of recent years.