

Book Review

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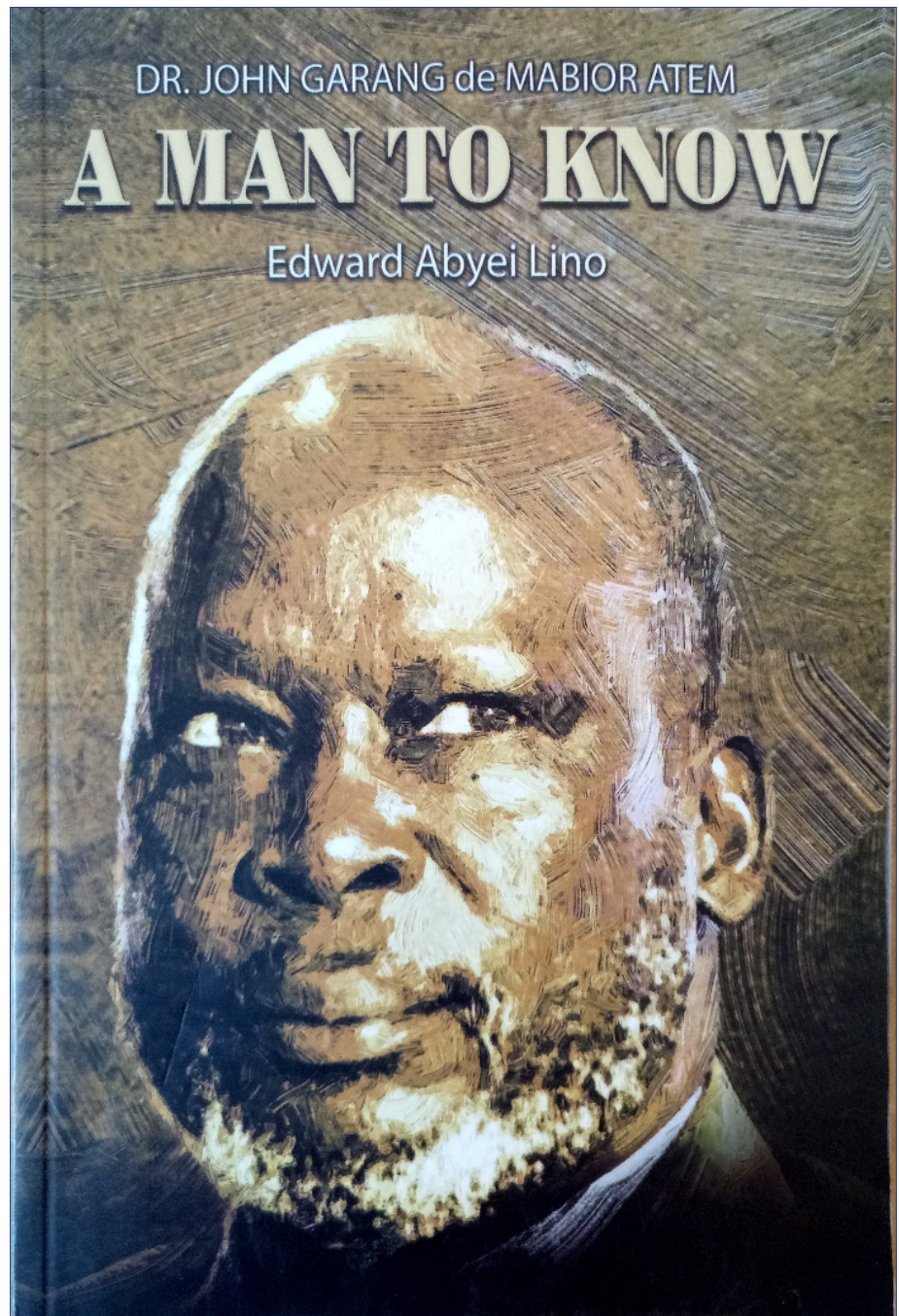
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It would be a redundancy of great proportions to state that Dr. John Garang de Mabior Atem was a man of superb intellect whose personality was shaped by myriads of events and extraordinary people he encountered in and outside his country throughout his short life. Having rubbed shoulders with great Pan-Africanists of the 20th century, it was obvious that the man would develop a worldview which entrapped a galaxy of complex concepts, including the elaborate concentric circles which he employed rather unconvincingly at times to extrapolate the conclusions of the various scenarios of his glaringly radical and contradictory New Sudan vision.

Although he loomed larger than life over Sudanese politics for more than twenty-two years, Dr. John Garang de Mabior remained an enigmatic and a polarizing politician until the end. Hence, more than a decade after his untimely death, the man continues to energize both his supporters and detractors in equal measure.

Although a few books have been written in the past several years about the man and his vision, it is obvious that more volumes will have to be written in order to arrive at a reasonably accurate portrait of the man and the foundations of his philosophical thoughts. Edward Abye Lino has now joined his compatriots who have written about Dr. John Garang in the past years. He hopes that his book, titled *Dr. John Garang de Mabior Atem: A Man to Know*, will inspire other associates of the late chairman and commander-in-chief of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/SPLA) to write about their experiences with the man.

The author is one of only a handful individuals who can rightfully claim the privilege of close association with the late Dr. Garang. A former member of the SPLM underground cell, a 'fifth columnists', if you will, in Khartoum in the mid-1980s; and the chief of SPLM's External Security organ until the end of the civil war in 2005, Mr. Lino is well-positioned to write with authority about Dr. John Garang whom he first met under most unusual circumstances. Garang, a young army officer and a best-man of the author's brother-in-law visited the author in a patients' ward in Wau civil hospital in 1974. Mr. Lino was not a regular patient. Having been accused and arrested for allegedly disseminating seditious communist ideology among secondary school students, he walked, ate, and slept under the watchful gaze of a police escort imbedded in his hospital ward.

Although nearly eight years would pass before the two men met again in a substantial manner, the indelible impression Garang had left on the author grew into great admiration for the man, especially after the author joined his political idol in the war of liberation in 1983. Mr. Lino's admiration for Dr. Garang is so profound that the author proclaimed Dr. Garang 'a political prophet' in the first sentence of this book. The book begins brilliantly from where most narratives would end, namely with the unexpected, anticlimactic death of the hero of the story. However, since true heroes do not die figuratively, the author skillfully sets the stage to immortalize his hero by promptly announcing the physical demise of Dr. Garang in a helicopter crash. By so doing, the author has not only wittingly made his seminal point that the tragic end of Dr. Garang in 2005 was only one inexorable event in a much larger-than-life montage about the man and his vision, but he has also prepared the reader for a long journey into the world of the man from the 'pastures of Wangulei.'

The world of Dr. Garang is certainly too complex for an ordinary reader to navigate

without the guidance of an insider such as Mr. Lino. However, the author, who is an extraordinarily complex ideologue and a revolutionary poet in his own right, seems to unwittingly drag a few hurdles of his own making into the middle of the road, making it unnecessarily daunting and tiresome for the reader to vicariously enjoy the author's shared experiences with Dr. Garang. Mr. Lino's unorthodox writing style and the crop of moribund phrases that crop up from time to time in the book are most likely outgrowths of his style of poetry, a discipline notorious for its indiscipline. Readers also ignore at their own peril the author's ominous warning that the book does not follow a chronological order. Indeed, events in the book swing abruptly even within the same paragraph, threatening to undermine the pleasure of reading.

Uncertainty about the book's character adds an extra layer of murkiness. The subsection in chapter one, which the author titled 'living My Riddles, and in which he complains bitterly about the neglect that he has received in the hands of both the SPLM and colleagues since 2005, is emblematic of the ambivalence about whether Dr. John Garang de Mabior Atem: A Man to Know is a memoir of the author or a biography of Dr. Garang's. Although it is safe to state unequivocally that the book, with its rather curious title, is neither a memoir nor a biography, the book's archival value is unassailable.

Although endowed with interesting insights into the heroic deeds during the years of the liberation war, the book also indicates that habits do indeed die hard. Ostentatious sloganeering of the Soviet era propaganda is strewn all over the book with no apparent purpose other than to preach the heroisms of the heroes and to impeach the credibility of political 'traitors' who 'do not know their origins.' To that end, the author bends backward at times to dig up historical events or figures in order to give local events and national heroes international context and stature. Needless to say that national heroes and peoples' struggles do not need validation from an alien power or from a distant historical event, an exaggerated ideological impulse to internationalize even the most mundane event is a potentially risky adventure which sooner than later is bound to land an unscrupulous writers in embarrassing situations.

In an attempt to give an international context to a controversial self-help scheme for which Captain Garang was in the eye of the storm while serving in the Sudanese army in 1970s, especially after the involvement of one of President Nimeiri's close aides in the investigation, the author buoyantly compared the matter to the infamous 'Dreyfus Affair.' As if wrongly identifying the Dreyfus trial as a World War II phenomenon is not embarrassing enough for a former European history teacher, confining the multilayered affair, which contributed greatly to the withdrawal of France from Fashoda in 1898, to a contest between a junior captain (Alfred Dreyfus/John Garang) and a senior military officer (Maj. Waslin-Esterhazy/Maj Abul-Gassim Mohammed Ibrahim) is to deride the weight of the most scandalous miscarriage of justice during France's Third Republic. The Affair fractured the French society so severely that renowned French novelist E'mile Zola's sincere but unscrupulous defense of Alfred Dreyfus earned him a conviction for libel. The open letter Mr. Zola wrote to a French newspaper contained libelous accusations not dissimilar to the ones Mr. Lino hands out haphazardly against some South Sudanese politicians in his book.

The author's stated purpose of writing the book notwithstanding, A Man to Know is a missed opportunity not only to shed more light on the personality of Dr. Garang, but also to bring more healing to the severely fractured South Sudanese society, especially

at this time of national dialogue and reconciliation. Although it is unfair to expect a single book to do justice to the life and times of Dr. John Garang, it is only reasonable that readers may feel the sense of disappointment at the failure of one of the keepers of SPLM's secrets to dissipate the dark cloud that has hung over the mysterious circumstances that continue to surround the demise of his fellow comrades, including Martin Majer, Lakurnyang, Uncle Uduho, Benjamin Bol, Joseph Malath, Dr. Hugo Luigi, Aleu, and others.

When all the 'i's are dotted and the 't's are crossed, *A Man to Know* reads and sounds like a fiery sermon delivered by a charismatic preacher who exuberantly exalts the lofty virtues of the 'prophet' while at the same time keeps his angry gaze trained exclusively and unflinchingly on members of the congregation whose souls he says shall burn in the purgatory as a result of their lack of faith. Whereas the sermon may be music to the ears of the choir and the gallery, but for the 'doubting Thomases', and their Gentile cousins who doubt the 'prophet' and who listen irreverently to the preacher from their seats in the back pews, their rallying cry after the lengthy sermon will most likely continue to be "Give us Barabbas!"



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