

“We are one, but we are different”: Murle identity and local peacebuilding in Jonglei State, South Sudan

By Diana Felix da Costa

■ Executive summary

Despite the Murle group being politically and economically marginalised, local and national political and popular discourses portray this group as the main aggressor in South Sudan’s Jonglei State. This widely asserted narrative ignores the fact that responsibility for the cycle of violence in Jonglei rests with all those perpetrating violence and certainly not solely with one group. While sharing an overarching ethnic identity, when it comes to issues of peacebuilding the Murle can be neither seen nor treated as a consolidated group. Rather, there are cattlekeeping Murle living in the lowlands of Pibor county and agrarian Murle living in the Boma Plateau; there are also age-sets, clans and many other differentiating factors. Accusing all Murle of responsibility for violence only serves to magnify the sense of marginalisation and isolation felt by the Murle as a whole. This policy brief seeks to address some of the differences between the cattlekeeping lowlands Murle and the cultivating highlands Murle from the Boma Plateau. By doing so it highlights the importance of understanding cultural specificities and the local political economy and, when it comes to peacebuilding, of differentiating who is responsible for a specific conflict and who has influence over those responsible.

Introduction¹

Since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, which led to the independence of South Sudan in July 2011, the main cause of insecurity, instability and displacement in the new state has been communal violence. Jonglei, the largest of South Sudan’s ten states, has been hit the hardest by inter-communal and political conflicts.

Local and national political discourses portray the Murle group as the main aggressors and the source of much of the instability affecting the state.² Such Murle stereotypes are partially driven by concrete experiences, but are also largely manipulated to serve political purposes. Government control over the Murle community is reasserted and legitimised through a perpetrator narrative, which is a

discourse sustained by prominent senior government officials, NGOs, media agencies and the general population “despite the reality of a politically and economically marginalised Murle” (Laudati, 2011: 21).

This policy brief seeks to briefly and necessarily superficially unpack some of the nuances and complexities that exist within one specific dimension of Murle identity, i.e. the differences between the pastoralist lowlands Murle, known as Lotillanya (from the Lotilla river), and the agrarian highlands Murle, known as Ngalam (which in the Murle language also means someone with no cattle), from the Boma Plateau. By doing so the policy brief highlights the importance of understanding cultural specificities and the local political economy, and – when it comes to peacebuilding – of differentiating who is responsible for a specific

1 The policy brief is based on ongoing fieldwork in the Boma Plateau in Pibor county in Jonglei State, home of the Murle agrarian community, and the findings are most reflective of Murle from Boma. The author is grateful to Mike Arensen for useful discussions and feedback on this policy brief.

2 For example, referring to Murle disarmament, Laudati (2011: 24) quotes President Salva Kiir as saying: “either I leave them with guns and they terrorize the rest of the people, or I crush them to liberate the other people from being always attacked by the Murle.” For other examples, see also Arensen (2012: 30-33).

conflict and who has influence over those who are responsible.

It is clear that further studies are still necessary to recognise the nuanced emic and etic understanding of what it is to be Murle, as well as the differences internally within the group. If distinctions such as livelihood, region, red chief clan and age-set are recognised by the community internally, then any responsive peacebuilding initiative should also acknowledge these and be very mindful of not generalising or grouping such internally different groups together. Ultimately, responsibility for the cycle of violence in Jonglei rests with all those perpetrating violence and certainly not solely with one group.

Who are the Murle?

The Murle are a small tribe of about 148,000 people (although the numbers may be higher) who centuries ago migrated from Ethiopia to the south-eastern corner of Jonglei State. While the majority of the Murle are pastoralists living in the flat open lowlands that spread from the Pibor, Veveno, Lotilla and Kengen rivers, Maruwo Hills and Labarab, there is also a smaller group of Murle farmers living in the Boma Plateau and surrounding areas.

The Murle share a history and language, and several collective symbolic categories such as common names, cosmology, legends, clans and system of social organisa-

tion such as the very important clans and age-sets, among other elements. Significantly, all of Murle society is organised according to age-sets, or generations, where men form a group based on age that accompanies them through life, although these age-sets are most important during youth when young men are searching for wives. In addition to “red chiefs” from each age-set, there is also a certain internal hierarchy and the “elders” of each particular generation have often a more prominent role. The age-sets originate from Gumuruk in the lowlands and arrive later in the Boma Plateau, usually lasting for roughly a ten-year span. While rather complex, the current dominant generation in both Pibor and Boma is the Botonya, although in the lowlands the Lango are attempting to assert themselves, but have yet to reach clear dominance against the Botonya. Some interviewees argue that much of the current troubles originate from the fact that the Botonya – the group that are most involved in violence – have not yet been given dominance by the older Titoch, and therefore find themselves caught between the Titoch and the emerging Lango. In Pibor a younger generation called the Tagot is emerging.

The Murle are very mobile and it is common to find Pibor Murle living in Boma and vice versa. There are also many inter-marriages between pastoral and agrarian Murle, and those from Pibor are often referred to as “in-laws” by those from Boma, with most people having relatives in both places. There is, however, a current narrative in Boma



where the Botonya dominant age-set state they no longer want to allow their sisters and daughters to inter-marry with cattlekeeping Murle, because this is no longer seen as beneficial to them.

“We are one, but we are different”: Murle identity

Although the Pibor and Boma communities continue to consider themselves as sharing one overarching ethnic identity, the Murle use this ethnic identity instrumentally, associating and disassociating themselves according to need, and to some extent even as a survival mechanism. There are, however, practical differences between the Pibor and Boma communities, and the Murle minority from Boma often feel they are both marginalised and given a bad name by their Pibor “in-laws”.

Critically, life among the lowland Murle is oriented around cows, which determine livelihoods, division of labour, marriage, lifestyle patterns and every part of social life, while in Boma people live from cultivation and have no cattle. “Ngalam” is the Murle term used to describe those with no cattle. While the Boma Murle use the term to describe themselves as a social group or “tribe”, and increasingly refer to themselves as Ngalam as a way to disassociate themselves from the violence related to cattle-raiding perpetrated by the “other” Murle, it possesses derogatory connotations when used by a cattlekeeping Murle to refer to those of Boma.

Cattle raiding is intimately related to much of the violence happening in Jonglei. Yet, as an agrarian people, the Murle from Boma are not involved in such raiding. Cattle raiding and communal violence also intersect closely with militia activity, and the ongoing David Yau Yau rebellion grew substantially out of Murle resentment against the Sudan People Liberation Army’s (SPLA) violent disarmament campaign, which was particularly violent in Pibor. As a result, many lowlands youth joined Yau Yau, who relaunched his rebellion against the government in August 2012.

As an acephalous society, there is no one individual responsible for taking decisions for the whole of Murle society. “Red chiefs” are those holding spiritual power and tend also to play an important role among the age-sets of both the lowlands and highlands Murle. There is, however, a sense that Murle youth in Boma have greater respect for government authority, including local chiefs, than cattle-camp youth. This may be related to the longstanding presence of the SPLA among the Murle of Boma, who have therefore become more used to some sort of government presence.

Historically, the lowlands Murle aligned themselves with the Arab government through a militia known as the “Brigade” led by Ismael Konyi, while the highlands Murle from Boma aligned with the SPLA. In fact, Boma was one of the first towns captured by the SPLA in 1985, and many

Murle from the Boma area were recruited into the SPLA. While this is no longer a divisive issue between Boma and Pibor Murle, there are political tensions between the two groups. Boma, which was previously an SPLA stronghold and the headquarters for Pibor, was demoted to *payam* status (effectively a cluster of villages) and eventually to sub-county, while Pibor was made into the county headquarters.

Perhaps the most compelling and grave example of how these differences play out are abductions of Boma children by lowlands Murle. Child abduction is practised by the latter group, but not by the Murle from Boma. For example, during the time of writing in April 2013, a young child was abducted in Upper Boma overnight by four armed Murle men from Maruwo Hills, one of whom was related to the child’s family. The child was not recovered, but one of the abductors was caught, revealing the identity of the abductors. These kinds of incidents were reported by highlands Murle as the greatest example of why they “cannot trust Murle” from the lowlands and serve to illustrate the fragmentation and tension within the Murle.

Despite the social tensions described above, the Murle from Boma have welcomed their “in-laws” from Pibor and Maruwo Hills when these have faced conflict in their areas. This may well be a matter of survival, given the sense of marginalisation the Murle feel as a whole. In some ways it is a utilitarian understanding of identity, which is situational and interactive, i.e. it is constructed relationally and can change according to specific interests. The Murle negotiate, accept and challenge identities that are projected onto them by others. Yet, once a Ngalamit, always a Ngalamit, no matter how many cattle a man may possess and even though he is living in Pibor, suggesting that identity is also fixed.

Implications for peacebuilding

Communal violence throughout South Sudan and particularly in Jonglei remains one of the country’s most critical issues of national security and stability. While peace conferences serve to get groups to talk, these conferences have to be linked to tangible measures. Better sharing of resources and power, the improvement of service delivery such as education and infrastructure such as roads and telecommunications (e.g. there are still no phone connections in Boma), controlling firearms in the hands of civilians, and disciplining the armed forces are all critical to diluting the sense of marginalisation felt by the Murle as a whole, but also by other groups.

Locally, it is important to recognise the differences that exist within and among groups. In the context of the Murle, the differences briefly discussed above serve to demonstrate the extent to which the Murle cannot be perceived and engaged in terms of an “imagined” and unified Murle community. For example, the small cattlekeeping Jie tribe living in Boma sub-county raid and are raided by the

cattlekeeping Murle. Yet often the Jie take revenge for raids and associated violence perpetrated by the cattlekeeping Murle on the agrarian Murle from Boma.

Key questions need to be asked: who specifically is instigating and driving conflict? Who specifically has the ability or influence to reduce it? Since the Murle do not have a consolidated leadership who can influence the entire group, assembling “Murle politicians” from Juba, “youth leaders” from Pibor town or “local chiefs” from Boma is not necessarily the appropriate way to respond to localised violent events. Rather, engagement should target particular red chiefs, leaders and specific age-sets from the specific area where the raiding originates.

The highlands Murle are trying hard to disassociate themselves from the violence in Jonglei and hence from the Murle group by rejecting cattle-raiding with the Nuer and Dinka and refusing to support the Yau Yau rebellion. Yet by being lumped in with those who are effectively perpetrating violence, they themselves are being driven towards violence. Similarly, lowland Murle point to certain regions and age-sets as perpetrating violence, rather than the entire community. Not all Murle support cattle raids, child abductions and violence, just as not all Lou Nuer or Dinka Bor support raids, child abductions and violence.

Rather, raids or abductions are very localised affairs. Just as the Murle from Boma and Pibor are different, if one goes even further, Murle from Pibor also belong to different regions, clans and age-sets. Peacebuilding and conflict mitigation actors must recognise and identify the nuanced differences between those who are responsible for violence and those who are not. At a higher level they should differentiate between the lowland and highland Murle, but also more specifically between the minority of lowland Murle behind the raids and the majority who are not.

Recommendations to the UN Mission in South Sudan/donors/international NGOs

- **Spend more time:** Consider carrying out longer-term missions to troubled locations that invest in building relations and trust with communities and allow for greater understanding of the situation, in place of the one-day visits that are often the case.
- **Grassroots engagement:** Invest in more local staff members so that missions can consistently and widely

communicate with civilians as well as with local government. Relationships and engagement tend to be with government officials, or with the officials who are present, while more independent information gathering will improve understanding, respect and a perception of impartiality among the local population.

- **Support to existing livelihoods:** Support livelihood activities that respect and support existing livelihoods and lifestyles, in particular those that take into account pastoral, transhumant or agrarian activities.
- **Invest in development:** In addition to peace conferences, dedicate more resources to supporting tangible peace dividends such as the construction of roads, telecommunications, schools and health centres.
- **Directed programming:** Implement programmes that fit current livelihoods rather than attempt to change them. For example, create a system of mobile schools in transhumant areas, which will ensure that youth do not have to choose between an education and the most desired livelihood of cattlekeeping.
- **Greater understanding:** Avoid portraying the Murle as the source of all the trouble in Jonglei; instead, develop greater understanding of the local political economy, including identifying those specifically responsible for violence and with power over resolving it.
- **More research:** Conduct further longer-term research into group identities.

References

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