

**‘THIS WORD, IT IS FOR MURLE, NOT MEANT FOR  
OTHER PEOPLE’: THE POLITICS OF MURLE IDENTITY,  
EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE AND OF THE STATE IN  
BOMA, SOUTH SUDAN**

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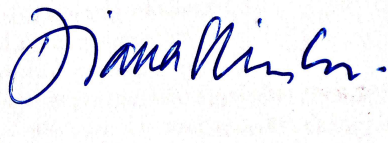
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# ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an anthropologically-informed and multi-sited qualitative study based on research carried out between 2012 and 2015 that focuses on the Highland Murle, a predominantly agrarian people part of a larger predominantly pastoralist group in south-eastern South Sudan. It is primarily concerned with how Highland Murle carve a place both within historically dominant narratives of the “fierce and hostile Murle” as well as in the new state of South Sudan. It is the first attempt to study Murle society, identity and state relations from the perspectives of the Highland Murle and from Boma.

Drawing particularly on the 2012-2014 period of war between the government’s Sudan People’s Liberation Army and the largely Murle rebellion, the South Sudan Democratic Army–Cobra Faction, the dissertation explores how Highland Murle people have addressed and engaged with the pressures of a predatory state and of structural and everyday violence; of being Murle and its pejorative stereotypes, by being the objects but also the active agents of identity politics.

The dissertation contributes to the literature on state formation by showing how populations on the margins imagine the state and find ways to lay claims to it. It also contributes to the literature on violence as a destructive and creative force, which has meaning and is formative of people’s perceptions of who they are. It does this by drawing on how during the 2012-2015 war some Highland Murle, as predominantly agrarian, made use of ‘*being ηalam*’, a derogatory term to refer to someone with no cattle, to disassociate from the violence targeting Murle people. Thus, the dissertation explores how various forms of violence interact with ethnic identity-making and performance, demonstrating also how identity politics are not only used by dominant groups as discourses of power and exclusion, but also employed instrumentally by marginal groups as a source of protection from the violence that surrounds them.

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## NOTE ON MURLE NAMES, SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION

Murle orthography is not standardized and spelling remains variable. Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to adhere to the most commonly agreed contemporary spelling as well as to the preference of informants.

I have left the original names of places as well as of some informants such as paramount chiefs, military leaders and politicians. All other informants have been anonymised. Names of places vary according to the ethnic community. For example, Maruwo is the Murle term while the Jie ethnic community refer to Maruwo as Lozidok. I have chosen to use the name of places as commonly known to the Murle ethnic community.

Spelling of names has also changed over time. For example, Boma used to be 'Bumma' and Tooze used to be 'Towoth'. There is still little consistency in how some place names are spelled. For example, Likwangole is also sometimes Lokwangole or Lekongwole; Vertet also Veriteit; Nyat also Nyath; Maruwo also Maruwa or Maruo; Raad also Raat; Kassengor also Kissangor, Kessengor or Kathengor; ɲatiliwaan also written ɲatelewaan; among other cases. I have chosen a version consistent with key informants and maintained coherence throughout the dissertation.

When using 'Boma', I am referring to the broader geographical area. The area includes Boma's small government headquarters Itti town, also known as Boma town (as well as 'Lower Boma'), and Upper Boma, that refers to the Murle villages on the top of the Boma Plateau (during the time of research these were Bayen, Jongolei and Kaiwa). The insurgency group South Sudan Democratic Movement/Army-Cobra Faction (SSDM/A-CF) is most often referred to as 'Cobra Faction'.

I refer to the Murle population of the Boma Plateau, including Itti and Upper Boma, as Highland Murle. Others have used the term Hill Murle, or Boma Murle. The term includes the predominantly agrarian Murle living in these areas as well as in villages along the way to Ethiopia, namely Itti town, Kaiwa, Jongolei, Bayen, Nyat and Nyalongoro. Although Maruwo Hills was until recently administratively part of Boma, as agro-pastoralists, the Murle of Maruwo are considered by Murle to be part of the Lowlands. While Murle themselves are unlikely to use the terms 'Highland and Lowland Murle' (and instead use the Murle terms *Lotillanya* and *ɲalam*), they reflect local understandings of origin. As explained by one informant, "That name [Highland Murle] is perfect for the Murle in Boma, we always say I am a Murle from Jebel Boma. Those from Pibor are Murle from Lotilla River. One will

say, am from Lotilla.”<sup>1</sup> I deliberately do not use *Lotillanya* and *ɲalam* because they are embedded with meaning and politicisation, as will be discussed in depth in this dissertation.

I refer to the Kachipo ethnic group as Suri-Kachipo because its members call themselves Suri. Kachipo is an external word, allegedly the Jie term to refer to Suri (Bader 2000) and has no meaning in Suri language. I will use Kachipo when making reference to statements.

Richard Lyth (1971; 1955) and Jonathan Arensen (1982; 1992) have done the only existing linguistic work on the Murle language. A few remarks regarding the Murle alphabet and orthography:

### **Consonants**

The same as in English with the exception of:

c ‘ch’ as in ‘chase’ and never ‘c’ as in ‘cat’

ny as in Spanish ñ

ɲ ‘ng’ as in ‘thing’

z ‘th’ as in ‘thick’

### **Vowels**

a ‘a’ as in ‘father’

e ‘a’ as in ‘fate’

i ‘ee’ as in ‘beep’

ɔ ‘o’ as in ‘pot’

o ‘o’ as in ‘low’

u ‘oo’ as in ‘boot’

ɛ ‘e’ as in ‘ten’

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Titoch, correspondence 25/07/2016.

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## GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACROSS	NGO operating in Boma
ARCISS	Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan
ARRA	Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (Ethiopia)
AUCISS	African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan
Boma	Main field site; also lowest unit of local government below payam
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
DC	District Commissioner (British)
DoT	Diocese of Torit
DYY	David Yau Yau
FZS	Frankfurt Zoological Society
<i>Ganon</i>	Peace
GoS	Government of Sudan
GoSS	Government of South Sudan
GPAA	Greater Pibor Administrative Area
Hakuma	The government (Arabic)
HQ	Headquarters
IDP	Internally Displaced Person/People
IGAD	Inter-Governmental Authority Development
INTERSOS	Italian NGO with a base and activities in Pibor
<i>Jore</i>	Quarrelling or fighting (without guns, eg. with sticks)
<i>Lotillanya</i> (pl.)	Term used to refer to people from the Lowlands
Merlin	NGO managing health activities across Boma
MP	Member of Parliament
MSF-B	Médecins Sans Frontières–Belgium
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
<i>ɲalam</i> (pl.)	Various meanings: lacking cattle; cultivator; geographic connotation; reference to Highland Murle people;

<i>ጦጥ</i>	‘Fighting with guns’ / war
Payam	Unit of local government, above boma and below county
PCOS-Pibor	Presbyterian Church of Sudan - Pibor
PoC	Protection of Civilians (UN PoC camps)
RRC	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (GoSS)
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
Sea Partners	Christian organisation running activities in Upper Boma
SNNPR	Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region
SPLA	Sudan People’s Liberation Army
SPLM	Sudan People’s Liberation Movement
SPLM–DC	Sudan People’s Liberation Movement–Democratic Change
SPLM/A–IO	Sudan People’s Liberation Movement / Army–In Opposition
SSDM/A–CF	South Sudan Defence Movement/Army–Cobra Faction
SSP	South Sudanese Pound
SSPS	South Sudan Police Service
TGoNU	Transitional Government of National Unity
UN	United Nations
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNHAS	United Nations Humanitarian Air Service
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VISTAS	Viable Support to Transition and Stability
VSF-G	Vétérinaires Sans Frontières – Germany



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I have done my best in providing some context and nuance to the complex relationship of the Murle people in their home country of South Sudan and so many people have helped me in this endeavour. Still, all shortcomings and errors of transcription, interpretation and fact in this dissertation are my own responsibility.

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In Itti, all the staff at Merlin, Across and JAM welcomed me, let me stay at their compounds on occasion and use their Internet. I am particularly grateful to Dr Willy Tabu, Onesmus

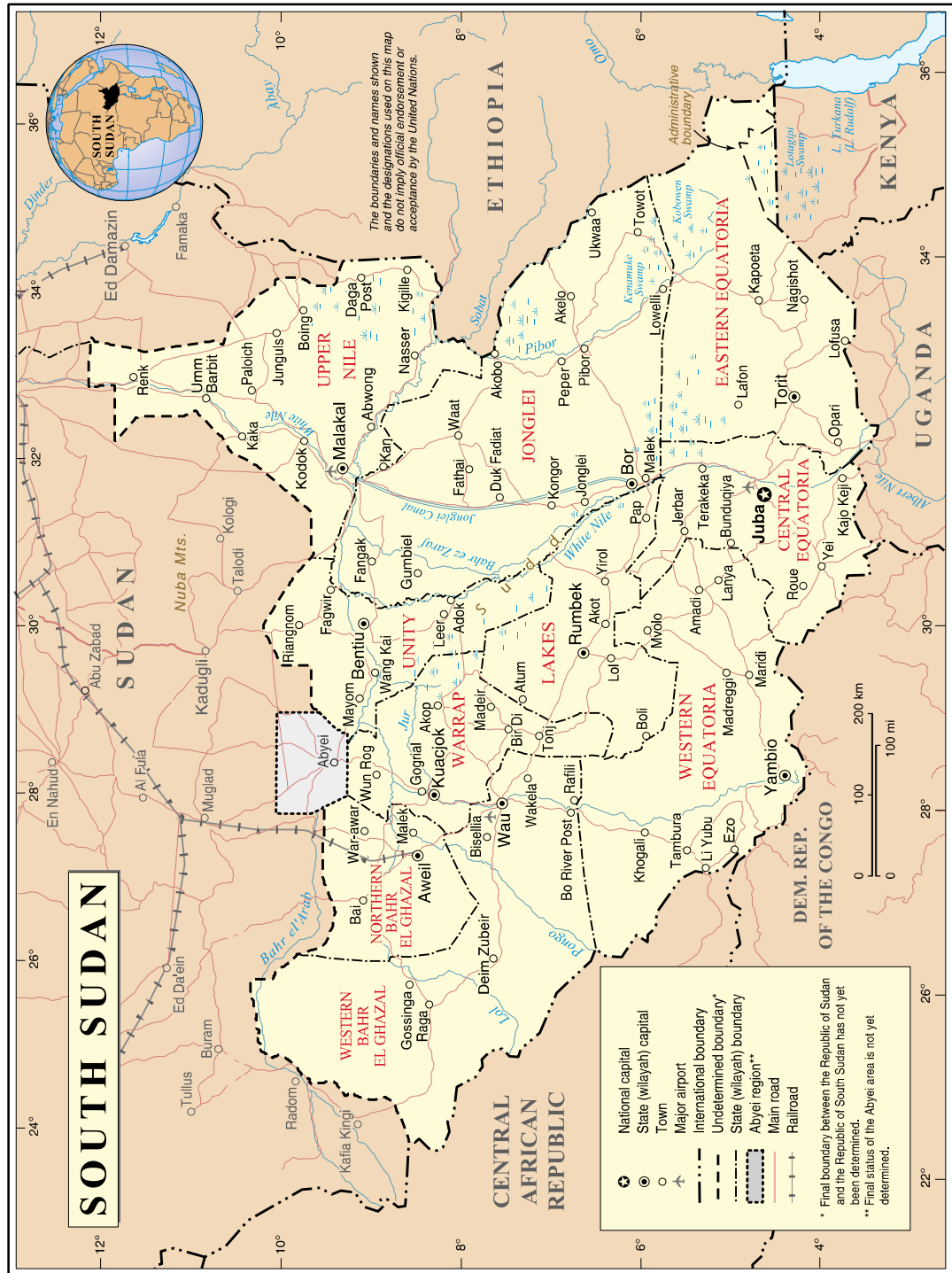
Dralega and Santino Tifho for taking care of me when it was needed. In Jongolei village in Upper Boma I stayed with the excellent and committed teachers of the Faith Learning Center School and Sea Partners. I thank in particular Henry and Donnie, but also all the teachers who welcomed me.

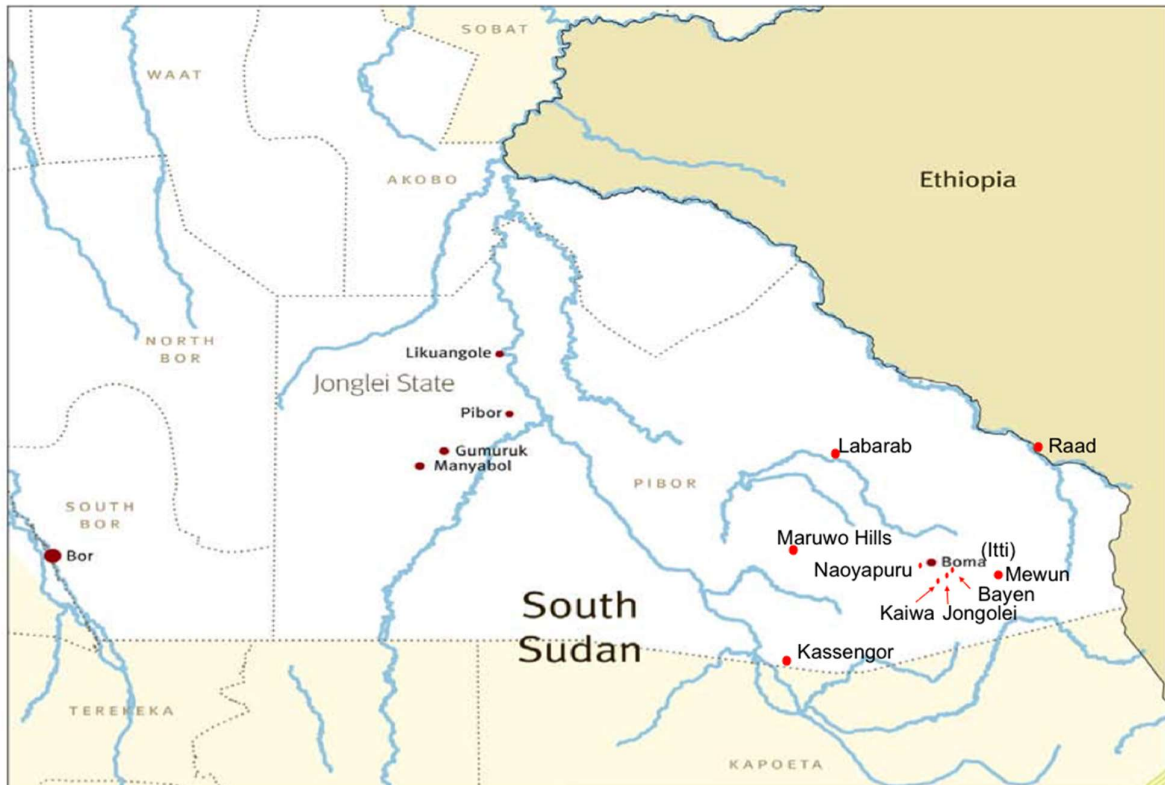
Liz Hodgkin first showed me how to travel in South Sudan. I cherish the weeks I spent with her in Isoke and I continue to find her curiosity so inspiring. Unknowingly, Liz taught me how to be in and learn about South Sudan. In Juba, Venetia Holland first hosted me; Philip Winter for his thoughtful words of advice over delicious dinners at Acacia; Kwesi Sanscullote-Greenidge for the humour, friendship and an office space at ACCORD; Fr. José Vieira and the Comboni Family for kindness and hosting me; my neighbours in Juba, Awak and Kana. Sara Gottfredsen, Mathilde Kaalund and Alberto Giera have also become good friends.

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My family and friends remain the pillars that sustain me, thank you; you're my home. Finally, I'm not sure how I would have done it without the endless help and patience from my husband Luca, who I met as I started by fieldwork in South Sudan. He has been by my side in the best and worst times. Freshly arrived in South Sudan, I met Luca in Juba to learn about Pibor, where he had lived. Luca spoke with so much enthusiasm about Boma and Pibor; for him it was his "favourite place in South Sudan", and it has certainly become mine too.

I dedicate this thesis to the daughters of Zein Kuju, Joseph Lilimoy and Blue Daky, born respectively in Raad, in Khartoum and in Arua. May they one day return to and know their home, and grow up to a peaceful and prosperous Boma state in a better South Sudan.





Map 1 Approximate locations of key places mentioned in the dissertation (adapted from Human Rights Watch 2013b).

**Song by late paramount chief ɲantho Kavula<sup>2</sup>**

*A long time ago I left Lotilla [home] to be in Maruwa [my original home]  
We've been fighting with enemies about my father's ancestral home  
Persisting until we achieved the impossible  
We encourage our young warriors to fight hard  
So that our fathers can get a place to take water with their children*

*A long time ago I left Lotilla [home] to be in Boma [my original home]  
We've been fighting with enemies about my father's ancestral home  
Persisting until we achieved the impossible  
We encourage our young warriors to fight hard  
So that our fathers can get a place to take water with their children*

*Baale e kotoɲeya e Lotilla e izi lorec oniin o  
Kiciwona ki moden maruwo yo looc ci rɛɛn baba o  
ɛmɛda matawori e baatak bɛɛ  
Logoz ween camit e orit noɲ e  
Arɔɔɲ baba e coma alaam ɲinti awodɛn dɔlya e*

*Baale e kotoɲeya Lotilla e izi lorec oniin o  
Kiciwona ki moden Bom yo looc ci rɛɛn baba o  
ɛmɛda matawori e baatak bɛɛ  
Logoz ween camit e orit noɲ e  
Arɔɔɲ baba e coma alaam ɲinti awodɛn dɔlya*

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<sup>2</sup> Sung by the late paramount chief ɲantho Kavula, on the 28/06/2013; recording on file; translated with his son Kaka ɲantho and verified by Joseph Lilimoy.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

*“Our first place in our mind, our home, is Boma. All of our culture started in Boma. Don’t doubt Murle are only one. The word *ηalam* is not the term for Boma, it is a Murle without cattle, it can be anyone.”*

Late paramount chief ηantho Kavula, 26/06/2013 Juba

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Attesting to the symbolic meaning of Boma as the original home of the Murle ethnic group of South Sudan, ηantho Kavula, the late Murle paramount chief from Likuangole, proposed to sing the song on the previous page, as a piece of oral history. In it, ηantho alluded to Murle’s common origin, language and culture, asserting how Murle people have historically identified as one fixed group.

He was speaking at a time when this unity was being undermined and questioned: at a time when Murle people collectively felt under siege by the government, during the 2012-2014 war between the government’s Sudan People Liberation Army (SPLA) and the largely Murle rebellion, the South Sudan Democratic Movement/Army – Cobra Faction (SSDM/A-CF), led by David Yau Yau and composed predominantly by Murle fighters. Chief ηantho insisted that ‘*Murle are only one*’, reacting to the ways in which the war had set in motion and made use of identity politics. The chief was referring to the debate and shifting meanings around the term and label ‘*ηalam*’, commonly used in Murle language as a pejorative term to refer to people with no cattle. ‘*ηalam*’ was utilised and appropriated differently by government, sections of Murle people and members of other ethnic groups. In its most extreme aspect, this term was being used to denote a distinct ethnic group composed of people from Boma, split from the Murle.

The Murle are a small ethnic group numbering approximately 140,000 people living in south-eastern South Sudan, in what was until recently Jonglei state, and is now Boma state (Map 1).<sup>3</sup> The Highland Murle, some 6000-8000 people, are a predominantly agrarian group, part of the larger predominantly pastoralist Murle group, who live in the agriculturally

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<sup>3</sup> Population numbers are highly unreliable. 148,000 is based on the 2010 Census (Southern Sudan Centre for Census, Statistics and Evaluation 2010, 12).

fertile lands of the Boma Plateau. Sparsely populated with some 22,000 people,<sup>4</sup> the ethnically heterogeneous Jebel Boma County is strategically located on the southern border of what is now Boma State.<sup>5</sup> Boma County is on the border with Ethiopia to the east, neighbours Namorunyang State (previously Kapoeta East County in Eastern Equatoria) to the south, with Vertet County from Boma State on its remaining borders (map 1). Until recently a sub-county in Pibor County, it was made into a county in the recently established GPAA, then renamed as Boma state in October 2015.<sup>6</sup> Boma is also home to the agrarian Suri-Kachipo ethnic group and the agro-pastoralist Jie ethnic community, with whom Highland Murle have historically held generally positive relations.<sup>7</sup> The larger and more dominant agro-pastoralist Murle, known as Lowland Murle, Lotilla Murle (after the Lotilla River) or commonly in Murle language as *Lotillanya*,<sup>8</sup> live along the plains spreading from Pibor, Veveno, Lotilla and Kengen rivers, neighbouring the agro-pastoralist Dinka Bor and Lou Nuer ethnic groups, as well as the Anyuak.

Previous scholarly accounts (1972; Andretta 1985; Arensen 1992; McCallum 2013) view Murle society from the perspective of the predominantly pastoralist plains and their small government headquarters. This dissertation is the first attempt to study Murle society, identity and state relations from the perspectives of Highland Murle and of Boma, certainly the greatest contribution of this piece of work.

This local study is also firmly situated in the wider political context of the new state of South Sudan. First, because it documents how a group of people living on the margins of the state have negotiated their position in that state, and how violence has been part of that relationship. It specifically chronologically traces the war between the state's SPLA and the SSDM/A-CF. Second, because it recognizes the role of the contemporary state in affecting people's lives and shaping their identities. Third, because of both the historical importance

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<sup>4</sup> Population numbers are highly unreliable. According to the Census of 2010, Boma's population was at 20,415 people, counting Boma (6,074), Kassengor (9,312), Maruwo (3,768) and Mewun (1,261) payams (SSCCSE 2010, 18). However, NGO food distribution lists in August 2014 pointed at over 22,000 people. Considering that in mid-2014, a large part of the Murle population of Boma was displaced, and the fact that the majority of the population from Mewun, Maruwo and Kassengor did not travel to Itti town to collect food, the numbers are likely to be closer to 30,000.

<sup>5</sup> When I began my fieldwork in 2012, Boma was a sub-county in Pibor county, part of Jonglei State. As the SSDMA/CF-SPLA conflict evolved, Boma was administratively placed under Jonglei state. When the GPAA was established in May 2014, Boma was made a county. In October 2015 the GPAA was transformed into Boma state. These changes will be discussed through this dissertation.

<sup>6</sup> Boma was upgraded to a county with four payams administratively divided along ethnic lines – Gugu payam (previously known as Boma) of Highland Murle, Maruwo Hills payam of Lotilla Murle, Mewun payam of Suri-Kachipo and Kassengor payam of the Jie ethnic group.

<sup>7</sup> Juba Archive Collection, Pibor File, 'Pibor District', G.R. King, District Commissioner Eastern District, 'Report on the situation of the northern borders of E. District' (dated 15 October 1945), no page.

<sup>8</sup> *Lotillanya*, plural; *Lotillain*, singular. *ɲalam*, plural; *ɲalamit*, singular.



of Boma in the making of an independent South Sudan and, paradoxically, the role played by the Murle ethnic community as '*the other*' or "scape-goated Murle minority" (Thomas 2015, 14) in contemporary South Sudan. As noted by Edward Thomas (2015, 13), "Murle people are particularly suitable candidates for minority status: their leaders had a long and durable alliance with Khartoum; they are isolated by language and ecology; and their hinterland economy is configured around the looting system".

While it is also true that some Murle leaders have held strong relationships with Khartoum (McCallum 2013) and that the Lowland Murle's economic system is tied around cattle-raiding, what Thomas (2015, 13) calls "the looting system", this dissertation offers an alternative account: one centred in Boma, where its Highland Murle population have developed a hinterland economy shaped around cultivation, distanced from "the looting system". Equally significant, contrary to the depictions that the Murle ethnic community has been permanently allied with Khartoum, the Highland Murle home of Boma was the first place to be captured by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) on the 8 April 1985. It functioned as the SPLM/A's main headquarters throughout the initial years of the struggle against the Khartoum government.

Throughout the second Sudanese civil war (1983-2005), part of a long history of violence initiated by colonial and independent governments headquartered in Khartoum, Boma remained the only SPLA base that was never recaptured by the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF). The second civil war led to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in 2005 between the SPLM/A and the Government of Sudan. It provided for a referendum on southern self-determination, which was held in January 2011. Then, on the 9 July 2011, after a long struggle, South Sudan became an independent country.

The wave of euphoria, hope and optimism of independence, both internally and internationally, was to be short-lived. Overcoming the longest civil war in Africa— which lasted from 1956 until 2005, with a short break between 1972 and 1983—would be no easy feat.<sup>9</sup> There are no reliable figures for the human cost of the long conflict as demographic data coming out of Sudan was poor, and war-related deaths and displacement were mostly left unrecorded (Johnson 2011, 143).<sup>10</sup> But what is certain is that its human, social and material cost was immense.

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<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the conflict see Johnson (2011).

<sup>10</sup> Demographic data in conflict-affected countries across the world tends to be highly politicized and unreliable (Cramer 2006; Karim et al. 1996). Referring to Southern Sudan, Clémence Pinaud (2013, 73–75) notes how statistics during the second civil war were politically loaded and depended on warring parties' hold of territory

The wars have also left a less visible legacy of violence: a militarised society, ethnic antagonism and shattered communities. On 15 December 2013, triggered by an ongoing internal power struggle within the SPLM (Rolandsen 2015; de Waal 2014; Johnson 2014), the country fell back into a civil war. Leaders have made use of ethnicity as a mobilising force and historical resentments were tragically allowed, even encouraged, to resurface. As noted by Ferdinand von Habsburg (2016, paragraph 2), a long-term observer of South Sudan, the “context of 2013 is anchored on decades of violence, inter and intra-ethnic communal clashes, and the proliferation of small arms, all against the background of three civil wars within half a century”.

Even during the period of uneasy peace, from the signing of the CPA in January 2005 until December 2013, South Sudan was marked by serious insecurity across its regions with numerous cases of inter- and intra-ethnic communal violence, as well as rebellions that often exploited ethnic divisions for political purposes. Although the source and type of violence may have changed, ordinary people in the hinterlands of the state continued to live with violence, in many instances directly and indirectly perpetrated by organs of the state itself.

The experiences of the Murle ethnic community and the antagonism they have faced in South Sudan, place them as the most extreme example of the structural violence and the predatory tactics employed by the contemporary state in South Sudan, thus making a valuable case through which to examine and learn about state-society relations in the country.

Despite a shared collective sense of ethnic identity, the Murle people of South Sudan have diverse experiences of history, ecology and landscape, thus also of livelihoods, legacies of conflict and even of the state. This dissertation explores the ways in which the Highland Murle people of Boma carve a place in the face of historically dominant narratives of the “fierce and hostile Murle” (Laudati 2011, 25), as well as being actors in the new fragile and fragmented state of South Sudan.

The dissertation examines the shifting meanings and instrumentalisations of ethnic identity occurring in the context of armed conflict between an ethnically-demarcated rebel movement and a predatory state, where ethnicity is adopted as a political tool and organising principle. By focusing on the Murle, an ethnic group that includes both farming

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and political allegiance. Nevertheless, sources (Hutchinson 2004, 131) point that the second civil war left two and a half million people dead, four million people displaced internally and hundreds of thousands as refugees.

communities living in the highlands as well as pastoralists in the lowlands, this dissertation is able to explore the subtle, shifting meanings and uses of ethnic and sub-ethnic labels – notably the *ηalam* label for the Highland communities, used derogatorily by Lowland Murle to denote those poor in cattle, but increasingly adopted by many Highland Murle to distinguish themselves from the lowland cattle-keeping Murle and the rebel movement during the SPLA and SSDA-CF conflict. The dissertation argues there has been a systemic ‘structural violence’ inflicted by the new state on the Murle, a context which helps to explain the activation of the sub-ethnic (or a new ethnic) identity of ‘being *ηalam*’ among the highland communities, an identity which was then subsequently downplayed as political circumstances shifted. But the dissertation also argues that Murle people see the state in different ways that at first glance may appear to contradict each other, but instead these co-exist. The thesis reveals how the state is seen both as predatory and abusive, as well as highly desired and longed for force.

This dissertation seeks to make contributions in four key areas. The first is empirical in seeking to provide insights into the specific dynamics and understandings of the largely agrarian Highland Murle people in terms of variations within the broad group. Theoretically, the thesis analyses how ethnic identity politics are negotiated and deployed by both a minority group within an already marginalised group, as well as by a predatory state that employs ethnicity as a political and military tool. It shows the repercussions this has on the collective search for a common South Sudanese collective national identity. Emerging out of the empirical insights, the study also makes contributions with respect to 1) how populations on the margins engage with the state; 2) how forms of violence relate to each other and can serve as a central element in people’s ethnic representations as well as in articulations of relations to others; and 3) how ethnic identities are political and constantly negotiated.

Over the next 8 chapters the dissertation argues that identity narratives are part of the continuing insecurity in the region, but can also serve to ensure protection. Identity politics are not only used by dominant groups as discourses of power, political violence and exclusion, but also employed instrumentally by marginal groups as a source of protection. It contends that Highland Murle make use of identity narratives, such as ‘being *ηalam*’, to protect themselves from chronic insecurity at various levels. Highland Murle’s instrumental transformation, social construction and temporary becoming *ηalam*’ was produced through the narrativisation of identity built through the creative selection of what were considered to be significant characteristics and events that could ensure greater protection, by disassociating with Murle.

The thesis provides a nuanced account of the shifting salience of multiple layers of identity, and makes an important contribution to scholarship on the interplay of violence and ethnicity. As demonstrated through this dissertation, identity-making processes are neither simply a result of state-driven political strategies to divide and rule, nor only a resort to tribal identities as a means to find refuge from the state. Rather, ethnic identity-making results from the constant interplay and negotiation of ethnicity in relation to the state and its administrative, political and military strategies and opportunities.

Perhaps, then, this dissertation's greatest original contribution to the wider scholarship on ethnicity, violence and the state in Africa lies in the ways it discusses complex processes of collective identity-making as temporary and shifting. The ways in which Highland Murle people negotiated and adopted the *ɲalam* identity, seeing ethnic identity as processual and transforming, reveals the most distinct contribution of this study, indicating the *temporariness* of ethnogenesis. The findings in this dissertation also challenge the often simplistic and polarised scholarly debates on identity in South Sudan as a straightforward cause of conflict. Rather, identity is malleable and can be both a source of insecurity as well as protection. The implications of this research for the wider study of ethnicity and conflict, and more broadly to African studies, lies in the ways in which we should approach the process of ethnogenesis as constantly in the making, fluid, temporary and reversible, negotiated also in relation to dynamics of violence and the state.

This first chapter is divided in four main sections. The first section (1.2) introduces the research context and background, presenting the national, regional and 'local' context for the Highland Murle people of Boma. The second section (1.3) presents the research puzzle driving this dissertation. The third section (1.4–1.7) presents the theoretical framework that has been engaged in this dissertation. Finally, the last section (1.8) provides a short overview of the chapter plans.

## 1.2 RESEARCH CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

### 1.2.1 THE ETHNIC AND VIOLENT MAKING OF THE MODERN STATE IN SOUTH SUDAN

The history of the state in South Sudan is one of a violent and extractive nature. Nineteenth and twentieth century states in Sudan employed violent tactics, slavery and forced labour to get obedience and extract resources from its people (Thomas 2015; Leonardi 2013; Ryle et al. 2011). The very limited colonial development was concentrated away from the floodplains, mainly in Equatoria and the first civil war set the stage for tensions between

Equatorians and floodplains people (Thomas 2015). Chapter 3 will discuss the particularly violent character of the colonial pacification campaigns in Pibor, known as the Beir Patrols (Collins 1960), noting also how these were somewhat far removed from Boma. They were part of a history of colonial violence and repressed development, followed by two civil wars and post-independence insecurity.

As noted by Rolandsen and Anderson (2015), it is well known that violence has been fundamental to the ways in which states have structured and consolidated their authority in east Africa, even before the colonial conquests of the late nineteenth century. Although violence in South Sudan is partially rooted in colonial era spatial inequalities, it is also explained by the way in which successive states have appropriated “ethnicity to organize their relationships with rural (and subsequently urban) populations, and this has made ethnicity part of South Sudan’s political order” (Thomas 2015, 19; Leonardi 2013). This is the legacy of the contemporary state and its predatory tactics in South Sudan (Rolandsen and Anderson 2015; Rolandsen and Leonardi 2014; Anderson and Rolandsen 2014) and provides critical context for the present study.

An understanding of the contemporary state and government power in South Sudan has to be combined with an analysis of the mobilisation and instrumentalization of ethnicity in everyday politics at national, state and local level, by both state and non-state actors (Marko 2015). In South Sudan, the contemporary state deploys ethnicity to organise and make its people legible (Scott 2009). In turn, the various loose social groupings within its population employ it as a means of collective identity and in order to gain momentum on claims over state resources. While conceptually ethnicity may appear to be a construction and an invention, it holds very concrete political, social, economic and emotional currency and has material consequences in people’s lives. Fukui and Markakis (1994b, 8) speak of what they term as “ethnocracy” as a key feature of the state in the Horn of Africa, referring to the “monopolisation of state power by certain ethnic groups, and the consequent exclusion of the rest.”

The legacy of the Anyanya armed group and of the SPLM/A contributed to a government largely dominated by the country’s two largest ethnic groups, Dinka and Nuer, and feelings of perceived and real marginalisation by smaller groups. In terms of numbers, the Dinka are the largest ethnic group in South Sudan, with approximately 40 per cent of the total population. The Nuer make up the second largest group with roughly 25 per cent. But the notion of Dinka domination has also been politically motivated and orchestrated by the Khartoum government with the aim of fractionalizing the south and weakening Southern

solidarity against the North (Johnson 2011; Santschi 2008). Even though ethnicity and views of tribalism are more complex than the Dinka-Nuer dichotomy seems to suggest, the Dinka are perceived by most Equatorians as well as other ethnic groups in the country as dominating the government, the SPLM, and the SPLA, “and therefore getting a too big slice of the resource cake” (Santschi 2008, 638). In reality, “the Dinka” or “the Nuer” are also internally heterogeneous and politically divided entities, just as “the Murle” are as well.

In Sudan’s two civil wars (1956-1972 and 1983-2005) and more recently in South Sudan’s 2013 conflict, allegiances have often developed along ethnic lines (Rolandsen 2015; Hutchinson 2001; Hutchinson 2000; Jok and Hutchinson 1999). The second civil war was fought between the Khartoum regime in the North and the South, but it also led to serious internal clashes between different factions in the SPLM/A, that mobilised ethnicities for political goals. Critically, after the 1991 SPLM/A split (Johnson 2011), more Southerners died at the hands of other Southerners than from clashes with the North (Hutchinson 2001; 2000). The 1991 split in the SPLM/A triggered a new tendency of “regional subculture of militarism and ethnicised violence” (Hutchinson and Jok 2002, 86) that has since grown in South Sudan.

The struggles in the south revolved around two main figures: the father of the SPLM/A, Dr John Mabiior de Garang, a Dinka, and Dr Riek Machar Teny, a Nuer, who formed the break-away ‘SPLA-Nasir’ faction, after a failed coup against Garang in 1991. The split was initially politically-motivated, based on differing views about the prime goal of the SPLA in fighting for a “united, democratic, secular Sudan” in favour of “self-determination” or “political independence” for the South. However, political ideologies were quickly discarded in favour of a more basic drive for political survival and leadership by the two ‘doctors’, who both “eventually reached for the ‘ethnic’ card” (Hutchinson 2000, 6). Already in the 1990s, ethnic identities were used instrumentally by the two leaders of the SPLA factions as a tool for mobilisation, leading to years of unprecedented south-on-south violence. It destroyed hundreds of Dinka and Nuer communities throughout the Greater Upper Nile (Jok and Hutchinson 1999; Hutchinson 2001; Hutchinson 2000; Hutchinson and Jok 2002; Hutchinson 2009) and connects directly to the civil war of 2013.

Since independence in 2011, access to state resources and patronage networks have been channelled through structures of ethnicity. In the absence of a common northern ‘enemy’, the ethnicisation of politics and of the state has only grown, making ethnic identities increasingly the means for assertion of state resources and power in the nation-state. Ethnicity has become the social structure by which the elites in the South Sudanese

government organise the country, disburse resources, build and maintain neo-patrimonial relations and make its people and territory legible (Thomas 2015; Pinaud 2014).

In the post-independence era, the ethnicisation of the state has been instrumentalized to a dramatic extent by senior political figures after an internal power struggle within the SPLM (Johnson 2014; Rolandsen 2015; de Waal 2014; Mamdani 2016). On the 15 December 2013 South Sudan returned to war between the government's SPLA led by president Salva Kiir and the SPLA-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO), led by former vice-president Riek Machar, again tangling political tensions and ambitions with essentialised ethnic identities and grievances (International Crisis Group 2014a). The conflict quickly spread from the capital Juba to several other states, particularly in the Greater Upper Nile region. Within weeks, thousands of people were killed or wounded in the violence, and hundreds of thousands displaced from their homes (Human Rights Watch 2014; UNMISS 2014). From January 2014 a number of agreements were signed, again under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), but fighting continued. By October 2014, 1.4 million people were internally displaced, over 100,000 of these seeking protection inside overstretched UNMISS Protection of Civilians (PoC) camps, over 460,800 people had fled to neighbouring countries, and some 3.9 million people were at serious risk of food insecurity (UN OCHA 2014). A Peace Deal was signed in August 2015 between President Kiir and Riek Machar, and the latter returned to Juba as the first Vice-President in April 2016 (BBC News 2016a), but by July 2016 renewed clashes between the SPLA and SPLA-IO took place in Juba and Machar once again withdrew into hiding (BBC News 2016b). As a result of the ongoing political crisis and conflict, the humanitarian situation has worsened. By September 2016, 1.61 million people were internally displaced, with 190,000 of those seeking protection in PoC camps, and another 882,203 were seeking refuge in neighbouring countries (UN OCHA 2016c). According to UN OCHA (2016d), 4.8 million people out of a population of 11 million did not have enough food to survive on.

The final report of the African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan (AUCISS), mandated to investigate the human rights violations and other abuses committed during the most recent civil war, asserted in unequivocal terms that "when fighting broke out within the Presidential Guards in Juba, Dinka members of the Presidential guard and other security forces targeted Nuer soldiers and civilians" (AUCISS 2014, 119). According to the AUCISS (2014), senior state officials ordered the SPLA and "shadowy" presidential forces to ethnically target and kill Nuer people in Juba over those first days of conflict. Following the tragic events in Juba in December, a vicious civil war expanded to the Greater Upper Nile region, with the SPLA split between forces loyal to the Government and forces loyal to

former Vice-President Riek Machar. Ethnicity has since served as the driving force for military recruitment and is behind many targeted killings, of Dinka and Nuer alike, with multiple reports of ethnic atrocities committed across Central Equatoria, Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile States by both parties (UNMISS 2014).

Under intense international pressure, a Peace Deal, the 'Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan' (ARCISS), was brokered by the IGAD and signed by President Kiir and SPLA-IO leader Riek Machar in August 2015. The ARCISS stipulated the creation of a Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU) led by president Kiir and deputised by Riek Machar. Although the return of Machar in April 2016 promised an end to the over two years of civil war that swept across the country, the conflict has magnified ethnic rifts that existed long before the conflict (Jok 2016). As political fragmentation continues and communities become increasingly antagonised along ethnic lines, identities become also more essentialised.

At a more practical level, spatial and social inequalities and hierarchies also tend to be experienced in ethnic terms "and the government's principal means of redistribution of wealth and mitigating these inequalities has been the state payroll" (Thomas 2015, 129). On the one hand, "in everyday experience, people's ethnic affiliations [that] generally provide them with language, cultural resources and social networks and the means to produce and share wealth" (Thomas 2015, 129). On the other hand, as noted by Martina Santschi (2008, 638), "Southern Sudanese often refer to ethnicity in connection with nepotism and the feeling of not getting 'their' share of power and resources as members of a specific ethnic group." Ethnicity then emerges as the means by which one can access or be denied the state and its wealth and privileges.

The government in South Sudan is thus a highly fractured entity that operates largely through ethnically-based patronage systems through which resources are disbursed. This is the informal nature of the state in South Sudan.

Yet it is equally important to understand and consider the formal structures and principles of the state, as these are also the context in which informal systems operate. Over the remaining sub-section, I present the formal government structures and also examine briefly the national government's decision to rearrange the administrative organisation of the country from 10 to 28 states. This is not only emblematic of the wider instability of political arrangements in South Sudan, but also sets the tone in relation to how the state is being made in South Sudan, the unfortunate ways in which ethnicity is part of that, and of disbursing the state's resources.



Formally, the government is organized at three levels: national, state and local government, based on the principles of devolution, decentralization and popular participation (figures 1 and 2) (Government of South Sudan 2011, Arts 47–49).

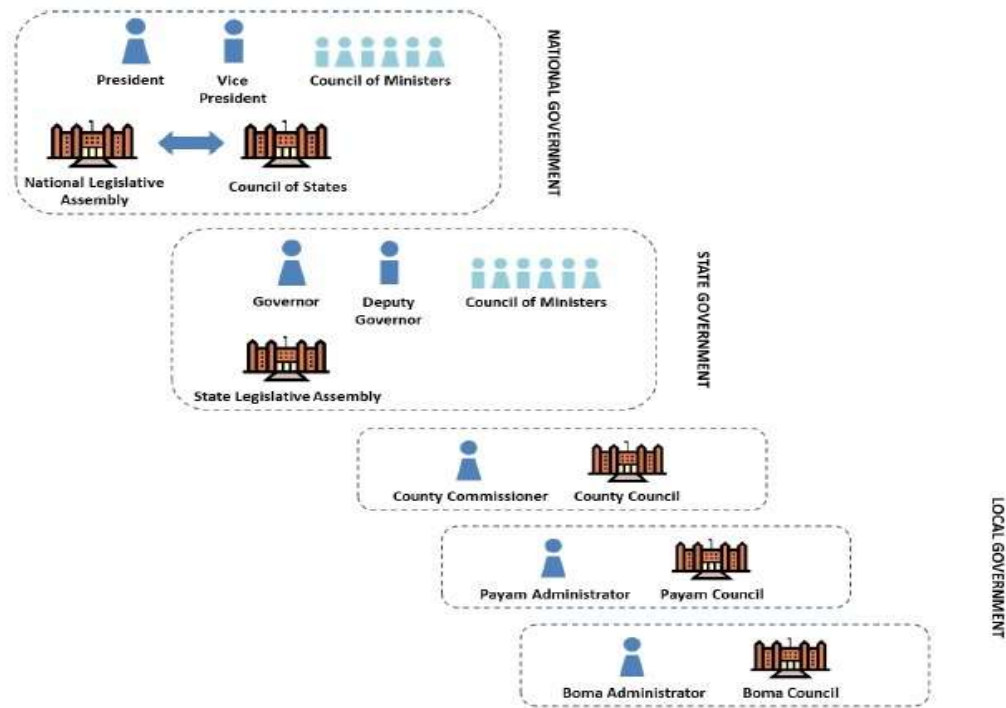
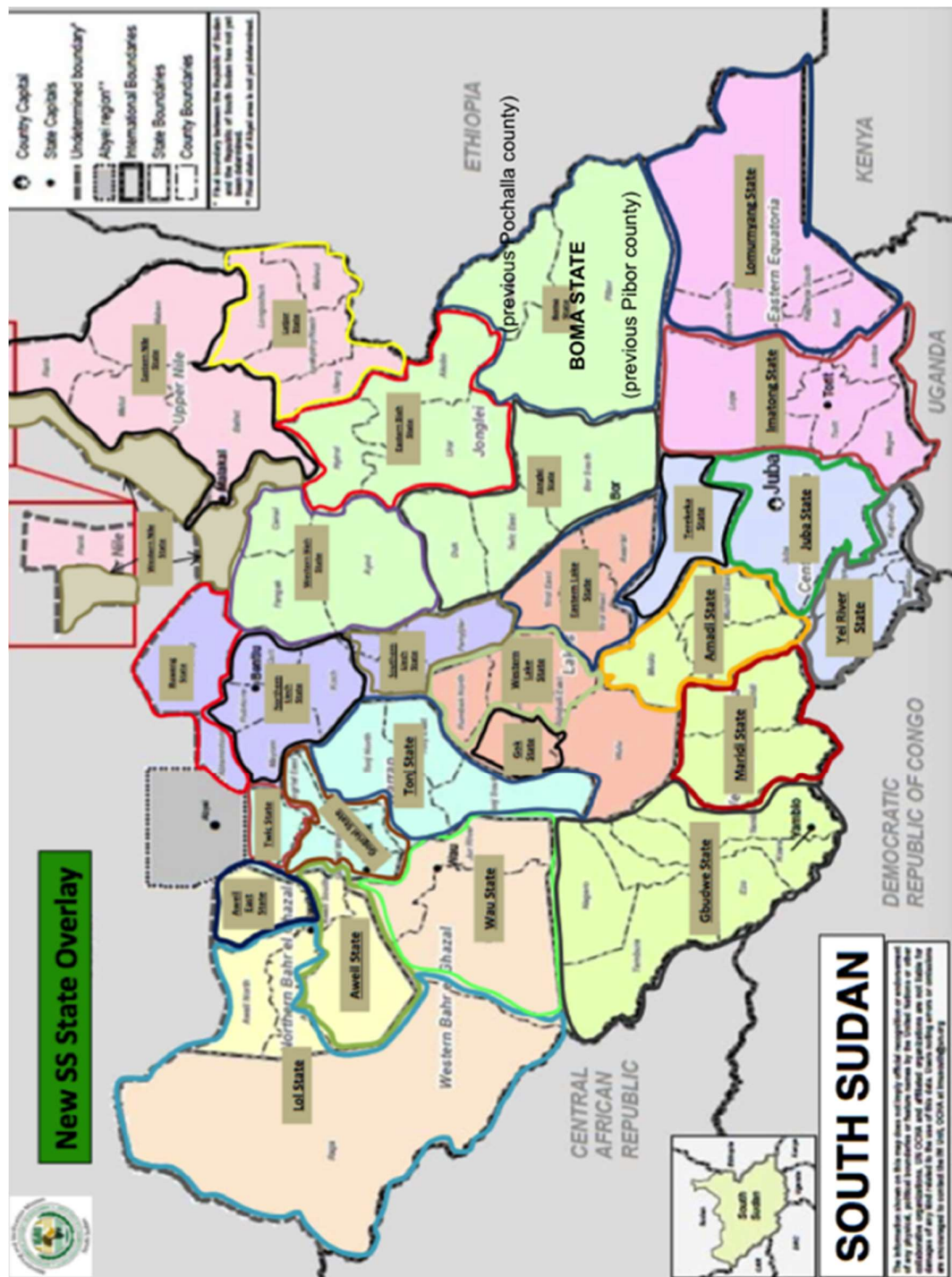


Figure 1 Decentralised structure of government (Conflict Dynamics International 2012)

The Transitional Constitution provides for ten states, although in May 2014, as a result of the 'Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in Jonglei State between the Government of South Sudan and the South Sudan Democratic Movement / South Sudan Defence Army', the Greater Pibor Administrative Area was established with the equivalent status of a state (discussed in detail in chapter 8) (GoSS and SSDM/A-Cobra 2014). Then, in October 2015, President Salva Kiir broke up the existing ten states and created 28 new ones, defined overwhelmingly, and controversially, along ethnic lines, including the extinction of the GPAA and creation of Boma State (map 2) (Republic of South Sudan 2015). Order 36/2015 makes President Kiir's own ethnic group the prevailing ethnic majority in administrative areas, covering 42 per cent of the country, compared to the previous approximate 25 per cent of total land (map 2 and appendix 6, map 14) (see Radio Tamazuj 2015c).



Although in principle, ethnic federation, as practiced in Ethiopia, can work towards greater national cohesion (Abbink 2011; Turton 2006), the political motivations behind this decision and its timing suggest otherwise. In great part, the move served to create more seats to accommodate a growing number of dissatisfied political elites. Order 36/2015 should also be understood in the context of the 2013 civil war and as a response to the SPLA-IO and Riek Machar's call for 21 states in a federal South Sudan, delineated along the old colonial administrative borders (Wël 2014). Machar's proposed 21 states also created advantages for his own ethnic group the Nuer, resulting in an increase in predominance of total land area from 15 per cent to 19 per cent (see appendix 6, map 15) (Radio Tamazuj 2015c).

There has been some popular support for the 28 states, largely because of the promise of a more decentralised government and of greater resources. But the procedure of the decision-making, the lack of public consultation, and the fact it technically contravenes the ARCISS renders Order 36/2015 very controversial. There are also doubts about the economic viability and constitutionality of the executive decision (Mayai, Tiitmamer, and Jok 2015), at a time when South Sudan faces a dire economic crisis (Oxfam 2016).

Popular calls for federalism are based on frustration with an over-inflated central government that caters for political elites and a nearly total lack of services across the lower tiers of government. The national government controls the economy through its management of oil revenues, with very limited resources trickling down to local government, and by consequence to the people. According to Thomas (2015, 146), the national government "allocates most resources to Juba and to the army: only about 10 per cent goes to state capitals." Hardly any of these 10 per cent allocated to the state level leaves the state capital; perhaps 10 per cent, goes to rural areas (Thomas 2015, 146). The AUCISS 2014 report stated slightly different figures: the national government retained 85 per cent of revenue, and the states received 15 per cent. According to a senior opposition leader quoted in the report:

"The resources, 85% and more of the budget is spent here in Juba and 15% is the one that goes to the states and you call it decentralized; and when you look at this 15% most of it goes to salaries or people who are technically part of the central government. So none goes to development at all. If you look at the budgets, the health, even the latest budget, the health gets 4% of the budget. Education gets 6%, President's office gets 10% and paying arrears gets 7% more than both health and education; and then there is no good formula for allocating resources" (AUCISS 2014, 45).

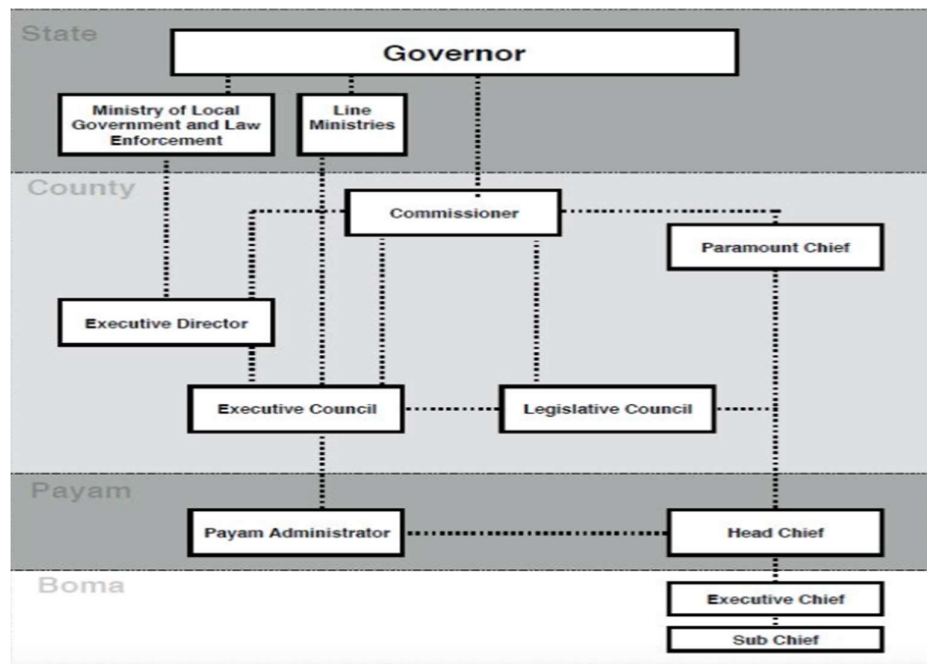


Figure 2. State and Local Government arrangements according to legislation (Conflict Dynamics International 2014).

Local government makes up the third tier of government. Although this level should arguably be the most important government tier since it is the closest to the population and has a critical role in service delivery, it is the most neglected and thus the least developed in all respects. Despite formally being the third tier of government, local government is entirely dependent on the states since it is the respective state government that establish local government. The units created are financially dependent on the state government, which has to finance their budgets from its share of 10-15% of national revenue, in addition to revenues raised locally. This effectively means that counties and other local government structures experience a devastating lack of financial, human and physical resources. In most cases, and certainly in most areas across Jonglei, local government is unable to deliver services to its population.

As a result of the neglect of local government and absence of resources at that level, the physical and de facto government presence across rural areas is rather limited. As in many of the South Sudanese hinterlands, the most concrete physical manifestation of the state in a margin such as Boma is effectively the national army, the SPLA. The delivery of services such as health and education have been provided overwhelmingly by NGOs, a significant marker of political neglect.

Notably, across Boma, the hospital and all primary healthcare units were run by the non-governmental organization (NGO) Merlin (which has since moved out of the area), most educational activities depended on another NGO, Across, and social and economic support during food crises was provided by another NGO, JAM. While this is not unique to Boma and Greater Pibor, it is perhaps more extreme due to the area's deliberate political marginalisation and physical isolation. For example, in 2009 in Jonglei State, other better politically connected counties like the ethnically-Dinka counties of Bor and Twic East, or the Lou Nuer's Akobo county, benefited from greater access to state provided education and health facilities, even if these still proved insufficient. Taking the number of permanent school classrooms as evidence of access to development, Bor had 117 permanent school classrooms, Twic East and Akobo each had 47, against 9 in all of Pibor, which was in turn the largest county in South Sudan (SSCCSE 2010, 64).

What clearly emerges is that access to state resources and services is not principally based on levels of need and marginalisation, but more so on ethnic-based patronage relationships that privilege for instance, the people of Bor, Twic East and Akobo over those from Pibor. Having discussed the formal and informal workings of the state in South Sudan, the next section turns briefly to the communal and political dynamics of Jonglei, that are also partially a result of the state's overwhelming neglect of the area.

### *1.2.2 THE COMMUNAL AND THE POLITICAL IN JONGLEI*

The communal and political dynamics of the Murle ethnic group in South Sudan will be discussed in great depth and with a specific focus on Boma throughout the dissertation. But it is important at this stage to present the specific social and political complex realities of Jonglei state in order to set the stage for the more specific context of the Highland Murle sub-section of the Murle ethnic group, who are the main actors of this dissertation.

Until South Sudan's fragmentation into 28 states, Jonglei was the largest and most populated of the country's ten states with over 1.3 million people, and was among the most underdeveloped regions in the world (ICG 2009; Young 2010; Copnall 2013) (see map 3). South Sudanese and foreign observers alike often pointed to Jonglei as a "microcosm" of South Sudan (for example Fick 2009; Small Arms Survey 2014; The United South Sudan Party 2013). It is a physically remote hinterland made of swampland and vast plains; it is rich in oil reserves (Moro, Akec, and Bol 2014, 63) but poor on infrastructure, roads and telecommunication network; and it has been the site of various political rebellions among

its ethnically diverse population that are often caught in intense communal violence. And not least, it is home to six ethnic groups, four of which practice different degrees of subsistence agro-pastoralism, the Dinka Bor, Lou Nuer, Lowland Murle and Jie; while the Anyuak, Suri-Kachipo and Highland Murle live predominantly an agrarian life. Jonglei has also been the stage of a long history of colonial and post-colonial violence.

Since the 2005 CPA, violence in Jonglei has been multi-faceted, with some areas, especially the Murle home of Pibor county, experiencing an extreme deterioration of security. Jonglei state was hit the hardest by both communal and political conflicts (Small Arms Survey 2009; 2011; 2012; ICG 2009; 2014a; 2014b). Across Jonglei, neighbouring ethnic groups continued to engage in inter-communal conflicts, accompanied by mass killings, cattle-raids and abductions of women and children, in addition to local feuds at the village level. The rebellions of the late George Athor in 2010 (HSBA 2011) and David Yau Yau in 2011 (HSBA 2013a) both supported with weapons by the Khartoum government, contributed to a wide availability of weapons and ammunition.

Inter-communal conflict between Lou Nuer and Murle escalated and became increasingly violent in 2009-2011 (Thomas 2015; Small Arms Survey 2012). Targeting tactics changed: attacks were no longer only about capturing cattle, but also aimed at targeting entire villages, killing women, children and the elderly, looting and destroying homes and state and NGO facilities (Small Arms Survey 2012). This “new era of violence” (Small Arms Survey 2012, 2) is regarded to have started with a Lou Nuer attack on Likuangle between 5 and 8 March 2009, where some 450 mainly women and children were killed. According to the numbers compiled by the Small Arms Survey (2012, 3), from March 2009 to March 2012 over 1,800 Lou Nuer people were killed by Murle and 134,000 cattle taken. In turn, over 2,000 Murle were killed in Lou Nuer attacks and over 628,000 cattle taken, in addition to unaccounted numbers of displaced civilians on both sides.

The government of South Sudan responded by initiating another round of civilian disarmament of all groups in Jonglei state, the fifth SPLA-led disarmament campaign in Jonglei since 2007 (Pact Sudan et al. 2012; Young 2010; Human Rights Watch 2009; Garfield 2007). However, the SPLA battalion responsible for disarmament in Pibor was mostly made of officers from the Nuer and Dinka ethnic groups, who took the chance to avenge earlier Murle cattle raids on their own communities (McCallum and Okech 2013). By May 2012, the campaign had effectively become a forced disarmament campaign particularly in the plains of Pibor county, where the SPLA reportedly committed rapes, simulated drowning and other serious abuses (Human Rights Watch 2013b; Amnesty International 2012).

In addition to previous unresolved political grievances, the SPLA's violent disarmament campaign instigated Murle rebel leader David Yau Yau to resume his 2010 rebellion (HSBA 2013a). The violent actions of the SPLA against Murle civilians also encouraged many Murle men to join David Yau Yau's rebellion as a way to protect their communities, capitalising on the feelings of resentment, distrust and marginalisation among the Murle population toward the SPLA.<sup>11</sup> Formally, the SSDM/A-CF was fighting the Government of South Sudan and calling for greater Murle representation in the government and the provision of a Murle state. As the 2013 civil war expanded, the 'Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in Jonglei State between the Government of South Sudan and the South Sudan Democratic Movement/ South Sudan Defence Army' was signed in May 2014 (chapter 8). The dissertation is concerned with how Highland Murle people engaged with and experienced being Murle and being South Sudanese during this period of time.

### *1.2.3 THE VIOLENCE OF BEING MURLE IN SOUTH SUDAN*

The grievances, violent events and dynamics outlined above were not one-off cases, but rather symptomatic of a much more systematic anti-Murle narrative and marginalisation in South Sudan. This section examines what I call the violence of being Murle in South Sudan; a combination of politically-motivated hostility and symbolic and structural violence affecting the Murle people. It is important to recognise the harmful ways in which the Murle people have come to be represented in South Sudan as "a problem" (McCallum 2013, 11–24), because this study is also about how the Murle people in Boma have searched for ways to differentiate themselves from those unforgiving stereotypes. The section briefly depicts and contextualises the politically driven brutal stereotypes and representations of the Murle ethnic community in South Sudan. These themes are historically contextualised in chapter 3, and developed further in chapter 4.

At a discursive level, international, national and local political discourses have portrayed the Murle group as the main aggressors and the source of much of the instability affecting Jonglei and beyond, "despite the reality of a politically and economically marginalized Murle" (Laudati 2011, 21). The Murle ethnic group are stereotyped as exceptionally violent and usually principally blamed for violent events in Jonglei and elsewhere (McCallum and Okech 2013). Referring to the disarmament of the Murle in 2008, President Salva Kiir argued that:

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<sup>11</sup> Fieldnotes, Likuangole 04/2015.

“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” (in *South Sudan President Response to Save Yar Campaign* 2008).<sup>12</sup>

The Murle’s politically dominant Dinka Bor and Lou Nuer neighbours have had the power to create prevailing narratives that cast the Murle as the only aggressors and perpetrators in Jonglei:

“By privileging the stories, memories, and truths of the Dinka over those of the Murle, the moral legitimacy of the Murle and their claims to history and reality is overwritten. Such legitimacy subsequently provides the Dinka-led SPLA greater authority and agency to forcefully disarm and perpetrate violence against the Murle in order that the Murle, with the help of international NGOs and national settlement schemes, may then be shaped into ‘educated and trustworthy’ citizens” (Laudati 2011, 23–24).

Correspondingly, a Lou and Jikany Nuer Press Release from the diaspora announcing the 2011 communal attack on the Murle in Pibor read “There is no other way to resolve [the] Murle problem other than wiping them out through the barrel of the gun” (Lou and Jikany Youth in Jonglei 2011).

Until the 2013 national conflict broke out, the Murle ethnic community had been by far the most victimized of all groups not only in Jonglei, but nationwide (Laudati 2011). The structural and symbolic violence that produces such a ferocious reputation is reproduced by dominant groups and affects all Murle. Building from colonial era representations (discussed in chapter 3), the Murle are demonised and spoken of in the harshest of terms: as infamous cattle-raiders and fearsome warriors (Thomas 2015; McCallum 2013). But the most notable prevailing myth propagated by the media, poorly informed and biased NGOs (Child Protection International: The Save Yar Campaign 2008) and even senior government officials including President Salva Kiir, accuse Murle of suffering from infertility and link this to child abduction practices across Jonglei.

Child abductions constitute an important element in the history of conflict in Jonglei and elsewhere in South Sudan (Thomas 2015; Rolandsen and Breidlid 2013; Akuei and Jok 2010) and are practiced by various ethnic groups. However, abductions are most often attributed to the Murle and explained by political narratives of Murle infertility, which have no factual basis (see Smith 1955; Dymment 2004). These claims state that the Murle suffer from untreated sexually transmitted diseases that produce high rates of infertility, and

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<sup>12</sup> Jack Rice interview with President Salva Kiir on behalf of the Save Yar Foundation.



therefore abduct children to replenish their numbers (Akuei and Jok 2010). Although further research is needed on the complex political economy of abductions, what is certain is that there is no evidence that Murle have higher infertility rates than other groups, nor that they are the only groups practicing child abductions. Rather, such myths serve to further demonize and tarnish the Murle as a group and emasculate Murle men; a stereotype that cannot be proved to be true, sometimes cannot be falsified either.

Such negative stereotypes and accusations of the Murle are partially driven by concrete events (there are effectively many cases of child abductions) but are also manipulated by more dominant groups to serve political purposes (notably, omitting that other groups also abduct). Popular derogatory stereotypes of the Murle community are constructed through multiple sources. These include vicious ethnically-loaded language and hate speech used by biased media reports and national, state and local government leaders on national and international media (Thomas 2015). But even NGO staff and ordinary citizens have internalised the anti-Murle discourse (McCallum 2013, especially chapter 7). Dominant accounts are established by more powerful groups who are able to determine whose stories and versions are heard and what 'truths' remain. Or as articulated by Vigdis Broch-Due (2004a, 33), "Which narrative gets picked up, whose voice is authorised, which truth claims are conveyed and which genre of evidence is evoked depends largely on its location in the wider political economy." Referring to Jonglei, Anne Laudati (2011, 25) makes a compelling case that "The Dinka have been able to draw on a victim narrative together with entrenched stereotypes of a fierce and hostile Murle to gain access to international moral sensibilities and values in order to potentially safeguard access to important natural resources".

Although this is beginning to change slightly with more Murle individuals accessing the internet and making their voices heard, it still holds true that "the missing voices are those of the Murle themselves, who, with a few exceptions do not interact with the ongoing public discussions regarding their community" (McCallum 2013, 273). The Cobra Faction war and the events of the recent years have contributed to some changes in how loudly Murle voices are heard, both through armed conflict and formal political structures as well as through social media. Nevertheless, dominant discourses continue to be created by more powerful neighbours with access to and control of the state (discussed in chapters 6 and 7).

The Murle have thought of themselves as politically marginalised and under threat as a people (McCallum 2013). Referring to the government, one Murle local administrator from

Pibor displaced in Juba observed, “They are looking to wipe out Murle community.”<sup>13</sup> The Murle felt collectively targeted by the state, particularly the Jonglei state government, which was perceived as a biased and overwhelmingly Dinka government (Laudati 2011). This contrasts to experiences in other isolated areas of South Sudan, such as the Dinka from Gogrial discussed by Zoe Cormack (2014), who despite living in an isolated ‘peripheral’ area do not consider themselves as marginal but instead know they are part of a politically powerful group.

Ironically, since the national conflict between the SPLA and the SPLA-in-Opposition began on 15 December 2013, the dynamics of the conflict in Pibor changed significantly for the better, and the area went from being the most unstable to one of the quietest in the Greater Upper Nile region (Todisco 2015). With the Government keen to have the Cobra Faction and the Murle ethnic group on its side, a peace deal was signed on 9 May 2014 in Addis Ababa, which included provisions for the establishment of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), answering the Cobra Faction’s calls for greater representation and an independent state (GoSS and SSDM/A-Cobra 2014).

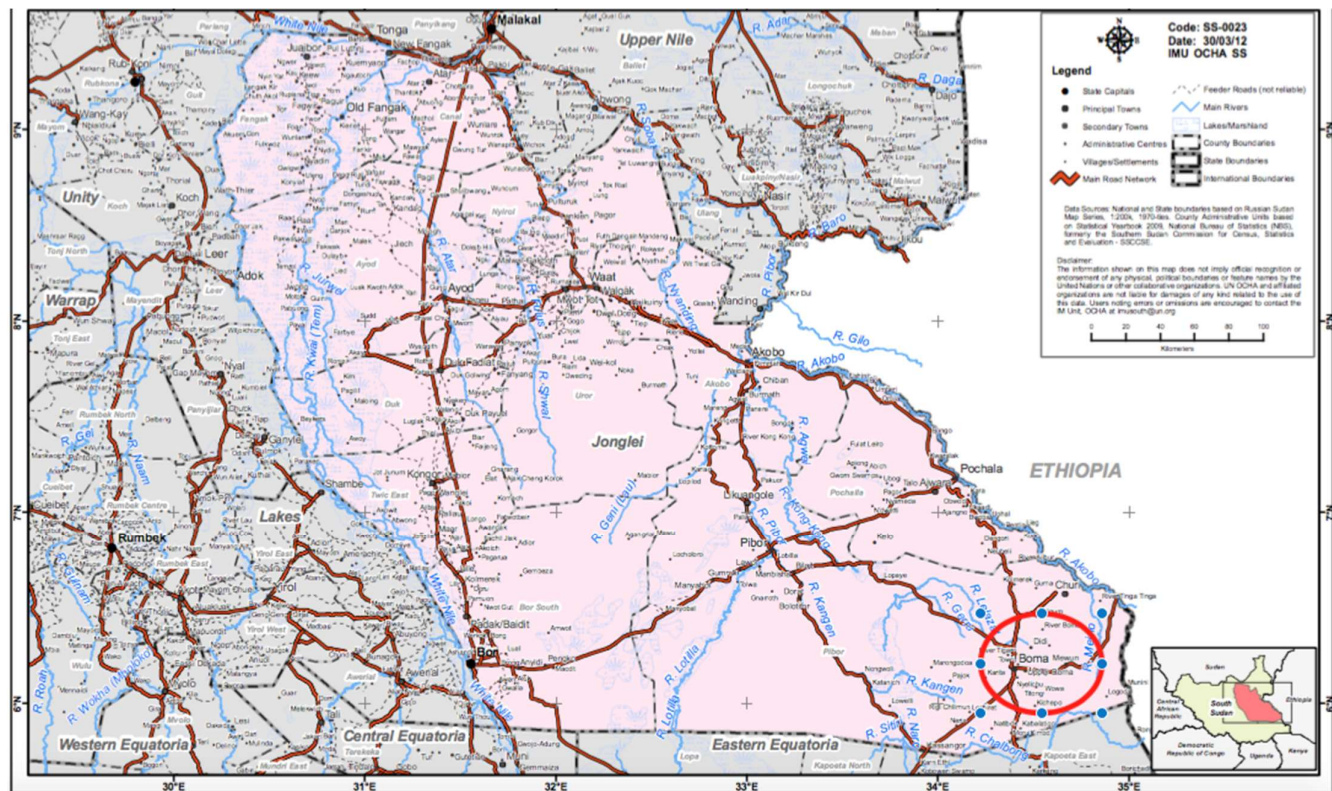
As the civil war that took over the country was mobilised by the two leaders Kiir and Machar along their ethnic lines, as Dinka and Nuer respectively, the Murle were for the time being, left alone (Todisco 2015). Nevertheless, widespread national-level anti-Murle rhetoric has remained strong with cattle raids and abductions in Jonglei consistently blamed on Murle, regardless of reality. Perhaps the GPAA was an interim solution found to keep the Murle in hand during the SPLA and SPLA-IO war. What is certain is that Murle peoples’ experiences of everyday violence and political conflict during the last couple of years deserve to be documented, scrutinised and contextualised.

#### *1.2.4 A FOCUS ON BOMA AND HIGHLAND MURLE SOCIAL RELATIONS*

The dissertation considers the complex social and political dynamics set out above from the perspective of the Highland Murle people of Boma. The focus of the research is on Murle social relations that all connect to Boma as a locality, a place and a home. In this sub-section, I introduce the specific context of the Highland Murle people and of Boma (see map 3).

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Alani, Juba 07/06/2013.



Map 3 Jonglei state, Boma highlighted

Despite its proximity to Pibor, and Boma's own complex histories of violence, at the time of fieldwork in Boma in early 2013 (before the SPLA and SSDA-CF war reached the area), Murle inhabitants generally spoke of their home as peaceful and, in some ways, as a sanctuary.<sup>14</sup> This did not necessarily mean that the area around Boma was devoid of insecurity, but that this is how it had come to be construed and experienced in local accounts of everyday life. People in Upper Boma insisted on the safety of the area, on how the war between the predominantly Murle rebellion, the SSDA-CF, against the government's SPLA – already affecting most of the Lowlands – would not reach their home. Highland Murle in Boma were also convinced of their own 'peacefulness' as an internalised social attribute connected to their livelihoods as predominantly agrarian, and of their historical loyalty to the SPLM government.

<sup>14</sup> Even as Jonglei imploded into the vicious and unprecedented ethnic violence between Lou Nuer and Murle from 2009 onwards, Boma continued to be experienced by its Murle inhabitants as a stable place, secluded from the rest of the chaos of Jonglei state. It was also seen as a safe haven by Murle in the Lowlands. For instance, during the Lou Nuer attacks in Likuangle and Pibor in late 2011, thousands of Lowland Murle fled south to swampy areas closer to Boma and to Boma town itself in search of safety. When the David Yau Yau rebellion intensified all across Pibor County and got closer and closer to Boma town in April 2013, people in Upper Boma reassured me that we were safe in villages located in the Highlands above the town.

Effectively, the dynamics of communal and state violence described in the previous section affecting the Murle people in the plains felt very distant from Boma and to its the Highland Murle people. As predominantly agrarian, Highland Murle in Boma were not involved in the increasingly violent dynamics of cattle-raiding and communal violence in Jonglei among Murle, Lou Nuer and Dinka Bor described above. As in other places around the world, there is an assumption that sedentary agricultural populations are more “legible” (Scott 1998), cooperative and amenable to the state and thus more peaceful (Leonardi 2013). In turn, states’ own “legibility” is threatened by non-sedentary populations (Scott 1998). Highland Murle people associated their agrarian lifestyle with peacefulness, against the common (often misconceived and misinterpreted) stereotypes of the violent neighbouring agro-pastoralist groups regularly on the move and clashing over cattle and resources (Galaty and Bonté 1991; Markakis 1993; 2004).

Murle people in Boma also suggested their area had a closer relationship to the ‘SPLM state’ because the SPLA first found a home and base in Boma and the fathers of South Sudan, the late Dr John Garang, President Salva Kiir and many other important men of the struggle had once lived in Boma. Boma had been the first region to experience the ‘SPLM state’, and the only place to do so continuously until the independence of the new nation in 2011. Although not factually true, it remains a commonly believed myth in South Sudan that Boma was considered so meaningful within the independence struggle that the SPLM subsequently honoured the area by naming the lowest administrative unit in South Sudan after it, as boma, referring roughly to a collection of hamlets.<sup>15</sup> During the second civil war in what was then the Republic of the Sudan, Murle people in Boma accepted the arrival of displaced people from across the south fleeing conflict in their home areas and seeking the protection of the SPLA in Boma. This was also offered as proof of their hospitality and loyalty to the SPLA.

Yet despite its prominence in constructions of Murle identity as well as in the struggle for South Sudanese independence (both discussed in chapter 3), Boma is more than just a physical margin; rather, it remains on the margins of the state politically, socially and economically. There is no phone network and no electricity (apart from the handful of noisy generators that ran mostly from the NGO compounds). There is no secondary school and the hospital that was run by the NGO Merlin was destroyed during the 2013 SPLA-SSDA-CF war. The very poor roads connecting Boma to Kapoeta across Kassengor and to Raad in

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<sup>15</sup> According to Kishindo (2000, 25), the term ‘boma’ is actually of Kiswahili origin and it means ‘enclosure’, usually associated to a livestock enclosure, equivalent to a kraal, which can also translate as ‘fort’ or ‘government office’.

Ethiopia are impassable during the rainy season that usually lasts for more than half the year. During this time, some merchant trucks and other vehicles endeavour to drive through from Kapoeta to Boma, but the risk of getting stuck somewhere between Boma and Kapoeta is significant. As such, the only ways to reach the area are by air or by foot, even if both means remain unpredictable. It is not uncommon for a plane landing in Boma, or for that matter in many places across South Sudan, to be unable to land or take-off as planned due to heavy rains and a wet airstrip. On the other hand, walking by foot –the only option for the majority of people from Boma– can be fatal. Many people in Boma fear movement by foot due to criminality and banditry and most people have a story to tell about a relative killed on the road. This isolation has an all-encompassing impact on life–physically, politically, socially, emotionally and economically.

The discursive violence and demonization discussed above in section 1.2.3 affects all Murle and the state's structural neglect in Boma materialises in poverty, absence of state-provided security, services and poor conditions. Peacetime everyday violence (Scheper-Hughes 2007) is composed of insecurity on the roads, fighting between different age-sets, small-scale ethnically-motivated attacks and revenge attacks, domestic violence, village quarrels, alcohol abuse and associated violence. In this dissertation, I argue that the structural violence resulting from state neglect is also related to the peacetime everyday violence (Scheper-Hughes 2007) experienced and lived in Boma.

Thus, the ways in which Highland Murle people discursively constructed Boma as peaceful was deceptive. Boma was neither free of violence, nor did its population benefit from a special relationship with the SPLM government. The anti-Murle narrative discussed in section 1.2.3 affected all Murle, regardless if they were from the plains or the hills. And despite Boma's significance in the SPLM/A's struggle, Boma was a forgotten borderland.

In early May 2013, twenty-eight years after it was first captured by the SPLM/A, Boma was seized by the SSDM/A-CF (Cobra Faction). Most civilians fled to the bush fearing the possibility of violence. But it was when the SPLA returned to re-take Boma, and in the process looted property, burnt villages and targeted Murle civilians that Murle people fled further away, in great part to Ethiopia.

War once again took over Boma: the invisible structural violence of the state was physically manifested, and became visible and concrete. The violent conflict did not simply spiral and escalate out of the forms of violence that had been tacitly incorporated into the understanding of peacetime by being part of ordinary life in Boma. Rather, different forms

of violence accumulated, overlapped and coexisted. In other words, the same kinds of everyday violence faced in peacetime coexisted with the violence of war.

Despite the historical allegiance and 'sacrifices' that Highland Murle people felt they had made to the SPLM/A struggle in their fight against the North, the SPLA's recapture of Boma was brutal and did not distinguish between Murle civilians and Cobra Faction soldiers. Highland Murle people felt betrayed. Although the SPLA recaptured Boma area in just over two weeks, these events had tremendous significance and ongoing implications for the Murle inhabitants of Boma. Itti and the Murle villages of Upper Boma were looted and destroyed and most of its Highland Murle population fled to Juba, Kapoeta and to neighbouring Ethiopia.<sup>16</sup> The violent events also had implications for how Highland Murle in Boma experienced *being Murle*, "but not 'People of Cattle'", (Galaty 1982; Spear 1993a):<sup>17</sup> how Highland Murle imagined, participated in and related to their broader Murle ethnic group and to the South Sudanese state.

### 1.3 RESEARCH PUZZLE

The research puzzle is presented at this point because it was so strongly driven by the material and discursive realities of people in Boma. It emerged out of this specific social and political context, and from the conditions and contradictions that were raised by Murle informants and by the events they experienced.

At the local level, there are a number of emotional, social, political and representational contradictions. The Highland Murle people consider themselves to be ethnically part of the broader Murle group, yet also see themselves as different from its pastoral majority. Because of the history of the SPLM in Boma, its Murle population consider themselves to have a close relationship to the government, yet the area is much more than just a physical margin and border, it is politically, socially and economically isolated and forgotten. Murle people think of themselves as peaceful, yet often engage in acts of physical violence, both

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<sup>16</sup> There are no reliable population figures for Boma pre- and post- 2013 crisis. One educated estimate suggested that before May 2013 Itti town had a population of around 5000 people, but it is likely to have been lower. The three Upper Boma villages were also scarcely populated, with less than 5000 people in total. The violence of May 2013 displaced most of Boma's Murle population, apart from Kaiwa village in Upper Boma, left with roughly 500 people. These are admittedly unreliable rough estimates based on my own as well as other witness accounts.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Spear borrows the term "Being 'Maasai', but not 'People of Cattle'" from John Galaty (1982) to refer to the Arusha agricultural Maasai in the nineteenth century. In parallel to the case of the Murle, Spear (1993a, 120) states "If Maasai commonly saw themselves and were seen by others as 'People of Cattle', then the designation 'Agricultural Maasai' would be a contradiction in terms".

actively and passively. Everyday life is constructed as secure and peaceful, yet at the same time there are constant instances of physical violence, people are often on alert and constantly reassessing their security options.

Everyday life for the Murle people in Boma was not as peaceful as they described it, nor the relationship to the government and to the SPLA as harmonious as desired and articulated. By examining the continuities and discontinuities of these contradictions, we can look to understand how multiple forms of violence and its relationships to the state weave into notions of collective identity and belonging. This is what is discussed theoretically and empirically throughout this dissertation.

This dissertation is interested in these contradictions. It explores the dissonance between a chronically insecure reality and the ways in which Highland Murle people interpreted and narrativised that reality as, nonetheless, peaceful. Based on interviews, observations and participation in peace meetings, it became clear that a large part of the Highland Murle population shared a tacit narrative of peace with respect to their home Boma. In such a context, where people live in chronic insecurity, structural violence is a normalised “social condition” (Lubkemann 2008), thus effectively incorporating certain forms of violence in the understanding of peace.

I make use of Kevin Dunn’s (2001, 56) useful definition of what he terms “the process of narrativisation” to consider the ways in which people come to construct ideas about peace and violence and how these are performed and incarnated, despite a distinct material reality. I also make use of the concept of narrativisation to later consider the ways that ethnic identities are represented, shaped and transformed. I build from Dunn’s understanding:

“The process of narrativisation entails taking on, creating, assigning or performing a story of some sort that captures the central elements and characteristics of what it means to be a member of the specific community” (Dunn 2001, 56).

This dissertation explores how the Highland Murle experienced and made sense of the set of dynamics and processes triggered by the war between the government’s SPLA and the largely Murle rebellion. The ways in which ethnic identities have been deployed and performed by Highland Murle were simultaneously a reaction to the structural violence of the state as well as a reflection of people’s aspirations to the same state.

Thus, the dissertation is an account of how Highland Murle have addressed and engaged with the pressures of violence, of a predatory state and of being Murle, by being the objects but also the active agents of violence and identity politics. Focusing on the particularly

volatile period of violence between 2012 and 2015, it explores how Highland Murle carve a place both within historically dominant narratives of the “fierce and hostile Murle” as well as in the new state of South Sudan.

#### 1.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONTRIBUTIONS

To consider these theoretical and practical contradictions, I engage with three main sets of literature addressing the state, violence and ethnicity. The rest of the chapter outlines the theoretical underpinnings of this dissertation, which are also the sites of its theoretical contributions.

To address the research puzzle I draw theoretical and empirical inspiration especially from the edited volumes *Violence and Belonging* (Broch-Due 2004b) and *Being Maasai* (Spear and Waller 1993). Vigdis Broch-Due’s collection of case-studies from across post-colonial Africa on the formative role of violence in shaping people’s sense of belonging illustrates powerfully the conceptual interactions between the post-colonial state, violence and identity politics (2004b). Thomas Spear and Richard Waller’s (1993) volume combines historical, social, economic and political insights into the development and making of a flexible Maasai ethnicity.

#### 1.5 CONSTITUTING THE STATE AND CONSTITUTING THE PEOPLE

First, let us consider the state as the broadest unit of analysis. I understand state formation as a negotiated and an inherently violent process (Cramer 2006; Tilly 1985) and I see the state as having a significant position not only in “regulating people’s lives, but in defining their identities” (Broch-Due 2004a, 14). There are multiple approaches to thinking about the ‘making’ of the state. My focus has not been on the technical dimensions of state-building in the more formal Weberian sense, with its emphasis on state institutions and liberal peace principles on which there is already vast scholarship (Paris 2002; 2004; Paris and Sisk 2009). I make use of Peter Evans’ definition of a predatory state as one that “preys upon its citizens, terrorizing them, despoiling their common patrimony, and providing little in the way of services in return” (Evans 1995, 45 in Reno 2015, 737). This study is about Highland Murle people’s difficult relationship to a new and predatory state, and sets out to contribute to the literature on processes of state formation, specifically by approaching it from the perspective of a minority group.



In South Sudan, physical and political margins such as Boma are seemingly “sites of disorder, where the state has been unable to impose its order” (Das and Poole 2004b, 6), but where the actions of the state attempting to exert its authority and produce order can best be witnessed. It is in processes of everyday life at the margins that the state, and people’s expectations of it, are made and reconfigured. State power is always unstable, “something best seen when one moves away from the ‘center’” (Asad 2004, 279; James 2009a), both in terms of its presences and absences. The state exists relationally to its margins which are not merely peripheral spaces, but rather “they determine what lies inside and what lies outside” (Das and Poole 2004b, 19). Studying places like Boma that seemingly lie at the edge of the state geographically, politically, economically and socially are then key to witness how state law and order are constantly re-established and negotiated (Asad 2004; Ferguson and Whitehead 2000).

These ‘margins’ are what constitute and make the current South Sudan and are thus central to its configuration (Das and Poole 2004a). As has been pointed out by studies across Africa (Thomas 2015; Vaughan, Schomerus, and Vries 2013; Das and Poole 2004a; James 2009b), studying ‘borderlands’, or margins, is key to understanding state-society relations (Korf and Raeymaekers 2013; Goodhand 2013). Borders may present opportunities for some people, but overwhelmingly they are “crucial sites for the assertion and expression of state power, which can constrain the lives of borderland people” (Schomerus et al. 2013, 10). By making claims on the state and attempting to frame the state as the guardian of their interests, borderland populations “demonstrate how borders often become important sites of state formation via the imagining of the state as the protector and enforcer of local claims. In this process, the state may also become a hegemonic, often violent, force even in the lives of remote and marginalised peoples” (Schomerus, Vries, and Vaughan 2013, 15). In South Sudan, the only concrete expression of the state in margins such as Boma is the military, the SPLA. But this has not prevented Highland Murle people in Boma from imagining the state, defining their own expectations of it and claiming it. In fact, it is precisely the SPLA’s long-term presence in Boma that is used as the premise for people’s claims to the SPLM state.

Yet just as the state searches for ways “to make a society legible” (Scott 1998, 2) and prescribe new identities (Broch-Due 2004b), so do the state’s ‘subjects’, the people, imagine an idea of and are part of constructing and forming a concrete state. Legibility, which James Scott (1998) defines as the efforts by a state to settle or ‘sedentarize’ populations, and in the process shape and control them, is then a dual process.

Citizens seek to make an imagined and longed for state legible and real, built on expectations of peace, security and access to social services. Simultaneously, where the state seeks to employ a set of ideas and practices that make its people, society, legible to itself (Leonardi 2013, 198). But this does not mean that negotiations are inclusive or conducted on an equal footing. Rather, negotiating statehood

“engages heterogeneous groups with highly differentiated assets, entitlements, legitimacy and styles of expression. Not everything is or can be negotiated and not everyone takes part in negotiating statehood. But the political configurations and institutional arrangements that result from such negotiation processes must be seen as imprints of domination by the more powerful over weaker groups” (Hagmann and Péclard 2010, 545).

In this sense, in Boma, rural Murle experiences and imaginings of the state draw on historical, emotional and political configurations, and simultaneously from their positioning in society. As the first place captured and held by the SPLA in 1985, Boma was central to the assertion of the power of the state, at the time a different state, the Sudan. In this sense, Boma was not a margin, but quite the contrary. It was a centre where the struggle for secession began by the movement and army that is now in control of the country, the SPLM/A.

Works such as those by Das and Poole (2004a), Ferme (2001) and Cormack (2014) elucidate visibly how people living on the margins are not passive, but have agency and are creatively determining their own centres. They offer evidence of people that are “bristling with life that is certainly managed and controlled but that also flows outside this control” (Das and Poole 2004b, 30).

Contrary to much of the academic literature on the state in Africa and its assumptions of an orderly distinction between the realm of the state and the realm of society, the premise of any discussion of ‘the state’ should be that states are *not* external to society. Dichotomous expectations of “clear-cut boundaries between private and public, legal and illegal, indigenous and foreign, collective and individual domains” (Hagmann and Péclard 2010, 542) are inconsistent with the everyday political realities of state construction. Rather, as observed by Hagmann and Péclard (2010, 552),

“The main characteristics of the boundaries upon which the classical conception of the state relies are their elusiveness and their constant redefinition by the actors involved. These elusive boundaries constitute major political objects in processes of negotiating statehood.”

Instead, the state is forged not only by state actors such as government officials, politicians and military leaders but equally by non-state actors that are not part of its formal politico-administrative structure (Hagmann and Péclard 2010, 546). It is in this continuous negotiation that “state officials and non-state actors are involved in ‘doing the state,’ both in co-operation and in competition with the state” (Hagmann and Péclard 2010, 543). Even when people criticise state practices and failures, they are “participating in state formation by promoting the ideal of state law and regulatory orders” (Leonardi 2013, 201). Far from being only a negative force in people’s lives, the state is also seen by many people as a source of protection (James 2009a). In this sense, the state is simultaneously an idea, a set of practices and a process, constantly changing over time (Leonardi 2013; Das and Poole 2004a; Ferguson 2003; Broch-Due 2004b).

Through this dissertation, I make use of Cherry Leonardi’s helpful distinction of the two imagined social spheres of ‘*hakuma*’ and ‘home’, and their respective moral authorities, by applying these to understandings of violence and insecurity (Leonardi 2007b). For Leonardi, ‘*hakuma*’, meaning government in Arabic,

“has come to denote a bundle of influences and symbols, spatially located in the town. It encompasses armies and the military cultures originally introduced by the Turco-Egyptian army in the 19th century, and also the literate, bureaucratic cultures of schools and government offices” (Leonardi 2007b, 394).

On the other end, ‘home’ refers to the family and the ‘traditional.’ While Leonardi makes use of the terms to refer to the ways in which ‘youth’ in South Sudan negotiate the tensions in social position of “*in-between*” (Leonardi 2007b, 394) ‘*hakuma*’ and ‘home’, I find these spheres can also be adopted and helpful in considering the nature of violent conflict and the ways in which it can be locally understood.

The state is not a coherent entity, rather it is structured around competing nodes of power. Although the state seeks to appear stable and “rock-solid”, it is better thought of as “multi-dimensional arenas in which different groups compete for resources by using all kinds of means – technological, organisational, ideological – to occupy strategic nodes in the distribution of power. These nodes are always contested” (Wolf 2003, 61). Thus, the state is composed of individuals with their own agendas and constituencies, often mobilised around ethnicity.

The dissertation analyses how ethnic identity politics are played out and deployed by a predatory state that employs ethnicity as a political and military tool, and the repercussions

this has on the collective search for a much needed common South Sudanese collective identity. But this is also a study about how populations on the margins engage with the state, by showing how the violence of the state can serve as a central element in people's self ethnic representations, as well as in articulations of relations to others. In other words, the process of imagining and creating is mutual, by the state and by its people.

## 1.6 CONSIDERING THE MEANINGS OF *VIOLENCES*

This dissertation is not intended to be a formal study on violence, or rather, violence is not the organizing principle of this study. Instead, I understand violence as part of the material, social and political context in which Highland Murle people exercise their social and political agency and practice and through which people make sense of a number of intimate social dimensions that weave through and with violence (Englund 2004). Others such as Carolyn Nordstrom (1997; 2004) have emphasized political violence as the context itself, but this arguably limits people's experiences and ability to act as social and political agents.

Violence can affect every dimension of life, the public and the private sphere, including a person's intimate sense of who they are. In considering the power of violence, it should be "the lived, existential dimension of violence and the troubling ways it communicates with other arenas of personal life, apparently not directly within the domain of war and upheaval" (Broch-Due 2004a, 17). Respectively, I see violence as meaningful and decisive in shaping processes of Highland Murle identification and alliance-making in Boma (Watson and Schlee 2009). But this can only be truly understood when contextualised in the specific circumstances of the Murle ethnic group in South Sudan (Englund 2004), which is what I intend to do over this dissertation.

In this sub-section, I present my understandings of violence as a meaningful plural category, not only destructive but also creative, and outline some working definitions of the various forms and expressions of violence discussed in this dissertation. For the purposes of this study, I am interested in examining how violence weaves itself with notions of collective identity and belonging and this sub-section sets out my theoretical approach to this.

First, I discuss violence not only as an event or act, but as a continuum (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004a), part of the exceptional as well as of the normal, both quotidian and political (Ferrándiz and Feixa 2007, 53). The violence continuum can be helpful in conceptualising the ways in which in some contexts, "violence gives birth to itself" (Scheper-

Hughes and Bourgois 2004a, 1). In this sense, there may be more value in exploring not what triggered violence, but rather the process of how people *make* war and peace and move through a continuum of violence (Richards 2005). Although ‘war’ and ‘peace’ are sometimes spoken as discrete entities that can simply replace each other, in reality both terms are much more fluid categories that often coexist (Cockburn 2009). With reference to northern Uganda, Finnstrom (2004, 114) suggests that “going from bad to good surroundings, from war to peace, is a long process, a continuum – rather than involving an essential or even illusory break between two absolute, defined and definite conditions of human life”.

But as will be discussed throughout the dissertation, I also seek to go beyond the continuum in what I see as its limitations in reflecting the ways in which forms of violence that affect Highland Murle people’s lives relate to each other in Boma. The approach remains too linear to account for the ways in which different forms of violence manifest themselves during periods considered locally as peaceful. It fails to adequately acknowledge the ways in which modes of violence can overlap, sometimes continuous, sometimes contradicting, coexisting, multiple. There is not one type of violence that simply mutates into another. Different forms of violence can coexist at one given time, affecting different people differently. This study will demonstrate how a linear conception of violence as a continuum remains insufficiently nuanced to capture what is going on in Boma. Significantly, the continuum does not adequately reflect Murle emic categories of *jɔre* and *ɔɾɔn* (discussed in chapters 4 and 5) and the ways in which *violences* are experienced and engaged with in Boma.

Violence is not one entity, it is oftentimes plural and that is why I deliberately use the plural *violences*, which reflects most accurately how multiple forms of violence can occur simultaneously, sometimes discretely coexisting; other times overlapping, accumulating and building on each other. In a different way, Ferrándiz and Feixa (2007, 52) have also used the plural ‘violences’ to place emphasis on the multi-faceted dimensions of different expressions of violence. The dissertation then proposes a theory of the ways in which different forms of violence, or *violences*, accumulate, coexist and also transform, how they change in depth and nuance. Rather than a linear escalation and transformation of violence, *violences* coexist and may or may not causally produce one another.

The above considerations on the continuum are important because there are various levels of violence present in Boma that sometimes coexist, other times build on each other and other times replace each other. On the one hand, periods conceived locally as ‘peacetime’ in Boma can be characterised by different levels of violence that have become normalised and

thus made invisible. To some extent, this may be because understandings of violence are so often closely tied to its physicality. Thus, it can be difficult to recognize how “invisible violence” is constituted through the various levels of structural, symbolic and everyday violence that operates as part of everyday life (Bourgois 2010), what Scheper-Hughes (1997) refers to as “peacetime crimes” and I will refer in this dissertation as ‘peacetime violence’. Referring to the importance of recognizing invisible violence, Philippe Bourgois (2010, 17) says it best:

“Direct physical violence is easily visible, [but] it is merely the tip of the iceberg. Often it distracts us from being able to see the less clearly visible forms of coercion, fear, and subjectification through which violence deceptively and perniciously morphs over time and through history. These deceptive forms of violence are largely invisible to or ‘misrecognized’ by both protagonists and victims—who are often one and the same.”

In this sense, invisible violence is part of how ‘normality’ is constituted. Violence is not external to people’s lives but often central to and emerging from their lives; thus it must not be seen as ‘abnormal’ (Nordstrom and Robben 1995), but as part of social life. Building from this perspective, I conceptualize chronic insecurity as a “social condition” (Lubkemann 2008), thus constant, naturalised and invisible (Bourgois 2010).

As in so many places around the globe, even though violence has been a major part of South Sudan’s history (Cormack 2014; Hutchinson 2004), including of the local history of Boma, people in Boma do not define their everyday lives as violent. As observed by Stephen Lubkemann (2008, 1), in many places in Africa, “prolonged and chronic armed conflict has served as the primary backdrop for the social existence of entire generations”. Although Lubkemann is referring to war when he says that populations in such places do not see war as an “‘event’ that suspends ‘normal’ social processes,” I argue his point is equally valid to refer to the invisible violence of the everyday, which has “become *the* normal—in the sense of ‘expected’—context for the unfolding of social life” (Lubkemann 2008, 1).

In considering violence beyond its physical and concrete dimensions, I return to the concept of structural violence, as more encompassing and simultaneously less palpable, harder to locate and yet equally disorienting. I draw inspiration from Scheper-Hughes (1992; 1997) and Bourgois (1995; 2001; 2004) to highlight what I deem to be underlying dimensions of violence: structural violence that in turn, allows other forms of invisible violence to occur and flourish, as will be shown empirically throughout this dissertation.

It may be helpful to do some definitional work of the forms of violence discussed in this study. *Structural violence* refers to “Violence exerted systematically—that is, indirectly—by

everyone who belongs to a certain social order” (Farmer 2004, 307). Like Farmer (1996), I see oppression as the core of “chronic structural violence” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004, 25) which dictates the conditions of physical and emotional distress ranging “from high morbidity and mortality rates to poverty and abusive working conditions” (Bourgois 2001, 7). It is, as the names suggests, rooted in macro-level socio political structures such as unequal state relations and marginalization and is articulated locally in ongoing social neglect, political isolation and absence of services. It is the implicit nature of structural violence that makes it so overwhelming and all-encompassing, and thus invisible. The actions – or inactions – of the state and its predatory tactics are often at the source of structural violence, which results in social inequality, marginalisation and neglect. Yet structural violence is oftentimes harder to comprehend because it is faceless and not tied to one single perpetrator. As noted by Broch-Due (2004a, 35) “We are less accustomed to view the production of physical violence through the same lenses as those applied to the production of poverty. In contrast to creeping marginalisation, violence enacted clearly has immediate actors, perpetrators and victims.”

I see structural violence as the underlying conditions that also produce what Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) has coined and developed as *everyday violence*, based on her work in the shantytowns of Brazil’s northeast. Everyday violence refers to the ‘peace-time crimes’ (Scheper-Hughes 2007) that affect the marginalised communities around the world, through which violence is normalized and made invisible. I adopt her definition of the term as “the implicit, legitimate, organised, and routinized violence of particular social-political state formations” (Scheper-Hughes 1997, 471). These range from daily practices and expressions of violence ranging from interpersonal and domestic violence (Bourgois 2004, 426) to the everyday consequences of structural violence such as insecurity on the roads and fear of movement, attacks and robberies, drunken quarrelling as well as age-set fighting, among others.

I refer to discursive violence as a specific dimension of symbolic violence affecting Murle as “the internalised humiliations and legitimations of inequality and hierarchy” (Bourgois 2001, 8). Discursive violence suggests unequal power relations and contributes to neglect, poverty and marginalisation.

Finally, perhaps the most visible of all forms of violence, political violence that I will refer simply as war, denotes targeted physical violence, most often by the state (Bourgois 2001) but in the context of South Sudan, also by other organised forces. While it is useful to consider these various expressions and forms of violence, chapter 4 and 5 will demonstrate

how none of them fully reflect Murle emic categories of *jore* and *ɔɾɔn*, which in some ways are able to offer more nuance and complexity because they can occur simultaneously.

### 1.6.1 INTENTIONALITY

There is another important element connected to local conceptions of violence in Boma, and that is intentionality of an act. This is also why local conceptions of violence tend to be most informed by concrete physical acts of violence, including war. David Riches' (1986b, 8) definition of violence as "an act of physical hurt deemed legitimate by the performer and illegitimate by (some) witnesses" is a good starting point because it suggests perspectives and angles. Riches also recognises

"[A]n apparent paradox ... 'violence' is very much a word of those who witness, or who are victims of certain acts, rather than those who perform them. Yet what is required is that this *performance* should be understood and explained".

When considering violence, we should focus on its meaning as understood by the witness and the victim (Riches 1986b). This use is predicated on the power relations between performer and witness and thus offers important insights into the performer's perspective (Riches 1986b; Ferguson and Whitehead 2000). On the one hand, this places too much emphasis on the physical and literal dimension of violence, whereas as noted earlier, "violence is more than the illegitimate physical force against a person or group of persons" (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004a, 22). On the other hand, in Boma it is the physical dimensions of violence within their respective moral codes that are most meaningful to people's everyday lives.

Highlighting the importance of 'meaning' does not necessarily advance a cultural-relativist view of the meanings of the performance of violent acts. Rather, it accentuates the contexts in which these performances are enacted, and what communicative messages they may carry (Aijmer and Abbink 2000). Hence, violent behaviour cannot be explained through moral arguments, rather it can only be understood within the socio-cultural and historical elements key to situate the violent act, before adding a moral dimension. Violence is best, or perhaps only understood when examined within its social and historical context, since it is the social and cultural dimensions of violence that give it its power and meaning (Riches 1986a; Donham 2006; Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Bay and Donham 2006).



### 1.6.2 *VIOLENCE AS FORMATIVE*

The uncertainty and ambiguity generated by violence (Broch-Due 2004b; Vigh 2011) is a catalyst to other changes in social life and, as Donald Donham (2006, 28) puts it, “can ‘speed up’ history”. Usually immediately associated with obliteration, demolition and chaos, violence appears “destructive of identity, relationship and lifeworld” (Broch-Due 2004a, 17). But rather, this study reveals how violence creeps and interlocks deeply into complex notions of belonging and identity, through creative and powerful ways. Conditions of violence and war present both challenges and opportunities (Grabska 2014) and can assume a dual powerful “world-making” (Bowman 2001, 32) role by both triggering essentialising narratives and simultaneously being the reference to which identities are instrumentally reimagined and recreated. It is a force capable of disintegrating old structures and fabricating new ones (Broch-Due 2004a). As argued by Bøås and Dunn (2007, 5),

“War does more than merely disrupt or destroy existing social systems; it also creates new systems. Although cruel, ugly, and inhuman, war is also by nature an instrument for social restructuring. It is a site for innovation, reordering social, economic, and political life, and is best approached as a drama. War is a social drama over the distribution of ideas, identities, resources, and social positions, and it often forces the disadvantaged to design alternative survival strategies.”

In the context of the national and local political dynamics in Jonglei discussed in sections 1.2.1 to 1.2.3, the Murle ethnic group were the politically, socially and economically “disadvantaged”, and within the Murle, the Highland Murle felt victimized by both their broader group and the wider State. This dissertation argues that whether intended or not, violence became for many Highland Murle a creative and constituent force in social relations with the power to deconstruct, redefine and reshape social order (Donham 2006; Abbink 2000).

Violent conflict has often played an important role in defining and maintaining group boundaries, which serve to delineate ethnic identity (see Turton 1994; Fukui 1994; Turton 1997; Schlee and Watson 2009). War can have an essentialising effect on identities in the ways in which violence is deployed both as a means to “produce certainty” and as a way to reinforce “essentialised ideas about identity and belonging”. Accounts from Boma suggest that violence is “formative of people’s perceptions of who they are” (Broch-Due 2004a, 2), and importantly, of who they are not. Drawing from the case of Tigreans in Ethiopia, Tronvoll (2004, 242) argues that violence has been central in recreating “past impressions

of significant others and formed future ones". In this sense, violence had come to be perceived as "an enduring social and political phenomenon, which manifests itself within all aspects of social life" (Tronvoll 2004, 242).

The effects of violence in processes of identity-formation can be an externally-driven process, resulting from pressures of the state or other non-state actors such as neighbouring groups. But just as much, violence can pressure members of a group to reproduce alternative identities as a self-preservation survival strategy; as much functional, strategic and performative. Put simply, "In different situations it may be advantageous for a group or individual to define themselves in a particular way" (Watson and Schlee 2009, 2). In other words, violence and war instil a sense of urgency in the selection of an 'appropriate', acceptable and neutral identity; one which can provide access to social and political gains, and/or, as a minimum, provide inconspicuous protection. An identity from the many possible identities in the bag, or "masks or cages it may inhabit" (Gupta and Ferguson 2001a, 12), which can place the individual discreetly in what would be perceived as the safer margin of a conflict. For many Highland Murle this was perceived, right or wrongly, to be siding with the government; but these choices are contextual, temporal, situated and ever-shifting.

For many Highland Murle, representations of being 'peaceful' and rejecting violence', were connected to sometimes *being ηalam* and *not* Murle, which was perceived as the most adequate temporary identity in the context of the largely Murle rebellion with the state. When political violence peaked in the Murle plains, but especially when it reached Boma, it prompted a debate on Highland Murle ethnic identity as *ηalam*. On the one hand, government and other ethnic groups deliberately made use of the term to distinguish Murle of Boma from the wider Cobra Faction (predominantly Murle) rebellion, but also as a means to promote division among the Murle ethnic group. On the other hand, some Highland Murle people also willingly and positively adopted the term *ηalam*. In other words, Highland Murle people felt the need to dissociate themselves from the violence of being Murle and being *ηalam* conferred people that social and political space and difference.

The shifting geographic, social, political and economic category '*ηalam*' will be discussed extensively throughout this dissertation so I will introduce it briefly here. The term *ηalam* (plural) or *ηalamit* (singular) refers to a man with no cattle and is often used as an insult in Murleland. Literally, the word means 'sugar ant' and is used to refer to someone that has no cattle and is therefore forced to cultivate. According to Arensen (1992, 35), the term suggests "that they have no cattle and have to spend all their time scurrying around in in

the earth to procure food”. Since Highland Murle identify as cultivators, internally Murle use the term *ɲalam* to refer to Murle from Boma, although this remains controversial. This dissertation will show how the term has shifted and is continuously being redefined and gaining new social and political meanings and clout. It shifts between being used as an adjective, a reference to place or a people. Geographically, Boma has become known as a *ɲalam* area, with the term gaining a geographical meaning.

The term *ɲalam* had until the recent past no significant political connotations, but was rather used as an insult by a Murle possessing cattle speaking against a Murle with less, or no cattle. Accordingly, Murle individuals with most cattle are located along the Nanaam River. Subsequently each area after that has less cattle eventually reaching Boma where Murle do not keep cattle at all and are instead agrarian. *ɲalamit* can also be used in the Lowlands to refer “to those who have cows but whose mother is from Boma,” even if the father may own cattle.<sup>18</sup> As an internal label, *ɲalam* has existed within Murle society for as long as people can remember but it had never been meant as sub-group of the Murle. Rather, it was a term used internally to identify people in terms of cattle ownership, thus wealth status and effectively their place of origin in the Highlands.

## 1.7 STATE, VIOLENCE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY POLITICS

Crucially, and as will be discussed in this study, the constant demonization of the wider Murle group has had serious consequences for the ways in which the Murle people negotiate their position within South Sudan and experience being South Sudanese. Being at the receiving end of state structural violence, constant threat and sense of marginalisation has been part of making modern Murle identity, similar to how Wendy James (1996; 2009b) explains that the Uduk communities from the Blue Nile reproduced themselves as a by-product of a constant attack by the state.

There are many ways in which identity as a shifting category can be employed and conceptualised. However, in the context of this dissertation and argument, I am interested in the ways in which specifically ethnic identity is mobilised individually and collectively. I understand ethnic identity to be a combination of intrinsic shared collective experiences and projections, which is of most significance because of its social and political dimension.

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Titoch correspondence, 22/05/2016.

These are fluid and variable concepts, sometimes used deliberately so by different actors, which are articulated strategically.

I privilege ethnicity in this study because in the context of the war between the predominantly Murle Cobra Faction with the government's SPLA, it was ethnicity that emerged as people's most significant identity marker. Ethnic identities are of course profoundly embedded in other social relations and identities built around gender, age-sets and generations, class, economic status, religion, nationality, origin and place (Broch-Due 2004b). These various elements of identity certainly played a part in shaping experiences, engagement and understandings of the Cobra Faction-SPLA war, but ultimately it was people's ethnicity as Murle that established an individual and collective sense of marginalisation, persecution, insecurity and relations to the state. Although ethnicity has effectively become "a sort of universal shorthand that masks a host of much more complex issues of identity and difference" when discussing violence (Hayden 1996 in Broch-Due 2004a, 6), it is still of analytical value in the ways it has meaning for participants and spectators. Ethnicity has proved a popular means of political solidarity and mobilisation, and has materialised as one of the dominant political forms of the post-colonial period across Africa, by both the state and its people (Maybury-Lewis 2003; Markakis 1994; Markakis 2004; Mohamed-Salih and Markakis 1998; Werbner and Ranger 1996; Werbner 2002). Instead of using 'ethnicity', South Sudanese commonly use the term 'tribe' to refer to what are in many cases ethnic affiliations. Building on Ferguson and Whitehead (2000, 15), Douglas Johnson makes the useful distinction between "tribe" and "ethnic group" where "tribes are bounded and/or structured political organizations, while ethnic groups are a cultural phenomenon with only latent organizational potential", and as such, cannot be used interchangeably.<sup>19</sup> In this dissertation, I will refrain from using the term "tribe", except when it is used by my interlocutors.

There are two main approaches to understanding ethnicity (Barth 1998; Eriksen 1993; Turton 1997). *Primordialists* see ethnicity and its historical assertions, collective understanding, and ability to manage social relations, "as a historical artefact, and focus on trying to understand its demonstrated power in the modern world" (Spear 1993b, 15). The fact that ethnicity succeeds in evoking powerful and too often bloody responses proves its significance as a mobilising force, explained by primordialists as based in its "historical

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<sup>19</sup> Johnson, draft 'Introduction' dated 27/02/2015 (unpublished).

content and depth of ethnicity, focusing on the affective power of traditional symbols to evoke deep emotional responses within individuals and collectivities” (Spear 1993b, 15).

In turn, *instrumentalists* recognise ethnicity as ‘invented’ and deployed for the purpose of “one social goal or another” (Anderson 2006; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992; Fukui and Markakis 1994a; Mohamed-Salih and Markakis 1998). Speaking about the creative nature of Maasai identity, Thomas Spear (1993b, 15), argues that the power of ethnicity lies in ability “to create a shared historical consciousness and to mobilize this in the service of modern aims, its ability to reflect both traditional and modern concerns”. It is now largely agreed that ‘ethnicity’ is a social construct, that can mutate and change over time, and is therefore difficult to define and pinpoint, partially limiting its value as a category of analysis (Fukui and Markakis 1994a; Mohamed-Salih and Markakis 1998; Eriksen 1993). Rather, as has been seen through a number of post-colonial studies of groups living on the margins of the state, the so-called traditions, ethnic identities are imagined political constructions resulting from specific social and historical environments (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992; Fukui and Markakis 1994a; Anderson 2006; Leonardi 2013). Identities are not natural, static and absolute. In the words of James Scott (2009, xii–iii),

“Nothing could be further from the truth. All identities, without exception, have been socially constructed: the Han, the Burman, the American, the Danish, all of them. Quite often such identities, particularly minority identities, are at first imagined by powerful states (...).”

Flexible and instrumental identities can be mobilized not only to access resources, but also for social and political objectives and for protection. In extreme scenarios of survival, individuals deploy and are able to perform variable identities that can provide them with some physical safety. In an article about a fleeing Tutsi survivor of the 1994 genocide, Johan Pottier (2005) demonstrates how politics of identity take shape in reality and have very concrete consequences that relate to survival or death. He shows how a woman drew on a variety of identities—ranging from ethnicity, class, gender, religion and cross-ethnic solidarity, nationality—to support her escape to safety of the refugee camp in Bukavu.

Identities are then both strategically selected, performed and produced through multiple and contested discourses, recreated through unstable, mutable and fragmented senses of the self and the ‘other.’ As noted by Dunn (2001, 56), “identities are socially constructed, conditional and lodged in contingencies that are historically specific, inter-subjective and discursively produced”. Emphasizing the simultaneous agency and creative power of individuals in these processes as well as its limiting effect on individuals, Gupta and Ferguson (2001, 12) suggest that:

“An identity is something that one ‘has’ and can manipulate, that one can ‘choose’; or inversely, it is something that acts as a source of ‘constraint’ on the individual, as an ascribed rather than a chosen feature of life. In both cases, the individual subject is taken as a pre-given entity, identities as so many masks or cages it may inhabit. Such positions are perfectly compatible with the observation that identities (like the contents of ‘cultures’ themselves) are historically contingent.”

This does not make identities any less real, since they frame social relations and produce real ‘outcomes’. It is not necessary to start defining ethnic identity, since “an ethnic group is not a group because of ethnicity, but because its members engage in common action and share common interests” (Turton 1994, 17). In this sense, like “instrumentalists”, I understand ethnicity to be like any other social category, “formed in relation to people’s own immediate needs and to their relationships with others” (Spear 1993b, 15). Which is precisely why leaders across the Horn of Africa and in particular South Sudan have made use of ethnicity, manipulating and evoking it as a sacred attribute.

On this basis, analysing ethnicity requires acknowledging both its “instrumental” or material aspects and its “primordial” and cultural aspects, since its success as a way to advance group interests “depends on it being seen as “primordial” by those who make claims in its name” (Turton 1997, 82 in Watson and Schlee 2009, 2). Both approaches to ethnicity are of value and complementary (Watson and Schlee 2009; Feyissa 2009; Spear and Waller 1993) and this dissertation demonstrates how Murle ethnicity is interpreted as both instrumental and primordial. Instrumental in the sense that ‘ethnic ideologies’ (Spear 1993b, 16) determine who controls and has access to critical resources (Bayart 2009), and thus confers legitimacy in the eyes of the government and of other ethnic groups. Yet, simultaneously, primordial interpretations of ethnicity should not be totally dismissed as ‘a form of “false consciousness”’, because ultimately, ethnicity continues to be “a powerful ideology for identity formation and social action” (Spear 1993b, 16). Put simply then, “ethnicity establishes and controls social access to critical resources” (Spear 1993b, 16).

For the purposes of this dissertation I recognise ethnic identity formation as a process that follows the particular interests of a group, or of individuals within that group, understood relationally to other ‘identities’ and structures, both in terms of state and non-state actors. In this sense, there is as much a naturalised element to identity as there is a performative dimension. As Yuval-Davis (2007, 6) points out, identities “are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are [and who they are not]”. It is the narratives of Highland Murle people regarding themselves, their home and the events and processes affecting their lives that this thesis is concerned about.

Privileging the angles from Boma, this dissertation is concerned with the ways in which violence proved to be formative of people's sense of who they are. Highland Murle interpreted and incarnated their ethnic identity in Boma as part of the wider Murle community seeking to on the one hand, carve their place within a more dominant Murle group, and on the other hand, to protect themselves from the violence of being Murle in South Sudan. Narrativising *being ḡalam* seemed to at least temporarily provide Highland Murle with that safety. When the war between the SPLA and the SSDA-CF reached Boma, some Highland Murle people adopted the term *ḡalam* to dissociate themselves from the violence perceived to be targeting all Murle.

## 1.8 CHAPTER PLANS

This chapter has presented the context and focus of this research and provided an outline of the theoretical underpinnings and empirical contributions of the dissertation.

CHAPTER 2 discusses the research approach and methodology. It examines the dynamics of researching in contexts of instability and proposes improvisation as an intrinsic part of research methods. It also provides a timeline of the fieldwork and the various complementary data collection methodologies employed.

CHAPTER 3 traces the historical production and circulation of an image of Boma as both a borderland and as a centre. It examines historical imaginings of Boma and of the Murle ethnic group, and how the Highland Murle from Boma have looked to carve a place within the broader Murle society.

CHAPTERS 4 and 5 are paired together and trace the shift from everyday violence to the war between the SPLA and the SSDM/A-Cobra Faction in Boma, and how diverse forms of violence, or violences, interacted with each other.

CHAPTER 4 examines Boma in 'peacetime' and the visible and invisible violences of the everyday, which connect to the structural and symbolic violences that shape being Murle in South Sudan. CHAPTER 5 provides a historical narrative of the re-emergence of the SSDM/A-CF and civilian reactions to the growing violence, in particular in terms of displacement and places of exile.

CHAPTERS 6, 7 and 8 are linked and discuss from different angles and progressively the politics of Murle identity, and how ethnic identifications were being recruited and performed for social and political purposes.

CHAPTER 6 explores accounts of *being* Murle from Boma during the Cobra Faction war with the government, the instrumental and performative use of a *ηalam* identity and how the relationship between violence and identity/belonging was constituted through the active engagement between place and necessity, cross cut with relationships, and political and social exigencies.

In turn, CHAPTER 7 addresses the ambiguous relationship of the Murle with the state, in its multiple and overlapping possibilities. The chapter also explores the extent and ways in which state bureaucracies and elites have the power to create and influence narratives of new group identities. In other words, the chapter is concerned with the ways in which the state plays a role in shaping identities and constructing group boundaries.

CHAPTER 8 examines how the peace deal between the Government of South Sudan and the SSDM/A-Cobra Faction, which led to the creation of the GPAA, the 'liberation' of Murleland and concretely of Boma, offered Highland Murle the social and political space to once again become Murle. This connected to aspirations for a revised role for the state, without the perceived and real threat of ethnically-targeted violence by the SPLA, and to some extent by neighbouring groups.

Finally, CHAPTER 9 offers some final methodological and theoretical reflections on the central themes of this dissertation, as well as suggestions for future research.



## 2. METHODOLOGY: MAKING SENSE OF VIOLENCE AND UNCERTAINTY

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter 1 I introduced the dissertation, its rationale, theoretical framework and main contributions, providing also a contextual background to the research focus. The constant instability that pervades through chapter 1 is also the social and political environment in which I conducted my fieldwork. It is of great significance also because it was that context which led me to my research focus and questions. Perhaps one of the most striking elements researching South Sudan is how social and political life is constantly flowing and in movement, in a variety of ways and levels (see also Hutchinson 2009). A rapidly shifting political and military context; the state constantly being imagined and re-imagined by its population; violence as part of life, shifting and mutable, and triggering a variety of responses and reactions; and ethnic identities continuously being reconfigured and adapted.

My research took place in a shifting social and political environment where I navigated between physical, social and political spaces of instability and constant change.<sup>1</sup> Improvising –theoretically, ethically, emotionally and methodologically (Cerwonka 2007; Malkki 2007)– has not been a secondary feature, but rather an ever-present, conscious and necessary strategy. While I have faced certain methodological challenges in researching in such a politically volatile period of conflict, it has also been a unique opportunity to engage theoretically with the ways in which individuals make sense of events. This constant flux that has affected the research has not only been an important methodological factor, but most importantly, it reflects and is a central feature of the society and an object of that research. As Cramer et al. (2016, 17) note, “Crises and mistakes become themselves a form of evidence”.

This chapter is divided in two complementary sections. By providing a meta-narrative of events and field sites, it first tackles the ways in which this dissertation understands and has engaged methodologically with violence and the uncertainty it produces (Raeymaekers

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter discusses issues also addressed in an article published in a special issue on the ethics of researching in conflict in the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* (Felix da Costa 2016). The special issue was the result of a Workshop on the same topic held at the University of Oxford in June 2015 (Stellmach and Beshar 2016).

2014). Second, it discusses the data collection methodologies used throughout the fieldwork. The unpredictable nature of conducting fieldwork in insecure environments has been part of the empirical and methodological decisions and thus I first explain the contexts of the various field sites and how these shifted and interacted with methodological choices and possibilities.

Researching social phenomena in contexts of violence, and thus encountering and experiencing human suffering, is never going to be an objective and straightforward investigative process. Rather, it is full of uncertainty, intense involvement, self-reflection and doubt, as well as permanent ethical reassessment, improvisation and ethnographic intuition. As Allaine Cerwonka (2007, 6) notes, “Fieldwork is always already a critical theoretical practice; a deeply and inescapably empirical practice; and a necessarily improvisational experiment”, amplified by the even greater uncertainty and chaos of conflict.

Researching and conducting fieldwork on any social phenomena is inevitably unpredictable and uncertain. This is multiplied many times by situations of violence and instability. When Frank Pieke was on fieldwork in China in 1989, he witnessed the Tiananmen Square protests. He continued his fieldwork and labelled his adaptive response as ‘accidental anthropology’ (Pieke 1995), urging anthropologists neither to hold on to the execution of a predetermined research plan, nor to start all over again when encountering unexpected events. I believe that accidental anthropology is “not about emergencies but rather about understanding contingencies in a wider social and cultural context” (Nordstrom and Robben 1995, 16). The principle of ‘accidental anthropology’ is vital if fieldwork is to remain a genuinely reflective and honest endeavour that reacts to a shifting social world. Fieldwork is much more than just collecting data, but rather engaging in an inter-subjective and equal dialogue with the social world being studied (Clifford and Marcus 1986). In this sense, the research findings are the result of a collaborative effort.

To give meaning to complex episodes of social life, an essential part of my methodological approach has been to rely on ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz 1973), seeking to situate events in space and time. In writing this dissertation I have also chosen to portray events and make arguments through the use of thick descriptions and vignettes as entry points to analytical writing. By default rather than by choice, my methodological choices were not always as reflective, coherent and consistent as I had initially planned for. I adapted to what was possible to do in the existing circumstances of insecurity and uncertainty.

In studying the mutable and shifting nature of violence, I have chosen to present events chronologically as they occurred: chronic insecurity and peacetime everyday violence; the arrival of war and the ways in which varied forms of violence coexisted; and the return to a normalised everyday violence. The research focuses on Murle social relations that all connect to Boma as a locality, a place and a home, inspired by Harri Englund's (2002; 2004) work on the Malawi-Mozambican border. What this means is that even though empirical work was carried out in various locations (at 'home' in Boma and subsequently in places of Murle displacement as well as in the Murle plains), all key informants had emotional and concrete ties to Boma. Thus, the dissertation focuses on the social, political and ethnic relations and perspectives of the Highland Murle.

## 2.2 METHODOLOGY, VIOLENCE AND FIELD SITES ON THE MOVE

This doctorate is based on research carried out during the past five years. Just under half of that time was spent in South Sudan. During the roughly 27 months I spent in South Sudan, from the first time I visited the country in October 2011 to the most recent visit in December 2015, I spent periods fully dedicated to my own fieldwork and research, and time doing research work in Greater Pibor as well as other parts of the country. This period allowed me to travel to areas I would not have otherwise gone to and also to situate the Murle as a people and Boma as a place and landscape within the wider South Sudanese context. I also gained valuable insights into the dominant dynamics and political economy of aid in the country through the consultancies and engagement with aid structures. But I also came to realise how logistically challenging it is to conduct independent research in such a volatile environment and thus how aid-industry dependent researchers can become. Yet engaging with the aid industry carries risks of politicisation.

Nonetheless, this doctorate draws overwhelmingly from roughly 12 months of dedicated fieldwork in Boma and in areas of Murle displacement, including South Sudan's capital city Juba. As I began the doctorate in September 2011, I spent one month in South Sudan in November 2011 as a research associate for the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs researching the community-level work of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). I then moved to South Sudan from September 2012 to September 2014. During this period, I worked as a consultant for a joint research project for the Overseas Development Institute's Humanitarian Policy Group and the University of Bristol, and then later the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, Médecins Sans Frontières-Belgium,

Radio Benevolencija Humanitarian Tools, the GSDRC at the University of Birmingham, the Danish Refugee Council/Danish Demining Group, Vétérinaires Sans Frontières–Germany and AECOM/USAID.

When I first arrived to South Sudan to formally begin my doctoral fieldwork in September 2012 I was continuously discouraged from going to Murleland, by senior members of government, other foreign and South Sudanese academics and NGO staff. One such piece of advice came from a prominent South Sudanese academic who told me that “the worst thing in South Sudan is to have *Khawaja*<sup>2</sup> blood on your hands”, and that I should not go to Pibor to avoid bringing problems to the area. Sadly, this kind of rhetoric was not new. Linguist and missionary (who later became an anthropologist) Jon Arensen reported that in 1974-1975 when he was undertaking linguistic surveys across Southern Sudan, he was advised by government officials in Juba to not visit Pibor district: “The people there were seen as dangerous and might attack us.”<sup>3</sup> He chose to go to Pibor anyway and found the stories about the Murle to be false. As I came to learn, the negative portrayal of Pibor and of Murle was part of the aggressive anti-Murle rhetoric used by the government, media and most spheres of society to represent the Murle in a violent and inhospitable light. However, when in contact with people who had actually been to and spent time in Murleland, opinions were very different, with one aid worker that had lived in Pibor as well as travelled extensively through South Sudan referring to Pibor and Murle people as “the most welcoming people in South Sudan”.<sup>4</sup>

While I was in the process of narrowing down the selection of a specific field site in the last months of 2012, the conflict in Pibor continued escalating. Aid agencies regularly evacuated their staff from Pibor town returning within every couple of days (MSF 2012; Briggs 2013). Pibor was known as dangerous and inhospitable. I wanted to avoid being locked in a compound during my fieldwork and had heard of Boma as a place secluded from the political and communal troubles pervasive in Pibor and more broadly in Jonglei.

### 2.2.1 MAIN FIELD SITE: BOMA

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<sup>2</sup> Common South Sudanese term to refer to a white person.

<sup>3</sup> Jon Arensen, personal communication 12/08/2016. Laudati (2011) makes a similar point.

<sup>4</sup> Fieldnotes, discussion Luca Fraschini, 05/10/2012. Also Jon Arensen (personal communication 12/08/2016) shared a similar remark.

In early November 2012 I travelled to Boma for a first ten-day visit where I established initial contacts and enquired whether I could return for a longer period of fieldwork. Coincidentally, Korok Remoris, a senior government official from Boma, at the time acting as the Jonglei State Advisor on Wildlife, was also on the flight trip and offered me his support, also introducing me to other state and non-state actors in Boma. Korok became a friend during my research endeavours.

It was during that first week in Boma, while having tea with Korok and with Justin Kok, a Lou Nuer old man acting at the time as the Executive Director for Boma sub-county, by the house of the latter, that I was told that my birth name –Diana– would not stick since no one would remember it. Rather, I should be given a Murle name by which I would be known. From then on, among Murle friends in Boma and beyond I became known as *ɲatin*, following Korok's late aunt.<sup>5</sup> *ɲatin* is a common Murle name that literally means “woman with cows”.<sup>6</sup> I liked it, also because it reminded me of the beautiful steep rock ledge dominating the top of the Boma Plateau, *ɲatiliwaan*, at once a proud symbol of Boma, with mythological and spiritual meaning for the Murle.<sup>7</sup>



Photograph 1 *ɲatiliwaan* at the top of the Boma Plateau.

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<sup>5</sup> For insights into Murle names and choices see J. Arensen (1988).

<sup>6</sup> *ɲa* is woman and *tin* is cows (sing. *tang*).

<sup>7</sup> *ɲatiliwaan* is a walking stick used by an old woman.

I found the small government headquarters of Itti town located at the western foot of the Boma Plateau and southern edge of the Boma National Park, to be a welcoming, sleepy and relatively safe place; extremely isolated, with no mobile network and with very limited infrastructure. The political, administrative and economic centre of Boma is in Itti, and thus, the schools and hospital as well as the NGO bases are all located in Itti. Government presence was limited and there were three NGOs operating in the area, Merlin, Across and JAM, delivering health and education services and doing emergency food distribution, respectively. At the centre of Itti there were the SPLA barracks, but it did not feel like a militarised area, as a greater part of the soldiers were themselves from Boma, or had been stationed there for many years. The small market was surrounded by large mango trees.



Photograph 2 Aerial photo of Itti, Maruwo Hills seen far behind.

I returned to Juba where I had begun Murle language lessons. Paul Longony Oleo, a Murle intellectual from Boma who became a good friend, agreed to give me weekly lessons for about three months. Although my language skills remained limited it gave me a basis to move to Boma.

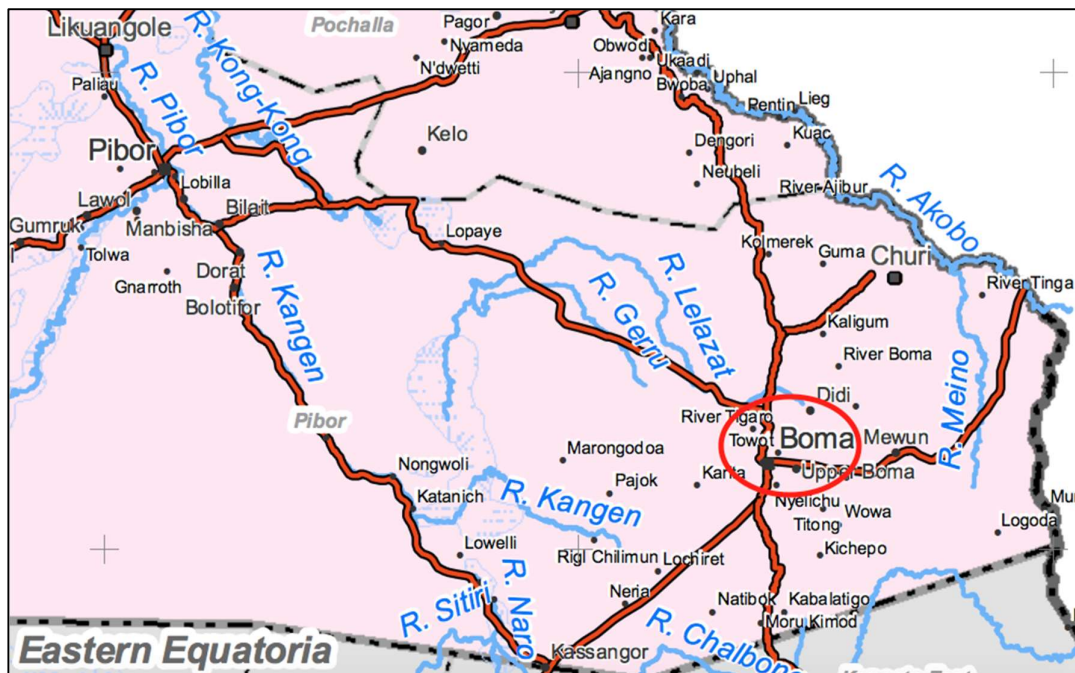
I chose Boma area as my prime field site and moved there in mid February 2013, initially planning to stay until December 2013. The Murle villages in Upper Boma where I also conducted fieldwork are about a two-hour walk from the town while all the other payam headquarters, in Mewun, Maruwo and Kassengor, are roughly a 12-hour walk to reach.

The seeming tranquillity and safety was a significant factor in selecting Boma above other places in Greater Pibor to conduct my doctoral research: in addition to being welcomed by

initial contacts and authorities, equally important, I could walk freely between villages without too many security concerns and *be in the world*, rather than remaining secluded behind fortified aid compounds (Duffield 2014, 77; Duffield 2010).

But by February 2013 the political environment had already changed and Boma was not as sleepy as when I had first visited earlier in November. The ongoing Murle rebellion in Pibor had gained traction; there had been confrontations between SPLA soldiers and the local population on 25 December 2012 resulting in the burning of at least ten homes; and Maruwo Hills, administratively part of Boma and some 50 kilometres away had been destroyed and occupied by the SPLA, with most of its Murle population fleeing to Itti, Labarab and Nyat. There were also sporadic ethnically motivated attacks and violence on the roads; which did not target me directly, but my Murle research assistant became very exposed, and like many residents of Boma we limited our movements. Nevertheless, Boma and in particular Boma Hills felt shielded and isolated from the conflict affecting the rest of Pibor county.

I moved to Boma in what people of Boma still considered a ‘time of peace’ and spent some three months between Itti and Upper Boma, visiting the three Murle villages of Bayen, Kaiwa and Jongolei (noted in map 4 as ‘Upper Boma’, see also photograph 3).<sup>8</sup>



Map 4 Boma and surroundings.

<sup>8</sup> Jongolei village in Upper Boma is not to be confused with Jonglei state.



In Upper Boma I was based in Jongolei village and rented a tukul at the compound of the Kenyan teachers that ran the Faith Learning Center Primary School.<sup>9</sup> This phase, which began by being exploratory and with the aim of learning about the historical and social context of Highland Murle and mapping networks, was key in giving me some understanding of ‘normal’ everyday life in Boma.



Photograph 3 The Boma Plateau seen from Itti, highlighting the three field sites Bayen, Jongolei and Kaiwa (and Tooz).



Photograph 4 The Boma Plateau, seen from Itti.

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<sup>9</sup> Supported by the faith-based organisation Sea Partners (<http://www.sea-partners.org/#!/boma-project/>).



I recruited Stephen Oboch as a research assistant who was to be my ears and mouth in Boma. He interpreted interviews and discussions from Murle (which were the majority), and continued formally teaching me the Murle language. But most importantly, he provided constant insights and guidance to approaching authorities and a new place, introduced me to his extended networks of family and friends and guided me through the terrain and small paths across the villages and valleys.

I thought I would be working with Oboch for all of 2013. I was heart-broken when Oboch quit for a better-paid NGO job that also did not require moving everyday village-to-village. I transformed this from a negative to a positive element by recognising the various research assistants that I worked with as informants and as rich and varied sources of information. In the context of growing instability, people in Boma were taking decisions about what worked best for them, and this included my research assistants who would choose a different job or to suddenly move away.

I had thought to focus on one geographical area and build my knowledge and information around a territorially bounded area. After the initial weeks in Upper Boma, I realised that grounding the dissertation field site in a particular village did not correspond to Murle conceptualisations of life and place, and would be too rigid. Early into my fieldwork I realised how mobility was central to people's lives. It was also clear how villages and places disappeared and emerged, shrank and moved. It became apparent that remaining in one site did not reflect people's routines and everyday lives, characterised by regular movement between locations, both for safety, work, education, family ties, and other reasons.

Not long after I had redefined my study as multi-sited shifting between Itti town, Upper Boma and Juba (and possibly also later on Pibor town to reflect a more contextualised understanding of social life and place), Boma was engulfed into the broader conflict between the predominantly Murle rebellion, the SSDM/A-CF and the government's SPLA. The majority of Highland Murle fled from their homes in Boma, leaving for other areas in South Sudan, particularly Juba and Kapoeta, and also to neighbouring Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda.

Through the war in Boma, I too was displaced. I lost most of my personal belongings, with the exception of my back-pack that I took back to Juba carrying my laptop, fieldnotes and documents. On 1 May 2013 I was in Upper Boma when I received two calls on my satellite phone warning me that the town was on the verge of being taken by the rebellion and that NGOs were evacuating and asking whether I wanted to leave with them. Faced with unpredictable violence, I chose to take up their offer. I ran down the mountain in a record

hour and a half and got to Itti just as the aid workers were boarding the small carrier. As we took off the dirt airstrip in silence and unease, I was desolated and disgusted by my privilege. Through the small window I could see Stephen Oboch, my first research assistant, walk off. At that moment I was oblivious to the gravity of the situation; I had thought I would be returning to Boma weeks later, when insecurity subsided, to continue with my fieldwork plans. This was not to happen.

The privilege I possessed as a foreign researcher was never made more crudely clear. It brought to the forefront how challenging it was to remain an 'independent researcher' when I was constantly dependent on the logistical support of aid structures. It also made visible how new technologies have altered how researchers *exist* in the field. Referring to his fieldwork in Maiurno in Sudan in the 1970s, Mark Duffield (2014, 77) notes that "Limited external communication meant local immersion, learning the language, making friends and trusting people". Conversely, I had my own satellite phone and could occasionally access the Internet at the NGO compounds. I had privileged access to information about events taking place across South Sudan, and in some cases I was even better informed about the broader events relating to the rebellion taking place in Pibor than many of my local informants in Upper Boma with no immediate access to information on events as they unfolded. I was also more or less regularly in touch with my supervisor, family and friends. Undeniably, this affected the extent to which I immersed myself in 'the field' but I still felt very involved and able to build meaningful relationships.

The changing circumstances made clear "the methodological point of having relationships rather than a locality in focus" (Englund 2004, 67), and how the spatial contours of the 'local' as a notion needed to be rethought: "The 'local' presupposes the 'translocal' or the 'non-local', and the analytical error has been to view the 'local' as a context rather than as requiring a context for understanding its own emergence" (Englund 2004, 65). Instead, "the multiplication of contexts should be the point of departure for ethnographic analysis, not uncomfortable noise to be explained away" (Englund 2004, 66). In this sense, my focus was on Boma as a social and territorial locality and the social, political, emotional and physical journeys Highland Murle from Boma were to make (Turton, 2005).

In such circumstances, my research remained territorially bound to Boma as the starting unit of analysis, but it became multi-sited as I followed some of the trajectories made by my informants and friends from Boma. Like Stephen Lubkemann (2008, 4), I "decided to let the experience of war-time displacement itself define the boundaries of my 'field site'." I followed many of the displaced Murle residents of Boma, with whom I had already built an

initial relationship, or their extended networks, to the various areas people took refuge in as they recreated their own “social worlds that war-time dispersion had created” (Lubkemann 2008, 4).

### 2.3 IMPROVISING AS METHODOLOGY: RESEARCHING IN CHALLENGING CONTEXTS

Having left Boma abruptly on the 1 May 2013, a couple of days before the area was taken by the rebellion (5 May), I suddenly found myself in Juba at a loss. In considerably more distressing, extreme and challenging circumstances, Murle from all across Murleland fled their homes. Many crossed international borders to refugee camps in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda; those able to, fled to Juba; while others found safety in remote swampy areas, the closest to safe havens (Felix da Costa 2015).

I began following the “‘multiple ends’ of the displacement stream” (Lubkemann 2008, 4), as had been done by Lubkemann during the Mozambican civil war. This was barely a conscious choice, but significantly, I too was very emotionally involved in what was happening and felt compelled to follow, and record as methodically as I could, the events as they emerged. Those following months I continued with my fieldwork, improvising, adapting and engaging with “accidental anthropology” (Pieke 1995).

Prior to the conflict, flying in and out of Boma was only possible through the rather unreliable weekly United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) flight, permitted only for humanitarian staff. To fly with UNHAS to get in and out of Boma, I had to find an NGO that would agree to sponsor me.<sup>10</sup> After the conflict, research logistics and access became even more challenging. Conversely, perhaps because of a sense of shared experience and renewed urgency, establishing dialogue and trust became easier. Murle people felt more alone than ever, and perhaps I was seen as a friend and interlocutor.

The relationships with friends in Boma grew after its destruction in May 2013. Looking to follow the new social and political circumstances of the people from Boma, I travelled to areas of Murle displacement to learn how people were making sense of events and of the new social and political reality.

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<sup>10</sup> This was done through informal relations and friendships with aid workers who would assist me in managing the bureaucracy. The NGO would buy the flight from UNHAS, but I would reimburse them. Alternatively, an NGO would fly me in in return for a briefing of the situation.

### 2.3.1 FOLLOWING 'DISPLACEMENT STREAMS': JUBA, KAPOETA AND ETHIOPIA

I spent May and June 2013 in Juba, getting to know Murle social networks in the capital, made of those that had been previously living in Juba and those who fled there more recently. In July 2013 I spent one month in Kapoeta town, where some five hundred Highland Murle had fled. In late August 2013 I travelled to Ethiopia for a month to reconnect with displaced Highland Murle that had crossed the border area of Raad and established themselves in a spontaneous settlement, as well as in the town of Dima (see map 5).

My trips to areas of Murle displacement strengthened relations with Highland Murle friends and informants that had begun months earlier in Boma. I often carried news from place to place. I became involved in some of the peace meetings (explained further in the chapter), either by being drawn into supporting the elaboration of a concept note and funding proposal for donors alongside Murle intellectuals, or by attending and documenting the meeting as part of the secretariat team. In turn, I saw these invitations by Murle intellectuals, chiefs and politicians as signs of collective consent and support to my interest in documenting Murle narratives of events, and as informal collective approval to continue my research in light of the new context of conflict and displacement.



Map 5 All field sites visited highlighted.

In total, I was based in Juba from May 2013 until September 2014 and during this period, even when doing aid-related jobs, I spent considerable time with Murle friends in Juba and relationships strengthened and understanding about Boma and Highland Murle social relations grew. At the same time, however, I also actively searched for ways to return to Boma. Boma became a highly militarised and controlled area, and access was even more challenging. The UN and NGOs were occasionally flying in, and I began to engage formally with some of these agencies in order to access Boma.

Since displacement from Boma in May 2013, I was able to return to Boma for a short consultancy with MSF in June 2013, and then independently in November 2013 for a week. In 2014, while working for the Danish Refugee Council, I travelled to Boma three times between July and August 2014, for some three weeks. Most of these latter visits coincided with peace meetings, which were valuable sources of information as will be discussed below.

For the researcher, there are both benefits and risks in associating with an aid agency. The most obvious benefit is logistical and at times institutional support to access hard-to-reach areas. I considered these collaborations as opportunistic engagements from both parties, where both the agency and myself had a simultaneous purpose, as well our own individual agendas. There were also serious risks, as I somewhat naively came to learn: one can easily become entangled in the politics of aid (Felix da Costa 2016; Duffield 2001). More than the tragic events that unfolded in Boma, the environment in Juba in relation to the Murle situation also became more sensitive and risky.

### *2.3.2 POSITIONALITY AND THE POLITICS OF INFORMATION*

In Boma, I was initially seen by the population as part of the aid encounter with something concrete to give. It took some time until people began understanding and accepting I was a student, a tangible and well understood category.

After the destruction of Boma, the context of Boma became increasingly politicised in Juba. I was a doctoral student with first-hand knowledge in a world of advocacy NGO-types often operating remotely, and who often felt entitled to information, despite their distance from the field. The compelling moral mission of NGOs may lead them to acquire a sense of entitlement and expectation. This is perhaps grounded in a combination of agendas (for example, competition for donor dollars and advocacy attention), a desire to operate independently and a genuine belief in the morality of their cause.

Just before the conflict reached Boma in May 2013, I published a short paper for a Norwegian peacebuilding institute discussing briefly the specific social communal dynamics of the Highland Murle in Boma (Felix da Costa 2013). I had intended to use the policy brief to counter the wider anti-Murle discourse, with international donors in Juba as an audience. On the one hand, I was keen to draw attention to the predicament of the Murle in Boma. On the other hand, I feared representing the wider Murle in an unfavourable light that could have negative consequences for the already tense political environment and be used to legitimise anti-Murle rhetoric and policies, particularly in terms of reproducing anti-Murle discourses and contributing to the narratives promoting the division and disunity of the Murle people. I became well aware of the perils of publishing in highly politicised contexts, of how information can be distorted, taken out of context, misinterpreted and how researchers can easily become scapegoats.

In this scenario, choices regarding how to handle and present certain information at both an ethical and emotional level are difficult to take. Rather, in such politically charged environments, it may be wiser to resort to silence and self-censorship for both self-preservation and protection of informants. Laura Hammond (2011) notes that silence can and should be read and interpreted as having meaning and significance, both from research informants and researcher alike. Ultimately, given the practical implications of knowledge, Pottier et al. (2011, 17) argue that difficult questions and decisions should be analysed through the following lens:

“If anthropological knowledge is best seen as public knowledge, we are left to wonder whether our words can be used against either us or our informants; if they can, there may be justification for self-censorship, either in choosing to frame the research project in such a way that sensitive or uncomfortable truths are avoided, or else (perhaps more commonly) censoring ourselves in the presentation of what we have found.”

At this level, witnessing “positions the anthropologist inside human events as a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being, one who will ‘take sides’ and make judgments, though this flies in the face of the anthropological non-engagement with either ethics or politics” (Scheper-Hughes 1995). However, this political righteousness suggests that such decisions are straightforward and simple: in reality, they are set in complex and messy political, social and ethical webs. As Adam Kuper (1995, 425) suggests, in his response to Scheper-Hughes, “most ethnographic situations are less dramatic and most political choices more complicated”. Rather, Aihwa Ong (1995, 428) is right to argue that, “taken to the extreme both positions, neutrality versus advocacy, are very dangerous, if not for anthropologists, then for the people they work with”. There are scientific expectations that

researchers should be neutral and impartial, but like Hutchinson (2011) arguing on the basis of her long-term involvement in South Sudan, I have also found this to be an illusion. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research in India with Maoist insurgency and counterinsurgency groups, George Kunnath (2013, 740) questions the meaning of objectivity 'in the face of violence and oppression'. More recognition should go into acknowledging the contingent and the failures in social research. Importantly, there should also be greater recognition of the emotional and human aspects of research and the positionality of the researcher.

My research has been interested in how competing truths are constituted relationally and structurally. I have found it impossible to create a linear and structured picture and reconstruction of events that have taken place in Boma, as these are contested and subjective. Instead, the various voices, sometimes in contradiction, offer a more complete understanding of social processes in war (Broch-Due 2004b). It is also difficult to discern what is objectively 'true' and 'false', from what are just rumours, which can nevertheless be equally important. At a workshop at the University of Birmingham in November 2014, one participant made the insightful remark that "it's rumour when 'they' say it, but it's knowledge when 'we' say it", astutely alluding to the hierarchy of knowledge, authority and 'expert knowledge', and contested and partial truths.<sup>11</sup> This increases the ethical and moral dilemmas faced by the researcher, who holds an even greater power and responsibility when telling a story.

In April-May 2015 I spent one month in the Lowlands in Pibor as a consultant for VSF-Germany learning about the effects of conflict on the Murle's relationship with cattle (Felix da Costa 2015). During this month, I visited Pibor, Likuangole and Gumuruk and spent time in both permanent settlements and in a number of cattle camps. The month was a joy, not only because it offered a great deal of context and understanding to social connections and relationships across Murleland, but also because after over two years of heavy fighting, destruction and displacement, Murle families were returning home and to their regular migration routes, and enjoying a refreshing period of peace and some relative stability.

I had witnessed the Murle collective struggle and the suffering experienced during the war that led to the establishment of the new political entity, the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). I was unequivocally supportive of the GPAA, and convinced of its potential to

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<sup>11</sup> Anonymous participant at the workshop entitled 'Knowledge, "information" and conflict: what we know, how we know it and what it means', 07/11/2014, organised by the Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Birmingham. The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule.

provide a chance for peace in the area. During the research debriefing with VSF, after I enthusiastically shared my research findings with a small audience composed of the NGO staff, I was jokingly asked by the NGO's country director if I had been nominated as an ambassador for the GPAA. The friendly remark brought to the forefront issues I had often asked myself.

On the one hand, it raised awkward feelings of failing to adhere to the supposed principles of research detachment and of the neutral observer. It questioned my research objectivity and my ability to offer an unbiased picture. On the other hand, the remark recognised where I stood – that my research was positioned and my knowledge situated and anchored in Murle aspirations and perspectives in which the establishment of the GPAA was seen as a recognition of the Murle struggles and as a way in which they could govern themselves. I do not see that it is possible to do research in any other way: recognising the researcher's intellectual and emotional subjectivity and partiality, while striving to tell a story as rigorously as possible. In her long career of engaged anthropology, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995, 419) says it best: "In the act of writing culture what emerges is always a highly subjective, partial, and fragmentary but also deeply personal record of human lives based on eye-witness accounts and testimony".

With this short anecdote, I unequivocally lay out my position and acknowledge my subjectivity throughout the research process. As noted by Zoe Cormack (2014, 37) in relation to her own doctoral fieldwork in Gogrial,

"This kind of knowledge is produced *by experience* and *through relations* with the subjectivity of the ethnographer an integral part of conducting and interpreting ethnography. The same applies to collecting oral histories, because of the reciprocal and performative nature of their authorship. These are inescapably also *my* stories about Gogrial, elicited through the unique relationships that I built during my stay".

As made clear above, through my engagement during a particularly intense time across Murleland, I became part of meaningful Murle relationships and networks, which had begun earlier in Boma. In each of the field sites, which will be discussed throughout the dissertation, I encountered diverse logistical, ethical and methodological challenges which shaped my research and what I was able to achieve. In this sense, circumstances, war and uncertainty have significantly shaped how and what stories I collected.

In my research, I privileged following processes rather than final outcomes, relationally, where "cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete" (Geertz 1973, 29) and involves the construction of "partial truths" (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 1). How knowledge is



constructed and institutionalised, and differs from other ‘knowledge processes’, and how competing knowledge is also constituted relationally and structurally.

## 2.4 CONNECTING HISTORIES: DATA COLLECTION

Throughout my time working with the Murle people in Boma and elsewhere, I introduced myself as someone keen to learn about *k̄er ci Murlo*, literally ‘culture of Murle’. In turn, while learning about *k̄er ci Murlo*, I learnt how Murle people have found ways to make sense of turbulent times of war. As war took over Boma, I strove to document as accurately as possible people’s stories and narratives of events as these unfolded, not just through formal interviews, but importantly through informal discussions, through observation and participating as much as possible in social events. As political violence grew, Murle people also often found a sense of urgency in sharing their stories, as noted by Peter Alani, a man from Pibor displaced in Juba, “No problem in passing information, it is all true what we’re saying. We are not tired. We are ready to tell people the truth”.<sup>12</sup>

As argued by Lisa Malkki (2007, 164), ethnographic fieldwork is “simultaneously a critical theoretical practice, a quotidian ethical practice, and an improvisational practice” *being in the world* to develop knowledge of it.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.4.1 RELATIONSHIPS AND ORAL SOURCES

In relation to her time in Gogrial, Cormack (2014, 37) notes that her research “was ethnographic in the sense that developing personal relationships was an essential part of the process”. Personal relationships have been central to my research process, especially in the context of war and displacement experienced by the Murle community.

Initial expectations of staying in Boma for much of 2013 were interrupted by the war, which also meant that the research rhythm and speed with which I had started in Boma—proved a bit inappropriate. Had I known I would only be continuously in Boma for three months, I would have probably been more focused and directed in my work. Instead, those three

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Alani, Juba 07/06/2013.

<sup>13</sup> Allusion to Mark Duffield’s critique of current remote research and aid management methodologies, where he states that ‘being in the world is no longer a requirement for developing knowledge of it’ – a reference to Maybury (2010) in Duffield (2014, 76); see also Jenkins (1994).

months in Boma spent mostly in Upper Boma, with shorter stays in between in Itti, were very exploratory. I walked up and down the mountain, through the three small Murle villages of Upper Boma and visited people in their homes, exploring people's life histories and recollections of Boma, seeking to draw connections and patterns. I began by visiting elders who could offer insights into historical events, but would also just visit people in their home with a research assistant, critical not only for translation but also in mediating my somewhat awkward presence. In the earlier period in Boma, although I had a semi-structured interview guide, I usually kept discussions open for conversations to flow.

My approach to interpreting oral sources has also been ethnographic. I tried to make use of formal interviews, life histories, conflict histories and analysis of Murle words and significant terms. As time passed, I also became more aware of the importance of songs as rich sources of knowledge and made an effort to record and translate some of these, which I have included throughout this dissertation. I gained equally valuable insights to interpreting this 'formal' material through informal conversations and observations that I recorded daily in my field notes, looking to describe events through "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973) as well documenting my own impressions and reflections of those.

I also quickly realised the effect that small gestures have on trust-building. For example, in my first month in Boma, I was given and began using some beads from the *Thithi* age-set. Oboch had told me that people often asked him to what generation I belonged to so when I began wearing the *Thithi* beads people were able to place me in a certain age-group often sparking conversations and affinities.

After the war reached Boma and I started travelling to areas of displacement, I would usually find someone that either I knew from Boma, or otherwise had common acquaintances, which mattered significantly. The Murle community is not large and this led to much trust being built. Informants and interviewees in Juba, Kapoeta as well as Raad and Dima in Ethiopia, were found largely by building on links established earlier in Boma.

Mainly, this doctorate is based on in-depth interviews and informal discussions with men and women in Itti town and the three villages of Upper Boma (Bayen, Jongolei and Kaiwa), in Kapoeta town, Juba (especially the neighbourhoods of Souk Sita and Jebel), various locations in the Lowlands in Greater Pibor, and Raad and Dima (in Ethiopia). In addition, occasionally also group discussions and notes on public meetings, particularly peace meetings, conducted between 2012 and 2015.

The fieldwork relied upon interpreters and translators not only to provide on-the-spot interpretation from Murle language into English of interviews and conversations and events, but also the written translations of songs and other recordings. Whenever feasible, interviews were conducted in English, but to a great extent, the majority were in Murle language, as well as when appropriate, in Kachipo-Suri and Jie.

My informants have included men and women from all the existing age-sets in Boma, from the youngest *Lango* to the eldest *Nyakademu* (see appendix 1). As a female researcher, I have had equal access to men and women and in most locations I spent time in and have tried to collect male and female perspectives, apart from Raad/Dima in Ethiopia where the research context was too unpredictable and I only had the chance to speak to male friends and informants who had greater freedom of movement. I also held many discussions with Murle politicians and intellectuals, as well as local government officials in all the areas I went to. These tend to be men, apart from a handful of cases. In Boma and Pibor I actively searched for government chiefs and spiritual red chiefs (*alat ci meri*)<sup>14</sup> and held several meaningful discussions with Murle, Jie and Suri-Kachipo chiefs.

My knowledge and perspectives have been particularly informed by the discussions with the closer friendships I made with men and women from *Muden*, *Thithi*, *Bothonya* and *Lango* age-sets who spoke English. Time socialising and discussing South Sudanese politics or *keer ci Murlo*, Murle culture, over some tea or soda were among the most enriching. These included the various young men who helped me as research assistants in Boma, Juba, Kapoeta, Pibor, Raad and Dima, as well as their wives. All of them were essential and the greatest insights were achieved through their mediation.

The majority of my interviews and conversations were not tape-recorded, in great part because of how sensitive Murle issues became as tensions with the government grew. In most cases interviews were simultaneously interpreted and written down. In some cases, notably in Raad and Dima (but not only), where Murle informants were very much under the spotlight, I did not carry any notebook around and all the conversations I had were recorded once I got to a safe and private place. Although this meant I lost some material, it was important to protect my informants and myself.

Similar to Cherry Leonardi's (2013) experience learning about chiefship in South Sudan, in the initial stages of my research in Boma, my questions about history and aspects of Murle

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<sup>14</sup> *Alat ci merik* (plural) and *alan ci meri* (single) of red chief/s.

society “were often disappointing to those who hoped I would bring some form of practical aid, assuming that I was part of the ‘UN’ and hence of the *hakuma* itself”. But as time went on people got to know me and I became part of networks of relationships. When after the dramatic events of displacement and war in Boma in mid-2013, I was still there, people begun trusting me and also understanding my use. Elders often welcomed the opportunity to discuss Murle history and simultaneously demystify vicious Murle stereotypes.

#### 2.4.2 PEACE CONFERENCES

In total I attended three Boma Peace Conferences that took place during and after the SPLA-SSDM/A-Cobra Faction war. The first one took place in Juba on the 12-15 September 2013 as Boma was deemed too insecure, and the two others in Boma on the 11-14 November 2013 and 19-21 August 2014, respectively. I also attended the first Greater Pibor chiefs meeting that brought together all major chiefs from Murle and Anyuak in Pibor town, on the 13-17 April 2015. In all meetings I sat among the participants, many of whom I knew and had already interviewed individually. Although all the meetings were tape-recorded, patient research assistants interpreted simultaneously as I wrote down the discussions as literally as possible. I have significantly used these written translations of the debates at the meetings to offer insights into how conflicts and grievances are viewed and discussed by local people as much as possible in their own words. This was also done by Sharon Hutchinson (2009) in relation to the grassroots peace initiatives between Nuer and Dinka in 1999, known as the Wunlit Process. Similar to her conclusions, the discussions in the peace conferences often demonstrated that a large number of participants blamed leaders and political elites, rather than specifically other ethnic groups.

All the meetings were funded by the USAID ‘Viable Support to Transition and Stability (VISTAS) programme and largely left to the discretion of the Murle VISTAS staff to define the agenda. Meetings usually brought together a number of Murle government officials and intellectuals from Juba alongside local spiritual leaders and government chiefs, youth leaders and other members of the communities involved in the meetings. The smallest meeting held in Juba had roughly 60 participants while the others had over 100 people. All the Boma Peace Meetings were ethnically diverse with Murle, Jie and Suri-Kachipo participants, while the latter (in August 2014) also had Toposa representatives. I made use not only of the formal meetings but also of the ‘in-between’ moments, the informal

discussions in the mornings and evenings, during lunch and during tea-time, when participants informally discussed the issues being formally debated at the meetings.



Photograph 5 Boma Peace Meeting November 2013 (left) Boma Peace Meeting August 2014 (right).

Accounts were pronounced in public forums attended openly by people of various backgrounds from Murle Members of Parliament (MPs) and intellectuals from Juba to respected members of Murle, Jie and Suri-Kachipo communities in Boma. Often, both formal community representatives as well as less known individuals were given the chance to speak. I found these fora where ideas were expressed for public reaction to be extremely valuable sources of information and I have used them extensively throughout this dissertation. Because of their public nature, the fora offer grounds for calling positions ‘shared’ by virtue of the kinds of reactions received. Discussions were held more or less in a spontaneous manner and with an audience, who could respond to and contest claims, providing greater context and validity to the statements made.



Photograph 6 Chiefs at the Boma Peace Meeting November 2013. Suri-Kachipo paramount chief Kamalong standing; Murle paramount chief Logidang to his immediate right; extreme right Jie paramount chief Lorumo.

Nevertheless, it was important to pay attention to styles of speech and rhetoric, and to recognise that silence did not mean agreement (Hammond 2011), and that status and speech acts were related. The power and expressive dimensions of silence were most evident at the Peace Conferences in Itti. The mood at the August 2014 Peace Conference, after the Peace Deal between the Government of South Sudan and the Cobra Faction had been signed was ostensibly different from the November 2013 Peace Conference, and so were people's accounts and space to dispute positions. Logidang Lom, the Murle paramount chief explained that when he was called *ɲalam* in the Peace Meeting in November 2013, he chose to remain silent, not out of agreement but precisely for disagreement and anger:

*"The first meeting under the mangoes [in November 2013] I kept quiet until I went home. I was quiet because I was annoyed at something. The thing that kept me quiet was that those of Jiye were insisting that I describe myself as from ɲalam, saying if you're Murle you should go the place where Murle were. That time John Dunyi [Kachipo intellectual] was saying 'you have to say you're ɲalam, not Murle' and that made me angry. When I saw that meeting, it wasn't really a peace meeting. They were just forcing me to say I was ɲalam, otherwise I'd be killed. Now we're here talking again about the same things we talked about last time. Now people of Boma are around, Cobra are around, this is what makes me talk today."*

Silence was both his choice as well as imposed by the threatening statements of other people at the conference. But months later, in a different political environment, chief Logidang made clear how meaningful his silence had been.

#### *2.4.3 SOCIAL MEDIA AND CYBER METHODOLOGIES*

As Murle people fled into displacement and to areas with mobile network, more young people got access to information, through a basic Nokia phone and to Facebook. The impact that the so-called 'new technologies' have had and continue having not only on my data collection, but on social life itself among Murle that come from areas where there is no phone network or access to information is significant. Social media, especially Facebook and Skype, have given me the chance to actively stay in contact with informants and friends, and also an idea of what issues are being discussed in forums.

Indeed, with the recent proliferation of digital medias and the increase in political instability in research areas, many anthropologists and social researchers are increasingly unwilling to establish an end to their primary research upon leaving 'the field' (Abram and Pink 2015). When I left Boma in May 2013, I became part of a number of Murle open and closed groups on Facebook that have become very important to Murle to discuss ideas, political developments, ethnic relations, state affairs, corruption, identity, borders, expectations and much more.<sup>15</sup> With much of Murleland not having phone network at all, displacement to urban areas in South Sudan and to neighbouring countries has meant for many having a phone with network for the first time. Facebook can be installed on a basic Nokia phone and was for many quite an affordable way to remain in touch with dispersed relatives and friends. The Facebook closed groups that have emerged have been a very important means for Murle youth to discuss politics and public issues and debates. I also had Murle friends that joined Facebook spread between Ethiopian, Ugandan and Kenyan refugee camps as well as in Juba, Boma and Pibor which meant that even after I left South Sudan I have been able to have a pulse over a number of environments exchanging messages regularly with contacts.

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<sup>15</sup> Closed groups on Facebook which I was a member of: Pibor Youth Association; Greater Pibor Administrative Area Forum «GPAAF»; Boma State (PIBOR); Boma Intellectuals; Bee o Murlo Adoi {Boma}. Public Groups included: Murle Youth Voice; Jebel Boma News; Greater Pibor Administrative Area Students Union; Majat, Kaiwa Bayen & Jongolei {mkbj}; East Jonglei State (then renamed 'Boma State').

Although Boma still has no network, USAID installed a V-SAT at the Boma county office providing Internet access to local government officials and a few others. In an area with no network at all, thus living in social isolation, access to the Internet at the local government office triggered new relationships and new means of contesting social processes through social media. But importantly, in terms of data gathering, it has meant I am able to stay in touch with Murle friends, and continue collecting information, even if partial and incomplete. It makes data gathering not limited to physically 'being there', but rather an ongoing process, present in multiple 'fields'.

Some anthropologists such as Patty Gray (2016) and John Postill (2016) have argued that "there is nothing inherently inferior or illegitimate about researching local issues remotely (e.g. via Twitter, live streaming, webcam, email, online archives), or indeed retroactively, especially for ethnographers with previous local experience" (Postill 2016). For them, the main challenge lies in overcoming this fallacy and making appropriate planning and use for remote ethnography in research designs and practices. I agree that remote technologies such as Skype, Facebook and digital chatting can be extremely useful in studying offline social phenomena. But I find these data collection methodologies to be complementary to face-to-face interaction, and limited when used on their own. Notably, one of the reasons behind Postill and Gray's support to remote ethnography lies precisely in the "idea of remote fieldwork as a safer way of conducting research in conflict-ridden or otherwise hazardous locations" (Postill 2016). For me, this argument embodies perfectly the unequal power relations experienced between researcher and 'researched'. Instead, the most valuable and insightful research knowledge lies precisely in the emotional connections and relationships established with people, and the ability to tell a story through those.

## 2.5 CONCLUSION

As Laura Hammond (2004) notes in relation to her work in Ada Bai in Ethiopia, as time went by I also felt that the quality of my research improved considerably, not only because I became (slightly) more comfortable with the Murle language, but even more so because as people grew accustomed to me, they also trusted me more. The ethnographic accounts, stories and journeys departing from Boma that make up this dissertation are also my story, my Murle social networks and relationship to Boma, which took me to various other places and people with their own particular relationships to Boma. For Laura Hammond (2004, 23) and her many years of involvement with people in Ada Bai,



“The ethnographic account is necessarily not only an exploration of certain themes, cultural meanings, and forms of practice, it is also a story with a chronological element to it. However, while the story has a clear beginning, it does not have an ending; this has kept me coming back over the years.”

Certainly, the accounts presented in this dissertation also have a strong chronological component to them. Stories and imaginings, which began a long time before I arrived. One of the methodological limitations of this dissertation is precisely the absence of archival research. Although I have made some effort to collate historical accounts from colonial references, these only offer a glimpse of imaginings of Boma. I hope that in the future, this research can be complemented with archival work that may offer greater insights into current relationships, of Boma as a concrete place with lived experience and history, as well as a historical fragment, a ‘homeland’ and a symbol. Ultimately, this dissertation is unapologetically the result of intense empirical research and documenting. In presenting these Murle stories and the insights gained through and with them, the dissertation is also a testament to the challenges of conducting fieldwork in and during conflict.

### 3. IMAGINING THE MURLE AND THE HILLS OF BOMA

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Murle people describe themselves as having come from the East, from a place called *Jen*, in the Ethiopian Highlands. According to B.A. Lewis, these migrations seem to have been completed over 200 years ago, possibly much longer.<sup>1</sup> The late Murle paramount chief ŋantho Kavula from Kongor in Likuangle, explained that “*Logoz o Jenu*’ – ‘the people from east’ is how those of Boma are known.”<sup>2</sup> Despite this, Murle narratives often present their physical presence in Boma as a place as indissoluble from being Murle. Simultaneously, Boma is also pointed out as “the mother of the SPLM/A”<sup>3</sup> or even “the mother of South Sudan”,<sup>4</sup> and in that sense, the SPLM/A, and South Sudan, are an ungrateful child that have forgotten all that his mother has done for him.

This chapter tells a story of multiple internal and external understandings of Boma, simultaneously a place, a signifier, and a meaningful yet mutable category. Boma is a remote borderland and a physical margin in South Sudan, yet it is central to Murle conceptions of ancestry and original home (as part of the East Corridor that leads to *Jen*) (Lewis 1972; Arensen 1992, 21). As a place, Boma was also central to the making of what is now an independent South Sudan. Interestingly, it was precisely Boma’s remoteness and the fact it was a frontier with Ethiopia that made it so central during the second civil war and to the SPLM/A. This dual construction and symbolic imaginary has remained in the minds of many Murle. This chapter seeks to address and tease out the interaction between Boma as a concrete contested landscape and place, part of a battle for recognition, development and status; with Boma as a historical fragment, a homeland and a symbol.

The significance of Boma—historically, socially, politically and economically—is multiple and complex. With reference to her study of landscape-making in Gogrial, and in presenting

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<sup>1</sup> Pitt Rivers Museum Manuscript Collection (PRM), B.A. Lewis Papers, Box 1, Item 12 (1/1/12): “Murlei Notes”, ‘Note on the Murle Tribes (Plains Section)’, page 8.

<sup>2</sup> Interview Juba 26/06/2013.

<sup>3</sup> General Kennedy Gain, Juba 05/12/2015.

<sup>4</sup> Facebook comment by a young man from Boma with reference to a picture posted of government infrastructure being built in Orgin in the base of Boma Hills, 17/02/2016.

images that have come to define external representations of the region, Zoe Cormack (2014, 54) makes the valuable point that

“Asking if these images are ‘correct’ is the wrong question – the point is that they *both* reveal and conceal (...). But these narratives must be denaturalized, because they impose frames through which the history of Gogrial is understood. These frames affect what is noticed, what is unseen and they authorize certain actions and responses. Narratives produce ways of seeing that can become the only way that a situation or a region is understood. They risk obscuring the complexities of local experiences and debates.”

Likewise, my analysis concentrates on the internal and external representations and discourses about Boma and its Murle inhabitants that have informed and shaped popular and academic understandings of the region and the people who live there, situating them within wider imaginings of Pibor and Murle society, and more broadly in South Sudan.

Boma as a place has become intrinsically part of being Murle, and Murle are part of Boma. Despite geographic divisions and historical contingencies, the Murle people from Boma up to Likuangle “share one overarching cultural system” (Andretta 1985, 7; 1983; 1989), through several collective symbolic categories such as a common language, names, cosmology, and systems of social organisation such as clans and the very important age-sets. They share concrete material bonds through regular inter-marriages and support networks. They also share a very concrete history of marginalisation and victimisation that plays a role in constantly redefining Murle ‘ethnic identity’ (McCallum 2013). This dissertation is concerned with demonstrating how within this context, complex histories of war and the specific social landscape, geography and ecology of Boma are part of shaping a sub-group of a wider group, especially with regard to the common negative discourses of Murle.

The chapter traces colonial era representations of the Murle people and traces historical constructions of Boma as simultaneously a centre and a periphery. It also examines how the geography, ecology and social landscape of Boma have affected Highland Murle senses of collective self.

I begin with a description of Boma’s physical landscape, in its tangible form, and how it is intimately connected to Highland Murle society. Though the Murle ethnic community are largely known as pastoralists, Highland Murle adapted their livelihoods to Boma’s ecology and become agriculturalists, an essential part of self-representation. Highland Murle are ethnic Murle “but not ‘People of Cattle’” (Galaty 1982; Spear 1993a). The chapter discusses Murle imaginings of Boma and what it is to be a Murle from Boma, including in relation to the wider social landscape of Boma.

The second section of this chapter traces historical imaginings of Boma as a remote location, but also its centrality to the SPLM/A struggle. This recent history of Boma in the formation of what is now independent South Sudan has meaning to current Highland Murle imaginings and expectations of the state.

The SPLM/A's history in Boma has had a defining effect in shaping Highland Murle's constructions and expectations of the state. The SPLA had its headquarters in Boma until 1989, when it became too remote from which to be able to control other parts of the Greater Equatoria region that had been captured.<sup>5</sup> However, even after the SPLA HQ was transferred to different locations in the Equatorias, Boma remained an SPLA stronghold, the only one never to have fallen back into Khartoum's hands, partially because of its remoteness as a border and its physical landscape. Their physical and emotional proximity to the SPLM/A during the second civil war in South Sudan led many Highland Murle people in Boma to consider themselves as deserving of a privileged relationship to the government and to the state. Contrary to these expectations, after the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) Boma became politically irrelevant and forgotten by the SPLM. Highland Murle were Murle, after all; and being Murle in South Sudan is not easy.

### 3.2 IMAGINING THE BOMA HILLS

*"This was Boma, an empty wilderness half the size of Switzerland; a blank spot on the map. Here and there, nearly invisible in miles and miles of unrelenting bush, was an isolated village of a few thatched huts. But these empty plains, woodlands and swamps reputedly held massive populations of migratory wildlife, notably the white-eared kob and the tiang" (Snyder forthcoming).*

The passage above reads like it could be from a colonial explorer in the 1900s, but it is actually from the 1980s memoirs of American conservationist Philip Snyder due to be published in 2016. In 1980, Snyder (forthcoming, 8) was given the challenging task of establishing the Boma National Park; in his words, "to open Boma to the outside world and put in on the map".

The strikingly beautiful, vast and seemingly endless landscapes of Boma (photograph 7) had also caused strong impressions on previous visitors. The narratives of remoteness and of the unknown – such as "This is a blank spot on the map, terra incognita", "heart of darkness"

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<sup>5</sup> Douglas Johnson, personal communication 27/02/2015.

(Snyder forthcoming, 11 and 27) – resonates with earlier colonial era accounts and suggests an eerie emptiness in need of external intervention.



Photograph 7 The vast landscapes of Boma.

Although the Boma National Park (map 6), spanning over 22,800 square kilometres, was established in 1978 for the protection of the white-eared kob migration it has never been developed.<sup>6</sup>



Map 6 Boma National Park (Wildlife Conservation Society)

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<sup>6</sup> Boma National Park has the largest migration of white-eared kob in the world, with a population of 800,000 migrating seasonally between savannah grasslands in areas with low rainfall and temporarily swamped grasslands in areas with high rainfall. Since 2007, the Wildlife Conservation Society has been responsible for its development, but insecurity and instability have been significant challenges (Morjan 2014, 163).

The Boma Plateau itself spreads over approximately 65 by 48 kilometres, through a series of foothills rising out of the flood plains of what is now Boma State, beginning some 48 kilometres west of the Ethiopian border and escarpment (Andretta 1985, 168). The Plateau, known generally among its Murle population as Upper Boma, or Boma Up, is 3,550 feet above sea level and hence gifted with moderate temperatures. Upper Boma is covered with multiple steep rock ledges, but two dominate the social and physical landscape: Mount Tooze, rising 450 feet above the plateau level to the southwest and Mount Ngatiliwaan on the east (Willimott 1957). The area is remarkably fertile, with volcanic soil rich in nutrients and abundant rain. 1,430mm of annual rain (Fryxell 1985, 22) allow Highland Murle in the Boma Plateau to make two harvests per year. The lush vegetation, in combination with the fact that the area was infested with tse-tse fly, made pastoralists move further along the plains.<sup>7</sup>

Ascending from the flat plains below to Upper Boma, the slopes and valleys of the Boma Plateau become a mix of lush vegetation and dense forest with limited human activities. The Murle people living in the sparsely populated villages of Upper Boma – Bayen, Jongolei and Kaiwa – centre their lives around the seasons and the cultivation and hunting calendar (see appendix 2 for a calendar of seasons and livelihoods). There is a time of the year for weeding, planting and harvesting as well as for hunting. The cultivation calendar includes a period that is known as the “hunger season” when food is scarce sometime around March and April, particularly if and when the rains delay. However, as explained by one young man from Boma referring to the post-2013 period, violent conflict impacts heavily on ability to cultivate and “Nowadays hunger is throughout the year due to low farming”.<sup>8</sup>

In Lower Boma, Boma town also known as Itti, is roughly 30 kilometres from Raad, on the South Sudan-Ethiopia border, specifically with Ethiopia’s Gambella’s People Region and the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SNNPR). On the way, the road passes by the small Murle villages of Nyat (where the Boma National Park Headquarters are located) and Nyalongoro, said to be rich in minerals. Despite Boma’s significant economic potential through its vast Boma National Park, potential oil reserves and various minerals, Boma does not have any all-weather road and the entire area is secluded during its long rainy season (April to November). In the dry season a four-wheel drive vehicle takes two to three days to reach Juba through Kapoeta. Allegedly, the road connecting Boma to Pibor

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<sup>7</sup> Tse-tse flies began declining in 1988 and by 2000 was over, with the exception of Raad, where it is said to remain active. Tse-tse flies can fatally infect humans and animals with trypanosomiasis, or sleeping sickness.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Titoch, correspondence, 25/07/2016.

built when Richard Lyth was the District Commissioner in Pibor was mined during the second civil war and remains unusable. By foot, strong young men take some five to seven days to walk the roughly 210 kilometres separating Boma from Pibor.

There is no phone network across all of Boma. This affects all people across Boma, from Itti, the political and economic centre and the only location with a functioning market, to the villages in Upper Boma and along the road to Ethiopia. Due to the difficulty in reaching the area, prices in Itti market escalate dramatically with the rains, with a bar of soap going from 3 South Sudanese Pounds (SSP) to 20SSP, equivalent to an increase in US dollars from 0,75 cents to five dollars (rough exchange rate in 2013). Although the monetised economy is small, there are some basic products that are usually bought in the market such as soap, pangas and clothes.

Elizabeth Andretta, who conducted her doctoral fieldwork close to Pibor town in 1981 – 1982 on Murle social cohesion, makes the important point that “To understand the basis for this change from pastoralism to horticulture, it is necessary to first examine the topography of the area and the influence of certain features of the environment on subsistence patterns and intergroup relations” (Andretta 1985, 168). I build from Andretta’s point, recognizing that the landscape and modes of subsistence largely determine people’s everyday activities and events, as well as to some extent the risks of violence individuals are exposed to. Modes of subsistence are therefore not a minor element to be overlooked as they determine activities and cycles, exchanges and wealth. Rather, they are part of defining an individual’s experiences of everyday life.

### 3.2.1 MURLE IMAGININGS OF BOMA

*“From Boma to Pibor we all have the same language, the same clans, we are the same Murle. Every Murle from Pibor came from Boma. But Boma had tse-tse fly so [pastoralists] people moved away.”*

General Kennedy Gain, Juba 05/12/2015

Murle collective history places Boma as the group's ancestral home.<sup>9</sup> One version puts Boma as the first home, where ancestral Murle elders moved east to the Boma Plateau, and the majority of people continued northwest up the Kengen River until they arrived at the present location of Pibor. According to oral histories, the people who make up present day Murle moved along the Omo River until reaching the Turkana Lake and moving further north into what is now Kapoeta. There, they split into sub-groups, leading to the 'creation' of the Boya, Didinga and Tenet<sup>10</sup> groups (map 7).<sup>11</sup>

The last of the 'divisions' was between the Murle and the Tenet by a small watercourse below the Boma Plateau called Medainya, caused by a dispute over oribi soup cooked during a time of famine (Lewis 1972, 18; Arensen 1992). Andretta also makes reference to the oribi soup division, but asserts that the dispute caused the break into "three separate groups of Murle people": the Murle living along the various rivers in the Lowlands; the Murle of the Boma Plateau and third, she mentions the Longarim of the Boya Hills (Andretta 1983, 85). I take Serge Tornay's (1981, 139) point that

"This should not be seen as an actual event but as a kind of metaphorical history which serves to hide from the eyes of posterity, and consequently from our own, the real causes of these secessions and migrations – namely ecological changes, famines and epidemics on the one hand and economic prosperity and demographic expansion on the other."

After breaking from the Tenet, the Murle section continued moving north through Jebel Kassengor until reaching Maruwo Hills. There, common oral histories say that the two brothers Lettec and Dumar who lived with their father at Maruwo Hills took separate paths. Although there are some variations on the story, it is said that the elder brother Dumar decided to move to the Boma Plateau while the younger one Lettec chose to remain with his father in Maruwo. As the father grew increasingly sick, Dumar was called to return but by the time he arrived, the father had passed away. One version says that as a result, when the father died, Dumar's cows in Boma were transformed into buffaloes and the chiefly drum (*kidong*) was lost. Conversely, Lettec prospered and went on to control the area all the way up to Likuangole. The descendants of these chiefs are known as red chiefs (*alat ci meri*) while the rest of the population are known as black commoners (*ol ci koli*).

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<sup>9</sup> According to one version, the name Boma originally derives from *Jebel Bun*, the Arabic terms for 'Mountain' and 'Coffee', as there is coffee at the top of Boma Hills. Similarly, Lotilla originates from the Murle word *Lota*, which means 'down, those down there'.

<sup>10</sup> Also known as Termac and Longarim.

<sup>11</sup> See Arensen (1992, Chapter 2) for greater detail of these migration histories and splits.



Another version suggests that before Dumar returned, the father asked Lettec to take care of his properties and not to fight with his brother upon his return. Lettec was also told to take the *Lod* (cowbell), and ring it so that the cows would come to him. In turn, Dumar, the eldest son, had taken the *kidong* (drum). By the time Dumar arrived his father had passed away. As the eldest brother, thus entitled to inherit his father's wealth, Dumar thought all the father's wealth would be under him. Lettec however informed Dumar that the late father had asked him to be in charge of his wealth. As they quarrelled, both reached for the *kidongwa* (drums) but Lettec remembered his father's advice to keep the *lod* but not the *kidong*. Lettec then rung the bell and all the cows went to him. Dumar kept the *kidongwa* as the elder brother, but any cow that was with the Dumar in Boma turned to buffalo.

There are many folktales about the origins of Murle that are often tied with their livelihoods. One young man from Likuangole recounted another variation of the story:

*"A father had two sons. He took the hoe and the cow-bell and when he was about to die he asked his sons to choose. The one from Boma chose the hoe, and it so became that if he hit rock it would turn to maize, but cattle could not live there. The other one chose the bell, which made all animals turn into cows."*

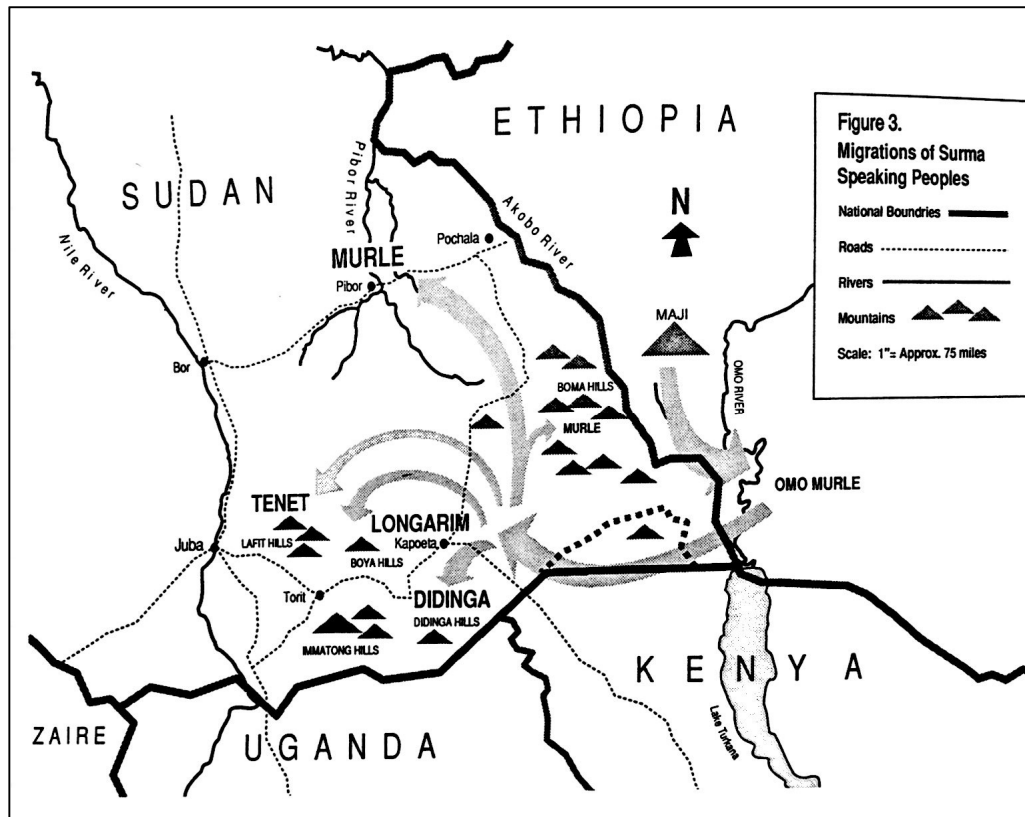
Paulino Chacha, Juba 13/06/2013

He also recalled how his grandmother, who was herself from Boma, used to explain the diverse livelihoods in Boma and Pibor: "The mother of all Murle took some milk to give to the child from Pibor and took some brew from maize to feed the one of Boma, and that's how we survive on." Accordingly, this story also explained why Highland Murle were often portrayed by their 'in-laws' in the Lowlands as heavy drinkers.

The Murle are overall part of the East Sudanic language classification, and more specifically part of the Surmic-speaking groups that span across Southwest Ethiopia and into present-day South Sudan (Bender 1977). The Surma include the Suri, Tirma, Mursi, Tid or Chai, Me'en (Tishena-Bodi), Kachipo (known also as Baale), among a few others (Bender 1977). For Bender, 'Surma' was an apt designation for the entire group because it included the geographical and linguistic core of the family.

Map 7 (by Jon Arensen) illustrates the migrations of the Surma-speaking people that began in Maji heading south to the Turkana Lake and then crossing north into current South Sudan where the group broke into several new groups, namely Boya (also known as Longarim), Didinga, Tenet and Murle. The language proximity and relationships between these groups remains important, not least because power and influence in South Sudan is partly

determined by the size of a group. As explained by Margaret Konyi, a woman leader from Boma, “Didinga and Boya [and Tenet] used to be part of Murle. If we’d stayed together, we’d be stronger and more developed”.<sup>12</sup> Although the term was not widespread, Murle people displaced in Kapoeta in June 2013 referred to the BODIMUTE group, referring to the Boya, Didinga, Murle and Tenet groups of South Sudan.<sup>13</sup>



Map 7 Migrations of Surma speaking peoples (Arensen 1992, 24).

For centuries groups have been breaking into new groups for environmental, political, social and economic reasons (Galaty and Bonté 1991; Spear and Waller 1993). With reference to the Lower Omo Valley, Serge Tornay (1981, 124) points out that

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Konyi, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba 13/09/2013.

<sup>13</sup> I first heard this term in Kapoeta in discussions with Murle and Didinga people and although it was not used regularly it was acknowledged as an existent term. Each two letters referred to one group: BOya/Didinga/MURle/TENet.

“The small and fragmentary groups which have formed and reformed during the course of the last two centuries in this area represent breakaway minorities of larger and more important ethnic groupings which have followed an evolutionary course of their own.”

Consistent with Tornay’s (1981) analysis, could modern political forces and the modern nation-state be splintering the Murle ethnic group? As has been seen across Africa, “the state has a role not just in regulating people’s lives, but in defining their identities” (Broch-Due 2004a, 15). One of the ways the state asserts its power is through imposing certain ethnic labels and assumptions on its population and in the process, prescribing new fixed identities. As such, the state can participate directly and indirectly in processes of group-making and the secession of minorities from larger ethnic groupings.

Murle elders consider Boma as their ancestral home and it is an important place in collective Murle identity and historical symbolic accounts. As stated by one senior Murle politician “Boma is the cradle for all Murle, it belongs to all Murle, because gradually it also became part of *Jen*, east corridor.”<sup>14</sup> In the context of South Sudan, ancestral claims to landscape legitimise claims to government resources and administrative positions. But rather than being given natural facts, “associations of place, people, and culture” are social and historical constructions that need to be explained (Gupta and Ferguson 2001b, 4). The three ethnic groups in Boma –Murle, Suri-Kachipo and Jie– claim ancestral rights to parts or the entire area.

The Suri, known externally as Kachipo or in Murle language as *Zuac*, live in Mewun, Koryen and Runit, on the eastern side of the Boma Plateau, roughly a 12-hour walk up from Itti. According to Bader (2000), they number between 5000-7000, but this is difficult to establish. They identify themselves as Suri and are part of the wider Surma language group, which also means that Suri-Kachipo are able to understand Murle, and vice-versa (Kafi 1989). Like the Highland Murle, they are predominantly an agricultural people. There is a history of fighting with Highland Murle,<sup>15</sup> but above all of friendly alliances and intermarriage. It is common to hear Highland Murle people refer to the fact that that “everyone has a Kachipo grandmother”. The most recent wars between Murle and Suri-Kachipo were in 1997 and 2007.<sup>16</sup> At the moment, relations are stable although the conflict between the SPLA and SSDM/A-CF affected relations as well.

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<sup>14</sup> Francis Lokurnyang, Boma Peace Conference Juba, 12/09/2013.

<sup>15</sup> Noted also by Cerulli (1956, 39) and Arensen (1989, 67).

<sup>16</sup> The 1997 war was allegedly triggered when a Kachipo man killed a Murle man from Bayen village named Boya who was hunting alone. The Murle youth from Bayen followed the footprints that led to a Kachipo village. As a

Highland Murle relationships with Jie, known to Murle as *Kum*, are more tense, and it is extremely unusual for inter-marriage to take place between Highland Murle and Jie, partially because as an agro-pastoralist group, the Jie would not choose to marry girls into an agrarian community, who would not be able to afford the bridewealth. On the other hand, there are some inter-marriages between Jie, (especially Ngimokodol clan) with Lowland Murle from Maruwo Hills, as the two communities share grazing lands along Maruwo.

Jie of South Sudan are part of the Ateker, or Karimojong, ethnic cluster, which includes Toposa, Jie of South Sudan, Jie of Uganda, Karimojong, Dodos, Turkana, and Nyangatom people, who all share a similar language, livelihoods and lifestyle, adapted to their political and ecological conditions (Müller-Dempf 2008). These groups share a long history of friendly as well as antagonistic relations, but tend to refer to each other as enemies. As an agro-pastoralist group, Jie have their main permanent villages in Naoyapuru just outside Itti, Kassengor payam in Boma and in Lopeat in Kapoeta East, in Eastern Equatoria State. From January to April/May people move from Kengen and Maruwo to Kassengor and Naoyapuru because there is water for the cattle.

There are competing versions about when Jie moved to Boma from Lopeat payam in Eastern Equatoria. One account says that Jie have been in Boma since the 1950s. Another common version is they moved under the leadership of chiefs Lotabo and Loliya in the early 1990s, after heavy fighting with Toposa, and settled in Boma within Itti, in the area where the Presbyterian church is currently located, also under the protection of the SPLA who they supported. Later, Jie moved out of Itti to Orgin on the foot of the Boma Plateau in a village that was named Naoyapuru. More recently, seemingly in 2010, after tensions between Jie and the SPLA following a Toposa raid, the original Naoyapuru was burnt by the SPLA and thus Jie relocated to a 'new' Naoyapuru slightly further, but still only a 30-minute walk from Itti.

Jie are organised according to four clans, which marry mostly among themselves. Ngiziria are the majority clan in Naoyapuru and have privileged relations with Highland Murle. Ngikurono clan live in Rumit in Upper Boma with alliances with neighbouring Suri-Kachipo. Ngatarakabuon clan are in Lopeat and Ngimokodol clan lives in Maruwo Hills, known to Jie

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result the Murle youth burnt down the village and Kachipo retaliated, escalating into a war between Murle from Bayen village and Kachipo. In 2007, another war between Kachipo and Highland Murle led to the disappearance of Boti village close to Nyalongoro.

as Lozidok. Each of these locations has a majority from that clan but is also mixed with members from other clans.

Even though Jie have settled in Boma for long, many Murle feel that Jie have both extended and abused Murle hospitality in Boma and have become a source of insecurity in the area. As pointed out by the Jie paramount chief, “we take revenge on Murle of Boma if Lotillanya come and do something to us, because they are connected”.<sup>17</sup> This was deeply resented by Highland Murle. In the aftermath of the SPLA and SSDM/A-CF conflict where Jie ethnic militias supported the SPLA’s recapture of Boma (discussed in chapter 5 and 7), Highland Murle became more vocal in their desires to push Jie out of Boma. For example, in the context of the anti-Jie rhetoric at one Peace Meeting in Boma, one Murle youth argued:

*“You Jie are cattle-keepers and you loot people who have sorghum and maize, is food something new for you? Now you’re the one who cause the problem and are the ones who inflamed Kachipo to fight us. I want to ask my father from Jie called Lobun. The time when my father was also alive, was he going to Kassengor to loot cows and goats? For all those problems, you Jie go back to Kassengor. If someone needs to buy goats, we’ll go there”.<sup>18</sup>*

These kind of public remarks may only be rhetoric, but they are powerful. Concurrently, it is also recognised that Jie have been in Boma for long enough to remain there and consider it their home. Another Murle youth from Boma observed that

*“Jie have been in Boma for long enough to call Boma home, but in several occasions they refer to themselves as visitors from Kassengor, They have their administrative area in Kassengor, not in Boma as many have been claiming. For us [Murle in Boma], we love to host them for as long as they wish to stay but only if they willingly involve themselves in the communal activities as citizens of Gugu payam, not of Kassengor payam.”<sup>19</sup>*

As one Murle woman leader explained, “For Jie, there’s a rope being pulled. Eastern Equatoria State (EES) says they’re their people, but it’s up to them to decide to belong in EES or remain there in Boma.”<sup>20</sup>

### 3.3 BEING MURLE IN BOMA

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<sup>17</sup> Interview Jie paramount chief Lorumo Loliya, Naoyapuru, 07/08/2014.

<sup>18</sup> Logo Boyoi Boma Peace Meeting, Itti 21/08/2014.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Titoch, correspondence 09/06/2016.

<sup>20</sup> Margaret Konyi, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba 13/09/2013.

This section examines Highland Murle specific cultural, social and economic adaptations of *being Murle* while predominantly agriculturalists, and how these connect to the landscape and ecology of Boma. It is not the focus of this dissertation to engage in detailed discussions of Murle social institutions but it is important to recognize their significance in binding Murle together as a self-recognised ethnic group. A number of scholars, Bazett Lewis (1972), Elizabeth Andretta (1985), Jon Arensen (1992) and more recently Judith McCallum (2013), have discussed in some detail Murle social institutions. The age-set (*buul*) system, red chiefs and common clans bind the Murle group together and shape Murle discourses about themselves as a distinctive and cohesive ethnic group. However, it is important to examine some of the social variations experienced by Highland Murle in Boma, “reflect[ing] the adaptation of social institutions to different ecological niches” (Andretta 1985, 223), as well as historical contingencies and the civil wars.

Before May 2013, when Boma was captured by the Cobra Faction and Murle identity became even more politicised as will be discussed throughout the dissertation, Highland Murle from various ages and gender made references to Boma Murle being “one, but different,” with connotations of “them” and “us”, referring to “those keeping cattle in Pibor” and “farmers from Boma” (Felix da Costa 2013). Despite ecological and livelihood variations, “being one” is reinforced through the important relationships between Murle kinship structures, the age-sets and the spiritual control of red chiefs.

The Murle ethnic community is divided into two royal clans, the more senior Tangajon, and ɲaroθi, also known as drumships, which are then divided into various sub-clans. While both major clans can be found all across Murleland, Boma and Likuangle are generally known as Tangajon areas while Maruwo, Gumuruk and Pibor are overwhelmingly ɲaroθi areas. Although Lewis (1972) and McCallum (2013) emphasise the importance of clans across Murleland, similar to Andretta (1985; 1989) and to Arensen (1992), I also found that practical genealogical knowledge and interest in clans among Murle people was very limited, apart from the fact that it is unacceptable to marry from within one’s clan.

The clans also help to establish seniority among red chiefs (*alat ci meri*), with those from Tangajon considered to have the greatest spiritual authority. Red chiefs are spiritual men said to have gained their power directly from god (*Tammu*), and as such with spiritual authority to rule. Jon Arensen (2012, 2) explains that

“Although not operating as political entities, each drumship possesses an *alaan ci meeri*, red chief. There is a leading family in each drumship and the position of red chief is passed on

from father to son. But an *alaan ci meeri* holds a religious position rather than a political one. A more accurate translation of *alaan* would be priest or prophet. (...) He can pray for rain, bless the crops, advise the hunters, heal the sick, and predict the success (or failure) of an upcoming cattle raid. He is also feared because he has the power to curse a person and cause their death”.

Red chiefs seem to have lost some of the authority they held, although this varies across the region. One government chief in Kongor payam in Likuangle explained that having the power of government behind, especially the support of armed police had become more important and influential than the spiritual power of red chiefs.<sup>21</sup> But contrasting this, as will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6, Peter Kuju, a young yet important red chief in Boma prohibited his people from leaving Kaiwa village despite the threat of SPLA violence, and nearly all people obeyed fearing the spiritual, moral and physical repercussions of breaking his orders.

The most cohesive social institution that grips Murle society together are the highly functional age-sets. Common to other pastoral societies in East Africa, in Murle society age-set systems (*buul*), also known as generations, are well-defined groups of men based on age, that accompanies them through life, although these age-sets are most important during youth when young men are searching for wives, and have a responsibility of protecting the community.

Within each age-set, there is a certain internal hierarchy through a number of internal sub-categories, where ultimately the “elders” of each particular generation have often a more prominent role. This is why some young men choose to drop an age-set, for example from the older *Bothonya* to the younger *Lango*, where they become one of the seniors within the *Lango*. There are also respected red chiefs in each age-set. The age-sets originate spontaneously from Gumuruk in the Lowlands and arrive later in the Boma Plateau, usually lasting for roughly a ten-year span. The periods between age-sets have shortened significantly through the widespread availability of firearms as new age-sets emerge and compete with older that have not yet had the chance to establish their power and dominance. During the fieldwork period in Boma in 2013, the dominant age-set were the *Bothonya*, while in Pibor this varied between *Thithi* to *Bothonya* and already *Lango*. In 2013 *Lango* did not exist in Boma, yet were attempting to assert themselves. In Pibor a younger generation

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<sup>21</sup> Interview, sub-chief in Kongor Likuangle, 21/04/2015.

called the *Thagot* was already emerging (see appendix 1 for a complete list of existing age-sets).

There is a broad Murle collective identity based in great part on the common social institutions referred above. In similar ways by which *being Maasai* is immediately associated with cattle (Spear 1993a; Galaty 1982), *being* Murle is equated with being a pastoralist. The question of livelihoods is an important element in Murle collective identity, and importantly, in the configurations and activities of everyday life, both practically and more symbolically. Although cattle continue to be important for Highland Murle in Boma, subsistence and social organisation are based on agriculture, which also feeds into representations of being a “peaceful people” (discussed further in chapter 4).

### 3.3.1 BEING MURLE AND BEING ḢALAM

From the perspective of people in the Lowlands, lacking cattle, or being *ḣalamit*, signifies ‘poverty’ in wealth, status and family. But for many of those in Boma, lacking cattle, or being *ḣalam* is a social given, not a state of poverty and source of embarrassment. Even before the 2013 conflict between the SPLA and the SSDA-CF, Highland Murle informants already stressed their modes of livelihood as a distinctive element in their identity.

Gain Paul was the sub-chief of Kaiwa village. In February 2013, before the elevated politicisation of Murle ethnic identity, he explained how he saw the continuities and discontinuities between the people from the Highlands and Lowlands:

*Gain: “The [Murle] culture is one, same language and also the beads and age-sets are the same. But there is one difference, they are cattle-keepers and we are cultivators here. We are eating our crops, bananas, mangoes... them, everything they do has to do with cattle. The difference between Murle and ḣalam is ḣalam have no cattle. (...) We call ourselves ḣalam. Those people of Pibor migrated with cattle. If we were to speak a different language, then we could’ve separated entirely.*

*Diana: If someone asked you where you are from, what would you say?*

*Gain: I will say I’m from ḣalam of Boma. The reason is that those of Pibor have made the term ḣalam famous. The government treats us the same though. We are doing this locally, ḣalam and Murle, the government doesn’t care, and treat us as one [people]. If someone from Western Bahr-el-Ghazal asks, I will say I’m ḣalam not Murle, otherwise I will be seen as if I’m from Pibor.*



*ɲalam* is used as a fluid and shifting state of being, which an individual can move from and into, as will be discussed in greater detail through chapters 6, 7 and 8. Elizabeth Andretta (1989, 17) makes the point that the symbolic and material connections between the two groups provided Murle from Pibor and Boma an “adaptive edge,” enabling people to adapt to unpredictable ecological pressures as well as to conflict. Similarly, Arensen (1992, 35) argues that,

“Even though the Murle from the two areas call each other derogatory names, they have maintained close contact with each other. One reason for this is that the agriculturally based Murle in Boma provide a secure haven for pastoralists when life gets difficult in the plains”.

Likewise, Highland Murle move to the plains when faced with difficulties in the Boma Plateau. For example, in 1997 the combination of a terrible drought in Boma and a local war between Suri-Kachipo and Murle in Upper Boma, led to many in Upper Boma to migrate to the Lowlands. Also, during the SPLM/A’s stay in Boma throughout the 1980s and 90s, many Highland Murle migrated to Pibor in search of safety after villages in Upper Boma were destroyed (as discussed briefly later in the chapter).

Nonetheless, there are some contradictions when some Highland Murle in Boma protest that regardless of the amount of cattle they may accumulate, they will still be known as *ɲalam*, questioning the so-called fluidity of Murle identity. The chief of Jongolei explained:

*“If someone asks me if I’m Murle I will say no, I’m ɲalam. Murle have cattle. It’s an insult, they will call us ɲalam, even if we have 1000 cattle, it’s used like an insult by Murle to ɲalam.”*

Lile Kidongi, Jongolei 27/02/2013

Paul Titoch, a young educated man from Boma contested both this fluidity and the meaning of the term for Highland Murle. For him,

*“The term ɲalamit should not be taken as an insult any more because Murle in Boma have willingly accepted that name and they are also referring to Lowland Murle as Lotillanya. If a Murle from Boma relocates to Pibor and has enough cattle, still he will be called as a ɲalamit. It is also the same if a lowland Murle move to Boma and cultivate, he will still be called Lotillain”.*

Paul Titoch, correspondence 14/07/2016

He argued that the term had acquired a geographical sense, which was undeniably connected to Boma, despite livelihoods and wealth:

*The more a ḡalamit accumulates more cows the more he is called ḡalamit, nothing will change his real identity, If a ḡalamit has 70 cows for example, and wanted to marry a lady from Pibor, the family of the girl will be told by neighbours “Do you want your daughter to be married by a ḡalamit”.*

Paul Titoch, correspondence 14/07/2016

Gain, Lile and Paul’s views demonstrate that there is no agreed understanding of the meanings of term. During my visits to the Lowlands, I met many young men whose father’s were originally from Boma, yet they had settled into the Lowlands and did not feel the social pressures or feelings of inadequacy. Perhaps *ḡalam* is a term and category that is constantly shifting meaning, depending on the specific context. But the greatest paradox lies in how Highland Murle people have come to see themselves as cultivators, even if they do not cultivate. David’s parents were from Boma but apart from his first years of life in Boma, he moved on to live in Khartoum, Kakuma, Narus, Pibor, Juba and then Kapoeta where I met him. In his short life (he was 24 years old), he had lived in all those places. David, who had spent the last five years in Pibor where he considered all his friends to be in, “didn’t like Boma that much”. Yet, he insisted, “I don’t like cows, I do cultivation.”<sup>22</sup>

In the past, anthropologists have also recognised some differences in the smaller agrarian Murle of Boma. When discussing the clans and drumships in Murleland in his ethnography, B.A. Lewis (1972, 53–54) wrote that “the small Boma community is really outside the scope of this account, but they do provide an interesting comparison with the Murle of the plains on a few points”. According to Lewis (1972, 54),

“The Boma Murle (...) marry with the *ḡalam* people of Erbo in Ethiopia, and, unlike the rest of the Murle, bury their dead. Because of this the Murle call any poor man who has no cattle a *ḡalamit*, and often apply the same name to all the inhabitants of Boma.”

In fact, the “real” *ḡalam* still live in Ethiopia on the mountain range located north-west behind Dima town.<sup>23</sup> By some accounts the place is called Tεε, in other accounts it is named Torobore, or by Lewis’s (1972, 54) account Erbu, a couple of hours towards Raad not far from the Ethiopian border. The *ḡalam* of Ethiopia are a small agrarian group with a similar language to Murle. According to John Konyi, who fled Boma to Ethiopia, many people from Boma choose to migrate to Torobore/Tεε even in times of peace. For John Konyi, the *ḡalam* of Ethiopia are “the same as Murle, language, beads, scarring and clans. Even people migrate

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<sup>22</sup> Discussions with David Korok, 07/2013 Kapoeta

<sup>23</sup> Also referred sometimes as *ḡalam* Tama. Fieldnotes, Dima, Ethiopia 04/09/2013.

from Murleland over there for cultivation. I have two uncles there.”<sup>24</sup> There is also a *ηalam* prophet, known as *Coini*, from Bæ in Ethiopia that is respected all over Murleland. Among other powers, he is able to “fix barren women”, “provide protection for crimes committed in Boma, for example killing”, reveal information regarding murders and other crimes, among other things, and people travel all the way there for his assistance.<sup>25</sup> The prophet *Coini* also has power over war and is said to have contributed to the Cobra Faction’s success. During the conflict between the SPLA and the Cobra Faction, Cobra fighters went to *Coini* to request his support. They offered him three automatic rifles for his blessing and in return, *Coini* gave Cobra Faction soldiers the power to become invisible.<sup>26</sup>

It is, however, challenging to find historical references to *ηalam* in Ethiopia. In one of the few references, Bender (1977, 11–12) mentions the “*ηalam* ( I)alam, ‘the people without cattle’”, stating these were located on the Ethiopian border, in addition to the Murle of Lowland, known as Lotilla, and those of the Boma Plateau.

Across Murleland, the agro-pastoralist lifestyle, diet and relationships have also come to influence people’s physical features and appearance. Lowland Murle people have historically inter-married with Lou Nuer, making people from the Lowlands taller and physically different from the shorter Highland Murle who have historically inter-married with Suri-Kachipo people. Physically and aesthetically, for people in Boma, it is no longer common to make facial and body scarification to decorate the body and identify with certain age-sets, as was the case in the past. However, in the Lowlands, it remains a common practice.

Due to changing political circumstances and generational relationships, technology and innovation, body adornment, scar motifs and designs have changed. Previously young men would make designs of patterns, spears, fish and animals associated with age-sets, especially due to their colours (photograph 8). While each age-set still have associations to animals (as photograph 8), young men are incorporating new images of power into older practices. While the practice of scarification has been totally dropped among the Highland Murle (only a few older men and women have these), it remains very common across cattle camps in the Lowlands. There, young men scarify designs of AK-47s, knives, military ranks,

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<sup>24</sup> Interview John Konyi, Dima 03/09/2013

<sup>25</sup> Fieldnotes, Dima.

<sup>26</sup> Fieldnotes, Dima 09/2013 and Juba 12/2015.

Thuraya phones, Motorolas, among other symbols associated with modern power in South Sudan (photographs 8 and 9).



Photograph 8 Youth from Lango age-set from Maruwo with Lango beads (black/yellow), a scarification of a 'Lango' (type of antelope), of watches (left lower corner) and of patterns.



Photograph 9 Youth from Lango age-set with new motif scarifications: Military ranks (in cattlecamp by Lotilla River) (Left); Thuraya phones (in cattlecamp by Lotilla River) (centre); and AK-47 motifs (in cattlecamp in Kong Kong River) (right).

Body scarification indicates which age-set and respective sub-group a young man belongs to. For example within *Bothonya* there are several sub-groups such as *Oromo*, *Nyoro*, *Kum*, *Tujar* and *Subarad*. Motifs of AK-47s and Motorolas identify youth from *Oromo* (*Nyakeno*) sub-set of *Bothonya*. Chief Lile from Jongolei village in Upper Boma distanced himself from the Lowlands evoking cultural factors and physical attributes, including the absence of scarification practices in Boma as well as their 'behaviour':

*"It is only language that makes people unite. They are cattle-keepers, which is a very big difference. There are also differences in culture, for them [in Pibor] ladies are used to building tukuls, here men do it. If they are together you can easily identify Murle of Pibor and of Boma, they have different behaviour. [Why?] It is easily identifiable through tattoos on the face and bodies, they don't do scarification on the face anymore only cuts in the body. They shave their hair and use different hairstyles, waistbands, different looks... The behaviour is also different and easily identifiable. This ḡalam is from Boma, also if one of them comes to here, you can easily tell... here only the girls did tattoos and that stopped now in Thithi generation".*

Chief Lile Kidongi, Jongolei 27/02/2013

As many others, Lile made reference to language as a strong unifying factor. But as simultaneously as explained by Joel, language was also a source of distinction: *"The language also has some slight differences, it is easy to know where one come from by the way he or she pronounces some words. Those from Lowland pronounces the same words in a different way from those of Boma"* (Paul Titoch, correspondence, 14/07/2016).

This section suggests that there are important collective historical, social, political and moral bonds for Murle people that are valued and remain strong across Murleland, even as these are being contested and debated. Modes of livelihoods are a central dimension of the debates (though not the only one) due to the political associations, social inequalities and sense of inadequacy that also derive from livelihoods. My aim here has not been to discuss specific livelihoods issues; rather how modes of livelihood and subsistence–cultivation and pastoralism–connect to questions of being Murle, and its derogatory stereotypes of 'violence'. On a concrete level, modes of livelihood affect greatly everyday practices and strategies and thus how other elements are socialised into everyday life.

### 3.4 BOMA: A CENTRE AND A MARGIN

This section traces some colonial era representations of Boma and how these contrast with the myth of the 'fierce Murle', which has come to feed into contemporary images of the Murle. The section also explores the historical making of Boma as both a remote borderland and a centre. It argues that these historical events, in particular the SPLM/A's presence in Boma from 1985 have been central in shaping Highland Murle current understandings, aspirations and expectations of the contemporary state.

### 3.4.1 *EARLY TRAVELLERS AND COLONIAL DEPICTIONS*

Unlike other parts of South Sudan that were more closely documented and portrayed by colonial explorers and administrators, academics and the media, Boma and its population remained largely out of the public gaze, in large part due to its geographical isolation. Boma has no river running through the area that would permit a flotilla to reach it and was on the fringes of what would become the two provinces of Upper Nile and Equatoria, as well as of Sudan and Ethiopia. What is most prominent, though unsurprising, through all those early records is how stunning and full of potential all those visiting found Boma and its views, its temperature and its fertile agricultural lands. There were also references to “The natives [that] were quite friendly” (Austin 1902, 115). All in all, Boma was depicted as a friendly, isolated and prosperous land, with surprisingly large areas of cultivation.

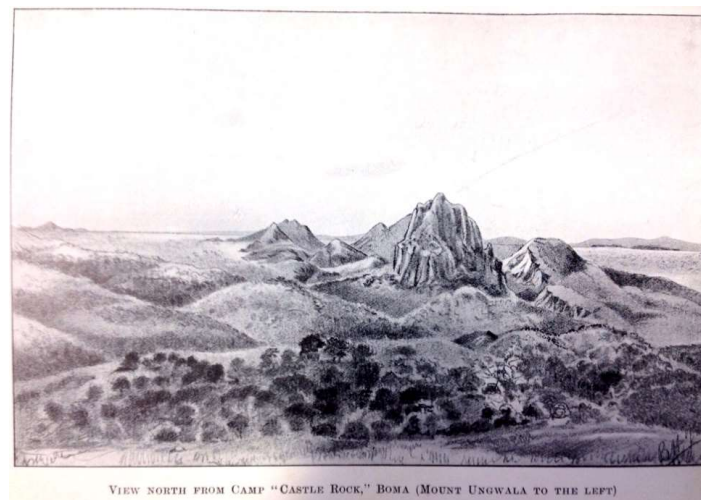
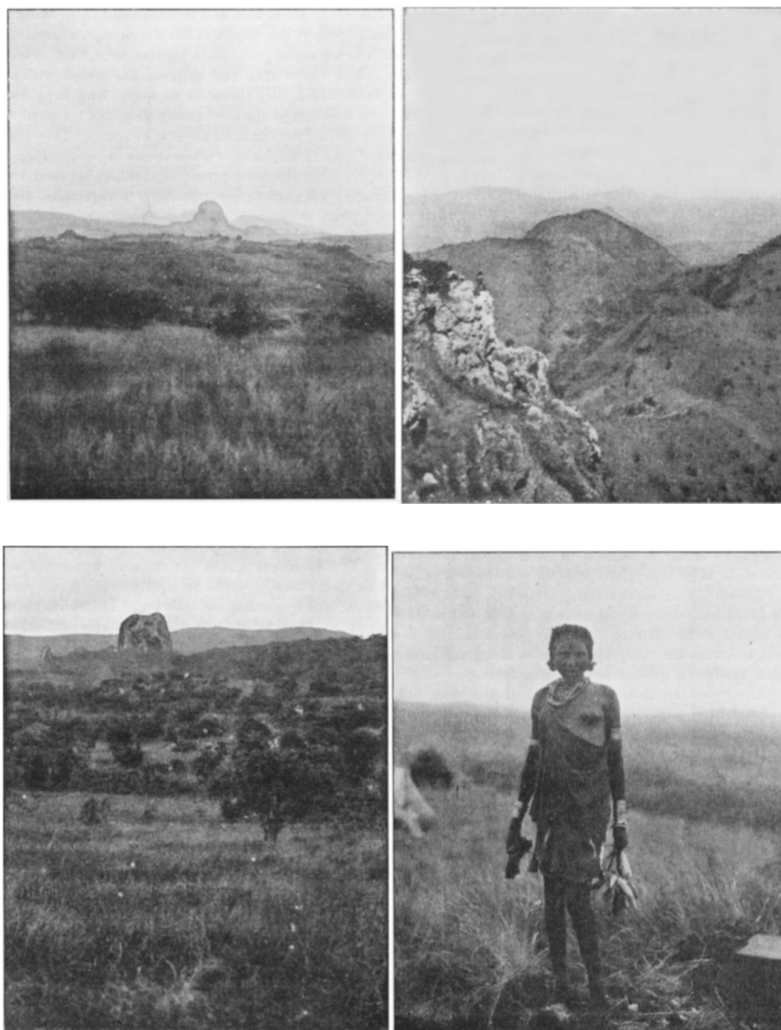


Figure 3 'View from Camp "Castle Rock", Boma (Mount Ungwala to the left)'; drawing by B.M. Jessen (in Bulpett 1907, 218).

Seemingly, the first time explorers reached and refer to Boma was in 1899-1900 when Major Herbert Austin led an arduous expedition through Cairo to what was then Lake Rudolf (Austin 1902). Then, in 1904, Northrup MacMillan led an expedition up the Sobat River (Lewis 1972, 3). The expedition included C.W.L. Bulpett and B.M. Jessen who wrote their memoirs documenting their 1904 exploration from the Sobat to the trekking through Anyuak area using mules and donkeys until reaching the Boma Plateau (Bulpett 1907; Jessen 1906). Referring to the Highland Murle and their physical and economic remoteness, Bulpett (1907, 219) expressed: “They are an interesting people, these inhabitants of the rocky fastnesses of Boma, and are apparently quite isolated and cut off from the rest of the world;” adding also he

“imagine[d] that no foreign trade caravans have ever come amongst these people, for they have nothing to barter, and their own wants are confined to salt, beads and iron wire. They have no ivory to trade with and nothing that could attract the trader” (Bulpett 1907, 222).



Photograph 10 Photographs of Boma by Jessen (1905), including Boma girl selling maize for meat (Jessen 1905, 159).

He was, however, struck by the large agricultural lands in the Boma Plateau, noting that “They cultivate very extensive tracts of maize and dhura in the alluvial soil of the fertile passes lying between the undulations of the Highlands” (Bulpett 1907, 220). Jessen (1905, 170) also remarked on the lack of “domestic animals, except goats”, and was particularly impressed by the remarkable agricultural fields. Jessen (1905, 168) reported impressive wildlife and beauty: “A more beautiful place for sport, or as a health resort, could hardly be imagined”. Likewise, Bulpett concluded his thoughts on Boma stating that “Such is Boma, and it is no exaggeration to call it paradise in its way, destined perhaps, one day to becoming

a resting-place and health-resort for the hard-worked Soudanese official" (Bulpett 1907, 225) (see figure 3 and photographs 10).

These were the first written records describing Boma and its Murle population. The image offered by these colonial era accounts is one of beauty, abundance and prosperity, as well as isolation and remoteness. Interestingly, it contrasts to the contemporary Murle image in South Sudan: as aggressors, thieves and outsiders, despite a reality of Murle victimisation and political and economic marginalisation.

### 3.4.2 *IMAGINING THE MURLE: COLONIAL DEPICTIONS OF THE 'FIERCE BEIR'*

Although Pibor was by all standards very remote, there are many more colonial and academic references to it than to Boma. The Boma Plateau has largely been referred to in the literature as "the remoter parts of the [Upper Nile] province" (Willis 1995b, 97).

In 1949, B.A. Lewis observed that "The tribe calls itself 'Murle'. It is better known to the world as the 'Beir Tribe', but this is the name given to it by the Bor Dinka."<sup>27</sup> That the Murle were generally known to colonial authorities as 'Beir', the Dinka term to refer to them (meaning 'enemy'), is indicative that their relationship to the *hakuma* was (and remains) mediated by Dinka Bor representations of Murle as the aggressors. As explained by Edward Thomas (2015, 70), "At the time, Bor people paid tax, while Murle and Nuer people did not. Both Murle and Nuer groups raided Dinka areas, and British punitive patrols on non-taxpaying groups, using Dinka irregulars, were sometimes cast as 'protection' of taxpayers from raids".

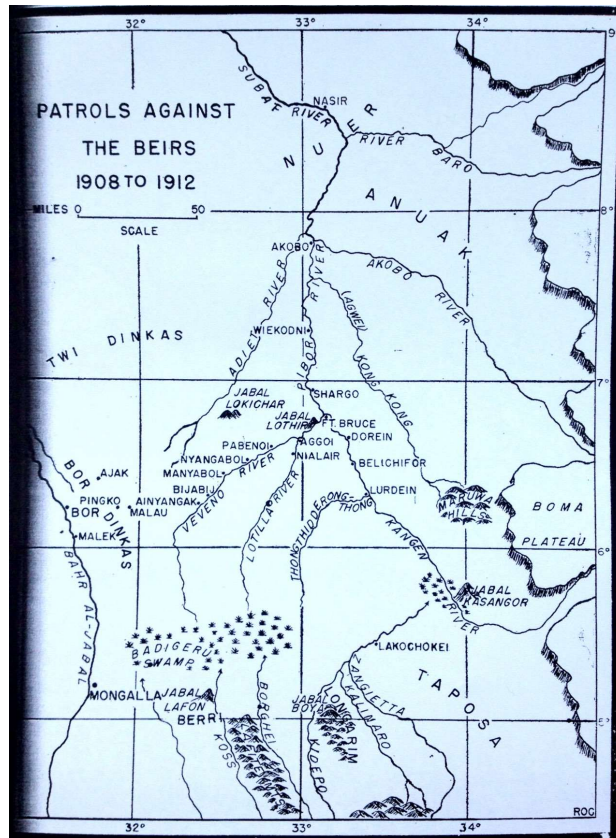
Bazett A. Lewis was a District Commissioner in Murleland during the Condominium Government from December 1941 for two and a half years, having subsequently returned in 1949 for two months of anthropological studies. He offers a review of the early explorations to Pibor, and the establishment of a military and civil administration in Pibor, after the very aggressive Beir Patrols of 1912 (Lewis 1972, 1–18). On his account of the Beir Patrols, Captain H.H. Kelly referred to the Patrols as "punishment of the repeated raids on the peaceable Dinka of Bor district" (Kelly 1912, 499), while Lewis reports that the British Government "was anxious to protect the Dinka of the District" (Lewis 1972, 6).

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<sup>27</sup> PRM, B.A. Lewis Papers, Box 1, Item 12 (1/1/12): "Murlei Notes", 'Note on the Murle Tribes (Plains Section)', no page.



The British began by ‘pacifying’ the neighbouring Dinka, and with less success the Nuer to the north of Murleland, subsequently turning their attention to the Murle of Pibor, driven by regular Dinka complaints of Murle cattle-raids, and keen to control “inter-ethnic hostilities” (see map 8) (Collins and Herzog 1961, 131; Collins 1960).



Map 8 'Patrols against the Beirs 1908 to 1912' (Collins 1960).

Historical scholarship offers extensive evidence of Murle victimization, ranging from the notorious Beir Patrols to more recent demonization of Murle as supportive of the Khartoum government during the first (Thomas 2015) and second civil wars (McCallum 2013). According to Lewis (1972), the Murle were relatively isolated from early incursions from the British and Egyptian colonisers due to the topographical nature of the Lotilla-Pibor plains but “their reputation for being an aggressive and war-like people added to this isolation” (McCallum 2013, 27–28).

The eastern flood plains, delimited by the Bahr al-Jebel and Sobat rivers and the Ethiopian border making up the area until recently known as Jonglei, was portrayed by colonial writers as unwaveringly violent (Thomas 2015, 73). Such references of “ethnic ferocity”

were part of the ideology of slavery that “depict[ed] societies outside the slavery system as inherently violent” (Thomas 2015, 70). He offers the example of how the early nineteenth century Nuer migrations from Unity state to Jonglei and Upper Nile were for long represented as a violent and forceful conquest. Rather, subsequent research demonstrated that Nuer migrations were in fact characterised by “coercion, negotiation, assimilation and wayfaring pioneered by small groups” (Jal 1987; Johnson 1994; Hutchinson 1996 in Thomas 2015, 70).



Photograph 11 Murle at Akobo, 1928 (Coriat) (Willis 1995b, chapter 8 plate 3).

For much of the twentieth century it was the “Fighting Nuer” (Johnson 1981) who provided the stereotype of “young, male, ethnic aggression” for southern Sudan (Thomas 2015). Douglas Johnson’s enlightening deconstruction of the stereotype of the Nuer as “intractable and fierce” and “almost mechanically aggressive warriors” (Johnson 1981, 512 and 522) demonstrates that episodes of Nuer violence were often misinterpreted by hostile colonial officers that had to intervene on the side of its colonial subjects “to justify with tangible protection the more onerous demands of administration, often before an investigation could be made of the rights of the matter” (Johnson 1981, 523, footnote 5). In this regard,

Johnson notes that having to choose between ‘administered’ and ‘unadministered’ peoples, colonial administrators always sided with “its subjects”. This included the 1912 Beir Patrols after the Murle heavily raided the Dinka Bor, even though some years later “it was discovered that the Murle raids had been a response to considerable Bor Dinka provocation” (Johnson 1981, 523, footnote 5). Thomas also notes that there are indications that the Murle raids that took place between 1840 and 1960 resulted from temporary breakdowns in local relationships. Murle people were not inclined to resort to violence more than other groups, nor interested in participating in state violence (Thomas 2015). Thomas provides an example from 1930, when British officials struggled to raise a force of 26 chiefs’ police in Pibor (Willis 1995b, 202).

### 3.4.3 AN “UNADMINISTERED” LAND

Pibor Post was established in 1912. But as late as 1931, Boma remained isolated and dislocated from colonial administration, geographically distant from the Upper Nile and Eastern Equatoria centres of colonial authority. In the *Upper Nile Handbook* of 1931, referring to Native Administration of the “Anuak and Beir”, Willis (1995a, 345) noted that

“The development of the last [Anuak and Beir] is at present a matter of speculation as there is still a considerable area in the S.E. [southeast] corner of the province including part of the Boma plateau over which no attempt at administration is made”.

In 1926, Henry Darley (1926, 43) referred to Boma’s physical isolation and consequent absence of colonial administration, despite its strategic location: “Being far away from the nearest British posts, it is unadministered. Yet it is the key to all the lower districts, and is the back door into Abyssinia”.

Lewis also noted that Darley’s account painted a very different picture of the one provided in the turn of the century by Austin, Jessen and Bulpett. According to Lewis (1972, 9), Boma “was then, in 1912, a centre for Abyssinian raiding parties from Maji, and these were to be the main preoccupation of the garrison at Pibor Post for many years to come”.

In 1936, the Sudan Defence Force established the only police post in the entire Sudan-Ethiopia border on the top of the Boma Plateau, known as Tooz Post (following the steep rock ledge with the same local Murle name), to ensure that the Italians did not take over the

plateau. It was also in 1936 that the 125 mile road connecting Boma to Kapoeta was built reaching up the steep escarpment to Upper Boma (Arensen 2013).<sup>28</sup>

In 1939 Richard Lyth, a former missionary that had been recruited into the Sudan Defence Force as a young British Officer was assigned to fight against the Italians, then the colonial authority in Ethiopia (Arensen 2013). After a successful campaign in Maji, Lyth returned to Boma, reassigned from the Sudan Defence Forces to the Sudan Political Service. His first posting was as a Frontier Agent based in Boma, where he was between 1942 and 1945 (Lewis 1972, 14; see also Arensen 2013), reporting to Geoffrey King, the District Commissioner (DC) for the Kapoeta region. During that time, Lyth, known in Murle as Kemberbong,<sup>29</sup> learnt the Murle language well and wrote a comprehensive grammar of the language (Lyth 1955). In 1946 Lyth became officially the DC for Pibor, which at the time included Pibor and Akobo Post. He established a new road to Boma through the Maruwo Hills, branching off from the Pibor Post–Pochalla road, that had been opened by the previous DC in Pibor, J.N. Grover (Lewis 1972, 14). During Lyth's time in Pibor he lobbied and succeeded in administratively moving Boma from Kapoeta to Pibor, and as such placing all Murleland under the same colonial government administration. At a Boma Peace Meeting in 2013, Rachu Jakin, a senior Murle intellectual and politician from Boma recounted:

*"Europeans asked people in Boma where do you want to belong – Eastern Equatoria or Upper Nile [province]. Our people in Boma said we didn't want to belong to Equatoria, we have our brothers in Pibor in Upper Nile. We can't decide without them, and cannot divide from them."*

Rachu Jakin, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba 13/09/2013

Boma was not the stage of a forceful pacification campaign as was the case in Pibor with the Beir Patrols. Yet, its recent history shows that Boma has been the stage of sporadic wars between its ethnic groups. By 1976, when missionary and anthropologist Jon Arensen and his family wanted to move to Murleland, things had changed significantly. The Arensen's had initially chosen to settle in Boma "because it was peaceful, beautiful and the people were sedentary – ideal for an NGO literacy project."<sup>30</sup> However, they eventually relocated to Pibor due to inter-communal fighting between Highland Murle and Suri-Kachipo; Jon Arensen recalled "it was not as peaceful as we thought."<sup>31</sup> Arensen explains that at the time the

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<sup>28</sup> Based on the notes of Richard Lyth, Arensen's *The Red Pelican* tells the story of Lyth's time in Boma.

<sup>29</sup> See Arensen (2013, chapter 13) for an explanation of why Lyth was named Kemberbong, that translates as 'Red Pelican' in Murle.

<sup>30</sup> Jon Arensen, personal communication, 12/08/2016.

<sup>31</sup> Personal communication Jon Arensen, 12/08/2016.

Highland Murle and Kachipo lived an uneasy peace with each other “based on historical hostility” (2013, chapter 14).

#### 3.4.4 BOMA, “THE MOTHER OF THE SPLM/A”

The remoteness of Pibor and Boma contributed to few Murle taking part in the first civil war (1955-1972) between the Anyanya rebels and the Government of Sudan (McCallum 2013, 33).<sup>32</sup> Still, two Murle who did have a more prominent role in Anyanya I were John Kireru (or Kereru) and John Tholomothe, both from *Nyeriza* age-set. Kireru was a native of Boma but lived in Likuangle much of his life, where he probably met John Tholomothe, from Likuangle.

John Kireru is said to have served both as a combatant in the frontlines and as a medical personnel until he was wounded in his leg. After the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, he left the movement and worked as civil servant in the Veterinary Department in Pibor and later on at the Missionary Reform Church Hospital in Lokurnyang area in the eastern bank of Pibor town. In turn, Tholomothe was integrated into the armed forces in Malakal as a sergeant in a low military rank.<sup>33</sup> Judith McCallum (2013, 34) quotes a former Murle Anyanya member lamenting:

“The issue was we didn’t have political people to help us. We were seen as a lower class people, and lacked educated people. Of all the Murle only Arani, Tholomoth, John Kireru, and John Ngantita Ngakavera Tobok were educated.”

For Joseph Lilimoy, a Murle intellectual and senior Cobra Faction member, the period saw the beginning of Murle marginalisation in the hands of Dinka Bor:

*“Murle think that our participation in Anyanya I was undermined after the agreement of Addis Ababa by the leadership of the regional government of Southern Sudan because the movement itself was hijacked from its founders by Dinka Bor represented by Abel Alier in collaboration with Khartoum, and that was the beginning of Murle marginalization.”*

Joseph Lilimoy, correspondence 30/07/2016

After Sudan’s independence in 1956, Hassan ĩacingol, the first Murle to be appointed a District Commissioner allied himself to Khartoum, which was to have dire consequences for

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<sup>32</sup> According to McCallum (2013, 33), 11 of the roughly fifty Murle that joined Anyanya I were given a rank.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Lilimoy, correspondence 30/07/2016. Lilimoy is son-in-law to the late John Kireru.

the Murle and the ways in which they were collectively portrayed.<sup>34</sup> The statements by the anonymous Murle Anyanya member and Lilimoy suggest that the post-1972 Agreement were a turning for the Murle in South Sudan and their growing reputation as hostile. The Murle were seen to be Khartoum supporters not only because of the perception of low Murle support and participation in Anyanya I but also due to Hassan ngacingol's pro-Khartoum measures (McCallum 2013, 34–35).

The Anyanya II movement began to gain some traction in the late 1970s as it became apparent that Khartoum was going to repeal the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972 (Johnson 2011, chapter 5). Murle intellectuals Lokurnyang Lado and ngacigak ngaciluk, along with Pagan Amum, began to hold rallies mobilising students in Upper Nile and eventually in 1982, they crossed to Bilpam, Ethiopia along with some 600 Murle that had joined the movement (McCallum 2013, 37). The second civil war began in May 1983 when a battalion deployed to Bor, Pibor and Pochalla mutinied and moved to Bilpam in Ethiopia, forming the SPLM/A in July of that year (Johnson 2011).

But Boma first gained some international prominence in June 1983 when Lokurnyang, Pagan and other guerrilla members took eleven foreigners hostage.<sup>35</sup> These included missionaries John and Gwen Haspells and their children who had lived in Upper Boma since 1980 (The New York Times 1983). It also included staff from the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS), in Boma since 1980, tasked by the Sudan government to establish Boma National Park (Snyder forthcoming). They were kept hostage for some two weeks until 8 July 1983, when SAF soldiers swept through Boma and rescued the hostages. In the process, one SAF soldier was killed, in addition to at least 18 'rebels'.

The harsh SAF rescue operation encouraged a number of Highland Murle to join the Anyanya II rebels who were pushed back into Ethiopia and remained on the border in Raad.<sup>36</sup> The SPLM/A was keen to incorporate the Anyanya II rebels into their ranks. In October 1983, the Ethiopian government flew Dr John Garang, Kerebino Kwanyn Bol and William Nyuon Bany to Raad with the aim of convincing ngacigak and Lokurnyang to join the SPLM/A. While ngacigak (photograph 12) accepted to join the SPLM/A, Lokurnyang resisted. As a result, Lokurnyang was arrested and executed by a firing squad (McCallum 2013, 38–39), alongside some of the soldiers who supported him.

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<sup>34</sup> See Thomas (2015, 169–177) on "The Life and Death of Hassan Ngacingol".

<sup>35</sup> Philip Snyder, forthcoming, 320–321 provides a chronology of the hostage crisis. See also Arensen (2016).

<sup>36</sup> Interview, *Dorongwa* age-set, Jongolei 26/02/2013.



Photograph 12 The late Cde. Lt. Col. Martin Manyiel Ayuel (left) and Alternate Member of the SPLA Military High Command, the Late Maj. ḡacigak ḡaciluk (right) in Boma in December 1985 (from Kur Garang Deng's home archives) (K. G. Deng 2016).<sup>37</sup>

In the second civil war, while Boma was taken by the SPLM/A, Pibor was for most of the second war under the control of Khartoum. Internally, the Murle were split during the war between those in Boma area that largely supported the SPLM/A, and those who fought with Ismael Konyi's Pibor Defence Force (PDF), known as the Brigade or commonly, 'Berget', a local defence Murle militia in Pibor aligned with the Khartoum government.<sup>38</sup> Decisions regarding which side people fought on were often based on practical concerns such as who was in control of the physical location that one was in and which area one was displaced into, rather than political or ideological considerations (McCallum 2013). Nevertheless, this did produce divisions among the Murle from Boma and Pibor (McCallum 2013, 193) which in the years preceding the CPA were discussed and overcome through peace and reconciliation meetings.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Photo used with permission from Mr. Kur Garang Deng.

<sup>38</sup> The PDF were established and led by Sultan Ismail Konyi. The Khartoum government supported the PDF militia and Sultan Ismail (who is also a red chief) was appointed Governor of Jonglei State in 2003. In 2006 based on the Juba Declaration, he joined the SPLM/A (Arnold 2007) and became the Peace and Development Advisor to Salva Kiir. He is currently an appointed member of the Council of States, a chamber of the South Sudan National Legislature. See McCallum (2013, Chapter 5).

<sup>39</sup> The first step in a gradual reconciliation and cessation of hostilities between Murle communities divided partly by opposing loyalties to GoS and SPLM/A, and their neighbours took place in Likuangole in June 2003, under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church of Sudan-Pibor (PCOS-Pibor), with follow-up meetings in Boma

Externally (both in and beyond Southern Sudan), the Murle were seen as supporting Khartoum as the PDF was aligned with the northern army throughout the war (Arnold 2007). Although they were active in both the Anyanya movements and the SPLM/A, there is very limited documentation of the history of Murle involvement in the South Sudanese wars. Instead popular records about the Murle nullify this complexity and simply emphasize their militia movement associated with Sultan Ismael Konyi and supported by the Khartoum government (McCallum 2013; Laudati 2011).

Boma was successfully captured from SAF in 1985 led by the late ḡacigak ḡacaluk, who was made the commander of the Agarab ('Scorpion') Battalion, which had over 280 Murle soldiers who had joined the SPLA from the Anyanya II (McCallum 2013). The SAF Commander of the area was Clement Wani Konga, with SAF soldiers spread through Itti, Amara and Toož.<sup>40</sup>

Kennedy Gain, originally from Pibor, was at the time a young intelligence officer in the Agarab Battalion. He was to have a vital role in the military operation capturing Boma and later in fighting Sultan Ismael Konyi's 'Berget', temporarily capturing Pibor from SAF (see Thomas 2015, 184–187; McCallum 2013, 39–43). Following the Chukudum SPLM Convention in 1994 (Rolandsen 2005), Gain was appointed the county commissioner (civil administrator) of Boma, where he served from 1995 until the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005.<sup>41</sup>

I have included in the appendix (see appendix 3) a substantial segment of Kennedy Gain's extraordinarily detailed personal memoirs of events. These are valuable not only because Gain was actively part of the capture of Boma and thus his account serves as evidence, but also because of their intimate and deeply personal nature as memoirs of the struggle (see Santos 2010 for a comparative example from Mozambique). Gain's narrative begins with the successful capture of Boma in 1985 and includes references to the capture and loss of Pibor, complicating the 'tale' that the Murle did not support the SPLM/A. His account implies inter-connections between layers of political dynamics in Boma-Pibor-Khartoum, as well as its wider international support links to Ethiopia and Cuba, among other places. It suggests social and political complexity of alliances made, broken and re-made. It also hints at the extraordinary mobilising authority of leaders such as John Garang and ḡacigak ḡacaluk but

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in February 2004 and Likuangle in June 2005 (Bradbury et al. 2006, 156–158). See also McCallum (2013, Chapter 2, especially 44–48) for background of the intra-Murle reconciliation.

<sup>40</sup> Interview General Kennedy Gain, Juba 05/12/2015.

<sup>41</sup> Interview General Kennedy Gain, Juba 05/12/2015.



also the moral authority that ethnicity plays in military and political mobilisation. What equally emerges is the importance that Boma as a place has played in the making of the modern South Sudanese nation-state. The fact that Boma was never recaptured back by SAF also attests to both its strategic location and remoteness. Simultaneously, the heavy presence and long-lasting authority of the SPLM/SPLA in Boma has also been significant in shaping Highland Murle's imaginings and expectations of the state and the government: one which began as a rebel army and has transformed into a formal government (De Alessi 2012).

Strikingly, General Gain's account reminds us of the legacies of violence that have affected different areas of South Sudan, at different times with different intensity. Importantly, it reveals how contrary to common perceptions, the Murle participated actively in the SPLM/A and bore heavily the brunt of the liberation war. Finally, the events above demonstrate how the making of what is now South Sudan and its formal state institutions began in Boma. This point bears heavily on contemporary rural Highland Murle experiences and imaginings of the state, which draw on these historical, emotional and political configurations. Boma was central to the assertion of the power of the state, at the time a different state, the Republic of Sudan. For General Kennedy, Boma's symbolic power is evident:

*'Boma is a historical place. It's the mother of this young nation. The first flag was raised in Boma. If they want to destroy Boma, we will not be happy. Boma is a historical place for SPLM/A, so the small villages are named Boma, as a homage to Boma.<sup>42</sup> Lots of places are left to abandon, but no – we'll not abandon Boma. Boma shall not be made a battlefield'*

Kennedy Gain, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba 12/09/2013

In this sense, Boma was not a margin, but quite the contrary. It was a centre, where the struggle for Southern Sudanese independence began by the movement and army, that is, formally since independence, in control of the new state.

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<sup>42</sup> As explained in chapter 1, footnote 15, Gain's etymology of the word boma is a myth – but a common one in South Sudan, not just with Murle people in Boma but South Sudanese across the country. For example K. G. Deng's (2016) blog entry honouring the '31<sup>st</sup> Anniversary of the fall of Boma to the SPLA' where he states "Dr. John Garang and his colleagues named the nucleus of their political system (last administrative unit) as 'Boma'." Rather, Kishindo (2000, 25) suggests that "the origin of the term is the fences or enclosures around the dwelling units of traditional chiefs, slave owners/traders and important people in the pre-colonial Swahili society". Although Kishindo is referring to Malawi, it seems the term became a generic word across various British colonies at least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century to indicate the colonial local government centre. For a discussion of the term see also the H-NET List for African History and Culture ("Meaning of Colonial BOMA: Query & Replies" 2006).



Photograph 13 Dr John Garang addresses soldiers as Salva Kiir Mayardit, Kerubino Kuanyin Bol, William Nyuon Bany and other senior commanders look on following the liberation of Boma, Jonglei (undated) (in Mckulka 2013, 114).

Although the SPLM/A had been making ground across much of southern Sudan, this all changed after May 1991, when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrew the communist regime in Ethiopia, which had until then offered vital support to the SPLM/A:

*"We all had to run back to South Sudan. There were also more defections from Riek [Machar] and Lam Akol, when they attacked Bor. They also sent some forces to Likuangole, at the time controlled by the SPLA by Commander Akot Maze."*

Interview General Kennedy Gain, Juba, 05/12/2015

For Boma, this meant that many of the Southern Sudanese refugees seeking safety in Ethiopian refugee camps were no longer welcome there. Most walked through Boma on their way to Kakuma, but many also chose to stay in Orgin, by Boma town, and in Churi, perhaps better known by its Dinka name of Pakok,<sup>43</sup> closer to Raad by the Ethiopian border, seeking the protection of the SPLA. One elder from Boma recalled: "By then Itti had become

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<sup>43</sup> Displaced Dinka gave the name of Pakok to Churi. Allegedly, Pakok in Dinka means 'our former home'. Churi is the Murle name for a type of trap to catch small animals.

a town, much bigger than now... NGOs, civilians, army, they were all mixing. Many displaced Dinka coming from Ethiopia and Kakuma were staying in Orgin.”<sup>44</sup>

During this period, many of the locations that had been under the control of the SPLA including Pochalla, Akobo, Bor and Pibor were captured by SAF (Johnson 2011). Kennedy recalled the period between March and July 1992:

*“Everywhere had been taken except for Boma... Torit, Bor Kapoeta, Pibor, all taken. (...) Only Boma and Pageri remained under the control of SPLA. In the same year in 1992, SAF was sent to attack Boma but was repelled. The commanders in Boma at that time were Kuol Deim from Abyei, Babur Maze and Joseph ηatio.”*

Interview General Kennedy Gain, Juba 05/12/2015

Again, in 1993, Ismael Konyi mobilised his militia, ‘Berget’, to attack the SPLA in Boma, but they were repelled. Following the first SPLM/A Convention of 1994 in Chukudum, General Kennedy Gain was transferred from the Military to the Civil Administration and was appointed as the first SPLM county commissioner in Boma. During that period, in 1995, Salva Mathok Deng was the military commander of Boma, with the Agarab Battalion containing roughly 600 men.

The Murle paramount chief of Greater Boma, which ranged all the way up to Maruwo Hills, Mojong Kengen Longole, the father of current Maruwo Hills powerful chief Baba Majong (who had a prominent role in the recent SSDM/A-Cobra Faction) and the Jie paramount chief Loliya (the father to current Jie paramount chief Lorumo Loliya) were SPLA supporters. Both chiefs mobilised their communities and welcomed the SPLA forces with cattle. Chief Logidang Lom, the current Murle paramount chief was then a soldier for Kennedy Gain. According to Gain, “the people of Boma from Nyalongoro to Bayen were supporting the SPLA and many *ηalam* soldiers joined the SPLA.” However, others gave accounts of aggressive forced recruitment of civilians into the SPLA: “When the SPLA went there [to Boma], everyday soldiers were collecting boys by force to join the SPLA. For 21 years, up to 2006.”<sup>45</sup> According to one young man from Boma, “if one family had three sons in the family, two would be taken.”<sup>46</sup>

Despite Boma’s centrality for the making of an independent South Sudan, it was abandoned by the political and military SPLM/A elite and eventually in 2013 made a battlefield. From

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<sup>44</sup> Interview Korok Remoris, Juba 09/05/2015.

<sup>45</sup> Interview Korok Remoris, Juba 09/05/2015.

<sup>46</sup> Irer Lotony, Juba 09/12/2015.

the perspective of those who endured the war in their home, Boma was a battlefield from the day the SPLA took it from SAF, as argued by one young man from Boma:

*“Boma has been destroyed and abandoned very long ago by the very people who claim they won’t allow it to be made a battlefield. They forgot Boma when they named Pibor as a county and Boma as a payam. By the way, Boma was a battlefield ever since SPLM/A took it from SAF. In 2005 Murle mainly from Bayen, Kaiwa, Jongolei and Nyat fought with the lowland Murle over naming of the county as Boma county but not Pibor. Two people from Bayen were killed that day and this was witnessed by General Kennedy Gain who was by then the commissioner of the county”.*

Paul Titoch, correspondence, 09/06/2016

While for General Kennedy, the SPLM/A presence in Boma was seen as a source of pride and peace, for those in Boma, like the young man above, it was remembered as a source of insecurity, forced recruitment and instability.

#### 3.4.5 CHANGING LANDSCAPES

As the political landscape changed in Boma throughout the early 1980s, so did the physical and social landscapes. In Upper Boma, many villages disappeared and many people chose to move to Lower Boma, for safety and to access services that had started to be provided by NGOs. Korok Remoris, a Murle politician from Boma, referred to how because of the war a number of villages were abandoned and no longer exist:

*“Before, Majat on the side of the hills behind JAM, had many people living there. Also Kelebeta, on the side of the airstrip in Upper Boma. And ηameri. There was a village called Pibor, and also Letec village. Kiliac was my village. All people ran because of war, some to Ethiopia and some to Pibor.”*

Interview Korok Remoris, Juba 09/05/2015.

Majat used to be among Boma’s largest villages, along with Bayen and Kaiwa, until it was destroyed in 1992. Majat was also the home village of Chief Wazin Liwakol, the Murle chief of Boma during the 1980s who was killed by the SPLA. Interestingly, Chief Wazin was originally a Jie who settled in Majat and married two Murle girls, Delang and ηachamor. His new family members from Murle and his relatives in Jie held good relationships. Irer, who was a young boy when his home village of Majat was destroyed, recalled why chief Wazin was killed:

*"Majat village was destroyed and finished in 1992. The son of chief Wazin was spying on the SPLA for Berget so the SPLA revenged by attacking the village and killing his father, chief Wazin. All the population of Majat fled to Pibor and many joined Berget after that. Some then married their daughters locally, they got cattle and chose to stay in the lowlands. But many returned and made Nyat. I had uncles who moved to Pibor town, but my father chose to go to Akelo [also Kelo, between Pibor and Pochalla]. Eventually we moved to Pochalla because there was aid and food distribution there. In 1993-1994 Nyaboyo village also disappeared as a result of Kachipo and Murle violence, which was not connected to the SPLA."*

Irer Lotony, Juba 09/12/2015

Many of the Highland Murle displaced from Majat eventually returned to Bayen, Nyalongoro and established the village of Nyat. These ties and stronger relationships between people originally from Majat and those of the Lowlands might explain why a great part of the youth of Nyat later joined the Cobra Faction, when it arrived in Nyat. Conversely, hardly anyone from Upper Boma actively joined the Cobra Faction as fighters.

The administrative centre of Boma, Itti town, was established in 1980 by the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS).<sup>47</sup> Korok Remoris, who was part of the initial 1980s FZS team explained that the town of Itti was "created" by the airstrip.<sup>48</sup> During the SPLA years, Itti town flourished as people left the villages in Upper Boma in search of greater security in the town.

It was not only the physical landscape that changed. Wider political economy dynamics interplayed with local issues. Highland Murle and Suri-Kachipo had a fierce war in both 1993-4 and in 1997, which also affected the social landscape of Upper Boma. As referred to above by Irer, Nyaboyo village disappeared after a Murle-Kachipo war, with most of its people moving to Bayen and Jongolei villages. Then in 1997, there was another war between Murle and Suri-Kachipo. One version says that it rose out of the alleged Suri-Kachipo killing of a Murle man from Bayen while on a hunting trip. Another version blamed this war on Jie; the Murle man had been killed by a Jie who ran to Mewun, leaving his footsteps for Murle of Bayen to follow. When the Murle of Bayen reached Mewun they revenged the death of the man by killing women and children. A ferocious war ensued between Murle and Suri-Kachipo.

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<sup>47</sup> Interview Jeremiah Lotiboy, Pibor town 24/04/2014.

<sup>48</sup> Interview Korok Remoris, Juba 09/05/2015

Nevertheless, Murle consider Suri-Kachipo to be rightful co-owners of parts of the Boma Plateau. Conversely, Suri-Kachipo people consider themselves to be the rightful owners of all Boma, having initially welcomed Murle to the Plateau, and eventually retreating further into the mountain, to Mewun. Part of this claim to Boma rests on the fact that one of the main Suri-Kachipo clans in Boma is called Bom, deriving from 'Bongosa'.<sup>49</sup> The current Suri-Kachipo paramount chief, Kamalong Bom is in fact from the Bom clan.<sup>50</sup> There is another version that says that Murle acquired the land from Suri-Kachipo in exchange for a beautiful girl called Bom, and Suri-Kachipo then name the land after Bom. That is how the name Boma came into existence.

According to Murle accounts, Jie are said to have arrived more recently in Boma. By these accounts, all four Jie clans lived in Lopeat and in 1980 moved to Kassengor, as a result of the 'dorkog' disease, where many animals, both cattle and wildlife, died of thirst. One Murle elder explained:

*"Gero and Lazach [close to Maruwo] had water points so the Jie, Toposa and Murle all gathered there up to May when the rains started. All returned home to their areas, except some Jie who remained in Kassengor. From then, old people would stay in Kassengor cultivating and cattle would be moved to Lopeat. They used to bring goats from Lopeat to exchange for tobacco. They used to come, they were hardworking and they also worked with Phil Snyder. Then in 1997 Toposa came to attack Kassengor and all the houses were burnt and everyone ran to Boma. They came close to the SPLA there and settled close to them, in Itti. But they littered around and were sent to Naoyapuru on the side of Orgin further. In those years of war, NGOs were coming and distributing free food, from WFP. So Jie never left."*

Interview Korok Remoris, Juba 09/05/2015

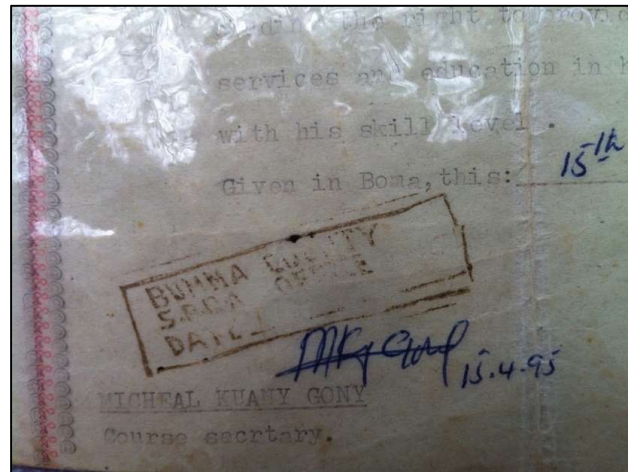
Unexpectedly for many in Boma, the independence of South Sudan in 2011 saw Boma fall into being a margin, no longer with the same status and use to the SPLM/A as before. People in Boma became bitterly aware that they were no longer important for the SPLM/A struggle nationally and regionally in the SPLA-controlled part of Pibor. Since 2005, the multi-ethnic assortment of generals and other senior SPLA figures began leaving; the IDPs left; most of the NGOs left; and the SPLM's capital of the Greater Pibor region, previously in Boma because Pibor was under the control of the SAF, was transferred from Boma to Pibor. This issue has remained a point of contention and resentment for the Murle population of Boma. Anecdotally, one *Thithi* man from Bayen recalled these political and administrative changes and insisted on showing me his Community Health Worker Diploma from 1995, clearly

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<sup>49</sup> Paul Minalim, correspondence 11/03/2016.

<sup>50</sup> Interview John Ndunyi and Minalim Barkutul, Itti 12/08/2014.

stating Bumma county (Boma) (photograph 15). Boma, previously so important, with the CPA and later independence, was relegated to a margin, and its people resented this.



Photograph 14 Detail from a Community Health Worker Diploma, stating 'Bumma County', from 1995.

Boma and its population had become the periphery, not only of the country and of the new SPLM government, but importantly, in relation to their Murle group in the Lowlands, more dominant both in numbers and in strength. Highland Murle were subordinated to the broader dynamics of existence of the Murle.

General Gain lamented the neglect of Boma, but also noted that it was not only Boma that had been forgotten:

*"Boma was the first area to be captured by the SPLA, and SAF never returned to the area. My complain was that since we've become an independent country and a government, the first area to be developed should be Boma. Because the mother of the SPLA is Boma. So they [Boma residents] have a right to complain. [But] since independence, we all ran to Juba. When I go visit the area [now], it was much better before when we [SPLA] were there. There were many people and many organisations based there [before]. There were schools, hospital, the Wildlife headquarters... And the same with Pochalla, it has been forgotten."*

Interview General Kennedy Gain, Juba 5/12/2015

But for many Murle from Boma, the neglect of their home was seen to have been caused by the 'in-laws' in Pibor. As one young man complained:

*"Boma is forgotten by the Government of the South Sudan because all Murle who are generals in the government are from Pibor, they always want Pibor to be better than Boma. That is why they proposed Pibor to be a county in 2005, an area which was controlled by Sudan Defence Forces. They refused to accept [an] additional county which was supposed to be Boma. Boma people blame our fellow Murle from Pibor, [but] not the Government in Juba."*

Paul Titoch, correspondence, 09/06/2016

This social, political and economic neglect affects not only Boma, but all of Murle land. It is not only because the area is physically remote, but more so because the new state of South Sudan has been taken hostage to ethnic politics. In the new state, powerful groups dictate the storyline, “whose histories, claims, and experiences threaten to be overwritten and silenced under such discourse” (Laudati 2011, 16), and in this storyline the Murle have tended to be the silenced underdog. Within Jonglei and beyond, the Dinka have had privileged access to resources by drawing on a victim narrative as well as relying on deep-rooted anti-Murle stereotypes. As a minority within a minority, Highland Murle in Boma have been subordinated to the “stereotypes of a fierce and hostile Murle” (Laudati 2011, 25). The Murle relationship to the state has been mediated by the Murle relationship with their Dinka neighbours. The violence of being Murle in contemporary South Sudan will be discussed further in the next chapter.

### 3.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined some of the historical contradictions and contingencies that have produced the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ contemporary discourses about the Murle, analysing these alongside imaginings of Boma as a symbolic place: the indissoluble home to the Murle people and the first ‘home’ of the SPLM/A. Importantly, this chapter has raised how different angles shape narratives of events. Those from Pibor, from Boma, from SAF, Berget, SPLA, IDPs in Boma, did not see events from the same angle. A crisis then, was determined not by the event, but by the point of view. This chapter has also looked to emphasize that there are important variations that have shaped how the Murle collectively and individually represent and see themselves today. There are many ways of *being* Murle.

By making use of the emic categories of *jɔre* and *ɔɾɔn*, the next two chapters examine the many ways in which Highland Murle people have instrumentalized, perpetrated, experienced, lived, performed and strategically deployed *violences* in Boma. In particular the chapters focus on how Murle people from Boma have understood, interpreted and given meaning to different types of violence and used it as formative of their identity.



## 4. LIVING WITH *JORE*: MURLE EXPERIENCES AND PRACTICES OF EVERYDAY PEACE AND VIOLENCE IN BOMA

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented the historical contingencies and constructions of ‘the fierce Murle’ and of Boma as a place with different meanings for different groups of people. It explored how these have shaped how the Highland Murle collectively and individually present themselves today and relate to the contemporary state of South Sudan. This chapter examines how various forms of violence are part of and shape Murle social existence in Boma. Discursively and physically, the Murle language distinguishes between events classified as *jore*, translated loosely as quarrelling or fighting with sticks or fists, and *ɔɔn*, as fighting with guns and closer to the English term for violence. Chronic insecurity and peacetime violence belong to the domain of peace characterised mostly as *jore*, not the domain of violence and war, known as *ɔɔn*, the Murle term for ‘fighting with weapons’. The distinction between events qualified as *jore* and *ɔɔn* is context-specific and based on intentionality and moral codes. *Ganon*, the Murle word for peace, or peacetime, is characterised by everyday episodes of *jore*, of very different types.

By largely drawing on personal narratives, the chapter shows how Highland Murle people in Boma represent physically violent practices and events of everyday life as *jore*, thus enabling them to maintain a collective narrative of peace in Boma. In turn, I argue, these representations contribute to a collective sense of Highland Murle identity. The chapter examines the violences of ‘peacetime’ (Scheper-Hughes 1997) and how events are understood locally. The emic terms of *jore* and *ɔɔn* will be given meaning throughout chapter 4 and 5.

#### 4.1.1 THE ‘PEACETIME’ VIOLENCE OF THE EVERYDAY

In early February 2013, six Murle schoolboys from Bayen village were attacked on the road from Upper Boma while walking down to Itti to buy soap. Two were killed, as young as seven and twelve years old. Some weeks after the attack, the chief of Bayen, Johnson Lopio, described to me what had happened:

*“Our boys were walking down for shopping to buy some soap, they were schoolboys. They met some unknown men in the bush, we don’t know if it was Yau Yau or what... We don’t know but government is investigating. I called some soldiers down in Itti with my Motorola and we went to the place where they were attacked. Six boys were walking down, three were shot, one was wounded and two were killed. The other three ran away. The four boys who survived say that it was Jie who attacked them. Also me, I have gone down to Itti to speak to the Jie chief, information has been passed to him but so far there is no news. The case is still with the Jie chief, he was told to look for the boys who did this, but up to now there’s nothing... We don’t know why they did this.”*

Johnson Lopio, Bayen 13/03/2013

Chief Lopio’s account of the tragic death of these boys sets the tone for the themes discussed in this chapter: the ‘peacetime’ violence of the everyday “which gives birth to itself”, through “chains, spirals, and mirrors of violence”, thought of as a continuum of violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004b, 1).

The attack and killing of the Murle schoolboys was revenged on Jie months later. In April 2013, four Jie individuals were attacked and killed on the road from Itti to the Jie village of Naoyapuru. Though unproven, the latter was interpreted by many people in Boma as a Murle revenge attack for the murder of the boys earlier in February. I recorded the killing of the four Jie in my fieldnotes:

*I returned to Boma [town] and was told that the day before a group of five Jie was walking from Itti to Naoyapuru and were attacked, with four people killed, including one chief (...). Apparently, one version was that the chief was feeding information into the SPLA, so DYY militia killed him. Another version is just that this is a revenge attack for the Murle boys from Bayen killed in February. Everyone got very scared with the likely Jie revenge attacks now. For the first few nights Murle in Itti were sleeping in the bush and not at home, and Jie were not coming to town, though it seems things are now getting back to normal.<sup>1</sup>*

While the murder of the Murle children and of the Jie adults on the road, including a chief, were locally understood as violent events, both incidents took place in the time of *ganon*, what would qualify as ‘normal’ peacetime in Boma, in Lubkemann’s (2008) words, a social condition. These kinds of incidents were part of what constitutes ordinary life in Boma, a physical manifestation of the structural neglect of the state, lack of state-provided security and impunity. While not everyday occurrences, they did not seem that exceptional to those describing the events, but rather were what people had to live with, endure, anticipate and

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldnotes, Itti 15/04/2013.

find strategies to cope with. After all, according to Highland Murle interlocutors, Boma was peaceful and the two attacks had taken place during peacetime.

Revenge attacks are more or less arbitrary in a temporal sense, yet socially predictable and expected events, often considered locally as a legitimate means of achieving justice. Insecurity and uncertainty are part of the everyday, part of the fabric of other life events and woven relationally to the state. In his explanation above, chief Lopio alluded to the aspirational role of the state in investigating and bringing the perpetrators to justice. He suggested the attack might have been perpetrated by the David Yau Yau rebellion (at the time active across Pibor), but almost certainly, he knew this was not the case. He had also gone to see the Jie chief to seek formal justice. He was aware it was unlikely for anyone to be formally brought to justice for the killing of the children. Instead, as was often the case, local justice would be achieved through a revenge killing. Blood feuds are still one of the most common forms of achieving local justice.

Events (and rumours) such as the ones described above reminded people of the insecurity and uncertainty of everyday life. Perceptions of increased risks of violence led people to take pre-emptive action, even though it was unlikely that revenge attacks would occur immediately after. Consistent with Henrik Vigh's (2011) notion of 'anticipatory violence', the days following events such as the ones described above were days of particular uncertainty, tension and distress, before returning to 'normal'. For some days after the killing of the Murle boys, Jie women did not come into Itti to sell fresh milk, vegetables and wood as was usually the case. Similarly, after the attack on Jie on the road to Naoyapuru, many Murle in Itti did not even sleep in their homes, fearing reprisals.

The chapter examines the ways in which different forms of violence are experienced and enacted by Highland Murle in the everyday as a social condition (Lubkemann 2008), not just actual violence but also its possibility, potential and the resulting uncertainty of life in Boma (Vigh 2011). I explore the discursive and concrete realities of everyday ordinary life in Boma focusing on the period immediately before Boma became a battlefield, from May 2013 (as a result of the SPLA-SSDM/A-CF war, discussed in the next chapter). I examine the disparities between Highland Murle people's representations of everyday life and its contrast to actual events, experiences and practices. I argue that Highland Murle people have constructed a narrative of peace in Boma despite the structural violence that surrounds everyday life as well as regular experiences of direct physical violence that are naturalised and made invisible. As such, the chapter investigates the various layers and *violences* that constitute peacetime and how these link together.

First, I examine Highland Murle people's ideas and narrativisation of peace in Boma. Second, I turn to the structural violence of being Murle, regardless if one is from the plains or from the hills. Third, I turn to the invisible yet also visible and concrete manifestations of the *violences* of the everyday. Various dimensions of violence include: structural government neglect, means of achieving justice in this context, communal violence, indiscriminate violence on the roads, age-set fighting and inter-personal violence. I also discuss how the notion of intentionality is important in local classifications of violence. Throughout, I explore the context and meanings behind some of these events and actions, some of which may not be locally considered as 'violence', but rather as a 'naturalised' part of the insecurity of everyday life. Thus, I attempt to piece together both subjective and objective meanings of violence.

#### 4.2 HIGHLAND MURLE IDEAS AND NARRATIVISATION OF PEACE IN BOMA

In this section, I examine the ways in which Highland Murle people in Boma narrativised Boma as a peaceful place. Even though life was spoken of as peaceful, people often experienced and engaged with episodes of everyday violence: children attacked and killed on the road, chronic insecurity on the roads and inter-personal violence. Perhaps these sorts of events have become invisible and normalised but it demonstrates that there are two types of reality. On the one hand, the material facts of everyday life; on the other the stories that people tell about everyday life.

There are many ways in which people encounter and digest violence in their experiences and practices of everyday life, where violence can move from existing discretely in the background of social life to dominating existence (Tilly 2003). Through fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau and Northern Ireland, Vigh shows how people living in volatile areas come to understand violence "as a quasi-present feature of social life" (2011, 94) and develop anticipatory actions in the light of prospects of violence. Vigh is referring to how violence constitutes and is part of daily life, even when it is invisible and not 'actively' present. In this sense for Murle people in Boma, everyday violence and physical incidents of *jore* are woven in, 'naturalised' and part of the everyday violence of social existence and in the process, rendered invisible (Bourgois 2010). In this sense, although violence does not intrinsically define the lives of people in Boma, it does unconsciously and unintentionally affect actions and decisions. Direct physical violence is part of constituting daily life, even when it is not 'materially' present.

Before the war between the SPLA and the SSDA-CF reached Boma, at a material level and perhaps even more so at a discursive level, violence did not define people's everyday life; in fact, quite the contrary. For example, people in Upper Boma maintained that their villages in the hills were safe and that no major conflict would reach Boma. Even as the rebellion drew closer and closer to Boma, Marta Nyelang, a middle-aged widow living in Jongolei, still thought that the fighting would never reach her home:

*"David Yau Yau is not able to reach here. There are no problems with rebels and no guns to fight them. If there is any fear, it is not of rebels, maybe of others. But those in Upper Boma are safe, and ηatin [referring to me] is safe too."*

Marta Nyelang, Jongolei 09/03/2013

Yet Upper Boma was not safe – not from everyday violence (as demonstrated by the killing of the boys described earlier), not from weapons, not from fear of movement, not from communal violence, and as was proven less than two months later, not from direct political violence, when Boma found itself at the centre of clashes between the SSDA-Cobra Faction and the SPLA. Similar to what had already happened in various Murle towns in the plains, in May 2013 Boma became a battleground. But this will be discussed further in chapter 5.

This chapter explores the dissonance between a chronic insecure reality and its constructions as peaceful, nevertheless. Highland Murle in Boma thought of themselves as peaceful people, associated with Boma as a place, its landscape and its history. Murle residents represented Boma as a place of stability and peace, despite historical contradictions and contemporary experiences of regular insecurity. These tacit understandings and performances may be explained by the ways in which low-level violence had become routinized and established, and, thus, rendered invisible. I draw from Kevin Dunn's (2001) concept of 'narrativisation' to consider the ways in which people come to discursively construct ideas about peace and violence and how these are performed and incarnated, despite material contradictions in everyday life. This Highland Murle narrative of peace was constituted through concrete realities of comparison to the much more drastic levels and scale of violence further north-east of Jongolei between the Lowland Murle and their Lou Nuer neighbours. These in turn, were connected to stereotypes in South Sudan that associate pastoralism with violence. People in Boma appropriated these discourses to show their peacefulness as a predominantly agrarian people.

#### 4.2.1 THE EVERYDAY: LIVELIHOODS AND SOCIAL STEREOTYPES

I argue that Highland Murle constitute, give meaning to and justify their claims to being a peaceful people in a peaceful home, by appropriating broader popular discourses of the 'violent pastoralist' and relying on the remoteness of Boma and its misguided sense of safety.

In the context of insecurity, unpredictability and violence in Boma, I use the notion of 'the everyday' to refer to the organisation of daily life for Murle people in Boma, what determines the exceptional in the unexceptional (Chatterji and Mehta 2007). Building from this, Veena Das (2007, vii) renders the everyday as a site of repetition, enfolded by "practices of governmentality instituted by the state as well as other social actors such as NGOs. The everyday stitches together practices originating from various sites". It is impossible (nor desirable) to speak of an essentialised 'everyday' across Boma. However, there are common features and internalised 'truths' across the Highland Murle areas of Boma that produce shared experiences and understandings of everyday life, which despite weaving themselves with chronic insecurity, feed into an idea and narrative of peace in Boma.

On a material level, the everyday is located in routinized activities with emotional, social, political and economic meaning, which also contribute to a sense of shared sub-cultures. For the Murle people in Boma, daily life is partially experienced through shared livelihoods that affect and regulate existence, status and social, economic and even political exchanges. The kinds of concrete activities that make up everyday life in Boma are obviously different for men, women, girls and boys, depending on age-sets, social status and contingent on whether one is in Itti town or in Upper Boma, among other factors. However, at a basic level, everyday life is composed of people walking to their fields early in the morning, brewing alcohol, drinking together; women and girls fetching water and cooking; people walking up and down Upper Boma to Itti for a visit to the hospital and to the market in Itti; Murle women from Upper Boma selling fruit and other vegetables, and Jie women selling wood, among other things. Men taking tea; soldiers playing cards or domino; a dozen or so foreign traders selling clothes, soda, and other manufactured goods. On Sunday, drums can be heard from afar calling people for church, in the various churches in Itti and in Jongolei in Upper Boma. NGOs go about their activities, which before the war included running the busy hospital and the Accelerated Learning Programme, where students from across Pibor came to do primary school in four years instead of eight. Occasionally an age-set dance (*kurumon*) is scheduled in Itti or in Upper Boma. All these activities require movement. Social life and livelihoods demand mobility: from the village to the fields, from the fields to the town, to the school and to the town in Lower Boma. But insecurity in the Boma Plateau is also often directly connected to movement.

There are powerful political narratives, “myths, misconceptions, simplifications and overgeneralisations about pastoralists that pervade our popular and academic vision of Africa” (Bonté and Galaty 1991, 5; see also Markakis 1993; 2004; Schlee 2012; Scoones, Catley, and Lind 2013). International discourses represent pastoralism as violent, unsustainable, irrational, subversive and contrary to development (Humanitarian Policy Group 2009; Leff 2009; see for example the photographic essay by Muller and Laurent 2015). Cherry Leonardi (2013, 14) has also made the point that historically,

“People without cattle, or with very few cattle, tended to be more willing to enter into the economies of government, money and markets; more people from these areas would be drawn into the armies and employment of the state, particularly during the colonial period”.

She explains that to some extent, cattle kept people away from urban areas and government, “contributing to the preservation of distinct value regimes and hence the constitution of difference between state and society” (Leonardi 2013, 14). The ‘myth’ of violent pastoralists builds from a historical colonial legacy that saw East African pastoral societies as “acephalous” and inherently egalitarian due to decentralized political systems, incomprehensible kinship systems and a reputation of unruliness and impoverishment (Galaty and Bonté 1991; Thomas 2015). According to Thomas (2015, 49), “Colonialists believed that people from these decentralised systems were predisposed to reject the disciplines of the state, the law and the market”. But as asserted by Bonté and Galaty (1991, 22), although “pastoralists move to seek pasture it is a misnomer to equate nomadism and mobility with conflict and expansion”. Bonté and Galaty’s (1991, 22) edited volume demonstrates that “the warlike and predatory image of pastoralists derives from the myth of the nomad,” and simultaneously they illustrate the diversity of political structures “dispel[ling] any myth that associates pastoralism with a certain form of political culture or organisation, whether hierarchical or egalitarian, centralised or decentralised” (Bonté and Galaty 1991, 24).

These assumptions are also based on colonial and political discourses and aspirations that favoured sedentary populations, which historically have been seen to be easier to understand, control and make legible (Scott 1998). In the current political context of South Sudan, this dichotomous narrative tends to portray the Equatoria region as an area of peaceful cultivators and the largely pastoralist Greater Upper Nile and Greater Bahr-el-Ghazal regions as more disorderly and violent (see for example Sudan Tribune 2014; Petero 2015).

The 'submissive cultivator' / 'hostile pastoralist' simplistic dichotomy is neither true (not least because most pastoralists are also cultivators), nor helpful. But it has become part of the popular imaginary of communities across South Sudan, including for Highland Murle themselves. Highland Murle people have appropriated the popular discourse of violent pastoralism to make sense of their own ethnic identity and lay claims to the state. For instance, many Murle people from the Highlands made references to no longer possessing cattle due its association with violence, and thus living proof of their 'peacefulness'. Irer Lotony, a Murle youth leader from Nyat who later joined the Cobra Faction explained that:

*"The reason we refuse to have cattle is only one – if you're keeping cattle here, you're engaging and calling enemies to come for you. If you want to die, just tie yourself to cattle and see what happens".*

Interview Irer Lotony, Itti, 05/03/2013

As implied by his statement, especially from the perspective of non-pastoralists, there is still a perception that pastoralists continue to form mutually hostile groups, permanently in conflict over natural resources and engaging in mutual raiding. In other words, there is an assumption that cattle attract violence and that not having cattle translates as a less violent society.

As mentioned in chapter 3, the existence of tse-tse flies in Boma in the past made it impossible to keep cattle in the area, thus the Murle people of Boma adapted their livelihoods to a mix of cultivation and hunting. Despite a heritage of pastoralism, Highland Murle are socialised through cultivation, which is closely associated for them with who they are as "peace-loving individuals", as "peace-loving Murle" and as "peace-loving South Sudanese".

Contemporary Murle livelihoods in Boma are predominantly based on small-scale agriculture, which as discussed in chapter 3, has also shaped social institutions and exchanges. For example, with respect to the gendered division of labour: in the plains men generally tend to cattle while women are responsible for cultivating, while in the Highlands, both men and women cultivate. Also, whereas the construction of homes in the plains are under the responsibility of women, among the agrarian Murle they are the responsibility of men. The agrarian lifestyle and the absence of cattle, also associated with 'sedentarism', are factors in Boma's contemporary construction as a peaceful place and Highland Murle as a peaceful people. This 'sedentarism' is also part of the Murle narrative of peace and of a historical relationship to government as legible subjects.





Photograph 15 Marta Nyelang posing for a photograph and pretending to farm by her house

Nevertheless cattle remain a very important moral, social and economic feature in people's lives and in determining wealth status. Constructions of the Murle ideal social life and status are still largely imagined around cattle. The ultimate poverty (*mathiz*) in Murle society is defined through a lack of family, as an orphan (*boyokzeth*) or as an unmarried man. In the Lowlands, family and support networks are established and sealed through exchanges made with cattle; bridewealth is always made of cattle. One man in Pibor town described wealth it in the following terms:

*"For a man to be considered rich in the village it must show that you are very fat. (...) If you have 400, 600, 700 cows you are very rich. If someone has lots of cows you'll marry lots, you're rich. (...) We're surviving through cattle, if you have none, then you have to cultivate. But they'll call a man ḡalamit only for a short time, if he's got a daughter he will get cows. If you have 10 or 20 cows you are a ḡalamit. Because that is not enough to marry yet. If you have enough to marry and remain with 10, you are no longer a ḡalamit. If someone is engaging a lady and she accepts, he talks to the father and he says he needs 60 cows but you don't have enough then you're ḡalamit. It is like an abuse, look at this person..."*

Interview cattle market, Pibor, 27/04/2015

But bridewealth exchanges in Boma are different. Bridewealth in Boma is composed of farming tools, agricultural outputs like sorghum and tobacco, goats and chickens, perhaps some money and possibly some local brew. Bridewealth for a girl from the Lowlands is currently on average at around 40-60 cattle, often more. Conversely, if a Murle man from the Lowlands wants to marry a Murle girl from Boma, the bridewealth is paid in cattle, usually made of six to eight heads of cattle. The significant difference in bridewealth cattle provokes some resentment among young men in the Highlands and encourages feelings of

being second-class Murle. But by marrying their daughters to Lowland Murle families, Highland Murle families can accumulate cattle that will support relocating to the Lowlands. Because the bridewealth is so much lower in Boma, many Lowland Murle men marry from Boma. Thus, Highland Murle commonly refer to Lowlands Murle as ‘in-laws’.

While in the Lowlands, men often marry more than one wife, in the Highlands, it is less common to find men with several wives. Generally, someone that only married one wife and has few children that will subsequently bring him cattle, is considered a poor man. There are other ways in which cattle is part of life in Boma. For example, fines agreed in village courts in Boma chaired by the government chiefs are given in number of cows, and then converted into money or other goods. It is also very common for many Murle of Boma to own cattle in Labarab, where they are kept in herds belonging to family members.<sup>2</sup>

Everyday life and conceptions of self are constructed through relationships (or lack of them): with neighbours –the significant ‘Other’– and with the state (see comparative examples Kurimoto 2009; Feyissa 2009). McCallum (2013, 267) concluded her doctoral dissertation about Murle identity in post-colonial South Sudan by stating that “the Murle identity has been constructed through its interaction with its neighbouring ‘Other’”, in particular the Dinka Bor community, as well as through experiences of the civil war. While this is accurate, it is important to take a closer look at specific social landscapes and ecologies. The “neighbouring ‘other’” for the Highland Murle in Boma are the Suri-Kachipo and the Jie ethnic communities, and in some political respects even the Lowland Murle in the small government headquarters of Pibor.

The effect of state power, both its presence and its absence, its activities and inactivity, and its imaginings also constitute and shape the everyday in Boma (see Leonardi 2013 for a similar argument). Until the David Yau Yau rebellion reached Boma, the area was out of the spotlight and presented as a distant and quiet place with its Murle, Kachipo and Jie inhabitants coexisting *relatively peacefully* through the territory. This was the case if Boma was compared to high-profile areas further north in Jonglei where episodes of communal violence and raiding among Dinka, Nuer and Murle were more regular and intense taking on tragic proportions particularly since 2009 with thousands of people killed, women and children abducted, villages and infrastructure destroyed and cattle raided (Small Arms Survey 2012; ICG 2009). Effectively, compared with further north in Pibor, life in Boma did

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<sup>2</sup> Labarab is currently administratively contested; some say it is located in Boma county and others claim it is in Vertet county north-west of Boma.

appear peaceful. Highland Murle were aware of both the depictions and realities of communal violence further northeast in Jonglei, and certainly in comparison with Boma's neighbouring 'other', Boma was a rather discrete and peaceful place.

### 4.3 THE STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE OF BEING MURLE

This section examines the violence and structural challenges of being Murle in South Sudan, combining both politically motivated hostility and structural state neglect. First, (and building from the historical insights of chapter 3), I argue that the pejorative representations of the Murle ethnic group in South Sudan are politically driven and the basis of the structural neglect of the Murle people. Second, building from personal narratives, I discuss the consequences of structural violence on Murle people's lives. Bourgois' (2001) definition of structural violence as chronic and historical-economic oppression and social inequality is fitting to the Murle's social, economic and political existence in South Sudan. Structural violence is subtle, invisible, and often not attributable to one specific person; rather it is situated in broader social structures.

#### 4.3.1 *THE STATE AND ITS "SEMI-CITIZENS"*

The politicisation of ethnicity and tenuous distinction between state power and ethnic domination has been pervasive in the context of South Sudan, and Jonglei state in particular. Because of how the state has been forged in South Sudan, populations in the hinterlands such as the Murle have become "semi-citizens" (Johnson 1986, 221 in Turton 2005, 270). Other groups have also been excluded in different ways, as part of wider patterns that employ the particular idiom of remote hinterlands and violence. But arguably, the Murle people qualify as the most ostracised group in the country. As previously discussed in chapter 1, in South Sudan (as well as beyond, especially Ethiopia) the Murle are often represented as "backward", "hostile", and "aggressive" (Mackenzie and Buchanan-Smith 2004; Laudati 2011) in relation to other groups and the state. As Laudati (2011, 21) points out,

"despite the reality of a politically and economically marginalized Murle, they are often cast as the aggressors and perpetrators of the continuing insecurity of Jonglei—a narrative that has been upheld by media agencies, prominent figures in government, NGO staff, and local citizens".

In the political economy of Jonglei, the Murle ethnic group are particularly fitting to be an ostracised group due to the perceptions of their historical alliance with Khartoum, their cultural and ecological isolation, the “hinterland economy [is] configured around the looting system” (Thomas 2015, 13), and not least, their more powerful and louder neighbours, especially the Dinka Bor who are able to control the narrative (Laudati 2011).

Relations between the Government of South Sudan and the Murle group have been tense, particularly with the government of Jonglei sitting in Bor town. The establishment of South Sudan consolidated the power of Jonglei’s dominant ethnic group, the Dinka Bor. This was predictable given the leading role that Dinka Bor played in the liberation struggle. As a result, Dinka Bor hold, or are perceived to hold, many of the positions of power in Juba and in Bor. Although this should not in itself constitute a problem, across South Sudan communities perceive public offices to be subject to ethnically based patronage networks, derived from a perception that state institutions distribute resources and justice according to ethnic bias. The result is a deeply divided state where different ethnic groups have strong grievances against the government. In addition to political isolation, the Murle are also geographically isolated, a position exacerbated by the extreme underdevelopment of their county, now an administrative area equivalent to a state.

The Highland Murle community of Boma do not exist in isolation, and when people in Boma refer to feelings of remoteness and marginalisation it is in relation to a broader group, region and country. Highland Murle self-identify as Murle, and simultaneously as ṇalam, and are identified by non-Murle as Murle. They are neighbours to Suri-Kachipo and Jie and have exchanged with these groups, inter-marrying with the former and trading with both. They also exist in a context of the state and government they are part of. And within these categories, until the conflict between the SPLA and the SSDA-CF, they are Murle. Ethnicity has become a powerful tool with which to relate to neighbours and to the state in South Sudan and as a means to verbalise political aspirations.

Highland Murle social life needs to be situated within a broader political economy of the Murle and of ethnic politics in South Sudan. Highland Murle exist in relation to and as an integral part of their broader Murle group and in turn, as South Sudanese seeking to craft a place in the new nation. As will be illustrated further in the section, there are concrete accounts of everyday violence of the ways Highland Murle experience the violence of marginality, discrimination, neglect and poverty and how macro-level political and structural violence intersects with more concrete physical everyday manifestations of violence.

This feeling of social, political and economic neglect by both national government and by the Murle county authorities in Pibor was articulated by Irer Lotony in the following terms:

*"In 2004 I was in Kakuma as a refugee. Back then people were colliding for politics, Upper and Lower Boma [referring to Boma and Pibor] were fighting. Historically Boma is very important because it was the first place to be captured [by the SPLA] and it is the backbone of all of South Sudan. During that time, this place was a county. But our people are a minority, there are not even people in the government so it [county HQ] got diverted to Pibor because they're more. In terms of administration system, they're undermining us, we don't share leadership equally, we have fewer chances, so when big people come [to Boma], we raise our complaints. We tell them 'this place was your mother. You all lived here during the war', like to Kuol Manyang.<sup>3</sup> But services don't reach us, they stay all in Pibor. So the Vice-President said that starting from that day, this place becomes a county. But so far, nothing has happened. It's on the table of the president but he says there's no budget. Let's wait for the opening of the pipelines.<sup>4</sup> There will be no hatred when we become a county, we'll get services. Only problem for Pibor, and there's lots of crime because of that. One commissioner cannot handle all the territory. Criminals cannot be caught because the place is so big."*

Interview Irer Lotony, Itti 05/03/2013

With little to show for government provided services in the area, the only truly visible presence of the central state in Boma had been the SPLA's Division 8, stationed in Itti with a large barrack located next to the government office in centre of the town. Relations between Murle civilians and the ethnically mixed Division 8 had been positive. Division 8 had been in the area since 2006 and many of its soldiers were from Boma while many of the non-Murle soldiers had married locally. There was also a state-run primary school in Itti, although it functioned irregularly. All other services were provided and run entirely by NGOs. The Merlin Hospital built in 2004 in Itti had been construed as a post-CPA "peace dividend" and functioned as the only hospital with surgical capacity in all of Pibor. Merlin also ran primary healthcare services across Boma with community health workers, but these 'clinics' were not more than a *tukul* (thatched roof mud hut) with limited drug supplies that would be visited a couple of times a year. Similarly, education was also overwhelmingly run by ACROSS, a faith-based organisation based in Boma since the 1970s that ran an Accelerated Learning Programme in Itti and paid for primary school teachers in villages across Boma.

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<sup>3</sup> Kuol Manyang Juuk was the former governor of Jonglei State and current Minister of Defence. Along with former vice-president Riek Machar, they visited Boma in March 2012.

<sup>4</sup> In 2012 South Sudan closed its oil pipelines due to tensions with Sudan and subsequently imposed severe austerity measures.

The workings of structural violence, in the form of distrust and humiliation experienced in Boma are well illustrated by an episode of SPLA and government authorities' suspicion of Highland Murle. In mid-March 2013, the chiefs who had previously been given Motorola radios as the only means to communicate with Itti, had their communication equipment confiscated.<sup>5</sup> The chiefs mobilised to go to Itti and speak to authorities about this. I saw the chief returning from Itti in full official attire, including the red satchel identifying chiefs and I asked him what had happened. He was upset and told me that soldiers had gone to Bayen to take away his Motorola, which he used to communicate with Itti in case problems arose. He said to me, "but we're *ɲalam*, not Murle, and we don't support David Yau Yau!"<sup>6</sup> By this, the chief was playing on the highly contextual and flexible ethnic Murle-*ɲalam* identities and alluding to his people's allegiance to the government.

#### 4.3.2 THE MANIFESTATIONS OF STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Simultaneously despite and because of their notoriously fierce reputation, the Murle people are the victims of verbal and physical aggression and attacks against them. Pastor Joseph Rumolin, originally from Kaiwa, had lived in Malakal for many years. With some humour, he recounted: "once I was having a chat with two men and one didn't know I was Murle. When the other one mentioned it, the first one jumped in fear, saying all Murle were dangerous."<sup>7</sup> There would be a nearly comical element to this characterisation of Murle as monstrosities and evil, if such stereotypes that dehumanise Murle did not lead to real violence against Murle civilians.

Specific to Jonglei, the Murle did not feel welcome in Bor town, the capital of Jonglei state. For example, in 2007 four Murle patients were killed in the Médecins Sans Frontières hospital in Bor, with three others killed in the same day in the town, with none of the incidents investigated (Small Arms Survey 2012). Although in practice, Murle from across Murleland experience similar levels of discrimination and persecution in Bor, some in Boma naively thought that if they emphasized their 'ɲalam' identity, they would not be harassed. Reality, however, was rather different.

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<sup>5</sup> Chiefs in Upper Boma were able to communicate with Itti through Motorola radios were distributed by Sea Partners, a small Christian organisation.

<sup>6</sup> Fieldnotes, Jonglei 13/03/2013.

<sup>7</sup> Fieldnotes Joseph Rumolin, Itti, 16/11/2013.

A Highland Murle police officer that had been working in Bor explained how he constantly felt threatened because of his Murle ethnic identity: “I constantly received abuse and even threats. You cannot be found speaking Murle in the market, you’ll even be threatened for your life.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, another civil administrator from Boma previously based in Bor complained: “my colleagues abused me and treated me badly”, not mentioning the challenges of career progression as an ethnic Murle public servant.<sup>9</sup> But this treatment was not reserved for the ‘average’ person only. Even a senior Highland Murle politician working as an advisor for Wildlife to the former Governor Kuol Manyang, had his house in Bor stoned.<sup>10</sup>

I met James Vorgol in July 2013 in Kapoeta where he was attending secondary school. A bright young man in his early 20s from Kaiwa village in Upper Boma, Vorgol was in Kapoeta when the “corruption” reached Boma, the term many Murle euphemistically used to refer to the SPLA attacks against Murle civilians.<sup>11</sup> Vorgol drew compelling connections between his own life and broader structural violence against ‘his’ people:

*One of my brothers was a soldier in Kaiwa and was quarrelling with his wife and shot himself. He was the one paying my school fees, but then no more. My father and mother died too. [My brother] Beko is a drunk. My younger brother James Larka was a soldier but when the corruption began he escaped from Boma as a civilian to Raad. My mother had TB [tuberculosis] and died very sick. I took her to the hospital and spent 6 months with her. My father also had TB. I found out my mother had died but the road was blocked so I couldn’t return to Boma until 2 months later. (...)*

*There is discrimination of Murle, there are no schools, no roads, no hospitals... are we really [South] Sudanese or not really? His [DYY] aim was to fight with soldiers not civilian people. He went to Labarab and was there. DYY wanted a separate state, to have things for Murle. There is Dinka domination, that’s what made Yau Yau start a revolution, and he was right. We are having only one county but we are many people. Our blame is only going to Dinka, not others. (...) Our people are fighting in the frontline [SPLA in Sudan border] but they are being killed in Boma, innocent people. People there are cultivating, but now there’s no food, now people are suffering like dogs. Sometimes I even think, why was I even created.”*

Interview James Vorgol, Kapoeta 19/07/2013

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<sup>8</sup> Simon Longony, Itti 15/11/2013.

<sup>9</sup> Moses Oleo, Itti 16/11/2013.

<sup>10</sup> Fieldnotes, Itti 27/11/2013.

<sup>11</sup> Murle students were allowed to attend school in Kapoeta without paying fees during the crisis across Greater Pibor.

In his perceptive account, and borrowing a term from Philippe Bourgois (2001, 17), Vorgol described the “silent brutality” that surrounded his life, both at a personal level, and collectively as part of the Murle community. His account reveals how various violences weave and intersect with each other. Vorgol traced his individual fate – the poverty and lack of opportunity, his brothers’ alcohol abuse, the domestic violence between his brother and sister-in-law and the subsequent suicide of his brother, the loss of both his parents to tuberculosis, and the inability to move. He recounted these episodes in his life as part of what had led him to where he was now, not as examples of violence.

Yet, Vorgol was quick to connect these personal struggles with wider elements of political, structural and symbolic violence targeting his Murle ethnic group. He connected the South Sudanese government neglect and the absence of hospitals, schools and roads across Murle land to the Murle insurgency. Evocatively, he asks “*are we really [South] Sudanese or not really?*” The negative stereotypes surrounding Murle also led to greater social exclusion and humiliation. One woman displaced in Kapoeta complained: “Murle are not wanted, not even our language people want to hear”.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4.4 JORE IN PEACETIME: ‘THIS IS LIFE IN SOUTH SUDAN’

Above, I examined the origins of the broader structural dimensions of violence against the Murle people and some of its concrete manifestations. In this section, I will present examples of the way that various forms of peacetime violence are manifested, classified and understood as part of everyday life by Murle people. I refer to these as peacetime violence because they do not qualify as part of a conflict or a war, but are the regular experiences of insecurity situated as constituting normal dynamics of social life and of relations, even though there is a thin line dividing these. I also examine the important notion of intentionality and context, in local classifications of physical violence.

Philippe Bourgois (2004, 426) defines everyday violence as “Daily practices and expressions of violence on a micro-interactional level: interpersonal, domestic and delinquent”. Inspired by Scheper-Hughes (1992) the concept focuses on the “individual lived experience that normalizes petty brutalities and terror at the community level and

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<sup>12</sup> Fieldnotes, Kapoeta 17/07/2013.



creates a common sense or ethos of violence” (Bourgois 2004, 426). In the Murle language, these kinds of episodes would be considered as *jɔre*.

Murle people recognise events as violence when these are not socially and morally justified. This applies to some but not all forms of what would be considered by external observers to constitute gender-based violence. Thus, while not the emphasis of this thesis, it is important to recognise that everyday violence is highly gendered, both in its understandings and experiences.

A woman that is perceived to fail to fulfil her roles and responsibilities as a wife or mother (such as ensuring the home is in order, that there is water and meals are prepared on time) may be physically beaten by her husband. While external observers would surely constitute such a case as gender-based violence, both wife and husband would likely consider these actions to be justified behaviour, as they were caused by a woman’s perceived failure to fulfil her social duties. But there is a fine balance between what is considered morally acceptable and that which is deemed excessive and unjustifiable, therefore violent behaviour within Murle parameters. Women have social strategies to address what they consider to be abusive behaviour. For example, when Gola’s husband’s drunken behaviour and abuse became intolerable, including his beatings, she reached out to her brother-in-law, Johnson Korok. The husband’s physical abuse was socially unacceptable and considered unjustified and morally condemned by the wider community. Gola, from Upper Boma, left her home with her children and was temporarily taken in by her husband’s brother Korok. Abusive behaviour by a husband is socially censored and deemed unacceptable, and Gola remained with her brother-in-law until her husband ‘cooled down’. What this reveals is that violence, including gender-based violence, is only understood as such if it is not explicable in Murle terms. But gender is only one element of personal identity that comes into play in the context of violence, and other identity features, such as social standing, age, class, wealth and connections are also influential.

#### 4.4.1 *JɔRE, ɔɔɔN AND INTENTIONALITY*

The greatest insights about understandings of violence can be achieved through the examination of Murle emic terms, which have also shifted to adapt to new threats. In particular, I draw on the notions of *jɔre* and *ɔɔɔn* and how intentionality is often connected to understandings and definitions of violence.

The term *jore* broadly translates as ‘quarrelling’, and can be used in a wide-range of situations. Jameson Kumen, a young man from Boma whose story is told below, defined *jore* as “normal fight by hands or sticks without sharp tools,” begging the question of what a ‘normal fight’ is.<sup>13</sup> Lewis also defined *jorice*n as stick-fighting.<sup>14</sup> In turn, Jameson defined *ɔɔn* as “fighting either by gun or sharp tools,” suggesting a difference in scale and seriousness, and to some extent intentionality to harm lethally. The Murle words *ɔɔn* and sometimes ‘*ɔɔɔɔ*’ have also come to refer to war, or otherwise fighting with deadly weapons. It can refer to a war between Murle age-sets, violent conflict against a neighbouring group, as well as against the state.

It is helpful to consider the genesis of these Murle terms. ‘*ɔɔ*’ is the base verb for ‘to spear’. With the widespread presence of small arms in South Sudan, ‘*ɔɔ*’ has become extended to mean ‘to shoot’. *ɔɔn* thus mean ‘war’ because the final ‘-*n*’ is a suffix that makes the verb into a noun (gerund). In turn, ‘*ɔɔɔ*’ means ‘argue’ with the second ‘*ɔ*’ meaning reciprocal, thus ‘argue with each other.’ ‘*Yɔɔn*’ is a noun meaning ‘argument’, also referring to conflict more broadly.<sup>15</sup>

B.A. Lewis’s 1940s notes on Murle customary law with regard to homicide also emphasize intentionality and shed light on the distinction between *jore* and *ɔɔn*.<sup>16</sup> Lewis makes a distinction between murder as ‘*ɔɔɔ*’ and “homicide not amounting to murder” as ‘*afɔr-tonnik*’. He refers to a number of court cases where the distinction was less about the kind of weapons used (presumably because small arms were not as commonly found in the 1940s), and more about the intention of the act. Lewis refers that “killing with a spear; magic; or throttling are regarded as *ɔɔɔ*.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, it also seems clear that the terms have evolved to reflect current forms of violence that have become more prominent such as “fighting with guns” and a conflict with the state.

Village quarrels, qualified usually as *jore* happen regularly, and are usually deemed rather innocuous, and even with some amusement: the action itself and the explanations and gossip that come with it afterwards. It is nearly as if these kinds of interactions are performances. The main feature of a ‘performance’ is having an audience. The audience understands the message of the performance, the story that is being told, drawing the village

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<sup>13</sup>Jameson Kumen, correspondence 04/03/2015.

<sup>14</sup> PRM, B.A. Lewis Papers, Box 1, Item 12 (1/1/12): “Murlei Customary Law (with regard to homicide)”, pages 1-4.

<sup>15</sup> Jon Arensen, correspondence, 16/08/2016.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.* PRM, B.A. Lewis Papers, “Murlei Customary Law (with regard to homicide)”, page 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

spotlight to that event. Oftentimes, village quarrels involve family members and alcohol. Below is the description of one such episode as it unfolded in front of me in Jongolei village in March 2013:

*Apparently, one nephew (John Wazin from Thithi age-set) had beaten up his uncle (Muden age-set), who was running around the village searching for the boys' sisters, saying he would kill the girls. He had stolen two spears and they ran all around. He ran, the girls ran. One of the girls hid in the bush while the other ran saying she was taking refuge at the [SPLA] barracks. It then came to be that the fighting calmed down only to proceed in front of where I was sitting (by the old Arab clinic). In the meantime, the spear he was carrying around was taken from him and he found a long cane stick in alternative. Wazin's mother came, they started quarrelling and he began hitting her with the cane. It felt like it escalated. (...) The angry uncle then started saying he was going to burn the tukuls down, if he couldn't find Wazin. At this point a few people tried to intervene, mostly without success, apart from the sub-chief with some success. The man agreed to go home, but didn't, he just walked to the nephew's tukul. Right now, Wazin walked back and is sitting down telling the uncle to sit down, while the latter shouts at him 'no, I want to fight you'. In the process of discussion, the angry brother shouted at the sister 'you weren't able to have children, I got the witchdoctors to fix you, you only have children because of me, and you let them beat me', along with other insults. She shouted back 'I fed you until you got married last year'.<sup>18</sup>*

I was with Oboch when the scene above unravelled in front of us, as if a stage. Oboch explained to me that what was happening was not considered violence; these were quarrels, *jore*:

*"If the uncle wasn't drunk, it would be intentional, then maybe it would be violence. Like the chief said, 'we asked him in the morning and he couldn't even remember or say anything, so ah, we just leave it'. If he'd [the uncle of the story above] burnt a tukul then maybe it would become violence."*

Stephen Oboch, Jongolei 01/03/2013.

Oboch was referring to both intentionality of a deliberate act deemed to cause pain, and consequence and context. Actions of a drunken person are not taken as seriously. A lot of alcohol is brewed and drunk in Upper Boma, usually also part of the kind of village quarrels described above. The most popular is *nyan ci vɔɔr*, a local brew native to Boma made with sorghum or maize (sometimes also mixing both), which literally means 'white stuff'. It is often used in social gatherings and events, ranging from the communal building of a home to *nudineɛt*, preparation of the land before planting and *evien*, the Murle word for

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<sup>18</sup> Fieldnotes Jongolei 01/03/2013.

‘digging’ or cultivating together. *Nyan ci vɔɔr* has therefore a strong social dimension to it. It is said that it makes people mellow and sleepy. *Siko*, on the other hand, was introduced by the SPLA soldiers who moved to Boma in the 1980s and 90s. It is significantly more potent and often said to be behind aggressive behaviour.

But perhaps most important, both *Siko* and *nyan ci vɔɔr* keep “your hunger away.”<sup>19</sup> One day, I found the wives of one sub-chief in Upper Boma, *ɲatin* and Mary, inebriated by their home. The following day, Mary, somewhat embarrassed justified herself: “I was very hungry and drinking helps take the hunger away.”<sup>20</sup> Mary’s explanation implied the intimate connections between structural violence and everyday violence.

But this is only one dimension of alcohol. One young man who kept away from alcohol explained the social importance of collective drinking in Boma. Taking alcohol, particularly *nyan ci vɔɔr* is not generally condemned, but instead seen as a collective activity:

*“Drinking is not a problem in Boma. In fact when your friends drink and you don’t join them, they will give you some names associated to church. To them, churchgoers are fake. So almost everyone in Boma drinks, mostly nyan ci vɔɔr. But siko has made many people commit too many crimes, some people commit suicide over something a sober man would have just ignored. Those taking nyan ci vɔɔr will go for siko to make them forget some of the things that disturb their minds. Before women were only taking nyan ci vɔɔr and not in an open environment, but nowadays things have changed. A father, mother and the son can be found sharing a bottle of siko under a tree.”*

Paul Titoch, correspondence 16/05/2016

Physical violence in Boma is not limited to alcohol abuse, although it is certainly a very common trigger.

Jameson’s story demonstrates how the threshold between *jɔre* and *ɔɔn* as emic classifications is very thin and one can easily transform into each other. His story below demonstrates how “violence is in the eye of the beholder” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004b, 2). In Jameson’s eyes, his actions and the death, loss and suffering he caused had been unintentional. However, for the family of the man he killed, he had committed a murder and should be punished for the death and pain caused. Already in the 1940s, B.A. Lewis reported that blood feuds were the most popular form of justice, restricted by the fact that only the murdered man’s father or brother would consider it his duty to kill the

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<sup>19</sup> Various conversations, Upper Boma.

<sup>20</sup> Rachu, Jongolei 19/03/2013.

murderer.<sup>21</sup> According to Murle customary law, revenge should be taken and Jameson should pay with his own life. The account illustrates perfectly the paradox pointed out by David Riches (1986b, 3), that 'violence' is the word of the victim or witness, rather than of the performer. The account below offers context to the 'performance' of violence and its contested meanings.

#### The story of Jameson

Jameson Kumen, a *Bothonya* originally from Bayen village was 25 years when he inadvertently killed a man. He had 'booked' a girl from Upper Boma and was saving up at his NGO job to pay the bridewealth to his future parents-in-law. Even though it was well known that his future wife was 'booked,' one young man insistently tried to engage her into a relationship. Jameson spoke to him twice and asked him to stop engaging with his future wife and by the third time they quarrelled:

*"For the third time he repeated the same thing [that he was sorry] and I thought and told my friend that we should meet the guy in his home. It was on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2012 evening, my friend and I left to meet the guy in his home. My friend was holding a thin stick in his hand while I was with nothing. Before we reached the guy's home, we found him and his friend along the road. His friend was holding a stick in his hand of about 1.7 to 2 metres while he was with nothing. I told him I had something to discuss with him in his home. And he told me that well, let's go. Immediately, we went, reaching home (four of us) we stood in front of his house while he was entering the house leaving us outside. For me, I thought that he went in to bring us some seats, [but] in a while he [got] out of the house with a stick of about 1.5 metres in his hand and he beat me on the left side of the head and I fainted and fell down. After I recovered from the faint, I woke up and found myself surrounded by people and I stood up and looked around and grabbed a stick from his friend and started also beating him on the right side [of the body] below the ribs once. Thereafter he lost conscious and stood for a while before entering his house and started vomiting. While he was vomiting inside I was asked by the neighbours who heard the fight and came, and I explained to them the whole issue. They told me to go home and that we shall discuss the issue in the morning.*

*The following morning was Friday 12<sup>th</sup> of October [2012], I went to work to my normal job at JAM [NGO] as usual around 9am and I received news from one of our guards who was leaving off night duty. He told me that there is a problem going on in the town that the person you have fought with has passed away (dead) and now Police are searching for you especially the family of the dead are seriously searching for you to revenge. After the guard told me this I immediately reported to my manager that I wanted to go to the police because I did not intend to murder*

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<sup>21</sup> PRM, B.A. Lewis Papers, Box 1, Item 12 (1/1/12): "Murlei Notes", 'Note on the Murle Tribes (Plains Section)', page 13.

*that person, for I was revenging my pain that he beat me. My manager told me that he must go and inform the police first so that they can come and escort me to their station. When we reached the station, immediately I was chained both hands and legs and taken for investigation. And they told me they are aware of my problem and that I should wait for the judge from Juba. I was detained in a container cell with eight other prisoners. And when the local authority called the family of the deceased and told him the case was an accident, it was not with intention, we should solve it, the family of the late refused. They tried several times to solve the issue but the family of the late refused until the deceased's elder brother entered into the container with a knife and tried to kill me but I was rescued by police (...)."<sup>22</sup>*

One of Jameson's close friends from Boma and also from Bothonya age-set shared his own thoughts on the events. Paul Titoch reported that after the quarrel with the deceased, Jameson was arrested and brought to the station where he was locked in the container. Some of the closer friends that had witnessed the fighting were called in to record their statements with the police. But for the family of the deceased, there was only one way to achieve justice, and that was through a revenge killing. Paul explained:

*"As it is the normal case in Murle culture, the only justice to be served was to kill Jameson, no matter what the problem was, he has killed a person and he should be killed too. That is why the deceased's family refused the case to be settled in the court, because they believed they would never see their son again and they would only be happy if they too killed Jameson. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of May [2013] some people [from Itti] found some Cobra Faction rebels on the Itti-Nyat road; on hearing this, all prisoners were released and asked to go anywhere they thought was safe for them since Itti was unsafe for everyone."*

Paul Titoch, correspondence 16/05/2016

Jameson's story does not end here, and the dissertation shall return to it later in the next chapter, when Jameson finds himself in Ethiopia as a refugee. However, it demonstrates how tenuous the line between a "quarrel", *jɔre*, and "violence", *ɔɔn*, is, how often violence can be accidental, and how an isolated episode of youth violence can escalate into revenge attacks and several killings. There are also broader contextual moral factors that explain a case. For example, Paul argued that the troubles Jameson had found himself in were partly his own doing for not respecting traditions: "Jameson was also very wrong in his decision of taking

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<sup>22</sup> Jameson first told me his story in Boma, when he was being held in prison in Itti in early 2013 and I would pass by the prison to greet him. However, the specific account above is an extract from the letter he wrote and submitted to UNHCR-Ethiopia on the 19/09/2013 explaining his case and requesting individual refugee status for himself and his new wife, which he was eventually granted.

a second wife, because he was only some months old with his first wife and to me, he would have waited for some years before going for a second wife”.<sup>23</sup> Paul was alluding to competition between young men to marry, and how some young men were already finding second and third wives while others would remain single, and the tensions and competition this provoked.

Thus, understandings of violence are tied with questions of intentionality, moral justifications and with the angle of the victim and the performer or perpetrator. For Paul Titoch, “many people believed Jameson was guilty but they were wrong, it was an accident. But some believed that a killer is always guilty.”<sup>24</sup> Jameson was put in the container-jail in Itti awaiting formal trial from a judge that occasionally went to Boma. Because it involved a killing, his case was considered too serious to be dealt with by the chiefs’ court. By the time he was released as the DYY rebellion captured Boma, eight months had passed with Jameson awaiting trial. Who knows how much longer he would have remained arrested without trial, had Boma not been captured.

As explained below, fighting between youth is not uncommon, often associated with competition for women and marriage. But intra- and inter-generational fighting are very common sources of *jpre*, “quarrelling”, that increasingly turn into violence, and *ɔɾɔn*, war. In Jameson’s case, he was fighting with another young man from his own age-set, *Bothonya*. But age-set fighting is part of transitioning into being a respected member of the community. Rolandsen and Breidlid (2013, 7) observe,

“Younger age-sets are supposed to demonstrate their eligibility for responsible adulthood through a ritual or social performance in which violence plays an important role. Since entitlement to privileges associated with “youth” or manhood can be obtained only through membership in the dominant age-set, younger age-sets are expected and even encouraged by the community to rebel against the ruling age-set”.

Competition between Murle age-sets is a rite of passage supervised and regulated by the older generations. Traditionally, age-set competition fighting was practiced through stick-fighting, but since the CPA there are more and more cases of members of rival age-sets using guns and challenging each other with small arms. Rolandsen and Breidlid (2013) note the case of *Lango and Bothonya* in Gumuruk in 2011, but there have since been more skirmishes between these two groups as well as among *Lango* and the emerging *Thagot*, in 2015.

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Titoch, correspondence 16/05/2016.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Titoch, correspondence 16/05/2016.

These age-set struggles cannot be explained by the 'youth crisis' discourse, which suggests that there is a profound generational conflict tearing social fabric. As noted by Rolandsen and Breidlid (2013, 7), "The younger age-sets cannot afford to dismiss completely the authority of the older generations because generational ascendancy also depends on social recognition by the community – and not simply on the assertion of physical strength." Revealingly, age-set tensions and internal power struggles are set aside when facing a common enemy, as was the case during the SSDM/A-Cobra Faction war with the SPLA.

#### 4.5 CONCLUSION

For pages and pages in her ethnography about everyday violence in a favela in northeast Brazil, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992; 2004) describes in detail horrendous episodes of violence, poverty, social discrimination, hunger, disappearances and extra-judicial killings taking place in the favela of Bom Jesus da Mata. Then she adds:

"Throughout all, Bom Jesus da Mata continued to perceive itself as a quiet, peaceable interior town in the *zona da mata*, far from the violence and chaos of the large cities on the coast. As the initial excitement of each incident blew over, life resumed its normal course" (Scheper-Hughes 1992, 218).

Scheper-Hughes' account of people in Bom Jesus da Mata reflects accurately how Highland Murle people continued to imagine their home of Boma, as a quiet and "peaceable" remote town, villages and plateau, also because it was compared to the vicious communal violence of the Lowlands. One of the main arguments in this chapter is how the 'everyday' and normality of life – despite events of everyday violence – prevails. But this chapter has also argued and demonstrated how everyday violence is a reflection and partial consequence of systematic structural violence and neglect by the state. It has argued that the distinction between these two types of 'violences' – in Murle terms, *jore* and *ɔɾɔn* – was important for Murle people from Boma to identify themselves as 'peaceful' in contrast to the hostile and unfavourable way that the Murle as a wider group are seen by others. These notions of violence, and the perceived absence of them, were connected to the activation of the identity sub-category of *ɲalam* among the Highland communities of Boma, as a means to distinguish themselves from the violence associated with being Murle in South Sudan. In the context of structural violence resulting from the neglect of the state, the state is regarded both as an admired and desired source of hope, opportunity and regulator of peace and justice, but also paradoxically as largely absent and abusive, coopted by other more powerful ethnic groups.



Due to the association between the creation of the SPLM/SPLA state in South Sudan and Boma as a location, Highland Murle people felt loyal and more closely aligned to the state, and thus also entitled to a fair and responsive state. Simultaneously, people felt particularly betrayed by the absence of that same state and the violence resulting from that absence.

To some level, as has been described throughout the chapter, insecurity is an accepted, even normalised part of life. Perhaps this is also the underlying consequence of the structural neglect and violence of the state. Despite village quarrels and attacks on the road, ordinary life goes on. Local understandings of violence, the transformation from and simultaneous occurrence of *jore* to *ɔɔn* are context-driven and tied to intentionality. Physical violence may occur regularly in different contexts: boys caning each other, brothers and uncles fighting, fist fights, houses being burnt, drunken SPLA soldiers, children ambushed and killed by neighbouring tribes as they walk back from buying soap in the market. But how these seemingly physically violent events are classified depend on their specific context and the intention of the act.

The next chapter will delve into what was to become represented by Murle collectively as one their darkest and most defining historical periods. It was *ɔɔn*, a war, a serious war with the state, with repercussions in all spheres of private and public life. This war would also come to affect negotiations and representations of 'Murleness' in Boma and relationships to the state. It was this kind of violence - *ɔɔn* - that was a central aspect of how Highland Murle people distinguished themselves from the 'other' Murle, whether those known as 'violent cattle-keepers' or members of the Cobra Faction. Especially during the period of the armed conflict, the peaceful/violent dichotomy became central to the assertion of Highland Murle identity. But that 'peace' could encompass the 'violences' known as *jore* without compromising the contrast with *ɔɔn*.

## 5. THE TIME OF *JORE* AND *JRON*: EVERYDAY VIOLENCE AND WAR IN BOMA

*“Murle community is currently facing its worst ever time. There are 6000 [Murle] in Kenya, many in Uganda and 4500 in Raad and others are all in the bush due to this war by David Yau Yau.<sup>1</sup> Therefore we have to talk peacefully. This is not politics. We are talking about tragedies and atrocities. Boma is not inhabited by its people now, it is now a military ground, with no schools. (...) Most of you haven’t gone to Pibor, it is also very bad. There’s nowhere for Murle to be, we are all homeless. We cannot disagree; we cannot portray a negative image.”*

General Kennedy Gain, Boma Peace Conference in Juba, 12/09/2013

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The strong words above were spoken by one of the most prominent Murle elders, a politician and SPLA die-hard, General Kennedy Gain from Pibor, at a Boma Peace Conference that took place in Juba between the 12 and 15 September 2013.<sup>2</sup> He was speaking to a group of people from Boma, largely Highland Murle intellectuals living in Juba, but also a dozen Highland Murle, Jie and Kachipo men that had been flown to Juba from Boma, as well as handful of senior Lowland Murle politicians. They had come together to discuss the way forward after the destruction of Boma and the displacement of most of its Murle population, resulting from the conflict between the government’s SPLA and the largely Murle rebellion SSDM/A-CF. The war had started in 2012 and had escalated into a full-scale crisis, which produced dire humanitarian needs across Murleland, and pitted the ethnic groups of Boma, Murle, Jie and Kachipo against each other.

SPLA abuses in Pibor caused dramatic displacement across Murleland (Map 9 illustrates the extent of the areas affected, and the population displaced across Pibor county from May to June 2013). By mid-July 2013 all six population centres in Pibor county (Boma, Gumuruk,

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<sup>1</sup> Aid agencies reported slightly different numbers, as per below.

<sup>2</sup> This was the first of a series of peace meetings specific to Boma organised by USAID’s VISTAS programme. The agenda and were however set by the meeting members. It took place in Juba because Boma was still deemed to be too insecure. A charter brought participants from Boma, including the Highland Murle paramount chief, Logidang Lom. The meeting suffered from an imbalance of many Murle participants against a handful of Jie and Suri-Kachipo, who felt verbally attacked. I was invited to attend the meeting and act as the secretary and note-taker. Most of the meeting was in Murle language, with some Jie and Kachipo speeches.

Likuangole, Manyabol, Maruwa Hills and Pibor) had very few civilians left in them and humanitarian actors were being prevented by the government from accessing the vast majority of the displaced Murle population in Pibor county. By early August, 100,000 Murle (out of the 140,000 estimated Murle population) were in need of emergency humanitarian assistance (UN OCHA 2013). By September 2013, some 7,000 Murle had been displaced to Juba; an estimated 1,500 of the 16,500 refugees from Jonglei who had fled to Kenya and Uganda were thought to be Murle and 3,400 Murle had found asylum in Ethiopia (Human Rights Watch 2013b, 26–27). The numbers were likely to be higher.

In his statement above, General Gain referred to the gravity of what was happening to Murle people individually and collectively. His words set the tone for this chapter: an examination of the seriousness of the events facing Murle people; destruction, serious abuse and killing of civilians, displacement, division and uncertainty haunting all of Murle across land from Likuangle to Boma. For many Murle people, the Murle ethnic group was under threat of genocide.<sup>3</sup> General Gain made the point that the destruction in Pibor was just as bad, or worse, than that in Boma, alluding to the shared Murle experience of the war and calling for a unified Murle response and the need for image control, in the face of external threats.

This chapter is divided into two sections. First, I examine the existing links, continuities and discontinuities, between the structural and everyday violence explored in the previous chapter, and political violence and the war with the state. I argue that even in times of conflict, just as everyday life continues, so does everyday violence. I also argue that the structural dimensions of violence are the foundations for political violence, which can run parallel to everyday violence. The latter two, everyday violence and political violence, interact at times, but materialise in different dimensions. Thus, the violence continuum is useful to consider that there are various forms and expressions of violence. However, it has limits in acknowledging how different forms of violence, or *violences*, can exist within the same material reality without necessarily building on each other.

The chapter engages with various meaningful events of the past years, by drawing on individual stories and readings of the war. It delves into what was being described by and was known to Murle collectively as one their darkest recent historical periods.<sup>4</sup> It begins by briefly examining the communal war between Lou Nuer and Murle and how it eventually mutated into a war with the state. The chapter traces the emergence of the rebellion led by

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<sup>3</sup> Fieldnotes Jacob Lothiboi, Juba 12/06/2013.

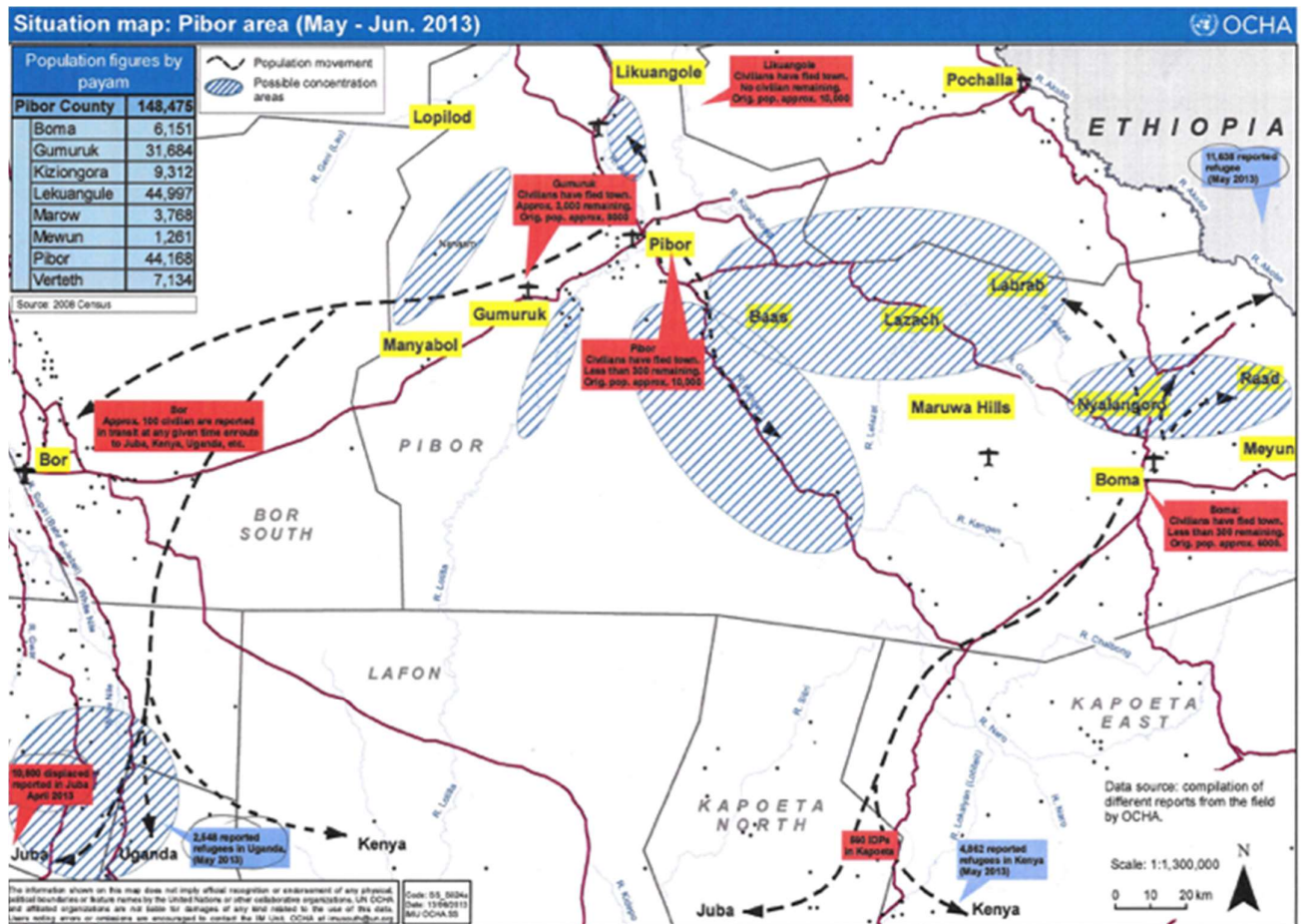
<sup>4</sup> This was noted by many informants, both on one-to-one discussions and in peace meetings.

David Yau Yau (DYY) against the Government of South Sudan, particularly after it gained momentum as a result of the violent SPLA-led civilian disarmament campaign. It was this second phase of the rebellion that had intense repercussions across the region and led to its destruction, disruption and the displacement of large parts of the Murle population.

The second section of the chapter (from 5.4) builds from personal narratives to examine displacement experiences, strategies and decisions of Highland Murle people. I argue that these personal accounts of the war and displacement reveal how the place from which people made sense of the SPLA-Cobra war was part of shaping a narrative of being, or not being, Murle. Thus, ethnic identity narratives are shaped by physical and emotional place, and can shift and adapt as people move from one place to another. Narrating these events allows for an examination of the process and dynamics of the mutually constitutive relationship between violence and identity politics over chapters 6, 7 and 8.

From the perspective of Boma, the communal war between Murle and Lou Nuer affected people across most areas of the Lowlands, but did not directly affect Highland Murle in Boma. Accordingly, the disarmament campaign and the re-emergence of the largely Murle rebellion led by DYY were initially relatively distant events with limited effect in people's lives. It was only in the weeks prior to the attack in Boma town in May 2013, as the fighting between the SPLA and SSDA-CF got closer, that the security situation deteriorated significantly in the area. This chapter documents the capture of Boma by the SSDM/A-CF and the ensuing SPLA recapture of the area, alongside Jie militias. These events and the ways they were interpreted demonstrate how the power of the state is constantly being negotiated in the margins.

During this period, Murle people felt they were collectively under siege by the government, by the SPLA and by their neighbours. Regardless if one was a civilian or a combatant, a cattle-keeper or a cultivator, a woman or a man, young or old, in the town or the village, from Likuangole or from Boma, Murle people were collectively targeted and ostracised based on their ethnic identity; they were guilty by association. On the other hand, later on, the government begun distinguishing between Murle and *ɲalam*, cutting off Boma from the Murle community, through a typically divide-and-conquer strategy and playing on ethnic politics. The ethnic targeting and politicised divide-and-rule ethnic policies contributed to a revaluation of Murle ethnic identities, discussed in chapter 6 and 7.



## 5.2 THE POLITICS OF COMMUNAL VIOLENCE AND OF STATE WAR

The last chapter discussed the Murle emic terms *jɔre* and *ɔɔn* and how everyday violence is better interpreted as *jɔre*, or quarrelling. The Lowland Murle had been at war, *ɔɔn*, with their Lou Nuer neighbours. The transformation into a war with the ‘hakuma’, *ɔɔn*, proved harder to comprehend and react to because it was perceived as simultaneously an ethnic conflict and a state war; Murle people felt attacked from all sides. In her discussion of Nuer-Dinka extreme ethnic violence triggered by the 1991 SPLA split, Sharon Hutchinson (2009, 71) makes a distinction between “the ‘traditional’ quarrel between Nuer and Dinka over the cow” and that which ensued promoted by the SPLA elites. Although there is a distinction between the war of the ‘home’, which involves raiding and is centred around cattle and the war of the ‘hakuma’, these two types of *ɔɔn* have increasingly become fused together targeting the Murle.

Until the December 2013 civil war that set the conditions for the establishment of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) (the focus of chapter 8), the Murle community felt collectively under siege, demonised in the national press, vilified by state and central government, and both feared and despised by the public (McCallum 2013; Laudati 2011). This was to have repercussions in both the private and public spheres of life. By the way it was conducted, the SPLA-Cobra Faction war would also affect negotiations and representations of Murle identity, particularly for many of those from Boma who did not relate to the DYY rebellion in the same ways as in the Lowlands. This will be discussed in detail in chapter 6, 7 and 8.

The next two sections present the politics of communal ethnic war and of state war and its interactions, including the origins of the South Sudan Democratic Movement/Army-Cobra Faction rebellion. The latter as well as the events that preceded it have been described in detail elsewhere (Small Arms Survey 2012; M. Arensen 2012; Hutchinson 2012; McCallum and Okech 2013; Copnall 2013; Todisco 2015). Nevertheless, it is important that this chapter examines briefly the rise of inter-ethnic violence that preceded the SPLA-SSDM/A-CF war because it was precisely the escalation of this violence that led to the vicious SPLA-led civilian disarmament campaign, which in turn contributed significantly to the popular support of the SSDM/A-CF. These events also illustrate how ethnicity has become a powerful mechanism through which to relate to neighbours and to the state, and a tangible means of verbalising political aspirations. The politicisation of ethnicity and the tenuous distinction between state power and ethnic domination has been pervasive in the context of South Sudan, and Jonglei state in particular, where the Murle have the lower hand (Laudati 2011).

Historically, as the second civil war between the SPLA and the Khartoum government had intensified and the latter promoted the use of local militias, political aspirations, community protection and cattle-raiding became ever more difficult to distinguish (M. Arensen 2015). The post-CPA period saw a brutal escalation in violence and revenge attacks between Murle and Lou Nuer. These resulted from regular small-scale cattle raids and abductions between Murle and Lou Nuer, which escalated to unprecedented levels in 2009 (International Crisis Group 2009). In March 2009 a Lou Nuer attack led to the killing of over 450 Murle people as well as dozens of abductions of children and women (Small Arms Survey 2012). Murle retaliated in April and August of the same year inflicting a similar number of Lou Nuer losses. After a relatively quiet 2010, the conflict intensified again in 2011. On the 25 December 2011, a Lou and Jikany Nuer Press Statement made calls to

“[W]ipe out the entire Murle tribe on the face of the earth, as the only solution to guarantee long-term security of Nuer’s cattle. There is no other way to resolve Murle problem other than wiping them out through the barrel of the gun” (Lou and Jikany Youth in Jonglei State, South Sudan 2011).

In early 2012 by some estimates 1,000 to 3,000 Murle people were killed when three major Lou Nuer attacks occurred in Pibor, the last one culminating in the burning down of the MSF hospital in response to a previous Murle revenge attack that had also targeted the MSF hospital in Pieri (M. Arensen 2015, 13–14). Table 1 below shows the major clashes between Lou Nuer and Murle in Jonglei between 2009 and 2012. The state was perceived to be unable to provide security and justice; survivors took it upon themselves to revenge the death of their relatives and recover the cattle stolen, leading to an ongoing revenge cycle.

Date	Attacking tribe	Location of attack <sup>15</sup>	Deaths (approximate)	Cattle stolen (approximate) <sup>16</sup>
January 2009	Murle	Akobo county	300 (Lou Nuer)	Unknown
5-8 March 2009	Lou Nuer	Likuangole, Pibor county	450 (Murle)	600
18 April 2009	Murle	Akobo county	250 (Lou Nuer)	Unknown
6 February 2011	Murle	Uror county	8 <sup>17</sup> (Lou Nuer)	1,000
18-24 April 2011	Lou Nuer	Likuangole, Pibor county	200 (Murle)	(138,000)
15-24 June 2011	Lou Nuer	Gumukur and Likuangole, Pibor county	400 (Murle)	(398,000)
18 August 2011	Murle	Pieri, Uror county	750 (Lou Nuer)	38,000
23 December 2011- 9 January 2012	Lou Nuer	Likuangole and Pibor, Pibor county	1,000 (Murle)	100,000
27 December- 4 February 2012 <sup>18</sup>	Murle	Akobo, Nyirol, and Uror counties	276 (Lou Nuer and Bor Dinka) <sup>19</sup>	60,000
2 March 2012	Murle	Nyirol county	15 (Lou Nuer)	15,000 <sup>20</sup>
9-11 March 2012	Murle	Ethiopia (near Wanding payam) <sup>21</sup>	225 (Lou Nuer)	20,000

Sources: UN and media reports; interviews with UNMISS; interviews with national, state, and payam officials.

Figure 4 Major clashes between Lou Nuer and Murle in Jonglei, 2009-2012 (Small Arms Survey 2012).

### 5.2.1 STATE INTERVENTION, ATTACKS ON CIVILIANS AND THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE MURLE REBELLION

The government responded to the dramatic escalation of communal violence by bringing together the Jonglei political elite and chiefs in a peace conference in Bor in May 2012 (Republic of South Sudan 2012) and by carrying out a disarmament campaign throughout Jonglei. The peace talks and the short-lived widespread presence of the SPLA throughout Jonglei managed to reduce intra- and inter-ethnic violence in the immediate aftermath, but this did not last long.

As had been the case in Jonglei and elsewhere in South Sudan in the past, the civilian disarmament campaigns were to have disastrous consequences (Young 2010; Garfield 2007). The SPLA-led civilian disarmament campaign in all of Jonglei started off peacefully by engaging local chiefs, except in Pibor county, where the SPLA reportedly committed rapes, simulated drowning and other grave human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch 2013b; Amnesty International 2012).

Murle rebel leader David Yau Yau, originally from Gumuruk area, was a civilian before launching his first armed revolt following his defeat in the April 2010 elections where he ran as an independent candidate in the parliamentary elections for the Gumuruk-Boma constituency seat.<sup>5</sup> His first revolt operated primarily in Pibor county and benefited from weapons supplied by the late George Athor, who was in turn supplied by Khartoum. By June 2011 DYY had signed a ceasefire agreement with the government and his small forces numbering some 200 men were integrated into the SPLA (HSBA 2013b).

Fuelled by the aggressive civilian disarmament campaign, DYY relaunched his rebellion in August 2012, rebranded as South Sudan's Liberation Movement/Army – Cobra Faction. By then, he had direct access to the Khartoum government who supplied his rebellion with weapons. Mobilisation initially came from DYY's own *Bothonya* age-set but by the end of 2012, he had succeeded in capitalising on the feelings of resentment, distrust and marginalisation among the Murle population toward the SPLA. Civilians initially joined the movement primarily as a means to protect their families, property and community. Yet as the rebellion grew in numbers and strength, Cobra supporters gained a more ideological and political consciousness, fighting to address Murle feelings of marginalization by the Jonglei state government in Bor, seen to be monopolised by Dinka Bor (HSBA 2013b). In this sense, it became difficult to distinguish between Cobra Faction youth and militarised cattle camp youth (see also Pendle 2015), as great numbers of Murle men (by some accounts 3,000–6,000, see HSBA 2013b) joined the Cobra Faction.

Appendix 4 includes a *Bothonya* age-set war song of encouragement popular during the SSDA-CF and SPLA war. The song starts by making reference to the names of 'Nyandeng' and 'Bior' alluding to all Nuer and Dinka warmongering against men from *Bothonya* age-set.

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<sup>5</sup> On 30/07/2014 President Kiir appointed DYY as GPAA Chief Administrator, equivalent to Governor. In December 2015 he was removed from that position and then appointed Deputy Minister of Defence of the Transitional Government of National Unity.



The second verse substitutes 'Nyandeng' and 'Bior' by 'Peter Gadet' and 'Kuol Manyang', seen as two of the main individuals waging war on Murle:

*"Peter Gadet and Kuol Manyang why have you left your cow and got yourselves into a fight with Bothonya?"*

The song is indicative of how the war with the state was perceived to be a war with two ethnic groups and led by some powerful men from those ethnic groups with high-level positions in the government and the SPLA.

In January 2013, the then Governor of Jonglei, Kuol Manyang, issued Provisional Order No. 01/2013 on the formation of what was termed 'community police' in counties across Jonglei state (Jonglei State Governor's Office 2013a). The order called for the recruitment of 40 men in each boma who would be provided with guns, a uniform, ammunition and a minimum salary of 300SSP. They would also benefit from the logistical and operational support of the South Sudan Police Service (SSPS) to "assist the SSPS by providing protection to unarmed civilian population and their properties" (Jonglei State Governor's Office 2013a). The order was implemented in all the counties of Jonglei except Pibor county. This meant that after the disarmament campaign of 2012, Dinka and Nuer young men across Jonglei were being rearmed to fight Murle in Pibor.<sup>6</sup>

The 2012 civilian disarmament campaign also left Murle unprotected to defend themselves against the very heavy 2013 Nuer raids and the SPLA aggression. By 2013, Murle cattle-keepers from the Lowlands had overwhelmingly joined the Cobra Faction leaving the cattle less protected, with women assuming roles they would not usually take on. While most men were busy fighting the SPLA, Lou Nuer particularly from Akobo West raided Murle cattle *en masse*. By April 2015, when I visited various cattle camps in the plains, Murle had not yet recovered from the heavy losses in cattle and families struggled to survive. Anecdotal, one local chief in a cattle-camp in Lotilla payam who was also the head of household had no more than 50-60 cows, co-owned by 3 brothers. According to the chief, over 400 of his cattle were raided between 2011 and 2013.<sup>7</sup> Considering that these 50-60 cows were not all lactating and were being shared by several wives and some 20 children, it was barely enough to feed the household (Felix da Costa 2015).

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<sup>6</sup> See Pendle (2015) for a comparative example of 'community police' and militarised cattle-keepers in western Dinka area.

<sup>7</sup> Interview chief Lotilla payam, Gumuruk 13/04/2015.

The fact that the Cobra Faction were distributing weapons was an important pull factor for men to rearm themselves and protect their families and property. For example, in several interviews in Likuangle with men who had joined the Cobra Faction, they reported that their main motivation in joining the Cobra Faction was to protect their community against SPLA aggression. Although the majority of the fighters were from DYY's own *Bothonya* age-set, large numbers of youth from *Lango* age-set as well as men from *Thithi* and even *Muden* age-set joined. As Maze, a *Thithi* from Nanaam explained:

*"It was not only DYY, the SPLA tortured all Murle community which is what made Cobra to succeed. We all joined him, I joined. During that time we weren't even thinking of life, even if there was only one man in the family, all went to join and women took care of the cattle. I returned after the peace agreement. (...). Everyone in the community was giving cattle to eat during the Cobra fighting and supporting DYY. Right now, after the fighting, no one gained anything, we weren't fighting to get cattle, we were fighting only to defend ourselves and Murle. So when we returned home, we returned with nothing."*

Maze, Likuangle, 18/04/2015

Politically, the rebellion were fighting for greater Murle representation in the government and for the attribution of a Murle state. Representing the views of many others, the late Murle paramount chief, ṅantho Kavula, explained that

*It is DYY who began all this. He mobilized all this youth against the government. That is the reason for the fighting. The reason why DYY started the rebellion was because he heard of all the bad things the SPLA was doing against his community during the disarmament... the raping and killing. That's why he mobilized the community to fight for the freedom of his community.*

ṅantho Kavula, Juba 26/06/2014.

The Cobra faction gained traction after several successful ambushes of the SPLA, which in turn was becoming increasingly violent to civilians, and by doing so, encouraged more men to join the rebellion (HSBA 2013a). In February, the SPLA began bringing additional troops to all major areas across Murle land, including Pibor, Boma and Maruwo for counter-insurgency operations. But the SSDA-CF was still inflicting many casualties on the SPLA, thought to be ill-prepared and ill-equipped. As also noted by Todisco (2015), war in the hinterlands of Jonglei was not a priority for the national government.

### 5.3 JORE AND JRON IN BOMA

What the above demonstrates is that forms of violence take place in parallel: the Murle were at war with the SPLA and simultaneously being attacked and raided by Lou Nuer, with the backing of the government. Simultaneously in Boma, occurrences of everyday violence as described in the previous chapter, *jore*, such as drunk village quarrels, domestic violence and violence on the road continued to be part of everyday life, even as a war brewed and got closer to Boma.

The above account of the continuities between the Murle and Lou Nuer communal violence and the growing rebellion pertains to the Lowlands. Events in Boma were rather different. Communal violence and the militarisation of cattle-raiding ‘exchanges’ and practices had become a feature of the Lowlands and of the difficult dynamics between agro-pastoralist neighbouring ethnic groups in Jonglei. However, it did not directly affect the Highland Murle people of Boma who had no cattle and remained outside the dynamics of raiding and of aggravated communal relations from the geographically distant Lou Nuer borders. In the months preceding its arrival in Boma, the rebellion felt so distant that Barkou Ngatira, a Suri-Kachipo chief in Boma, even thought that the impending rumours of the rebellion in Pibor were fake.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, while the civilian disarmament campaign of 2012 was extremely violent and abusive in the Lowlands, in Boma area it was conducted in a comparatively less violent manner. The SPLA disarmament campaign was conducted in two rounds in Boma in 2012: the first one in March and the second in August. In the villages of Upper Boma it was a peaceful and voluntary affair: “the chiefs were the ones doing it together with the soldiers. It was peaceful in Upper Boma”.<sup>9</sup> However, in Itti it was a different story. In the first disarmament campaign in Itti, in March 2012, the SPLA went through all the homes, collected all the small arms and proceeded to round up the youth and men on the airstrip and beat them.<sup>10</sup> One young man from Boma reported:

*“All Murle men were taken to the airstrip and asked to produce their guns. It was not peaceful but very aggressive, many [men] were beaten. (...) I remember John telling me about it, he was beaten and asked to bring his gun to the soldiers. If you failed to accept [admit] that you own a*

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<sup>8</sup> Boma Peace Meeting, Itti, 13/11/2013.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Titoch, correspondence 16/05/2016.

<sup>10</sup> Interviews Stephen Oboch, Beko Kabacha.

*gun, the beating will go on (...) sincerely there was no one who had a gun in Boma by them, the only people who had [guns] were the soldiers..."*

Paul Titoch, correspondence 16/05/2016.

The second round in August was considered less violent, although there were still beatings: "The only people who were a bit beaten were those from Ila Salaam [neighbourhood]". Ila Salaam in Itti was the home to many Murle from the Lowlands, from Maruwo and Labarab, studying or doing business in Boma. Joel explained: "they were said to be members of [the] Yau Yau movement, because most of them are from Maruwo and Labarab".<sup>11</sup> This kind of geographical profiling was common and was part of the divisive state identity politics against the Murle that contributed to create tensions among the Murle.

Although several of my male friends in Boma had scars as a result of those beatings, it was largely considered that "disarmament in Boma was not bad."<sup>12</sup> Certainly, it was not as bad as across the Lowlands. It did not, as was the case in Likuangle, Gumuruk and Pibor, lead to the raping of women and indiscriminate killings that motivated many men to then join the Cobra Faction (Amnesty International 2012; Human Rights Watch 2013b).<sup>13</sup> But the beatings and distrust of Murle instigated many men, especially those from the Wildlife Forces to join the Cobra Faction.

Initially, then, Highland Murle people did not suffer from the same levels of violence nor feel the need to protect their families from SPLA abuses, as was the case in the Lowlands. It was only later, after some of the episodes of insecurity, harassment and humiliation described in what follows, and upon the capture of Itti by the SSDM/A-CF, that some youth, especially from Nyat and Nyalongoro villages decided to join the rebellion. This might have also been because many of the youth from Nyat and Nyalongoro, who had been displaced from their original village of Majat during the SPLA-SAF war and had fled to Pibor, felt closer to the Lowlands.

In late 2012 and early 2013, while Pibor was already highly insecure, everyday life in Boma remained more or less normal although tensions were growing related to the uncertainty of the SPLA-SSDM/A-CF war that was approaching closer and closer. By January 2013, the conflict had extended to Maruwo Hills, with all villages there burnt and civilians from that area displaced mostly to Labarab, Nyat and to a lesser extent Itti (see map 9), and most men

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Titoch, correspondence 16/05/2016.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Lilcho, Itti 04/03/2013.

<sup>13</sup> Various interviews in Lowlands, April-May 2015.

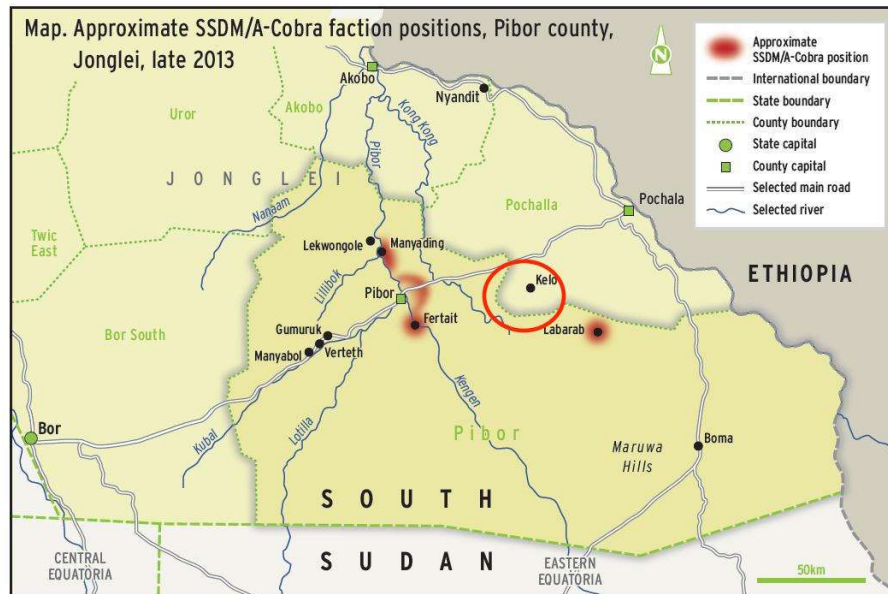
from Vertet and Maruwo joined the rebellion, making up Cobra Sector Two.<sup>14</sup> Maruwo was turned into one of the SPLA bases against the insurgency, which in turn had its own headquarters between Vertet and Labarab, in Kelo (see map 10). This led the number of soldiers in Boma to grow exponentially.

The arrival in Boma of more soldiers from Division 2 in Juba destabilised this balance. Division 2 soldiers, from various ethnic backgrounds, did not have the long-term emotional connection to Boma of those in Division 8, and were arriving in a period of war with a largely Murle rebellion. This amounted to a growing distrust of any Murle, whether a soldier, government official, or civilian. One of the consequences of this was that there were more SPLA soldiers roving around town, many of these drunk and resentful at the SPLA losses against Cobra, representing a risk to Murle civilians.

With the arrival of SPLA reinforcements in Boma, rumours of possible attacks on Boma also grew (see appendix 5 for fieldnotes on an alleged attack). The challenge of ascertaining facts and predicting future insecurity were very evident not only in my fieldnotes of events, but in most people's discussions in the aftermath of an event such as the one described in the fieldnotes on the 19 March 2013, just over a month before Boma was retaken by the SSDA-CF. Yet what is also very clear in the fieldnotes is the speed with which normal life re-emerges. Or rather, how this kind of unpredictable insecurity is a backdrop for social existence, which does not suspend 'normal' social processes.

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<sup>14</sup> The majority of the Cobra military forces Sector Two hailed from Vertet and Maruwo, under the leadership of chief Baba Majong and James 'Kong Kong' Arzen, both from Maruwo, who later launched attacks and captured Maruwa, Nyath, Itti and Upper Boma.



Map 10 Approximate SSDM/A-Cobra Faction positions (Kelo signalled), late 2013 (Small Arms Survey 2013).

SPLA soldiers in Boma town were well aware that Cobra was inflicting high casualties among SPLA soldiers. The SPLA was effectively losing ground against Cobra. On the one hand, Cobra was in its own territory, strongly motivated and relatively well-armed by Khartoum; on the other hand, at the highest level, despite the heavy losses of men, SPLA leadership in Juba did not see the conflict in Jonglei as a priority. There were rumours in Boma that there was not even enough drinking water in the frontlines. In turn, SPLA soldiers in Boma were revenging the loss of their colleagues on the frontlines on the local population. What was happening elsewhere in Greater Pibor, began happening in Boma to a lesser extent.

The ramifications of the growing insecurity in Boma were significant for civilians. It constrained movement, cultivation in the fields, attending school, hospital visits and more broadly, added layers of fear of the potential of violence. If in Pibor there were reports of gang rapes and indiscriminate killings, in Boma drunken soldiers threatened people on the roads and harassed civilians. People feared movement between Lower and Upper Boma and to their cultivation fields. Many children stopped attending school. Also as a result of the restricted movement, visits to the Merlin hospital in Itti decreased drastically.

Murle civilians were being threatened by drunken soldiers on the road from Itti to Upper Boma. Below, Johnson, Samuel Beko and Marta Nyelang share their accounts of one event, on the day that both Johnson and Beko were attacked by drunken soldiers as they walked from Itti to Jonglei in Upper Boma:

*Johnson: We were on the way returning from Itti to Upper Boma. We stopped on the way to relax a little and rest; we heard gunshots ahead of us. I stood up to see the direction it had come from and I saw the man put some more bullets, and when he saw me he started running towards me, and then we all started running up to the route of Kaiwa.*

*Me: Who did it?*

*Johnson: They were Didinga soldiers from Eastern Equatoria, completely drunk. The soldiers were saying these rebels have killed lots of us, and we need to do revenge and need to kill these people in Boma who are also Murle. So one Latuho soldier said no, these people are different. Don't say we need to do revenge to these people, these people are ḡalam and they [rebels] are Lotillanya. Most of rebels are from Lotillain, not from these people in Boma. If you want to do revenge go fight those rebels or people in Pibor."*

Johnson Korok, Jongolei 18/03/2013

Johnson told me that he had heard about this conversation between the Didinga and Lotuho soldier from another Highland Murle soldier when he was back. The talk had taken place in the morning before shooting. Samuel Boko was also walking up from Itti that same afternoon and found the same soldiers that had previously attacked Johnson. He narrated what had happened to him:

*"I was coming from the hospital in Itti with my two wives because one was sick, me, my two wives and one ḡalam soldier walking behind us. On the last stream when coming from Itti, those Didinga soldiers stopped me and my wives and there was an argument. They were asking me where I was coming from, and I said I'm coming from Itti. 'Are you not the one running from us?' The way I saw them was that they were actually people who wanted to attack me. Then the other soldier appeared and they told me to move."*

Samuel Boko, Jongolei 18/03/2013

Like many people in Jongolei village, when the shooting began, Marta ran to the edge of the hills past the school, where one could look down on the route from Itti to Upper Boma and see what was happening, with Itti far in sight. Marta explained what she had heard:

*"When I was running to the hills I met two Didinga soldiers who were talking their language, which is Didinga and is similar to ours. I heard them say that those two drunken soldiers had been talking of revenge, and that we have to go warn the barrack and rescue to see if any civilians got hurt".*

Marta Nyelang, Kaiwa 18/03/2013

Marta's version of events offers a layer of complexity to people's relationship to the SPLA. It demonstrates clearly how the SPLA was not perceived as a united and structured entity, but rather composed of individual soldiers. Some of these would be drunken Didinga soldiers

taking revenge on Murle civilians, and others would be Didinga soldiers seeking to protect Murle civilians.

In Itti, as uncertainty increased, more people packed their bags and moved from the town to Upper Boma where they felt safer. By March 2013, the SPLA was preventing people from leaving Boma by vehicle, as, for the government, it would send the message that Boma was unsafe and civilians afraid. Commercial trucks carrying civilians by road to Kapoeta were being sent back to Itti. By April, this had changed and the town was therefore visibly emptier. On the 26 March 2013 I wrote on my notes that “walking around we can see people packing their bags and heading off.”<sup>15</sup> My friend Beko estimated that Itti town had decreased from an average population of 4000-5000 people to roughly 1000 people.<sup>16</sup>

Regular movement between Itti and Upper Boma had also decreased significantly because it was considered unsafe. Movement was simultaneously seen as carrying risks and being a strategy in the face of growing insecurity. As the conflict drew closer, I recorded episodes in my fieldnotes about how people were managing the growing insecurity:

*ηatin [a young lady from Jongolei] moved houses, or using the word that was described to me, “migrated” from her home which was a little isolated from the village on the way to Kaiwa, to a more central area; allegedly due to insecurity. [...] People are not walking up and down alone anymore; they’re waiting until finding a soldier, essentially someone with a gun to walk with.*<sup>17</sup>

Those living in isolated homes further away from the village centre, abandoned their homes and moved closer. But perhaps most notably, people changed their habits of moving up and down regularly. Women and children waited at the edge of Itti town until an armed civilian or soldier made the journey. They would then walk alongside the armed men. This was also the case between the villages in Upper Boma. My research assistant Daniel, from Bayen, would remain in Bayen until he found soldiers walking to Jongolei, whom he would then accompany.<sup>18</sup>

Legal and administrative distrust of Murle local government officials was also growing within the local government, led by a Lou Nuer executive director, Justin Kok from Akobo. Significantly, as already referred in the previous chapter, the Murle chiefs of Upper Boma who had previously held Motorola radios (provided by an NGO), the only means of

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<sup>15</sup> Fieldnotes Jongolei 26/03/2013.

<sup>16</sup> Beko Kabacha, Itti 29/04/2013.

<sup>17</sup> Fieldnotes Jongolei 21/03/2013.

<sup>18</sup> Fieldnotes Jongolei 29/04/2013.



communicating with Itti, had these confiscated by the SPLA. The same happened to the Murle local government officials who had their Thurayas taken. By being Murle, all Murle civilians were implicitly treated by the government and SPLA as rebels, implicated and judged guilty by ethnic association.

These kinds of government and SPLA attitudes were received by Highland Murle with outrage and anger. Young men felt betrayed and humiliated by the government's actions and evident suspicion that they were rebels. These feelings of injustice were significant in pushing some Highland Murle men to join the Cobra Faction.

Irer Lotony was a young prominent *Bothot* in Boma. After his home village of Majat was destroyed in the 1990s, his family had settled in Nyat. He had studied with a scholarship in Kenya up to Secondary level, although he returned to Boma without completing his Kenya School Certificate. Irer explained that there had been two particular episodes that made him "go to the bush" and join Cobra. The first one was the violence on the 25 December 2012 in Itti, already discussed in chapter 4. Irer recounted that on Christmas day, two SPLA drunken soldiers had a fight and one killed the other. The soldier then accused Murle of having killed the soldier and as revenge, the SPLA burnt at least eight houses in Ila Salaam, in Itti, reaching close to Irer's home. As SPLA soldiers shot at civilians in their homes, Murle with rifles, both civilians as well as Wildlife officers shot back. Luckily, no one was killed in this shooting but the tension with the SPLA remained. Irer continued:

*"After this incident, the second trigger was when in late March the SPLA requested that both me and another Murle called Malual who was an intelligence officer give in our Thurayas and chargers. This is what made me so angry. We decided to go to the bush and join DYY. I wasn't just going to wait until I was slaughtered like a goat."*

Irer Lotony, Juba 09/12/2015

At the time, Irer was a local government officer, working as the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission officer in Boma, as well as the formal youth leader for Boma. He was a respected person and managed to recruit other youths to join him. He explained that upon his decision to join the Cobra Faction, he sent a message to the youth in Nyat and Nyalongoro to join him: "I was the one who mobilised youth to join me in the bush. I managed to mobilise around 300 men."

### 5.3.1 *THE FIGHT OVER BOMA*

Not long after, all of Boma was captured by the SSDM/A-Cobra Faction: first Maruwo Hills, then Nyat and eventually Itti and Upper Boma. By late April 2013, the centre of Maruwo Hills payam, which was being used by the SPLA as an HQ for its counter-insurgency operation, was taken by Cobra forces, under the leadership of the paramount chief of Maruwo Hills, Baba Majong and James 'Kong Kong' Arzen, also from Maruwo. It was the afternoon of the 28 April. The news travelled to Upper Boma through people returning from Itti by foot. David Baba, who I was working with, rushed back to tell me:

"I have just been told that last night around 12am-1am David Yau Yau men attacked Maruwo Hills and that fighting is going on up to now. Two cars full of soldiers escaped and drove back to Itti, fearing the fighting...."<sup>19</sup>

The information was scattered, with no specifics on casualties nor details, but Maruwo, and the fighting were very close at less than 65 kilometres from Itti, taking about two hours by car in the dry season and roughly a day's walk. While the Executive Director in Itti assured people that the situation was under control, simultaneously the SPLA dug trenches in the edges of the town in the direction of Maruwo. But perhaps the greatest indication of the insecurity ahead was that SPLA soldiers stationed in Boma had been sending their families away from Boma since March 2013. Then, on the 30 April, NGOs began evacuating their staff in chartered flights.

On 1 May 2013 I walked to Upper Boma with David and a friend to collect some personal belongings. As we walked out of Itti to Upper Boma, dozens of defecting flip-flop wearing SPLA soldiers took the same route out on the way to Kuron and then to Kapoeta. Aware of the casualties inflicted in Maruwo and having seen their fellow soldiers desert from Maruwo, they too were deserting. It was a muddy walk as the rains had started, and it had rained all night. On the way up we crossed paths with a number of parties walking down, including some of the teachers I had been living with in Jongolei, somewhat unaware of the seriousness of the situation. Their obliviousness represented accurately the isolation and lack of information experienced in Upper Boma. As we arrived at the school compound I collected my belongings and passed on the latest bits of information, or rumours, to the teachers. It was taken somewhat casually. After lunch, as I started walking down I received

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<sup>19</sup> Fieldnotes Jongolei 28/04/2013.

a call on my satellite phone from a friend working as Security Adviser at the NGO Forum in Juba asking if I was evacuating. In my fieldnotes I later wrote:

*I had no idea about this... I said I didn't mind going later and he told me there was no later, it was now, all [NGOs] were leaving now. I then spoke to Onesmus [the senior coordinator of one of the NGOs] who asked where I was, that everyone was leaving and I should run down as fast as I could if I wanted to go with them. I never got down that fast. I ran down, took my boots off, locked my bag and in 5 minutes was in the ACROSS evacuation charter with nearly everyone. Crazy. I felt completely devastated. I could see through the window Oboch walking away from the airstrip. I wanted to cry. Everyone was tense.*

Nearly all NGO staff evacuated that day, with additional charters on the 2 and 3 May. I, not even an aid worker, was taken, along with the handful of Ugandan and all South Sudanese staff, but Murle local staff were left behind with their families. The twisted power relations and privileges of aid workers were never clearer to me. Within just over an hour I was in the safety of Juba and the tragedy unfolding in Boma was hundreds of kilometres away. Simultaneously, on 1 May 2013 Nyat village, also the headquarters of the Boma National Park just a couple of kilometres outside of Itti, was easily captured by the Cobra Faction. Most of the Wildlife Rangers, many Murle, but also some Anyuak and Jie, stationed in Nyat joined the Cobra Faction.

During those first days of May the senior government authority in Boma, executive director Justin Kok, also deserted Boma walking out to Kuron along with hundreds of poorly equipped SPLA soldiers fearing the encounter with Cobra. Waiting patiently for all NGO staff to leave, the Cobra Faction under the leadership of James 'Kong Kong' Arzen walked in and easily captured Itti on the 5 May 2013. Led by General Arzen, Irer was part of the SSDM/A-CF troops who took Nyat and Itti:

*"We took Nyat and Itti immediately without any resistance and fighting, SPLA soldiers had all defected. Upper Boma was taken under my leadership, it took 3-4 days of fighting [against the SPLA] until we managed to capture it".*

Irer Lotony, Juba 09/12/2015

Despite several accounts that there was no direct fighting, a press statement issued by the SSDM/A-CF spokesman, Col. Peter Konyi Kubrin read:

*"The gallant forces of the SSDA yesterday stormed and captured the strategic town of Boma. SPLA forces ran away leaving behind more than 50 dead bodies. More than 250 soldiers of the Wildlife and the Police gave themselves up and are now safe in the hands of our heroic Cobra units. This is a practical reminder to those who did not take our warning of imminent*

attack on Pibor and Kapoeta seriously. We are determined to rid the eastern bank of Bahr el Jabal of the corrupt and rotten regime in Juba before the end of the year" (SSDM/A Press Statement in (SSDM/A 2013).

Another young man who was in Boma at that time reported later to me, contradicting the SSDA's press statement:

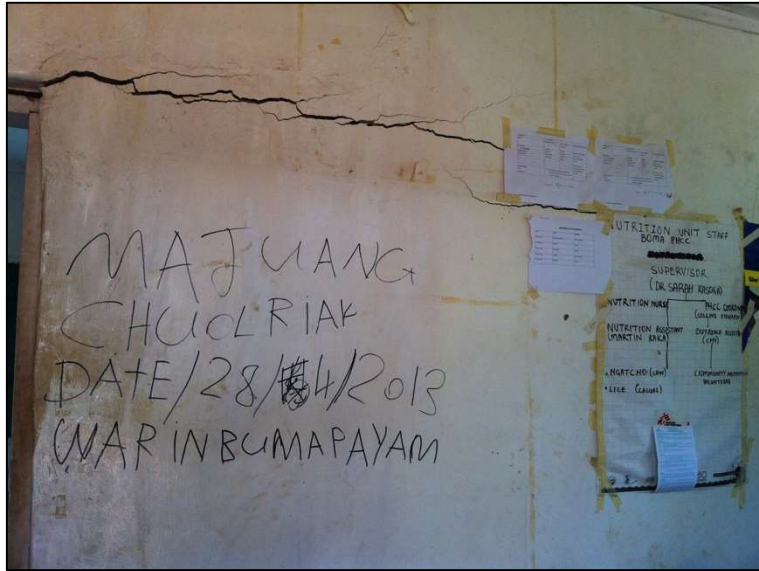
*"There was nothing like fighting in Boma when Cobra Faction took it over, starting from Nyat to Upper Boma. They just entered into empty areas where there were no soldiers, the SPLA have been complaining of inadequate ammunition some days before they left the area, so for their safety they deserted. No single SPLA soldier was killed by Cobra faction that time simply because they moved out of the Boma before Cobra faction entered."*

Paul Titoch, correspondence, 13/07/2016

In reality, SPLA soldiers had been deserting Boma for the past days and it was a remarkably easy capture, particularly considering the symbolic and strategic value of Boma. One South Sudanese blogger wrote: "The South Sudanese media and the military seemed to have also resigned to the fall of Boma. No one knows if Boma has been abandoned only for a season or for eternity" (Aher 2013). The SSDM/A-CF statement also added,

"It is to be recalled that Boma was the first location to be captured by the SPLA in 1985 and after which the administrative unit on the level of the village is now called. Since Boma is now under our control, they have no moral authority to claim being the legitimate government of South Sudan" (SSDM/A, 2013).

The references above to the events in Boma, a place full of meaning yet remote from the political, economic and social centres of the country, reveal how state law and order are constantly re-established and negotiated on the borders. The struggle over Boma demonstrates how state power is always unstable and most visible from the borders (Asad 2004). In Boma, the state was frail and nearly non-existent, but its importance to the SPLA says much about state power. Boma as a margin was not merely a peripheral space but rather defined what laid inside and what laid outside the state (Das and Poole 2004b, 19). Although the capture of Boma was initially denied by the SPLA, some two weeks later on the 18 May 2013 they admitted that two Battalions of SPLA Commando, the army's special force, had retaken the area (Sudan Tribune 2013a; Dimo 2013).



Photograph 16 'War in Buma Payam', written on the wall of the looted Merlin Boma Hospital, dated 28/05/2013.

### 5.3.2 THE STATE'S USE OF ETHNIC MILITIAS

The SPLA's recapture of Boma also demonstrates how the SPLA made use of ethnic militias to achieve its political and military goals, disrupting the fragile balances of power achieved locally (Pendle 2014). At first, Jie and Kachipo are said to have joined the rebellion, perhaps not seeing any alternative to this, but this was to change when one Jie man was shot dead by one of the rebels. The SPLA approached Jie, armed and recruited a militia in Kassengor and with their support returned to Boma on the 14 May, first capturing Itti and then two days later retaking Upper Boma (see Minority Rights Group International 2013). Suri-Kachipo people were initially supportive of the ideas of the rebellion until Upper Boma was recaptured by the SPLA. Jie were armed and asked to lead the SPLA, as "they know the mountain well".<sup>20</sup> Allegedly, leading this operation was the then Deputy Minister of Defence, Dr. Majak D'Agoot, who was seen on national television with a Jie government official in Upper Boma, after this was retaken. In the process, the state participated in essentialising ethnic identities and pitting different groups against each other.

As explained in previous chapters, Jie are divided into four clans settled in different areas in Boma and in Eastern Equatoria. Based on the area of settlement and neighbours, Jie have built different levels of alliances and relationships with different neighbours. For example, the Nyeriza clan from Naoyapuru have greater interactions with Highland Murle in Boma,

<sup>20</sup> Irer Lotony, Juba 09/12/2015.

while Nyakurono clan share relationships with Kachipo in Rumit village in Upper Boma. Apart from 'normalised' violence as referred to in the previous chapter, relationships are generally thought to be cordial, sometimes even positive.

Although Lowland Murle and Jie have a history of raiding each other, sometimes turning violent, they also share grazing lands. There are generally positive relationships between the Nyamokodol and Nyatarkabun Jie clans and Lowland Murle in Maruwo (known to Jie as Losidok), because of these shared grazing lands. When the Cobra Faction forces composed overwhelmingly of Lowland Murle from Maruwo Hills captured Boma, many Jie men also joined the rebellion. But after one Jie was killed, the wider group began fearing retaliations and attacks.

Hence, when the SPLA offered to arm Jie in Kassengor and requested their assistance to recapture the area, Jie leaders took it as an opportunity to gain some political ground in Boma. As explained by the Jie paramount chief Lorumo Loliya referring to those events: "Before, there were no problems with these *ɲalam* and Kachipo. But those of Lotillanya [Lowlands] bring the problems."<sup>21</sup> In the period immediately following the SPLA's recapture of Boma, Kachipo and Jie targeted, robbed and killed Highland Murle in Boma. One young man that was in Boma recalled: "*Jie started robbing people on their ways to hiding places, Those who were going into the town to get foodstuffs for their families were robbed by Jie.*"<sup>22</sup>

But Jie support for the SPLA's recapture of Boma should also be understood in the context of the narratives of legitimacy and ownership of Boma as an ethnically heterogeneous place and home, and hence, of its protection. At a Peace Meeting in November 2013, at the height of the SPLA-SSDA-CF war, Philip Logeliyo Lachakara, a Jie from Naoyapuru, explained to the crowd, addressing in particular the Highland Murle, why his people had supported the SPLA:

*"Last time you threatened our boys in the meeting in Juba, asking them 'why did you gather with Commando to chase David Yau Yau from Boma?' That time we joined with them because Boma is our area, that's why we came. (...) If he comes here again, will you tell your people who have a gun to go fight with DYY or what? Because now all of you, you are Murle. I'm asking you this because we know every corner of this place and we should support our Commando [SPLA special forces] here. If DYY comes we will join them and fight to protect Boma".*

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<sup>21</sup> Interview Naoyapuru 07/08/2014.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Titoch, correspondence, 25/07/2016.

But the “fight to protect Boma” also involved the targeting of Highland Murle civilians and the occupation of Murle homes in Itti. At that time, Murle were being seen as guilty and as rebels by ethnic association and systematically targeted by security forces and other proxy ethnic militias. Simultaneously, Jie were seen by most Murle as being used as proxies by the Dinka government in Bor.

Discussing the SSDA-CF capture of Boma in May 2013, at a Peace Meeting later in November 2013, Barkou Ngatira, the Kachipo chief of Rumit (a mixed Suri-Kachipo and Jie village in Upper Boma), questioned why Highland Murle people had not “run like them”, as if implying some guilt. For Barkou, Cobra Forces had used magic and that was why Kachipo and Jie men initially “ran away without fighting”:

*“We don't know, was it magic? (...) That time we realised this guy [DYY forces] had magic, that's why we all ran away without fighting. Then we heard Commando was coming from the side of Kassengor with big artillery. We ran again to the side of the caves. I'm standing here because I was accused. We weren't killing anybody, all these problems were brought by DYY. Whatever happened here, we shouldn't blame each other, we should blame DYY. Why did that Ngolozia [the previous Murle speaker] stay in Kaiwa and did not run like us, did he think death wouldn't come to him too?”*

Barkou Ngatira, Boma Peace Meeting Itti, 13/11/2013

Barkou's claim above sums up the conundrum in Boma at that time: for Jie and Kachipo the violence and instability originated from the Cobra Faction. For Highland Murle civilians, while they feared the insecurity and uncertainty brought by the rebellion, the violence affecting them derived from the SPLA's recapture of the town, supported by Jie and to a lesser extent Kachipo men. There were multiple perspectives and versions, none totally true nor totally false.

#### 5.4 JIJN IN BOMA: STAYING BEHIND, MOVING ON

The rest of the chapter examines Highland Murle people's decisions and choices on security and movement once Boma was captured (see map 11). The personal accounts reveal how movements and places people settled in also affected the ways people related to *being* part of the Murle imaginary, individually and collectively. The next chapter will also draw on displacement narratives to explore and argue that the different places where people

searched for safety were infused with meaning, and affected the way political violence and war was made legible and understood.



Map 11 Broad areas of Highland Murle displacement

During the two weeks that SSDM/A-Cobra Faction controlled Boma, most civilians were cautiously hiding in the bush around their homes, particularly in Majat area and in Kaiwa. Beko Kabacha, a Murle young man in Ethiopia that had been working for one of the INGOs in Boma later recalled what had happened:

*The rebels were occupying the area but not harming people nor looting. They were even protecting the NGO compounds from looting and Jie. But they were looting and stealing from the shops in the market. Meantime most people, particularly women and children, were hiding in the bush close by. We were sneaking in from Majat and Bayen all the way behind Merlin via Kalthin to check emails and remain connected.*

Beko Kabacha, Dima Ethiopia, 02/09/2013

It was when the SPLA retook control of the town that most people in Itti and the Upper Boma villages of Bayen and Jonglei fled. Similar to what had happened elsewhere in Pibor, homes, NGO compounds and other civilian property were looted, destroyed and burnt in Itti by the SPLA and Jie militia. Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch 2013b, 34) reported “key education and health facilities were utterly destroyed. The Merlin hospital, at the time the only facility with in-house surgical capacity in Pibor county and serving over 95,000, was ‘totally destroyed’”.<sup>23</sup> The compounds of the other two INGOs based in Boma, Joint Aid

<sup>23</sup> HRW (2013b, 34) also reported what I witnessed myself, “every single store room had been emptied, drugs had been strewn out into the mud and stores had been vandalized. All the hospital equipment from beds and



Management (JAM) (a WFP partner for food distribution) and ACROSS, were also looted, burnt and destroyed (see photographs 18, 19 and 20).

In experiencing the SPLA's antagonism, large numbers of Murle in hiding took the decision to flee further. Beko's brother John, who fled to Ethiopia with his family explained:

*"When the SPLA pushed those of Yau Yau out, the people hiding in Majat were thinking of returning home but then the SPLA started burning tukuls in Jongolei, Bayen, Kaiwa and Itti and people thought "If this is what they're doing to our village what will they do to us?!", and we decided to move. People were discussing where to go, I was pushing to go south to Kuron then Kapoeta and on to Kakuma, but the majority were deciding for Raad."*

John Konyi, Dima 04/09/2013

Most people took decisions over where to flee to based on decisions taken more widely by the village leaders, but even here there was some variation. The population of Kaiwa village remained in Boma, while the majority of the population of Itti, Bayen and Jongolei villages in Upper Boma chose to flee to Raad across the border in Ethiopia. Smaller numbers also chose to escape to Kapoeta and some on to Juba earlier in May. These are discussed over the following sub-sections.



Photograph 17 ACROSS school in Itti burnt (left) and JAM NGO office looted (right).

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mattresses to medical equipment, including fridges used for storing vaccines, had been stolen or destroyed" (see photographs 18, 19 and 20).



Photograph 18 ACROSS school material looted (left) and WFP food storage warehouse looted and destroyed (right)



Photograph 19 Merlin Hospital looted (left) and hospital water tank/system destroyed (right).

#### 5.4.1 *CHOOSING TO STAY BEHIND IN BOMA*

While most of the Murle population fled, the greater part of the population of the largest village in Upper Boma, Kaiwa, remained behind hiding in caves above Kaiwa. Peter Kuju, the red chief from Kaiwa had refused to leave his father's home and abandon his land to be "entirely occupied by other tribes, and that was why I stayed."<sup>24</sup> He also instructed all his

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<sup>24</sup> Red chief Peter Kuju, Itti 15/11/2013.

people in Kaiwa to remain in Upper Boma and to take temporary refuge in the caves further north of Kaiwa into the mountain. Jameson who escaped to Raad in Ethiopia explained

*"People in Kaiwa didn't come because red chief Kuju told people to stay by cursing those who left saying 'death will find you on the way', so most people decided to stay. More than 32 people from Kaiwa were killed."*<sup>25</sup>

Jameson, Dima, 06/09/2013

What this demonstrated was how the red chiefs' spiritual power of cursing continues to be taken extremely serious. Red chiefs are a central part of discourses of security and insecurity, and in determining the thresholds of each. For the people of Kaiwa, it was perceived to be safer to remain in Boma under the risk of violence of the SPLA and ethnic militias, than to leave under the threat of the curse of the red chief. These kinds of choices illustrate how local value systems are constructed and who holds influence locally.

According to Logidang, the Highland Murle paramount chief in Boma, when the SPLA recaptured Boma and retook control of Itti and the villages in Upper Boma, some 12-35 Murle men from the South Sudanese security forces, including the South Sudan Police Service (SSPS), the Wildlife Police and from the SPLA, that had previously deserted reported back. They had mistakenly assumed they would be welcomed back into the SPLA but instead they were shot dead. All Murle were viewed with evident suspicion by the government and seen as guilty of being rebels by their ethnic association. When the SPLA retook control of Boma, the remaining Murle in Boma felt they were being persecuted and targeted not only by the SPLA but also by individuals from Jie community, and to the great surprise of Murle, by Kachipo too.

But even after this tragedy and the many struggles encountered in Boma, the decision to stay in Kaiwa when all others fled, was defended by red chief Kuju, by Sultan Logidang and other Murle people from Kaiwa who remained behind. For them, had they all fled, their home Boma could have been taken and appropriated by neighbouring Jie and Kachipo. Thus, the potential of everyday violence by Jie and Kachipo existed in parallel to and sometimes intersected with the violent conflict.

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<sup>25</sup> The number of Murle security personnel killed in this episode varies based on the version, but seems certain that it was at least 12 people, all shot by the SPLA (also reported by Human Rights Watch 2013b).

#### 5.4.2 MOVING ON: DISPLACEMENT, DECISIONS AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Jameson Kumen's story was told in the previous chapter. He had inadvertently killed a man in Itti in 2012 and had been put in prison, both for his own safety and while awaiting trial. Because Jameson was educated, the police in Itti often asked him for help in administrative work. When the crisis of May 2013 reached Boma, the police released all the prisoners, including Jameson, and they all ran to Raad.

*"I was then detained in the container cell until the 5<sup>th</sup> May 2013 when the rebels entered Boma and fought with government, we were released (8 of us) by the government police and told us to evacuate. And we evacuated where I came to South Sudan-Ethiopia border up to 7th June 2013, I reached the camp (Raad). When I arrived there, I also found the family of the late (deceased) were also there. Of which they tried several times to kill me at night and [I] used to sleep in different tukuls by changing every night."*<sup>26</sup>

The war in Boma and the challenges it brought intersected with the previous everyday violence of life. When the war reached Boma, Jameson had physical freedom to escape and yet he ran to Raad, like most of those from Boma. There, he faced the risk of a revenge murder by the family of the man he had unintentionally killed in Boma months before. Thus, as Jameson's case illustrates, it was not that suddenly the war took precedence over all other types of violence previously existent. Rather, for Jameson, he continued to face the risk of another form of violence: the targeted revenge from the family of the victim, simultaneous to the risks of war.

The physical place from where people faced the war and displacement crisis had great significance: not only in terms of material needs and concerns of everyday life – insecurity, food, shelter – but importantly in how it was to affect discourses of identity and belonging (James 2009a; James 2009b), discussed in detail in the coming chapters 6, 7 and 8. The people remaining behind in Kaiwa, but also to a lesser extent in Kapoeta, were being pressured to disassociate from being Murle: their 'Murleness' endangered them, while their negotiation of being *ɲalam* offered them some safety.

People's displacement journeys are far from linear. Rather, they are continuous and based on constant individual and collective reassessment over other better places to move to. In this case individuals moved back and forth: from Boma to Kapoeta to Juba, and back to Kapoeta; to Kakuma and then back; from Boma to Raad and back to Boma, and so on. Yet

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<sup>26</sup> Extract from Jameson Kumen's letter to UNHCR-Ethiopia, dated 19/09/2013 explaining his case and requesting individual refugee status.

everywhere they went, Murle were ostracised for being Murle: “Murle are not wanted, not even our language people want to hear”.<sup>27</sup> People managed everyday life by instrumentally selecting and deploying different sets of identities and categories: as ‘refugees’ and as an Internally Displaced Person (IDP), as a Murle or as a *ηalam*, among other possible identity labels. For example, as IDPs, students were allowed to go to school in Kapoeta for free, but could otherwise travel to Juba. In Boma they would be a *ηalam*, but in Ethiopia or in Juba they would again be seen as Murle, and make great use of the wider Murle social support networks of support available to them.

Decisions over where to go were most often based on practical reasons: safety, distance, existing social networks and access to aid. The rest of this chapter examines personal Highland Murle accounts of decisions to stay ‘home’, flee within South Sudan or cross the border. These illustrate concretely how people make choices when facing conflict, but also how the place of displacement is part of shaping not only conflict narratives but also identity claims. Below I offer some illustrative accounts of people –John, Beko, Likwong, Kaka, Adut and others in Ethiopia, Kapoeta and Juba– whose displacement experiences are emblematic of wider concerns of Highland Murle people and their journeys.

The accounts that follow offer insights into Murle people’s complex relationships with the state, through its most common manifestation on the ground, the SPLA. Despite accusations of persecution, Murle individuals fleeing Boma often found a helping hand in the actions of SPLA soldiers, the same army structure they feared. There were many accounts of hitching rides with SPLA trucks that dropped soldiers in Boma and would subsequently offer rides to fleeing civilians. The next chapters (7 and 8) will discuss in greater detail the complexity of the relationship with the state and its various expressions and layers.

What was perceived by many Murle as a state war against the entire ethnic group provoked a disillusionment of the potential of the state in people’s lives. Just two years after the country’s independence and the hope that it had carried, ordinary Murle like Marko Alan, who had until then worked for an NGO in Pibor, felt an absolute disillusionment with the state, “South Sudan has nothing for us,”<sup>28</sup> as he moved his family to a refugee camp in Arua in Uganda. Conversely, the violent conflict also led to the opposite reaction in others: an apparent blind belief in the state, and the demonization of the Cobra Faction, as will be discussed in the next chapters.

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<sup>27</sup> Fieldnotes, Kapoeta 17/07/2013.

<sup>28</sup> Fieldnotes, Marko Alan, Juba 08/2013.

I argued earlier that despite structural and everyday violence, Murle did not emphasise violence in their accounts of everyday life. Likewise, even during war and forced exile, some sense of normality was kept. During hardship and war, people's concerns demonstrate how 'normal' life was maintained: despite the uncertainty and hardship faced, people focused on 'normal' things. Women gave birth; youth were still concerned with finding means and resources to go to school; young men were still thinking about bridewealth and marriage. For example, one young man, Beko Kabacha, fled Boma to Ethiopia with his family. Once he got back connected online through a phone, he got in touch by Facebook with Paulino Chacha regarding marriage to his wife's younger sister. Paulino, who had fled Pibor town to Juba some months earlier, thought that if Beko was thinking of marriage it was because he was ok.<sup>29</sup>

#### 5.4.2.1 Crossing the border to Ethiopia

In August 2013 I flew to Addis Ababa and made the journey to Dima and then on to the Raad spontaneous settlement where most of my friends from Boma had fled to nearly three months earlier.<sup>30</sup> The people who fled from Boma to Ethiopia first settled in Raad, on the Ethiopian side of the border along the Akobo River (photograph 21). The group that numbered some 3500-5000 people included a majority of Murle, including many from the Lowlands that had been studying or doing business in Itti, as well as some families of SPLA soldiers, some Anyuak and even some Jie. The area known as Raad encompasses the two sides of the river in both South Sudan and Ethiopia, connected by a solid bridge (photograph 22). On the South Sudanese side there was an SPLA base, with some tukuls for the families of the soldiers. On the Ethiopian side it was just a field with an Immigration Police Station (photograph 21), located some 55 kilometres from Dima town, roughly one hour and a half by car.

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<sup>29</sup> Fieldnotes, Juba 20/06/2013.

<sup>30</sup> I have very few formal interviews with people in Ethiopia because it was deemed unsafe and risky to interview people openly, exposing myself and my informants to harassment by ARRA, the Ethiopian refugee agency doubling as national security. For this reason, while in Ethiopia I never used a tape-recorder nor took open notes. Instead I would arrive to a safe place and write down the main points from each discussion. For this reason, there are hardly any direct voices included, but rather sections from my fieldnotes where I recount in second person what was told to me in those discussions previously.





Photograph 20 A view of the border area where Highland Murle fled to and first settled.



Photograph 21 Raad bridge, from South Sudan looking on to Ethiopia

When the SPLA pushed the rebels out of Boma, the Murle people hiding along Majat were considering returning to their homes. But as John explained, when the SPLA started burning tukuls in Jongolei, Bayen, Kaiwa and Itti, many people thought that “if this is what they’re doing to our village what will they do to us?”, and they decided to flee.<sup>31</sup> People were discussing where to go. A few like John argued in favour of a move south to Kuron, then to Kapoeta and on to Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, where many had already lived and knew

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<sup>31</sup> Discussion John Konyi 03/09/2013 Dima

well. It was a familiar place. Kakuma was also considered a good option because it had structures well set up, including schools, and its official language was English.

However, John told me, the majority of people in Boma were pushing to move to Ethiopia. Although there were no support structures set up in Raad, it was deemed to be physically closer and culturally familiar. Many Highland Murle people, especially youth had previously walked and visited Dima town, which was also the closest market centre. The Surma-speaking ethnic groups in the area shared a similar language and to some extent cultural practices to Murle, and the 'original' ḡalam ethnic group were also just across the border (as discussed in chapter 3). Importantly, as explained by one young man that was part of the decision-making:

*"Many of us were pushing for Kenya via Kuron, [but] we were convinced to go to Ethiopia because of children and old people who were too weak to walk up to Kuron".*

Paul Titoch, correspondence, 25/07/2016.

In addition, there was a rumour going around that Murle were being prevented from crossing the border into Kenya, or at least were being asked to pay a significant amount of money to cross.<sup>32</sup> Although this is unlikely to have been the case, it played a big role in determining the choice of Raad as a destination for many.

People arrived in Raad in batches. In normal circumstances, able young men would have taken roughly two-to-three days walking from Boma to Raad. But with women, children and some luggage, the journey took some 12 to 14 days of walking. During the journey, four women gave birth "in the bush" or forest to three baby girls and one baby boy. One of them was Nyurit and Lilcho's little girl who was named Gaba, the Arabic word for 'forest', following the Murle custom of naming after a meaningful event or occasion (see also Arensen 1988, 130).

When the first batch of people arrived in Raad the SPLA stationed in the South Sudanese side of the border registered them, under the instructions of the SPLA commander, Major Biel Guang Lual, a Lou Nuer officer stationed in Raad for three years. After that, the SPLA appointed some 'able boys', recently arrived, to continue registering. They were then

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<sup>32</sup> Discussion Daniel Beko, Itti 01/05/2013.



allowed to cross the border from Raad to Ethiopia.<sup>33</sup> Many of the Murle soldiers that did not join the rebellion also fled and settled in Raad.

Families crossing from Boma settled spontaneously as a village, replicating villages from 'home', thus relying on existing social support networks. So, those of Jongolei or Bayen settled close together as neighbours; the same for Murle from Pibor that had been living in Itti as students or traders, families of soldiers, and so on. Although UNHCR recorded some 5,000 refugees (or technically asylum seekers as they had not yet been processed and formally given refugee status), MSF, the only NGO with an operational presence in the camp, thought these were over-inflated numbers and that instead numbers of displaced were closer to 3,000.

UNHCR and the Ethiopian government's Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) planned and eventually did move the people in the settlement in Raad to a formal camp further away from the border, respecting international guidelines, called Okung (or Okugu) Camp in Dima Woreda in Gambella Province. But in September 2013, over three months since people had first fled and settled in Raad, this seemed like a distant plan. The conditions in the settlement were initially extremely poor. At first, in late May 2013 there was no food available and people survived on wild foods. Then in July food aid began arriving but there was not enough food because of continuous arrivals. By September there was "too much" food, due to ghost registrations. By September 2013, John thought that "there's more than enough [sorghum] and people are even making a lot of *nyan ci vɔɔr*" (local brew) and that the conditions in the camp were "somewhat ok":

*"For the first month in Raad there was no food at all, people just searched for wild greens all day, we were quiet and suffering. Food aid only came in July, by then we were fine but new arrivals meant that we had to share the food so there was not much for all. By August there was enough food to make alcohol and then it was a party even with dancing."*

John, Itti 13/11/2013

MSF started their clinic in Raad in July. While food and makeshift shelter were considered to be relatively ok, the sanitation conditions remained extremely poor, with few and very bad latrines (there were rumours in the settlement that two people had fallen inside the latrines because they had been so poorly built).<sup>34</sup> There were also many water-borne

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<sup>33</sup> Allegedly, 50 US dollars. Fieldnotes Dima 03/09/2013.

<sup>34</sup> Fieldnotes Dima Ethiopia, 03/09/2013.

diseases from the unhealthy river water. Everyday, women would cross into South Sudan to access the river and fetch the only drinking water available (photograph 23).



Photograph 22 Access to the Akobo River was from the South Sudanese side of Raad

The relationship between the displaced population in Raad and the SPLA was rather amenable and of mutual support. The SPLA had permission from the Ethiopian government to cross into Ethiopia and oftentimes supported the displaced population with rides to Dima, particularly when those suffering from illnesses needed to visit the clinic there. Interestingly, while this was seen by displaced Murle in Raad as a supportive and positive relationship, donors and aid organisations saw it as a concern. People who wanted to return to Boma would also walk together with armed SPLA soldiers, feeling protected.

Despite John's words above, it would be a mistake to think that life in Ethiopia as a refugee was easy. Paul Titoch from Bayen, and a close friend to John, was also displaced to Raad and then later stayed in Okugu Refugee Camp, where he worked as a translator for UNHCR. Highland Murle had fled the outright war in Boma, but they could not escape the chronic violence of everyday. Joel recalled moments of tension and conflicts among the Murle in exile in Raad:

*"Life wasn't that easy in Ethiopia, there were several conflicts among Murle. But only one of those conflicts will never fade from my mind. The fighting between Bayen and Jongolei youth against youth from Nyat, Nyalongoro, Maruwo and Labarab. The first fighting was between [people from] Bayen and [people from] Nyat, but [people from] Nyalongoro, Maruwo and Labarab joined Nyat and formed an alliance to fight Bayen. This made Jongolei youth join their brothers from Bayen. To me, all these were just madness and I can't take part in it (...). What makes me not forget is the injury my friend John suffered, he was found at his home and just beaten by the boys from Nyat, Nyalongoro, Maruwo and Labarab. John lost some teeth and*

*others were broken, he was not involved in the fighting but they saw John and many of us as spying on them. They attempted several times to attack me too. They were afraid to attack me during the daytime because I would call police for them to be arrested so they tried at night but they failed too because I was changing my sleeping places from house to house. Sometimes John and I went to sleep at the home of an Anyuak friend or even we would go to Dima town.*

*The second fight was the worst because it led to the loss of lives, two people from the group of Nyat, Nyalongoro, Maruwo and Labarab were killed that day and many were hospitalised. Since it was my first time to be in a refugee camp I concluded that life at home [in Boma] was just the same as in the refugee camp, fighting is part of leisure for Murle, for they will not take a minute without having fight”.*

Paul Titoch, correspondence 16/05/2016

The tragic events described by Joel above were triggered by a localized fight between two *Bothonya* boys from Bayen and Nyat, which escalated dramatically when people were relocated from Raad to Okugu. For a while, the tension between the villages diminished after elders intervened, but when the youth of Nyat who had joined the Cobra Faction rebels returned to the Camp, they looked for possible ways of fighting with the youth from Bayen, accusing the latter of harassing people from Nyat because they had been less in numbers. Joel recalled:

*“These two villages fought again and Nyat were chased away from the fighting site. Still Nyat never gave up and kept mobilizing their youth for a fight with Bayen. This time they got support from Nyalongoro and Maruwo youth”.*

For Joel, the youth from those villages united under the fact that the majority of them had joined the Cobra Faction movement, while those of Upper Boma had mostly not. According to him, Nyat youth continued to provoke the youth of Bayen, until two of its young men got themselves into a fight, and providing an opportunity for a larger fight between the villages: *“That day innocent people were beaten and Bayen youth was chased from the camp to a nearby village called Markaz”.*

The tension between the youth from the villages of Upper Boma against the youth from Nyat and Nyalongoro aided by other youth from the Lowlands did not dissipate. As one young man called it, *“the game of revenge was the main cause”*. Isolated stick-fighting incidents, *jore*, between young men from these villages continued to take place again escalating into more serious fighting:

*“These groups were ready to face each other at night but Bayen and Nyat reluctantly went to hiding place and returned to the camp very early in the morning around 5am and started blowing tolib [a cow’s horn connected to a pipe]. The chiefs were trying to stop the three villages not to fight because they were large in number and obviously people thought they would outnumber their opponents. The chiefs were able to control the other group easily due to their small numbers, but the three villages [(Nyat, Nyalongoro and Maruwo) didn’t listen to the chiefs and made their way to where Bayen and Jongolei youths were, and they started fighting. You can’t believe, numbers have no merits but determination does, the three villages [Nyat, Nyalongoro and Maruwo] left the battlefield to only Bayen and Jongolei.”*

Paul Titoch, correspondence 25/07/2016.

Despite the violence of these events, they were considered to be *jore* “because it was fought by sticks”, rather than *orɔn* “which involves guns.” But what emerges is the fragmentation between the same people, as well as the violence faced in exile, that are not necessarily building from the wider war, but which people still have to face.

#### 5.4.2.2 Travelling to Kapoeta with the SPLA

I visited Kapoeta for some three weeks in July 2013. Given its geographical closeness and their good relations with the Toposa population in Kapoeta, most women and children from Boma fled to Kapoeta in Eastern Equatoria State during May and June, catching rides with SPLA trucks. Just under 600 people settled in the small improvised IDP camp set up by the local authorities in unused USAID project facilities. On the edge of town past the airstrip, people were settled in concrete buildings organized by family. Latrines were available, water points close by and food distributed. The camp was composed mostly of women and children, as well as a dozen or so secondary school boys, many of them that were already living in Kapoeta attending school prior to the Boma clashes. In the chaos of the clashes in Boma, many families had been separated, with some fleeing to Ethiopia and others now in Kapoeta, not always aware if their family members were safe or even alive. When I told one Dinka old man, a former soldier that had married a Highland Murle woman and remained in Boma, that his family was safe and alive in Raad, he answered: *“Here my stomach might be full but without my children my heart is empty.”*<sup>35</sup> Many men had also joined the rebellion or feared remaining in South Sudan. Although the group was composed mostly of Highland

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<sup>35</sup> Elder in Kapoeta whose family were in Raad. Fieldnotes, Kapoeta 06/2013.

Murle, the IDP group also had a number of Anyuak women and children as well as other mixed ethnic groups, principally the families of soldiers.

I spent a number of days sitting with women at the camp chatting and singing age-set songs. There was a relaxed environment, with enough food around. In Kapoeta, both the government and NGOs had responded more or less promptly to the arrival of the people from Boma. They shared with me their stories of how they had reached Kapoeta. Although people had arrived at different times, they had all made more or less the same trajectory and crossed the desert with a truck with the support of either the SPLA or Bishop Paride Taban, at Kuron.<sup>36</sup> Marta Likwong had come on the 5 May just as the Cobra Faction took control of Itti:

*I left Bayen on the 5th of May and went to Kuron. From there bishop [Paride] Taban gave us a lorry to bring people to Kapoeta. Some of us went to Kachipo area in Mewun. We arrived in Kapoeta on the 26 of May, we came all together with mama Mary. Those of Itti and Jongolei and Bayen side. Those of Kaiwa remained there in the caves. That's why those of Kaiwa have been the most killed. The SPLA went to the mountain with a big machine bombing there [the caves].*

Interview Marta Likwong, Kapoeta, 17/07/2013

Likwong's sister-in-law, Kaka had remained in Kaiwa under the instructions of red chief Kuju, but later decided to leave to Kapoeta, after the SPLA murdered some of the Murle SPLA soldiers from Kaiwa that had reported back to the SPLA, mistakenly assuming they would be welcomed back. She had arrived in Kapoeta much later in June along with other women and a few young men who had caught a ride in an SPLA truck. Kaka again, recounted the story of the murdered Murle soldiers:

*Kaka: Mostly those SPLA from ηalam community went to Kaiwa. Then SPLA asked the chief to bring those soldiers to report back. When they came, they were all killed. Those ηalam from SPLA were killed. My uncle called Konyi and Abut [were killed]. First they killed 9 SPLA of ηalam, then they killed another 6. They asked the chief to bring them. (...) Right now there are maybe 30 women plus children living in the barracks with the SPLA.*

*Diana: Why don't they leave?*

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<sup>36</sup> Since retiring from the Diocese of Torit in 2004, Bishop Paride Taban has been leading peace initiatives across South Sudan. In 2005 he established the Holy Trinity Peace Village in Kuron, Eastern Equatoria state (<http://www.kuronvillage.net>), close to the administrative border to Boma sub-county.

*Kaka: Because they have a lot of children so they cannot just come... (...). All this problem is from DYY, this Murle of Pibor, until the people of Boma lose their lives for nothing. DYY needs what? We don't know.*

Kaka, Kapoeta, 17/07/2013

Other Murle reported similar stories. Vorgol, whose story was recounted in the previous chapter, had made a similar journey from Kaiwa in Upper Boma on to Mewun and then to Kuron where he took a lorry to Kapoeta where he finally arrived at the end of May. Although most people in Kaiwa chose to remain in their village under the instructions of red chief Kuju, Vorgol was keen to continue his secondary school and so chose to move on. After sharing his vague account of fleeing Boma, and as if apologizing for missing some details, he added: "When you run you don't remember anything".<sup>37</sup>

#### 5.4.2.3 Reaching Juba

As South Sudan's capital city, Juba is the most ethnically diverse place in the country. As a result, Murle people considered Juba to be a more neutral place, unlike Bor: "In Juba it's better, there are many [ethnically-diverse] people, but in Bor it is very dangerous."<sup>38</sup> But during the SPLA-Cobra Faction war, Murle people in Juba still felt fear and intimidation in the capital.

Adut's husband was a Wildlife Ranger in Boma who had 'disappeared' during the crisis, likely having joined the rebellion. She fled Itti to Upper Boma with her three small children, first to Kuron then to Kapoeta and eventually reached Juba and was taken in by Paulino Chacha, the cousin-brother of her husband. She told me what had happened:

*It [fighting in Boma] started because of David Yau Yau. I went to the bush around Boma and saw soldiers. They fought with DYY until they managed to fight back and return to Boma. They told people in Boma that they had relations with DYY and that is why they were causing us oppression. (...) After the soldiers came back to Boma, insecurity became very high until the husbands told wives to go find a place with more security. (...)*

Adut was quick to understand and explain that the Murle were being scapegoated and blamed. She recalled the recent murder of Kolor Pino, a high-rank Murle SPLA Brigadier

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<sup>37</sup> James Vorgol, Kaiwa IDP in Kapoeta 19/07/2013

<sup>38</sup> Peter Alani, IDP in Juba 07/06/2013

General from Labarab who was the Warden and the Commander of the Wildlife Forces in the Boma National Park. He was murdered on the road by Kassengor, allegedly by the SPLA, when travelling by road from Kapoeta to Boma in early May 2013, along with 10 other people including his bodyguards (Sudan Tribune 2013b). The episode led many Murle, especially Wildlife Rangers to join the Cobra Faction.

*“With Kolor, they gave him a chair to sit down, took his guns away and shot all of them.<sup>39</sup> When Wildlife [Forces] heard [this] in Nyat, there was fighting in Boma. Soldiers say that all Wildlife have a connection with DYY. It’s always blamed on DYY. So from there, Murle soldiers joined with Wildlife and fought against the SPLA. So when Wildlife came back they slaughtered them. Many people are dying in Boma. Even my husband, up to this time, I don’t know where he is. If you go to Boma now, there are only soldiers from other tribes. If a Murle hides somewhere, if he comes back they’ll say ‘you’ve joined DYY’, even if that person was only fearing and hiding. We are just in the middle. Even women hiding with us, they shot at us, until we ran away (...).*

*They are saying this year we will kill all the Murle! They tell us the area is safe, but if we come back they kill us. If you’re a Murle man coming to Juba you’ll be captured and they’ll say you’re coming from DYY. The only people not killed are women, if you’re a man you will be killed here. Women that are pregnant, soldiers are saying ‘you should protect only those in your womb’, not the men. We don’t know who is alive and who is dead. Even though we don’t have any connection with DYY, but they have this plan to kill Murle. Even here if they say come for [IDP] registration [for distribution of aid services], some people fear because of soldiers. (...)*

*[In Boma] Soldiers are using us as wives, making us cook. For those of us here, we don’t know if you’ll be alive or dead. The men who protect us are dead so we don’t know for us. God will know. Even the soldiers friendly to us in Boma, if they meet us here, the person will say we are collaborators. (...). On the 20 May when soldiers fought with Wildlife, I left. That time I heard there was going to be fighting. I was in Boma Up with my 3 children. I came to Kuron first, then Kapoeta. When I reached Kapoeta I had no relatives there so I came to Juba and called Paulino”.*

Adut, Juba, 14/06/2013

Murle homes in Juba were overwhelmed with new arrivals of relatives from Greater Pibor, especially women and children. Adut was originally an ethnic Anyuak who had married a Murle man, thus becoming herself Murle. Her account reveals how women and men faced different risks with regard to the SPLA. Although there were also cases of women directly targeted, young men were most at risk of lethal violence by the SPLA. Women were exposed to other threats, with much greater nuance. Earlier in the chapter Kaka and also Adut refer to the women left in Boma who took ‘refuge’ with their children in the SPLA barracks in Itti.

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<sup>39</sup> With ‘they’ Adut is referring to the SPLA and to Jie militia.

Those women were not being kept in the barracks by force, but they were “used as wives” and made to cook and wash. For those women, the protection afforded to them and their children by being in the SPLA barracks involved difficult and complex compromises.

Adut had been able to decide to go to Juba because she could afford the public transport fare. But perhaps even more important than her economic status, were her social support networks in Juba. Because she had no news of her husband, she settled with her husband’s cousin-brother, Paulino. Murle people escaping from the war with no relations in Juba settled spontaneously around the home of Sultan Ismail Konyi in Konyo Konyo neighbourhood, feeling that the sultan would provide them with safety and with some assistance. But even in Juba, all Murle feared, not only the possibility of violence for the sheer fact of being Murle but also the uncertainty of events at ‘home’ and of loved ones. For Adut, like many other Murle people, she felt safer in Juba but she explained that even in Juba, all Murle were accused to be DYY “collaborators”. Ultimately, all Murle people felt at risk regardless of their gender, age or economic status. Adut could afford to move to Juba but she still felt threatened as a Murle woman, as well as fearing for loved ones in Pibor. Ethnicity is profoundly embedded in other social relations and identities built around gender, clans, age-sets and generations, wealth, religion and localities. But in the social and political context of the SPLA war, Murle people privileged ethnicity because regardless of their age, gender or economic status, it was their ethnic identity as Murle that posed a threat, and produced a common experience of the state.

## 5.5 CONCLUSION

Through the personal accounts of the events in Boma, the chapter has traced the ways in which violences accumulate and can materialise in parallel dimensions, ranging from structural violence and its materialisation into conflict violence as well as its coexistence with everyday violence. Because the dissertation is interested in locating the stories emerging specifically from Boma, the chapter offered a chronological account of the war between the Government of South Sudan and the Murle population at large, from the perspective of Boma. Importantly, the chapter then turned to present various accounts of how Murle civilians from Boma managed insecurity and in many cases took decisions to flee, some across a national border, others to another state within South Sudan and still some to remain in Boma. People did not all face the physicality of violence, but very often they faced the potentiality and uncertainty of violence.



There are three key reflections to take from this chapter. First, forms of violence, or violences, coexist, sometimes building on each other but more often than not, existing in parallel. The Murle ethnic community were at war with the SPLA; simultaneously Murle cattle-camps were being attacked and raided by organised Lou Nuer youth, with the implicit support of the government. Thus, the continuum is not a linear progressive force here.

Second, just as everyday life continues, so does everyday violence. This is what the violence continuum fails to fully and appropriately recognise. It was not that certain types of violence escalated and were replaced by other more intense types of violence, what could be called political violence or war. 'Ordinary' incidents of violence continued to be part of social life for the Highland Murle from Boma. But these coexisted with the war with the state and other ethnic communities. To a greater or lesser degree, everyday violence, or episodes of normalised violence as examined in chapter 4 continued to affect the daily lives of people living in war as the backdrop for social existence. These were not transformed into a war nor were they suspended. Or perhaps more accurately, some were. For example, at the spontaneous settlement in Raad, it was agreed that age-set tensions and fighting would wait to be resolved once people returned 'home'. Effectively, what ended up happening was that new age-sets, previously non-existent in Boma, were given the space to assert themselves and mature, something that possibly would not have been allowed in Boma yet. Conversely, other types of everyday violence continued to dominate people's lives. For example, Jameson who escaped the war in Boma and took refuge in Dima continued to face the threat of revenge attacks by the family of the man he had accidentally killed in Boma. Like all the people who crossed the border to Raad, he was an asylum seeker. He was given official refugee status not because of the SPLA-SSDM/A-CF war, but because his life was in danger due to the threat of a revenge attack.

Finally, the accounts of displacement illustrate how realities are constructed and shaped according to people's geographical and material perspectives, which change as people also move from one place to another, a point further developed in chapter 6. The next chapters 6 and 7 will examine in detail from different angles and progressively the politics of Murle identity, and how, in the context of political violence, ethnic identifications were being recruited and performed for social and political purposes.

## 6. THE POLITICS OF BEING MURLE: STATE WAR AND THE NARRATIVISATION OF ḢALAM IDENTITY

*“This is politics, people want to separate us into two, it’s not true, it’s just politics. The land belongs to us all, Boma and Pibor belong to all of us. We cannot say they’re few [Murle in Boma], so let them go. They are part of us”.*

Late paramount chief ḡantho Kavula, 28/06/2013, Juba

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

ḡantho Kavula, the late paramount chief from Likuangole, was making reference to the controversy surrounding the politicization of the Murle term *ḡalam*. Set in motion by the war between the Cobra Faction and the SPLA, the term had acquired new meanings and was being used to refer to Highland Murle as a distinct ethnically-bounded group or ‘tribe’ (the term used most often by South Sudanese). For ḡantho, it was all politics, emanating from elites in an ethnically tainted government, politically manoeuvring to divide the Murle and weaken them. But for chief ḡantho, dividing the Murle was inconceivable: the Highland Murle were Murle, and Boma was Murleland, regardless of such politics.

In the eyes of many Murle, including chief ḡantho, the war with the ‘hakuma’ (Leonardi 2007b) was actually a war led by Dinka Bor and to a lesser extent Lou Nuer, who held aspirations to rid Boma of Murle and take over the rich land. Although the Murle had in the past been at war with neighbouring Dinka Bor and Lou Nuer, for chief ḡantho, the dynamics of the conflict in 2013 were different. Not only because it was a war with the ‘hakuma’ that was largely seen to be dominated by Dinka Bor, but also because of the deployment of identity politics as a weapon of war. For chief ḡantho, the Murle were one people from Likuangole to Boma, regardless of the fact that Boma had become scarcely populated and its Murle people had different livelihoods. For ḡantho, “It is new, saying Murle of Boma are different. Even before, 2004, 2005, 2009, there were no rumours. It is only this year.”<sup>1</sup> It was

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<sup>1</sup> Late paramount chief ḡantho Kavula, 28/06/2013, Juba

only that year, in 2013, that Murle identity was being questioned and ripped apart, and in the process pitting Murle against Murle.

As noted by ŋantho (and discussed earlier in chapter 3), until the 2013 SPLA-Cobra Faction war, the word *ŋalam* had been used as an internal derogatory label, even as an insult, for Murle people with no cattle. It was often used to refer to Highland Murle because they were predominantly cultivators in most cases, without cattle. The conflict with the SPLA raised the prominence of the term and instilled it with new meanings. Many Murle interlocutors spoke of pressures from the state and from other ethnic groups to divide the Murle, by separating the Lowland Murle agro-pastoralists from the Highland Murle cultivators, who would ostensibly become known as the ‘*ŋalam* tribe.’ For Murle people, the perceived objective of this strategy was to weaken the Murle ethnic community, and take over their land.

This chapter will explore how Highland Murle people were recruiting and performing ethnic identifications for social and political purposes. This was a reciprocal process – the next chapter will discuss the ways in which the state was part of negotiating and to a large extent, defining narratives of identity (see also in Broch-Due 2004b). This chapter will examine how and why different Highland Murle individuals accepted or rejected ‘being *ŋalam*,’ depending on their position, interests and needs at that moment. The chapter will draw a connection between how a predatory state, events of violence and the war sweeping across Greater Pibor were being used instrumentally to shape identity narratives.

Murle places of exile were also infused with meaning (James 2009a), and affected the way political violence and the war were made legible and understood: from remaining at ‘home’ in Boma, to fleeing across the border to Ethiopia and internally to Juba or Kapoeta. The chapter will examine the significance of movement and of place, in shaping people’s narratives of events, understandings of violence and diverse performances of identity. This will involve going beyond the physical location but to consider the events, their interpretation, and feelings that led people to move.

Inspired by Spear and Waller’s (1993) edited volume that explores the various possibilities for *Being Maasai*, the chapter explores accounts of *being* Murle from Boma during the Cobra Faction war with the government, the instrumental use of a *ŋalam* identity and how the relationship between violence and identity/belonging was constituted through the active engagement between place and necessity, cross cut with relationships, and political and social exigencies.

Highland Murle people were certainly not only victims of the war and of displacement. They were participants in the conflict and active agents in strategically selecting, deploying and embodying elements of Murle identity that could portray them in a neutral and non-menacing way in light of the ongoing conflict, and thus offer some security. Boma peace conferences with Jie and Suri-Kachipo included various official accounts of being *ηalam*, and allegedly breaking away from being Murle. Highland Murle used being *ηalam* instrumentally, or simply accepted it, but it often fell short of reality, which was much more complex and heterogeneous. For Logidang Lom, the Murle paramount chief of Boma, the adoption, or just the non-rejection and toleration of the term *ηalam* as a separate ‘tribe’, was a way to secure safety in a context of pressure and insecurity in Boma:

*“They want us to call ourselves ηalam, to separate from those of Pibor, otherwise they say they’ll hold us responsible for raids and abductions and as part of those of David Yau Yau.”<sup>2</sup>*

‘They’ referred inter-changeably to neighbouring Jie and Suri-Kachipo and to the SPLA. Logidang Lom maintained that all Murle had become guilty by ethnic association of “raids and abductions and as part of those of David Yau Yau.” But the politics of Murle identity were much more complex than this suggests and could offer a liberating space for those fearing persecution and seeking to divest from what had become the burden of being Murle. In reality, despite the controversy around the term *ηalam*, ultimately, as expressed by two young men from Pibor displaced in Juba, “*ηalam* have been treated by government as Murle, not as *ηalam*. They are being killed as Murle.”<sup>3</sup>

## 6.2 ON VIOLENCE AND IDENTITY NARRATIVES

“Far from being a people with a problem of displacement, the Uduk are in their modern form a people *created* by this problem” (James 1996, 186).

It seems pertinent to start this chapter by evoking Wendy James’s (1979) work on the “making of the Uduk people”, through their stories of survival. It was their experiences of forced migration that *produced* the Uduk as a group. In a similar way, I argue in this chapter that it was the experiences of what was perceived by most Murle as a war of the ‘hakuma’ and the ‘home’ (Leonardi 2007b) against all Murle that temporarily *produced* Highland Murle as a distinct *ηalam*-bounded group. By denying the violence of *being* Murle and at

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<sup>2</sup> Sultan Logidang, Fieldnotes Boma Peace Meeting in Boma, 15/11/2013.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation Stone and Paulino Chacha, Juba 19/06/2013.

some level, tolerating being called *ɲalam*, some Highland Murle found that instrumentalizing their identity was a useful strategy for safety. Yet simultaneously, many Highland Murle people asserted their 'Murle-ness' by making use of pan-Murle social networks of support in Juba and elsewhere. Of course there was not a single Highland Murle response to the war, but many. These varied based on emotional reactions to the war, as well as social, political and, importantly, physical positioning and necessity. These variations will be discussed further ahead in the chapter.

### 6.2.1 THE PRODUCTION OF *ŊALAM* IDENTITY

Speaking to a crowd of Highland Murle, Jie and Kachipo at a Peace Conference in Boma in November 2013, Jeremiah Lotiboy, a Murle pastor who was at the time the Boma acting county commissioner, made the following analogy:

*"There is a story of turtles and rabbits. The turtles told the rabbit to burn their houses and the rabbit went and burnt his house. When the rain came, the turtles hid in their shells but the rabbit ran from tree to tree with no home to go to. (...) At that time, Yau Yau started the fighting in his home. Yau Yau took time to burn his home. Everybody knew that, and when fire burnt in Pibor then the flame reached Boma. Because of that time, DYY is like a rabbit. He burnt his home from Pibor up to Mewun. For this reason, we don't want to be like him. He was like a rabbit, fooled by the turtles."*

Jeremiah Lotiboy, Boma Peace Meeting, Itti 14/11/2013

The story illustrates the way the Cobra Faction conflict with the SPLA was perceived and discursively constructed by many people in Boma; in the view of many Highland Murle people (especially from Upper Boma), the war had been brought not by the SPLA, but by Yau Yau to his own home, and had spared nowhere in Murleland. Certainly, once the war reached Boma, it initially made little distinction between civilians and combatants, Lowland and Highlanders, pastoralists or cultivators.

Jacob had fled Nyat in Boma in early May 2013 walking to Ethiopia and eventually crossing the border back into South Sudan further north in Upper Nile. From there, he was flown to Juba by the NGO he had been working for. Like many others, Jacob thought that the Murle were threatened as a 'tribe', and that the government was instrumentally using David Yau Yau's rebellion as a reason to attack all Murle:

*"The issue is not the rebellion. They [Government and SPLA] were searching for a way to attack us. This issue is from Bor and their problems with Lowland Murle. (...) SPLA are just coming behind DYY, but what they're doing is not against DYY, they're targeting all Murle community."*

Interview Jacob Lothiboi, Juba, 25/05/2013

Even though some Highland Murle youth, especially from Nyat, had joined the rebellion, many people in Boma blamed the DYY rebellion for having initially brought war, destruction and displacement to their home. As noted in chapter 4 and 5, the SPLA had not initially engaged in consistent aggressive behaviour in the Highlands.

Conversely, most Murle of the Lowlands largely saw the rebellion as legitimate form of self-defence against an aggressive SPLA and actively supported and joined the Cobra Faction. For the late Murle paramount chief ŋantho Kavula speaking from exile in Juba in June 2013, the Murle were facing one of their greatest challenges as a community:

*"This is worse than ever, the problem is not from the rebels, it's from the government. The problem is the case of revenge, the SPLA are taking revenge on civilians."<sup>4</sup>*

It was not that all Murle people in Greater Pibor had experienced direct physical violence. People were reacting not necessarily to the physicality of violence, but instead to the risks of violence and feelings of fear and of insecurity (Vigh 2011). Philip Papa, who had fled from Pibor town to Juba, made this point:

*"People are running away from the town because people are being killed. Fighting between DYY and SPLA, for us in the town we've seen fighting took place in Likuangle, rebels only attacked there very heavy against the SPLA barracks. In Pibor there was no heavy attack launched against the SPLA like what took place in Likuangle. But indirectly, the attack in Likuangle made all of us be [seen as] the enemy of SPLA. When there was the attack in Likuangle, the SPLA took revenge on us in Pibor town."*

Interview Philip Papa, Juba, 03/06/2013

Indirectly, the actions of the SSDM/A-Cobra Faction against the SPLA, transformed all Murle civilians into "the enemy of SPLA". Being Murle meant being guilty. This general sense of persecution, fear and inability to speak out on Murle oppression grew especially after the arrest of two prominent Murle pastors in Juba, Reverend Idris Nalos Kida and Pastor Trainee David Gayin (Amnesty International 2013). Neighbourhoods in Juba with large Murle populations such as Jebel and Souk Sita were being intensely monitored by National

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<sup>4</sup> Interview ŋantho Kavula, Juba 26/06/2013.

Security. There were a number of recorded cases of Murle men being detained without any formal accusation.<sup>5</sup>

Brigadier General Kolor Pino, the warden of Boma National Park who was described by President Kiir as a “dedicated soldier and nationalist” (Sudan Tribune 2013b) was killed by the SPLA on his way from Kapoeta to Boma on 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> May 2013 (Human Rights Watch 2013b). For many Murle people, his murder was proof that even high-level Murle individuals that had been long-time supporters of the SPLA were being targeted based on their ethnicity. President Kiir blamed Kolor Pino’s killing in cold blood, along with several other Wildlife Rangers and bodyguards, on “rogue” elements within the SPLA and said that “Those responsible for this reprehensive crime will be held accountable” (Sudan Tribune 2013b). But no serious investigation took place and no one was held accountable. Referring to the sense of persecution and attacks across Murleland, one man displaced in Juba told me: “If we don’t do something, it will continue until Murle community is finished.”<sup>6</sup>

This was not an unjustified claim. *Being* Murle had become a liability and a source of insecurity. Particularly since the civilian disarmament campaign aggressively carried out by the SPLA in 2012 (Human Rights Watch 2013b; Amnesty International 2012), there were numerous cases of Murle civilians indiscriminately targeted and killed by the SPLA. As such, survival strategies in most cases involved fleeing for physical safety. Pastoralists across the Lowlands concentrated with their cattle in Baaz and Juom, in remote hard-to-reach cattle camps and swampy areas considered to be safe havens (Felix da Costa 2015). Town people in the Lowlands gradually left for Juba, and once there, temporarily settled in the overcrowded homes of Murle relatives. Once this became socially and economically unsustainable, many families chose to continue their journeys on to Kakuma Refugee Camp in northern Kenya, and to Arua and Adjumani in northern Uganda.

The patterns of violence in Boma were more sudden and options less obvious. Contrary to agro-pastoralist populations that could rely on their cattle to sustain themselves, Murle people from Boma depended on their crops to survive. This made moving to hard-to-reach areas more challenging. Also, the narrativisation of peace in Boma, discussed in chapter 4, contributed to a false sense of safety. Some Murle civilians in Itti had been leaving for Juba and Kakuma for some time, but also relying on the false safety of Upper Boma. The larger part of Murle people in Itti and Upper Boma mistakenly assumed they were safe in Upper

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<sup>5</sup> Fieldnotes, cattle market, Pibor 27/04/2015.

<sup>6</sup> IDP from Pibor in Juba, 07/06/2013.

Boma and were somewhat taken by surprise by the confrontations of May 2013 between the SSDM/A-Cobra and the SPLA.

In this scenario, many Murle people in Boma resorted not only to flight but also to the adoption of an alternative identity that would guarantee them safety, by disassociating with what was seen as the cause of violence, *being Murle*. Highland Murle people positively embraced their *ɲalam* identity, also being negotiated with Jie and Suri-Kachipo people. Murle people from Boma deployed their *ɲalam* identity when it was perceived to be socially and politically expedient, like in Peace Conferences and in some areas of displacement. Other times, people resorted back to being Murle.

So, in a context like South Sudan, how were participation in and experiences of political violence and war part of shaping and reinforcing identity narratives? Violence generates uncertainty and ambiguity that can provoke social transformation and “can ‘speed up’ history” (Donham 2006, 28). Fleeing a war zone can be a concrete strategy in managing insecurity, as much as remaining at ‘home’. Some Murle fled Boma while others, from Kaiwa, thought it would be safer to stay, as was discussed in chapter 5.

Survival means different things in different places and different times but in all of them it means the reconfiguration of reality and the potential for identity transformation. Usually immediately associated with obliteration, devastation, chaos and the anti-social, violence appears at first sight to be “the very antithesis to our sense of belonging, destructive of identity, relationship and lifeworld” (Broch-Due 2004a, 17). But this essentialised understanding of violence does not account for the powerful social ways in which violence interweaves itself conceptually into complex notions of belonging and identity.

### 6.3 THE POLITICS OF MURLE IDENTITIES AND THE NARRATIVISATION OF *ɲALAM*

Identities are always political. This is very visible in South Sudan, where networks of actors often deploy them as the means to claim, mobilize and capture state and international resources, as well as simultaneously deny others the access (Laudati 2011, 25). Specifically, identity politics are usually deployed to “secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context” (Heyes 2014, n.p.), a rather accurate reference to the context of South Sudan and the ways in which politics are conducted.

Across Africa, groups and ethnic identifications have historically been very dynamic and



responsive to perceptions of threat, illustrating “not only the constructed and contingent nature of identities, but also the mobilizing forces of fear and anxiety, which are discursively produced” (Dunn 2001, 59). As with the case of the Murle in South Sudan, evolving and socially constructed ethnicities in Central Africa have been grounded in social myths and historical narratives. Writing about the effects of discourses on identity, Dunn observes that, firstly:

“Identities of groups – ethnic, racial or national – are often produced through narrativity. The process of narrativisation entails taking on, creating, assigning or performing a story of some sort that captures the central elements and characteristics of what it means to be a member of the specific community. Narratives of identity are formed by a gradual layering on and connecting of events and meanings, usually through three steps: the selection of events themselves; the linking of these events to each other in causal and associational ways (plotting); and interpreting what the events and plot signify” (Dunn 2001, 57).

Highland Murle’s instrumental transformation, social construction and temporary ‘becoming *ɲalam*’ was produced through the deliberate narrativisation of identity enabled through the creative selection of what were considered to be significant characteristics and qualities. It was simultaneously negotiated between Highland Murle people internally as well as with the wider Murle group, and externally with government actors and other ethnic groups, particularly the Jie and the Kachipo people in Boma. In some ways, this was a strategic and nuanced identity-making. In this sense, identity is crucial in shaping the hierarchy of social positions of power, influences how actors are perceived and treated by others, and affects how actors view and understand the world around them (Dunn 2001).

In South Sudan, being Murle has come to be synonymous with pastoralism, cattle-raiding, child abduction, hostility, lack of ‘development’ and violence. Murle have been at odds with those in positions of power in South Sudan, in a context where access to and control of the state and its resources is largely determined through ethnic politics and identities. The war with the SPLA was perceived by many Murle to be a war with Dinka Bor ethnic community of Jonglei perceived to be dominating and controlling not only the state, but also the grand narrative (see Laudati 2011). Hagmann and Péclard (2010, 554) give the example of Mozambique, where “memories of the war, or rather the power to write and tell the ‘grand narrative’ of the civil war in Mozambique, is also at the centre of Frelimo’s claim to embody the state.”

In the Murle collective perspective, they had as an ethnic unit been collectively constructed as the ‘enemy’, by the government’s SPLA, which in turn was perceived as a highly biased and ethnically politicized structure. The SPLA was a highly fragmented military structure

co-opted by the specific interests of its individual elites, who in turn used ethnicity to mobilise their constituencies. Simultaneously, narratives of difference had been brewing among Highland Murle for some time in Boma, as discussed in earlier chapters. These largely concerned perceptions of the marginalization of the wider Murle group and discontent with the government in Pibor.

Murle people from the Highlands had many components of identity: gender, age-set, clan, origin, economic status, among various others. But the element that could best distinguish Highland Murle in Boma from the broader larger Lowland Murle was their mode of subsistence and its implications for everyday life and group relationships. As cultivators, they separated themselves from the war with the state, which was simultaneously a war with their agro-pastoralist dominant neighbours, the Dinka and Nuer. Being cultivators had great meaning and weight in the reimagining and discursive construction of an alternative, albeit temporary, safer identity. Serge Tornay (1981, 125) makes the valuable point that “processes of ethnic group formation, [however], cannot be fully understood without reference to modes of subsistence and ecology.” Actually, modes of subsistence and ecology can also serve discursively to create difference. As discussed in chapter 4, from an internal Highland Murle perspective, being *ηalam*, the absence of cattle and surviving through cultivation, distanced them from the dominant agro-pastoralist Murle and the stereotypes that saw all Murle as violent and hostile, at odds with the state and their neighbours.

As much as some Highland Murle ‘became *ηalam*’, the narrativisation and the politics of *ηalam* were partially an external product. As one man explained, the *ηalam* politics “is something brought by outsiders.”<sup>7</sup> He was referring to the ways in which at a larger scale, a Dinka-dominated government, and on a more micro-level, Jie, had interests in dividing and dwindling the Murle as a self-identified unified ethnic group. For example, at various Boma Peace Meetings, Jie individuals were calling Highland Murle as *ηalam*, aware it was a term of abuse, used mostly internally among Murle and of the political connotations the term had acquired.

Externally, a divide and conquer strategy was deployed by government and carried out on the ground by the SPLA and neighbouring groups with the intention of changing the Boma social landscape. The Murle ethnic community were convinced that Dinka Bor had an interest in taking over their home Boma, because so many Dinka Bor in the SPLA had lived

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<sup>7</sup> Fieldnotes, Boma Peace Meeting, Itti 15/11/2013.

in Boma from the mid-1980s onwards and recognised the area's resource-rich potential. Simultaneously, Highland Murle felt increasingly threatened by Jie in the area.

While these politics of difference were instrumentalized and politicized by outsiders with vested interests, interests in dividing the Murle, they were also widely politicized internally within the Murle community. There were different reactions to 'becoming *ηalam*', in some cases out of necessity. Other times because of political aspirations and in some cases, for genuine wishes of greater autonomy and somewhat naively considering that as a separate 'tribe', *ηalam* could have greater access to state resources, as discussed further ahead in the chapter.

For example, at the September and November 2013 Boma Peace Meetings, in Juba and Boma respectively, even though it was not in the agenda, there were heated debates discussing the term *ηalam*, its adoption, rejection and its consequences. In the Boma Peace Meeting in September 2013 that took place in Juba because Boma was deemed unsafe, Korok Remoris, a senior politician, argued:

*Korok: We're always hearing from people this word 'ηalam'. I want to answer this (...). Who created 'ηalam'? – All of us, we are born, but we don't name ourselves. We are named. By who? The people of Pibor named us ηalam because we have no cows. It is them who called us ηalam; we refused many times. Now we accepted it, why are you quarrelling? It is them who named us. It is them, people of Pibor, who are naming us. Somebody who is poor without cows just looking for wild fruit – ok. Call us ηalam. It is the people of cows who named us.*

Korok Remoris, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba 12/09/2013

Korok's controversial statement was met with both approval and anger from different people in the room. The answer from Benjamin Lilcho, from Boma but who had been living in Pibor working for the local authorities, represented well the controversial dynamics provoked by the term:

*Benjamin: But why do you accept it? If today someone calls you thief, will you accept it? When Dinka were killing us, did they call us ηalam?*

Benjamin Lilcho, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba 12/09/2013

Benjamin's statement also demonstrated how oppression and the violence of the government were often equated with Dinka, and how despite the rhetoric of *ηalam*, Murle across Murle Land were treated, threatened and "killed" as Murle, not as a separate 'tribe'.

The SPLA's recapture of Boma succeeded with the aid of Jie militias, well familiar with the terrain. In turn, Jie individuals took advantage of the reduced physical presence of Murle in

Boma, seen as an opportunity to grab state power and government positions. Jie support to the SPLA had a twofold motivation: the legitimate concern to protect their homes, as well as in the process accumulate economic, social and political capital. In turn, for Highland Murle, the narrativisation of *ηalam* offered the discursive framework that enabled them to be safe, as *ηalam*, and not Murle.

#### 6.4 EVERYDAY LIFE, PLACE AND NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY

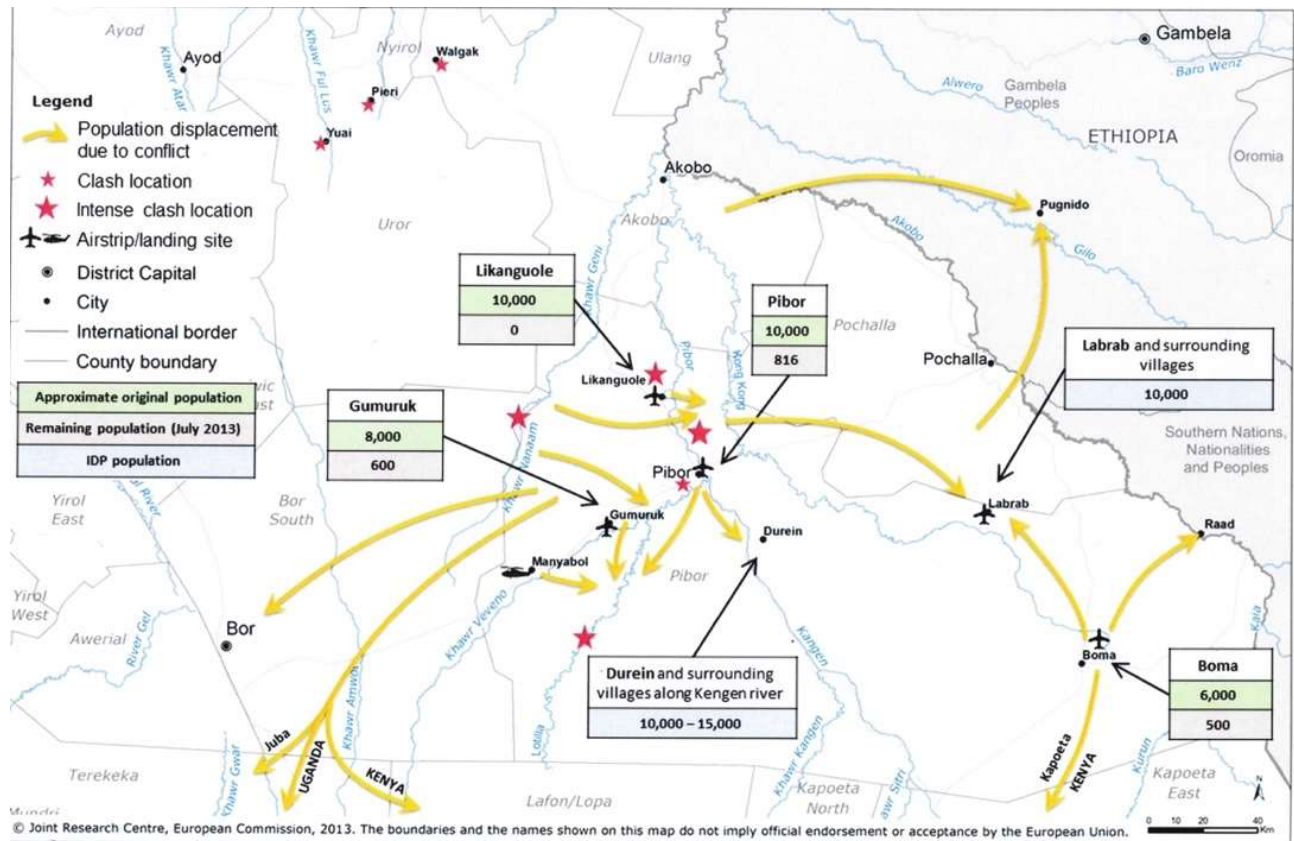
In the rest of the chapter I examine how the various places Highland Murle decided to be in, whether 'home' in Boma or in different places of exile, played a part in shaping people's understanding and narrative of the social and political context they faced (James 2009b; 2009a).

Writing about the ways in which Ethiopian returnees made Ada Bai a home, Laura Hammond (2004, 9) observes that "Different senses of place were based on the particular relationship forged through daily practice." In a similar way, there was a lot of variation in how people were making forms of violence legible and relating it to their most intimate experiences of being Murle. Versions and understandings of what the conflict meant in relation to belonging to and being Murle varied. To a great extent, variation depended on the spatial and social locations and the circumstances people found themselves in. The contested nature of the explanations suggests that to understand a wider context, narratives must be compared and juxtaposed, and that there is no single privileged standpoint from which to studying social processes.

When Highland Murle fled to different locations (maps 11 and 12), as discussed in chapter 5, the places where people searched for safety were infused with meaning, and affected the way political violence and war was made legible and understood (see Malkki 1995; 1992). The movements and places people settled in also affected the ways people related to *being* part of the Murle imaginary, individually and collectively. In a similar case, Liisa Malkki discusses how Burundian refugees in Tanzania adapted to their lives in exile. She makes the important point that "The social and imaginative processes of the construction of nationness and identity can come to be influenced by the local, everyday circumstances of life in exile, and how spatial and social isolation of refugees can figure in these processes" (Malkki 1995, 3).

Building from Malkki's and Hammond's point, everyday practices of the lives of Highland Murle people at home and in the various places of displacement, their spatial isolation and social, economic and political pressures, shaped in different ways how people made sense of events of the war and of the wider reality. As examined in the sections below, the angle from which 'home' was seen shaped the performance of identity. "'Homeland' in this way remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced peoples, though the relation to homeland may be very differently constructed in different settings" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 11), as demonstrated by Malkki's (1992) work with Burundian refugees. Relations to homeland, imagining and recreating events, performing identity may be very differently constructed in different settings.

The SPLA and SSDA-CF war triggered many people to leave Boma, and in the process it was in some cases necessary to reimagine, reconceptualise and enact an alternative identity from the repertoire of identities that people have. By drawing on comparative perspectives from various locations where Murle people from Boma fled to, the rest of the chapter examines the narratives of Murle and *ḡalam* identity in the various places, and how identity was being performed differently, based both on the places people had come from and where they went to. Thus, I argue that social and physical dimensions shape the understandings of war and narratives of events, as well as influence identity claims. The narrativisation of *ḡalam* took different turns, in connection to the meanings and experiences that people had of that physical place. But Murle also crafted alternative *ḡalam* identities in response to the practical circumstances of their day-to-day lives (see Malkki 1995), whether at *home* in Kaiwa in Upper Boma, in displacement in Juba and Kapoeta or across the border in Raad and Dima in Ethiopia. The pressures of being Murle were experienced, enacted and addressed differently in each place. It demonstrates the ways in which movement and place shape people's narratives of events, understandings of the war and of violence, and diverse performances and enacting of identity.



Map 12 Murle population movements and displacement in July 2013 (ECHO, 2013).

#### 6.4.1 STAYING HOME, BUT ADAPTING TO A NEW LANDSCAPE IN BOMA

Perhaps the most remarkable interpretation of how *ηalam* identity was employed, constructed and performed was by the Highland Murle people who remained in Kaiwa village in Upper Boma and felt greatest the pressures of being Murle. Being Murle signified being associated to the rebellion fighting the government, and thus carried the potential of being a target of violence. So pragmatically, people in Kaiwa 'became' *ηalam*, both as a choice as well as an imposition.

Murle from Kaiwa village deep in the Boma Hills, hid in the forest and caves in the Boma Hills during the most critical period of violence in Boma in May 2013, but did not flee permanently elsewhere as nearly all other Murle in Boma. On their return to their village, the Highland Murle from Kaiwa found it destroyed and looted. They also witnessed a shift in the social landscape in Boma, that saw Murle go from being the socially and politically dominant 'tribe' in Boma, to a threatened minority. If Highland Murle identified as Murle, Jie and Suri-Kachipo equated them to rebels, or at a minimum, as rebel sympathizers. In turn,

Jie and Suri-Kachipo also began calling Highland Murle *ηalam*. Most of the Highland Murle accepted the interpellation and adopted the term *ηalam*.

The circumstances that made people choose to remain in Boma when most other Murle left were discussed in the previous chapter. Pressure from Red Chief Peter Kuju for Kaiwa residents to remain in Boma, or otherwise leave and be cursed had serious repercussions. For Kaiwa residents, it was safer to remain in Boma and face the war than to challenge the red chiefs' demands and spiritual power, suggesting how respected red chiefs continue to be.<sup>8</sup> Irer recounted Peter Kuju's words: "He said whoever leaves this mountain is cursed and will die on the way. Kuju said he would not leave his father's home. That's why many Murle were initially killed by Kachipo in Mewun and Jie and SPLA".<sup>9</sup> I met Peter Kuju in November 2013; he explained to me that if they had all left, Kaiwa and all of Boma would be entirely occupied by other tribes, and that was why he ordered people to stay.<sup>10</sup>

Surrounded by SPLA aided by Jie, keen to establish their control of Boma, people of Kaiwa felt daily the pressures of being, or not being, Murle. Accepting being called *ηalam*, and calling themselves *ηalam* offered them some protection and liberation from the risks of being Murle. Not being Murle conferred them some neutrality from the ongoing conflict between the largely Murle Cobra Faction and the SPLA. Long-time alliances with neighbouring Kachipo changed, illustrating how group local dynamics constantly shift.

At the Boma Peace Meeting in September 2013 in Juba, the Murle paramount chief of Boma, Logidang Lom, from Kaiwa village, was asked what had happened during the clashes in Boma. His account of events demonstrates well how he dealt with the daily pressures of violence against Murle, and how becoming *ηalam* was perhaps the only escape from this violence:

*"You've heard there were people killed and displaced. It's true for us coming from Boma, the situation is very bad. What brought all this mess is our son DYY who started this from there [Pibor] and it extended up to Boma. When Kolor [Pino] was killed, for us in Boma we were very annoyed... The Wildlife soldiers headed by Kolor joined DYY, they had their own intentions of joining DYY. After DYY had arrived in Boma, the SPLA found Kolor on the road and killed him, but he was innocent."*

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Kuju, in his mid-20s was initially part of Bothonya but was 'pulled up' to be Thithi because of his position as a red chief.

<sup>9</sup> Irer Lotony, Juba 09/12/2015.

<sup>10</sup> Conversation red chief Peter Kuju, Itti 15/11/2013.

By 'innocent', Logidang meant that Kolor Pino had not joined the Cobra Faction. He resented the rebellion for the killing of his people and the destruction of his home. He continued describing the events in Boma, explaining that the SPLA co-opted neighbouring Kachipo to ambush his people in Upper Boma:

*"When the SPLA recaptured Boma from DYY, they stayed in Itti for two days and went to Upper Boma. Civilians were hiding in the bush. Even DYY is a Murle but all Murle civilians [in Boma] were hiding from him. Those of Jonglei and Bayen ran to Nyabare River, those of Nyat followed to Nyalongoro side, and those of Kaiwa were in the Kaiwa forest hiding. The SPLA went to Upper Boma, and Kachipo were ambushing Murle in Upper Boma. One lady survived who was a Kachipo, many others were finished there. Those who went to Mewun were killed in Zooc side. The sons of Kamalong [the paramount chief of Kachipo], they know the mess they are doing. Even the boys in school were killed there. If we collected all those killed by Kachipo there are 12. When we confirmed, then SPLA decided 'you of Kaiwa we need to unite you with Kachipo and Jie'. Another man, Barko, a Kachipo, came back to Orgin to report himself to town because he feared, he knew the mess Kachipo had done to Murle. You see, with all this happening the rest of Murle ran. We [Murle] have become very few [in Boma], that's why we needed to reunite with Kachipo and Jie. The reason why I accepted was because we were alone. Let us talk truth of what happened."*

With this, chief Logidang was referring to *accepting* being called *ɲalam*. His people in Kaiwa had become so few, they were "alone"; the local government administration was replaced nearly entirely by Jie, so that the few Highland Murle in Boma were under duress to "unite with Jie and Kachipo". In order to demonstrate their allegiance to the state and rejection of the rebellion, they had to reject being Murle. Jie were taking the chance to gain political space in Boma and pushing Murle out of the area and making claims over Boma as their land. Logidang explained that the commander for the SPLA's special unit, Commando, General Peter Gatwich Gai, had in fact then come in Murle's defence. He continued:

*"After that the former administration was put in place. Jie were saying it's their area, not for Murle. And SPLA said 'no, no'. SPLA said 'if you want to do something to those Murle of Kaiwa, do it and we'll do the same to you'. To another boy from Jie, General Gatwich said 'why have you come here to create confusion. This area is not for Jie or Kachipo; it's for Murle of Boma'. Jie told me, 'why you are here and have not followed your brothers to Raad?' I said to them I would call my people back. At that time in Boma, you think you have no power in Boma, even administration office is for Jie paramount chief. When the SPLA threatened them, they reduced their attacks. By then, the general was Peter Gatwich Gai. Chief Lorumo said, 'I don't want Murle from Pibor here, but I really like Logidang, they're a small group of people. When you asked who the people of Boma were, they said Jie, Kachipo and Murle, those ɲalam of Boma. SPLA asked 'why you mention yourself first, it should be Murle first'."*

Chief Logidang Lom, Boma Peace Meeting Juba, 12/09/2013



Months later in November 2013, another Peace Meeting, again sponsored by USAID, took place this time in Boma, as requested by chief Logidang and others. But with the rebellion still strong and the SPLA making little effort to distinguish between Murle combatants and civilians, the environment in Boma remained tense with few Murle people around. In the months immediately preceding the attack and occupation of Boma, Murle men that had fled to Raad and Ethiopia made regular trips to Boma walking by foot for three days. During these months, there was a false sense of security and of freedom. Murle men arriving and leaving Boma had to register with National Security. There was no free movement within Itti, and the areas past the market towards the NGO bases were off-limits. There were reports of beatings and rapes. Salaried jobs in the local administration were taken over by Jie men. In this scenario, there was a lot of tension between neighbouring groups. The following was taken from my fieldnotes during that meeting, reporting after several conversations with my close friend John who had fled to Ethiopia but had temporarily returned to Boma:

*Yesterday John and others were talking to chief Logidang; John was telling me today that the chief was saying that they were being squeezed into being ηalam, "by government and by Jie, and even by Kachipo". That if they don't separate from Murle they'll be crushed by Jie. The advice of chief Logidang is to for now, just accept it, say ηalam, but in the long run they are and will still be Murle: "when things go back to normal". Many have also said that there are only two people pushing for this who are also influenced by outsiders – that is Korok Remoris and Zuagin, "and they have something wrong in their heads" as I've been told repeatedly. Johnson Lotiboy and pastor Joseph Rumolin both told me this was nonsense, "we are all Murle of course". Pastor told me he'd get offended if someone called him ηalam.<sup>11</sup>*

Another Peace Meeting took place in Boma in August 2014 in a very different environment. By then, the Peace Deal between Cobra and the government had been signed and many Murle had returned home (as discussed in chapter 8). Cobra had a presence in town, patrolling the market together with the SPLA. Until then, chief Logidang had remained quiet in the previous meeting, as the Murle are non-confrontational and their cultural reaction to a dispute is silence. But by August 2014 he was vocal about the pressures that Jie and Kachipo had placed on him and his people in Boma to *become ηalam*:

*The first [peace] meeting under the mangoes [in November 2013] I kept quiet until I went home. I was quiet because I was annoyed at something. The thing that kept me quiet was that those of Jie were insisting that I describe myself as from ηalam, saying if you're Murle you should go the place where Murle were. That time John Dunyi [the only educated Kachipo youth] was saying*

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<sup>11</sup> Fieldnotes, Boma Peace Meeting Itti 16/11/2013.

*'you have to say you're ηalam, not Murle' and that made me angry. When I saw that peace, it wasn't really a peace meeting. They were just forcing me to say I was a ηalam, otherwise I'd be killed. Now were here talking again about the same things we talked about last time, and Toposa is present. Now people of Boma are around, Cobra are around, this is what makes me talk today. I'm saying this because I want to see if Jie and Kachipo are coming for peace, because they're joining and having cooperation, doing things together against the people of Boma. That time it was only me and [chief] Kero as chiefs, all our brothers had run away. That time many people from my village died, some killed by Kamalong and others by chief Lochilya [Jie] and Barkou [Kachipo chief] in Rumit. I'm saying this because if you're a chief of a village and your son takes a gun and goes kill a visitor in your home its better that he kills in the bush, not at home. What Dunyi said last time, 'if you're a Murle, then be a Murle, if a ηalam, say ηalam'. If I say Murle, will Kamalong come and attack me now, now that Cobra is here?*

Chief Logidang Lom, Boma Peace Meeting Itti 21/08/2014

At this Peace Conference, while surrounded by Murle elements from the Cobra Faction, Logidang challenged the individuals from Jie and Kachipo that had previously threatened him as a Murle, to call him *ηalam*. He felt safe, and comfortable in again restoring and professing his 'Murleness'. This restoration will be discussed further in chapter 8. As expressed rather clearly by the chief, it was the pressure to survive in what had become a hostile home in Boma that had been behind the Highland Murle's instrumental temporary discursive transformation to *ηalam*. This was more so than in any other place where Murle fled to, perhaps because in Boma, Murle faced daily the pressures and violence of being Murle, and by consequence, of discursively becoming *ηalam*. More than animosity towards the SPLA and a Dinka-dominated government, what most transpires is the hostility and contest between Murle and other local ethnic groups.

#### 6.4.2 MIXING IN KAPOETA

As discussed in chapter 5, the Murle and others that had fled to Kapoeta town had been well received by the Kapoeta South local government, aid agencies, and the host population. The displaced had been given concrete-built homes to settle in, food had been distributed, the Kapoeta South county government temporarily lifted school fees and encouraged children and youth to attend school, and local relations in the town were pleasant.

Yet at a time where being Murle was immediately associated with being a rebel, the Highland Murle displaced in Kapoeta felt the need to assert their allegiance to the government. Many felt that if they disclosed their Murle background they opened

themselves up to being mistreated by the government, the SPLA and their hosts. One young man, Vorgol, complained, “especially soldiers, they say “you Murle, you are all Yau Yau.”<sup>12</sup> While being physically safe in Kapoeta, many Highland Murle still felt safer by dissociating themselves from the violence attached to being Murle. As noted in chapter 5, the majority of those who fled to Kapoeta were women and children. The women were quick to distance themselves from the rebellion and from Murle more broadly. In order to do so, they presented what they considered to be a distinctive factor: their mode of subsistence as an agrarian community, with its implicit association with being a peaceful people. In their eyes, pastoralism was associated with carrying weapons, abductions and cattle-raiding. In a discussion with Kaka and Likwong, two women from Kaiwa, they observed:

*Kaka: We are different because we have no cows and we are cultivating, when these people came and killed us, we had no guns.*

*Likwong: Even those of Pibor came from far to take our children, but we don't want revenge. For example, for Murle of Pibor, if you don't have a sister you go abduct one, so you can marry. But for us of Boma, we just cultivate and marry, without cattle. Maybe we will separate. Us in Boma, we are very few in number, we don't fight. Boma is just for *ɲalam*. *ɲalam* is another tribe, like there is also Didinga and Boya. Like Jie and Toposa, they are separate but with the same language. (...) Like in 1994 there was a fight in Boma between *ɲalam* and Lotillanya because for us we don't want to be together with them. People say ‘ah you Murle, you are thieves’, but we are not, we are just cultivating. But for them, they want us to be united, so that they take development to their side.*

Kaka and Likwong, Kapoeta 17/07/2013

Likwong remarked that ‘*ɲalam* is another tribe’; compared with Toposa and Jie, as different tribes with the same language. Perhaps this emphasis on ‘another tribe’ was also inspired by the closer interaction with people from Didinga and Boya in Kapoeta. By chance, the police officers that had been tasked with policing the IDP settlement in Kapoeta were from Didinga. Highland Murle were quick to connect the original separation from Murle and breakaway of Didinga, Boya and Tenet into separate ‘tribes’. The separation of *ɲalam* from Murle was explained as part of this gradual breakaway of groups. For Oleo Francis, a young man in Kapoeta, “*It's becoming like a tribe, ɲalam.*”<sup>13</sup>

The narrativisation of *ɲalam* was also connected to an urge to access social, political capital and economic resources. Christopher Rachu, from *Thithi* age-set, who had become the IDP

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<sup>12</sup> James Vorgol, Kapoeta, 19/07/2013.

<sup>13</sup> Oleo Francis, Kapoeta, 19/07/2013.

Secretary in Kapoeta complained of Highland Murle being left behind, with no access to government positions:

*"Those of Pibor are neglecting us, like we're not politicians, [that] we don't know how to speak, we are drunks... Even in the SPLA we don't have brigadiers and major generals, not even coronels, even though the SPLA headquarters was there before. We are brothers, but then like this... they mistreat us."*

Christopher Rachu, Kapoeta 20/07/2013

This was not necessarily literally true. Effectively, there were few senior Murle in the SPLA, from either Boma or from elsewhere. On the other hand, several of the handful of Murle Members of Parliament in Bor were from Boma, such as Rachu Jakin and Judy Jokongole. The latter was in fact elected for representing the Gumuruk-Boma Constituency, as the official SPLM candidate in the 2010 elections that led to David Yau Yau's first rebellion. But the perceptions of neglect persisted, regardless, associated with Boma's relegation to a payam part of Pibor county, while until 2005 it had been the SPLM/A's centre of power.

Kaka, Likwong, Oleo and Christopher's perspectives were not the only interpretation of Highland Murle marginalisation and resentment towards their broader Murle ethnic community. Particularly the younger generation was quick to defend Murle actions and assert Murle as one people. These accounts recognised Boma's marginalization by the political centre in Pibor, but also saw that the wider Murle ethnic group as a whole suffered from the anti-Murle stereotypes propagated at national level. Vorgol, a bright young man from Boma in Secondary School in Kapoeta, thought that although Murle were discriminated against by the Jonglei government in Bor, internal division among Murle was a significant set-back to development in their area:

*"As a tribe we are also having problems. They [Murle of Pibor] didn't want Boma to become a county. They wanted all good things to go to Pibor. Many of my [Boma] people, I also blame them; they go to school and then finish and go drink alcohol. Even the youth leader does nothing. That's why it gave those people the chance to take over. Even Akot Maze said we should send a Pibor man there, because those of Boma are so quiet they say nothing. He sent Henry Kuju but he died. I'm blaming both sides, my own people and those of Pibor (...)."*

Vorgol was referring to the recurring stereotype of agrarian communities across South Sudan as having an alcohol abuse problem, brewing alcohol from sorghum and millet. Yet he understood the importance of unity among Murle, especially in the face of what he saw as the ethnic and state war, by Lou Nuer and Dinka Bor, against all Murle.

*"If you are somebody who is educated you know we are all Murle. All those people in Pibor originated in Boma. If we are to be united all these troubles wouldn't have happened. There's no way to separate people. To be Murle or ḡalam, all are Murle, no difference between Pibor and ḡalam. If we go to history, Boma was the first place captured [by SPLA] in 1985. It's supposed to be a state, because it's the first place, but up to now there is no development. Peace will only come when cooperation is there. If not, then the corruption won't stop. If you say two tribes, those of Pibor will finish Murle of Boma. ḡalam is just because of no cows. People are really one, all of us are Murle. (...) For me, DYY had rights. If you listen to their radio, they say we don't have problems with civilians. But president and governor are behind this. Lou Nuer and Dinka combined with government."*

James Vorgol, Kapoeta, 19/07/2013

#### 6.4.3 ADAPTING AND SURVIVING IN ETHIOPIA

The violence of being Murle and its repercussions extended all the way across the border to Ethiopia, and life was not easy. Not only because the Nuer and Anyuak ethnic groups were also in both South Sudan and in Ethiopia, and disseminated negative stereotypes of the Murle, but also because there had been cases of child abductions in Ethiopia for which Murle had been blamed. Even though Murle people in Raad and Dima had felt well received by ordinary Ethiopians, with many reporting making friendships and staying in Ethiopian homes, there were also cases of active discrimination. During my visit, as I walked with Murle male friends in Dima market one morning, people shouted in Amharic to us, "Murle thieves." Revealing how familiar Murle are with this kind of symbolic violence in the form of harassment, my friends barely reacted.

To avoid this kind of harassment, Murle in Raad and Dima, in Ethiopia, sought strategies to adapt and go unnoticed. John and Jameson explained to me that, as is the case for Nuer and Anyuak that live on both sides of the border of South Sudan and Ethiopia, and can present as (or even 'pass as') being South Sudanese or Ethiopian (Feyissa 2010), "Murle can pretend they're Ethiopian and 'become ḡalam' from Ethiopia,"<sup>14</sup> alluding to the 'real' ḡalam that lived close by.

John also found physical ways to adapt, mingle and go unnoticed. He had previously been a clean-cut young man with a job at an NGO. As several other young men in the camp, he had

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<sup>14</sup> Fieldnotes, Dima, Ethiopia 09/2013.

bought himself an Ethiopian football jersey and changed his haircut letting his hair grow longer and dying the tips yellow, much to the amusement of other Murle who did not adhere to this new perceived “Anyuak style”.

John thought this made him physically look like an Anyuak and if anyone addressed him he would just use the few Anyuak words he knew. He changed his style and looks after the first time he travelled from Dima to Mizan Teferi, a larger town a few hours away, with his brother Beko. That first time he had taken the time and money to get a travel permit from the local police that cost him 200 birr, at the time roughly the equivalent to 10USD (1 USD = 18,7 Birr at the time). By then, he still had his old “civilized” haircut, and they were stopped and checked. Since then he had gone without permit but “disguised” as an Anyuak.<sup>15</sup> He continued travelling to Mizan Teferi, without permits, but was never again singled out or checked by authorities.

The circumstances of having fled to a new country made many of my interlocutors romanticize about being South Sudanese and reminisce about ‘home.’ Many of the Murle that had fled to Ethiopia were busy being in a new country adapting to a new language and circumstances. They did not always have news of what was going on in Boma and in the wider SPLA–Cobra Faction war. The settlement in Raad had people from across Murleland but debates and tensions on intra- Murle identities was not an issue of great concern. But displacement triggered other social changes that once loose, could not be turned back. For example, displacement to Ethiopia triggered shifts in age-set identities.

Many young boys from Boma in Raad, taking advantage of being away from ‘home’ began wearing *Lango* beads, challenging *Bothonya*, something that would probably not have happened at home. *Bothonya* youth explained that this would be dealt with once they were all back in Boma. However, in reality, *Lango* young men found in Ethiopia and in the discomfort of exile an opportunity to emerge as a new unit and this was left unchallenged by the older *Bothonya*. The notion of *returning home* is often more aspirational than real, and as has been the case, by 2016, three years after the initial displacement from Boma, many Highland Murle had not yet returned to Boma. Year after year, social transformations initially considered temporary become permanent.

In the same way, the politics of intra Murle identity were also left to deal with later. Jameson summarised well how he saw the dilemma Highland Murle were facing in Ethiopia:

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<sup>15</sup> Fieldnotes Dima Ethiopia 05/09/2013.

*"I shall be very happy if we just become ηalam. The problem is this language of ours, it is the same, like 'abona'.<sup>16</sup> They've done many bad things to us, like abductions and killings. Now the name Murle is bad. But if you are ηalam you are accepted. I want to be known as ηalam. (...) It is very difficult being a refugee, we'll think of that when we go home. There are no problems between ηalam and Lotillanya in the camp. But Lotilla boys were sad when they heard that Boma became a county".*

Jameson, Dima, 06/09/2013

Although Jameson was probably sharing his honest opinion, it is unlikely that "boys from Lotilla were sad" from the news of the potential of Boma becoming a county. Rather, the distrust between people from different areas had affected his perceptions. Jameson's remarks portray the frustration of an existence constantly threatened by the negative wider reputation of the Murle. Simultaneously, Jameson was conscious that Highland Murle could not just become ηalam, they were Murle. In a similar case, Wendy James (James 1979; 1994; 1996) argues that the Uduk ethnic community was formed through collective experiences of survival and displacement. Along similar lines, there had been no such thing as the ηalam group, certainly not in an ethnically-bounded understanding. The Murle of Boma experiences of the SPLA and SSDA-CF war produced them as a ηalam group, but the people themselves perceived this as an instrumental and temporary status. Baba and Korok were two young men in their early 20s. Baba was from Bayen and Korok had come from Labarab in the Lowlands to study at the Accelerated Learning Programme, run by a non-governmental organization in Itti. They had fled the war together and moved from Raad to Dima and elsewhere together. One night in Dima, Korok lucidly made his point about the claim that ηalam guaranteed safety while Murle were attacked:

*"In the end, we are all Murle. If Daniel and I go to a place like Bor where they all hate Murle; ok, so maybe they'll kill me, the Lotillain first, but after that they will kill Daniel. We're the same, we have the same language."*

Korok, Dima, 02/09/2013

Korok's brutal yet thoughtful analysis brought home the main issue: the Murle existed in relation to and were essentialised by their more powerful Dinka Bor neighbours. If ηalam could exist, it was also in relation to the broader Dinka Bor group and their interests in dominating, dividing and ruling the Murle.

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<sup>16</sup> Abona is the standard greeting in Murle language, literally means 'Good'.

#### 6.4.4 BEING MURLE IN JUBA: RELYING ON MURLE SOCIAL NETWORKS

The term *ɲalam* was being debated across most areas where Murle were displaced with more or less intensity. However, in reality Murle responded in real-time to the social conditions of each place. While in Boma, the consequences of the term were not only discursive but had positive, practical implications pertaining to people's safety, in Juba it was quite the contrary. In the neighbourhoods in Juba where most Murle lived – Souk Sita, Jebel, Jeberona, Kator and Lologo – Murle stuck together, irrespective of where they came from. In Juba, the Murle were one small community, supporting each other and drawing on the strong family ties and marriage relationships that bounded Murle people from across Murleland together. People in Juba were safe because they had Murle networks to rely on.

Murle social support networks were demonstrated to be strong, resilient and rather extensive. There is a culture of hospitality and mutual support among the Murle. Perhaps the most common ties in support networks are those existing through relatives, inter-marriages and through age-sets. Most homes belonging to Pibor men that I visited in Juba had wives from Boma. Alluding to the growing debate pushing for *ɲalam* as a separate 'tribe', Paulino Chacha, himself married to a woman from Boma, hinted "Maybe they [Murle of Boma] have forgotten that half the people of Pibor have their ancestors".<sup>17</sup>

Highland Murle's sustenance in Juba often depended on the support of their Murle networks. Murle fleeing from across Murle Land to Juba relied almost entirely on existing Murle networks, staying with Murle relatives or friends with homes in Juba. They would sleep, eat and live in homes of Murle that were already previously settled in Juba. Murle homes in Juba swelled. A home of six was hosting in some cases more than 40 people. For this man: "I don't have a home in Juba, I'm staying with the family of my wife. In the same tukul we are 3 men and 3 women, and 2 small boys."<sup>18</sup>

It was not just the over-crowded conditions, but the very high cost of life in Juba, where essential goods such as water and food were very expensive that posed a challenge. Because life in Juba was expensive, often people would spend some weeks in Juba and then find ways to move on to settle in Arua or Adjumani in Uganda or Kakuma in Kenya where there were also Murle networks of support. Many IDPs in Juba keen to move on to these refugee camps

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<sup>17</sup> Paulino Chacha, Juba 13/06/2013.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Papa, IDP, Juba, 3/06/2013.



in neighbouring countries were under the impression that they would have to pay to cross the border and reach the camps. There were also fears that “borders are full of Dinkas who won’t allow us to cross.”<sup>19</sup>

The majority of Murle people fleeing to Juba (according to UN OCHA, by July 2013 10,000 people) were town people from the Lowlands (Pibor, Likuangle and Gumuruk) with some money, but not only. Some Highland Murle also made the journey from Boma to Kapoeta and eventually to Juba. In those cases, upon arrival to Juba and then staying at a Murle home, people would drop the *ɲalam* identity narratives and re-assert their ‘Murle-ness’.

Paulino Chacha had moved from Pibor town to his sister Mary Gaba’s home in Souk Sita neighbourhood in Juba. Mary Gaba had been part of the SPLA’s Red Army, and had eventually become a Member of Parliament in Bor. With Paulino at her home in Juba, a number of his age-mates and relatives fleeing Likuangle and Pibor also sought refuge at Mary’s house. As a popular young man with relationships across Greater Pibor, he hosted many *Lango* age-mates that found themselves in Juba. Paulino’s wife Gedang was from Boma, and Mary’s home also saw the arrival of several of Gedang’s relatives for different periods of time. Due to the very high cost of living in Juba, Paulino as the male head of household eventually decided to take his family and his cousin-brother’s family (Adut, whose account is shared in chapter 5), to a refugee camp in Arua in northern Uganda.

Another man from Boma resident in Juba explained: “Now you’ll find Murle homes with over 20 people; but the salaries of Murle Wildlife and SPLA have been cut. Even here in Juba people are suffering”<sup>20</sup> Referring to the making of a community in Ada Bai, Laura Hammond (2004, 26) observes that the reliance on both kin and affinal social support networks ensured social safety nets were in place during times of hardship. In a similar way, when most households struggled to make ends meet, the increased reliance on Murle social support networks ensured social safety nets were in place at those particularly distressing times. Paulino Chacha explained: “We share everything. I cannot refuse... I receive him in my home, because he’s from my generation and from Likuangle. If you have friends or relatives, you go to their house.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Fieldnotes Juba, 7/06/2013.

<sup>20</sup> Jacob Lothiboi Juba 25/05/2013.

<sup>21</sup> Paulino Chacha, Juba 19/06/2013.

These practices of collaboration and cooperation reinforced kinship networks and demonstrated the concrete and dynamic importance of the Murle age-set system and how it binds together Murle people from different places.

Some Murle interlocutors displayed some resentment at the narrative of division used by some Highland Murle people. But most frequently, the changing ways in which *ɲalam* was growing as a political construct were disregarded by Murle from the Lowlands. For Paulino, originally from Likuangle but who had himself lived in Boma for some years,

“The time of John Kumen, he said that ‘we [Murle of Boma] will pay back the cows to get our women back’. Will they manage? We have over 10,000 cows! They’re just talking because up to now we are still marrying women from Boma. Most of them [Murle of Boma] can’t marry because they’re drunk, they’re addicted to alcohol.”

Paulino Chacha, Juba 13/06/2013

Paulino was referring to John Kumen who had temporarily acted as Boma Executive Director (later in 2016 appointed Commissioner of Boma) and had taken a hard-line in what he saw as Pibor’s neglect of Boma and attempted to control inter-marriages with Lowland Murle because of the lower bridewealth.

The important social support networks whose existence many of those displaced depended on, also represented heavy burdens on host families. Mary Gaba, who had a home in Souk Sita, told me of the difficulties she faced in feeding the many relatives and friends of her younger brother Paulino in her home in Juba. “It is not easy,” she stoically repeated several times. In June 2013, she had a total of 28 people living in her home in Souk Sita in Juba. This required buying food and water everyday: “there is no chance of saving and no chance of refusing anyone. But that’s Murle culture,” she told me.<sup>22</sup> Her account of nearly 30 people at her home, was emblematic of Murle homes across Juba. In this scenario, everyday existence revealed that Highland Murle in Juba were part of, trusted and relied on Murle social support networks. Ethnic identities are context-based and geographically situated. Highland Murle people who had previously reiterated and drawn on their *ɲalam* identity while they were in Kapoeta, changed identity narrative and identified as Murle when in Juba; relying on Murle social networks made them Murle again.

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<sup>22</sup> Fieldnotes Juba 27/06/2013.

## 6.5 CONCLUSION: MULTIPLE AND FLUID MURLE IDENTITIES

In this chapter, I have examined how identity politics take shape, reflecting continuously shifting alliances, and have real-time and concrete consequences that can relate to survival or death. In extreme scenarios of survival, individuals deploy and are able to perform varied identities that can provide them with some physical safety (see also Pottier 2005 referring to the case of a Tutsi refugee woman).

There are a number of reflections to make about Murle and *ɲalam* identities. First, they are simultaneous and overlapping; second, they are deployed selectively depending on circumstances; third, they are relevant in relation to contestation over land, resources, opportunity and in some cases, survival; and fourth, they are geographically situated and contingent on place.

For instance, when Highland Murle people that I had initially interviewed in Kapoeta and who had stressed their *ɲalam* identity reached Juba, they shifted identity narratives. Once in Juba, people adapted to the circumstances of Juba and their strategic needs to rely on broader Murle social support networks. People changed their minds, offered different versions and explanations of events, contradicted themselves, as time and circumstances changed (Tronvoll 2004). Based on people's own words, but also on omissions and evasions, it can be seen how individuals would change their stories and their allegiances as events unfolded, and as they moved from one location to another, adding complexity to the idea that those caught up in war are victims; rather they are active agents able to frame a story. To survive during the months proceeding the attack and destruction of Boma, Murle people from Boma resorted and negotiated alternative ethnic identities. In this sense, identity politics are not only used by powerful groups, but also by marginalised and more vulnerable ones to protect themselves.

Being Murle as an ethnic unit was ultimately in itself perhaps the greatest and most long-term survival strategy in terms of the wider social landscape that Murle belonged to. At the time of his statement below, at a Boma Peace Meeting in September 2013, Baba Medan was the Minister of Youth in the Jonglei State Government. Even after the GPAA was created (discussed in detail in chapter 8), Medan chose to remain in the Jonglei State government and in fact was appointed as Jonglei State deputy governor. Then, by late 2015, he was appointed as the Governor of Boma state, by President Kiir. Baba Medan spoke of the interdependence between the *Lotillanya* of the Lowlands and the *ɲalam* of the Highlands:

*"There's a saying in Murle – there's a woman not organising her house, the child urinating everywhere, when you enter it smells, and we say – that is not a good lady. The name Murle is always very good, if we can't stay peacefully, then it is bad. [...] The words ḡalam or Lotillanya, yesterday those who spoke said we need that old man to explain properly what these words mean. For us here, these words have existed within Murle community. When the rains return to Pibor, it [means it] is raining in Boma and it means we can eat beans. People in Boma would say, 'those Lotillanya are very ignorant. What can we say if we can't remove this word? It is going to be there, but it's not going to be for a tribe. This kind of word is there just to make a joke and for playing. People are translating it differently and into different shapes. They want to turn the original meaning, that's why they want to make it a tribe."*

Baba Medan, Boma Peace Meeting Juba 13/09/2013

As Baba Medan asserted, the original meanings of *Lotillanya* and *ḡalam* had existed for long and would continue to exist and be used internally among Murle, and would not be made as a tribe. The politicisation of the terms would not succeed in splintering the Murle. The next chapter examines the narrativisation of *ḡalam* from the perspective of the state, in how state bureaucracies and government elites are able to trigger, establish and influence narratives of new group identities.

## 7 THE POLITICS OF MURLE IDENTITY: THE STATE AND ETHNIC POLITICS

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter demonstrated how political and communal violence can have an essentialising effect on the narrativisation and making of ethnic identities and how individuals respond to this. It argued and demonstrated that the making and adoption of identities is instrumental, contingent on individuals' position, interest, place and time, and continuously shifting. In turn, this chapter explores the extent and ways in which predatory state bureaucracies and self-serving elites have the power to establish and influence narratives of new group identities. Borrowing the words of Vigdis Broch-Due (2004, 9), the chapter is concerned with "the role of the state as an influential third player in the process of boundary constructions between groups".

In South Sudan, state structures and government elites have long been involved in seeking to prescribe identities and ethnic stereotypes, with dire consequences for peace, war and nation-building. One of the most outstanding examples of this is perhaps the case of the Murle, who have felt attacked and persecuted by a state that combines its power with ethnic favouritism. This chapter demonstrates how the South Sudan government, co-opted by individual elites from more dominant ethnic groups, participates in the manipulation of group identities for political purposes. As observed by Tobias Hagmann and Didier Péclard (2010, 554),

"Processes of state (de-)construction in Africa have been shaped by dynamics of inclusion and exclusion: the question of defining who belongs and who does not belong to the nation (state), who is indigenous and who is foreign, is a crucial object of negotiation."

Drawing on the case of the Murle ethnic group and the South Sudanese state, the chapter argues that, often resorting to violent means, modern state forces have the ability and leverage to influence, transform and constitute new ethnic groups. I argue that groups emerge, are made and remade in reaction and response to events, to pressures from the state, the environment, to geography and to political violence. Yet I argue that ongoing processes of state formation and identity formation are dialectical, and not a sole result of imposition from and by the state. Rather, pressures from the state interact with the needs and understandings of events by Murle individuals themselves, who may instrumentally

adopt alternative identities in the face of a state perceived to be violent and targeting Murle as an ethnic group. Thus, I show how identity politics are deployed by both dominant groups and the state to support political aims, as well as by vulnerable groups as a means of protection.

The chapter is divided into two sections.<sup>1</sup> First, building from chapter 6 and the case of the divisive politics of Murle ethnic identities, the chapter argues that the state participates in the instrumental manipulation and recreation of ethnic identities. This has devastating consequences, counter to peace and to the making of a common South Sudanese collective identity. With a focus on Boma, this section will examine state policies that delineate administrative borders along ethnic lines as well as the government's instrumental use of ethnic militia groups.

Second, by discussing Murle allegiances to and perspectives of the Cobra Faction war with the state, the chapter examines Highland Murle imaginings, expectations and claims to the state. This section also demonstrates how the state and its institutions, in particular the SPLA, are fragmented and layered with various centres of power.

## 7.2 THE STATE AND ITS DIVISIVE POLITICS

Politics in South Sudan are mediated through ethnicity. Ambitious politicians in the government unable to manage political bases through resource allocation, instead mobilize political constituencies by invoking fears of competing ethnic control (Thomas 2015, 160–161). Economic development has happened unevenly across territories divided among different ethnic groups, and in the process produced spatial and social hierarchies, which offer opportunities based on ethnicity. Local government structures have also organised their people through ethnicity, simultaneously sketching administrative borders based on these (Thomas 2015, 160–161; Leonardi 2013).

Building on chapter 6, and its account of the politicisation of Murle ethnic identities, this section explores the extent and ways in which the government and political elites in South Sudan have created, mobilised and influenced narratives of group identities, employing administrative controls and the creation of divisions along ethnic lines, and violence. The

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter relies heavily on material from the three Boma Peace Meetings where the uneasy relationships with the state was observed in practice and spoken of at length.

section will discuss this from two angles. First, the ways in which elite government officials make use of the instruments of the state for their own purposes, including the manipulation of administrative borders. Second, the use of ethnic militias as tools of the state.

As has been pointed out by Elizabeth Watson and Gunter Schlee (2009, 27), “state policies have often had the effect of making identities more rigid and competitive”. In this sense, identity formation should be understood as intrinsically political, “shaped by and shaping the politics of “us versus them” in political systems ranging from egalitarian bands to empires” (Ferguson and Whitehead 2000, 15).

Civil conflicts tend to delineate which groups count and which “can safely and in a sense legitimately be subjected to extreme... violence. Some groups fall below the law, and some are elevated above it” (Keen 2000, 33 in Laudati 2011, 24). For example, in Uganda, the Acholi people have been consistently subjected to a government campaign of dehumanization based on “ethnic racism to divide and rule” (Otunnu 2009). Olara Otunnu, a Ugandan politician and former UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict quotes Commander Kajabago Karushoke, a principal ideologist for the government, referring to Acholi: “Those people are not human beings; they are biological substances ... that should be eliminated” (Otunnu 2009).

In South Sudan, the Murle have been constantly demonized and dehumanized, victims of incendiary hate speech, especially by Dinka Bor and Lou Nuer diaspora groups (Thomas 2015), which is tolerated and even sometimes disseminated by the government (Human Rights Watch 2013b). There are multiple examples of blog posts by South Sudanese expressing anti-Murle sentiments and referring to Murle as killers and agents of dehumanised behaviour. For instance, in an opinion piece published in the Sudan Tribune in 2009, Peter Nhiany from Bor, urged “We need to find the root cause of all these dehumanizing behavior carried out in the region by Murle” (Nhiany 2009).

### *7.2.1 ADMINISTRATIVE MANEUVERING*

Before the establishment of the GPAA (discussed in detail in the next chapter) –which turned Boma into a county– Boma was a sub-county, a rather particular administrative grey-zone unrecognized in the Provisional Constitution of the Government of South Sudan, and existent only in Akobo West sub-county, part of Akobo county. Boma sub-county had been administratively under Pibor. Boma sub-county had an Executive Director with a small

team that was formally under the county commissioner in Pibor, who would visit Boma, at most a couple of times a year for a few days. The absence of an effective government presence and resources in Boma, apart from the SPLA, fed feelings of political marginalisation in Boma. Highland Murle people felt excluded from opportunities and resources, which were perceived to remain in Pibor town. Feelings of neglect in South Sudan are often explained along ethnic lines. Highland Murle in Boma often justified claims that Boma was marginalised by the 'in-laws' in the plains because people in Boma were *ḡalam*. In reality, Murle people in the hinterlands of Pibor town shared similar feelings of neglect. For Paulino Chacha, a young man from Likuangle displaced in Juba, "There's tribalism in South Sudan, but even at the village level, people only root for their own people in their village".<sup>2</sup> For him, most of the Murle leaders and people in positions of influence hailed from Gumuruk, and supported others from Gumuruk, preventing people from other areas to access positions. In reality, all areas of Pibor county suffered from social and economic neglect.

In June 2013, not long after the SPLA's recapture of Boma from the SSDA-CF (examined in chapter 5), the then Governor of Jonglei state, Kuol Manyang, issued State Order 11/2013 removing Boma sub-county from Pibor and placing it administratively under the Governor's office (Jonglei State Governor's Office 2013b; Sudan Tribune 2013d). As suggested by Korok Remoris' statement below at a Boma Peace Meeting in Juba in September 2013, the move was welcomed by a large part of the population from Boma. The administrative shift away from Pibor and its repercussions were discussed at length during that meeting. For some Highland Murle intellectuals present at that meeting, the new administrative arrangement was tied to hopes that Boma could have greater access to state resources, but it was also tied to the potential of positions of authority for those specific Highland Murle elites. However, others at the meeting feared that fragmenting their homeland could divide Murle. Many people openly criticized the move as another attempt by Kuol Manyang and Dinka Bor to deliberately divide Murle and take over the rich land.

At that Peace Meeting in Juba in September 2013, senior government official Korok Remoris who had been appointed the chairperson of the Boma administrative body accountable to the Governors office, explained why becoming a separate sub-county, independent from Pibor was important for Boma to access the 'hakuma' in Bor, or as he put it, the "administration, jobs and resources":

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<sup>2</sup> Paulino Chacha, Juba 13/06/2013.



*'The meaning of sub-county; we want Pibor, Gumuruk, all to become counties. It's about administration, jobs and resources. But some then said, 'if Boma becomes a county, then Murle will be divided', but no. It's not that, it's about access to services. Look at Akobo and it's one community. Look at Pibor, how big it is. Yet there are no roads. We have to travel by air. So government came up with making Boma a sub-county.'*

Korok Remoris, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba 12/09/2013

Korok Remoris had previously served as the advisor for wildlife to Governor Kuol Manyang, sitting in Bor. Close association with Dinka Bor senior politicians had tainted the reputation of Murle politicians, as it had done with Korok Remoris and with Baba Medan. The separation of Boma from Pibor was perceived by many Murle people with suspicion, as a Dinka move to isolate and weaken Highland Murle and Boma from their wider Murle group in Pibor, and to further isolate them from the Cobra Faction rebellion. In the eyes of many Murle, the goal of the administrative move was for Dinka Bor was to take control of Boma. For many Murle people, Kuol Manyang as a Dinka Bor, was perceived to be leading the alleged Dinka plans to take over Boma.

The South Sudanese media also publicised the administrative re-allocation of Boma from Pibor to the Governor's office (Sudan Tribune 2013d). The Sudan Tribune comments section is known to spark fierce debates, and did so with the article 'Jonglei Governor's Decree Transfers Boma into New Sub-County' (Sudan Tribune 2013d). One anonymous commentator assumed to be Murle argued,

*'Kuol Manyang is a killer-Jonkoz [Dinka],<sup>3</sup> we don't want him in Murleland. This is called land grabbing or land-stealing. No Jonkoz is allowed in Murleland, we will fight Jonkoz as one man. The sky is our limit. We will occupy Bor itself in response to occupying our land. Pibor will be free. Murle fighters woyee.'*

Speaking of Boma and what he perceived as an attempt of Dinka land grabbing, he continued:

*'Jonkoz are dreaming. As a man, you will always fight for your land if it is being grabbed in the broad daylight as Kuol Manyang is doing now. But he will die in Murleland. Let him move his ass from there before it is too late. You will also fight for your women and kids if they are being murdered in cold blood along ethnic lines, and the SPLA is being used for Jonkoz plans. You also defend your COW.'*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 'Jonkoz' is the Murle term for Dinka and Nuer.

<sup>4</sup> Exact reproduction of the terms and spelling from the original comments by Sudan Tribune commentator named 'Good South Sudanese', probably in diaspora.

In another post, the same anonymous commentator lists the resources found across Murleland as the motivation for the Dinka-led land grabbing:

‘We have animals, wild game, beautiful natural scenes good for tourism, and even we have cattle and fish and gold and oil and natural gas and all valuable minerals, and beautiful people, in fact Boma and Pibor are the richest all over South Sudan. That is why, Jonkoz of Kuol Manyang is trying hard to steal Murleland. But he is daydreaming. We will kill him and Majak D’Agoot<sup>5</sup> and all his spies’.<sup>6</sup>

Although perhaps more extreme in nature, the views above are continuous with many reported as held in this dissertation by Murle people. On the one hand, administrative division was perceived in Boma as holding the potential to provide an avenue to access resources from Bor. On the other hand, it was seen across Murleland with suspicion as a political move with ulterior reasons, and as part of the ethnically-tainted state policy to promote conflict and division among the Murle, as well as between the Murle and their immediate neighbours, Jie and Suri-Kachipo ethnic communities living in Boma. Ultimately, the government was considered to be synonymous with Dinka Bor elite, and Dinka Bor held aspirations of controlling Boma. As stated by General Kennedy Gain, referring to the period of war between the government and the Cobra Faction, “The time of David Yau Yau, government was trying to divide Murle in two, so they can keep Boma as theirs, keep the land of Boma.”<sup>7</sup>

### 7.2.2 *ETHNIC POLITICS AT WORK*

Chapters 5 and 6 have discussed the ways in which the SPLA co-opted men from the Jie ethnic community in Boma to fight the Cobra Faction and regain control of Boma. Subsequently, as Murle people had mostly fled for safety away from Boma, the government of Jonglei placed Jie young men in local government positions previously mostly occupied by Murle local government officials. These events—the Jie’s support to the SPLA’s recapture of Boma and their subsequent monopolisation of local government positions—were perceived with great hostility by the host Murle population, especially those that had remained in Kaiwa village in Upper Boma. For many Murle, Jie and Kachipo had been used by what were perceived as a Dinka Bor government in Jonglei to take over Boma and

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<sup>5</sup> Majak d’Agoot, a Dinka from Twic East, was at the time the Deputy-Minister of Defence.

<sup>6</sup> All comments above from the comments section of Sudan Tribune (2013d).

<sup>7</sup> Interview General Kennedy Gain, Juba 05/12/2015.

promote division in Boma and amongst Murle. The localised struggle over land thus mirrored the struggle over the state itself.

At the peak of tension in Boma in September 2013, a Boma Peace Conference took place in Juba, because Boma was deemed too insecure. Speaking at that Conference, Lieutenant General Kennedy Gain used 'they' to refer to how Dinka Bor, perceived by most Murle to control the government and the SPLA and with the power to determine the 'grand narrative', had made use of smaller ethnic militias against the Murle:

*"This kind of divide and rule, it is external politics coming from outside saying let's divide these people so we can rule them. They brought Jie and Kachipo saying kill Murle so you can take over. Because they know Jie, Kachipo and Murle are illiterate so they are easy to confuse, they get confused fighting each other and they can take over. Now, they're trying to cause problems in Boma. And with David Yau Yau they got the chance. I want to advise the groups not to fight each other. The soldiers will move out, then what?"*

Kennedy Gain, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba 12/09/2013

General Kennedy Gain was also alluding to the government's instrumentalisation of ethnic identities and use of Jie and Kachipo militias in Boma pitting them against Murle. In the eyes of the Murle General, like of many others, 'external politics' promoted by more powerful ethnic groups looked to divide and rule Murle, by taking advantage of "illiterate" groups which would fight among themselves and where Dinka Bor could take over. For the General, the Cobra Faction rebellion presented itself as an excuse for the SPLA's targeting of Murle civilians. But General Kennedy warned, *'The soldiers will move out, then what?'* In fact, the ways in which government was part of shaping identity narratives, their manipulation and essentialising, contributed to continuing insecurity and animosity between neighbouring ethnic groups. General Kennedy Gain also protested the involvement of Jie ethnic militias alongside the SPLA to fight the Cobra Faction:

*"The tribes now residing in Boma, if government is fighting with someone, they [should] hide in the bush and then come back. DYY is fighting with the government, not with civilians. Government is the one confusing people. I've met with many government people. In Boma we know the soldiers ran away, they didn't fight with DYY. The Executive Director escaped even before the war started. [When] They captured Boma, it came on TV, Minister of Defence who brought those Jie with uniform, with the former deputy Minister of Defence saying no Murle should step into Boma again, that it was for Jie and Kachipo only. Now this is not something created here. It was on TV seen everywhere in the world. What's the reason to take somebody's land and give it to somebody else? The Minister of Defence and Deputy Minister of Defence giving it to Jie. The Murle of Boma by then [before] allowed Jie to come.*

Kennedy Gain, Boma Peace Meeting Juba 12/09/2013

General Kennedy was referring to how Majak D'Agoot, a Dinka from Twic East, then deputy Minister of Defence, had allegedly appeared on South Sudan Television soon after the SPLA's recapture of Boma in May 2013, alongside uniformed Jie SPLA officers stating Murle should not return to Boma. These were senior government officials making use of other ethnic constituencies, smaller and more vulnerable ones, to promote their own agendas. Jie had supported the SPLA recapture of Boma from the SSDM/A-CF at the end of May 2013, in exchange for weapons. As a reward for Jie support to the SPLA in capturing Boma, the SPLA built boreholes in Kassengor. Once the area was again under the control of the government, with the endorsement of the government and the SPLA, Jie took control of most government positions and many moved in to Itti town occupying previously Murle homes. Several other homes that had not been burnt during the conflict were occupied by SPLA soldiers.

When the SPLA recaptured Boma from the SSDM/A-CF with the support from Jie armed militia, the Murle became a minority in their own home. What did this ethnic reconfiguration of the social demography of Boma mean? Jie leadership were openly threatening to kill any Murle that came into Boma, accusing them of being rebels. Being Murle had become a liability and a strong narrative emerged whereby Murle people were considered rebels by association. However, Jonglei government, and in turn, some politically savvy government officials from Jie and Kachipo, but also from Murle, encouraged a narrative which said that *ɲalam* would be allowed to remain in Boma, and as part of this narrative, *ɲalam* were not Murle.

Highland Murle that remained in Boma in the aftermath of the conflict argued that Jie and Kachipo were forcing them to adopt the term. Others instead accused the SPLA and government saying that it would not be possible to come into Boma, if Murle were openly stating they were Murle.<sup>8</sup> At a November 2013 Boma Peace Conference, repeatedly people argued, "this *ɲalam* thing is something brought 'by outsiders'."

In fact, at the Boma Peace Conferences in September and November 2013, at the height of the politicisation of Murle ethnic identity, Jie and Kachipo referred to Highland Murle as *ɲalam*, instead of Murle; even Highland Murle chose to refer to themselves as *ɲalam*. The narrativisation of *ɲalam* and its intended separation from Murle was tied to aspirations of resource control and domination. For Beko Nyiboi, a Highland Murle intellectual, the divisive politics of *ɲalam* identities and the politically-charged instrumental ways in which it was being used originated from neighbouring ethnic groups, from the media, the

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<sup>8</sup> Fieldnotes, Boma Peace Meeting, Itti 15/11/2013.

government and most of all from those with the power to create the dominant narrative. Addressing a crowd of mostly Murle intellectuals but also a handful of Jie and Kachipo individuals that had been flown from Boma to Juba:

*"The reason that has made us very annoyed it is because of this word  $\eta$ alam, it will become a tribe, used by media, by you all, but it is totally wrong. That's why we became annoyed. I'm from Boma Payam, I'm from Murle. Are you writing  $\eta$ alamit in your nationality? Who is controlling you? In Bor they call themselves Montonj but it's not a tribe; when you ask they say Dinka Bor. Those of Kachipo, they were saying they're Suri. No, don't take something you joke. When there's insecurity in Boma they [Murle of Boma] run to their brothers, they're dancing the same dance, at the same time. You are mistaken, I'm really very annoyed with this word [ $\eta$ alam]. If Boma becomes a county there will be more jobs. Take this example, it became a sub-county and we take a Lou Nuer as the executive director, this is not fine; we are not here to abuse each other or undermine anyone, we have our own internal problems, let's keep that for another time (...)."*

He called for all those in the room to reject  $\eta$ alam in the politically charged tone it had come to be used, because for him and many others, it was part of the divide and rule strategy originating in Bor. Referring to the elevation of  $\eta$ alam as a separate ethnic group, Beko continued:

*"This one divides us, don't accept it. If someone wants to divide you and rule, don't accept it. They want us to become enemies with each other. If you have that idea, take it alone and go somewhere else. There is an accusation that the people of Boma wrote a letter saying they wanted to become known as  $\eta$ alam. That's wrong, five people cannot decide for all!"*

Beko Nyiboi Boma Peace Meeting Juba 13/09/2013

As Beko's last sentence suggests, there had been rumours that some individuals from Boma had written a letter to the governor of Jonglei stating they were no longer Murle, but wanted to be known as  $\eta$ alam (see Jok 2013). There was certainly political contestation among Highland Murle on the issue. These were motivated by individual political interests as well as naïve assumptions that there were gains to be made by separating from the Murle and their bellicose reputation. For example, Zuagin Rachu Balko, a local administrative officer from Boma working in Bor, appeared in the local media commending the then Governor of Jonglei, Kuol Manyang for administratively removing Boma from Pibor. He introduced himself as a member of  $\eta$ alam community and referred to Boma as home of the "three communities of Kachipo,  $\eta$ alam and Jie" (see Jok 2013), infuriating other Murle who accused him of being part of a wider Dinka effort to divide and conquer.<sup>9</sup> By professing his alleged

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<sup>9</sup> Fieldnotes, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba, 09/2013.

*ɲalam* ethnic identity, and in consequence his disaffection from Murle, that brought Zuagin closer to the Dinka Bor government in Bor.

At the same Boma Peace Meeting in Juba in September 2013, General Kennedy provided another explanation:

*“This word [ɲalam], it is for Murle [to use], not meant for other people [to use]. It is for Murle. Even sometimes the word Nyoro, for Anyuak, even some people use Nyurit. Different tribes take this word differently. They want to take this word [ɲalam] to make you a different tribe, like you are not Murle. That is what I call ‘divide and rule’ by other tribes. We have in Jonglei state, people from Bor. Tonj people don’t have cattle, they are fishing and cultivating and originally from Bor town. Police General Magordit is from that area.<sup>10</sup> They’re not taking it as a serious issue, saying they’re a different tribe. They are all Dinka. If somebody from Pibor is migrating to Boma, people can ask ‘whose that Lotillain migrating’, but it is the same in Pibor, asking about someone from Gumuruk. People from the centre [in Pibor]. If a person from Pibor centre marries from Gumuruk, they say, ‘why [do] you marry her’, no cattle. ɲalam it is not a tribe, it means someone with no cattle. Even if a person has a lot of cattle but doesn’t want to take them to pasture, call it a ɲalamit. Women are ɲalam. If you want this name to exist, to claim it’s your tribe, then go and take your family there to another place. We know Boma is of all Murle. They make this name exist to benefit from this name, it is selfish.”*

Kennedy Gain, Boma Peace Meeting Juba 13/09/2013

General Gain’s reference to the multiple sub-groups within various ethnic groups are helpful to contextualise the possibilities of multiple identities in South Sudan and how these can be politicised and strategically manipulated, in what the General calls *“‘divide and rule’ by other tribes”*. He called on Murle people to reject the external use of *ɲalam* and accused those who accepted the shifting meanings of the internal term of being “selfish”. What General Kennedy meant with “selfish” was that Murle individuals who were adopting the term *ɲalam* had expectations to gain politically and financially from being from a different tribe. He was referring to the case of Zuagin Rachu Balko referred above and others like him (see Jok 2013), who saw the potential advantages of actively disassociating from the Murle ethnic community in terms of accessing government positions and resources. But what the General failed to acknowledge in his statement above was that Highland Murle positively accepting and adopting *ɲalam* were also in some cases doing so for their own protection and safety in a context of survival.

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<sup>10</sup> Allegedly referring to Brigadier General Mathew Mathiang Magordit, Director of the South Sudan Police Service Auxiliary forces in Greater Upper Nile.

### 7.3 MURLE IMAGININGS, EXPECTATIONS AND CLAIMS TO THE STATE

Building on the case of the Murle and the events of 2012-2014, this section explores how the South Sudanese state uses ethnicity to control, organise and make its people legible. Simultaneously, Murle people individually and collectively ‘make’ the state through their imaginings, expectations of and claims to the state, which are often mediated through ethnicity. As has been pointed out by a number of scholars (de Waal 2014; Pinaud 2014; Thomas 2015), patronage networks are usually connected with ethnicity and identity politics “since ethnic identity is institutionalised and closely linked to territoriality and belonging” (Rolandsen 2015, 165).

But despite the ways in which ethnicity regulates relations with the state, people are aware of the diffused and fragmented nature of the power of the state in South Sudan. In most cases, my informants were frustrated with individuals, or at most with specific factions of ethnic groups, rather than a blind overarching concern with *all* Dinka. In fact, many Murle spoke positively of President Kiir, arguing instead he was poorly advised. Their historical grievances were specific to Dinka Bor, and even then, with high-level government individuals that were perceived to actively attack Murle, such as the former governor of Jonglei, Kuol Manyang.

Peter Alani’s statement below offers some revealing perspective into Murle collective understandings of the government in South Sudan and of its ethnic colouring and tensions. Peter, a Murle civil administrator from Pibor displaced to Juba in May 2013 fleeing SPLA attacks in Pibor town, had strong thoughts about some of the most conspicuous ambiguities of the state in South Sudan. His statement alludes to the hazy distinction between the SPLA and the political party, the SPLM; the government and the state; their ethnic colouring and predatory tactics; its conflicting relationship with citizens; and how the state is co-opted by powerful individuals who often play on ethnic constituencies. Peter shared his own account of fleeing Pibor town and his understanding of events:

*“I went to Bor on the 14 May from Pibor by military helicopter and then reached Juba on 15 May. I was running, trying to save my life... I left some of my children in Pibor, I was escaping from death. Not from crossfire between rebels and SPLA, but from SPLA alone. What has destroyed Pibor town is not the rebels but it was the SPLA. They just come and take whatever is yours, remove the roofing [of your house], loot the food, they just shoot. Sometimes if they want to start looting, they start shooting in the air, then report they were fighting the rebels (...).<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Once a shot is fired people run away with fear and soldiers are able to loot.

*It's not hidden, they're doing it in daylight, like looting MSF and INTERSOS.<sup>12</sup> They removed everything from those compounds. That's what made people scatter to the bush. When people come to town for food they're shot by the SPLA. They've closed all the roads. Even disabled people were being killed. This fighting is not against David Yau Yau; it is tribalism against Murle. Even SPLA soldiers who are with them but are Murle are being shot. It's being planned by two people; our governor [Kuol Manyang] and the Minister of Defence [John] Kong [Nyuon]. These are the two people behind this. If we don't do something it will continue until Murle community is finished. In Boma many have been killed already. Why do we have so many Murle soldiers being killed fighting in Abyei in the border...?"*

Peter Alani, Juba, 07/06/2013

Resonating with many Murle, he accused the SPLA, the most tangible if not often the only material manifestation of the central state in South Sudan's hinterlands, of targeting Murle indiscriminately as an ethnic group or 'tribe' – the way South Sudanese ordinarily express ethnicity. Like many other Murle, Peter thought that Kuol Manyang Juuk and John Kong Nyuon, a Dinka from Bor and a Lou Nuer from Akobo, the Governor of Jonglei state and the Minister of Defence respectively at the time, were behind the SPLA's hostility against the Murle population.<sup>13</sup> The statements and actions of these high-level government individuals were understood to have wider resonance. For Peter, 'tribalism' – a term often used in South Sudan to refer to competing ethnic loyalties – pervaded all levels of government, including high-level government officials, their decisions and the state structures and resources they controlled.

Yet, Peter also explained that he had fled what he considered to be indiscriminate SPLA violence by taking an SPLA military helicopter to Bor, and then proceeding to Juba by car. Thus, his story illustrates the complex and paradoxical nature of many Murle people's relationship with the SPLA, as the most far-reaching agent of the state. On the one hand, the SPLA was perceived to be indiscriminately attacking Murle civilians. On the other hand, the SPLA assisted Murle people in fleeing the violence. In this sense, the state, and the SPLA, were not only political entities, but rather, also fundamentally social ones composed and made of individuals. Peter's account illustrates how state institutions have multiple centres of power and of tension, which exist simultaneously as a range of overlapping possibilities.

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<sup>12</sup> The two NGOs with compounds in Pibor town. See also MSF (2013).

<sup>13</sup> At the time of the interview in June 2013, Kuol Manyang Juuk was the Governor of Jonglei and John Kong Nyuon was the Minister of Defence. Not long after, in August 2013, President Salva Kiir dissolved his government cabinet. In the process, he exchanged their positions and appointed Kuol Manyang as National Minister of Defence and John Kong as Governor of Jonglei.



Above, Peter also lamented what he perceived as the government's hostility towards the Murle, particularly when "*so many Murle soldiers [are] being killed fighting in Abyei in the border,*" what he saw as proof of Murle's collective allegiance to the South Sudanese state. Tellingly, it was not that Murle people held no hopes and expectations in relation to the state. In fact, people held high hopes in what values and services the state was expected to promote and deliver. It was not that the state was unwarranted, unwelcome and rejected. Rather, the state was rejected in what was perceived by Murle as an overwhelmingly ethnic incarnation of the state, perceived as partial and ethnically aligned to their neighbours Dinka Bor and Lou Nuer.

As also suggested by Peter, perhaps one of the state's most conspicuous features in South Sudan is how the dominant government, effectively controlled by the ruling SPLM party, has effectively co-opted the state and its army, the SPLA. In a recent interview, Lam Akol, the leader of the main unarmed opposition party in South Sudan, the Democratic Change (DC) and now a minister in the Transitional Government of National Unity, emphasized that the SPLM led by President Salva Kiir, was not South Sudan: "The State of South Sudan is its people and these people existed before the SPLM and will continue to exist after its demise as is expected by many who suffered in its hands" (Sudan Tribune 2016a). But it is challenging to distinguish the state from the government and from the SPLM party, because the former has been entirely co-opted by the elite in the latter.

### *7.3.1 SEEING THE LAYERS OF THE STATE FROM BOMA*

Returning to the specific case of Boma, within the wider Murle group, how have Highland Murle in Boma related to the various layers of the state and what part does ethnicity play in this? At the national level, as has been discussed in previous chapters, the historical context and historical presence of the SPLM/A in Boma during the second civil war greatly influences the understandings, experience and expectations that Highland Murle have of the contemporary state, and of national government at a broader level. The political centre of the margins of Boma is not located in Juba nor in Bor, but in its most concrete form of state authority and state resources, it is in Pibor, which continues to be seen as controlling and monopolising the rather meagre state funds that reach the area.

Highland Murle positions, therefore, should be locally contextualised in terms of Highland Murle relations with their 'in-laws' in Pibor. As discussed in chapters 3 and 4, the Murle tend to be seen and characterized by the government, popular media and the wider

population, (including its own Murle politicians) as pastoralists, neglecting people from Boma. For example, referring to the fact that by May 2016, Boma state had not yet received the 20 tractors promised to each state by President Salva Kiir, Boma State Governor Baba Medan, a native of Likuangle, said [sic]: “One of the reasons is that man in Murle don’t cultivate, they only go after cattle, while women remain at homes to do the rest of the jobs, including cultivating for the family” (Sudan Tribune 2016b). This account of ‘the Murle’ pertained to the pastoralist Murle, neglecting that in Boma, men and women alike cultivate. With some disappointment, Paul Titoch, a young man from Boma, commented publically on Facebook to the Governor’s statement:

*Is it really fair for the Hon. Governor to say that Murle men don't cultivate? Just walk around your state and you will realise that most Murle men are now farming... especially along River Kengen, Labarab, Churi, Nyalongoro, Nyat, Bayen, Kaiwa, Gangulet and many other areas... why forgetting greater Mewun payam who never got any agricultural skills from the Government yet it always produces enough to feed it's citizens... Jie are pastoralists but still they are farming much better than those who use advanced skills in agriculture. Pochalla is mainly an agricultural centre. I hope Hon. Governor will not deny Murle men the chance to improve their living if the National Government, shall fulfil its promise to the Boma State. Just because they are always after cattle... ”<sup>14</sup>*

In Boma, as in many remote villages across the country, people feel that resources allocated to Greater Pibor do not trickle down to Boma. There is a perception that the limited resources that do trickle down to the county level located in Pibor town are kept there or distributed exclusively to other Murle areas where the government officials in decision-making positions hail from.

### 7.3.2 MAKING SENSE OF THE STATE AND ITS ETHNIC POLITICS

Perceptions of Murle exclusion and marginalization from power and resources in South Sudan are accompanied by ethnic scapegoating (Hirblinger and de Simone 2013). Decades of civil war in what is now South Sudan have contributed to the tightening of the links between ethnic belonging, violent conflict and survival. Especially after the 1991 SPLA split, the militarization of ethnicity took on even greater dimensions (Hutchinson 2000). In the aftermath of the 1991 SPLA split, violence between the two SPLA factions became even

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Titoch, Facebook status (31/05/2016) in response to the remarks by Governor Baba Medan in the Sudan Tribune (2016b).

more ethnicised, both in terms of recruitment along ethnic lines as well as the indiscriminate targeting of civilians on both camps. Thus, ethnic identities became more prominent and essentialised, taking on a greater role for ordinary South Sudanese across the country.

Perhaps a clearer angle to understand the type of imaginings and relationships Highland Murle people held of government is through the kind of allegiances Highland Murle held prior and during the SPLA-Cobra Faction war.

It is difficult to prove if SPLA violence targeting Murle civilians during the war between the Government and the SSDM/A-CF, as recounted in previous chapters, was institutional and part of “state policy” as was the case of the targeting of Nuer men in Juba in December 2013 (AUCISS 2014). However, this was certainly what most Murle, including opinion leaders like the late chief ṅantho, perceived to be happening: an ethnically-driven state policy to attack and kill all Murle. The hostility of particular senior commanders, or the specific actions of individual soldiers, made many Murle people feel that they were as an ethnic group under attack by a government; a government perceived to be dominated overwhelmingly by members of Dinka Bor, with whom Murle had tense relations.

The war between the SPLA and the SSDM/A-CF was perceived by many Murle of the Highlands and Lowlands, as a war of the state/government against the Murle ethnic group. Jacob, displaced from Boma to Juba, and the late Murle paramount chief ṅantho, reiterated two common complementary Murle positions, that *‘they’*, the government and the SPLA, were Dinka-dominated structures operating through ethnic allegiances that found in the DYY rebellion a pretext to attack all Murle:

*“The issue is not the rebellion. They [Government and SPLA] were searching for a way to attack us. This issue is from Bor and their problems with Lowland Murle... SPLA are just coming behind DYY, but what they’re doing is not against DYY, they’re targeting all Murle community.”*

Interview Jacob Lothiboi, Juba 25/05/2013

*“Old brave men like me, all our chiefs from Manyabol have been killed.<sup>15</sup> This killing is tribal, it is the SPLA, but in the SPLA there are Dinka doing it, because Dinka are not in good relations with Murle, it is tribal.”*

Interview ṅantho Kavula, Juba, 26/06/2013

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<sup>15</sup> These killings were also reported by Human Rights Watch (2013b; 2013a).

Self-serving elites that derived power from their association with the state resorted to violence for their own interests by instrumentally using ethnic militias. In addition, because of the ways in which communal violence is interwoven with political violence, individual soldiers from certain ethnic groups attacked Murle civilians for revenge on Murle attacks on their own ethnic communities. Soldiers' ethnic identity and allegiance felt stronger than their allegiance to being a soldier. Alcohol abuse often also played a part in many singular attacks.

Simultaneously, as articulated in chapter 5, there were many cases of solidarity and support from individuals in the SPLA towards Murle civilians fleeing the war, as shown by the case of Peter. Murle civilians walking to and from Raad, discussed in the previous chapter, often walked alongside SPLA soldiers that carried weapons, hence providing a sense of security and protection to civilians. Also, in Raad, when civilians needed to be taken to the clinic in Dima town in Ethiopia, it was the SPLA who drove them. Many Murle individuals fleeing from Pibor and Boma to Bor and Kapoeta respectively also caught rides on SPLA helicopters or trucks.

With reference to the period post-2005 up to 2013, Murle people know how to explain and deal with communal ethnic violence as part of social life, of the violence continuum and of the 'home' (Leonardi 2007b). There tends to be a season, or cycle, of active violence that coincides with the dry season; and a season of 'peace', which coincides with the rainy season (see also appendix 2 for a calendar of seasons in Boma). But ethnically-driven state violence is harder to comprehend and is perceived as socially threatening, aiming to break the Murle community, if not 'wipe out' the Murle altogether (Lou and Jikany Youth in Jonglei State, South Sudan 2011).<sup>16</sup> This had a twofold meaning: not only to physically annihilate the Murle 'tribe' but also to divide them and break them up through ethnic politics and identity narratives.

Drawing on interviews, the Murle ethnic community saw the 2012-2014 DYY war with the SPLA as a "tribal war" with the weapons and the endorsement of the state, the 'hakuma'. 'Tribal war' is in some ways more conceivable and understandable because it is seasonal and part of the 'home sphere'; Murle know how to respond to it and have a social, political and economic framework to situate it in. The combination of state and communal war is both emotionally and materially worse because this merging of different spheres of violence is perceived to be concerted and more structured, and leaves no way out. 'Tribal' conflict

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<sup>16</sup> The term 'wipe out' was used by Murle people and Nuer diaspora groups.

belongs within the sphere of the 'home', in opposition with the sphere of military and government, the 'hakuma' (Leonardi 2007b). When the sphere of the 'home' and the sphere of the 'hakuma' combined with the perceived aim of destroying the Murle and taking over their land, this was not only morally harder to comprehend but also certainly more lethal and threatening: the Murle felt attacked from all angles, from the 'home' and from 'hakuma'.

In Murle eyes, the communal had formally become political and that is what distinguished this war from previous communal conflicts with neighbouring Dinka and Nuer. Ethnic communal conflict with Lou Nuer and Dinka Bor had until this war belonged within 'society'. Conversely, war and simultaneous attacks by the government and neighbouring groups, especially Lou Nuer, were seen as more serious and lethal, "because it really threatens our existence."<sup>17</sup> Effectively, many Murle felt they were fighting the same ethnic enemy, but which this time had come disguised in the form of government. It brought together the two types of Murle understanding of violence: communal violence with government violence and it legitimised communal violence against the Murle under a government banner.

State violence was filled with ethnic undertones. It was also conceived by Murle historically as a part of a commonly held belief of a Dinka conspiracy to take over Pibor and Boma. There were many accounts of Dinka Bor attempts of political domination also during the SPLA's years in Boma. For example, dozens of Jie and Suri-Kachipo youth in Boma in their early 20s have the 'V' facial scarification on their forehead, typical of Dinka Bor. The explanation offered in Boma was that this was because allegedly in the 2000s, two Dinka doctors from Bor, Doctor Atem and Doctor Bior, held "a campaign to get Jie to do the mark," by convincing many Jie and Suri-Kachipo parents that their children would be taken by a disease, allegedly trachoma,<sup>18</sup> unless their children were marked with the 'V'.<sup>19</sup> According to David Lotabo, son of a former chief, "Some even say that it was a Dinka way to then accuse Jie of stealing their children."<sup>20</sup>

For Peter, the Cobra Faction rebellion was merely an "excuse [for the SPLA] to fight Murle and commit atrocities":

*The problem is two things. If peace comes we'll all return, but if the situation remains this way, we'd like to find a way to stay here in Juba. Yesterday John Kong was speaking on the radio,*

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<sup>17</sup> Fieldnotes Paulino Chacha, Juba 17/06/2013.

<sup>18</sup> Trachoma, also called granular conjunctivitis, Egyptian ophthalmia or blinding trachoma is an infectious disease that causes a roughening of the inner surface of the eyelids, and, if left untreated, permanent blindness when the eyelids turn inward.

<sup>19</sup> Fieldnotes, discussions with several informants in Boma.

<sup>20</sup> David Lotabo, Juba 19/08/2013.

*saying that DYY should come [surrender] without conditions... no peace... many in government are involved in this. They want to wipe out Murle people, so they can live there. For example, if we were to stay in Murleland, there are many resources... they've already decided. Lou Nuer go to Pibor and Dinka Bor go to Boma. Why are they dividing our land when we are still alive? The brigadier area commander in Pibor looted the market and put his shop there. They've done that because they know no Murle are coming back. You cannot go there for fighting and set up a shop there. It's not for David Yau Yau. They are using DYY as an excuse to fight Murle and commit atrocities.*

Interview Peter Alani, Juba 7/06/2013

The historical relationship to and experience of the state influenced the way that people in different areas across Murleland understood the conflict between the SPLA and Cobra. Chapter 5 examined how the SPLA-led civilian disarmament campaign that contributed to the David Yau Yau rebellion against the state was conducted differently in the Lowlands and in the Boma Plateau. It was common for many Lowland Murle to perceive the rebellion as a legitimate response to consistent mistreatment of Murle and as a way to protect themselves. However, the lack of popular support that Highland Murle initially had for David Yau Yau's rebellion was not because they did not empathize and identify with the cause of Murle oppression and neglect of their area. But rather they had not experienced political violence during the violent civilian disarmament campaign of 2012 through the hands of the SPLA in the same ways as those in the Lowlands. The concrete experiences of violence being perpetrated by the SPLA on the Lowlands Murle, which largely compelled them to take up arms to defend their families and property, did not affect Highland Murle in the same ways, as discussed in chapter 5.

In light of this, the allegiance of Highland Murle was not to David Yau Yau leading great numbers of youth in the SSDM/A-Cobra Faction, but rather to the SPLA. Although some Highland Murle youth joined the SPLA, particularly those from Nyat and Nyalongoro and the no-longer existing village of Majat, the majority of men from Upper Boma chose to remain as civilians. On the other hand, Lowland Murle were clearer on why they were fighting, including those who did not fight and chose to flee, expressing disappointment in South Sudan and in the way the state related to Murle as a collective. For John in Boma, "Even if they [Murle of Pibor] have not joined David Yau Yau, in their heart they sympathise with him".<sup>21</sup> Blue, who had fled Pibor town to Uganda with his family felt great disappointment when he said with sorrow: "South Sudan... South Sudan is no good. It has

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<sup>21</sup> Fieldnotes Itti 17/04/2013.

nothing for us.”<sup>22</sup> With ‘us’ he was referring to Murle: his ethnic affiliation, that at that moment in time defined how he related and existed within his nation, South Sudan.

Blue’s disappointment with the government of South Sudan contrasted greatly with civilian voices from Boma, who largely blamed the destruction of Boma and of the suffering people were encountering on the SSDM/A-Cobra Faction, who they saw as having brought this upon them. Kaka, a young widow who had fled the violence to Kapoeta complained “All this problem is from David Yau Yau, this Murle of Pibor, until the people of Boma lose their lives for nothing... DYY needs what? We don’t know...”<sup>23</sup>

This belief in the state, represented most commonly by the SPLA as the most visible organ of the State, saw fatal consequences more than once. As already discussed in chapter 5, when the SPLA recaptured Boma the Murle paramount chief along with the various Murle soldiers from the SPLA that had stayed behind hiding in Boma reported back to the military. Reported numbers vary, but somewhere between 18-25 men were shot dead by the SPLA as they reported back to the government, mistakenly thinking they would be accepted. Although there are various versions of this episode (presented in chapter 5), the essence of the story remained the same and demonstrates the extent to which people’s trust of the SPLA, as representative of the state, was broken. It also showed how Highland Murle did not initially consider themselves targeted by the SPLA, although they effectively were. All Murle were guilty by ethnic association.

## 7.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how Murle people on the physical, social and political margins of the state see the latter as a location of ongoing contestation. The state is simultaneously the source of tension and also part of the aspiration that it will prevent and solve conflicts. The state is not assessed only by its actions and its presences, but equally so, by its inactions and absences. That is why in some ways the making of and possibilities of the state are best seen from afar, from a hinterland and border like Boma, especially considering its historical symbolic role in the making of an independent South Sudan. Accounts such as those by Peter Alani and others shared in this chapter reveal the complexity of the relationship between the Murle population and the state: its multiple and

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<sup>22</sup> Fieldnotes, Juba.

<sup>23</sup> Marta Likwong and Kaka, Kapoeta 17/06/2013.

diffused sources of power and authority: simultaneously a source of insecurity and a source of protection.

As has been recognised in other African contexts, “state bureaucracies and elites actively play the ethnic card in an effort to obscure increasing social inequality, class differentiation and capital formation” (Broch-Due 2004a, 13). Ethnicity is not only used as a means to divide and rule, but also as part of the creation of the state, its formation and negotiation. Ethnicity has been adopted as the lens by which the South Sudanese state organises the country, disburses resources, builds and maintains patrimonial relations and makes its people legible. Thus, ethnic formation can be understood as a process that reflects the particular interests of a group, or of individuals within that group, as well as relating to other structures around it. So-called ethnic groups have emerged through environmental and social pressures. In the context of South Sudan, the modern state has the power to fabricate and exert forces that lead to the emergence of new so-called ethnic groups. But these are rather fluid and opportunistic, often-politically motivated creations that can come and go.

In the next chapter, I discuss how the new political developments, the end of the SSDM/A-CF and SPLA war and the subsequent creation of the GPAA in the midst of the national civil war, provided Highland Murle in Boma the social and political space to once again become Murle. I also return to the conceptual matters relating to understandings of violence, the continuum and its potential and limitations in understanding the dynamics of violence in Boma and its Murle population.



## 8. 'BECOMING' MURLE AGAIN: THE GPAA AND THE RENEWED SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SPACES TO BE MURLE

*"Rebels are no longer being called rebels, they are our brothers. We have signed the peace."*

SPLA acting commander in Boma, 15/07/2014

\*

*"The words ḡalam and Lotillanya, it is just abuse between us Murle alone. During that [SPLA-Cobra] conflict, we used that word ḡalam just to defend ourselves, to save your life. But now in time of peace, it is just our word again. (...) We divided ourselves last time because of the war, but now we shouldn't use those words again. We are all together."*

Interview Logidang Lom, Paramount Chief of Boma, Kaiwa 10/08/2014

### 8.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous two chapters, I argued that the state's war on Murle people and their subsequent displacement led both to a renegotiation, essentialisation and reformulation of ethnic identities. I also argued that these events had great repercussions for Murle across the various places of exile, both from the perspective of Highland Murle in Boma and those fleeing, as well as how that related to the ethnic making and politics of the state in South Sudan.

In this final chapter, I argue that the new social and political space provided by the creation of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) and the existence of the Cobra Faction political movement offered Murle people hope for a revised role for the state, one which could be more accountable and responsive. Conversely, because of the presence of the Cobra Faction's military wing, Murle people felt protected and safe from the perceived and real threat of ethnically-targeted violence by the SPLA and by neighbouring groups. Thus, this chapter explores the ways in which the establishment of the GPAA, and specifically Boma County reshaped Murle aspirations and expectations of the state in this context.

With regard to Boma, the new 'peace' and 'liberation' of Murleland offered Highland Murle the –fleeing– social and political spaces to 'become Murle' once again. As observed by the Murle paramount chief in Boma, the war between the SPLA and the Cobra Faction had led

Murle to divide themselves internally. The category of *ηalam* had been instrumentally deployed, “to defend ourselves, to save your life”, but “now we shouldn’t use those words again. We are all together.” With this statement, the chief showed that he regarded ethnic identity as shifting, processual, transformable and adaptable, Murle identity as both natural and instrumental. With the chief’s words in mind, this chapter also examines the effects of the ‘Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in Jonglei State between the Government of South Sudan and the South Sudan Democratic Movement/South Sudan Defence Army’ for Murle and *ηalam* identity negotiations and performance.

The chapter also returns to another theme discussed through this dissertation. The establishment of the GPAA and the events that unfolded in this context offer insights into the complex shifting nature of violence and of how it is experienced, recognised, accepted (or not), performed and qualified. On the one hand, with this I am referring to the contradiction that although the war in Boma and Greater Pibor was officially over, ‘peacetime’ was certainly not devoid of violence or insecurity. Rather, although political violence ceased, the structural neglect and marginalisation of Boma remained, and the invisible normalised violence of peacetime (as discussed in chapter 4), everyday violence, remained features of social life. On the other hand, an apparent paradox, the peace agreement between the government of South Sudan and the SSDM/A-Cobra Faction was signed during the brutal civil war in South Sudan.

The chapter addresses these issues through two sections. First, the chapter discusses the creation of the GPAA as it relates to the wider socio-political space and landscape, using these events as a platform to examine Murle re-imaginings, aspirations and expectations of the state, and its incarnation at various levels. Hopes for safety and services are connected to people’s understanding of what the state should be. The creation of the GPAA also offers insights into the making and remaking of social and political margins, which have come to be delineated along ethnic lines.

Second, the chapter discusses how Highland Murle ‘became Murle’ again and dropped the label ‘*ηalam*’ in its ethnic, or ‘tribal’ divisive sense, once people perceived they had the social and political space as well as security conditions to once again claim their ‘Murleness’. The creation of the GPAA and the new socio-political context in Boma presented a safe social and political space to once again, belong to and become Murle, while still being *ηalam*. Thus, this section reinforces the formative power of violence in influencing and shifting identity narratives.

The empirical material in this chapter was collected principally during the August 2014 Peace Conference that took place in Boma and in which I participated, during fieldwork in Pibor in April-May 2015 and in Juba, in November-December 2015. The dissolution of the GPAA and its transformation into Boma state, part of President Salva Kiir's creation of the 28 states in late 2015 are also discussed more briefly.

## 8.2 ANATOMY OF THE GPAA: THE PRECARIOUS POLITICAL AND ETHNIC REMAKING OF BOMA

*Do not sleep, take care, we're in peace now!! South Sudan oyééé, SPLM oyééé, Cobra oyéééé, salaam oyéééé!! In that last meeting we had here we said that the one who caused the problem here was David Yau Yau. I want to tell all of you that peace has come and David Yau Yau is now with the government.*

Rachu Jakin, Boma Peace Conference, Itti 19/08/2014

Rachu Jakin, a 'son of Boma' and one of the most prominent and respected Murle politicians, spoke with intent at the August 2014 Peace Conference in Boma. He was well aware of how the war in Boma, or as he called it, 'the problem', had until then been blamed by most of his constituents from Boma on David Yau Yau's rebellion, the Cobra Faction. The previous Peace Conference in Boma in November 2013 saw many anti-DYY accusations. But a peace deal had been signed between the government of South Sudan and the Cobra Faction movement; Rachu explained to the participants that the rebellion was over and that David Yau Yau was now part of government. His framing of events, 'the problem caused by David Yau Yau', hints at Highland Murle people's allegiance to the SPLA.

But that 'problem' was over. Weeks earlier, on the 9 July 2014, the third anniversary of the independence of South Sudan was celebrated in Itti town by the members of the Cobra Faction and the Sudan People's Liberation Army, together "as brothers". As the SPLA acting Commander in Boma at the time explained,

*"Rebels are no longer being called rebels, they are our brothers. We have signed the peace. They are staying close to us here. We appreciate the peace, because we want our families to stay peacefully. We are sharing food rations with them and even vehicles."*

SPLA acting commander in Boma, Itti, 15/06/2014

With ‘we’, the Commander was collectively referring to the SPLA and its support to ‘them’, the Cobra Faction soldiers staying in Anyagidi, the Cobra Faction base camp some thirty minutes walk from Itti on the way to Nyat.

The ‘Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in Jonglei State between the Government of South Sudan and the South Sudan Democratic Movement / Defence Army – Cobra Faction’, that led to the creation of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), had been signed on 9 May 2014 in Addis Ababa (GoSS and SSDM/A-Cobra 2014). This Peace Deal answered the Cobra Faction’s calls for greater government representation and an independent state. With the government of Salva Kiir keen to have the Cobra Faction and the Murle more broadly on its side as it fought the SPLA-IO in what had become an ethnically-tainted civil war, ongoing peace mediation efforts led by Bishop Paride Taban finally offered some headway (Taban 2014; Buruga 2014). Earlier in 2014, on 30 January a ceasefire agreement between the two parties had been signed, also in Addis Ababa. The lead negotiator for the SSDM/A-CF was General Khaled Boutros, who along with General David Yau Yau and Major General Joseph Lilimoy, made up the political leadership of the Cobra Faction (photograph 25).<sup>1</sup> The peace agreement was ratified by the Council of States in June 2014 and by July the president issued a Presidential Decree officially setting up the GPAA (The Citizen News 2015).



Photograph 23 Chief negotiator Khaled Boutros, Bishop Paride Taban and Joseph Lilimoy in Addis Ababa in May 2014 (photo courtesy of Joseph Lilimoy).

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Lilimoy, 25/04/2015.

Paradoxically, since the outbreak of national conflict between the Government of South Sudan (GoSS) and the SPLA-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO) began on 15 December 2013, the dynamics of the conflict in Pibor changed significantly for the better, and the area went from being the most unstable to one of the quietest in the country. As pointed out in a Small Arms Survey report,

“It is a strange irony that from the ‘peacetime’ period (post-2005) onwards, most people in Pibor, and particularly the Murle, have lived with almost continual violence and displacement, but now that civil war has returned to South Sudan they have slowly returned to their seasonal settlements and administrative centers” (Todisco 2015, 6).

Effectively, while the rest of the country descended into a third civil war –the first since independence– between the ruling SPLM, led by president Salva Kiir, and followers of the SPLA-IO, led by former vice-president Riek Machar, Greater Pibor found itself comparatively peaceful.

By September 2016, nationwide, since the beginning of the conflict, 1.61 million people had become internally displaced, nearly 190,000 of these seeking protection inside overstretched UNMISS camps (UNMISS 2016), over 882,203 people had fled to neighbouring countries, and some 4.8 million people were at serious risk of food insecurity (UN OCHA 2016e).

It is against this political and humanitarian backdrop that the creation of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) can be understood. The Government of South Sudan, overstretched and interested in investing all its forces and military might into fighting the SPLM-IO, was consequently compelled to negotiate an end to the Cobra Faction rebellion by addressing the greatest of its demands: the creation of a separate state. The GPAA was not in fact, formally a state, but an autonomous region separate from Jonglei state, with a de facto status as a state. But from a Murle perspective, its greatest accomplishment was that it no longer answered to Bor, Jonglei state, but rather directly to the Office of the President in Juba. As such, the political deal offered Murle leadership administrative independence from Dinka Bor.

The Government’s official reason for preventing the GPAA from being legally constituted a state was that the Transitional Constitution only recognised 10 states in South Sudan.<sup>2</sup> The government argued that the very delayed constitutional review process (Akol 2013) would

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<sup>2</sup> Interview, Joseph Lilimoy, 15/08/2014.

determine the final legal status of the GPAA. However, with hindsight, it can be said the government was politically manoeuvring to maintain some legal vagueness around the GPAA. The establishment of the 28 states in October 2015, already discussed in the introduction, demonstrates that when it became politically expedient, the President did not hesitate to disregard the Constitution and create new states. In this process, the GPAA was formally transformed into Boma state, as discussed later in the chapter.

The establishment of the GPAA was by no means a unanimous decision, and in going ahead with it Salva Kiir ignored the interests of powerful figures in both the national and Jonglei state governments, especially those of SPLA General Chief-of-Staff, Lieutenant General Paul Malong, and National Minister of Defence Lieutenant General Kuol Manyang. During the short life of the GPAA, the area and political arrangement remained fragile, not least because its establishment was predicated on the wider civil war. As noted by Todisco (2015), “Should the balance of the wider conflict shift significantly to one warring side or the other, or simply decay, new priorities and alliances could prevail, and state and local interests in Jonglei could reassert themselves”.<sup>3</sup>

Despite intense pressure from the GoSS, the Cobra Faction leadership of the GPAA succeeded in remaining outside of the national conflict, and forged relatively good relations both with the GoSS and with the SPLA-IO, the latter controlling Akobo along the northern border of the GPAA. Relations also improved on a local level between communities, especially Murle and Lou Nuer communities. For example, after receiving complaints that cattle had been raided from Lou Nuer in Akobo, allegedly, DYY himself made sure these cattle were found and identified in Likuangole and returned to Akobo. Senior Cobra officials also clearly stated their commitment to remaining outside of the battle areas, and having received their ‘independence’, focussing on taking the area forward as an autonomous state.

The GPAA was a new administrative arrangement, not previously existent in South Sudan. It comprised Pibor and Pochalla counties (see map 13), with a combined population of 214,676 people, although the population was likely much higher.<sup>4</sup> In what are probably the most remote and isolated areas of the country, there are still no roads, and limited access to education and healthcare. But notably, as explained by Joseph Lilimoy, a senior Cobra Faction general, people felt the new political arrangement offered them security and a sense of recognition and political accountability. Rural people felt they could have something to

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<sup>3</sup> For the background and challenges of the GPAA see Todisco (2015).

<sup>4</sup> This is according to the latest census of 2010, likely to be significantly lower than reality. Of these, 148,475 people are in Pibor and 66,201 in Pochalla.

gain from a 'hakuma' that was also part of the 'home' (Leonardi 2007b). Perhaps more important than access to services that the Murle population had effectively never benefited from, Lilimoy argued that people felt there was safety and a direct relationship to the state, considered legitimate and accountable.<sup>5</sup>

The Peace Deal that led to the creation of the GPAA offered provisions for a chief administrator with the same authority as a state governor, the establishment of a Greater Pibor Area Council with representatives from across the GPAA. It also offered inclusion in the national budget and assurances that financial resources would be channelled into the GPAA and managed locally. Former rebel leader David Yau Yau was appointed chief administrator by President Salva Kiir on the 30 July 2014 and kept the position until 23 December 2015, when Baba Medan was appointed the governor of the newly established Boma State. The GPAA was extinct less than two years into its establishment and transformed into Boma state, as part of the creation of the 28 states in South Sudan.

In the context of some internal contestation in Greater Pibor, President Salva Kiir announced the creation of seven counties. At an August 2014 Peace Meeting in Boma, Rachu Jakin announced to a Murle, Jie and Suri-Kachipo mixed audience:

*"The GPAA is for four communities. We've been given seven counties. Number one is Boma County, Pibor, Vertet, Gumuruk, Likuangole, Pochalla North and Pochalla South. Greater Pibor is now a state and it's part of government, separated from Jonglei state. Within Greater Pibor, DYY was appointed as chief administrator. DYY already did the swearing in."*

Rachu Jakin, Boma Peace Conference, Itti 19/08/2013

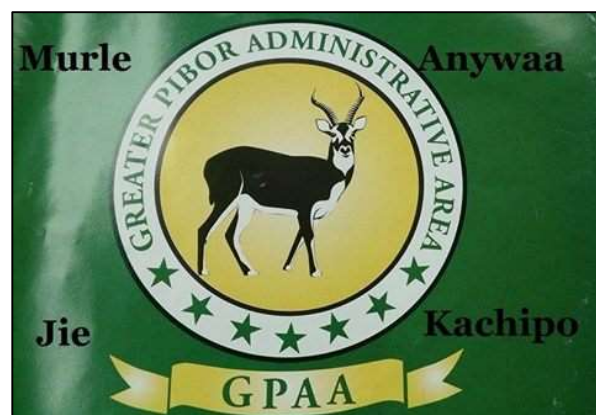
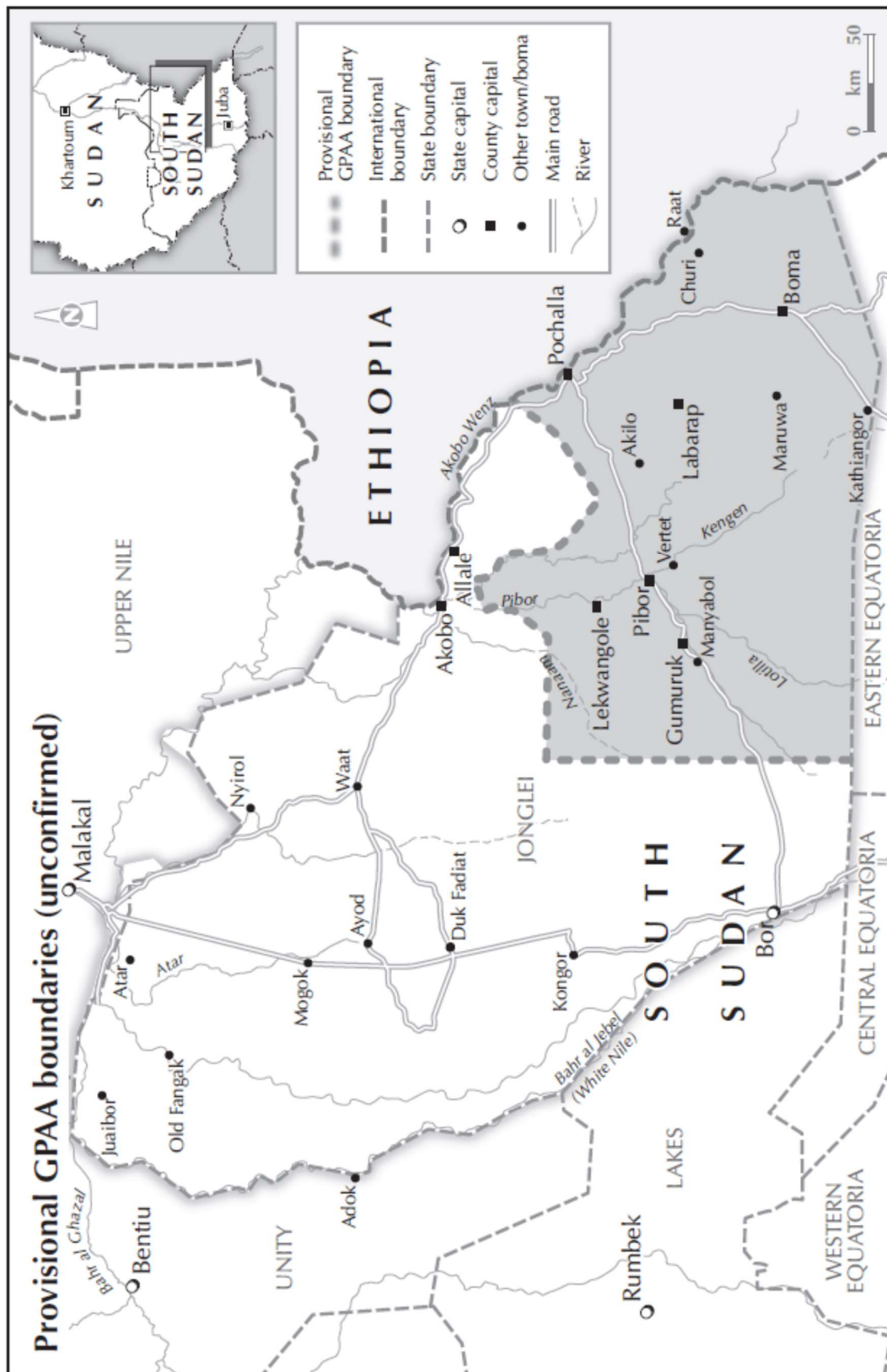


Figure 5 The new GPAA flag and symbols, a white-eared kob, seven stars representing each county and also naming the four ethnic groups in its territory.

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<sup>5</sup> Fieldnotes, various discussions with former GPAA deputy administrator and senior Cobra Faction member Joseph Lilimoy.



Map 13 Provisional GPAA boundaries (Todisco 2015).



Perhaps the early sign that even with a Murle government, there would be no real transformation in the government's relationship with rural people, was the way in which county commissioners were appointed. The political elite from each county nominated three candidates for the commissionership, while David Yau Yau made the final choices leading to internal tensions and dissatisfaction particularly in Likuangle and Boma, where the commissioners appointed were not those favoured by the population.

David Yau Yau appointed Beko Konyi as the first commissioner of Jebel Boma County. Originally from Boma, Beko had been the South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission representative in Pibor over the previous years. Others such as Pastor Jeremiah Lotiboy, acting Boma commissioner in the months preceding Beko's appointment, and John Kumen Kudumoch (who was later appointed commissioner of Jebel Boma county in the new Boma State), had also been contenders for the position.

As in other parts of South Sudan, the GPAA budget was barely enough to pay government employees and civil servants, with little or nothing left to invest in services. According to Radio Tamazuj (2014), on the 15 October 2014 the South Sudan National Cabinet passed a budget allocating 680,000 SSP for administration and another 250,000 to integrate the Cobra faction into the SPLA. In November 2015, the new budget of 141 million SSP was disbursed, extremely in delay and significantly lower than the 680 million requested by the GPAA authorities (Radio Tamazuj 2015b). Sam David, the GPAA Minister of Information at the time said the budget would only cover the salaries of the 2,000-person workforce. The National Government had been withholding the budget as a means to pressure the GPAA Cobra Faction leadership to support an SPLA offensive to Lou Nuer areas of Akobo and beyond launched from Likuangle. This pressure was a source of division among the Murle political elite and allegedly the cause of David Yau Yau's dismissal of Joseph Lilimoy as his deputy administrator on the 17 July 2015. Lilimoy, originally from Likuangle was adamant that Greater Pibor should remain neutral in the wider national conflict.<sup>6</sup>

The first year of relative order and stability in the GPAA in the midst of the civil war challenged the Murle reputation as an 'acephalous society' that lacked structure, leadership and incapable of law and order. This was despite the fact most local government officials across Greater Pibor were not being paid. Although the chapter focuses on the phase immediately after the creation of the GPAA it is worth making brief reference to what was

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Lilimoy, 12/2015.

to come next. The GPAA and the aspirational political reforms it inspired were to be short-lived, partially because of national interference and lack of resources.

The civil war in South Sudan between the Government's SPLA and the SPLA-IO diverted attention from the Murle 'problem'. From the government's perspective, the perpetrator narrative often attributed to the Murle also shifted. For a brief period, the Murle were not presented by the national government as the enemies of the state, a destabilizing element in Jonglei and in the nation, and as a 'problem' that needed to be solved. However, the temporary and unpredictable nature of political settlements, agreements and alliances in South Sudan meant that neither political arrangements and administrative units such as the GPAA, nor the identities they supported proved permanent. Rather, these remained and remain precarious and shifting.

Less than two years into its establishment, the GPAA was transformed into Boma state. As discussed in chapter 1, on 2 October 2015, President Salva Kiir issued an order to divide the country's 10 states into 28 states across South Sudan, largely along ethnic lines (Republic of South Sudan 2015). The "Establishment Order Number 36/2015 for the creation of 28 States" divided the country into Equatoria-based States, Bahr-el-Ghazal-based States and Upper Nile-based States with eight, ten and ten states respectively. It also broke up previously multi-ethnic states into smaller homogenous units. The 28 states were then discussed and approved in Parliament a few days later, in extraordinary speed (Sudan Tribune 2015a). Order 36/2015 reads that,

"The fundamental objectives of the order States that; it will devolve power and resources closer to the people, gradually reduce size of national government, attracts experts to work at the State and Counties level and promote social and economic development amongst the rural communities" (Republic of South Sudan 2015).

This had never been achieved with ten states, and it was unlikely that "power and resources" would truly become "closer to the people", in the even more administratively complicated and costly running of 28 states. Given the administrative and financial constraints experienced in South Sudan, the creation of the 28 states seemed to be a way to enlarge President Kiir's political constituency. It also risked simultaneously likely triggering a large number of local land and border disputes and conflicts (Mayai, Tiitmamer, and Jok 2015).

On the 23 December 2015, President Kiir issued another Republican Order appointing governors for the 28 states (Sudan Tribune 2015b). In the defunct GPAA, David Yau Yau was removed from his position as Chief Administrator, and instead President Kiir appointed

Baba Medan Konyi as the first governor of Boma State. David Yau Yau was later appointed Deputy Minister of Defence of the TGoNU, in efforts to accommodate the former rebel leader and integrate remaining Cobra Faction forces into the SPLA (Radio Tamazuj 2016j).

On the 5 November 2015 David Yau Yau and his top generals in the Cobra Faction were fully integrated into the government's SPLA (photograph 26) and by January 2016 DYY had allegedly announced the dissolution of the SSDM/A-Cobra Faction. On the 11 January 2016, David Yau Yau went on the radio saying that "Today [we] are declaring that we have joined our mother party the SPLM for the sake of peace" (Radio Tamazuj 2016d; Mayom 2016).



Photograph 24 The integration of senior Cobra Faction generals into the SPLA on 5 November 2015. From left, Major General Joseph Lilimoy, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant General David Yau Yau and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant General Khaled Bora (courtesy of Joseph Lilimoy).<sup>7</sup>

Fears that the disruption of the fragile balance of power achieved in Greater Pibor through the removal of DYY and Medan's appointment could lead to instability in Greater Pibor were well-founded (Radio Tamazuj 2016c; Radio Tamazuj 2016b; Radio Tamazuj 2016a). Baba Medan was a controversial politician in the political constellation of Greater Pibor. During

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<sup>7</sup> In the Cobra Faction, before integration into the SPLA, these senior commanders held the following ranks: First Lieutenant General David Yau Yau; Second Lieutenant General Khaled Bora and Major General Joseph Lilimoy.

the Cobra Faction struggle, he had remained closely aligned with the Jonglei state government. He had previously been the Jonglei State Minister of Youth and Culture until he was appointed deputy governor of Jonglei state in March 2014. His association with Dinka Bor and to the Jonglei state government made him an unpopular and distrusted option for governor of the new Boma state in the eyes of many Murle, and certainly in the eyes of the Cobra Faction leadership.

Naomi Pendle builds from David Turton's (1991) interpretation of violent conflict as "the public negotiation of authority and the balance of power between groups. The negotiation is interrupted when that balance tips in favour of one group" (Pendle 2014, 229). It is not uncommon in South Sudan for national elites to deliberately destabilize local political dynamics, with their own personal interests in mind. The creation of Boma state and the interference of national-level politics, through the appointment of Baba Medan, affected the fragile balance of power that had been achieved in the area. The manipulation of state power was followed by an outbreak of violence in Greater Pibor (Radio Tamazuj 2016i; Radio Tamazuj 2016c; Radio Tamazuj 2016e). In Greater Pibor, each political faction drew on his own geographic constituency. Baba Medan, from Likuangle built on his formal government position and mobilized the SPLA as well as his own personal relations mobilizing fighters from his area, while DYY drew on Cobra Faction hard-liners and his Gumuruk constituency. Fighting occurred in Pibor town from 23 February 2016 lasting for some days, leading once again to its destruction and a great part of the population fleeing to the UNMISS base and to the bush for safety (Radio Tamazuj 2016f; Radio Tamazuj 2016g; Radio Tamazuj 2016h).

### 8.2.1 RENEWED HOPES AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE 'HAKUMA'

*"We believe that with the GPAA, all our problems will be solved".*

Government official, Itti 08/08/2014

In the first months after the creation of the GPAA, Highland Murle, both in Boma and those living in Juba, held intense discussions about their hopes and aspirations for Boma in the new political settlement. Similar to the wave of enthusiasm that had spread across South Sudan in the initial stages of the country's independence in 2011 (see for example Gettleman 2011; Bell 2011; Rice 2011), people across the GPAA and Boma were optimistic and hopeful for change now that the 'Murle had been liberated'. But as noted by Cherry Leonardi, (2007, 406), the term 'liberation' has come to be "increasingly used with bitter irony in reference to [SPLA] senior officers 'liberating' land, resources and even women from their rightful

owners.” As had been the case nationally, the hopes for a fair, functional and responsive government in the GPAA and in Boma would prove to be short-lived.

The Murle government official quoted above was echoing what turned out to be hopeful yet premature aspirations of the Murle population across Greater Pibor. As observed by Leonardi (2013, 198):

“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. Neither imaginary was entirely fulfilled: communities remained indistinct, incoherent, fragmented and porous, while the state was largely failing to meet popular expectations.”

Murle people across Greater Pibor hoped the establishment of the GPAA would be an opportunity to reconfigure people’s relationship to a more responsive state. But the renewed expectations of the state in “bringing the services to the village” were left unfulfilled: there was no “protection, justice, services and resources” (Leonardi, 2013), just as before the GPAA.

In principle, the GPAA would have direct access to resources from the Office of the President in Juba and would be led by accountable Murle government officials, the former Cobra Faction ‘liberators’. In some ways, it represented the merging of ‘hakuma’ and ‘home’, which could, naively, be trusted and relied on to run a responsive state government. In practice, on the one hand, funding to the GPAA were being withheld by the government as a means to pressure the GPAA government and the Cobra Faction to side with the government in the national conflict, and allow access for a military offensive in Akobo via Likuangole in northern GPAA. On the other hand, the expectation that an ethnically-Murle government would carry out politics differently than previous governments was perhaps naïve and ill-founded. Murle elites were embroiled in their own political rivalries (as shown between Medan and Yau Yau) and perhaps less interested than hoped in achieving the development of services across Murle land.

Murle people hoped that the GPAA was the avenue to achieve greater political representation and in turn, access resources, services and infrastructure. Yet perhaps even more important, the GPAA brought the promise of a renewed relationship with the state: one which would not undermine nor attack Murle civilians, and one which Murle people could legitimately be part of; where Murle would not only be victims of discourse but could actively be part of shaping it. But as noted by Leonardi (2013, 160), “the increasing sense of ‘membership’ of the local state was accompanied by increasing expectations of the state”. Reflecting the concrete aspirations of people, one Murle Cobra soldier from Maruwo Hills uttered:

*"We expect development to come to our area, a main road made of maram from here [Boma] to Pochalla and Pibor to connect our state. We want schools in all these areas, in Boma, Maruwo, Labarab, Pibor..."*

Cobra Faction soldier, Itti 09/08/2014

But in addition to greater access to services, people believed that with the GPAA, the security in the area would improve. The same Cobra soldier from Maruwo explained,

*"We'll stop the raiding [of Jie] because we got our state and will have money and development, so we don't need to raid. We are raiding the cattle because we are hungry. Before we were far from town, but now we're close with government so we won't be raiding. Soon David Yau Yau will come disarm all the guns and keep it in the store."*

Across the Lowlands, people's confidence in the GPAA was expressed through people's decisions to return to towns, permanent villages and to the usual cattle migration routes and cattle camp areas that had been avoided for the previous years because of the war with the SPLA. When I visited various towns and cattle camp areas in the Lowlands in April and May 2015, there were regular, nearly daily age-set dances and cultural events and the market in Pibor town was bustling with traders and shops.

Initially, the ways in which people in Murleland felt that they were being fairly represented in government led to changes to their relationship to the government, and renewed hopes in its potential. But the hopes that a new type of 'hakuma' made of Murle leaders would somehow be different proved to be naïve. As discussed above, by early 2016, Murle leaders David Yau Yau and Baba Medan had mobilised their local constituencies against each other, leading once again to the destruction of Pibor town, the looting of at least five humanitarian facilities as well as the market, and at least 16,000 people displaced, with over 2,500 people seeking refuge at the UNMISS compound in Pibor (UN OCHA 2016a; 2016b).

As discussed in previous chapters, Highland Murle in Boma had felt they were at the periphery of the state and lacked political representation, in relation not only to Juba but also more immediately, to Bor and to Pibor. Ethnic configurations played a big part in how individuals felt the GPAA could reduce or increase feelings of marginalisation. It is through this prism that expectations for the GPAA can be understood – people longing for greater state-provided security and service delivery, and the belief that these could have greater chances of being realised in the new political arrangement.

The creation of the GPAA and the elevation of a number of bomas into payams and payams into seven counties, created new spheres of alleged influence, state power and hopes for

extra resources. It also created new salaried government positions. Elites in each county competed for positions and held intense discussions about administrative borders and external symbols of their respective areas. Over the first months since the creation of the GPAA, county elites competed over issues such as the new names of counties and payams, its symbols such as the flag, emblems, seals and festivals, land and administrative borders, and most importantly, for government positions and power (see figure 6). For example, at the Greater Pibor level, there was much discussion around changing the capital of the GPAA from Pibor town to Labarab, considered by some to be more central in the region and with a year-round river flowing through it. There were also rumours that this urge to move capitals was led by the fact that under Pibor town were large reserves of oil.

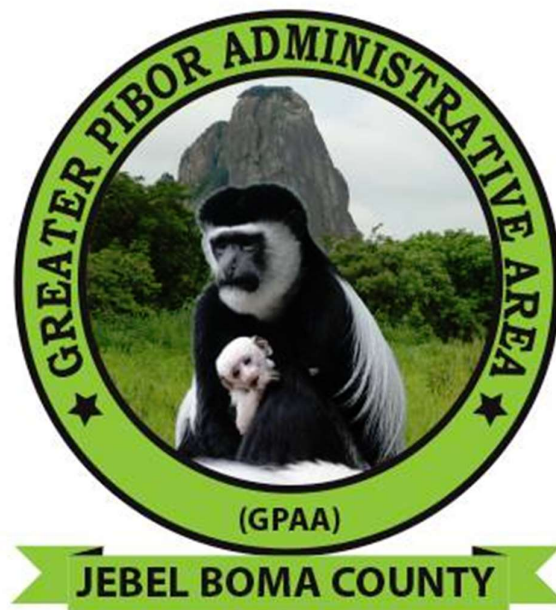


Figure 6 The symbol of the newly established Jebel Boma County, with ṛatiliwaan in the back.

Similarly, government officials in Boma concentrated on seemingly superfluous issues. Instead of the reconstruction of Boma, authorities focused on moving the centre of the town, the capital of the new Jebel Boma county to Orgin, on the feet of the Boma Hills: “We want to be a bit further away not so close to the army barracks. We also want to move the army seven kilometres out of Itti town to Khora Dep”.<sup>8</sup> Boma payam was renamed Jebel Boma county, covering six new payams: Gugu (the administrative centre, where Itti is located), Churi (also known by its Dinka name Pakok), Maruwo, Labarab, Mewun and Kassengor

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<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah Lotiboy, Itti 15/07/2014

payams. But despite the formal establishment of a peace deal and the end of formal fighting between the SPLA and the SSDA-Cobra Faction, the context in Boma remained uncertain. As expressed by Oga Lixa, a volunteer policeman from Mewun,

*"We don't know what it will bring, but we want peace. On the side of the police we want to receive our salaries and we want development to be here. If we got salaries we'd be many more policemen, but they had to go find food and money."*

Oga Lixa, Itti 09/08/2014

Oga's request represents perhaps the greatest issue that continued to affect post-war Boma, the return to the status quo of social and political neglect, everyday uncertainty and insecurity.

### 8.2.2 ETHNIC RECONFIGURATIONS AND RE-IMAGINING THE STATE

The increasing use of ethnicity as a frame of reference in South Sudan's conflicts is "in contrast to the much more subtle and complex role of communal belonging in South Sudan's everyday politics" (Hirblinger and de Simone 2013, paragraph 7). The political transitions triggered by the CPA in 2005 have encouraged political dynamics centred on ethnicity. International sponsored efforts that promote a decentralized system of governance have inadvertently produced tensions between different ethnic groups, who often see access to government resources and services as well as political representation at the local level of government through an ethnic lens.

This has been intensified by recent political reform processes such as the Local Government Act of 2009 which furnish 'traditional' authorities with a greater role (Leonardi 2013). Alleged efforts to strengthen the state in remote areas have also led to increased ethnic fragmentation across the country, where administrative territories have become increasingly linked to notions of communal belonging (Hirblinger and de Simone 2013). As noted by Leonardi (2013, 182),

*"The rhetoric and recognition of traditional authority with the policies of decentralisation to enshrine the chiefs as sole executive and judicial authorities in the 'boma'. These units, and those above them, became the focus for intense expectation and often dispute, resulting in ever more and smaller units, and more exclusionary, territorialised and ethnicised definitions of locality and community".*



The functioning of the GPAA had similar consequences, despite a formal rhetoric of inclusiveness. In the immediate aftermath of the establishment of the GPAA, Murle had very high hopes for the GPAA. Simultaneously, in Boma, Jie and Kachipo had fears they would experience even greater marginalisation than when they were part of Jonglei state. In fact, expectations and fears about what the GPAA could bring were being shaped by their location and ethnic affiliation. “Ethnicity [was] at the centre of governance” (Leonardi 2013, 187).

In August 2014 I attended a five-day Peace Meeting in Itti that gathered together Highland Murle, Suri-Kachipo, Jie and Toposa representatives. The meeting was set up to offer the space to discuss and ‘reconcile’ over the violence experienced and perpetrated over the previous years between the groups, especially over the previous year in 2013, during the SPLA and the SSDM/A-CF war. Complex histories of violence and revenge between groups in the area, that materialised over the SSDA-Cobra Faction – SPLA war in Boma, needed to be addressed. Newly established administrative boundaries promised to produce new structures of marginalization of other existing minority groups, of Jie and Suri-Kachipo.

Highland Murle complaints were particularly connected to the violence they had experienced after the SPLA retook Boma in late May 2013. But these grievances and animosity were not against a distant and anonymous state, but rather directed against Jie and even Kachipo neighbours. In May 2013, the SPLA had distributed weapons among Jie men who aided the SPLA in retaking Boma (see Minority Rights Group International 2013). In this process, there were few efforts to distinguish between Cobra Faction soldiers and Murle civilians, and Murle in Boma felt attacked by Jie and Kachipo, who they accused of attacks, killings and political undermining.<sup>9</sup> Once the government restored its authority in Boma, the local government was also ethnically altered with Jie and a few Kachipo occupying all the positions that had previously been held by Murle. Murle in Boma had become a minority in their own home and felt socially and politically threatened.

The Cobra Faction was overwhelmingly composed of Murle, but the new GPAA area was to be an ethnically heterogeneous area composed of Murle, Anyuak, Jie and Kachipo. At a Peace meeting in Boma in August 2014, Irer, who was at the time the Cobra Faction Commander

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<sup>9</sup> Other groups experienced different sets of dynamics also partially connected to the Cobra-SPLA conflict. For example, because of the chaos of the war, state officials in Eastern Equatoria and Boma did not negotiate grazing routes for Toposa pastoralists. Toposa moved into Kachipo area in Mewun in May 2013 and destroyed some infrastructure. In the process, some people were killed which then triggered serious revenge attacks from both groups. As a result, Kachipo joined forces with Jie and went for raiding of Toposa cattle.

in Boma, encouraged other ethnic groups to join Cobra, who had “become the army for all people of the GPAA”:

*“I’m telling you Kachipo and Jie, I received the message that you have to bring soldiers to be part of Cobra, so just list them and give their names. So that Cobra’s of all, including Anyuak as well. Big people of DYY want to recruit from Kachipo, Jie, people of Boma and Anyuak. I want to tell all of you of Boma here that Itti town is a town of all the communities around here, including Murle, Jie and Kachipo. Itti belongs to all who want to stay in the town.”*

Irer Lotony,<sup>10</sup> Boma Peace Conference, Itti, 19/08/2013

At the same peace conference Rachu Jakin, a Murle MP in Jonglei state, informed the crowd:

*“I want to tell you that the administration of GP will employ everybody here [referring to everybody from all tribes]”. [CLAPS].*

Rachu Jakin, Boma Peace Conference, Itti 19/08/2013

But minority groups in the GPAA feared the new status quo. As explained by one Jie government official: “A rope is being pulled by the two states, on Kassengor. But there are no schools, no water, no health centre in either sides.”<sup>11</sup> Kachipo and Jie framed their expectations proportionally to their relationship to Murle. Both Jie and Kachipo are minority groups, each with only a handful of secondary school graduates and one or two youth soon to graduate from university.

The Jie ethnic group have increasingly come to be perceived by Murle as a destabilising element in Boma, and within the GPAA more broadly, which “does not belong to the area and should go back to Eastern Equatoria State”.<sup>12</sup> A small number of educated Jie youth in Juba have been vocal about not wanting to be part of the GPAA, and lobbying for Jie to have their own county outside of the GPAA. Most recently, in a piece published by Gurtong Trust, these individuals expressed that “Jie are not against the presidential decree but we want all to know that we are not part of Greater Pibor Administrative Area” (in Jok 2014).

According to Murle sources, representatives from only one of the four Jie clans, Nyeriza, called for separation from the GPAA, and even then, only some of the urban youth in Juba with limited influence in the community and elders on the ground. In the peace meeting during August, this issue was not discussed, but a few Jie elders mentioned that they did

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<sup>10</sup> Before the war, Irer had been a local government official in Boma.

<sup>11</sup> Interview Daniel Lopeta, Naoyapuru 15/07/2014.

<sup>12</sup> Various discussions, Itti and Juba.

want to stay in Boma, which was their home. The same youth were keen to boycott the August peace meeting and tried to convince many Jie in Boma to not attend the meeting, but still there was wide Jie local turnout.

In the Murle narratives of events, the Jie ethnic group are a destabilising proxy militia orchestrated by Dinka Bor of Jonglei State. In particular, Jie people were seen as easily manipulated and used by former Jonglei governor Kuol Juuk Manyang, now Minister of Defence, and Michael Makuei Lueth, Minister of Information and Deputy negotiator in Addis Ababa, both from Greater Bor and seen by Murle as keen to undermine the GPAA.<sup>13</sup>

In his home in the village of Naoyapuru some 30 minutes walking from Itti, Jie paramount chief Lorumo Loliya expressed reservations about the GPAA, emblematic of broader Jie fears of being stuck between two larger agro-pastoralist tribes, the Murle and Toposa:

*"We don't trust it [the GPAA] because if they come they'll begin child abductions and killings on the road, those are the problems we expect. Also on this side [of Eastern Equatoria], Toposa will be coming here killing people and taking cattle".*

Lorumo Loliya, Naoyapuru 07/08/2014.

Lorumo's apprehension was a consequence of being a minority group in an administrative area where access to resources and justice is perceived to derive from one's ethnic affiliation. Jie chiefs reported that since Cobra had arrived in Itti, there had been no problems "but we don't know what will happen". Perhaps it was best said by Daniel, a Jie local government official in Boma: "we don't fear we'll be marginalised [by Murle leadership in the GPAA], we're absolutely sure we will."<sup>14</sup> Across South Sudan communities perceive public offices to be subject to ethnically based patronage networks, derived from a perception that state institutions distribute resources and justice according to ethnic bias. There is an expectation that the only way to have access to the state and its resources is by cutting the territory administratively. But as the creation of the GPAA demonstrated, this in fact establishes new layers of inequality and ethnic bias.

The Kachipo people remain probably the most isolated and excluded in Boma, both due to their own geographical isolation and lack of political representation. According to one Kachipo youth: "people in Mewun are not really aware of the GPAA but they know there's

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<sup>13</sup> Fieldnotes, various informal discussions.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Lopeta, Naoyapuru 07/08/2014.

peace and no more fighting”.<sup>15</sup> Echoing broad Suri-Kachipo views, John Dunyi, one young leader considered one of the community’s most educated members recounted that “only when I reached class 8, I realised there’s a government, that we are part of Jonglei state in South Sudan.”<sup>16</sup> In relation to the GPAA, he added:

*“Now we heard we are part of the GPAA, but we’re still all far away and alone. When shall we be known by the government? The school is operating alone, we cleared the airstrip alone... Once in Form 4 [the last year of secondary school] I went to Bor and met [former Governor] Kuol Manyang and asked him if we were really from Jonglei...”*

John Dunyi, Itti 12/08/2014

People in Boma were keen to be integrated into the State. For Logidang, the Murle paramount chief in Boma,

*“The separation from Jonglei as GPAA is good. When we were together with Dinka in Jonglei most things didn’t reach here... vehicles, roads, development... but as a separate area we can access those things (...) maybe Mewun and Kassengor and Churi will become big payams.”*

Logidang Lom, Kaiwa, 10/08/2014

What Logidang’s statement above also demonstrates is that he was considering the benefits of the GPAA not only for his own ethnic group, but also for Jie and Kachipo communities, by articulating the hope that “Mewun and Kassengor and Churi will become big payams”. Significantly, what his words reveal is how ethnicity is recognised and has meaning locally, but also that it is understood and navigated very differently at the local level, before it starts being instrumentalized by broader political elites.

### 8.3 BECOMING MURLE AGAIN: PEACETIME AND THE GPAA’S POLITICAL SPACE TO SHIFT IDENTITY NARRATIVES

This final section discusses how the new GPAA political arrangement, and the existence of a militarily strong Cobra Faction, offered Highland Murle the safety and the social and political spaces to again, ‘become Murle’. But this section also seeks to demonstrate how different forms of violence interacted with processes of belonging and proved to be significantly formative of one’s sense of identity. These events reveal how identity is

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<sup>15</sup> Discussion Philip Monyong, Itti 08/08/2014.

<sup>16</sup> Interview John Dunyi, Itti 12/08/2014.

mutable, shifting, processual and situated, possessing both naturalized and instrumental dimensions. Rather, becoming Murle was connected to social and political space, not actually a linear change of identity.

First, the section will discuss how Highland Murle people experienced the shift from *ɔɾɔn* to peacetime *ɔɾe*; and second, how these changes in real and perceived security shaped identity narratives.

### *8.3.1 THE FORMATIVE DIMENSIONS OF VIOLENCE: FROM ɔɾɔn TO PEACETIME ɔɾe*

Despite the new GPAA structures and the Peace Conferences, as late as January 2016, Highland Murle in Boma complained openly of insecurity. This section focuses on the post-peace agreement signed between the GoSS and the SSDM/A-Cobra Faction, presumably and technically a time of peace, but where many of the losses and violence experienced during the war, remained part of peoples' lives. Bureaucratic peace was in place: administrative changes meant people felt closer to the state; and events such as peace conferences offered the space to discuss issues and 'return to normality'. But the realities of everyday life demonstrated that the insecurity of everyday remained present, even if the war was over.

Even though, in principle, by mid-2014 people could return home to Boma, most of those displaced by the SPLA-SSDA-Cobra Faction war chose not to, and instead preferred to remain in Okugu Camp in Ethiopia. Life in Boma remained uncertain and precarious, with no food available since most had missed the planting season, schools were partially closed and there was a very poorly functioning hospital, especially when compared to the previous health services offered by Merlin. Leonardi (2013, 194) observes how in Central Equatoria after 1997, civilians returning home to areas such as Yei as well as other parts, found their homes and former plots of land inhabited by soldiers or displaced civilians from other parts of South Sudan. In Itti town, even after the Peace Deal, SPLA Commando soldiers continued to occupy civilian homes. In some cases, compounds with several tukuls were shared between occupying soldiers and the family owning that home. The only village in Upper Boma with people was Kaiwa, while Bayen and Jongolei remained deserted.

By August 2014, over a year since the war and destruction in Boma, not much had changed. Emblematic of other infrastructure and services, the Merlin living compound was still as vandalised as one year earlier (photograph 27), with drugs and remnants of what was once a vibrant office and home to over fifteen medical staff, rotting on the ground. Most people

were also depending on food aid, with the NGO JAM distributing food to civilians that were coming from as far as Maruwo Hills.



Photograph 25 Merlin accommodation compound in Itti in July 2013 (left) and in August 2014 (right).

By 2015, most Highland Murle in Ethiopia had still not returned. An irregularly dry year meant that most people did not plant and had limited food to survive on. Conversely, the county authorities increased taxes on traders, and most present actually left Boma, many to Pochalla. Boma was desolate. The ‘peacetime’ in Boma and Greater Pibor coincided with an escalation of the civil war, especially devastating across the Greater Upper Nile region. By May 2014, just as the GPAA Peace Deal was signed, aid agencies reported that South Sudan was facing the threat of famine (BBC News 2014), overwhelmingly in the Greater Upper Nile area. The UN reported that 7.3 million people were at risk of being food insecure (United Nations 2014). Thus, the necessary assistance for Highland Murle to return home was not available, as other more high priority humanitarian needs existed elsewhere. The Peace Deal discussed in the previous section did not at all produce the conditions for return of displaced Highland Murle to their homes in Boma.

Conversely, in Okugu camp in Ethiopia there was food distributed by aid agencies, a clinic, and importantly, free primary and even secondary schools using English. Many of my informants, as the male heads of household, came to Boma to inspect conditions and services available, only to leave back to Ethiopia soon after. But female heads of household also returned. Paul Titoch’s mother, who made a living from brewing alcohol, returned to Itti early on, aware that she would find SPLA soldiers willing to buy her alcohol. But in great part, return to Boma was always spoken of with some uncertainty, “once things get better”, and “when the grass is ready to make homes”, in the dry season sometime between

November and January, but ultimately postponed by most families for the next year, and then the next.

Referring to Ethiopian returnees, Laura Hammond (2004, 207) observes that repatriation is “equated with homecoming and [was] not recognized as a challenge that could be as difficult as living in exile had been”. In fact, returning to a destroyed “home”, where all possessions have been lost, where community infrastructure was destroyed, abandoned and no longer in place, where homes were still occupied by the ‘perpetrator’, where means of livelihoods like agricultural tools were lost, and no food planted, is harder than staying in exile where aid structures take care of many of the logistical dimensions of life. This too was a kind of structural violence and abandonment. Repatriation of migrants and refugees is a process that requires support. As observed by Longony and repeated by so many others: “Maybe people will return in January or February, but maybe not. Unless there’s some humanitarian assistance.”<sup>17</sup>

But there was close to none. As referred above, the Peace Deal had only been brokered because of the wider conflict in South Sudan, which had in turn created an overwhelming humanitarian crisis that was monopolising all the attention from humanitarians. In other circumstances, Boma and Greater Pibor would have received much attention and international support but not when Unity and Upper Nile States were utterly destroyed and most of its population surviving in swamps and in overcrowded UN Protection of Civilians (PoC) camps, requiring life-saving aid.

Thus, for prospective returnees, life in Boma was not easy to return to. Not only were there no homes, no services being provided and no food to eat, but although the SSDA-CF and SPLA war was over and a Peace Deal had been signed, the area was slowly returning to a state of peacetime neglect and everyday violence, not least because the absence of services and poverty were a form of invisible and structural violence. But this was also because episodes of local violence in peacetime affected people’s lives in multiple ways, as described below by a number of people.

Participants in the August 2014 Boma Peace Meeting shared numerous stories of violent events that had taken place, overwhelmingly on the road, since the previous Peace meeting in Boma in November 2013. Highland Murle people attributed this insecurity to Jie attacks and connected these to the ongoing debate concerning the origin of Jie and whether they

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<sup>17</sup> Irer Lotony, Juba 9/12/2015.

should leave Boma and return to Eastern Equatoria (see Achayo 2014). At the meeting, Ngali, a young man from Kaiwa, accused individuals from the Jie ethnic group of several violent events perpetrated against Murle people over the previous months ranging from the robbing of food and clothes and other personal belongings to attacks and ambushes on the roads.<sup>18</sup> In that same meeting, the youth leader from Upper Boma, Logo Boyoi, reminded the audience how the Highland Murle from Kaiwa village that had not fled Boma had been pushed to leave Boma and had been attacked and shot at recurrently, according to Kaka, by both Jie and Kachipo unknown men from Rumit village.<sup>19</sup> What were seen as continuous attacks on the Highland Murle, made many Murle ask for Jie to leave Boma and return to Kassengor and on to Eastern Equatoria.

Before the war, Irer had been the RRC in Boma, as well as the youth leader. As discussed in chapter 5, Irer had joined the Cobra Faction when Boma was captured in May 2013 and by August 2014, post-Peace Deal, he was the Cobra Faction Commander in Boma based in Anyagidi. Hearing all the accounts of violence at the August 2014 Peace Meeting, he asked the crowd,

*"I want to ask – who refuses peace? Which is something good for everybody. When we stay in peace, children can play, we have food, we can have schools. Since last time we've talked about peace, but now fighting continues. Now if you have cows moving on the road people will come and steal from you and kill you on the road. When I compare the life of cattle to human beings, you kill the human being and save the cow, which means you care more about the cattle than the human being. I'm requesting you the communities here, you should hear what we're saying here and take to the people back home. It's not for you alone to keep the peace."*

Irer Lotony, Boma Peace Conference, Itti 19/08/2013

In his statement above, reflecting a broader perspective, Irer linked cattle and violence, and lamented what he saw as people *"care[ing] more about the cattle than the human being."*

The war was over, but peacetime was constituted by everyday violence and insecurity, just as before and during the war. John, working for an NGO in Itti and with access to Internet, posted the following Facebook status in January 2016:

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<sup>18</sup> Ngali Ngare, Boma Peace Meeting, Itti 21/08/2014

<sup>19</sup> Logo Boyoi, Boma Peace Meeting, Itti 21/08/2014. Rumit is a mixed Jie and Kachipo village in Upper Boma.



*"Gugu is back to its old stages when people were ambushed and innocents killed on the roads. Someone's struggles seems to have brought it to normal but...! Anyway... 'RIP ladies and gentlemen.'"*<sup>20</sup>

In response to John's Facebook status, another young man from Boma commented below:

*"For many years the blood shed of innocent people of Boma had been the order of the day and year...No one had ever paid attention. The so call government had never taken any serious action on such issues instead they are deeply only interested on Boma resources rather than securing the area from such damn activities. RIP all of you dear brothers and sisters who have died the same way".*<sup>21</sup>

With 'RIP' (Rest in Peace), John and Kuju were referring to the attack of two boys allegedly shot on the road on the way from Itti to Kaiwa by Kachipo assailants. One had died and the other was in the hospital recovering. Thus, in practice the GPAA did not change much in Boma. People in Boma still felt neglected: there were no services and no security. Nevertheless, there was a more subtle change that involved Highland Murle people's sense of justice and connection to the state.

Despite the events of peacetime violence, only a few months after the Peace Agreement signed in May 2014 between the Government of South Sudan and the SSDM/A-CF, Boma was palpably a less tense place, and group relations had improved. Movement was no longer restricted, and both SPLA and Cobra Faction soldiers mixed in the market in town; rebels had become 'brothers', as articulated by the SPLA Acting Commander in Boma. Significantly, the presence of the Cobra Faction around Boma had positively affected the mood and narratives around 'Murleness', and Highland Murle, *ηalam*, felt once again comfortable as Murle, which is what the remaining section of the chapter will discuss.

### 8.3.2 DEPLOYING IDENTITIES: BEING *ηALAM* AND BEING MURLE

It seems appropriate to start this section with chief Logidang's explanation of the term and his advice to just be *ηalam*, if that was what it took to remain safe during the peak of the war when Murle people felt they were being targeted for being Murle. Boma paramount chief Logidang spoke the words below at a Boma Peace Meeting that took place in September 2013 in Juba at the height of the SPLA-SSDA-CF war:

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<sup>20</sup> John Konyi, Facebook status, 07/01/2016.

<sup>21</sup> Facebook comment, 08/01/2016.

*"The words ḡalam and Murle, I want to assure you in Juba, because all the leaders of Murle reside in Juba, Boma is for Murle, and this word called ḡalam is there but is not a tribe. When Lotillanya people go there to the house of a brother with new faces, they are asked- they're from Lotilla and same of the other way. That's why it is for us alone. Because what annoyed people is that some are saying that ḡalam is becoming a tribe. This word is our nickname. I went to Pibor when I was still young in the 1980s. People were bullying 'you're a ḡalamit', I was getting very annoyed, but they were just joking, like challenging me'. (...) We Murle divide ourselves, they divide and conquer us. When you divide and become few, an enemy will come and cheat you."*

Chief Logidang Lom, Boma Peace Meeting Juba 13/09/2013

He was explaining to a largely urban Murle crowd the meaning of *ḡalam*, the consequences of dividing, becoming weaker, thus being exposed to being conquered by enemies. With "they", chief Logidang referred to neighbouring groups. A couple of months later, during the November 2013 Peace Meeting in Boma, which again saw the use and abuse of the politically charged term *ḡalam*, one young man shared with me what chief Logidang had commented earlier to a group of youth:

*"The chief was saying that we are being squeezed into being ḡalam, by government and by Jie, and even by Kachipo. If we don't disassociate from Murle we'll be crushed by Jie".<sup>22</sup>*

Chief Logidang's advice to his youth when confronted with being *ḡalam* was essentially to "just accept it, say *ḡalam*". Yet, he was simultaneously reassuring his youth that in the long run they are and will still be Murle, "when things go back to normal".<sup>23</sup> The chief was aware of the instrumental deployment of flexible identities.

Nearly a year later, in August 2014 months after the signing of the Peace Deal and the formal recognition and establishment of the GPAA, I interviewed Logidang at his home in Kaiwa. He explained to me his understanding of *ḡalam*, and how and why it had been used instrumentally:

*The words ḡalam and Lotillanya, it is just abuse between us Murle alone. During that conflict [SPLA-Cobra], we used that word ḡalam just to defend ourselves, to save your life. But now in time of peace, it is just our word again. If there are some visitors [from an area of Murleland] that came settle in that home, we can use the words for [regional] identification. Those of Nanaam and Manyabol, they also call those of Pibor as ḡalam. We divided ourselves last time because of the war, but now we shouldn't use those words again. We are all together.*

Logidang Lom, Kaiwa 10/08/2014

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<sup>22</sup> Fieldnotes, Boma Peace Meeting, Itti 15/11/2013.

<sup>23</sup> Fieldnotes, Boma Peace Meeting, Itti 15/11/2013.

Referring to Maasai identity, Waller (1993, 295) notes the inherently mutable nature of ethnicity, and “its ability to adapt itself over time in response to changing needs and circumstances and to present itself in and through different media”. Waller’s acknowledgment seems appropriate to compare how Highland Murle people lived their ethnic identity, and how being *ηalam* served many people well in the particular circumstances facing them during the troublesome years of war between the SPLA and Cobra.

However, in the broader socio-political economy of Boma, Highland Murle not only felt Murle, but many also strategically recognized the longer-term advantages of being Murle. For Highland Murle, remaining Murle appeared not only natural, but also beneficial in relation to their own position in Boma Hills *vis-à-vis* their Jie and Kachipo neighbours. Thomas Spear makes this same point about the ways in which the agricultural Arusha people have been aware of the advantages of retaining a Maasai ethnicity, social relations, and cultural values:

“By remaining within the pastoral cultural nexus while pursuing an uplands agricultural economy, they were able to help ensure the long-term survival of pastoralists on the plains while strengthening their own position on the mountain *vis-à-vis* their Meru neighbours” (Spear 1993a, 124–125).

Spear (1993a, 120) observes that “If Maasai saw themselves and were seen by others as ‘People of Cattle’, then the designation ‘Agricultural Maasai’ would seem to be a contradiction in terms”. But it is not; it is rather the dominant image and narrative which also very much applies to how Murle saw themselves and were seen by others as ‘people of cattle’, despite a more complex picture of livelihoods and inter-dependent support networks.

Highland Murle felt Murle for the historical reasons given here by Rachu Jakin:

*“Someone went to Boma and asked ‘Are you ηalam?’ I answered not us, those are the people in that mountain in Ethiopia. We are Murle. The reason we are one people is we are speaking the same language, having one culture, clans and red chiefs ηarothi, Tangajon; the tribe is all the same Murle. Even small children, they say ‘I’m Murle’. This word ηalam is within us alone to categorise ourselves, Boma or Lotilla. (...) Late Kamalekolong, from Kaiwa asked – you from Boma are from which tribe? I said Kamalekolong, we are Murle. ηalam is just a nickname, cattle or no cattle. Our culture, Kamalekolong explained, ‘our brothers in Pibor they’re keeping cattle.’ The land, let’s not change the shape of the land from our grandfathers who left it to us, the grandchildren. It is very bad to take it from them.*

Rachu Jakin, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba 13/09/2013

Rachu, a respected intellectual and politician from *Dorongwa* generation, evoked historical narratives of being Murle and of the importance of respecting the land and its ancestors, thus providing an absolute and static notion of being Murle. But Highland Murle also saw the instrumental value of ultimately remaining Murle, as agricultural Murle.

The end of the war between the SPLA and Cobra and the creation of the GPAA affected discourses and narratives of Murle identity in Boma. Highland Murle no longer felt pressured to be '*ηalam*', and once again had the social and political space to become Murle again. It was not that identity formation and transformation were tied to bureaucratic and administrative transformation. It was much more than that. Rather, the end of the war and the end to the pressures perceived to target Murle people, plus the political and military strength of the Cobra Faction allowed Highland Murle to 'become Murle' again. In this sense, the pool of available identities widened again.

Identity construction and transformation is fluid and transformable and the Highland Murle navigations of *ηalam* demonstrated this. Far from being a time-bound and visible process, Highland Murle did not become *ηalam* and once again become Murle in the space of two or three years. Rather, Highland Murle individuals searched within the various categories that exist in the pool of multiple and fluid identities, and instrumentally and to some extent under the pressure of the SPLA-Cobra war and of neighbouring groups, accepted and performed being *ηalam*. In this sense, it was not an actual change of identity, but an instrumental adaptation. Murle identity claims were also being dialectically negotiated in a practical and creative way.

Highland Murle people navigated the crisis in Boma by working through shifting discourses of ethnic identity. Highland Murle negotiated their identity as Murle sometimes strategically and other times by default, in relation to the wider political context of conflict in Boma. Highland Murle in Boma pragmatically acknowledged the pressures they faced and adopted strategies of exclusion/inclusion as Murle. The end of the conflict between the SPLA and the Cobra Faction, and the ensuing creation of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area, provided the Highland Murle with the political and social space to not only once again become Murle, but also to emerge as a stronger group with greater political clout. The military might of the Cobra Faction and the threat of violence it implied were meaningful parts of this.

The agrarian Highland Murle people of Boma continued to be *ηalam* as an existent internal social and geographical category, but the external and to some extent internal pressures to elevate *ηalam* as a separate group, apart from Murle, dissipated. Highland Murle in Boma

were no longer threatened and at risk from neighbouring groups nor the SPLA for being Murle, and were no longer treated by association as rebels and enemies of the state.

At the Boma Peace Meeting in August 2014, the Cobra Faction soldiers surrounded the hospital premises where the meeting took place and ensured their presence and power was recognised and felt. Logo Boyoi, a youth leader from Kaiwa, laid out clearly the difficult situation that the few Highland Murle that had remained in Kaiwa after May 2013 had experienced. He spoke of the pressures Murle in Boma had been under by neighbouring groups to adopt the term *ɲalam* as category of identification. Logo brought up the rifles distributed by the SPLA to Jie and Kachipo with the intention to attack Murle, but also referred to how some individuals from Jie and Kachipo also stood up and looked to protect Murle civilians. He spoke of how Highland Murle had been asked by Jie and Kachipo individuals in Boma whether they were *ɲalam* or Murle, and straightforwardly told they would be killed if they were Murle:

*“On the last [peace] meeting, one Jie asked us if we were ɲalam or Murle. He said ‘if you’re a Murle we’ll kill you now; if you’re a ɲalam I’ll turn my gun to those of Labarab.’<sup>24</sup> Secondly, last time you were given rifles by the government and were told to kill ɲalam staying here. Without those of Labarab arriving here you would have done this but now they’ve come. The time, Abraham Nyitaak [educated Jie, son of the late chief] brought rifles [accompanying the then Deputy Minister of Defence from Twic East Dr. Majat D’Agoot] to distribute to Kachipo and Jie. That time Mary Kachipo said of the rifles, don’t use them on these people of Boma. You brought rifles with two cars.”*

Logo Boyoi, Boma Peace Meeting, Itti 21/08/2014

Logo also noted that the arrival of ‘those of Labarab’, referring to Lowland Murle and the Cobra Faction, to Boma, had prevented Jie and Kachipo from killing the Murle inhabitants of Boma.

This chapter has made use of statements made at Peace Meetings by paramount chief Logidang, Logo Boyoi, a respected youth from Kaiwa, and several others. These individual accounts can be read as asserting shared views because they were said publicly and affirmed by legitimate community representatives in the gathering. These statements were also pronounced, contested and responded to in a public forum at the Peace Meeting in Itti town in August 2014, attended by over 100 people, of various ethnic backgrounds. They

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<sup>24</sup> Labarab, located in the Lowlands, was controlled by the SSDM/A-Cobra Faction during the war with the SPLA, also where many Murle civilians took refuge.

included Murle MPs and intellectuals from Juba visiting Boma to respected members of the Murle, Jie and Suri-Kachipo communities in Boma. Interestingly, these statements also framed Highland Murle sense of Murle identity, in *their* way of being Murle as part of a wider group. The Murle people from Boma were Murle yet not ‘people of cattle’ (see Spear 1993a). Cultivation played a critical role in people’s survival, social organisation and everyday life. But more than that, cultivation was used as a signifier, identity marker and as a factor in determining group relations. It was also used as a means to establish difference, in opposition to pastoralism and its wider associations with violence. It was not that this was necessarily entirely true, but in these peace meetings Highland Murle people positioned themselves as victims of violence, perpetrated largely by pastoralists, in this case the Jie. Over time, effects on identity will almost retrospectively emerge, although it is much less likely that this is an articulated and visible process.

## 8.4 CONCLUSION

The processes described in this chapter refer to the social and political transformations experienced by Murle in Boma and in Greater Pibor from 2014, after the Peace Deal between the GoSS and the Cobra Faction was signed. But these have to be placed within the broader context of South Sudan. The civil war between the Government’s SPLA and the SPLA-IO diverted attention from the Murle ‘problem’ and offered some variation into the perpetrator narrative directed at the Murle ethnic community. The ‘Murle problem’ and the ways in which both Murle people themselves and the government/SPLA have addressed it, is emblematic of how South Sudanese politics operate.

The creation of the GPAA offered some social, legal and administrative space to coexist alongside and within the state, permitting Murle people to feel they were part of the latter. However, the GPAA proved not to be the mechanism by which people’s claims to the state would be met. Rather, the establishment and relative failure of the GPAA revealed that decentralisation and a degree of federalism alone would not bring about the change people desired. This could only be achieved through an institutional change in the ways in which politics are conducted. Referring to the most recent civil war in South Sudan and need for justice, David Deng (2016) mentions a common saying in South Sudan: “When our leaders unite, they loot; when they divide, they kill.” Political division of Murle elites proved the saying to be true in Greater Pibor.

In this context, the security context in Boma changed from *war* back to a state of peacetime structural and invisible violence. Everyday violence in Boma was not actually directly linked to the war between the SPLA and the SSDA-CF. Simultaneously, experiences of insecurity in Boma were not connected to the civil war ravaging much of Greater Upper Nile and turning the country in turmoil. Rather, insecurity originated locally and these events were given meaning locally. One such consequence of violence was repositioning the debate on Murle ethnic identity in Boma. Highland Murle identities shifted according to circumstances and events. Highland Murle were Murle in relation to Jie and Kachipo, yet they were *ηalam* in relation to the government.

As noted by Thomas Spear (1993b, 16), “ethnicity at its most basic, then, establishes and controls social access to critical resources”, but also to protection networks. Or put differently, ethnicity determines social protection, privilege and social and economic possibilities and entitlement in a political arena dominated by ethnic politics. But the temporary and unpredictable nature of political settlements, agreements and alliances in South Sudan means that neither the GPAA nor identities are permanent. Rather, these remain precarious, shifting and situated, continuously re-examined, reformulated and in a perpetual process of becoming. Highland Murle no longer felt the pressures –nor the necessity– of the *ηalam* label, and once again returned into being Murle. But this was not just a return to a fixed prior identity. The mobilisation of *ηalam* identity and label leaves a trace in people’s memory, which has implications for the future. Thus, the process of becoming Murle again is both a return but also a transformation.

## 9. CONCLUSION

### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

This dissertation has been concerned with how the Highland Murle people of Boma have found ways of asserting themselves both within historically dominant narratives of the “fierce and hostile Murle” as well as in the new state of South Sudan by being the objects but also the active agents of identity politics. Although historically informed, this study has focused on the particularly volatile and violent period of 2012-2014, during which the Murle people’s home area of Greater Pibor went through a vicious war with the state, examining emic Highland Murle categories of violence and representations of *jore* and of *ɔɔn*. In particular, this dissertation has focused on how violence has been part of shaping Highland Murle people’s sense of ethnic identity, in relation to both the wider Murle group and to the South Sudanese state.

This has also been a localised study of how the Murle ethnic group of South Sudan have overwhelmingly been portrayed as ‘backward’, ‘fierce and hostile’ (Laudati 2011, 25) and as a ‘problem’ to be solved (McCallum 2013, 11–24). These external representations, driven by perspectives which advantage the Murle’s more powerful Dinka Bor and Lou Nuer neighbours, arise from the specific context of the historical, social and political economy of the predominantly pastoralist Murle of the plains and their small government headquarters. Revealingly, the Murle ethnic group were at least until Sudan’s independence best known externally by the Dinka term ‘*Beir*’.<sup>1</sup> This dissertation has looked to trace, illuminate and question some of these broad derogatory representations. It concurs with Judith McCallum (2013, 276), who argued that damaging stereotypes of the Murle ethnic community need to be continuously demystified and countered, both by understanding their origins, considering ways of overcoming them and presenting alternative views.

Above all, this dissertation has looked to offer an alternative account and understanding of recent experiences of Murle people, one centred on and departing from the Hills of Boma. This dissertation is the first attempt to study Murle society, identity and state relations from the perspective of the predominantly agrarian Highland Murle and of their home of Boma rather than the pastoral Murle of the lowlands. Boma’s particular geography, landscape, ecology and histories of violence and of state-making have produced a rather different social,

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<sup>1</sup> PRM, B.A. Lewis Papers, Box 1, Item 12 (1/1/12): “Murlei Notes”, ‘Note on the Murle Tribes (Plains Section)’, no page.



political and economic context for the Highland Murle. The dissertation has taken a broadly ethnographic approach, engaging with Highland Murle perspectives on the state and violence as locally understood.

## 9.2 CHIEF ȦANTHO'S SONG

In this conclusion I return to the song that prefaces the dissertation.<sup>2</sup> The late Murle paramount chief Ȧantho Kavula sang the song set out below in late June 2013, as he sat in his *rakuba*<sup>3</sup> in Khor William in the suburbs of Juba, displaced from his home in Pibor. The war between the Cobra Faction and SPLA was at its height. I was about to travel to Boma for some days and asked the chief if he would like me to pass any message to the few people that had remained in Boma, including the Highland Murle paramount chief Logidang Lom. Chief Ȧantho tape-recorded a message to be shared with the chief and others in Boma. The song was a core part of his message:

*A long time ago I left Lotilla [home] to be in Maruwa [my original home]  
We've been fighting with enemies about my father's ancestral home  
Persisting until we achieved the impossible  
We encourage our young warriors to fight hard  
So that our fathers can get a place to take water<sup>4</sup> with their children*

*Baale e kotoȦeya e Lotilla e izi lorec oniin o  
Kiciwona ki moden maruwo yo looc ci rȦȦ baba o  
ȦȦȦ matawori<sup>5</sup> e baatak bȦȦ<sup>6</sup>  
Logoz ween camit<sup>7</sup> e orit noȦ e  
ArȦȦ baba e coma alaam Ȧinti awodȦ dȦȦ e*

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<sup>2</sup> Sung by the late paramount chief Ȧantho Kavula (unknown author) on the 28/06/2013; recording on file with the author, translated with his son Kaka Ȧantho and verified by Joseph Lilimoy.

<sup>3</sup> Rakuba is a light, temporary structure made of sticks and hard grass mats and/or plastic sheets.

<sup>4</sup> Reference to Maruwa Hills

<sup>5</sup> *Matawori*: reference to 'the strength we have could break a rock', as a metaphor to achieving something deemed impossible.

<sup>6</sup> *BȦȦ* hills, mountains, rock

<sup>7</sup> *Camit*: reference to the tail of an animal, usually cow, to stir away insects and birds that may lie on its behind. The term is used in the song to refer to young people as the tail of Murle, ready to defend the group from enemies.

*A long time ago I left Lotilla [home] to be in Boma [my original home]  
 We've been fighting with enemies about my father's ancestral home  
 Persisting until we achieved the impossible  
 We encourage our young warriors to fight hard  
 So that our fathers can get a place to take water with their children*

*Baale e kotoŋeya Lotilla e izi lorec oniin o  
 Kiciwona ki moden Bom yo looc ci rɛɛn baba o  
 ɛmɛda matawori e baatak bɛɛ  
 Logoɔ ween camit e orit noŋ e  
 Arɔɔŋ baba e coma alaam ŋinti awoden dɔlya*

For chief ɲantho, the song was living proof of the strength in unity of the Murle ethnic community. He chose that song deliberately as a response to the controversial and dangerous politics of identity that had engulfed the Murle ethnic group during the Cobra Faction war with the SPLA, which was seen as a divide and conquer strategy led by political elites. The song was the chief's response to the changing use of *ɲalam* and the –for him, absurd and dangerous– proposition that the Highland Murle of Boma were *ɲalam* rather than Murle. For the chief, the Murle were one people, from his home of Likuangole to Boma, where he had spent time as a young man. But ironically, many Highland Murle, including chief Logidang willfully and temporarily adopted the politicised use of *ɲalam* as a protective strategy, only to discard it later.

Months later, chief ɲantho was tragically killed in his sleep when an SPLA tank bulldozed over his *rakuba* in Khor William on the 16 December 2013, in the first days of what would become a civil war between the SPLA and SPLA-IO. Perhaps emblematic of Murle feelings of persecution by their government, when my friend Paul told me the news of the chief's death over the phone, he did so with grief but also with relief. For once, the killing of the chief was not a targeted killing, but rather an accidental one. In my fieldnotes in December 2013, I asked myself why it mattered whether it had been a targeted killing or not, when the paramount chief was tragically dead. But for Murle people in Juba and elsewhere it did matter. Not only because it indicated that the Murle ethnic group were not the specific target of state violence (as were the Nuer ethnic group; see UNMISS 2014; AUCISS 2014), but also because it related the death to the moral codification of unintentional rather than intentional violence.



Photograph 26 Chief Ijantho Kavula and myself in Juba in July 2013.

I have included this song in the conclusion of this dissertation as a tribute to chief Ijantho and to the many Murle people killed in the wars of the past years, and in some ways looking to fulfil chief Ijantho's request to teach these words and their meaning to younger generations of Murle. In the recording, chief Ijantho requested that the song be taught to Murle children, so they could know their heritage and the importance of protecting their land: *"It is my will, when you grow older, teach the younger ones so they don't forget our words."*<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the song loosely and metaphorically refers to the themes of this dissertation. It is about a united and cohesive Murle ethnic group that is able to transcend the violence of its neighbours to lay claims to its land and ensure its future. In the chief's words, *"It is a song for all Murle"*, referring to Murle people from Lotilla (across Pibor), Maruwo (and Labarab) and Bom(a) (Boma Hills). The song alludes to the Murle sense of being constantly under threat by neighbouring groups (referred to as 'enemies') who are also those who control the state. Through the song, the chief raised the importance of remaining united as a people. The song referred to 'the strength we have could break a rock', as a metaphor to achieve

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<sup>8</sup> Late paramount chief Ijantho Kavula, Juba 28/06/2013.

something deemed impossible. It was a song about protecting Murle land and ensuring the continuity of the Murle community, from the Highlands of Boma where the ancestors come from to the plains of Maruwo and Pibor up to Likuangole, where the chief was originally from. These messages from the chief connect to some of the final theoretical reflections that this chapter now turns to.

### 9.3 FINAL REFLECTIONS

The findings of this local study have broader methodological and theoretical implications for a number of interrelated dimensions of researching contexts of transformation and instability in Africa.

Methodologically, the study is a testament to the challenges of researching in a context of permanent flux and change. Rather than attempting to control the contingent and uncertain, and make the research focus static and monolithic, I have sought to engage and embrace the constant dynamism of social life not as a conceptual and logistical challenge to be overcome, but rather as a finding in itself and part of the research encounter. This certainly applies to all social research, but studying dynamics of social life in insecure contexts intensifies the unpredictable nature of research and exemplifies the importance of improvisation as process. Some of the most striking theoretical and empirical findings have emerged from being responsive to flux and engaging with improvisation not only superficially, but as a key theoretical and methodological tool (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007; Malkki 2007).

Theoretically, the dissertation has offered insights into how a minority population of an already small group manages and negotiates its ethnic identity as Murle and as South Sudanese; and simultaneously and relatedly imagines and seeks to lay claim to the state and its resources, in a context of social and political turmoil. By demonstrating how Highland Murle people continuously adapt and creatively transform what it means to be Murle, through their interactions with the state and its violences, the dissertation has offered insights into the ways in which modern state forces interact with the creation and recreation of ethnicities. It has also illuminated the creative and transformational power of violence as formative of a person's collective sense of identity.

This final chapter concludes with some final theoretical and empirical reflections on the three most significant interconnected elements present in this dissertation that ultimately draw on and simultaneously reveal the fluid and mutable nature of social life.

### 9.3.1 DYNAMIC IMAGININGS OF THE STATE

First, I consider the precarious and opportunistic nature of political arrangements that characterize the ongoing social, political and ethnic contestation of the state in South Sudan and its significance for people's ability to assert, imagine and lay claims to the state.

This dissertation has also been about what the state looks like from the perspectives of the Murle people of Boma. Of course the understandings, expectations and views of the state as seen from Juba, Bor or Pibor town as urban centres are likely to differ from views from the physical margins of Boma, whether Boma town or the villages in Upper Boma. Views from Boma are themselves multiple and not monolithic. There are also numerous social markers to consider such as gender, age-sets, status and wealth that shape aspirations, imaginings and expectations of the state. The findings of this research suggest that the shared characteristics explained by diverse members of the Highland Murle group as 'ethnic' are a crucial organizing and unifying principle *vis a vis* the relationship to and experiences of the state. This is perhaps one of the elements that unifies Murle people as an ethnic group and provides a unifying sense of being Murle in South Sudan.

There are multiple approaches to thinking about the 'making' of the state. I have privileged the "constructive local experience" (Cormack 2014, 259) of imagining and crafting of the state as an intrinsically political, social and lived experience, made through constant negotiation by state and non-state actors (Long and Long 1992; Arce and Long 2000). Benedict Anderson (2006 in Waller 1993, 296) has argued that "communities have first to be imagined before they can be realised". This is arguably also the case for the state, which has to be imagined and engaged with by its people before it can be meaningful. This 'imagining' is inevitably contested and also a process of negotiation.

This dissertation has been particularly concerned with how people respond to the pressures of the state asserting itself, often through violence, and in the process produce the state and find ways of laying claim to it. Chapter 8 discussed in some detail the establishment of the GPAA and what this signified for Murle people and their consequent renewed hopes and aspirations for the state, one which in principle brought together what Cherry Leonardi helpfully calls the spheres of the 'home' and 'hakuma' (2007b).

Across Pibor, before the establishment of the GPAA, Murle people perceived the national and state level governments as being controlled overwhelmingly by Dinka politicians (Laudati 2011). Thus, the state was seen as an antagonising and partisan force composed of individuals that privileged ethnic affiliation in the handling of government policy. In turn,

people in Boma also saw the small government headquarters of Pibor as a marginalising force, even though it was composed of ethnic Murle government officials. Ultimately, the state is seen as being made of institutions that are composed and controlled by particular groups of people with their own patronage networks and agenda.

When Pibor and Pochalla counties were removed from Jonglei state and assembled into the new GPAA (subsequently dissolved and transformed into Boma state), Murle people's expectations of the state changed because the 'hakuma' was for the first time in their perspective controlled by Murle politicians partially seen to be part of the 'home' sphere. Thus, there was a renewed hope that the state would be responsive to people's needs in the form of security and services. Understandings, hopes and expectations of the state are shown to be continuously being reconfigured depending on precisely who is controlling the state and its resources.

Ethnicised politics are by their very nature divisive and require the existence of 'the other', or ethnic scapegoats, determined by the broader social and political context. Problematically, the state in South Sudan is conceived of and seen from the vantage point of one's ethnic group. The state's possibilities, potential and resources are partially determined by one's ability to co-opt the state, which in turn has become tied to one's ethnicity. This is best seen at the local level in the diverse social landscape of Boma, which is home to the Highland Murle people, the Suri-Kachipo ethnic community and the agro-pastoralist Jie people. In the post-GPAA Boma, 'the other' increasingly became the Jie ethnic community; as one Jie young man disappointingly explained in relation to the GPAA: "we don't fear we'll be marginalised, we're absolutely sure we will."<sup>9</sup>

If access to the state in South Sudan has come to be determined by one's ethnicity (or if at least that is how it is perceived locally), then this also hints at why some Highland Murle saw it as beneficial at a certain point to avoid their ethnic marker as Murle, and instead present themselves to the state as *ɲalam*. This category was perceived to be detached from the tensions with the state and as a more 'state-friendly', neutral identity disassociated from the violence of being Murle.

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Lopeta, Naoyapuru 07/08/2014.

### 9.3.2 RECONSIDERING VIOLENCES

I now turn to some theoretical considerations on violence as a meaningful category that have emerged from this dissertation. During fieldwork I was confronted by the flux in social and political life and the emergence of the war across Greater Pibor and its physical arrival in Boma. The ways in which people made sense of shifting events in Boma as they happened permit for a number of theoretical reflections on the nature of violence. Above all, the events in this dissertation have shown how violence is a meaningful and culturally situated category, both an event and a process, part of everyday life but equally exceptional. The findings of this research reveal how violence emerges strongly as a non-linear, multi-directional and shifting category. What 'counts' as violence (which may vary significantly depending on the subjectivity of the actor), what violence then means or signifies, and how it relates to explanatory labels such as 'war' and 'peace' can vary considerably. In this sense, the dissertation has presented a chronological account of events in Boma, where it has been possible to tease out how different forms of violence interact, are weaved into claims to and rejection of the state, and simultaneously prompted a debate on the politicisation of identities.

First, let us consider the violence continuum, which conceptualises violence as both linear and progressive in scale (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004). It starts small and predictably increases in scale and scope so that peacetime violence progressively develops, feeds into itself and grows, with a war on the other extreme, and all other forms of violence positioned in between.

Events in Boma demonstrate how the analytical part played by the continuum of violence does not adequately account for the complexity of social life and of the violence within it. It misses the texture of violence and fails to acknowledge how multiple strands of violence can coexist at different levels. Rather, violence is multi-dimensional and different forms of violence can run parallel to each other. In other words, events that are part of peacetime violence such as drunken violence, wife-beating, age-set fighting and insecurity on the roads, among others, continue to be part of people's lives during war, not necessarily always feeding into each other. It is also possible to connect this multi-dimensional understanding of violence to Murle emic notions of *jɔre* and *ɔrɔn*, which help us to understand the subtle and nuanced ways that categories of violence interact.

This is why I have deliberately used the plural 'violences' throughout this dissertation. The events examined in this dissertation demonstrate how violences are multiple, shifting, plural, and varied; everyday violence and war can exist in parallel, sometimes discretely from each other, as exemplified in Boma and by those displaced by the war between the SPLA and the Cobra Faction. Events of everyday violence can coexist with war.

Second, let us consider the relational dimensions of violence to other spheres of social and political practice. This dissertation has discussed at length how Highland Murle people do not define nor see their everyday lives as violent. While violence can certainly be an element in people's lives, it is not the only one. Instead, we should see beyond flat discourses that approach violence as a one-dimensional category to understand how these categories work relationally. This study has shown how violence can weave through social life and interact with constructions and performances of ethnic identities and with makings and imaginings of the state.

The case of the Highland Murle illustrates the interactions between violence and identity and how different forms of violence can trigger different modes and elements of identity. When Highland Murle people feel threatened by communal violence and tensions with their immediate neighbouring groups, it is most strategic to resort to and draw on this broadly Murle ethnic identity to make a claim for the support of the wider and more powerful group. However, when faced with the structural violence of the state, and the targeted violence against all Murle, Highland Murle choose to temporarily disassociate from being Murle as a safety strategy. This political precariousness and experiences with violences conditions how ethnicities and identities are lived, experienced and transformed, as flexible and adaptive.

### 9.3.3 THE CONTINUOUS RE-MAKING OF ETHNIC IDENTITIES

Third, and building from this last point, I highlight how interactions between violence and the state can prompt a creative readaption of ethnic identities, as both fixed and moveable. As in the Mursi case (Turton 1994; 1992; 1991; 1979), Murle ethnic identity has emerged out of movement and of violent conflict over centuries. As argued by Schlee and Watson (2009) in relation to the wider context of north-east Africa, processes of identification and alliances in South Sudan are characterized by experiences of violent conflict. Like the Uduk people (James 1979; 2009b), Murle oral histories imply they have been a people on the move and simultaneously in the making.



The people who make up the present day Murle group began their journeys centuries ago from the Omo River in Ethiopia and split along the way into sub-groups, leading to the 'creation' of the Boya, Didinga and Tenet groups, and eventually the last and largest group to emerge, the Murle ethnic community. These 'splits' have been caused by environmental and ecological pressures as well as social and political disagreements. How do these historical events relate to the present? I consider two possible avenues. First, it could be that just as historical pressures have led to in the past (see Tornay 1981), sub-groups will continue to break-away into smaller factions, pressured by contemporary state forces and drawing on more specific identifiers such as clanship or mode of livelihood. The modern state can pressure certain ethnic labels and assumptions and negotiate social transformations (including by violent means), thus participating directly and indirectly in processes of group-making and the secession of minorities from larger ethnic groupings.

But I consider the second perspective most accurate to understand Murle processes of ethnic identity. Drawing also from recent history, Murle people from the plains and the hills have made use of their respective ecological areas and modes of livelihoods and the possibility to move between these as a means of survival. This is what Elizabeth Andretta (1989, 17) termed the Murle "adaptive edge", that enables people to adapt to unpredictable ecological, social and political pressures moving between the plains and the hills. This dissertation has been about this adaptive edge, in its material but also discursive dimensions.

In the context of contemporary South Sudan, there is more to be gained as a unified group. On the one hand, population size is used to determine resource allocation, establish political constituencies and in turn political representation (see Santschi 2008). The size of an ethnic group partially determines its access to state resources. On the other hand, considering that the contemporary state continues to be unable to offer protection to its people, but also remains a source of insecurity and fear, Murle people along the plains and the hills resort to the wider group as a source of protection. And equally important, because ethnic identities are not only instrumental as this would otherwise suggest. Ethnic identities are instrumentalized in South Sudan, but most importantly, they are also deemed natural and fundamental. Thus, the Murle people from Boma will continue to resort to the various possible identities as Murle.

This dissertation has shown how when faced with the threat of state and communal violence against all Murle, Highland Murle people chose within the options available to emphasise their difference and distinctiveness. The flexibility and multiple meanings of *ɲalam* were

thus being used politically, which had advantages in relation to the state. If being Murle was the source of violence, then being *ɲalam* offered some protection and safety. But this was a temporary and contested move too. In a changing political landscape, when given the chance, some Murle from Boma were both *ɲalam* and Murle, others just *ɲalam* and others still only Murle. As the possibilities available of the range of Murle identity options extend, in this case through the use of *ɲalam*, it also offers a range of alternatives 'going forward'. In other words, it is not necessarily that people can opt to use this exact same version of a transformed identity again, but that there now exists material evidence that flexible identities are possible in a more general way.

'Murleness', as "Maasainess" (Waller 1993, 295), then is a mutable social category operating within different livelihood modes, despite being mainly associated with one mode of subsistence and economic system. The association with pastoralism carries significant political and social connotations in South Sudan. Being Murle can have different meanings for different sections of the community, in part related to subsistence modes, where there may exist complementary but also perhaps incompatible views of ethnic identity. The study also finds that some identity claims can end up being 'naturalised' and others rejected (Spear and Waller 1993).

Ultimately, what emerges is ethnicity as a permanently changing social and political identity category that cannot be firmly defined. Ethnicity results from constant internal and external negotiations constituted by claims and conditional recognition: internally, by members of the group individually and collectively; externally, with neighbouring groups as well as modern political forces, such as the state and other international actors. I take Richard Waller's (1993, 300) point that the pressures of survival are at the core of the shifts and struggles of ethnic identity-making, which is why violence is such a formative category in shaping identity. The dissertation has argued that the process of continuously *becoming* is key to understanding Highland Murle people's ability to survive.

In this study, I have taken "identity as a political process through which the strategies of exclusion/inclusion are articulated" (Feyissa 2009, 181). It thus becomes clear why and how a group or individual may find it advantageous when faced with different circumstances to define themselves in a particular way (Watson and Schlee 2009). Highland Murle people were not only 'called' and pressured into being *ɲalam* by representatives of the state and other ethnic groups. Rather, it was an implicit negotiation between elements from the government, from other neighbouring ethnic groups, and from within the Murle collective group. Some Highland Murle people strategically accepted and even chose to

perform *ɲalam* identity. Thus, far from being victims of ethnic identity politics, Highland Murle people were also active agents of identity politics. Faced with the possibility of violence as Murle, some Murle from Boma made use of identity politics and of being *ɲalam* as a protection strategy. The consequences of these ethnic identity performances and temporary shifts are impossible to determine in terms of which elements will endure and which will be discarded. Rather, as Marshall Sahlins (1987, 27) argues, communities “make up the rules as they go along”, engaging both with questions of necessity and survival. These “rules” and processes of identity construction and social navigation and survival are embedded in each other, perhaps inseparably.

#### 9.4 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This dissertation has made a strong and compelling case for the significance of topography and geographical aspects of landscape and its relations to other social and political elements, especially its interactions with identity constructions and representations. By bridging the physical properties of landscape, it is clear that the geographical and topographical specificities and their social demarcations accord causally with people’s modes of subsistence, livelihoods and sense of identity, but also in the ways that displacement choices and action are carried out.

To this extent, ‘place’ emerges as a critical category here not so much in relation to place making or emplacement, but in the way that different locations (and the people, actions and opportunities found there) are continually read relationally by Murle people. Thus places are constructed in identity terms in relation to both material and physical features and characteristics, such as security, subsistence opportunities and access to social services. But place is also significant for less tangible identity related dimensions, such as which part of one’s identity can safely be displayed and enacted in a particular place. This is based both on subjective experience and also on how such identities will be read and accepted by others.

The dissertation has engaged less with the symbolic and metaphorical resonances and connotations of landscape, though it is certainly another dimension worth exploring further: not only because of how central movement has been and will continue being in the negotiated making of Murle ethnic identity, but also because of how it ties to the core of being South Sudanese (Tuttle 2013; Cormack 2016).

This dissertation has been concerned with the Highland Murle group as part of the wider Murle ethnic community. Yet Boma is an ethnically heterogeneous area, and the emphasis on Murle perspectives has inevitably sometimes been done at the cost of Jie and Suri-Kachipo truths and accounts of events. The Murle perspectives I have documented and depicted are as much 'truth' as other diverging perspectives and 'truths' from Jie and Suri-Kachipo interlocutors, less visible yet also part of this dissertation. The complex realities of Boma can best be understood through engaging in further research with Jie and Suri-Kachipo communities. Furthermore, given the rich history and social and political symbolism of Boma as the first home of the SPLA, there is great scope to engage in further research on Boma from the SPLA's perspective, as well as the angles from the Juba elites. But that has not been the scope of this dissertation. It has unapologetically engaged with Murle perspectives, narratives and truths on violences, state-making and shifting ethnic identities in relation to all the other social and political groups referred above. In the future, these could be enriched with additional research on Boma, relying on archival work for a greater historical dimension. Perhaps what this study also proposes is the importance of engaging in research on subjectivities, their meanings and their consequences.

## 9.5 CONCLUSION

Faced with the extraordinary dynamism and flux of social and political life, all historical experience points at social and political life as continuing to be fluid. *Being Murle* will continue being transformed both from within its own group and in relation to wider dynamics of the South Sudanese state. In this sense, there are a range of available options to people.

Through the case of the Murle ethnic group, this dissertation has examined one of the most conspicuous cases of state-society relations in South Sudan's recent history. In her doctoral work, Judith McCallum (2013, 275) makes the point that the process of nation-building in South Sudan has been centred around a common enemy. Before independence in 2011, this was the northern 'Jalaba'. Since the signing of the CPA, and particularly since independence, the Murle ethnic community became the most notable 'other'. But there are also positive dimensions to emerge. The state can pressure and, to some extent, influence the fragmentation and emergence of new ethnic groups, especially through violent means. But as shown through this dissertation, identity politics are not only a weapon of the powerful and a source of oppression, but are made use of instrumentally and strategically by marginal groups as a source of protection against insecurity. The flexible making and remaking of

ethnic identities shows that as much as an ethnic group can fragment and break, it can unify and form a common group. This has implications for reflecting about a collective South Sudanese national identity, that can also break and fragment, but also finds ways of coming together. Rather, people strategically make, remake and constantly re-imagine their ethnic identities, revealing how these are not fixed and permanent, but rather reactive to lived concrete pressures of violence and of the state, of others and of its own members.

This study has focused on the internal meanings of *"This word [ɲalam], it is for Murle [to use], not meant for other people [to use]"*, as uttered by General Gain in one of the Boma Peace Meetings in 2013.<sup>10</sup> But *"this word"*, deemed at that particular time so politicised General Gain preferred to not even mention it, will continue to be negotiated, both adopted and rejected for different reasons by different people at different times in South Sudan. The Highland Murle people of Boma will continue to creatively negotiate their position within the wider Murle group and within the state of South Sudan; sometimes that may involve using *"this word"*.

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<sup>10</sup> Kennedy Gain, Boma Peace Meeting Juba 13/09/2013.

## APPENDICES

### 1. MURLE AGE-SETS (PLURAL)

Longoroket, born 1900s–1910s. No known remaining members.

Nyakademu, born 1910s–1920s. Few remaining members.

Nyeriza, born 1920s–1930s.

Maara, born 1930s–1940s.

Dorongwa, born 1940s–1950s. The age-set of Ismail Konyi.

Muden, born 1950s–1960s. An age set that joined Ismail Konyi's Brigade. Some also part of the David Yau Yau rebellion.

Thithi, born 1960s–1970s. The age-set of a great number of the Cobra Faction Leaders and Commanders. Dominance still contested with Bothonya.

Bothonya, born late 1970s–1980s. The age-set of David Yau Yau. The first age set to fight younger age-sets with guns rather than sticks. Most took part in the Cobra Faction war.

Lango, born 1980s–1990s–2000s. Currently competing with Bothonya. Most took part in Cobra Faction war.

Thagot. Possible emerging age-set

## 2. BOMA: CALENDAR OF SEASONS AND LIVELIHOODS

According to a USAID Survey published in 2001 (Deng 2001, 31), before the second civil war the average household in Murle Boma used to cultivate over three acres of land with maize (*gora*) and inter-cropped with small quantities of sorghum for seed (*dhoow*), in the first season that starts in March/April. The same area was then cultivated in the second season (August/September) with sorghum inter-cropped with small quantities of maize (for seeds in the first season). In addition to sorghum and maize, which remain the two main crops of subsistence, beans, cassava, potatoes and vegetables are also grown. Fruits, particularly banana and mango, but also guava, paw-paw, sugar-cane and lemon, can also be found abundantly in Upper Boma.

Below is a calendar of the seasons and key livelihood events taking place by group.

DESCRIPTION	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV
<b>Approximate weather</b>	Dry season			Rain			Window of drier weather (less rain)			Rain		
<b>Highland Murle Cultivation</b>	Sorghum harvesting	Grass burning		Maize planting / Hunger gap	Weeding / Hunger gap		Maize harvesting	Sorghum planting				
<b>Animal Migration / Hunting Season</b>	White-eared kob migration / Hunting season											
<b>Toposa</b>		Toposa migrate to Boma for grazing and water										
<b>Lowland Murle</b>	Murle Lotilla migrate to Maruwo for grazing and water											
<b>Jie</b>		Jie from Kassengor migrate closer to Boma for grazing and water										

### 3. GENERAL KENNEDY GAIN'S ACCOUNT OF THE CAPTURE OF BOMA IN 1985

#### The Capture of Boma in 1985, as told by General Kennedy Gain:<sup>1</sup>

*"Babur Maze [another Murle from Pibor] was told to lead these forces, this was in March 1985. By then, the whole forces started moving from Raad to Boma. We reached Nyabanyi river and moved to ḡarunya and started deploying. The first group deployed in Itti, other forces went to cut the way between Pibor and Boma, and others to cut the way between Kapoeta and Boma. We made ḡarunya our HQ and left ammunition there. The HQ of Clement [Wani Konga] in Amara would be attacked.*

*Babur attacked Tooz, each person with 3 grenades. Fighting started in Tooz. Amara was surrounded but waiting, and only after Tooz was captured we would go for the other locations of Amara and Itti. It started at midnight. At 4am Babur started his fighting, and quickly the location was captured. The [SPLA] commander of that hill, 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant Chol Mourwel was leading the forces to take Amara.<sup>2</sup> The longest fighting was in Amara, until Chol Mourwel was killed. Only Babur succeeded, although he was wounded in his arm.*

*Our headquarters were made in Bayen. Myself, ḡacigak and Bol Madut came to Boma.<sup>3</sup> Since we had captured Tooz, we decided to continue trying until we captured all of Boma. I told them I'll take the HQ of Clement immediately. So I went to Tooz and told some of the forces there to go to our HQ. There were 82 millimetre mortars, plus the 14.7 heavy machine gun and with that we started shelling them down. The whole night we were shooting at them, then the following day we chased them down and there was no response from soldiers, they'd all ran, or were dead. On 1 April 1985 we captured all of Boma Up and I sent a message to ḡacigak to come. Only Itti was not captured.*

*A second defection happened in Khartoum on 2 April 1985, of Suwar Al-Dahab, from Nimairi.<sup>4</sup> He ran from his seat and was replaced. At the same time, Dr John sent us the message to stop attacking, to wait and see what would happen and what the new president of Sudan would do. But by 7 April we decided with commander Bol to ask ḡacigak to just capture Itti, even though we had superior orders to wait and do nothing. We agreed that we would say that they had attacked us and that we had only defended ourselves and that in the meantime they ran away.*

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<sup>1</sup> Interview General Kennedy Gain, Juba 05/12/2015.

<sup>2</sup> By other secondary sources, Chol Mourwel, from Tonj, is referred as Captain (K. G. Deng 2016).

<sup>3</sup> According to K. G. Deng (2016), Capt. (now Lt. Gen.) Anthony Bol Madut, was the deputy to ḡacigak, known by his codename 'Rock'.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson (2011, 70–71) reports that it was in fact the 6 April 1985, but I have left General Kennedy's original account. President Gaafar Nimairi was removed by the Sudanese Army in Khartoum on 6 April 1985 while he was on a state visit to the USA and was replaced by his Defence Minister and Commander-in-Chief, Abd Al-Rahman Suwar al-Dahab.



*So on 7 April at night we went to attack Itti, we fought all night and on 8<sup>th</sup> April they ran, and so Boma was all under our control.*

*From there we informed Dr John that all of Boma was captured. By July 1985, Dr John and Salva [Kiir] came to Boma and then again in August. ηacigak and myself, we were brought back to Bilpam in Ethiopia with Dr John by helicopter. ηacigak was sent back to Boma and I stayed with Dr John in Bilpam.”*

\*\*\*

Not long after this, in November 1986, ηacigak was killed in battle in Kapoeta. Kennedy Gain recalled:

*“After ηacigak’s death, Murle forces started scattering and leaving. After ηacigak’s death, Dr John went to Boma asking people why they were surrendering [leaving], and they said ‘because our commander ηacigak died’. And people asked Dr John for me to return. People replied they wanted me to come to Boma.”<sup>5</sup>*

(...)

Upon his return from military intelligence training in Cuba,<sup>6</sup> Kennedy Gain was tasked by Dr John Garang with capturing Pibor from Ismail Konyi’s PDF:

*“When we got to Boma, Dr John told me to gather forces in Boma and from Raad and proceed to Pibor. We reached there in November 1986 and fought with the militia of Ismael Konyi. I put our forces in Panawooth in Vertet, but we were attacked there by [PDF] militia and SAF. Pibor was under the control of militia and SAF, but around us, no. The order was given by Dr John not to attack, but if planes came, to shoot them down. In March 1987, Dr John with forces of Zal-zal Battalion joined me and we attacked and captured Pibor and we stayed there. After capturing Pibor, Dr John returned to Ethiopia, and Salva and I stayed in Pibor for a while. Then Agasio Akol Tong, a Dinka, took control of Pibor so we handed it over and Salva and I went to Boma. From Boma we were ordered to go to Gambela. There were some new recruits from Murle, including from the Red Army, so Dr John ordered me to take them to Bilpam for training, until 1988. We went to Gambela, Dr John went to Addis, but sent me a message to take big weaponry from Gambela to Raad and wait for him there. Pibor and Kapoeta were captured at the same time. Dr John called for me in the month of August 1988. In June 1989, in the rainy season in Malakal, Salva went to Pibor, and all commanders were ordered to go to Ethiopia. In Gambela we all met in August 89 for a meeting. Dr John explained that Ismael and his militia had surrounded Pibor*

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<sup>5</sup> Interview General Kennedy Gain, Juba 05/12/2015.

<sup>6</sup> Niran Battalion and Battalion B were graduating forces sent to Boma with ηacigak. At the same time, a group of Murle leaders including Kennedy Gain, Babur Maze, Kolor Pino and Joseph ηatio was sent to Cuba for military training in September 1985.

*after Salva had come from Malakal. There was mediation between Salva and Ismael trying to make his forces join the SPLA. But Ismael asked what Murle were in the SPLA? So the main reason*

*I was sent to Pibor in September 1989 was to try to bring Ismael and Berget into the SPLA. Aluel Alier<sup>7</sup> was the commander in Pibor then but I took over the position. I met with Ismael in Tenet airstrip and Ismael agreed to join the SPLA but wanted a second meeting the following day. Agor Loro [recently deceased] was the deputy to Ismael, and he refused to join SPLA and instead went to Juba with some of his forces. On the following day I went to the place of the meeting but on the way to Tenet<sup>8</sup> I got a letter delivered from Ismael delaying the meeting. By then the SPLA could just go in and out of Pibor. But Ismael went to kill Murle in the SPLA and Agor went collect weaponry to fight SPLA in Pibor. Until 1990 we fought those militias until in July that year we defeated Ismael and he ran to Juba. Until 1991 we remained in control of Pibor.”*

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<sup>7</sup> I am uncertain of the name of the individual and the spelling of his name; further confirmation needed.

<sup>8</sup> On the road between Pibor town and Gumuruk town.

#### 4. *BOTHONYA* SONG OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO DAVID YAU YAU

*Bothonya* age-set encouragement song popular during the SPLA-Cobra Faction war. By an unknown composer, it was sung by Abraham Loki and Samuel Irer; recording on file 06/05/2015. Translation with Samuel Irer and revision by Joel Bolloch.

*Nyandeng and Bior why have you left your cow and come to fight with Bothonya?*<sup>9</sup>  
*Bothonya and Yau Yau's people*<sup>10</sup>  
*You are useless people who remove the premolars teeth and are ruled by women*<sup>11</sup>  
*Nyarweng have no fighting tactics*  
*Commando*<sup>12</sup> *ran and we got them in Nyawiyagole*<sup>13</sup>  
*Bothonya, we must fight! Baba's Bothonya!*<sup>14</sup> *Bothonya,*<sup>15</sup> *we need a state!*

*Peter Gadet and Kuol Manyang why have you left your cow and come to fight with Bothonya? Bothonya and Yau Yau's people*  
*You are useless people who remove the premolars teeth and are ruled by women,*  
*Nyarweng have no fighting tactics*  
*Commando ran and we got them in Nyawiyagole*  
*Bothonya, we must fight! Baba's Bothonya! Bothonya, we need a state!*

*Nyandeng kibe'en Bior adote thang cung looc na ojowa jore Bothonya?*  
*Ripoto* ɔl o Yau Yau kal o apak  
*ɲalac balung ɲa alek jore Nyarweng*  
*Avir Komando karabai Nawiyagole*  
*Ripoto kər o Bothonya o Baba! kolibɔci arɔɔɲ ulaya!*

*Peter Gadet kibe'en Kuol Manyang adote thang cung looc na ojowa jore Bothonya?*  
*Ripoto* ɔl o Yau Yau kal o apak  
*ɲalac balung ɲa alek jore Nyarweng*  
*Avir Komando karabai Nawiyagole*  
*Ripoto kər o Bothonya o Baba! kolibɔci arɔɔɲ ulaya!*

<sup>9</sup> Nyandeng and Bior are common Nuer and Dinka names, and are here used as references to Nuer and Dinka. For another source, both refer to Dinka Bor: 'Nyandeng' is a reference to Madam Rebecca Nyandeng de Mabior, wife of the late Dr John Garang; 'Bior' is a reference to Bior Aswad Ajang Duot, an SPLA General who served as undersecretary in the Ministry of Defence and was recently appointed as the South Sudan Ambassador to Sudan. As noted by my informant "Both of them worked hard to destroy Murle tribe since 2005 up to 2013".

<sup>10</sup> *Ripoto* is a reference to *labac*, black and white antelope, alluding to the animal and colours of *Bothonya* age-set.

<sup>11</sup> *ɲalac* refers to Dinka custom of removing top teeth.

<sup>12</sup> Commando is the SPLA elite unit sent to fight the SSDA-CF in Boma.

<sup>13</sup> Nawiyagole is another name for Maruwo where heavy fighting took place and where Commando suffered heavy losses. Specifically, the place where the airstrip is located in Maruwo is called Nawiyagole.

<sup>14</sup> Reference to Baba Majong, red chief and paramount chief of Maruwo Hills and SSDA-CF commander, from Mudén age-set.

<sup>15</sup> The actual reference is to *kolibɔci*, translated as 'black backs' referring to an animal with black colour on its back, associated with *Bothonya* age-set.

## 5. FIELDNOTES FROM UPPER BOMA (19 MARCH 2013)

Fieldnotes on 19 March 2013 in Kaiwa, Upper Boma offer a glimpse of the tension and uncertainty in the area in the period preceding the SSDA-CF and SPLA takeover of Boma:

*Earlier this morning as I was having tea around 8:30am, shots began coming from the barrack next to our compound.<sup>16</sup> Then some louder sounds of what seemed to be some kind of cannon and more shots. It was chaotic, now one knew what was happening – all the children ran out of the classrooms [the school is separated from the compound only by a 100 metre football pitch], some of the smaller ones ran into our compound and were chased away by a man, I don't know who he was or why he chased them out. Then someone shouted out for all to get our backpacks and run and we all did it, throughout the shotguns (...).*

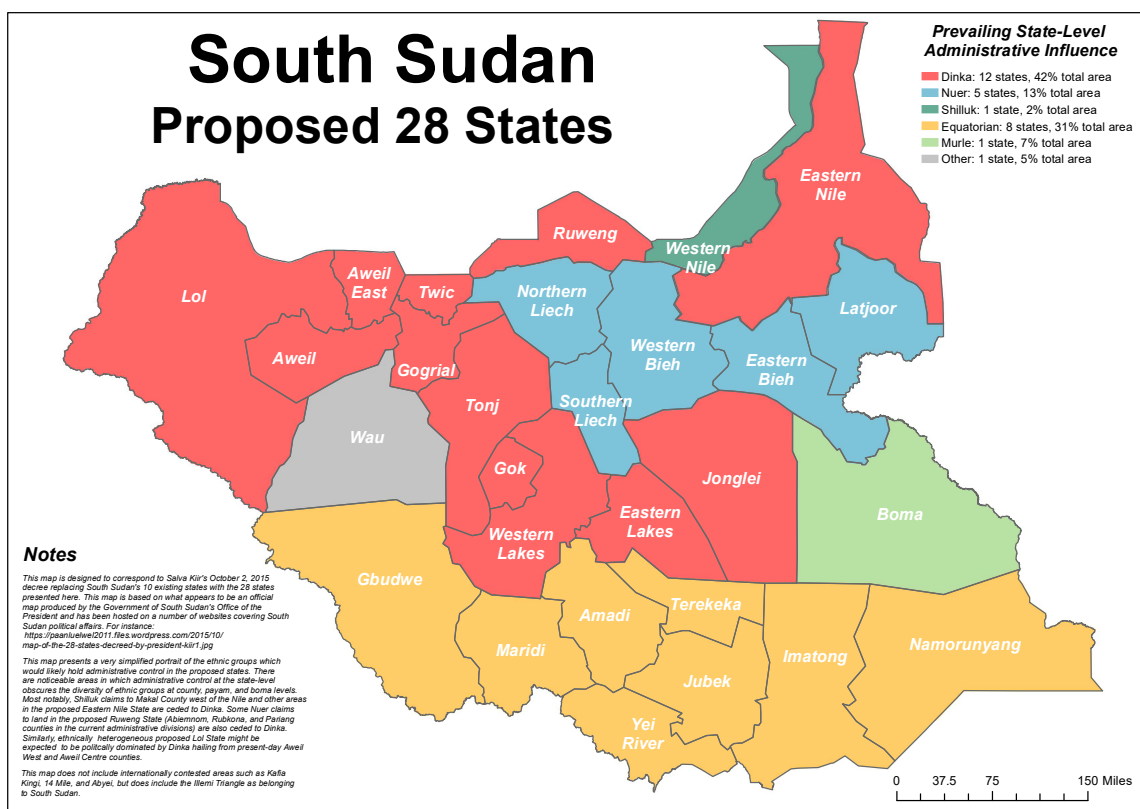
*Anyway, all the teachers, Oboch and me ran out in the opposite direction of the barracks towards Kaiwa through the Diocese of Torit [school] route where we found the entire [Jongolei] village running, women and children, all very scared and confused. As we were out at the junction/end of Jongolei, chief Lino also appeared with his gun and carrying his child. Someone then started shouting to return to the compound, that it would be safer. We ran back. Meanwhile shotguns and what sounded like cannons continued. We then found school director Henry and other teachers on the path. Chaos still all around, with people running in every direction. I was scared. We decided it was safer to return to the compound, and came back still completely unaware of what was really going on, and stayed in here in the tukuls.*

*In the meantime shooting had stopped and restarted again. I thought what a ridiculous situation when I went to brush my teeth and to the latrine, the most mundane of things in the midst of shots and chaos (...). It then subsided and by 9:30 it was over. We still didn't know much but started piecing bits of information from Beko, Johnson, Oboch and others. So the version is that a small group of green-uniformed men – DYY, 8-10 men came towards the barrack up the mountain. The SPLA didn't recognise them and fired the cannon on top of Tooz [legend says that it was placed there by the Arabs decades ago], which is very powerful and loud and [people say it] serves to warn of trouble up here to lower Boma. Cross-shooting went on until the gang ran away. According to the SPLA commander and the chiefs this was a small DYY group sent to "survey the area", check how many SPLA are up here, and how alert they are, in order to launch a bigger attack later and seize the weapons and cannon in Tooz (...). Many of those in Jongolei ran to Kaiwa but came back by the afternoon or stayed overnight. Those in Bayen ran to the forest in opposite direction. But everyone is fearing. On the one hand it's amazing how normal life re-emerged so quickly, women fetching water, men sitting around talking, drunks all around, children everywhere and playing football, but with an undertone of fear and alertness.*

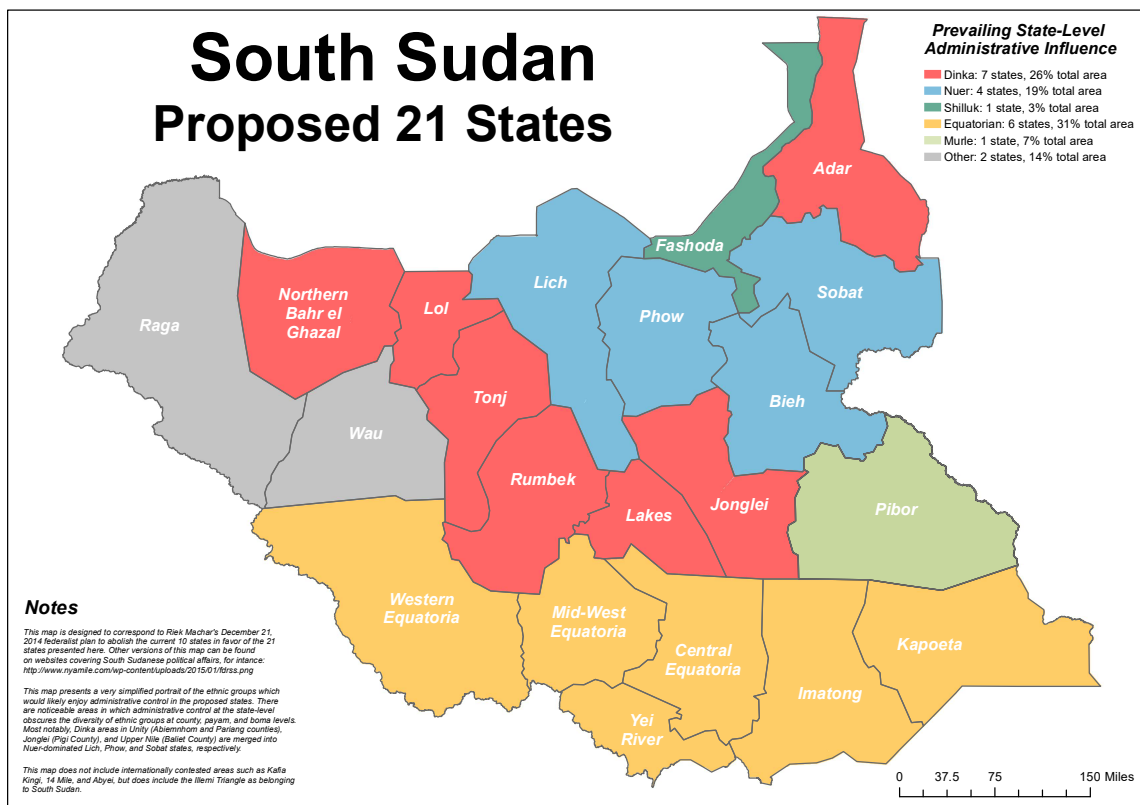
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<sup>16</sup> This took place at the Faith Learning Center teacher's compound where I lived in Kaiwa village in Upper Boma. There was an SPLA barrack 10 minutes away on the way to Bayen village.

## 6. MAPS OF PROPOSED ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS AND ETHNIC COMPOSITION



Map 14 Government's proposed 28 states with ethnic and administrative control highlighted (Radio Tamazuj 2015c).



Map 15 SPLA-IO's proposed 21 States with ethnic and administrative control highlighted (Radio Tamazuj 2015c).

## PRIMARY SOURCES

### ARCHIVES

Pitt Rivers Museum Manuscript Collection (PRM): B.A. Lewis papers. Copies of documents provided by Ferenc Marko.

South Sudan National Archive, Juba: Pibor District, Murle –Gieye / Taposa; Murle – Dinka relations; Murle – Nuer relations; Teposa – Murle relations.

### FIELDNOTES, INTERVIEWS AND SONGS

Much of the research is contained in the form of field notes that are in my possession. In most cases, dates and location of fieldnotes are indicated in the text. A list of interviews conducted is kept on file with the author.

I have also corresponded extensively with a number of informants after returning from fieldwork. Name and dates of correspondence are indicated in the text.

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