



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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Weekly Review

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A Personal Perspective on the Ngok-Twic Conflict in Abyei

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Ever since the border conflict in Abyei between groups of Twic Mayardit and the Ngok Dinka of Abyei in the border town of Aneet broke out on February 10, 2022, there has been a flurry of reactions on both sides of the conflict, crisscrossing both at home and abroad. In this heated climate, in which emotions on both sides run high, truth becomes the primary victim. Under these circumstances, I wanted to refrain from making any public statement, in case what I say is misunderstood or deliberately misconstrued on both sides and risks adding fuel to the fire. In the end, I decided that silence in such a crisis is also untenable. I have been highly moved by some of the messages to which I feel irresistibly driven to respond.

The most moving was a message from a child whose age I could not tell from his appearance, but who could not be older than ten years of age. He spoke very powerfully in Arabic and identified himself as the son of a Twic father and a Ngok mother to make the point that the two communities are closely interconnected and are indeed one people. The second message, by the Ngok Dinka cartoonist, Adija, presents the Ngok Dinka being pierced by the Arab with a knife and stabbed with a spear in the back by a fellow Dinka/South Sudanese. While I have had access to the accounts of the Ngok about the Twic attack building up with letters by the Twic Commissioner and Twic politicians in Juba, and culminating in the armed assault on February 10, and the defensive reaction of the Ngok to the situation, there are also reports of gruesome acts committed by the Ngok whom the Twic allege initiated the hostilities. These include allegations of beatings, the burning of Twic huts, and of course, killings, which the Ngok categorically deny. The third message about the situation is the perspective of the Sudd Institute in its Weekly Review of February 15 titled ‘Ngok-Twic Border Conflict: A Manifestation of Botched Socioeconomic Development in South Sudan’, which raises the issues involved in the Ngok-Twic border conflict as more widespread in the country and embodies national dimensions of poverty, lack of services, development, and related employment opportunities.

In situations involving violent confrontation, people tend to see only the negatives. However, the Ngok Dinka and Twic Mayardit are considered one people. Together with Ruweng in

Upper Nile, they were annexed to the administration of Kordofan in 1905 to ensure greater administrative protection against the Misseriya slave raiders. Kuac, a Twic section, was under the Ngok Dinka leadership of Chief Kwol Arob. The British later offered these communities the option of reverting to their respective administrations. While the Twic and Ruweng chose to return to the South, Ngok Paramount Chief Kwol Arob decided to remain in Kordofan to play a peace and reconciliation role to safeguard the interests of the people of South Sudan in their border relations with the Arabs. This position, which Paramount Chief Deng Majok, Kwol Arob's son and successor reaffirmed and reinforced, was emphatically applauded by many South Sudanese Chiefs and elders, foremost among them Chief Giir Thiik of Apuk, Chief Ayieny Aleu, Court President of Noi in Tonj, in the tape-recorded interviews I conducted in Juba in 1973 for my book, *Africans of Two Worlds: The Dinka in Afro Arab Sudan*, and two Twic Chiefs, Benjamin Lang Juuk, Chief of Akuar (Twic), and Madut Ring, the father of Bona Malwal and then Chief of Kuac (Twic), in the interviews, also tape-recorded, conducted for my book, *The Man Called Deng Majok: A Biography of Power, Polygyny and Change*. In my interviews with the Ngok Dinka for *The Man Called Deng Majok*, I was told that Ngok elders wept over the news that Kuac, Twic had been separated from Ngok. Until he died, Chief Deng Majok unsuccessfully sought to restore the unity between Ngok and Kuac. Though separated administratively, the two communities remained closely connected and continued to see themselves as one people and stood together against attacks from the neighboring Misseriya Arabs. Therefore, the view of the ordinary people on both sides is that the current conflict does not reflect the will of the people, but the ambitions of a few political entrepreneurs.

Crises are also wake up calls that open eyes to the deeper causes of the conflict. It must be emphasized that the contested claims in the conflict are mostly concocted by those individual political entrepreneurs, who are largely motivated by personal interests in winning popularity, and not by the chiefs and elders who not only know the facts on the ground but are also committed to peaceful coexistence among their people. Indeed, peace and reconciliation within and between neighboring communities are the core objectives of leadership in traditional societies. Of course, rights and wrongs are rarely equal, but they are never one-sided. People do not go to war to kill, and risk being killed, without a compelling cause. And it is not the interest of the comfortable political leaders that should matter the most, but those of the foot soldiers or warriors whom those leaders instigate to go to kill and risk getting killed for reasons quite marginal to the pressing material needs and sense of security and dignity of the ordinary people.

The issues involved in the current Ngok-Twic border conflict should be approached from the perspective of proximate causes and the deeper underlying factors. In terms of proximate causes, the conflict focuses on the management of Aneet town and its market, specifically the decision of the Chief Administrator of Abyei to modernize urban planning by surveying the land, which implies demarcating the borders. That has implications for the ownership of the

revenues accruing from taxes. These material issues should not generate violent confrontation, as they can be amicably discussed and resolved peacefully.

There are deeper issues of boundaries demarcation which, though sensitive and difficult, should also be amicably resolved. Some leaders, including among the Twic, wisely argue that discussing the sensitive issue of boundaries should be deferred until the more urgent and important issue of the final status of Abyei between Sudan and South Sudan is resolved. Although there is much to commend in this argument, I do not see the need to avoid discussing and resolving an issue on which the facts are clearly established and need not tear the communities apart and leave it to fester and explode sometime in the future in even more aggravated form. There are many sources that can be, and have indeed been, consulted to guide the discussion and agreement on the borders.

In the negotiations with the North, maps from the US Library of Congress that went back to the early 1990s and in the archives of the University of Durham in the UK were effectively used by the SPLM in their negotiations with the Sudan Government to determine the historic boundaries of the Ngok Dinka. These maps were later consulted by the Abyei Boundaries Commission (ABC) that was mandated by the Abyei Protocol of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) to determine the boundaries of the Ngok Dinka. There are also maps of the 1956 borders between the South and the North, which also represent the borders of the Ngok Dinka with their neighbors in the former provinces of Bahr el Ghazal and Upper Nile to the south, the east, and the west. There is the map of the ABC whose finding was supposed to be final and binding. Then there is the decisive map of the International Court of Arbitration at The Hague, that revised the northern, eastern, and western borders of Ngok Dinka territory. The Court made some changes in the borders with the northern neighbors, and the borders to the east and the west, but left the southern border of 1956 as confirmed by the ABC. Some Twic leaders claim that they were not parties to the border negotiations and agreements; nonetheless, no community should argue that they are not bound by an agreement signed by their government. Finally, there is the knowledge of the tribal chiefs and elders who know their boundaries with their neighbors very well, and who were extensively consulted by the ABC experts in determining the boundaries and attended The Hague Arbitration. One thing our people are traditionally known for is that they are deeply religious, God fearing, and believe in telling the truth as the most assured way of gaining divine justice. Lying is one of the mortal wrongs among our people for which divine punishment is unavoidable, sooner or later.

There are even deeper causes that need to be urgently addressed to bring about sustainable peace and security to the rural communities throughout the country. These include rural poverty amidst the abundant natural wealth of the country. This is the reason I find the Sudd Institute's article advocating the urgent provision of services, rural development and employment opportunities for youth and women quite persuasive. Particularly appealing is the restatement of the objectives of the SPLM/A of taking the amenities of the towns to the rural

areas, using oil revenues to fuel the engine of agricultural development, and building an extensive network of roads to connect communities and facilitate rural trade.

All this said, there is no reason the communities cannot sit and amicably discuss their differences and find mutually agreeable solutions on contested issues. Judging from the number of allegations, fabrications, exaggerations, and outright hate talk being promoted in the social media by members of these two communities at home and around the world, the situation is far more serious and explosive than we may realize. I strongly believe that dialogue must be urgently undertaken in earnest at three interconnected levels: at the local level between the traditional leaders and elders of both communities; at the state level between the governors and members of their respective governments; and at the national level between the respective leaders of the two communities and the Central Government. Since the participants at these levels are implicated as interested personalities, I suggest that the President, who is the uniting Head of the Nation and therefore above ethnic differences, should appoint a Senior Special Representative, assisted by a team of mediators and technocrats to facilitate the proposed dialogue at all the three levels.

Our international friends and partners, specifically the two UN missions, UNMISS and UNISFA, also have an important role to play in these intercommunal dialogues. Both have convening capacities as neutral mediators. With the material support of the sympathetic members of the donor community, they can also play a catalytic role in mobilizing humanitarian and development agencies, governmental and nongovernmental, to assist with the delivery of social services and the generation of development and employment activities.

One important observation that the Ngok Dinka must bear in mind is that President Salva Kiir Mayardit and the Government of South Sudan acted promptly to stop the violence and take steps to investigate the situation and place responsibility for what happened on individuals who must be held accountable. The cooperation of the SSPDF with UNISFA, and particularly the intervention of Division Three from Aweil to reinforce peace and security with decisive assertion of power, is something the Ngok Dinka have never experienced in their chronic conflicts with the Misseriya Arabs and the partisan attitude of the Sudanese Government in Khartoum in favor of the Misseriya. This should be viewed by the Ngok Dinka as decisive evidence that they have the full protection of the Government of South Sudan as fellow citizens of the country, without any discrimination, even though their final status between Sudan and South Sudan remains unresolved. This aspect of the situation alone is one that the parties must bear in mind as they negotiate the final status of the area. While the Ngok historical connection with the Sudan should be acknowledged and catered for in any negotiation and resolution of the dispute over the final status of Abyei, the fact that the Ngok Dinka can count on protection from the Government of South Sudan and so far never from the Government of the Sudan must be a crucial consideration in determining the status of Ngok Dinka between the two countries.

When the late popular Ngok Dinka singer, Nyankol Mithiang, asked the rhetorical question “How did Abyei get left out?”, she was right in alluding to the undetermined status of Abyei between the two countries, but she was wrong in that South Sudan has now abandoned the Ngok Dinka. The Ngok Dinka are South Sudanese under the Constitution of South Sudan. They now have an administration by which they are self-governing under the President of South Sudan. And all the services in the area are provided by South Sudan at par with all the other states of the country. Considering that Abyei remains a contested area, President Salva Kiir Mayardit and his Government have been remarkably decisive in catering for the interests of the Ngok Dinka. The two communities, the Ngok and the Twic, must recognize that the perpetrators of this conflict do not legitimately represent them as communities. And the Ngok Dinka must recognize that whoever is involved in the crisis from Twic does not represent South Sudanese people and the Government of South Sudan.

It is worth reiterating that in crises, there are always opportunities to be tapped and built upon. This crisis has reaffirmed the position of the Ngok Dinka as South Sudanese and Khartoum should have a serious look at the moral and political implications of this reality. It has also awakened discussion of critical issues relating to the plight of our rural masses who are afflicted with the hardship of poverty and competition over scarce resources. As I am known for saying, ‘What is not said is what divides’, I should note that this crisis should be a wake-up call for us to discuss the issues involved openly and candidly with the determined objective of resolving the differences through talking and not through fighting.

In this process and at an opportune time, the elders of the two communities should be convened to reaffirm and publicly restate to their communities the historic ties between their respective communities, revitalize the cultural, moral and spiritual bonds that have united their people for centuries, and disavow and condemn the divisive strategies of self-serving political entrepreneurs. Above all, we should applaud the evenhanded manner the leadership of South Sudan has managed the situation and should encourage them to sustain this uniting approach to inter-communal disputes and apply it to similar inter-communal conflicts that are destabilizing our rural areas throughout the country.

In that connection, it is worth considering the creation of a National Commission for Inter-Communal Peace and Reconciliation to pursue this overriding objective throughout the country. There has been a rise in communal conflicts in South Sudan since the signing of the Revitalized Peace Agreement. While the instances of inter-communal disputes are widespread throughout the country, recent cases include Leer, Rumbek, Bor, Akobo, Tambura, and Tonj. These are only examples in which communities have been engulfed in extreme sectarian/communal violence. The work of the proposed Commission will focus on inter-communal disputes both preventively and correctively, working closely with other institutions with related mandates in the country and with relevant international partners. Relevant also is

an initiative which we recently undertook to promote inter-communal cultural dialogue toward a better understanding of our respective cultural value systems, their commonalities, their differences, and the prospects for their complementarity. The ultimate objective would be to develop a unifying national identity and value system that can guide governance, constitutionalism, and guiding principles for dialogue with our international development partners.

In addressing the current inter-communal conflicts, the mandate of the National Commission for Inter-Communal Peace and Reconciliation should be to turn this local crisis into a stimulus for addressing generic national challenges with similar causes and manifestations. The overriding strategy should be constructive engagement to explore a common ground, resolve conflicts and unify efforts for pursuing shared objectives. Again, partnership with international peacebuilding, humanitarian, and development agencies, governmental and nongovernmental, would be crucial in this challenging and yet essential undertaking.

About the Sudd Institute

The Sudd Institute is an independent research organization that conducts and facilitates policy relevant research and training to inform public policy and practice, to create opportunities for discussion and debate, and to improve analytical capacity in South Sudan. The Sudd Institute's intention is to significantly improve the quality, impact, and accountability of local, national, and international policy- and decision-making in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.

About the Author

Francis M. Deng has recently been assigned the position of South Sudan's Roving Ambassador after having been the country's first Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Prior to that, he served for five years as the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide at the level of Under-Secretary-General. From 1992 to 2004, he served as Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons. His first position in the United Nations was that of Human Rights Officer in the Secretariat from 1967 to 1972 when he was appointed Sudan's Ambassador to the Nordic Countries. He was also Sudan's Ambassador to Canada and the United States of America and was also Minister of State for Foreign Affairs for five years. After leaving his government's service, he held a series of positions in leading think tanks and universities in the United States. Dr. Deng graduated with an LLB (honors) from the University of Khartoum to which he was appointed member of the Law Faculty and then sent abroad for post-graduate studies. He holds an LLM and a JSD from Yale University Law School. Dr. Deng has authored and edited over thirty books in a wide variety of fields and has written two novels on the crisis of national identity in the Sudan.