

COMMENTARY

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The militarization of cattle raiding in South Sudan: how a traditional practice became a tool for political violence

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Abstract

Cattle raiding, a longstanding practice among pastoralists in South Sudan, was historically governed by cultural authorities and ritual prohibitions. However, after decades of on-and-off integration into armed forces, raiders are now heavily armed, and military-style attacks claim dozens if not hundreds of lives at a time. Beginning with the emergence of the infamous Lou Nuer “White Army” in the Bor Massacre of the early 1990s, in which Riek Machar mobilized local herders to mount a devastating attack against the heartland of Sudan People’s Liberation Army Leader John Garang, political leaders have strategically manipulated these local conflicts in order to mobilize armed herders for their political movements. Political leaders’ systematic exploitation of customary raiding practices gravely inflames the current conflict, but the role of intercommunity violence has not been part of the mainstream dialogue around political solutions. Moreover, as allegiances between pastoralist militias and political factions decay, the proliferation of informal armed groups whose motivations are often distinct from the agenda of the state or opposition forces on whose behalf they once fought poses increasing challenges to peacebuilding efforts. Neglecting local realities poses serious implications for the prospects of peace. In this article, we synthesize perspectives from anthropology, regional history, and conflict studies to offer an analysis of the interplay between local conflict and state violence in South Sudan. We highlight opportunities for conflict de-escalation, concluding with policy recommendations focused on justice and enforcement in the rural areas of South Sudan.

Keywords: Pastoralists, Cattle raiding, South Sudan, Civil war

Nuer say that it is cattle that destroy people, for “more people have died for the sake of a cow than for any other cause.”

—Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (1940)

Introduction

On March 15, 2017, Ethiopian officials reported that Murle gunmen from the Pibor region of South Sudan had mounted a cross-border raid resulting in 28 deaths and the abduction of 43 children from Nuer villages in Gambella (BBC 2017). The attack recapitulated a similar,

even deadlier, incident last year in which 200 were killed, 160 children abducted, and over 2000 cattle driven off as spoils (Fortin 2016; United Nations Human Rights: Office of the High Commissioner 2016). These raids are outliers not because they are rare occurrences but because they made it into the news at all. Cattle raiding is a fact of life for pastoralists in the region, but these attacks occur in remote areas with little infrastructure and are rarely reported outside of local news outlets. On the South Sudanese side of the border, vicious cycles of raiding between the Murle and Lou Nuer result in casualties on a relatively routine basis, claiming dozens if not hundreds of lives at a time (Gettleman 2012a, 2012b; Leff 2012; Thomas 2015; UNMISS 2012, 2013).

Cattle raiding is a longstanding feature of many East African pastoralist societies. However, the ready availability of arms and the incorporation of this practice into the larger political conflict in South Sudan have

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intensified the violence to unprecedentedly deadly levels. Raiders who once mounted attacks with spears are now armed with AK-47s available for as little as the price of two cows. After decades of on-and-off integration into state armed forces, some are equipped with heavy arms including rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns (Leff 2009, 2012). Sadly, many of these weapons come from the South Sudanese state itself, as guns collected from sources including disarmament programs often end up back in the hands of civilians, whether through direct provisioning or via patronage networks with access to weapon depots (Kuol 2017).

Devastating, military-scale attacks targeting civilians and entire communities are being routinely incorporated into the raiding repertoire. During an outbreak of violence between Murle and Lou Nuer communities from December 23, 2011, to February 4, 2012, a period of just over a month, fact-finding missions by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) conservatively tallied 44 discrete attacks and counter-attacks resulting in 276 deaths, 25 abductions, and thousands of raided cattle (UNMISS 2012). The following year, a single incident on February 8, 2013, resulted in almost half the loss of life incurred during these 6 weeks, when Murle raiders attacked a group of Lou Nuer civilians as they migrated to seasonal grazing grounds, killing over 100. Many of the dead were women, children, and elderly. Reports of stolen cattle are often inflated in hopes of compensation: for example, local authorities and Lou Nuer youth claimed a wildly implausible 60,000 cattle raided during this incident. However, the County Commissioner reported up to 4000 heads of cattle stolen, approximately half of which were recovered by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). These numbers still represent a significant blow to the livelihood of the victims, who depend on their herds for subsistence (UNMISS 2013).

The root causes of the current conflict in South Sudan are notoriously complex and long standing. Most peace efforts have, appropriately, focused on national-level agreements such as implementation of the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (ARCISS) (IGAD, Intergovernmental Authority on Development 2015), the role of UNMISS peacekeeping operations, and the possibility of an African Union trusteeship (Gettleman 2013; Knopf 2016; Mamdani 2017). Undoubtedly, intervention at all levels will be required for any kind of long-standing peace. But local-level dynamics are neglected at a significant cost. As a 2013 Sudd Institute report states:

For some communities, their ongoing experiences with ethnic and inter-communal violence is so intense and localized that the end of the North-South war and

the independence of South Sudan may have little meaning for them in terms of their day-to-day security. Many communities say that independence has only ended a certain kind of war, but has left sources of insecurity most relevant to them unmitigated - the "mini-wars" that continued to occur between rival ethnic groups and communities... (Jok 2013, 7)

The context-specific features of any crisis have significant implications for policies that seek to mitigate violence. In the case of South Sudan, endemic cattle raiding creates dynamics that are easily coopted by the military and political objectives of those in power and quickly mobilized along ethnic lines. Analyses that treat cattle raiding as a primarily cultural phenomenon rather than part of the history of war in the region risk overlooking a central component of the current conflict. Cattle raiding, a long-standing historical reality, now significantly exacerbates the political conflict and poses threats to civilian wellbeing that rival the more visible atrocities committed by the SPLA and opposition (SPLA-IO) forces. But the issue has been by turns exoticized or, more commonly, omitted from serious consideration in the mainstream dialogue about causes of conflict and prospects for peace.

Why do such incidents not shock the international audience in quite the same way? Are they relegated to the category of "ethnic violence" and "cultural practices"? To the extent that these raids are cultural, they are a mutant breed of traditional forms of raiding and extensions of political rivalries at the national level. As we explore in this article, this transformation was deliberately wrought by political elites in order to mobilize civilian raiders for their own ambitions, transforming what was once a feature of life in pastoralist communities into a tool for struggle over political power. Their efforts to undermine the rituals and cultural authorities that traditionally governed intercommunity violence have been devastatingly successful. The push for a political solution in South Sudan must include local parties to the conflict. At a minimum, mechanisms to address local violence must be built into any national-level political settlements. To effectively support South Sudanese communities in restoring traditional checks on cattle raiding, stakeholders must have a rigorously accurate understanding of the role of these practices in pastoralist society and what features of the customary institutions that once governed them might be leveraged for peace.

This article seeks to contribute to the dialogue around peacebuilding in South Sudan by synthesizing the literature on the neglected role of pastoralist militias and informal armed groups in the current conflict. Drawing on secondary sources from anthropology, regional history, and conflict studies, we offer a comprehensive narrative

account of the politicization and militarization of pastoralist cattle raiding from the time of the Second Sudanese Civil War up to the present day. We focus on the strategic manner in which Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) and Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement-in-Opposition (SPLA/M-IO) leaders including President Salva Kiir and opposition leader Riek Machar have coopted intercommunal violence between pastoralist communities to mobilize military support for their political agendas, a dynamic which has seriously exacerbated the ongoing crisis.

In our discussion, we will primarily consider the Nuer White Army and Dinka *titweng/gelweng*, the two pastoralist informal armed groups who have arguably played the most significant role in conflict since the Second Sudanese Civil War and who were both closely involved in the 2013 outbreak of violence in Juba that sparked the current crisis. We begin with an overview of the predominant dynamics that motivated and governed cattle raiding prior to the significant politicization of these practices. Tracing the origins of these two armed groups and, using several case examples beginning with the 1991 Bor Massacre, we demonstrate how intercommunity animosity sown by cattle-raiding feuds has been exploited to perpetuate military-scale political violence. We conclude by discussing the complex relationship between these pastoralist militias and SPLA/M and SPLA/M-IO forces, emphasizing in particular the distinction between the agendas of political elites and those of the pastoralist informal armed groups who episodically fight on their behalf.

With no clear political solution in sight, the policy implications of these distinctions are profound. Most dialog focuses exclusively on political elites and state institutions, yet assessments that exclude or ignore the interaction between elites and local actors are incomplete. Continued failure to address the grievances which motivate these informal armed groups to participate in conflict will prove a persistent barrier to durable peace in South Sudan. As measures such as an arms embargo and targeted sanctions stall at the United Nations Security Council and the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan fails to yield significant progress, our article highlights under-explored opportunities for conflict de-escalation by integrating local actors and cultural authorities into a comprehensive peace process. We emphasize the need for increased inclusivity in the peace process in order to account for a broader range of non-state actors, especially pastoralist militias, and provide the necessary background for policymakers and academic communities engaged in these debates.

Main text

Life in pastoralist society revolves around cattle, which are the heart of pastoralist economic and social systems,

as well as a main source of nutrients in the form of milk and fresh blood (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Bridewealth in cattle is required for marriage, and herd size is often a reliable indicator of male social status as well as the status of the family into which he is marrying (Glowacki and Wrangham 2015; Small Arms Survey 2014). These structures create some of the incentives that have historically perpetuated inter-community cattle raiding in the region. Anthropologists working throughout East Africa have described similar raiding practices among pastoralist groups, including those central to the conflict in South Sudan such as the Nuer, Dinka, and Murle, as well as those on the periphery (Bollig 1990; Gray et al. 2003; Hutchinson 2000; Schilling et al. 2012; Thomas 2017). Even prior to the militarization of these practices, cattle raiding in its "traditional" form was not benign. Raids posed a significant threat to the health and wellbeing of pastoralists and to their communities in the form of mortality for young male warriors, decreased nutrition due to loss of herds, and decreased access to arable land and watering holes. In addition to acquisition of livestock, women and children were opportunistically abducted, with abducted women being taken as wives, and children being incorporated into the families of the captors (Mathew and Boyd 2011; Pike et al. 2010; Glowacki and Wrangham 2015; Akuei and Jok 2010; Small Arms Survey 2014). Raiding's persistence and devastating consequences continue to be shocking, both in scale and the inability of the state to prevent or punish it. On November 28, 2017, the Murle staged yet another deadly attack on Dinka's Duk Pawiel, killing 41, injuring scores, and making away with children and cattle, earning the condemnation of UN Special Representative for South Sudan, David Shearer (UNMISS 2017).

From the pre-colonial era until Sudan's first civil war, most groups observed highly ritualized purification ceremonies following killing. Among the Nuer, these rituals were presided over by traditional authorities known as leopard-skin or earth chiefs, who were responsible for settling blood feuds. Douglas Johnson describes these chiefs' role at the interface of the divine and the sociopolitical: "The settlement of many cases thus involved both political negotiation and spiritual atonement. The spiritual and judicial were interwoven to such an extent that Nuer did not readily differentiate between the two" (Johnson 1986, 60). Though these customs primarily governed inter-Nuer homicide, among certain Nuer communities, they extended to Dinka as well (Hutchinson 1996). A Nuer man who had killed sought refuge at the residence of the leopard-skin chief. Until the chief incised his arm to release the blood of the dead from his body, he was not allowed to eat or drink. The leopard-skin chief then negotiated with the kin of the dead an amount of restitution in bloodwealth cattle, and until this amount was

paid in full, the killer was not safe from retribution. Failure to observe ritual prohibitions was believed to result in grave consequences, including death (Tiitmamer and Awolich 2014; Hutchinson 1996; Evans-Pritchard 1940). Also in this domain, prophets were another category of influential spiritual leader widely respected and feared for their powers (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Traditionally, and to a large extent still, these individuals played an important role in governing raiding behavior, wielding significant power to both sanction and initiate raids as well as to prevent them (Leff 2012; Hashimoto 2013; Hutchinson and Pendle 2015). Youth intending to mount a raid sought their blessings in exchange for a share of the raided livestock (Evans-Pritchard 1940).

Raids were first mounted with spears and, later, firearms. Indicative of the central place cattle occupy in pastoralist culture, the Nuer word for bullet, *dei mac*, means literally “a gun’s calves” (Hutchinson 1996: 106–7). When guns began to replace the traditional weapon of spears during the first civil war in Sudan, some Nuer were no longer confident that death caused by bullet wounds was sufficiently purified by the customary rituals alone. In order to ensure that the risk of “pollution” to the killer was eliminated, they began performing new gun-specific rites to supplement those performed by the earth chief (Hutchinson 1996). Tightly governed by ritual mechanisms for purification and reconciliation, killing was a spiritual ordeal of significant magnitude.

These practices have devolved since the Second Sudanese Civil War. Perhaps the most revealing argument for the power of these institutions is the lengths to which political leaders like Machar and Garang, Kiir’s predecessor as leader of the SPLA, went to dismantle them. As early as the 1980s, political leaders on both sides of the conflict strategically armed and mobilized pastoralist raiders to fight on their behalf, successfully disinhibiting many of the traditional checks on violence and raiding. The two most prominent historical examples are the cases of the Nuer “White Army” and the Dinka *Titweng*.

The Nuer White Army

The “White Army” or *dec bor* originally referred to groups of Nuer pastoralists that formed to protect their cattle against raids (Adeba 2015). Some accounts maintain that this group takes its name from the white ash with which young herders paint themselves to protect against mosquitoes, but White Army members state it is instead to distinguish Nuer raiders from the “Black Army” or *dec char* as they (derogatorily) refer to professional soldiers, whom they view with disdain (Bredlid and Arensen 2017; Young 2016). During the Second Sudanese Civil War, this decentralized aggregate of armed herders gathered for finite periods of time in

order to fight, dispersing back to their cattle camps after such engagements. A loose and shifting group rather than a standing force with a fixed organizational structure, the coalition of armed herders fighting under the name “White Army” has evolved throughout the phases of conflict in South Sudan, at times more and less active with periods of quiescence and remobilization, since the time of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The White Army has had a second emergence, playing an especially active role in the current conflict. They are motivated in large part by resentment over the killing of Nuer in Juba after fighting broke out between Nuer and Dinka elements of the elite presidential guard on December 15, 2013. Today, the White Army refers to groups of armed young Eastern Nuer, separate from the formal SPLM-IO ranks, but without whom the SPLM-IO would have limited credible military force (Arnold and Alden 2007; Bredlid and Arensen 2017; Johnson 2014; Young and Mash 2007; Young 2016).

One of the most infamous large-scale mobilizations of Nuer raiders for political purposes was the Bor Massacre, led by Riek Machar in the Upper Nile region in the early 1990s around the time of his split from John Garang’s SPLA (Adeba 2015; Jok and Hutchinson 2000; Young 2016). After a failed coup attempt against Garang, a Bor Dinka, Machar split off to create a new faction, SPLA-Nasir (Hutchinson 2001). Seeking to mount a large-scale attack on Bor Dinka, the heartland of the territory under John Garang’s control, Machar sought to mobilize youth from Lou and Jikany Nuer cattle camps. The Lou Nuer were longtime neighbors with the very Bor Dinka that Machar sought to attack, and the two groups often shared grazing grounds for their cattle. Knowing that they would be unmotivated by political ambitions alone, Machar provisioned these young men with arms and promised them abundant payment in raided cattle (Young and Mash 2007).

In the period leading up to his 1991 split from the SPLA, Machar devised two mechanisms by which to take advantage of Nuer religious belief to advance his political objectives. First, concerned by news that certain groups of Nuer were categorizing deaths by gunfire as deaths by lightning, a ritually privileged category of deaths considered to be closely associated with the divine, Machar propagated the belief that there was a separate category of violence, “government” or secular violence, *koor kume*, that was exempt from traditional purification rituals and compensation requirements associated with traditional or “homeland” war, *koor cieng* (Hutchinson 2001). A killer and his community would be exempt from any claims of bloodwealth cattle from the family of the dead, and the spiritual requirement of purification from the blood of the dead was abrogated. In essence, they would bear no responsibility for bloodshed ordered down from or high from military superiors.

Second, Machar capitalized on a prophecy of the prominent Nuer prophet Ngundeng to legitimize the prospective raid on the Bor Dinka. Ngundeng, who died in 1906 but whose legacy remained influential, had prophesied that a terrible battle would take place between the Nuer and Dinka, in which the Dinka would be destroyed. The prophecy stated that this battle would be commanded by a left-handed messiah from the village of Nasir, whose forehead would be unmarked by the scars of manhood (referring to scarification performed during Nuer males' initiation ceremonies) and who would be married to a white woman. Machar, left-handed, headquartered in Nasir, unmarked, and married to the British aid worker Emma McCune, was only too happy to fit this description (Adeba 2015). Machar has continued to try to portray himself as the fulfillment of the prophet Ngundeng's prophecies in 2009 organizing for the repatriation of Ngundeng's ritual stick (*dang*) into his possession from Britain where it had been taken by colonial authorities (Young 2016).

Machar managed to convince the Lou and Jikany Nuer that any violence they conducted under the banner of political warfare would have no spiritual or material repercussions. Of the consequences, anthropologists Sharon Hutchinson and Jok Madut Jok write:

This new form of warfare transgressed all the ethical limits on violence that had been honored by previous generations of Nuer and Dinka leaders, swiftly transforming earlier patterns of intermittent cattle-raiding into no-holds-barred military assaults on Dinka and Nuer Civilian populations armed with little more than spears (Jok and Hutchinson 1999: 131).

Ultimately, Machar mobilized an estimated 30,000 Nuer youth. In the attack that followed, the infamous 1991 Bor Massacre, approximately 2000 Dinka were killed in one of the most massive losses of civilian life to have occurred during the Second Sudanese Civil War. The event severely damaged Machar's reputation and is a source of bitter resentment between these communities to the present day (Young and Mash 2007; Hutchinson 2000, 2001; Adeba 2015).

The Dinka *Titweng*

Young men of Dinka cattle camps were also mobilized to participate in political warfare in units known as the *Titweng*, first established among western Dinka communities, and *Gelweng* further south. Groups of Dinka herders first organized into defense units in response to attacks from Baggara Arab militias known as the *Muraheleen*, who were supported by the government in Khartoum in an attempt to destabilize the support base of the SPLA (Jok 2017; Kuol 2017). By 1995, the SPLA

had formally planned the organization of a civilian militia which they named *Titweng*, meaning "cattle guards" (Jok and Hutchinson 1999). Due to repeated raids by the SPLA-Nasir faction against Dinka communities, it was relatively easy to attract their participation. Armed but poorly trained, the Dinka *Titweng* fought with SPLA forces in nearly 200 military operations during the 1997 campaign for Bahr al Ghazal, a region in the northwest of what is now South Sudan (Jok 2017; Kuol 2017).

Much as it had been necessary for Machar to undermine the cultural institutions governing raiding among the Nuer, the SPLA had to disrupt such institutions in order to mobilize the *Titweng*. Traditionally, Dinka cattle raiders were strictly organized under a system of age sets. The age-set system defined which groups of men would raid together and also maintained intergenerational hierarchy. In order to mobilize larger groups of Dinka raiders than would have traditionally been possible under the age-set system, the leadership of the SPLA enforced a break in these deeply entrenched social systems, mandating a hiatus in the practice of age-set ceremonies and competitions. This was the first time that Dinka raiders had ever fought alongside men they did not know on a personal basis, and it was at this time that the group first began wearing uniforms—or, in the absence of clothing, tying palm leaves around their wrists—to identify their own fighters. In addition to augmenting the military force of the SPLA, the cattle kept by the Dinka *Titweng* provided an important source of sustenance for SPLA fighters, and *Titweng* herds came to be colloquially known as "the bank of Garang" (Pendle 2015).

Following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, these groups were loosely absorbed into local government. *Titweng* militias were used in governance activities such as tax collection, local elections, and the enforcement of court verdicts. In 2012, select groups of *titweng* were uniformed, trained, and salaried as community police. In April of the same year, a semi-formalized force called the *Mathiang Anyoor* (meaning "brown caterpillar" in Dinka) was recruited from the *titweng* in order to participate in government exercises in the contested region of Heglig (AUCISS (African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan) 2014; Kuol 2017). By mid-2013, a specialized force of former Dinka raiders from Salva Kiir's home community in the Bahr el Ghazal region was integrated into the presidential guard as the *Dõt ku Beny* ("Rescue the President"), solidifying a shift in the role of informal pastoralist armed groups from protectors and raiders of cattle to semi-integrated members of the state security apparatus. The *Dõt ku Beny*, drawn from *titweng* and *Mathiang Anyoor*, was tasked with the protection of President Salva Kiir and was closely involved in the December 2013 outbreak of

fighting in Juba (Kuol 2017; Pendle 2015; Sudan Tribune 2008, 2009).

Informal pastoralist armies and state actors

Pastoralists, historically marginalized, are often suspicious of government and organized forces on all sides. As a result, an important feature of pastoralist raiders' participation in political conflict is that they are only ever weakly integrated into formal militias, with little in the way of consistent loyalties. For example, the Toposa of Eastern Equatoria fought both for and against the SPLA at various times throughout the Second Sudanese Civil War, depending in part on the ability of the SPLA to deliver weapons and food (Johnson 2003). Riek Machar, despite his rhetoric, is said to have little authority over the current iteration of the Nuer White Army. As one individual testified to the African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan, Riek Machar "took over a rebellion that was not his" (AUCISS (African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan) 2014 as cited in Young 2016). Young raiders' primary motivation is rarely political ideology, but rather inter-community grievances and, in some cases, the enticement of material reward. Therefore, whoever can capitalize on unhealed wounds between communities, or maintain a supply chain of material goods in the form of cattle or arms, will be able to bid for their alliance (Breidlid and Arensen 2017; Jok 2017; Young 2016). Due to political leaders' uncertain ability to exercise firm control over the pastoralist militias who fight on their behalf, the Dinka *Titweng* and Nuer White Army have not been unambiguously supported by these same elites (Johnson 2003). The ramifications of this were never more visible than during attempts to disarm pastoralist militias after the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Army. A 2006 SPLA campaign to disarm the Lou Nuer in Jonglei is estimated to have cost the lives of 1200–1600 Nuer White Army and 400 SPLA fighters—approximately as many as those who died in the Bor Massacre (Brewer 2010; O'Brien 2009).

As allegiances between the main political factions and pastoralist militias decay, major actors are no longer able to consistently secure pastoralist militias' loyalty. Sadly, this does not mean that raiding has subsided to its pre-militarized state, when tit-for-tat raiding occurred at a relatively stable level, far from it. Instead, heavily armed, in some cases, military-trained, and completely disinhibited from any forms of cultural authority that may have once held them in check, raiders mount deadly attacks on a routine basis. Political leaders like Kiir and Machar, having undermined the traditional mechanisms that once governed violence in order to further their individual political interests, no longer have control over these

raiders either. The result is a security vacuum filled with opportunistic and deadly raiding.

Implications for peacebuilding

Referring to the December 15, 2013, outbreak of violence in Juba that ignited the current conflict, a Sudd Institute Report summarized the interplay between ethnic and political violence:

Historically, conflict within South Sudan has taken three forms: the liberation wars in which the south fought the north in the old Sudan; ethnic feuds over resources, especially among cattle herding communities; and rivalries between political leaders... The most devastating stream is that of political wrangling among various leaders vying for power, whether at the national or state level, as politicians [...] reach for the ethnic card, drawing their kin into conflict by explaining to them that it is the survival of the whole group that is at stake. In this sense, the last two trends, the ethnic composition of the country and the political rivalries, are interlinked, and they are at the root of what happened in Juba on December 15th. (Jok 2014, 7).

Though the root causes of the political conflict are complex, on a local level, there may be measures to significantly mitigate violence and reduce civilian insecurity. At present, however, few such disincentives are in place. Disarmament would be a positive long-term goal, but it has not been a successful strategy to date, nor is it viable as a short-term or one-off solution. Disarmament campaigns have a history of being used as ad hoc, reactive responses to violence. These interventions have been unsuccessful at best and disastrous at worst, such as in the previously cited case of the 2006 Jonglei campaign, which on final tally cost one death for every two weapons recovered (Garfield 2007; O'Brien 2009). In part, it is too difficult to coordinate the simultaneous disarmament of various pastoralist groups. Even without ulterior political motivations, disarming one community without sufficient protection from state forces exposes them to threats from other raiders. Another obstacle to disarmament campaigns is that respect for state authority among pastoralist communities is insufficient to avoid encountering armed resistance (Brewer 2010; Breidlid and Arensen 2017; Small Arms Survey, 2006–2007). Finally, small arms and ammunition are readily obtained through barter of livestock and across state lines throughout East Africa. Unless something is done to address the supply of arms, there is nothing preventing pastoralists from easily re-arming themselves (Arnold and Alden 2007; Kuol 2017; O'Brien 2009). While controlling the flow of firearms is an important security

measure, it is not a solution to inter-ethnic violent feuding so long as the drivers of conflict remain as potent as they have been over the past decade.

Likewise, modern law enforcement alone is unlikely to be an effective deterrent. First, pastoralist communities often view government and state forces with suspicion and generally prefer to resolve disputes within their own social structures. In a survey conducted by the Small Arms Survey's Human Baseline Security Assessment project, an overwhelming 90% of respondents reported that the primary providers of security in their areas were traditional leaders, followed by neighbors and religious leaders, with police and SPLA forces at the bottom of the list. Of these respondents, only 11% reported they would choose to report a crime to the police (Small Arms Survey 2010). But perhaps more importantly, the conceptual underpinnings of modern conceptions of justice are foreign to the traditional forms of restitution practiced by pastoralist communities. As a World Vision International report on customary law in contemporary South Sudan states, "the Southern Sudanese people [believe] that the purpose of any legal action in regard to crime is to restore the social equilibrium rather than to punish the wrongdoer" (Jok et al. 2004, 39).

Bloodwealth payments, commonly known in Sudan as well as South Sudan by the Arabic term *dia*, are the pillar of traditional mediation. They are widely considered the most acceptable mode of restitution to the aggrieved party. Among most pastoralist groups in South Sudan, payment is rendered in cattle to the victim or to the family of the victim. The number of cattle is not fixed, but rather negotiated based on the circumstances behind the crime and the individual attributes or social status of the victim, and this flexibility is a key feature of customary law. Traditionally, full reconciliation combined this act of compensation with ceremonies known among the Dinka as "Achuiil" and among the Nuer as "Ca Keth Dek," typically involving the slaughter of a white bull to forge a relationship between the two parties (Howell 1954; Johnson 1986; Jok et al. 2004; Akuei and Jok 2010; Tiitmamer et al. 2016).

The social function of bloodwealth payments points to one of the most profound disjunctions between traditional and colonial concepts of justice, namely, that "The principle of a life for a life rarely leads to a permanent peace." (Howell 1954). The process of bloodwealth compensation is designed to restore social order and to stabilize relationships between parties to prevent the perpetuation of revenge violence. By contrast, criminal proceedings are designed to deliver retributive justice through punitive measures such as incarceration and send strong signals of deterrence (Deng 2013). But punishment was never the purpose of South Sudanese customary law, and "eye-for-an-eye" approaches may

hold little meaning for many pastoralists, who have described such measures as "pointless" (Tiitmamer et al. 2016). This disjunction has been in tension since British colonialists tried to codify Nuer customary law in the region (Johnson 1986), and its implications for insecurity in rural areas are profound, since applications of statutory law without corresponding customary measures may fail to resolve the resentments that fuel devastating cycles of revenge raids if left unmediated.

Recent work by anthropologists Hutchinson and Pendle calls attention to the "supragovernmental" role that two Nuer prophets, Nyachol and Gatdeang, continue to play in contemporary Nuer society. These figures have wielded their spiritual authority to re-establish the "moral limits of lethal violence," thereby maintaining two enclaves of relative security for their followers. They have done so using radically different strategies: Nyachol, a female prophet, employs a deterrence and offensive strategy, maintaining a heavily armed Nuer militia to deter attacks by Dinka raiders and, more recently, government forces. Saliiently, given the history of Machar's propaganda, she has also reinstated the purification rituals surrounding all inter-Nuer homicide and traditional resolution of blood feuds. Gatdeang, a male prophet, has employed a strategy of diplomacy, fostering inter-community dialogue and "relations of peace, hospitality, and intermarriage with neighboring Dinka communities." Both have been able to create islands of relative stability, in large part by restoring sacred authority constraining violence and rejecting the secularized forms of violence propagated by political leaders (Hutchinson and Pendle 2015).

Though beliefs are not static, and certain aspects of traditional authority have been seriously eroded by decades of militarized conflict, the influence wielded by these cultural figures is far from obsolete (Hashimoto 2013; Hutchinson and Pendle 2015). Policymakers should take cues from the caution with which Gatdeang was treated by Salva Kiir when, in 2008, word reached Kiir that cattle belonging to Gatdeang had been raided by Dinka youth. Kiir was worried enough about the potential consequences for his upcoming political campaign that he paid a personal visit to Gatdeang in his home, dispatching two SPLA battalions to guard the community and ten armed policemen to guard Gatdeang himself (Hutchinson and Pendle 2015).

Long-term, ethnographically informed community-building initiatives should be featured alongside efforts at a national level. Attempts must likewise be made to meaningfully incorporate locally legitimized civilians and cultural authorities into the peace process, because these individuals wield influence in the arena in which decisions to mount a raid or refrain are decided. The societal gatekeepers of cattle raiding should be primary targets

for community-level peacebuilding efforts, and interventions attempting to work without the involvement of these figures are unlikely to have lasting success. Comprehensive studies of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in South Sudan exist to support these efforts (Bradbury et al. 2006; Jok et al. 2004; Tiitmamer et al. 2016). Several are critical of the incautious way in which enthusiasm for “customary institutions” has been applied by outside actors in the past (Bradbury 2006; Leonardi et al. 2010). These critiques highlight the fact that nowhere is precise and accurate ethnography more urgent or of more utility. Without an accurate understanding of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, it is nearly impossible to effectively promote peace between pastoralist communities. Customary law in South Sudan is an inherently fluid process, the very value of which depends on its ability to adapt to the specificities of each individual case. Therefore, there is no “template” or formulary for conflict resolution in such settings.

Simultaneously, while guidelines have been established for practical measures to strengthen enforcement, there is little potential for such protocols to de-escalate raiding-related conflict in rural areas until gaps in the policing and judicial systems can be addressed. An integrated enforcement approach combining modern law with traditional conflict resolution mechanisms was proposed by the East Africa Police Chiefs Cooperation Organisation (EAPCCO) in a 2008 document titled “Protocol on the Prevention, Combating, and Eradication of Cattle Rustling in East Africa” (Eastern Africa Police Chiefs Cooperation Organisation (EAPCCO) 2008). Along with an Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)/Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN)-commissioned study, “Livestock Identification, Traceability, and Tracking,” the EAPCCO protocol proposes pragmatic measures such as standardizing livestock branding practices to help aid identification and facilitate the return of raided cattle (Ekuam 2008). However, intricate local practices for livestock branding and horn deformation already provide a functional equivalent to systematized branding. The ability to track and identify stolen livestock can unfortunately not address the fundamental state failures to establish security in rural communities and trust in its police force or to institute functional judicial mechanisms (Human Rights Watch 2009; Small Arms Survey 2010).

Conclusions

Comprehensive assessments of the relationship between conflict and development have highlighted the need for “inclusive-enough” coalition building in order to lift countries out of violence (World Bank 2011). In the case of South Sudan, achieving security and cohesion at the community level is one of the major obstacles to conflict

de-escalation. Power sharing models between political elites do not sufficiently address local dynamics, and an approach far more inclusive than those currently being put forth will be required to build trust in state institutions and attain meaningful progress towards peace.

Neither the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement nor the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan included substantive provisions to address the grievances and crucial role of non-state actors and informal armed groups such as the Nuer White Army or the Dinka *titweng/gelweng* in the larger political conflict. The Security Arrangements section of the CPA (Section 7, Chapter VI) required that no armed groups allied to either party to the conflict operate outside of the SPLA or the Sudan Armed Forces. With respect to the manner in which these non-state actors might be integrated into state forces, the CPA offered only the vague stipulation that “parties agree to address the status of other armed groups in the country with the view of achieving comprehensive peace and stability...” The Transitional Security Arrangements section of ARCISS (Section 1.6, Chapter II) specifies only that all non-state security actors be “disarmed, demobilized, and repatriated by the state actors with whom they have been supporting...” (IGAD, Intergovernmental Authority on Development 2005, 2015; Jok 2015; South Sudan’s Prospects for Peace and Security: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 104th Cong. 64 2016).

Both agreements failed to adequately address the community-level drivers of conflict and the local dynamics which motivate the participation of informal armed groups such as the Nuer White Army and Dinka *titweng/gelweng* in conflict. Yet, these dynamics are inextricable from the political conflict consuming South Sudan. IGAD has recently laid out a “High-Level Revitalization Forum” in an attempt to salvage the functionally obsolete ARCISS. In order to achieve gains where the original agreement failed, this renewed attempt must broaden its inclusivity to encompass non-state armed groups and informal pastoralist armies (United States Institute of Peace 2017). This necessity is made more urgent by the fact that the number of such non-state actors proliferates as the conflict draws on, accelerating the erosion of any capacity the state retains. The conventional “recipe” of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration such as was called for by the 2015 ARCISS is not sufficient to achieve this goal. There must be a forum in which the grievances and agendas of pastoralist informal armies, in some cases dating decades into the past, may be understood and incorporated into the provisions of a renewed peace agreement. As a recent commentary on the origins of the Nuer White Army notes, pastoralist militias “do form alliances of convenience with rebellious SPLA

officers and politicians, but they also disregard, attack, or even kill Nuer politicians whose positions they oppose” (Stringham and Forney 2017). The implications for the peace process in South Sudan are profound and boil down to the crucial fact that the interests of political elite cannot be treated as equivalent to those of the informal armed groups who may under certain conditions fight on their behalf.

Cattle raiding alone cannot explain the violence in South Sudan, but its role in the current conflict cannot be ignored. Cycles of raids and retaliatory counter-raids between communities sow the seeds of resentment that allow armed youth to be mobilized rapidly by political leaders. It need not be such a tinderbox. The next serious push for policies to resolve the conflict in South Sudan should begin now, and it should depart from past efforts by adopting an approach that encompasses all levels of cultural authority. Failure to genuinely integrate these actors into the process will only yield a peace constructed by outsiders and not respected by the raiders and armed groups who lend military credibility to political movements.

If Machar and Kiir could so handily dismantle the traditional mechanisms and rituals governing cattle raiding, the international community may be able to support local actors in restoring certain aspects of these practices and incorporating them into a broader peace process. To the extent that this remains feasible after decades of protracted intercommunal conflict, meaningful buy-in from cultural authorities including community elders and prophets, as well as an accurate understanding of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, is essential to understanding what aspects of these institutions might be leveraged towards a substantive peace. If any components of ARCISS are to be salvaged, the High-Level Revitalization Forum must be drastically more inclusive than the original agreement, encompassing a sufficiently broad range of informal armed groups and outlining context-appropriate provisions to create a forum to evaluate their grievances. The subsequent policy considerations are likely to require a significantly more granular and localized lens than has been applied to date in the peacebuilding process. Such an approach will be rife with its own set of complexities and challenges; however, a broadening of the peace process is an urgent necessity in the push to de-escalate the violence consuming this smoldering young nation.

Abbreviations

ARCISS: Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan; CEWARN: Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism; EAPCCO: East Africa Police Chiefs Cooperation Organisation; IGAD: Intergovernmental Authority on Development; SPLA: Sudan People's Liberation Army; SPLA-IO: Sudan People's Liberation Army-In-Opposition; UNMISS: United Nations Mission in South Sudan

Acknowledgements

We thank Luke Glowacki for comments on the manuscript.

Funding

No funding was received for this article.

Availability of data and materials

Not applicable

Authors' contributions

HW conceptualized, drafted, and edited the paper. RBP and JMJ guided and edited the successive versions of the paper. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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Received: 2 September 2017 Accepted: 19 February 2018

Published online: 02 March 2018

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