



## The major traditional conflicts in south Sudan

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### Abstract

The paper endeavors to painstakingly unpack the main catalysts of traditional conflicts which revolved around natural resources such as land, water. However, the most of these conflicts are among the pastoral communities and agricultural communities. And these conflicts are occasioned by disputes over land distribution, the degradation of the ecosystem and natural resources and other issues such as the armed conflict in the country. The major traditional conflict subsumes the Dinka-Nuer conflict which is often sparked by issues such as grazing land, and family issues. The conflict has been transformed through political struggle amidst the elites to detrimental and subversive conflict led to the loss of lives and properties between the two groups. However, the current conflict has been unfortunately wrought by political struggle over power and economic resources, not directly related to the traditional issues.

**Keywords:** naural resources, land, pastoralism, conflict, climate and political struggle

### 1. Introduction

The conflict dimension is vigorously wrought by different factors such as grievances related to the unjust and inequitable distribution of land and natural resources, environmental degradation, resources scarcity in many regions of Africa and greed for land and valuable ecological resources have been the catalysts responsible for many armed conflicts (Porto, 2002)<sup>[7]</sup>. However, conflict attests to any struggle or contestation amidst groups or individuals over power. However, conflict is a natural process and associated with the process of change (Yanacopulos, 2006)<sup>[9]</sup>. Consequently, conflict is triggered by economic, power and resources As such groups could be deemed by age, gender, income, location, religion, and ethnicity. However, societies and nation have mechanisms for conflict resolution or mitigation which could be susceptible and amicable to conflicting groups (Yanacopulos, 2006)<sup>[9]</sup>. Democracy is staunchly weighed as a steadfast solution for addressing conflicts, but it may culminate in discrimination against minority groups. Furthermore, the unresolved conflict could instantly turn into violence. The violent conflict such as land invasion or attacks on the other party in the conflict can lead to violence and can turn into criminal violence (Yanacopulos, 2006)<sup>[9]</sup>. When a conflict achingly turned violent, the country should immerse to put violence to end and painstakingly address the grievances that occasion the conflict. When a conflict continues unresolved, one of the parties may take up arms, this will lead to arms conflict and eventually escalate into war. Conflict is an inevitable part of the change and of development, which transmogrifies power relations and may benefit some groups more than others and it needs to strenuously manage and resolve (Yanacopulos, 2006)<sup>[9]</sup>. Moreover, the political process vehemently demanded the

disadvantaged group to work together and to impose political pressure, and it could embroil major demonstration riots and small-scale violence and in a case, it cannot be resolved, the violence may lead into war (Yanacopulos, 2006)<sup>[9]</sup>. Therefore, an escalation ushers a breakdown in the social contract amidst the members of society. However, wars broach when one group has not seen other option but to turn into violence. However, the catalysts of conflict in the country, subsume grievances, economic deprivation, and access and democratic process (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. Also, many conflicts revolved around the ethnic division and this divisions are likely to continue to dominate the perceptions of protagonists (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. Furthermore, disputes are exaggerated by social and economic inequities the conditions that are triggered by the growing population, resources depletion and environmental degradation (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. Ginormous disparities in wealth and power, when accompanied by non-representative administrative systems seen by local people as non-traditional and incapable of attending their needs, these pressures can lead to fragmentation of societies. As such relations with other groups deteriorate as people turn to ethnic, tribe for assistance, protection, and identity (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>.

### 2. Traditional Ethnic Conflict in South Sudan

Traditional conflicts in South Sudan are perceived to be connected with natural resources, grazing rights, water, pastures, fishing's rights and raiding of cattle (Dhal, *et al.*, 2005)<sup>[1]</sup>. Most of the conflict in South Sudan are those in the Sobat area among sections of Nuer, in Central Equatoria between the Bari, Mundari, and the Dinka. However, in both areas competition over natural resources appears to be the cause of the conflict. But the last civil war is the main driving

force behind most of the conflict in South Sudan. In addition, to a smear of small arms and light weapons, their accessibility and their low cost instigate violence. The groups which have access to such weapons find themselves involved in violence which continues after the conflict. For young men, many of whom have known little else besides war and have no education their weapons are symbol and means of making a living.

### 2.1 Nuer and Dinka Conflict

Traditionally, and historically, Nuer rivalry and conflict shaped the Nuer and Dinka relation. The catalyst, for the conflict varied, including competition over grazing land, fishing rights, water, and cattle rustling. The history of conflict can be traced back to the first movement of the Nuer into the Zeraf valley and the nineteenth century the period of territorial expansion eastwards across the Bahr el –Jebel and latter across the Bahr el Zeraf. The Nuer expansion for natural process led to the absorption of large numbers of Dinka whose identity was lost within generation or two (Dhal, *et al.*, 2005) <sup>[1]</sup>. However, during that period the slave trade from the North intensified and it was a period of disharmony, internal strife, and political fission within the Nuer community and internal cohesion returned, when, external threats increased. The colonial administration exerted a lot of efforts to bring Nuer under control with some success, and the cooperation between the administrators in Dinka and Nuer areas debased the conflict between the two groups (Dhal, *et al.*, 2005) <sup>[1]</sup>. Furthermore, the Dinka-Nuer conflict was the conflict of the traditional society and its causes are normally, related to the hydra of life and the two groups have the same transhumant mode of livelihood which could enormously, stake steadfast competition (Malith, 2017).

Moreover, the Nuer communities live in the central Floodplain and they floundering seasonally flooding and famine compared to the Dinka and they largely, depend on their livestock than cereals (Malith, 2017). Also, the limitation of the dry season grazing is critical for the Nuer pastoralists and may lead into the conflict with the Dinkas who seasonally, utilize the neighboring pastures, this parlous disputes over the grazing areas is one of the age-old catalysts for the conflict between the Nuer and the Dinka (Malith, 2017). In addition to raiding and cattle rustling and revenge killings and looting that transpired during the raids. The Nuer raids on Dinka for cattle is to compensate the acute loss of cattle incurred owing to disease and to, cumulate cattle for bridewealth (Malith, 2017). The Nuer -Dinka inter-communal conflicts were naturally wrought by competition over natural resources, and ambition to increase each other's livestock at the expense of the others (Malith, 2017). Additionally, the conflict also was seasonal, betided amidst the Dinka themselves and the Nuer themselves. As such the conflict is triggered by shortages of resources and very limited to their territories. Moreover, the Dinka-Nuer traditional conflicts which were deemed to be inter-communal are enormously transformed by political struggle amidst the elites of the two groups (Malith, 2017). Previously the ecological factors and resources are behind the conflict

between Dinka and Nuer. The claim of the community over of land may lead to the conflicts and it has roots in the history of Dinka and Nuer relations. The Dinka –Nuer conflict is a classic case of the conflict in traditional society since the establishment of a government in the country in 1899 thank the Anglo- Egyptian conquest (Dhal, *et al.*, 2005) <sup>[1]</sup>. However, the conflict has wreaked havoc and exigent conundrums for law enforcement officials and the attention of distinguished anthropologies (Dhal, *et al.*, 2005) <sup>[1]</sup>. The catalysts of the conflict are related to the glitch of life. The two groups have a common lifestyle which could lead to contestation. The common causes of the conflict will be noted briefly and it has been going on intermittently for centuries. The main catalysts for Traditional conflict between the two groups subsume:

#### i) Grazing and Fishing

Owing to the economic and social roles of cattle, the Dinka and Nuer pay heed and protection of their cattle. However, taking care of cattle embroils in maneuvering them from one place to another in a quest for pasture and water. As such herdsmen are on the move and as a consequence of spreading cattle disease. And the contact between pastoralists wreaks tensions which may lead to a conflict. Also, the watering of cattle involved fishing, rivers, pools, and ponds contain fish (Dhal, *et al.*, 2005) <sup>[1]</sup>. Meanwhile, exploitation of fisheries is a preserve of the faction in the territory, where the water source is located, fishing issues are imperative among the Nuer as their land is swampy and difficult for cultivation, they lack many crops such as ground nuts. Grazing areas and water sources are physically identifiable and, rights over them can easily be enforced by the law enforcement agencies (Dhal, *et al.*, 2005) <sup>[1]</sup>.

#### ii) Family matters

The Dinka and Nuer use cattle as bride wealth on marriage and compensation in other family disputes such as elopement with a girl or adultery. However, the rules on return of bride wealth in the event of divorce are difficult to apply together with offspring; last for years the cases between persons who are not resident in the same territory and a lot of inconvenience culminated into the complainant, out of frustration he may take the law in to his own hands and take the cattle he believes belong to him. This seizure is an act of disputes because among the Dinka and Nuer one of the effects of the conflict is the cattle raiding to the vanquished or succumbed faction (Dhal, *et al.*, 2005) <sup>[1]</sup>.

#### iii) Cattle Rustling

Cattle augmenting naturally through breeding between Dinka and Nuer and the prestige depends largely on a number of cattle a person owns. Bride wealth and compensation and fines are paid in cattle and this is a recent development it may be calculated in unit price per cow. Cattle are exchanged as gifts and are offered as sacrificed to God. (Dhal, *et al.*, 2005) <sup>[1]</sup>.

#### iv) Blood Feuds

A blood feud is a relation between the clan [*gol*] of the deceased and the clan [*gol*] of the killer. A blood feud has three main consequences. The responsibility is collective: the clan [*gol*] considers that the death of a member through physical injury is an offense by the whole clan of the killer against the clan of deceased. This means collective vengeance or tit for tat is a collective responsibility. As such the customs are that any member of the killer's clan is liable to be killed in a revenge or the case could be resolved peacefully, he must contribute to compensation (Dhal, *et al.*, 2005)<sup>[1]</sup>. The clan of the killer and deceased must not eat or drink together until certain religious rites have been performed. Even if a blood feud has been solved by payment of compensation, the disputes, is only dormant and tribal provocation may be sufficient to start further fighting. It is very interesting to note that the Dinka and Nuer have similar terminology about disputes concerning death through physical injury. As such for both homicide is [*nak ran*] and the religious ceremony for atoning blood feud is [*cuil*] and blood feud is [*tir*] in Dinka and [*ter*] in Nuer (Dhal, *et al.*, 2005)<sup>[1]</sup>.

#### v) Transformation of Dinka - Nuer Conflict Traditional conflict into political conflict.

The reasons for the transformation of the traditional conflict into political conflict are several historical events which have an important in the conflict between the two groups: Firstly, the Sudan civil war 1955-1972 which was brought to an end after Addis Ababa Agreement and formation of South Sudan's Regional Government and beginning of political rivalry amidst elites in South Sudan (Malith, 2016). Consequently, Nuer had shown their disquiet and discontent in Regional Government and the Central Government in Khartoum and also they complained about the support given to the Murle in form of arms which escalated cattle raiding and abduction of children (Malith, 2016). However, Nuer broached to collect arms since 1976 with the intention of defending themselves against the Dinka and the Murle. Substantially disappointment with the national policies culminated into a full rebellion in 1981 with the formation of Anyanya II (Malith, 2016). Meanwhile, the Regional Government at that time floundered shortages of resources and political power to develop the region which in turn led to the surge of social and political instability in the South. Secondly: the SPLM/SPLA formation in 1983 and in the leeway of the civil war in Sudan the problem was amidst the elites of the two groups in the formation of SPLM/SPLA (Sudan's People Liberation/Sudan People's Liberation Army) and over leadership of the movement. The conflict over leadership was between Dr. John Garang and Samuel Gai Tut and Akuot Atem de Mayen, the two leaders of the National Action (NAM) that had been notoriously active throughout the ten years of self-rule in the South Sudan (Malith, 2016). Gai and Akuot were ministers of the Anya-Nya dominated government under Joseph Lagu in 1978-1980 (Malith, 2016). The power struggle started in 1983 after Bor and Ayod mutiny

of Battalion 104 and 105. The forces withdrew to Ethiopia and joined together with the forces of Anyanya II who were already there. The forces of Anyanya II were under the leadership of Mr. Samuel Gai Tut from Nuer. The Bor- Ayod group was under the leadership of Dr. John Garang de Mabior from Dinka. The two groups disagreed over the leadership and objectives of the movement during (Malith, 2016). The disagreement later erupted into violence which continued up to 1988 when Gordon Kong took over the leadership of Anyanya II after the death of William Abdella Chuol. Kong integrated the forces of Anyanya II with SPLM/SPLA. But the Violence followed the incident had taken tens of thousands of lives between the two groups and subversion of property and massive displacement. That conflict had no direct link with the Dinka and Nuer traditional conflict, but rather it was political rivalry amidst the elites of the two groups (Malith, 2016).

Thirdly the incident was the second phase of the power struggle transpired in 1991 when Dr. Riek Machar and Dr. Lam Akol declared a coup against SPLM/SPLA leader Dr. John Garang. Dr. Riek formed a rival movement called, South Sudan Independence Movement /South Sudan Independence Army (SSIM/A) (Malith, 2016). After dismissing Dr. Lam, he later allied his movement with National Islamic Front (NIF) army and fought against SPLM/SPLA. He reached the Agreement with Khartoum in 1997 (Malith, 2016). The Agreement did not last long because the NIF regime refused to implement some of the demands. Riek defected and joined the SPLM/SPLA before signing of Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. Dr. Riek became the Vice-President of the Republic until his dismissal in 2013 (Malith, 2016).

Fourthly and final phase of a power struggle betided on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2013. This phase of struggle was over the leadership of the SPLM party and the 2015 presidential elections (Malith, 2016). Dr. Riek (a Nuer) announced himself a presidential candidate for 2015 elections. The incumbent president of the party and president of the Republic Salva Kiir Mayerdit (a Dinka) was going to contest for 2015 elections despite he did not publically announce his candidature. The disagreement during the plenary discussions of SPLM-National liberation Council erupted into violent conflict with an Army Division, the Presidential Guards (Malith, 2016).

As it alluded the above the traditional conflict amidst Nuer and Dinka, unfortunately, has been diverted from its tradition as it was previously a conflict occasioned by competition over natural resources to the political conflict over a power struggle amidst politicians and power seeking elites of the two ethnic groups. Consequently, the ongoing conflict was politically wrought by elites using ethnicity as a mean of achieving their goals and aims through mobilization of ethnic groups. Also, the conflict has been aggravated by a dearth of good governance, pusillanimity of government's institutions, law enforcement agencies, high rate of unemployment amidst the youth and rampant corruption in the government. These issues conditionally embolden and precipitate the use of tribal

affiliation, which is likely to be used in political disputes amidst the elites, as such ethnic identities are essential for demanding political participation and pressures on the government to balance and allocate equally political power and economic dividends among the groups. Therefore all the recent conflicts are political disputes which should be addressed politically and not be expressed in the dimension of traditional conflict, owing to the differences in the roots causes of these conflicts and the previous ones which were occasioned by natural resources such as land.

## 2.2 Dinka and Mundari Conflict

The Bor and the Aliab Dinka of Upper Nile and Lakes states, on the one hand, and the Mundari and Bari of Bahr el -Jebel, on the other hand, have embroiled in the conflict from time to time (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. Mundari and Dinka have lived in peaceful co-existence relation punctuated by periods of conflict, over grazing land and cattle rustling. Most of the conflict between the Mundari and the Dinka, and between the Dinka Bor and Dinka Aliab are related to the change in the hydrology of Bahr-el-Jebel (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. However, the period followed the end of the first civil war in 1972 witnessed animosity and deterioration in Dinka - Mundari relations owing to an augmentation of Dinka cattle in the area, the rivalry over the cattle and the meat market in Juba and towns in Equatoria (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. As such the Dinka controlled the executive and security posts in the Regional Government, and the Bor and Aliab Dinka were believed to have used that advantage to undermine the traditional agreement with the Mundari regarding dry season grazing areas (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. Moreover, the Dinka controlled the main cattle and meat market in Juba and most of the licenses were granted to them, which angered Mundari.

However, after, re-division of the southern region into three sub-regions in 1980 the Mundari demanded to supplant Dinka in the cattle market in Juba. As such the Mundari started to form militia groups during that period, supported by authorities from the area, the leadership of the militia was placed under a retired police officer (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. The division of the Southern Region into three regions in 1983 culminated in violence against the Dinka and the Mundari mowed down a large number of Dinka who remained in Juba town (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. Moreover, the wider civil war reached Mundari area in 1986 with effect on Dinka -Mundari relations. The SPLA/M forces stormed Gemmeiza, Mangala, and Tereka; most of them were Dinka who used to share the same *Toich* with the Mundari (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. There was a report of a violation of human rights, rapes cases were reported. Other, actions subsumed the planting of mines in water points, fruit areas, and farms. The behaviour of the SPLA/M forces in the area was interpreted by Mundari as tit-for-tat on Equatorials for the division of South Sudan Autonomous Region into three sub-regions, and particularly, against the Mundari for what they have done during the period leading to division of Southern Region into three sub-regions

and the general feeling of antagonism was shown against the SPLA/M which was considered as Dinka movement by both Mundari and Bari (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>.

## 2.3 Bari and Dinka Conflict

In the leeway of 1965 and 1968, the Bari north of Juba had fought a bloody battle with the Dinka from Bor of Upper Nile and Yirol of Bhar-el Ghazal. However, the war staunchly emboldened and stimulated the alliance between the Bari, the Nyanwara and the Mundari against the Dinka (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. The Bari and Dinka do not share a common boundary The Mundari separated the two groups. In the 1920s, the Dinka of Bor and Yirol were forced by floods to move with their cattle southwards into Mundari land, where grazing was available throughout the year (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. The movement of Dinka into Mundari territory accrued the conflict over the use of grazing land. However, during the colonial era, the Mundari and the Dinka were able to co-exist in the same territory, through agreements among their chiefs (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. The Mundari would agree to allocate an area to the Dinka for their own use. And the new areas could be added to those agreed upon through other agreement. Moreover, the population and animals mounted in both Dinka and Mundari land, grazing became limited and scares, and there was not enough land for Mundari to be spared for Dinka (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>.

Therefore, Dinka was pushed south of Mundari area until they reached Bari, territory. However, before the independence of Sudan, the Dinka were allowed to move into areas south of Mundari land into the Bari area for grazing, through the agreement among the three tribes, the Dinka, the Mundari and the Bari (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. Due, to the long period of the flood in Dinka area, most of the areas which were allocated to Dinka became permanent grazing areas and it was very difficult for Dinka to return to their area of origin. The colonial authorities at that time organized annual meetings to allocate grazing areas to the Dinka during the most critical parts of the years when grazing was difficult for the Dinka in their areas (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. The first civil war increased the conflict between the Bari and Dinka when they were forced to move into very few areas where, the two practices, agriculture and grazing, and they were competing over the different uses of the same land. For that reason, the local government held in the 1973 Bari-Mundari-Dinka Conference, the purpose of the conference was to agree on new relocation procedures and areas for Dinka cattle. It was clear that the long conflict had left bitter feelings among the groups and this was one of the reasons behind the division of Southern Sudan Region into three sub-regions of Bahr el-Ghazal, Upper, and Equatoria (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. The annual meetings became less frequent following, the independence of Sudan in 1956. The last meeting of the three chiefs of the three communities was held in 1957 in Terekeka and no other meeting was organized to allocate grazing land and resolved disputes until 1973. When the Southern Regional Government organized a meeting of the chiefs of the three groups in presence of chiefs from the major tribes of South

Sudan (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. However, the colonial government was able to manage the inter-communal conflict over grazing land through consultation and annual meetings between the leaders of the communities.

#### 2.4 The conflict between Bari and Mundari

The Bari shares a common boundary with the Mundari. The relations between the two tribes have been poor since the intensification of the conflict in Equatoria, part of the reason was the movement of Mundari with their animal to Bari land, and the Tali area where Mundari lived has become a zone of contention between the SPLA and GOS early in the civil (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. This resulted in the movement of the Mundari towards the Bahr-el-Jebel in a quest for security and pasture. They occupied the areas north of Juba between Juba and Terekeka. The areas Mundari occupied are used by the Bari for agriculture and Mundari cattle often destroy the crops of Bari, resulting in a violent confrontation (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. Some NGOs mediated the conflict between Bari and Mundari this led to peaceful relations between the two, despite, the Mundari has arms more than Bari, during the time when they had a militia and there was last the conflict between the two groups a few years ago (Pual, 2004)<sup>[8]</sup>. However, the competition over land and resources immediately began after the independence of South Sudan owing to conflict related to land in urban and in rural areas and often land issues are manipulated elites through political competition over power. The political differences steadfastly transpired in the conflict over land between the government and local communities who have a right to that territory or communal right over the land in their places. The private sector could have access to land which may include a large area of communal land for economic purposes such a practice would lead to gradually increase of private acquisition of the land in urban and rural areas.

Land issues in most of the cases are were discussed between the investors, leaders of the community or influential individuals from the community. Moreover, the aforementioned tribal conflict in South Sudan previously revolved around access to natural resources and services as the main catalyst to the historical conflicts in particular between pastoralists and settled agriculturalists and between a certain community and the government. All these issues used to be handled through community engagement or conflict mitigation or preventing small-scale conflicts at the local level which is related to natural resources and services. However traditional conflict has been transformed through political rivalry amidst the elites of these ethnic groups and through historical events such the first civil war in Sudan from 1955-1972 and the second civil war in 1983 the identity politics of successive Sudanese government and current ongoing conflict in the country has brought fissure among communities, started as political rivalry over power, resources and leadership and turned into ethnic animosities and classes. This is because the elites manipulate these traditional issues as mean for mobilization in their bid for power. However, the elites

transform this traditional to political conflict. As such any conflict which exaggerated or politically triggered, and cannot be mitigated or resolved through traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution as became a political problem it should be politically addressed through engagement of these elites in the peace process.

#### 3. Conclusion

The catalysts of the traditional conflicts in the past subsume natural resources, and land as in the case of the Nuer Dinka conflict which revolves around the land, grazing and fishing, family matters, cattle rustling and blood feuds. The current conflict is a political conflict vigorously triggered by power struggle amidst the elites. However, the conflict has been transformed through political struggle and elites manipulation into more subversive and corrosive conflict and culminated in the loss of many lives and properties amidst the two groups. As such, the current ongoing conflict is a steadfast rivalry over power and economic issues and traditional issues are articulated and used. Additionally grievances, economic deprivation, by some groups, and unequal allocation of resource and disparities, in power between the Dinka and the other groups, incompetent, and incapable, of traditional administrative, to resolve conflicts, among the groups who share the same ecosystems, and communal relations. Ethnicity or tribalism or ethnic-based organizations are for assistance, mobilization, protection, are applied by elites, and these ethnic affiliations are politically made in the leeway of political confrontations amidst the elites. And they are not the real problems, but the issue is about power and resources as power is a resource that could render access to other resources, so holding power is an utmost ambition and a loss of it may lead to violence or conflict as it is in the case of the ongoing conflict in the country.

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