

Constructed and Open Identities in the Fog of War and Peace

Socio-Political and Historical Context of Hate-Speech in South Sudan

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The people of South Sudan have been suffering from one of the gravest humanitarian crisis since major armed conflicts erupted in 2013. About 2 million have been internally displaced, while more than 1.5 million fled to neighbouring countries, mainly Uganda, Kenya and Sudan. Altogether, some 6 million – out of an estimated total population of 10-12 million – are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, with famine in some parts of the country officially declared by the UN. Western diplomats estimate that more than 100.000 people have been killed since nationwide fighting started. Though violent conflict does not constantly rage all over the country, most places have been severely affected at one point or another and only few areas have been spared. In a particularly alarming escalation, the Equatorial region has become a major flashpoint of large-scale violence since 2016, raising international warnings against genocidal actions. Other areas, like Jonglei, were already suffering heavily from recurring massacres against civilians by armed forces before 2013.

Semantics Matter Greatly

The extremely complex and inter-woven conflicts in South Sudan defy simplistic explanations. Yet, such clichés still dominate most media reporting, both inside and outside the country and mutually reinforcing one another in a feedback loop. All too often, headlines about “ethnic violence” and “tribal conflict” imply ethnicity as the root-cause of the bloodshed. Many articles – even by highly respected media like the BBC and The Guardian - introduce the conflict as one between “President Kiir, a Dinka, and former VP Machar, a Nuer”, thus suggesting two clear-cut camps along ethnic lines. Such handling of news gives an image of South Sudanese as savages who are – as it were – destined to fight one another. This is effectively a racist logic, which only deepens existing divisions.

The bloody battles in South Sudan are not just fought with military means, but are as much the battles over narratives and identities. Semantics matter hugely, as even one syllable may make all the difference, e.g. between Southern Sudan and South Sudan. In

that sense, it is also wrong to call the current conflict a "civil war", because it implies a fight between civilians whereas in fact it is a conflict between warlords. There is no doubt that the vastly overwhelming majority of South Sudanese just want peace, wherefore the term "civil war" is totally misleading. These conflicts between the so-called elites in turn can only be understood by taking a deep look at their historical background and by distinguishing between myth and reality. This paper thus attempts to give comprehensive contextualisation for the phenomenon of hate speech, its origins and its role as an obstacle to a lasting and just peace in South Sudan and neighbouring regions.

Colonial Legacies of Categoricalised Suppression

What is now South Sudan suffered from the collective trauma of enslavement since pharaonic times millennia ago, when Egyptian expeditions would regularly raid the area for ivory, gold and slaves. The beginning of modern history was once again marked by large-scale plundering for half a century starting in 1821, when the Ottoman ruler in Cairo sent his armies to conquer what are now Sudan – literally meaning "Land of the Blacks" – and South Sudan. In the 1870s, slave-trade was curbed due to pressure from European powers, but this ban in turn created such discontent amongst the Northern Sudanese class of merchants that an indigenous insurrection eventually liberated the country from Ottoman rule in 1885. The so called Mahdiya, which is considered by historians as one of the earliest Islamist-militant movements, then re-established the scourge of slave-trade until it was defeated by a British-Egyptian force in 1898. The subsequent "Fashoda Incident" near today's Malakal town almost sparked the outbreak of WWI.

The British-dominated Anglo-Egyptian Condominium over Sudan eventually laid the foundations for many of the problems that have been haunting South Sudan to this day. While obviously not all of them can be blamed on the colonial legacy, it undisputedly did determine the major parameters of historical developments. First and foremost, this toxic legacy is about the British policy principal of "divide and rule", which has been adopted by indigenous ruling-classes ever since. And for many people in Southern Sudan this meant that their first contact with the modern "state" was a very negative one of violent suppression. Right into the 1920s, British officers systematically played Southern groups against each other by recruiting local warriors for brutal attacks against non-submissive communities, exploiting local rivalries. These aggressive expeditions were euphemistically called "pacifications" by the colonial powers.

Another lasting legacy of the British-led colonialism in Southern Sudan is the arbitrary creation of tribal boundaries. In fact, this is most evident in the term "Dinka", which is the English version of the Arabic word "Dengkawe" for the self-referring "Jieng", meaning

"people". The British cultural anthropologist Aidan Southall argued that *"we ought to recognise not only that Nuer were never Nuer, or Dinka were never Dinka, but that when they said 'we are Naath' or 'we are Jieng' they were not saying 'We are the Naath tribe' or 'We are the Jieng tribe' but just saying 'We are People' each in their own distinctive way."* The late scholar added that there was no historical evidence that those people were conscious of themselves as homogenous entities until they were treated as such by the colonial regime: *"Nuer and Dinka were convenient fictions for the early explorers, administrators, missionaries, and, alas, linguists and anthropologists, and so they are still with us, having acquired sufficient vested interests during the colonial period to perpetuate them."*¹ The pre-eminent South Sudan historian Douglas Johnson decries *"the familiar dogma of Nuer-Dinka opposition which has been repeated and elaborated in endless re-workings of Evans-Pritchard's classic ethnography"*, as well.²

The dilemma of constructed identities, which become real over time, directly relates to the challenges of countering hate-speech. The "South Sudan Lexicon of Hate Speech Terms" by PeaceTechLab recognises that people with Dinka identities use "Jieng" to describe themselves, as evident in the powerful group of Dinka leaders calling themselves "Jieng Elders Council". However, it argues that *"the term degrades Dinkas by associating them with cattle, characterizing the targeted person or group as illiterate, primitive, or barbaric. Specifically, it scapegoats the Dinka people generally for the behavior of government officials or soldiers."* This may be a tricky line of reasoning, but the Lexicon's recommendation to use *"South Sudanese from (state or region)"* for alternative wording all the more takes into account that the categorisation of people into clear-cut groups is neither easily possible nor conducive for peace building.³

In addition to fostering a culture of divisiveness and violence, the colonial rulers isolated Southern Sudan from the outside world. The "Closed District Ordinances", first introduced in 1922 and in force until 1946, were supposed to protect the South from Northern exploitation, but essentially meant that it was completely cut off from any development, especially in terms of infrastructure and education. Hence, traditional leaders in Southern Sudan were ill-prepared for the process of de-colonising. In contrast, a highly educated class of Northern Sudanese from the Nile Valley, which had been established by the British administration, managed to emancipate itself in the 1940s and to form a nationalist movement that pushed for independence. Meanwhile, the government of the

¹ Jay Spaulding / Stephanie Beswick / Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban / Richard Andrew Lobban, Jr. (ed.): *Sudan's Wars and Peace Agreements*, pp. 29-31

² Johnson, Douglas: „", p. 116

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day in London considered attaching Southern Sudan to Uganda, but decided against it on the geostrategic premise that a larger Sudan would be a bigger counterweight to Egyptian ambitions in the region. Eventually, Northern Sudanese leaders persuaded their Southern counterparts to join their bid for independence in a united Sudan with the promise to seriously consider introducing federalism.

The Fog of War I

Such hopes for a federal system, however, were disappointed soon after Sudan gained independence in 1956 as one of the first countries in Africa. Southern elites were also largely left out of the process of Sudanisation that replaced colonial administration officers almost exclusively with Northerners. This discontent had already exploded shortly before independence, in August 1955, during the mutiny of Southern troops in the Eastern Equatorial town of Torit. That historical event is exemplary for the historiographical challenges which a constructive public discourse faces: for, the Torit mutiny is widely hailed and celebrated in South Sudan as the beginning of the liberation struggle, where the first bullet for freedom was fired, as it were. This interpretation and instrumentalisation of history is problematic in various regards: firstly, conventional narratives claim that Torit was the beginning of a war that continuously lasted and escalated from 1955 to 1972. Yet, South Sudan academia clearly finds that the actual war only started eight years later, when the military regime in Khartoum deported all Christian missionaries from Southern Sudan.

Secondly, and more importantly, even an openly pro-Southern historian like Douglas Johnson stresses that *"soldiers in Torit and elsewhere in Equatoria killed not only some of their Northern officers, but Northern administrators, Northern merchants, and their families. Very few Southerners were killed at this time."*⁴ It is therefore more than questionable if such an indiscriminate bloodbath is suited to serve as "Heroes" or "Revolution Day" for building a national identity. However, questioning such a fundamental point of reference for legitimacy in South Sudan's official and popular narrative is extremely sensitive. While there can be no doubt about the rightful grievances of Southerners about marginalisation during the transition from colonial rule to independence, no campaign that promotes peaceful coexistence can support the myth of a glorious uprising that ignores the killing of civilians and instead claims the moral high-ground.

⁴ Douglas Johnson: „The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars – Peace or Truce“, revised edition, Woodbridge 2011, p. 28

It is equally undisputed in Sudan academia that the military dictatorship of Ibrahim Abboud (1958-64) escalated tensions in Southern Sudan with its policy of Arabisation and Islamisation. Its army reacted to the forming of the Anyanya and Anjidi rebels with scorched-earth strategies that were scaled up subsequently by civilian governments in Khartoum (1965-69). The so-called security forces of the Northern rulers specifically targeted Southern leaders through assassinations and horrible massacres in Juba and Wau. According to general estimates, about half a million people were killed until 1972 and the brunt of this was born by people in Equatoria as the main theatre of war. Against the backdrop of this brutality, the Anyanya and Anjidi insurgents have been widely viewed as gallant liberation fighters. However, recent research – especially by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) – has demonstrated that the highly fragmented rebels also perpetrated systematic war crimes against civilians who they considered as uncooperative. As with the 1955 Torit mutiny, it therefore seems more than questionable that the prevalence of an uncritical view about the Anyanya – and the largely unmentioned Anjidi - helps South Sudan to come to terms with its troubled history.

The 1960s also saw a growing factor in the conflict that is relevant as well for the current situation: intervention of foreign powers. Indeed, at the time it was West Germany that delivered record amounts of lethal weapons to successive regimes in Khartoum in order to keep out its Eastern German rivals in what is generally called the “Cold War”, which however was a hot war in Southern Sudan. The Sudan Armed Forces received not only modern fire-arms, but also large numbers of military trucks which enabled them to expand the range of their attacks. Not least, a West German state-owned company set up an ammunition factory near Khartoum that has kept the supply of bullets running ever since. Historical records show that Southern Sudanese and Congolese rebels captured some of those proliferating armaments, which further escalated the conflicts. Germany has hence a historical responsibility for the militarisation of what is now South Sudan. The Anyanya, on the other hand, also received military supplies from West Germany’s ally Israel, which wanted to keep Khartoum from increasing its engagement alongside Egypt. Israel is still a major supplier of weapons – and electronic surveillance – to South Sudan.

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1969 signalled a major shift in developments, as a leftist group of army officers led by Jafar Nimeri took power in Khartoum through a coup d’état. At the same time, the loosely-knit Anyanya-movement united under the command of Joseph Lagu. Peace negotiations mediated by church institutions and the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie led to the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement which granted nominal autonomy to Southern

Sudan. The treaty has been discarded by many South Sudanese as a farce, ever since it collapsed in 1983. They rightly point to the historical fact that ultimate power over Southern Sudan remained with the increasingly authoritarian Nimeri regime, which turned from leftist to Islamist over the years. However, it is all too easy to squarely put all the blame on the Northern Sudanese rulers who played the Southern political camps against each other. The memoir books of the two main leaders – former rebel-chief Lagu and Abel Alier, who had been a Khartoum-based lawyer and politician – give ample evidence about the fact that their rivalry (not least about egos) contributed hugely to the demise of the Addis agreement. And it cannot be easily discarded that the treaty provided more than eleven years of peace and some development in infrastructure and services for basic needs to Southern Sudan.

The historical events of this period have again direct relevance for the use hate speech today. The PeaceTechLab lexicon classifies the term “Kokora” – meaning “dividing” in a number of Equatorian languages - as offensive/inflammatory which refers to the 1983 re-division of Southern Sudan into three regions. This kind of federalism had been propagated by Lagu’s camp against the one of Alier and effectively meant the abrogation of the Addis agreement. The political discourse then already centered around the allegation of Dinka domination in politics. Nowadays, according to the PeaceTechLab lexicon, “*Equatorians use this term to describe Dinkas as land-grabbers*” and to incite violence against them and others. It therefore recommends to use the term “federalism” instead of “Kokora”. However, this suggestion highlights the self-admitted challenges the lexicon project faces in validating the context of the hate speech terms it has identified. For on the one hand side, “Kokora” is an established term in Southern Sudan historiography and its much-disputed implications cannot simply be ignored by a kind of banning of the word. On the other side, many South Sudan scholars would argue that the term “Federalism” can be just as toxic. Though it has rather positive connotations in Western countries like Germany, to many people in South Sudan it has the same meaning of “Dinkas out!” as “Kokora” may have. In fact, it is for these historical sensitivities that the now more than 30 states of South Sudan do not carry the label “federal”.

In its introduction, the lexicon unfortunately also summarises the collapse of the Addis Ababa peace agreement as follows: “*When Nimeiri ended that autonomy in 1983, the south took up arms.*” Which is factually incorrect, since the May 1983 mutiny in Bor took place shortly before the official re-division of the South. More importantly, such simplistic narratives uncritically accept South Sudan’s official reading of history and give automatic legitimacy to the use of violent means. For, while there is no doubt about the legitimacy of Southern grievances against manipulation, domination and marginalisation by Khartoum, no peace building project can simply accept the claim of a just cause for war.

It requires a close – and perhaps painful – look at history and the results may be telling: even the openly pro-Southern historian Douglas Johnson stresses that Major Kerubino Kuanyin Bol started the mutiny as he “*precipitated a crisis by coming under suspicion for the misallocation of funds and poaching.*” So when South Sudan celebrates the anniversary of that mutiny as the first bullet fired for liberation, it deliberately overlooks the fact that the immediate reasons for that shot were far less honourable than enforcing real democracy. And that Bol had previously been busy fighting Anyanya II rebel bands, who had increased military operations in their quest for separation since 1980 already.

The Fog of War II

The idealisation and glorification of trigger-happy warlords as martyrs and heroes should be considered as one of the root-causes of South Sudan’s conflicts. Bol epitomises this scourge like many other military leaders. Hailing him as one of the founders of the ruling SPLM/A hushes over the inconvenient truth that he switched sides several times and caused a major famine in 1998 with his renegade attacks in Bahr El Ghazal. Bol was soon after killed by the forces of a Southern rival, Peter Gadet, who had just split off from the pro-government militia of Paulino Matip. Gadet is still a main actor in the war theatre with ever-changing alliances, as was Matip until his death from health issues in 2012. Remarkably, Bol and Matip were Dinka-Nuer in-laws, which again illustrates the fact that ethnic boundaries in South Sudan are much more fluid than the usual narratives have them.

Most sensitive of all these issues is a critical re-examination of the role played by the late SPLM/A-leader John Garang. Since his death in a mysterious helicopter crash shortly after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, he has been glorified as a champion of democracy and founder of the nation. This is highly problematic on two major accounts: one, it is undisputed that Garang led the SPLM/A with an iron fist and sought to eliminate any internal opposition. The other inconvenient truth that does not quite fit into South Sudan’s official narrative is the fact that throughout all the struggle Garang promoted a New Sudan, which was to be united in diversity and would empower the marginalised peripheries, whereas most of his followers – like Salva Kiir – pushed for secession. Only after the signing of the CPA did Garang concede that if political transformation within Sudan were to prove impossible, independence was the only other choice for the south. Yet, he maintained the vision of a united New Sudan as his preference over separation until his death.

Moreover, Garang was not quite the prince of peace as whom he has often been portrayed posthumously, either. Much of the fighting in Southern Sudan during the 1980s actually took place between his SPLA and rival militias like the secessionist Anyanya 2. Above all, one cannot simply ignore what respected historians like Douglas Johnson have documented: that the SPLA focused its attacks also on civilian populations which it considered hostile and that it systematically recruited child-soldiers. Furthermore, many observers have criticised Garang's refusal to accept a Northern offer for ceasefire and participation in elections, after dictator Nimeri – who had introduced a draconic form of Sharia in 1983 (after the Bor mutiny) - was overthrown in the wake of a popular uprising in 1985. Though Garang's distrust of the old forces in Khartoum seems understandable, one has to acknowledge that this window of opportunity may have been the best chance to end a war that would go on to claim the hundreds of thousands of human lives. Ironically, Garang's rejection of the peace initiative by progressive parties strengthened those reactionary forces in the North that subsequently stepped up military operations in the South during the second half of the 1980s, especially through Northern militias. Further peace efforts were mainly sabotaged by intra-Northern rivalries. When a negotiated settlement of the conflict seemed close in 1989, Islamist army officers took power in another coup d'état to thwart those efforts.

The new government in Khartoum massively increased the oppression in general and in the South particularly with its militant Islamism, creating the Popular Defense Forces militias and declaring a "Holy War" that politicised religion in extreme ways. On the SPLM/A side, though, the 1990s started with a major split, led by Riak Machar and Lam Akol, who harboured their own ambitions against the authoritarian leadership-style of Garang. In addition, the SPLM/A lost its main supporter with the downfall of the Ethiopian Mengistu regime and its Eastern bloc allies, not least East Germany, which had supplied hundreds of thousands of Kalashnikovs to Mengistu in a proxy war with West Germany. In the course of the split-off, Machar's troops in 1991 committed one of the most notorious massacres, when possibly thousands of civilians were killed in Bor town. The Islamist regime in Khartoum, meanwhile, used the split in the SPLM/A to support Riak's faction and regain the military initiative in the South.

With regard to the 1991 massacre in Bor, the Lexicon of Hate Speech Terms by PeaceTechLab classifies the term "1991" in itself as offensive/inflammatory, which is obviously problematic. It does so on the grounds that "*Dinka leaders have used this reference to massacres of Dinka civilians in Bor to incite the Bor Dinka against the Nuer and to demonize Dr. Machar*". The editors also found that it "*angers people of Nuer and other communities who also lost family and friends in the massacres.*" While the Lexicon rightly points to the lack of any thorough investigation into the bloodbath, it does not mention that Machar publicly apologised in 2012 for his part in the mass-murder. This

may well have been mere lip-service, but it was surely an almost unheard of, if not even unique act of dealing with South Sudan's own history. In any event, the alternative recommendations by the Lexicon are at best euphemistic, like "1991 SPLM power struggle", and at worst grossly misleading, like "misunderstanding between SPLM separatists".⁵

The second half of the 1990s saw yet another unprecedented escalation of war, which also spread into the Southern peripheries of Northern Sudan. Garang's vision of a united New Sudan appealed to many marginalised communities there, especially in the neighbouring Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile and Eastern Sudan, where many communities joined the SPLA and allied forces of the Northern opposition. Scholars describe the military actions of the Khartoum regime in the Nuba Mountains at the time as genocide. In Southern Sudan, the humanitarian situation grew increasingly catastrophic, particularly in the oil-rich Unity state. Khartoum further adopted the historical strategy of divide and rule by supporting Southern militias of Paulino Matip, Peter Gadet and other warlords to secure those areas for oil-exploration and production by Asian and – initially – Western companies. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were displaced in the course of those assaults around the oil-fields.

The Fog of Peace II

The start of oil-production in the late 1990s, rather ironically, paved the way for serious peace efforts. On the one hand side, the military situation turned out more and more to be a costly stalemate between the financially bolstered regime in Khartoum and Garang's SPLA, which had the backing of Uganda and the US. On the other hand, oil revenues provided resources that could be used to fund a more inclusive government, as the pre-eminent South Sudan analyst Alex de Waal has elaborated. In other words: why continue fighting, when there was finally a big enough cake to be shared? Also, the nature of the regime in Khartoum changed around the turn of the millennium when President Omar Al Bashir ousted the Islamist leader Hassan Al Turabi. Bashir had long been viewed as a mere figurehead and Turabi as the real strongman. Since Usama bin Laden had been based in Sudan until 1996, Bashir's post-Turabi regime was all the more eager after 9/11 to get rid of its status as an international pariah. Against this backdrop, it entered into peace negotiation that first led to a Swiss-brokered ceasefire for the Nuba mountains in 2002 and in 2005 to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the SPLA, mediated by the East African regional body IGAD and the Troika of the US, UK and Norway.

⁵ p. 10

The CPA made the SPLM the ruling party in Southern Sudan (as well as a coalition partner in the Khartoum government) and the SPLA its army. President Kiir, who succeeded Garang after his death in 2005, set up the strategy of the “big tent” to absorb as many rival militias as possible, since they actually outnumbered the SPLA. The necessary resources were available thanks to increasing oil-revenues during a time of world market record prices. Most of the money went into corrupt channels of warlords who fostered their own patronage systems, whereas the provision of services for basic needs of the population was outsourced to international donors. Thanks to this “big tent”, Kiir managed to navigate Southern Sudan through the CPA Interim Period to the referendum, since it also served as a deterrent to potential assault by Khartoum. However, it came at the cost of establishing “*a political economy of rent-seeking that has reached an extreme—also known as a kleptocracy*” (de Waal). Indeed, the conflicts in South Sudan are highly complex, but just one figure may sum up why the militarisation of the political market-place is the key root-cause: 745. This was the number of generals in the SPLA shortly after the 2011 independence. It is more than the number of top-brass in the four US services combined, and second only to Russia with its admirals that landlocked South Sudan does not have.

To be totally clear: there is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that the great majority of Southern Sudanese favoured secession and did so for very understandable reasons. Historical patterns of systematic oppression, discrimination and marginalisation of Southerners - and especially their elites - by the ruling class of Northern Sudan, who pushed for Arabisation and Islamisation since Sudan’s independence of 1956, had created deeply rooted grievances. The CPA stipulated to make unity attractive, but Khartoum did not make any efforts at all to do so. However, the figures of the 98.8 % vote in favour of independence in 2011 would have been doubted in any other place, but were not in the Southern Sudanese context. As de Waal puts it: “*the referendum outcome itself was not necessarily an advertisement for democratic choice. These kinds of electoral out-turns are rare in the democratic world, but the declared result was unanimously endorsed internationally. The Republic of South Sudan became independent on July 9, 2011.*”⁶

The suppression of dissident voices, especially from the millions of Southern Sudanese who had built an existence in Northern Sudan, directly relates to the current conflicts, as the internationally respected scholars Mareike Schomerus and Lotje de Vries point out in a recent paper: “*It is fair to say that the majority of South Sudanese supported independence. Yet, the way in which it was achieved – with complete disregard of the process – was an indication that the political and military leadership of South Sudan was*

*pursuing its goal without putting much weight on developing a relationship of trust with South Sudan's citizens. With self-determination reduced to meaning one vote during the referendum and secession branded as the only possible choice for that vote, the regime in South Sudan denied its people the process of self-determination that Garang had envisioned. Southerners supported independence, but their right to self-determination as a process in which they are invited to jointly decide on what system of government, constitution and political leadership they would prefer has been denied. As their voice became curtailed, South Sudan paved its way towards violent conflict as a means of expression of political discontent."*⁷

Building state institutions and a national identity has been at the core of international diplomacy to assist South Sudan. This may appear plausible, though the concept has evidently failed. Those weak state institutions that were built up by foreign donors and the United Nations mission were after all largely abused for personal interests of warlords. More worryingly, one may argue that the period of greatest national unity was exactly the one when the whole system tipped and the "big tent" flipped over in a self-afflicted way: in January 2012, Kiir's government of unity reacted to a dispute with Khartoum on the use of Northern pipelines by completely shutting down its own oil production, which constituted more than 90% of its revenue. This suicidal decision was widely hailed by the South Sudanese public across the political spectrum in a flash of national pride and defiance. But by the time the dispute was settled and limited oil production resumed in 2013, world market prices had nose-dived. Reserves of up to US\$ 2 billion were used up and even larger debts taken up.

In addition, the government in Juba ordered its army in April 2012 to invade the Heglig/Panthou oil fields. South Sudan upholds historical claims on the area, but the international community does not accept these. Rather, it is undisputed that the Sudanese government has been traditionally controlling that territory. Hence, international pressure forced Juba to withdraw its troops shortly after the attack. Yet, the South Sudanese public once again celebrated the military victory across the political spectrum, generally "saluting the gallant SPLA forces", who had just committed a bloody aggression against all international law. This peak time of South Sudanese unity and nationalism should serve as a warning not to uncritically support the promotion of a national identity to overcome tribalist identities. While it may be necessary in a world of nation states to create some national cohesion and stability for peace, one should be aware that the creation of a "We" is bound to result in the exclusion of "They". In this context, it should also be remembered that xenophobic sentiments against traders and workers from East African countries, which had given shelter to millions of Southern

Sudanese refugees before, were sharply on the rise at that time of national unity in South Sudan.

The invasion of Heglig/Panthou fundamentally damaged South Sudan's international reputation and turned it from a global darling to a rogue state. Throughout the CPA interim period and until then, it had – as it were – surfed on a wave of global goodwill, both by the international public and diplomacy. The predominant narrative had been that Khartoum was evil and Juba good. While indeed many problems can be clearly blamed on Northern Sudanese politics, this was all too easy scape-goating. The prevailing bias of the international community in favour of South(ern) Sudan gave Juba a carte blanche, so to say. It overlooked the continuously worsening of the human rights situation for all too long. Therefore, it is also wrong to write – as can be often seen – that internal conflict in post-independence South Sudan broke out at the end of 2013. Rather, it had started right at the beginning with two bloody rebellions in Jonglei, by George Athor and David Yau Yau. Human rights organisations accused all sides of gross abuses and crimes, but with little resonance.

A closer look at the two insurgencies also illustrates the distorted images of "ethnic violence" and "tribal clashes" that dominated the headlines back then already as they do now. Both apparently received military support from Khartoum, but this only obscured the fact that the problems were essentially home-grown. Athor – with Kiir the only surviving co-founder of the SPLA – had a Dinka-background, but led a militia from various disgruntled communities. He took up arms over his lost election-bid for governorship and was assassinated in late 2011. Yau Yau – a former student of theology promoted to be Brigadier General of the SPLA – was bought in once more by the government in 2014 with the appointment as the Chief Administrator of a newly established, semi-autonomous area for the Murle community. Notably, respondents to PeaceTechLab's lexicon of hate speech cited "Beer" or "Ber" as an inflammatory term used to denounce Murle as "*people without identity who should be killed*",⁸ which has to prompt an even closer look at this seemingly marginal affair. In fact, the Murle are probably the single-most unpopular community in South Sudan, though they are – as all other communities – much less homogenous than one might simply assume. There are Murle pastoralists as well as peasants, political divisions amongst them have existed for many years as have generational splits.

The specialised researcher Judith McCallum sums up the context of anti-Murle hate speech as follows: "*The narrative of the Murle as a 'primitive' community – often seen as having apolitical motivations for its actions, and driven by their [alleged] need to abduct*

children (and cattle) due to an infertility epidemic – is one that continues to hold considerable sway in the current context of South Sudan and wider region, making the whole community convenient scapegoats for any violence which is unclear, or too political to attribute. However, this reductionist perspective diminishes the complexity of the Murle community, and underestimates the potential role of Murle leaders and community within the current South Sudanese political arena. [...] A strong narrative, even believed by some Murle themselves, asserts that the Murle community is more inclined to abduct children due to infertility, cultural practices and a more fluid sense of identity. Other communities, for their part, claim they only abduct children as revenge for the Murle child-abducting practices. This feeds into the discourse of the Murle as a primitive and ungovernable community, and in turn has been utilised by political leaders to incite cycles of violence against the Murle as a whole.”⁹

The Fog of War III

In this context of stereotypical narratives about supposedly homogenous ethnicities, Yau Yau is also the epitome of the rent-seeking rebellion cycle, which means: in the extremely militarised political market-place of South Sudan, inherited by Sudan, access to power and resources is only possible by forming militias. The ever inflating price of allegiance was affordable for the government as long as revenues from oil production were rising, but with the 2012 oil shutdown the economy flat-lined and that patronage system ran out of money to eventually collapse in December 2013 as heavy fighting broke out following a contested SPLM convention. Though it remains unclear what exactly happened in the chain of events, it is undisputed that the power-struggle between Kiir and his ambitious Vice President Machar provided the foundation of the conflict. It is also widely accepted that initial clashes broke out between troops loyal to late renegade General Matip and soldiers loyal to the President. It has also been established by international investigations that the latter then killed hundreds, if not thousands of people they suspected to have a Nuer background. This led to a further ethnicisation of the political conflict.

The devastating fighting that ensued subsequently, particularly in the North Eastern part of the country, has therefore been regularly described as a “civil war” along ethnic lines. However, as mentioned in the introduction, this implies that the conflict is about civilians of clear-cut communities fighting each other, whereas in reality it is about warlord militias competing for resources and recruiting on very local levels. At closer look, ethnic lines and alliances are much more blurred. The main fighting force of Kiir in the oil-rich

⁹ <http://life-peace.org/hab/murle-sudan-ethiopia-borderlands/>

former Unity state is a Nuer militia. Two of the major rivals there are brothers, and Machar is an in-law of Taban Deng, who defected from Machar's SPLA-IO to join Kiir. One of the fiercest opponents of the President has been Rebecca Garang, the widow of the SPLA-founder. This demonstrates that conflicts are essentially not between ethnic groups or clans, whose boundaries and affiliations are rather fluid anyways, but rather between members of the so-called "elites".

The de facto collapse in July 2016 of the power-sharing agreement between Kiir and Machar, which was brokered by IGAD in 2015 and only reluctantly accepted, was largely due to the distrust between the warring parties and, particularly, about the lack of resources to feed the political patronage system. Under those circumstances, the spread of escalatory online messages contributed to triggering the explosion of violence around the 5th independence day, when government and rebel spokespersons spread false information via Facebook with direct repercussions on event.¹⁰ Since then, a number of researchers have thoroughly examined and established the key dynamics of hate and dangerous speech in the context of South Sudan conflicts.¹¹ Top-official and institutions of the UN have also recognised that online media, especially Social Media, get "*weaponized as a tool for mass atrocities.*"¹² And they do so by encouraging ethnic polarization.

In conclusion, any peace building campaign should counter this ethnicisation, not by re-enforcing the prevailing narrative of the 63 South Sudanese tribes, but rather by promoting much more open identities. The call for peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups may sound constructive, yet it is essentially affirmative about the notion of supposedly clear-cut communities. In reality, identities are much more complex, not least through common inter-marriage bonds over generations. One obvious way to overcome the politics of identity and the discourse of ethnic affiliations may seem to be to emphasize the national identity as South Sudanese. However, history has shown that this is a slippery slope that can swiftly turn "positive" patriotism into antagonising nationalism of an even larger "us vs. them". This is all the more important as South Sudanese peace

¹⁰ <http://secgovcentre.org/2016/07/facebook-and-social-media-fanning-the-flames-of-war-in-south-sudan/>

¹¹ https://www.buzzfeed.com/jasonpatinkin/how-to-get-people-to-murder-each-other-through-fake-news-and?utm_term=.liMjW5zA8w#.oidqD0pwBx;

<https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-04-25/online-fake-news-and-hate-speech-are-fueling-tribal-genocide-south-sudan>

¹²

http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2017/06/in_south_sudan_fake_news_has_deadly_consequences.html

campaigns must ask hard questions about the predominant mythology of a very violent past. Fully recognising the traumata of decades and centuries of foreign oppression and the overwhelming desire of South Sudanese for independence, a critical review of history is needed in order to prevent it from repeating itself over and over. Cultural heritage has to be recognised – and transformed into a more Open Culture.

Finally, though the military, political and humanitarian situation seems only to ever grow more catastrophic, there may be a glimmer of hope in the current fragmentation of the nation, as Alex de Waal sees it: *“With neither side able to win a decisive victory, more power is slipping into the hands of increasingly decentralised communities. Ignored by the 2015 agreement, these communities could organise themselves and begin to call their leaders to account”*.¹³