



UN peacekeepers at the Protection of Civilians site in Juba, South Sudan, March 2016 (UN Photo/Eric Kanalstein)



COMMENTARY:

CYCLICAL YOUTH-LED CONFLICT AS AN EARLY WARNING INDICATOR

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The SPLA turned in on itself so dramatically in December 2013 because it had failed to transform itself from a motley assembly of warlords and militias ... into a modern, fit-for-purpose and integrated army.

South Sudan's second civil war (1983-2005) was conventionally and consistently portrayed in the western media as pitting the African, mainly Christian and animist, South against the Arab, Muslim North. And yet on any given day, fighting within the territory of what is now South Sudan was in those years typically more about cattle, women, and/or the resolution of longstanding local feuds between villages, clans, and ethnicities.

Youth were always at the heart of this violence. This was partly for the age-old reason that politicians or Big Men (whether western or African) always find it easiest to persuade young people to fight – all 17-year olds are immortal (to themselves). But it was also because the warrior culture of the two great Nilotic tribes in particular – the Nuer and the Dinka – demanded shows of manliness, and it was specifically on account of the role cows have come to play as bride-wealth in these two societies. In South Sudan, if the culture to which you belong requires that you supply the family of your bride-to-be with sixty or more cows, then unless you are exceptionally well-off, the only way you can acquire such a herd is through raiding.

The ostensibly political civil war exacerbated the scope and lethality of cattle-raiding in a number of non-intuitive ways. In more peaceful times that are now barely within living memory, the Dinka and the Nuer (like the Masai, that other great Nilotic tribe) had valued their cattle not just for their beauty, the colour of their coats (Machar denotes a particular shade of cow, as do many other common Dinka and Nuer names) and the size of their horns, but for their milk and their meat: vast herds were driven to markets, even into Uganda and Kenya for sale and slaughter. But now the fighting simultaneously inhibited the large-scale and long-distance movement of cattle, while discouraging the raising of cows on fenced ranges; it also restricted the development of markets and the movement of hard cash. Cows and Kalashnikovs became the principal currency in Southern Sudan, but with the value of the cows no longer in their meat or milk production potential, but rather in their number and random attributes such as coat colour. In that a constant was that young men still required women, so youth-led cattle raiding became endemic.

Endemic but still cyclical: for herds of cows are vulnerable when they are on the move, and in South Sudan they have to start moving in search of better grazing following the rains. In this country, the period from December to April is routinely described as the Fighting Season; this is not just because much of the country then dries sufficiently for heavy armour to be moved around and for troops to move overland, but it is also when cattle converge on scarce water points, bringing their herders in hostile contact with each other.

All this is to say youth (young men in particular) are at perpetual and extremely high risk of becoming involved in violence in South Sudan because they require cows to find a bride; and the market for cows has evolved in such a way that it is almost impossible for them to acquire such wealth except through violence.

Now the author of this most interesting paper suggests (and here we risk over-simplifying) that pre-emptive conflict resolution aimed at minimising cattle raiding, taken by political leaders in Warrap, Lakes, and Unity states, was historically in contrast to a relative lack of such governance in Jonglei, and partly explains why more Jonglei youth have been drawn into post-December-2013 fighting than in other states.



First we would note that while it was largely overlooked by the media, on any given day between, say, April 2014 and June 2016, there was more inter-clan violence in Lakes than in Jonglei; much of this fighting defied easy analysis in that it was Dinka on Dinka. As for Unity State, this has – 30 months on from December 2013 – proven to be by far the largest killing ground of all, with no need for any participation of the Jonglei-based and near mythical youth-centered White Army.

But perhaps most importantly, Jonglei and Upper Nile are the Nuer heartland; and it is the Nuer who perceive themselves (not entirely without reason) as the victims of a Juba-centered genocide in December 2013, perpetrated by the ruling Dinka elite. You would expect the home territory of the aggrieved (and more desperate) minority party to be a more fertile recruiting ground for youth than the homelands (Lakes, Bah-al-Ghazal, Warrap) of the still dominant (Dinka) party.

Where this paper hits the nail on the head is on the matter of impunity. The SPLA turned in on itself so dramatically in December 2013 because it had failed to transform itself from a motley assembly of warlords and militias – many of whose aims were quite evidently criminal rather than political – into a modern, fit-for-purpose and integrated army; far too much was papered over, in the name of expediency.

Jonglei over the years 2011 to 2013 is a particularly interesting case in point. A former junior military officer – David Yau Yau – ran for a minor political office. He was trounced. His reaction was to capitalise on decades of stigmatisation of his tribe (the Mutrle), and gross underdevelopment, to lead a rebellion – incidentally recruiting thousands of child soldiers, who joined his ranks willingly (if any 12 yr old can be said to take up arms willingly). He waged a successful, ultra-violent guerrilla war against the authorities (allegedly killing a number of UN peacekeepers en route), to a point at which embassies in Juba were petitioned by the government to indict him at the ICC. But eventually the Catholic church negotiated a settlement. Yau Yau was given his own mini-state, a very large cash grant to run it, and the title Honourable (and, later a promotion to Lt General); he agreed, also, to release all those child soldiers. The reaction of the international community? When introduced to us by the then Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, half of the diplomats present gave him a standing ovation – here, they said, was a man of peace.

Hadn't we just rewarded a war criminal? But who could naysay the release of those child soldiers?

Meanwhile, the African Union has indicated, in a blunt report known as the Commission of Inquiry, that starting in December 2013 both Salva Kiir and Riek Machar were responsible for War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity; the UN's Panel of Experts, convened to consider sanctions, notes carefully that there appear to be grounds on which either or both could be indicted on those grounds, should members of the UNSC so desire.

Kofi Annan recently noted that if you sacrifice justice for the sake of peace, you usually get neither. South Sudan is a case in point.