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Youth Gangs and overcoming waithood in a United Nations Protection of Civilians Site in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates contestations over the roles and legitimacy of gangs within the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) Protection of Civilians (PoC) site in Bentiu, South Sudan. Drawing on qualitative interviews, it argues that 'gangs' represented the medium through which everyday struggles and processes of social contestations were negotiated between youth, elders, and protection actors. Prevailing narratives of gangs as violent criminal entities structured conflict with elders and protection actors, but to their affiliates, gangs provided protection, identity, belonging, responsibility, agency, and a route to overcome the limbo of 'waithood' and achieve social adulthood.

Introduction

'For our team, we have no guys from rural areas, we are all urban boys. If you're coming from the village you have to learn the ways of the town. Old men ask us, "Why are you bringing us this new culture?" I tell them, "You used to dance in traditional ways in the village. We don't even know how to use those drums of yours. Just allow us to do things our own way, listen to our own music and dance our own way". We do things our own way.'[1]

These words with which this introduction opens are those of Lam,[2] a 26-year-old South Sudanese returnee, reflecting on the divisive inter-generational and urban/rural tensions among Internally Displaced People (IDP) taking sanctuary from war in the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)'s Protection of Civilians (PoC) site in Bentiu, South Sudan. Lam had formerly resided on the outskirts of Sudan's capital Khartoum. When violent conflict erupted in Juba in December 2013 and quickly spread across South Sudan, thousands of civilians found safety in PoC sites like that in Bentiu, one of several UNMISS bases across the country, which offered protection and shelter to thousands of displaced civilians fleeing the atrocities (H. Johnson 2019). Located in the Unity State capital, the Bentiu PoC site was one of six IDP sites, and the largest of its kind in South Sudan. At the height of the conflict, 120,000 displaced people lived

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there, under the protection of UN peacekeepers and humanitarians. Médecins Sans Frontières (2021) described the conditions inside the Bentiu PoC as 'over-crowded', 'undignified' with residents enduring 'sub-standard living conditions'. In February 2021, 96,000 people were still living at the Bentiu PoC site.

Lam arrived in the Bentiu PoC seeking safety from warring factions in 2013; it was here that our interview was conducted in 2017. Amidst the conflict and insecurity of Bentiu town, in the PoC site he found shelter, protection, belonging and community. Lam self-identified as a former affiliate of one of the several gangs in the Bentiu PoC site. It was perhaps his gang association that explained Lam's sense of estrangement from the elders, who sought to preserve the social hierarchies, values and norms of 'traditional Nuer culture'. Some youth, such as Lam, regarded elders as guardians of Nuer's 'idealised traditional' way of life, incumbrances to youthful aspirations for the idea of modernity associated with urban life and western culture, and moreover, impediments to young people's desire to participate in decision-making. Hence, gangs represented challenges to elders' authority, as well as that wielded by protection and humanitarian actors.

Yet, notwithstanding his embrace of 'this new culture' and ambivalence towards the 'traditional [village] ways' of the elders, Lam respectfully petitioned the elders for their approval that youth in Bentiu be allowed 'to do things our own way'. His appeal for the acceptance of young people's greater autonomy and new lifestyle suggests both some generational and urban/rural tensions. At the same time, it intimates how young people simultaneously challenge while also aspiring for social recognition from their elders, an argument also made by Leonardi (2007).

Navigating from youth into adulthood is by definition a period of uncertainty, transition and change (Honwana 2012; Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006), a liminal stage of ambiguity and disorientation (Turner 1995). At the Bentiu PoC, violent conflict and subsequent displacement and trauma, created extraordinary challenges to young people transitioning to adulthood (Arensen 2016). In the melee and confusion of war, traditional pathways to acquiring social adulthood were sundered. In and around the Bentiu PoC, the scarcity of livelihood opportunities for the young —few jobs, limited or non-existent access to education or training, and exclusion from political decision-making, limited young people's self-sufficiency and socio-economic autonomy, prime indicators of adulthood (Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006). Most people's daily needs were met by humanitarian agencies, which therefore exercised significant power and authority over the residents' management of everyday life. Young men's aspirations for marriage— another crucial marker of adulthood— were severely disrupted in the turmoil of war. A confluence of factors— fragmented families, loss of family wealth, depletion of cattle herds, poverty and inability to meet bride prices, among others— pushed many South Sudanese youth in the Bentiu PoC site into what Honwana terms 'waithood', a liminal space between childhood and adulthood. For many such as Lam, the 26-year-old introduced above, gang membership represented a creative coping mechanism and strategy to manage, evade, or overcome, 'waithood' (Honwana 2012). Gangs offered youth an alternative moral code, a source of protection and of community the PoC site, where daily frictions, rivalry and violence added to the disruptive context of war, displacement and rapid urbanisation (Luoi and Pendle 2015).

This article offers a seminal exploration of youth gang sub-culture in the Bentiu PoC site. Previous policy-related research has explained why and how gangs allured young people in the PoC site (Luedke 2020; Danish Demining Group 2017). Through an

ethnographic approach, the article draws on Honwana's concept of 'waithood' to contribute to the scholarship on gang studies, arguing that gangs were a mediating force in navigating and overcoming 'waithood', in supporting displaced youth to make sense of the world of the PoC site, to manage their identities as displaced youth, offering an alternative legitimate identity to that of militarised youth, and opportunities for personal growth, among other beneficial functions.

Hagedorn and Davis (2008), Goldson (2011) and Dziewanski (2021) have highlighted the diverse origins of gang and their social functions, and the difficulty of finding consensus around the very concept of the term. For instance, a common assumption is that gangs are inevitably violent criminal entities. Within urban and other areas, and in camps like the Bentiu PoC site where gangs proliferated (Abdullah 2020; Kupka 2021; Rodgers 2006), there was a prevalent belief that gangs were disorganised, anarchic and violent (Lazareva 2018). In the Bentiu PoC site, many held the misconception that youth were driven to affiliate to gangs by idleness, criminality and deviousness (Danish Demining Group 2017). Recent critical scholarship has offered more complex perspectives on gangs; there is broad agreement that gangs offer an alternative route to 'legitimate personal, social and economic actualisation' (Dziewanski 2021, 37), and provide members with a sense of identity, protection and belonging (Rodgers 2006; Kupka 2021). Other studies have argued against the homogeneity of the concept of gangs: not all gangs are violent, criminal enterprises (Glaser 2000; Klein and Maxson 2006).

Through an empirical analysis of the social meanings of youth 'gangs' in the Bentiu PoC site, this article takes Alcinda Honwana's (2012) notion of 'waithood' —a much underdeveloped concept within critical gang studies— defined as a liminal space where young people are entrapped and unable to transition into social adulthood, to contribute to critical scholarship on gangs. Honwana (2012) understands gang membership as a concrete strategy through which young people actively seek to overcome waithood, thus highlighting the value of gangs in mediating and navigating the struggles of marginalised youth. This article seeks to address this absence. It investigates how the 'gang' label was constructed, socially situated and deployed in the Bentiu PoC site.

The article begins with a brief review of literature connecting waithood and gangs, subsequently providing an overview of gangs and their problematic criminalisation in South Sudan. Through an empirically rich analysis of how gangs operated in the Bentiu PoC, the article then argues that gang membership represented an active strategy utilised by young people to evade waithood and assert control over their lives. On the one hand, the term was appropriated by some youth in their struggle to evade 'waithood' and to negotiate a secure position in society. On the other hand, the term 'gang' was deployed by actors seeking to control and criminalise youth. To many young people who felt socially excluded, and prevented from attaining social adulthood, gangs in the PoC site offered a sense of order and potential for growth. The social roles and pathways that gang membership offered youth enabled them to experience a greater sense of inclusion and belonging than existing alternatives. This article also contends that everyday struggles and ongoing processes of contestation and negotiation in the PoC site between youth in gangs and their elders were as much about inter-generational power struggles as about broader power struggles between urban and rural South Sudanese, and between returnees and those who never left, a point also made by Pendle et al. (2023) in this special issue.

These complex power struggles were exacerbated by the PoC site's extraordinary circumstances, its densely packed and constricted physical space and the site's normative uncertainty. The ambiguous nature of UN protection norms and policies means these are interpreted differently by the multitude of actors involved (Laurence 2019; Felix da Costa and Karlsrud 2013). While this offers peacekeepers and the broader protection community the flexibility to protect civilians in complex situations, it can at times lead to confusion and impossible commitments (Pendle and Cormack 2023). A prime arena where contestation over the social role and legitimacy of gangs could be witnessed, was around the disco parties organised by gangs. An analysis of the role and place of these discos in the life of the gangs follows, and is illuminating in what it reveals about multiple elements of life in Bentiu PoC camp. Thus, this article offers a compelling case study of how gangs, and the social contestations they elicit, can be both a home for youth aspiring to meaningful lives and social belonging, as well as the means through which these youth can be criminalised by wider society, against the backdrop of, and in conversation with protection agendas, policies and actors.

Fieldwork was carried out in April-May 2017 in the Bentiu PoC site, which at the time provided shelter to some 120,000 people, in the nearby Bentiu and Rubkona towns and in surrounding rural areas of Rubkona and Guit counties in Unity State. The data for this study draws on interviews with a total of 112 informants; including thirty qualitative interviews and twenty five focus group discussions with young men and women, many of them self-identified gang leaders, members and former members, as well as individuals engaging with gang members in positions of authority, such as PoC officials, chiefs, elders, and NGO workers.

Research was originally carried out for an INGO with a history of working with gang members and supporting inter-generational dialogues between youth and community leadership in the PoC site.[3] Cognizant of the challenges of accessing youth in gangs, the NGO affiliation and the support of South Sudanese staff themselves living in the PoC site, and one staff in particular with loose gang affiliation, assisted in identifying and gaining the trust of key informants. My acceptance as a researcher learning about gangs in the PoC site was also a sign of how the idea of gangs was informally integrated and co-opted into the governance structure of the PoC site, which is why some members were willing to be interviewed.

Literature review: waithood, gangs and social contestation

In societies experiencing long-term war such as South Sudan, violent conflict, militarisation, displacement and rapid urbanisation have disrupted 'traditional' definitions of youth and challenged the very meaning and status of youth (Abbink and van Kessel 2005; Philipps 2018), while establishing new social hierarchies (Jok 2005; Abraham et al. 2021). Inter-generational tensions in South Sudan and elsewhere are not a new phenomenon, yet volatile environments such as the Bentiu PoC site, speed up social transformations and social tensions with consequences for inter-generational dynamics (Grabska 2014).

Young people have arguably been both the greatest perpetrators and victims in the latest war in South Sudan. On the one hand, instrumentalised by political and military leaders as armed youth; on the other hand, deprived of a future, of livelihoods, marriage

and family life, and of the ability to establish themselves as meaningful contributors to their society. As a result, many are trapped in the liminal space of 'waithood', unable to achieve social adulthood. 'Waithood' reflects 'the contradictions of modernity' where 'young people's opportunities and expectations are simultaneously broadened and constrained' (Honwana 2012, 4); waithood embodies diverse lived realities and survival strategies, from small entrepreneurship and informal labour, to engagement and involvement in gangs and illicit activities. Yet, caught in this limbo-like state, young people have been prompted into actively and creatively redefining socio-cultural boundaries, and reinventing themselves in challenging new settings.

A number of competing theories seek to explain the emergence of gangs (Rodgers 2006; Goldson 2011; Dziewanski 2021; Kupka 2021). Social ecology sees gangs as 'partial replacement structures' for absent or dysfunctional social institutions such as families, clans or age-sets, as a consequence of poverty and social exclusion; cultural theories take gangs as 'reflections of lower class 'subculture''; a political perspective interprets gangs 'as forms of resistance to 'blocked' opportunities'; an economic interpretation takes gangs as 'informal business enterprises'; while psychological readings of gangs assume these are the expression of their members' 'deviant socio-pathological personality traits' or as pathways for 'youth maturation processes and identity creation' (Rodgers 2006, 282).

In a recent review of gangs across African urban areas, Dziewanski (2021, 20) noted the many permutations of gangs within a single city, differing in 'sizes, identities, motivations and inclinations towards crime.' Speaking of gangs in Soweto, South Africa, Glaser (2000, 10) concluded that 'Gangs are a particular kind of youth association that may be more or less criminal according to circumstances. Crime and gang formation, while often coinciding, follow separate trajectories'. Klein and Maxson (2006) suggest that many groups labelled as gangs fail to meet the criteria of popular imagination. These perspectives underline the challenges of attempting any consensual definition of such 'a dynamic and localised concept', not least because 'global definitions are infused with an implied objectivity, although they are, as anything, social constructions of diverse local phenomena' (Dziewanski 2021, 14). This article adopts Dziewanski's cautionary analysis in approaching the 'gang' phenomenon in the Bentiu PoC site. It explores the specificity of circumstances that led some youth to affiliate with and self-identify as gang members, their social expressions and actions, and how these enabled them to escape 'waithood' by creating meaningful identities and sense of community.

The empirical sections of this paper demonstrate how this fluidity and nuanced understanding of youth association and gang formation creates more helpful understanding of how and where the gang label is appropriated and deployed in some contexts, and with what purposes. It also nuances understandings of violence and criminality, while arguing that gang membership in the PoC site represented a means for young people to feel control over their existences, rather than falling into over-simplistic and inherently negative connotations of violence and criminality associated with gangs.

Criminalisation of youth gangs in South Sudan

Many of the gangs that operated with Bentiu PoC originated from neighbouring Bentiu town. Among their affiliates were numerous post-2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement

(CPA) returnees back from Khartoum and other cities and peri-urban refugee camps of East Africa. They returned to South Sudan bringing with them new ideas about human rights, new expectations of political and socioeconomic inclusion, and new moral codes and behaviours (Luoi and Pendle 2015). Many experienced difficulty readjusting and fitting into the social constraints of 'home', including its narrow gender and generational expectations (Grabska 2014).

But not all gang members were urban returnees, nor all urban returnees gang members. Rather, many returnees adopted 'traditional' Nuer values to better facilitate their return to South Sudan (Luoi and Pendle 2015). Gangs represent a powerful expression of how young people openly contested and reimagined themselves and their place in contemporary South Sudan. They offered affiliates a 'protective community and authority to safeguard an alternative moral order' (Luoi and Pendle 2015), and a means of accessing the imagined privileges of an alternative western culture, identity and social world (Grabska 2014), and the means to acquire 'legitimate personal, social and economic actualisation' (Dziewanski 2021, 37). Seen in this way, gang affiliation was an active strategy to overcome the lethargy of waithood, enabling youth to navigate other pathways to adulthood. Understanding the transformative possibilities that youth attached to gang affiliation illuminates their prevalence across the pre-2013 crisis urban landscape of South Sudan (Schomerus and Allen 2010; Sommers and Schwartz 2011), throughout the PoC sites (McCrone 2016; Luedke 2020), and their enduring rootedness within South Sudan's contemporary urban landscape (The Juba Mirror 2021; Ejidio 2021).

The criminalisation of South Sudanese gangs has a long history. From as early as 2008, government and police attempted to ban 'criminal gang culture' (Dak 2008) in Wau, Bor, Juba and other towns throughout the nation (Aleu 2009; Radio Tamazuj 2013). In Juba, in 2008, the county government issued a special order criminalising gang 'behaviour', though it was later overturned by President Salva Kiir (Leonardi et al. 2010). Before the December 2013 conflict, police were often called upon to break up gang meetings and dances, and many youth were arrested, including for 'unfit dressing' (Aleu 2009). For women this meant 'skirts above their knees, extra-short sleeve blouses or tight dresses', while for men this meant 'T-shirts showing western musicians' or what police operatives called 'gang clothes' (Aleu 2009). Authorities employed '*de facto* law-making powers to construct, not only specific acts as illicit and criminal, but also the very culture and identity' of gangs (Luoi and Pendle 2015).

The highly congested urban environment of the PoC sites fostered the active presence of gangs; in moving to the PoC sites, gangs asserted their 'civilian' status and hence claimed protection, even though their involvement in some criminal activities occasionally jeopardised the safety of the sites. Yet despite the vast size of PoC sites like Bentiu resembled urban environments, their everyday rhythms were heavily governed by protection policies and initiatives, rendering them most atypical of 'normal' environments. It is within these fragile spaces of economic precarity, resource scarcity, and food insecurity that the pre-civil war gangs gained momentum and appeal to youth struggling to find community, social belonging and hope for the future.

The correlation between the gangs, criminality and violence was partly due to members' subversive appearance. They were easily identifiable by their hip-hop-inspired fashion and music, and their behaviour – for instance, young men and women openly

socialising at disco parties (Danish Demining Group 2017; Luedke 2020) – but also because of recurring and sometimes violent clashes between rival gangs.[4] During fieldwork in April-May 2017, violence erupted for several days between the larger Holy Star and West Coast gangs against D-Black and Jamaica Boys gangs. The trouble originated several months earlier when a female relative of one member attended a disco party held by a rival group. Numbering 'about 1,000' and armed with spears and machetes, the rival gangs fought each other, subsiding only after the intervention of the United Nations Police (UNPOL) and Ghanaian military peacekeepers with tear gas to disperse the groups. Because fighting took place in highly congested areas, the violence affected the whole community.

As one UNPOL officer emphasised, however, most youth were 'not criminals at heart'.[5] According to him, 90% of juvenile arrests in the PoC in May 2017 were for opportunistic petty crimes.[6] These included assault, fighting over girls, and robbery; notably, there were no drug or alcohol arrests.[7] Though widely disruptive, episodic outbreaks of gang violence do not justify their wholesale criminalisation; rather, violent gang clashes are better understood against the backdrop of the violent and brutal realities of PoC sites.

Rather, since 2005, youth in gangs 'have reconstructed global identities and ideas of modernity, challenging 'Nuer culture' and authorities that uphold it' (Luoi and Pendle 2015, 1). Contestations around gang activities revealed spaces that offered youth in and out of gangs opportunities to challenge and resist customary authority and traditional norms and values (Ibreck and Pendle 2016). Formal camp leadership and protection authorities in the PoC site attempted to curtail violent criminal gangs. The alternative moral codes, social norms and values displayed by youth in gangs challenged static ideas about 'Nuer culture'. One youth representative of the Community High Committee (CHC), the PoC's main community-based administrative structure, drew parallels between, on the one hand, the presumed perils of youth exposure to global culture, protection policies and human rights framework in the PoC site, and on the other hand, the inevitable erosion of 'Nuer culture' and law and order:

> Nuer culture has become affected by international culture. Now the international community gives rights to criminals because somebody will threaten you and if you report it there is no solution. Only if there's physical violence and this encourages criminals in the PoC. If someone takes the wife of someone, in Bentiu he'd be put into prison and pay seven cows but now [UNMISS] Human Rights and UNPOL just say they [both] agreed to do it, so there are no consequences.[8]

As also noted by Luoi and Pendle (2015, 1), PoC residents regarded gangs as 'explicitly inherently in opposition to 'Nuer culture', which was imagined, represented, and idealised as static, intrinsically rural, and traditional, far from the realities of an ever-changing and dynamic society affected and responsive to decades of conflict, displacement and the state (Hutchinson 1996). In this issue, Pendle et al. (2023) also note that for decades, urban populations had openly socially challenged complying with the social norms of rural areas (see also Hutchinson 1996, 270–298).

Returnees who had sought refuge in urban towns or in East African countries were held responsible for these unwelcome changes (Grabska 2014). An elder in the chief's court in Bentiu blamed ' … youth coming from different countries who are bringing this *culture from abroad*, they're bringing the culture they found there.'[9] Allusions to the disruptive

and degrading influence on the presumed 'purity' of 'Nuer culture' centred around more visible and material expressions of foreign culture signified by the music, clothing and dance styles associated with African-American hip-hop culture and icons. A young man in the PoC suggested the appeal of gangs for youth; 'so many people are joining [gangs] because they aspire to look good and dress in nice clothes,'[10] alluding to the apparent connections between gangs, western style and status. But these symbols and the cultural values youth in gangs were assumed to embody were interpreted as indicative of 'immoral and antisocial behaviour' (Leonardi et al. 2010, 59), representative of foreign values and which ran counter to the cultural mores and norms of rural Nuer realities.

In the Bentiu PoC site in 2017, the names of the gangs alluded to a largely western culture of dissent and subversion. In 2017 the main gangs in the Bentiu PoC called themselves Holy Star, Jamaica Boys, D-Black, Good Life, West Coast, YMCMB (Young Money Cash Money Bank), Clean Boys and DMX (formerly known as Rough Riders). Many of these names derived from pre-crisis Bentiu and Rubkona towns. Within each group, friends assigned each other nicknames, usually referencing a particular idiosyncrasy, but sometimes borrowed from western youth culture's celebration of subversive 'coolness', wealth, and hyper-masculinity: tellingly, nicknames of members included Snoop-Dog, Slim Shady, Dr Dre, P-Diddy, MC, AK-47.

One of the larger groups in the Bentiu PoC in 2017 was D-Black, alluding to a reversal of 'Black Day' as difficult times, and, in turn, being able to take control of one's future.[11] Formed in Bentiu in 2006, D-Black drew inspiration from the music of Ja Rule, an American hip hop artist.[12] Its leadership estimated that by mid-2017, D-Black male members numbered over 100 youths, ages 15–25 years old likely over-estimated as often younger brothers of older members maintained a loose affiliation to the group. Like other groups, D-Black activities centred around organising disco parties, which proved successful for recruiting new members. As one informant stated, 'if there are many parties, the numbers of members increase'.[13] In 2014, the gang transitioned from Bentiu town into the Bentiu PoC site, where according to informants, it remained one of the site's most active gangs.

Community leader discourses denounced gang members as morally and socially corrupt criminals no longer in tune with 'Nuer culture'. An elder in the Chief's Court in Bentiu town described a gang member as 'someone who isn't respecting his mother and father. For girls, they're street ladies, with no respect for the community; they're criminals with no fear of government.'[14] Another local authority in the Bentiu PoC site thought that youth gravitated towards gangs because, ' … their mothers are not around, maybe they're in Khartoum or in Juba. So they get their own shelter, engage the ladies, they steal and have very nice clothes. But we can stop them and correct their ways back to Nuer culture.'[15] These reflections highlight the disconnect between generational values, but also reflect conflicting gendered values about women's roles, as well as an urban/rural divide represented by returnees. Seen from this perspective, the outwardly looking gangs operating within the PoC sites represented the degeneracy of Nuer cultural tradition.

Some gangs contested the negativity and exclusionist practices directed towards them, and were careful to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' gangs. A leader of D-Black, one of the larger gangs, stressed this distinction: 'There are many types of

gangs. Some go to steal and harass, others to promote peace. We are gangs, but the good kind.' This emic distinction forces a critical reappraisal of gangs, and the significant insights to be gained by understanding gangs beyond the paradigm of violent criminality, and instead through the prism of their diverse functions within complex social systems. D-Black's leader recalled that 'in 2015, the PoC was very congested and there were not enough jobs, but in 2016 things improved.' In these pressurised circumstances of congested living conditions and high unemployment, competition over opportunities and resources sometimes fostered deadly clashes between gangs. D-Black's leader was again keen to distance his gang as instigators, insisting that his members were merely ' … defending ourselves, not attacking.'[16] Similarly, one Jamaica Boys leader refuted the charge of affiliates as violent criminals because of their western style and disco party activities. This leader insisted that Jamaica affiliates were mislabelled, because 'gangs differ from us. They drink a lot, they create trouble, and they steal.'[17]

Yet, according to one gang leader, it was the pressure from elders that led youth in gangs to reach out to their seniors and manage generational relations, hinting at how young people, including those perceived as subversive, continued to search for and aspire to communal social recognition in the eyes of their elders (Leonardi 2007). Asked about gang rivalries, one leader responded, 'In 2015 we stopped fighting. Two years ago we were facing many challenges from our elders, but in 2016 we invited them to come to our dance hall, those from the Community High Committee, even the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, and they saw that we can do things peacefully.'[18]

Gang affiliation within the PoC site enabled young men to take a stance in relation to the wider conflict, which ironically, also contributed to their criminalisation. That they were not actively engaged in military service made them vulnerable to forced recruitment – particularly when venturing beyond the protective perimetres of the sites – but also created tensions with the site's elders, some of whose own sons were fighting in the Sudan People's Liberation Army – In Opposition (SPLA-IO). Though PoC residents tacitly supported the SPLA-IO, that they chose sanctuary in the PoC site was read as implicit resistance to IO military mobilisation. Gang affiliates who defied the politicised roles and responsibilities of militarisation faced the stigma attached to refusal to participate in warfare, and by extension, of failing to fulfil their expected roles as 'community protectors'.[19] SPLA-IO mobilisations often drew on expectations that young men should be defending their families, clans, and, in the post-2013 era of essentialised identities (Felix da Costa 2016), their Nuer group, from a hostile authoritarian government, reflecting the polarised ethnic politics of South Sudan (D. H. Johnson 2014).

Evading waithood through gang affiliation

Elders decried the lure of gangs, yet for many youth, the gangs operating within the PoC site represented a crucial support system, offering access to community and economic resources, and belonging, identity, safety and protection. Years of conflict, displacement and exile, ruptured families and, for young men in particular, militated against their expected entry into and responsibilities of adult males. Gang membership filled a vacuum, enabling affiliates to make sense of their roles and responsibilities as young men adrift in a hyper-masculinised militarised society (Hutchinson and Jok 2002), in

which customary masculinity appeared unstable and in flux. Luedke (2020, 19) compares gangs to a 'community akin to a cattle camp, and like both the *gojam* or the *gelweng* [cattle guards], the groups provide members with a sense of belonging and empowerment that is often inculcated through adolescence and youth.' Luedke further argues that similar to rural militias, urban gangs were a product of the challenges of state and economic disorder in South Sudan, arising from ' … part of the broader shifts that have occurred in the context of failed state and nation building projects and the collapse of community structures' (Luedke 2020, 19). Despite challenges to their legitimacy and legality, gang members valued membership, a prime benefit being the safety and protection of a formal alternative moral and socio-economic community willing to challenge traditional norms and values.

The gangs of the PoC sites had well-defined organisational structures; in such a volatile environment this aspect had enormous appeal to young people tired of the uncertainty of war. Membership gave young men a sense of responsibility, a central characteristic of adulthood. Resembling governmental-institutional structures, each gang of the Bentiu PoC site had a 'boss', a 'deputy-boss' and various 'ministries' each run by a minister responsible for overseeing different aspects of everyday life. For instance, the 'Minister of Finance' had charge of the group's financial affairs, and the Minister of External Affairs engaged and liaised with other groups. The 'Minister of Defence' described his peacekeeping role: ' … if there are any fights with another team, I'm the one advising, like a mediator. There's also a protocol, I'm the deputy to the Boss.'[20] Leaders needed to be charismatic to command respect. As in a family, or clan, loyalty was important: the boss of Jamaica 'was chosen because they see my behaviour as loyal to them'.[21]

That gangs could offer affiliates opportunities from which they were normally barred was a major pull to would-be members. First, and significantly, members could enjoy greater freedom in their relationships with girls and women, with whom they socialised at illicit disco parties, as discussed below. The civil war had impacted many areas of young people's lives, severely limiting their aspirations for marriage, children and family life, the major indicators of formal entry into adulthood. This was particularly disruptive because marriage conferred adulthood and enhanced status within their families and broader community (Grabska 2012). Among Nuer people, marriage remains central to inter-generational relations, 'as a mechanism of handing over resources from fathers to sons, building alliances between families and exchanging cattle for both productive and reproductive labour' (Grabska 2012, 7).

The war not only deprived many youth of their childhoods, but damaged their prospects of securing livelihoods. Families were rendered destitute as a result of war-related militarised cattle raids (Felix da Costa, Pendle, and Tubiana 2022); left without the means to pay dowries, young people remained unmarried, and their status anomalous, unable to claim adulthood.[22] The discos organised by gangs offered young men and women alternative spaces to socialise, freed of strict embargos against inappropriate gendered behaviour.

Second, gang affiliation in these PoC sites offered young people new possibilities for challenging their elders' authority. As in other parts of South Sudan (Abraham et al. 2021, 33), youth acquire social status 'by showing this independence from older generations'. Abraham et al. (ibid) give the example of the 'Toronto Boys' gang in Juba who 'push against familial control of their socio-economic choices'. In the Bentiu PoC, male

gang members commonly paid a monthly membership fee which would be used to fund recreational activities, such as renting sound systems or a space for disco parties. The monies collected could also be put to community use, e.g. payment of school fees, or to provide the family compensation demanded of young men who impregnated unmarried young women. These supportive roles were resemblant of the roles previously played by family, clan or age-set. As Grabska (2012), noted, the exchanges around bride wealth, and potential payments for compensation and school fees, are important aspects in forging inter-generational relations, family bonds, ties and loyalties.

Finally, gangs gave young men separated from their families the safety of a community (Abraham et al. 2021). As elsewhere across East Africa (Kurimoto and Simonse 1998), Nuer age-sets have become largely ceremonial. A combination of capitalism and Christianity 'combined to end, or at least dramatically modify, the formation of formal age-sets and the intense group solidarities that such rankings aroused' (Burgess and Burton 2010, 10). Gangs offered an alternative to formal age-sets and the social certainty, assurance and solidarity they formerly provided. Thus, gang affiliation can be understood as a means of coping with and managing the devastations of war.

A member of Jamaica Boys highlighted the importance of gangs for support: 'We also encourage ourselves to forget the crisis of South Sudan, by chatting and spending time together. And we do disco parties, we rent a space and put some music, but we finish it all peacefully.'[23] Another Jamaica member: 'the reason I joined the team was because of this crisis. I can forget some of the bad things that have happened here. If I'm with my friends I can forget.'[24] For these young men, joining a gang was thus about finding a way to deal with difficult pasts and ongoing uncertainty and precarious realities that placed them in the limbo of 'waithood', while holding out hope for, and expectations of, a better future.

Disco parties as arenas of contestation

Gangs and protection actors —UN military and civilian peacekeepers, UNPOL and protection staff from UN agencies and NGOs— generally encountered each other when gang violence or criminal activities disrupted the wider PoC community.[25] These various protection actors held distinct understandings of protection policy, and diverse interests and mandates; that could either contribute to the criminalisation or acceptance of gangs. Protection actions, policies and programmes interacted with redefinitions of youthhood and the acceptance or rejection of gang affiliates.

The normative ambiguity of UN PoC protection policy allowed for multiple interpretations of roles and responsibilities of civilian and military peacekeepers and other protection actors, and reinforced the mediating force of the PoC sites on social contestations. As noted by Pendle and Cormack (2023) in this special issue, young people 'experience protection through the way protection policies transforms their lives, and interact with pre-existing social structures and struggles'. Inter-generational dynamics were transformed in the context of the PoC site through protection policies and programmes that often had very tangible consequences in shaping how young people were 'imagined' and spoken about, and also the kinds of opportunities offered to young people in the PoC site.

The Bentiu PoC site was a protection and humanitarian arena where complex negotiations and transformation occurred, which were embedded in power struggles and

politics (Pendle and Cormack 2023). Contestations in the PoC sites interacted with and remade existing social struggles, from gender relations (Ibreck 2023) to generational relations. The disco parties organised by gangs were sites of contestation between youth and their seniors, and their operations were significantly shaped by protection actors and agendas.

UN protection policy for gangs and youth interacted with members' ongoing struggles, dilemmas, and contestations over authority in the PoC sites. Protection policies can either tacitly reproduce or explicitly challenge the popular global narrative that 'youth are in crisis' (Goldson 2011; Peters 2011). UN and humanitarian protection actors can also take on complex social engineering roles that place them at the centre of inter-generational struggles and contestations of power, authority, and ways of being Nuer between youth and elders, those from town and from village (Bierschenk 2014). Their protection policies had concrete implications for shaping how gangs were perceived by wider society, and what activities could be constructed as legitimate or otherwise.

A spike in rival gang fighting and in youth criminality in the PoC site in Bentiu in 2014 led protection actors to establish what they called a Youth Task Force (YTF). Composed of several protection-mandated UN agencies and international NGOs, the YTF's mandate was to advocate for, mobilise, coordinate and inform youth-specific programming.[26] The YTF held regular meetings that assembled UNMISS protection actors like UNPOL, the Child Protection Unit and Civil Affairs Division, along with UN operational agencies and NGOs working in youth-related activities in and outside of Bentiu PoC site. Some of the activities and initiatives developed under the YTF banner included establishing youth centres and sports clubs, and organising sports tournaments and other recreational activities. The YTF also participated in conflict resolution, mediating discussions between gangs, and between gangs and elders. At the height of gang clashes in 2014-5, protection actors hosted weekly meetings with different gangs, trying to ensure a safe space for discussion between conflicting groups.[27]

One arena where power struggles and tensions over the social role and legitimacy of gangs could be observed were the gang organised disco parties. Gang conflicts were often driven by competition over girls, whose gang affiliation was more fluid, and hence could move in and out of groups. The prospect of socialising with girls at these discos held major appeal, but competition over young women often ignited gang clashes, which often spread across the camp.

Because of their role in the YTF, protection actors became involved in institutionalising and controlling these events. Protection actors led the drafting of a set of nineteen rules for hosting disco parties, a development that brought together gang leadership and representatives of the CHC.[28] These mandates established key rules for hosting disco parties, and tried to regulate aspects such as timing ('7am-6pm', rules 12 and 15); venue, and more general rules. Weapons were forbidden (rule 1), as was 'violence' (rule 2) and 'alcohol' (rule 3), community leaders were to be informed of all activities (rule 5) and respect to be observed towards all protection actors (rule 7). UNPOL was responsible for 'solving criminal issues' (rule 8), and 'in case of arrest, the teams' administration' be informed – 'teams' being the apolitical term adopted by protection actors to refer to gangs.

Protection actors placed themselves firmly at the centre of dispute settlement between gangs. Rule 10 stipulated that when unable to 'settle their conflicts peacefully', youth

should 'ask for help from the humanitarians and community leadership to facilitate a resolution', while Rule 13 established weekly meetings between gang representatives and the two protection agencies leading this process. Rules also stipulated how community leaders should behave in relation to gangs, revealing how the PoC site and its protection actors and policies directly contributed to shaping the acceptance and legitimacy of gangs. As per the rules, community leaders should 'ensure that Community Watch Groups (CWGs) are not targeting youth who are not violating any of the rules of the PoC' (rule 11), while also attempting to open up the private space of youth to community scrutiny through rule 18.

The imposition of disco hall rule-making demonstrates how protection policies attempted to codify legitimate and illegitimate activities and behaviour, as well as to frame how inter-generational relations should evolve. Whether these rules were respected is not the concern here, but rather to show how protection policies and initiatives imposed by protection actors, community leaders and chiefs and elders governed social relations, determining the limits of legitimate and acceptable youth behaviour and activities.

Ibreck (2023) discusses how, in relation to gender violence, protection policies and programmes seemed to constrain tradition and custom, and imposed UN authority in opposition to the power of chiefs and elders. Similarly, the mediation and negotiation of the dance hall rules between protection actors, gangs and the CHC reveals how the everyday realities of protection in the PoC site operated and came into tension with local norms and practices. Analysis of these rules highlight how protection actors played a part in contributing towards the conditional legitimacy of gangs. Ultimately, local norms and practices change over time and involve continuous negotiations and boundary pushing between youth and older generations. The disco halls and their codification, and eventual acceptance, was one tangible example of this occurring against the backdrop of protection policies and actors.

Conclusion: youth contestation, the gang label to escape waithood

The social journeys and struggles of youth in gangs offers an important lens through which to understand the PoC sites, and the latter's impact on everyday life and the reshaping of social roles and relations. Focusing on the challenges of youth embodied in the discussion around the legitimacy of gangs speaks to the struggles of society more broadly, because youth and their seniors are largely entangled in the same competition for power, resources and recognition.

But these everyday struggles and ongoing processes of contestation and negotiation in the PoC site between youth and their elders were as much about inter-generational, as about broader power struggles between all those within the PoC site: urban and rural South Sudanese, returnees who came home, and those who never left. For Lam, whose words open this article, 'Rural youth are different from urban youth. We speak a different language even if it's the same mother tongue. I cannot just go to the cattle camp and dance their songs. We have our own style.'[29] These seemingly inflated dichotomies between urban/returnee values and norms and rural/'local' ways, as well as old/young, hide a much more complex reality of young people's social becoming and shared attempts at evading waithood.

What emerges here is how the label of 'gang' was a translation of a globalised urban life and the allure it held for young men also trapped in waithood. The formation of gangs in the PoC site were one powerful expression of how some young people sought to contest and reimagine themselves and their relationship with senior generations, while embracing a global social and moral economy that challenged the values of those same generations. This was especially visible in the confined UN-governed social and physical space of the PoC site in Bentiu, where youth 'coming of age' and inter-generational negotiations occurred in conversation with protection policies and initiatives. Gangs allow us to recognise and examine 'young people as citizens who both conform to and challenge the standards imposed on them by traditional hierarchies, national politics, and global forces' (Honwana 2012, 14).

Popular understandings of gangs in the PoC sites as criminal entities are overly simplistic. These perspectives fail to understand the value of gangs for young's people's sense of social, moral and political belonging and protection. Neither do they take account of the pull factors that attract youth to gangs; as well as offering members continuity between their difficult pasts, their present and the possibilities of better futures, gangs offer members a sense of collective belonging and identity, protection, a coping mechanism and support system, and a means to make sense of their role in a hyper-masculinised and militarised society, as young men in the context of ongoing conflict, and the limited opportunities of the PoC sites.

Against the backdrop of intense social changes driven by conflict, militarisation, displacement and urbanisation, perhaps it is possible to say that familial, clan and age-set loyalties are shifting to gang loyalties. Perhaps by recognising 'gangs of the good kind', to quote one young member, it is possible to see youth activity in gangs not as inherently destructive and criminal, but as a means of reimagining a future free from the traditional restrictions of freedom of thought and action, a pathway to overcome social and economic frustrations and realise adulthood. The relationships between youth in gangs and older generations also reveal that although young people are increasingly defying the authority of the older generations and thus pushing new boundaries with uncertain moral and socio-political consequences, they cannot completely afford to disregard their elders and other sources of authority because their wider social acceptance largely depends on communal social recognition.

Notes

1. Interview with male 26 years old, Bentiu PoC 02/05/2017.
2. This is a fictional name; the informant has been anonymised.
3. All informants have been anonymised or given pseudonyms. I did this research with logistical and administrative support from the Danish Refugee Council/Danish Demining Group and I complied with all their ethical standards and guidelines during research. I also gained informed consent from all participants.
4. Interview with senior UNPOL officer, Bentiu PoC 24/04/2017.
5. Interview with UNPOL officer, Bentiu PoC 06/05/2017.
6. Interview with UNPOL officer, Bentiu PoC 06/05/2017.
7. Interview with senior UNPOL officer, Bentiu PoC 24/04/2017.
8. Interview with CHC youth representative, Bentiu PoC 21/04/2017.
9. Interview with male elder, member of chief's court Bentiu, 05/05/2017.
10. Interview with male 26 years old, Bentiu PoC, 22/04/2017.
11. Interview with D-Black leadership, 24 years old, Bentiu PoC 25/04/2017. D-Black is also the stage name for Ghanaian multiple award winning hip hop and Afrobeat musician and entrepreneur Desmond Kwesi Blackmore.

12. Interview with D-Black leadership, 24 years old, Bentiu PoC 25/04/2017.
13. Interview with D-Black leadership, 24 years old, Bentiu PoC 25/04/2017.
14. Interview with male elder, member of chief's court Bentiu town, 05/05/2017.
15. Interview with male elder, Bentiu PoC, 21/04/2017.
16. Interview with D-Black leadership, Bentiu PoC 25/04/2017.
17. Interview with male 19 years old, Bentiu PoC, 21/04/2017.
18. Interview with D-Black leadership, 24 years old, Bentiu PoC 25/04/2017.
19. Interview male informant, 28 years old, Bentiu PoC 20/04/2017.
20. Interview with D-Black leadership, 23 years old, Bentiu PoC 25/04/2017.
21. Interview with Jamaica leadership, 23 years old, Bentiu PoC 25/04/2017.
22. Interview with male 20 years old. Rubkona town, 27/04/2017.
23. Interview with Jamaica leadership, 23 years old, Bentiu town, 27/04/2017.
24. FGD with Jamaica members, 20 years old, Bentiu town, 27/04/2017.
25. Interview with senior UNPOL officer, Bentiu PoC 24/04/2017.
26. 'Terms of Reference', Youth Task Force Rubkona County May 2016 (on file with author).
27. Interview with D-Black leadership, 24 years old, Bentiu PoC 25/04/2017.
28. 'Rules of Music Hall', unknown date (on file with author).
29. Interview male 26 years old, Bentiu PoC 02/05/2017.

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