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The politics of being Murle in South Sudan: state violence, displacement and the narrativisation of identity

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ABSTRACT

The article offers a nuanced account of how identities are negotiated and contested in South Sudan, by focusing on how Murle and ŋalam identities were deployed in different ways in different places in overlapping periods during a time of armed conflict. As such, it explores the interplay between political violence and the instrumental deployment of ethnicity. Focusing on the 2012–2014 period of war between South Sudan's government and a largely Murle rebellion, it unpacks the longstanding Murle stereotyping as 'fierce and hostile' – an image fostered by the interlocution of more powerful neighbours in the colonial encounters and sustained by their dominance in subsequent governance structures. The article specifically discusses how Murle agricultural communities from Boma found protection strategies by activating temporary sub-ethnic identities and navigating the violence of *being Murle*. This challenges the "naturalised" linkages between modes of subsistence or ecology, and identity, and demonstrates how spatial movements affect the instrumental narrativisation of ethnic identities. The article argues for the continual interplay of ethnicity in relation to the state and its strategies and opportunities. Identity-making and identity-politics are dialctical processes – deployed by the state as much as by those on the receiving end as a source of protection from violence.

The late Murle paramount chief ŋantho Kavula had fled the 'government war' affecting his home area of Pibor to South Sudan's capital Juba when I met him in mid-2013. I asked him about the politics around Murle identity unravelling in South Sudan: 'This is politics, people want to separate us into two, it's not true, it's just politics.'[1] The chief was referring to the debate and shifting meanings around the term 'ŋalam', commonly used in the Murle language pejoratively to refer to people with no cattle. Chief ŋantho then proposed to sing a song. For him, the song was evidence that Murle people historically identified as one fixed group and came from one single place:

> *Baale e kotoŋeya Lotilla e izi lorec oniin o*
> *Kiciwona ki moden Bom yo looc ci rɛɛn baba o*

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ɛmɛda matawori e baatak bɛɛ
Logoz ween camit e orit noŋ e
Arɔɔŋ baba e coma alaam ŋinti awodɛn dɔlya[2]

A long time ago I left Lotilla [home] to be in Boma [my original home]
We've been fighting with enemies about my father's ancestral home
Persisting until we achieved the impossible
We encourage our young warriors to fight hard
So that our fathers can get a place to take water with their children

Songs are not only important repositories of South Sudanese history and knowledge.[3] Songs are also culturally situated mediums used to challenge oppressive power structures or call for accountability. Chief ŋantho deployed his song as evidence of shared Murle identity and to contest the identity politics of a violent state.[4] His song alluded to his people's shared origins – their 'father's ancestral home' of Boma – and the collective struggle to protect this land from neighbouring groups.

Chief ŋantho was speaking – and singing – at a time when Murle identity was being undermined, and when Murle people felt collectively under siege by the South Sudanese state. He was reacting to how the 2012–2014 war between the government's Sudan People Liberation Army (SPLA) and the largely Murle rebellion, the South Sudan Democratic Movement/Army – Cobra Faction (SSDM/A-CF), composed predominantly of Murle fighters, had set in motion and made use of ethnic identity politics.

The Murle people are an agro-pastoralist community living along South Sudan's border with Ethiopia, in what was until 2014 Jonglei state and is since the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). They consider themselves a minority group and have historically held a difficult relationship with the state.[5] Referring to the disarmament of the Murle in 2008, South Sudan's President Salva Kiir Mayardit argued that: 'Either I leave them with guns and they terrorize the rest of the people, or I crush them to liberate the other people from being always attacked by the Murle.'[6] Political marginalisation is also reflected in the absence of social and economic infrastructure, even when compared to other remote parts of South Sudan. Strikingly, out of the 35,459 South Sudanese students that sat for the 2022–2023 Certificate of Secondary Education examination, only 42 were from the Greater Pibor area; and out of the 398 secondary schools in the country, only one was in Pibor.[7]

With a collective sense of group identity through shared social institutions, the Murle from the lowlands and highlands have had diverse experiences of recent history, ecology and landscape, thus also of livelihoods, legacies of conflict and even of the state.[8] At the most basic level, the Murle are divided between the larger agro-pastoralist lowland Murle inhabiting the Lotilla plains and the agrarian highland Murle inhabiting the Boma Plateau. Ecological differences have meant that the lowland and highland Murle have developed diverse sociocultural patterns and livelihood strategies. Whereas lowland Murle place cattle at the centre of life and follow seasonal transhumance migrations, highland Murle are predominantly cultivators with small livestock.[9] But these ecological differences should not be over-emphasised – as noted by chief ŋantho: 'The land belongs to us all, Boma and Pibor belong to all of us. We cannot say they [Murle of Boma] are few, so let them go. They are part of us. Murle are only one.'[10]

This article provides a seminal contribution to South Sudanese ethnography that challenges dominant anti-Murle narratives and provides a more nuanced understanding of Murle identity and Greater Pibor's historical context. Situated in scholarship on the interplay of violence and ethnicity, the study focuses on the tumultuous 2012–2014 period and geographically covers the highlands of Boma and lowlands of Pibor, and displacement in Juba, Kapoeta and Ethiopia. This is also a nuanced empirical study of how identities are negotiated and contested in South Sudan, by focusing on how Murle and ŋalam identities were deployed in different ways in different places in overlapping periods. More broadly, it contributes to scholarly debates about the relationship between identities and conflict. The article moves beyond simplistic interpretations of identity formation as a state-driven political strategy to divide and rule, or as a resort to tribal identities to find refuge from the state. Instead, it explores identity-making from both a bottom-up and top-down perspective and argues for the continual interplay and negotiation of ethnicity in relation to the state and its administrative, political and military strategies and opportunities.

It is widely accepted that people negotiate and perform ethnic identifications for social and political purposes. There is also extensive scholarship on how the violence of the contemporary state is part and parcel of producing and activating alternative sub-ethnic or new ethnic identities.[11] However, this research demonstrates how people are much more than only victims of war, displacement and state-driven identity politics. Rather, they are active agents in strategically selecting, deploying and embodying elements of identity that best suit the time and place and can offer protection in light of ongoing conflict. Identity politics are not only used by dominant groups as discourses of power and exclusion but also instrumentalised by "marginal" groups as a source of protection from the violence that surrounds them. Put simply, highland Murle deployed ŋalam sub-identities to protect themselves from the conflict affecting Murle people. Through a detailed analysis, the research also shows how Murle people's narratives of events, understandings of violence and tactical performances of identity were directly connected to their spatial movements and place-making.

The article first discusses the broader context of being Murle in South Sudan and the historical contingencies that have contributed to the community's marginalisation. This historical framing helps explain the emergence of the largely Murle Cobra Faction rebellion against the government's SPLA. It then examines how the SPLA-Cobra Faction war set in motion a divisive debate on Murle identity, and to the narrativisation of an alternative flexible and fluid ŋalam identity. Highland Murle individuals strategically accepted or rejected "being ŋalam" based on their socio-political, economic and spatial movements, interests and needs at that moment, which shifted over time and place. The article provides a rich account of how Murle people narrativised identities differently and continuously depending on their spatial movements.

Findings emerge from long-term and multi-sited ethnographic research in Boma, Juba, Pibor, Kapoeta and Dimma/Raat in Ethiopia. Fieldwork was first carried out in Boma in 2012 and 2013 until the SPLA-Cobra Faction conflict reached the area in May 2013, forcing most of its Murle residents (and the researcher) to flee. Subsequently, the author followed networks originating from Boma into displacement in Juba, Kapoeta and across the border to Dimma and Raat in Ethiopia, and documented identity narratives and survival strategies. Analysis is based on life histories, conflict and displacement

histories, and over 100 in-depth interviews, collected across these locations especially between 2012 and 2015, but up to 2023. Analysis is also drawn from three Boma Peace Conferences that took place during and after the SPLA-Cobra Faction war, between 2013 and 2014. All informants have been fully anonymised except for customary and senior government authorities speaking in a public capacity during peace conferences.

Violence, conflict, and ethnic identity formation

Violence has been fundamental to how states have structured and consolidated their authority in East Africa.[12] There are also numerous contemporary examples of how the state has been part of both constituting and militarising identities, including specifically in Sudan and South Sudan.[13] These studies reveal how violence is not just a destructive force, but also creative in how it weaves itself with notions of collective identity and belonging.[14] This is also why ethnicity has proven to be a popular means of political solidarity and mobilisation and has materialised as one of the dominant political forms of the post-colonial period across Africa, by both the state and its people.[15]

Ethnic identity formation is a process that follows the particular interests of a group, or of individuals within that group, understood relationally to other "identities" and structures. In this sense, ethnicity is as much primordial as it is instrumental and performative.[16] Across Africa, ethnic identifications have historically been very dynamic and responsive to perceptions of threat, illustrating 'not only the constructed and contingent nature of identities but also the mobilizing forces of fear and anxiety, which are discursively produced'.[17] I make use of Dunn's argument, with reference to Central Africa, that ethnic, racial or national group identities are frequently produced through 'the process of narrativization'. Navigating identities involves 'taking on, creating, assigning or performing a story of some sort that captures the central elements and characteristics of what it means to be a member of the specific community'.[18]

In South Sudan, as elsewhere, modes of subsistence – pastoralism and farming – play a large role in framing identity narratives. Referring to the Omo Valley, Tornay contends that 'processes of ethnic group formation, [however], cannot be fully understood without reference to modes of subsistence and ecology'.[19] This article argues that contrary to what is often assumed, there is no 'natural' link between modes of subsistence and ecology, and identity. Instead, highland Murle negotiated being *ŋalam* – the absence of cattle and a livelihood depending on cultivation – and deployed this purportedly primordial linkage between subsistence modes/ecology and identity discursively. Rather, subsistence modes – and all they represent and signify – are used instrumentally. Across Africa, pastoralist livelihoods are linked to violence, militarisation and being at odds with the state.[20] Thus, instrumentalising identity features centred on agricultural modes of subsistence serves to recall imaginings of peacefulness and ultimately as a protection strategy from political violence.

This is similar to how agricultural Arusha people have been aware of the advantages of retaining a fluid Maasai ethnicity.[21] Spear observes that 'If Maasai saw themselves and were seen by others as "People of Cattle", then the designation "Agricultural Maasai" would seem to be a contradiction in terms.'[22] Yet, both for Maasai and Murle, the dominant image and narrative as 'people of cattle' conceals a much more nuanced and

complex understanding of ethnic identity, livelihood fluidity and inter-dependent support networks between people in the lowlands and the highlands. This is also what Andretta terms as the Murle 'adaptive edge'.[23]

Empirical findings also parallel Malkki's arguments of how the everyday circumstances of life of Burundian refugees in Tanzania and their 'spatial and social isolation' were central to 'the social and imaginative processes of the construction of nationness and identity'.[24] This study contributes to this literature by showing how political violence leads to instrumentalised identity narratives that are moveable and shift according to spatial trajectories of displacement. Places of safety affected how people individually and collectively related to *being* part of the Murle imaginary. Connectedly, Wendy James explains how Uduk communities from the Blue Nile reproduced themselves as a by-product of a constant attack by the state.[25] Similar to James's argument that the Uduk were formed through collective experiences of survival and displacement, the highland Murle experiences of the 2012–2014 war and subsequent displacement trajectories produced them as a ŋalam group, as an instrumental and temporary status.[26]

The violence of being Murle in South Sudan

The Murle community are a small group in South Sudan often portrayed locally, nationally and even internationally as the main aggressors and the source of much of the instability affecting eastern South Sudan, 'despite the reality of a politically and economically marginalized Murle'.[27] In South Sudan, the group are stereotyped as '"backward", "hostile" and "aggressive"',[28] and often single-handedly accused of violent events in Jonglei and elsewhere, despite evidence of the opposite.[29]

The stigmatisation and scapegoating of the Murle have largely been fostered by the interlocution of their better-represented and politically powerful Dinka Bor neighbours in the initial colonial encounters with this region and sustained by the dominance of Dinka Bor and other neighbouring groups in subsequent governance structures. In 1949, B.A. Lewis, a British district commissioner in Pibor later turned ethnographer observed that 'The tribe calls itself "Murle". It is better known to the world as the "Beir Tribe", but this is the name given to it by the Bor Dinka.'[30] That the Murle were known to colonial authorities as 'Beir', a Dinka term to refer to them, meaning 'enemy', is indicative that their relationship to the government was, and remains, mediated by dominant Dinka Bor representations of the Murle as the aggressors.

After Sudan's independence in 1956 – and during the southern Sudanese Anyanya insurgency against the Sudanese government – Hassan ŋacingol, the first Murle to be appointed a District Commissioner, allied himself to the latter, reinforcing the negative portrayals of the community.[31] During the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A)'s struggle against the Khartoum government, the Murle were split between those in Boma, who largely supported the SPLM/A, and those who fought with Ismael Konyi's Pibor Defence Force (PDF). The PDF, locally known as the 'Brigade', was a local Murle militia in Pibor established by Ismael Konyi and aligned with the Khartoum government to protect the Murle community from 'predation by the neighbouring Dinka and Nuer, who dominated the leadership of the SPLM/A'.[32] Decisions regarding the side

on which people fought were often based on practical concerns, such as who was in control of the location where a person was or had been displaced, rather than political or ideological considerations.

The above historical contingencies have all contributed to the demonisation of the Murle community in South Sudan. But the most notable prevailing myth propagated by the media, poorly informed NGOs and even senior government officials, accuses Murle of suffering from infertility and link this to child abduction practices across Jonglei.[33] Child abductions are a relational phenomenon practised by various communities and part of histories of conflict in Jonglei and elsewhere in South Sudan.[34] However, abductions are most often attributed to the Murle and explained by historically speculative and political narratives of Murle infertility.[35]

Although further research is needed on the complex political economy of abductions, what is certain is there is no evidence that Murle have higher infertility rates than other groups nor that infertility is connected to child abductions. Rather, there is evidence that child abductions are practised by various groups in Greater Jonglei and that, in fact, in the last few years, Murle have been the victims of abductions more than other groups. A 2021 Human Rights report documenting armed violence involving community-based Dinka, Nuer and Murle militias in Greater Jonglei between January and August 2020 reported that out of 686 women and children abducted, 638 were Murle. According to the report, 'Among them were 239 boys and 219 girls. The coalition of Dinka and Nuer community-based militias accounted for 93 per cent (638) of these abductions, while seven per cent (48) were attributed to Murle groups.'[36] Myths of infertility serve to further demonise and tarnish the Murle as a group, emasculate Murle men and dehumanise Murle women.

Since the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), Jonglei State has been severely affected by communal and political conflicts.[37] Supported by the Sudanese government, the rebellions of the late George Athor in 2010 and David Yau Yau in 2010 and again in 2012, contributed to a wide availability of weapons and ammunition. These also contributed to increasingly violent intercommunal conflicts. Inter-communal conflict between the Lou Nuer and Murle escalated and became increasingly violent in 2009–2011, extending on to 2013.[38] Targeting tactics changed – attacks were no longer only about capturing cattle but also targeted entire villages, abducting and killing women and children, and looting and destroying homes, state infrastructure, including hospitals and schools, and NGO facilities.[39]

In 2011-12, South Sudan's government responded by initiating another round of civilian disarmament of all groups in the area, the fifth SPLA-led disarmament campaign in Jonglei since 2007.[40] The SPLA battalion responsible for disarmament in Pibor was mostly made up of officers from the Nuer and Dinka ethnic groups, who took the chance to avenge earlier Murle cattle raids and attacks on their communities.[41] By May 2012, it had become a forced disarmament campaign, particularly in the plains of Pibor County where the SPLA committed rapes, simulated drowning and other serious abuses.[42] In addition to previous unresolved political grievances, the SPLA's violent disarmament campaign instigated Murle rebel leader David Yau Yau to resume his 2010 rebellion with Murle men joining *en masse* to protect their families and communities. Formally, the Cobra Faction was calling for greater Murle government representation and the creation of a Murle state.[43]

The fighting ravaged across Pibor and eventually reached Boma in May 2013. The SPLA's heavy-handed response to Murle civilians in Boma led to most fleeing across the border to Ethiopia, south to Kapoeta in Eastern Equatoria, and some on to Juba. Across these locations, as well as across the lowlands, Murle people felt collectively under siege by the government and targeted based on their ethnic identity. In turn, the government's actions, as well as members from neighbouring communities in Boma, began emphasising the term ŋalam to refer to Murle from Boma.

The events that led to the establishment of the Cobra Faction and subsequent violence unleashed on the Murle people were symptomatic of a more systematic anti-Murle narrative in South Sudan. Recognising the harmful ways in which Murle people have come to be represented in South Sudan as 'a problem',[44] the rest of the article investigates how highland Murle from Boma found strategies for safety by navigating "being Murle" and activating temporary sub-ethnic identities, during a particularly challenging time, and how place and trajectories of displacement influenced shifting narratives of identity.

The state, the politics of Murle identity and the narrativisation of ŋalam

The SPLA-Cobra Faction war and subsequent dynamics set in motion a divisive debate on Murle identity politics. A product of contested internal and external negotiations and pressures, many highland Murle temporarily presented themselves as a distinct ŋalam–bounded group. This was produced through the deliberate narrativisation of identity enabled by the creative selection of what were considered to be significant characteristics and qualities. In the Murle language, ŋalam(it) refers to someone with no cattle and, by association – in a society structured around cattle – poverty in wealth, status and family. Because Murle people in Boma cultivate and do not keep cattle, the term was used internally among Murle to refer to people from Boma and had acquired a geographical association to Boma. In turn, the term Lotillain(nya) was another internal and informal term used to identify those from the Lotilla plains in the lowlands.

Violence in South Sudan is partially rooted in colonial-era spatial inequalities. But as argued by Thomas, it is also explained by how successive states have appropriated 'ethnicity to organize their relationships with rural (and subsequently urban) populations, and this has made ethnicity part of South Sudan's political order'.[45] Since South Sudan's independence in 2011, ethnicity has been instrumentalised to access state resources and patronage networks. The 2013 civil war further essentialised ethnic identities as the means to belong to the nation-state.[46] These fragmentary identity politics constructed primarily through violence are deployed by networks of actors as the means to claim, mobilise and capture state and international resources, and simultaneously deny others access.[47]

The Cobra Faction rebellion placed Murle civilians even more at odds with the state. The general sense of persecution, fear and inability to speak out on Murle oppression grew especially after the arrest of two prominent Murle pastors in Juba in early 2013.[48] Neighbourhoods in Juba with large Murle populations such as Jebel and Souk Sita were monitored by National Security and there were several recorded cases of Murle men being illegally detained. In May 2013, Brigadier General Kolor Pino, the Murle warden of Boma National Park described by President Kiir as a 'dedicated

soldier and nationalist'[49] was killed by the SPLA on the road from Kapoeta to Boma.[50] President Kiir blamed Pino's killing in cold blood on 'rogue' SPLA elements and said 'those responsible for this reprehensive crime will be held accountable'[51] but no investigation took place. For many Murle people, these attacks confirmed that even high-level and SPLM/A Murle loyalists were targeted. Alluding to the sense of persecution, one displaced Murle man in Juba feared that '[i]f we don't do something, it will continue until Murle community is finished'.[52]

This was not an unjustified claim. *Being* Murle during the Cobra Faction war, especially between 2012 and 2013, had become a liability and a source of insecurity and there were numerous cases of Murle civilians indiscriminately targeted and killed by the SPLA. During that period, survival strategies often involved fleeing for physical safety. Rural pastoralists across the lowlands concentrated with their cattle in Baaz and Juom, in remote hard-to-reach swampy areas considered to be safe havens.[53] Town people in the lowlands gradually and temporarily settled in over-crowded homes of Murle relatives in Juba. Once this became socially and economically unsustainable, many families continued their journeys on to Kakuma Refugee Camp in northern Kenya, or refugee settlements in Arua and Adjumani in northern Uganda.[54]

The patterns of violence in Boma were more sudden and survival strategies less obvious. Agro-pastoralist populations in the lowlands were both more accustomed to movement as well as able to rely on cattle to sustain themselves. Highland Murle farmers from Boma depended on their crops to survive. This made temporary movement to hard-to-reach areas more challenging. Some of those in Boma town had been leaving for Juba and Kakuma for some time, but the majority of Boma's residents in the Boma Plateau relied on the false sense of safety of the hills of Upper Boma. The Cobra Faction took control of the area without any resistance from the defecting SPLA on 5 May 2013, with the majority of civilians cautiously remaining in their homes in Boma or hiding close by in the bush. But civilians were forced to flee two weeks later, on 18 May 2013, when two Battalions of the SPLA's special force 'Commando' violently retook control of the area.[55]

In this scenario, many Murle people in Boma resorted not only to flight but also to the adoption of an alternative identity that would guarantee their safety, by disassociating with what was seen as the cause of violence – *being Murle*. Highland Murle people simultaneously embraced and were pressured into their (sub-ethnic) identity. This was a process negotiated internally and externally. On the one hand, they were pressured by a government army perceived to attack the Murle people as well as by their neighbouring communities in Boma. On the other hand, this alternative ethnic label was being strategically deployed by Murle people from Boma when it was perceived to be socially and politically expedient, such as in Peace Conferences and in some areas of displacement.

In similar ways by which *being Maasai* is immediately associated with cattle, *being* Murle is equated with pastoralism and holds significant symbolic, moral and socio-political capital not within the Murle community, but also nationwide.[56] Although cattle continue to be important for highland Murle, subsistence is based on agriculture, which also feeds into representations of being a 'peaceful people'.[57] Highland Murle had a repertoire of identity features they could draw from. Yet the element that could

best distinguish highland Murle from the broader larger lowland Murle was ecology and their mode of subsistence and its implications for everyday life and group relations. By instrumentalising their agrarian identity marker, highland Murle sought to separate themselves from the war with the government.

These politics of difference were also instrumentalised and 'brought by outsiders'[58] with vested interests in dividing the Murle. Externally, a divide-and-conquer strategy was deployed by the government and carried out on the ground by the SPLA supported by other neighbouring minority groups with the apparent intention of changing Boma's socio-ethnic landscape. The Murle community were convinced that Dinka Bor had an interest in taking over Boma because, during the SPLM/A period, so many Dinka Bor and others had lived in Boma in the mid-1980s onwards and recognised the area's resource-rich potential. Simultaneously, highland Murle felt increasingly threatened by neighbouring minority groups in the area.

But the politics of difference were also widely politicised internally within the Murle community. There were different reactions to "becoming ŋalam". In some cases Murle became ŋalam out of necessity – the narrativisation of ŋalam offered the discursive framework that enabled them to be safe. Other times because of political aspirations and in some cases, genuine wishes for greater autonomy and considering that as a separate "tribe", ŋalam could have greater access to state resources.

At the height of the Cobra Faction rebellion, the September and November 2013 Boma Peace Conferences were the stage of heated debates on Murle identity and the underlying meanings and socio-political repercussions of adopting or rejecting ŋalam identities. In the Boma Peace Conference in September 2013, which brought Highland Murle together in Juba because Boma was insecure, one elder argued:

> We're always hearing from people this word 'ŋalam'. I want to answer this (…). Who created 'ŋalam'? – All of us, we are born, but we don't name ourselves. We are named. By who? The people of Pibor named us ŋalam because we have no cows. It is them who called us ŋalam; we refused many times. Now we accepted it, why are you quarrelling? It is them who named us. It is them, people of Pibor, who are naming us. Somebody who is poor without cows, just looking for wild fruit – OK. Call us ŋalam. It is the people of cows who named us.[59]

His statement was met with both approval and anger from different people in the room. The heated answer from one former local authority from Boma living in Pibor revealed how contentious debates around Murle identity were, 'But why do you accept it? If today someone calls you thief, will you accept it? When Dinka were killing us, did they call us ŋalam?'[60]

These extracts show how Murle people negotiated the term ŋalam – its origins, shifting meanings and associations to spatial location, livelihoods and to poverty. But it also shows how identity-making and identity politics are dialectical processes – deployed by the state as much as by those on the receiving end as a source of protection from violence. Ethnic identifications were discursive and instrumental, but as shown by these statements, they were also about survival and about broader Murle societal continuity. Despite the ŋalam rhetoric, some Murle recognised how government – often equated with 'Dinka (Bor)' (as suggested by the second statement) – treated, threatened and 'killed' Murle from Boma or Pibor alike, whether they identified as Murle or ŋalam.

Place, trajectories of displacement and shifting narratives of identity

Highland Murle people's spatial locations and trajectories of displacement shaped people's narratives of the socio-political context and how they strategically deployed and performed ethnic identities. The 2012–2014 war forced many people to flee Boma, and set in motion a reimagining and enactment of alternative identities. By drawing on accounts from people at "home" in Boma, those who fled to Kapoeta and Juba, and across the border to Ethiopia, the rest of the article examines the narratives of Murle and *ŋalam* identities in these various places. The contested nature of explanations suggests that to understand a wider context, narratives must be compared and juxtaposed, and that there is no single privileged standpoint to study social processes.

The narrativisation of *ŋalam* took different turns, in connection to the meanings and experiences that people had of their spatial location. But Murle also crafted alternative *ŋalam* identities in response to the practical circumstances of their day-to-day lives, whether at *home* in Boma, in displacement in Juba and Kapoeta or across the border in Ethiopia. The pressures of being Murle were experienced and addressed differently in each place, suggesting how movement and place shape people's narratives and understandings of violent conflict, and diverse performances and enacting of identity.

Adapting to a new social landscape in Boma

Murle villagers from Kaiwa, deep in the Boma Plateau, hid in the close-by forest and caves during the most critical period of violence in Boma in May 2013 but did not permanently flee their homes as nearly all other Murle from Boma. On their return to their village, people found their homes looted and destroyed. They also witnessed a shift in the social landscape in Boma, that saw Murle go from a dominant group to a threatened minority. During this contested period, neighbouring Jie and Suri-Kachipo communities narrativised Murle as rebels or rebel sympathisers. Being Murle was associated with the rebellion, and thus carried the potential of being a target of violence. So pragmatically, people from Kaiwa village "became" *ŋalam,* simultaneously a choice and imposition.

The majority of Kaiwa's population remained in Kaiwa under the direction of the spiritual chief of the area, Peter Kuju, who threatened to curse those who left.[61] For Kaiwa's residents, it was safer to remain in Boma and face the war than to challenge the chief's spiritual power, suggesting how respected spiritual chiefs continue to be. One young man recounted the red chief's words: 'He said whoever leaves this mountain is cursed and will die on the way. Kuju said he would not leave his father's home. That's why many Murle were initially killed.'[62] For Peter Kuju, he ordered people to stay because if otherwise, 'all of Boma would be entirely occupied by other tribes'.[63]

The paramount chief of Boma, Logidang Lom, was from Kaiwa and remained in Boma throughout the war. His advice was to strategically be *ŋalam* if it provided safety during the peak of the war. At the Boma Peace Meeting in September 2013, he explained:

> The words *ŋalam* and Murle, I want to assure you in Juba – because all the leaders of Murle reside in Juba – Boma is for Murle, and this word called *ŋalam* is there but is not a tribe. When *Lotillanya* people go to the house of a brother with new faces, they are asked, if they're from Lotilla, and the same of the other way. That's why it is for us alone. Because

what annoyed people is that some are saying that *ŋalam* is becoming a tribe. This word is our nickname. I went to Pibor when I was still young in the 1980s. People were bullying me, 'You're a *ŋalamit*', I was getting very annoyed, but they were just joking, like challenging me. (…) We Murle divide ourselves, 'they' divide and conquer us. When you divide and become few, an enemy will come and cheat you.[64]

He was explaining to a largely urban Murle crowd the meaning of *ŋalam* and the consequences of allowing externally pressured divisions. With 'they', Chief Logidang referred to neighbouring groups. Some months later at the November 2013 Peace Meeting in Boma, which again saw the use of the politically charged term, one young man shared what Chief Logidang had commented earlier to a group of youth: 'The chief was saying that we are being squeezed into being *ŋalam*, by government and [by neighbours]. If we don't disassociate from Murle we'll be crushed.'[65]

Aware of the instrumental deployment of flexible identities, Logidang's advice to his youth when confronted with being *ŋalam* was to 'just accept it, say *ŋalam*'. Yet, simultaneously reassuring his youth that they were Murle, 'when things go back to normal'.[66] Nearly a year later in August 2014, months after the signing of the Peace Deal between the government and the Cobra Faction that led to the establishment of the largely Murle-populated GPAA, in his home in Kaiwa, Logidang explained his understanding of *ŋalam*, and how and why it had been used instrumentally:

The words *ŋalam* and *Lotillanya*, it is just abuse between us Murle alone. During that [SPLA-Cobra] conflict, we used that word *ŋalam* just to defend ourselves, to save your life. But now in time of peace, it is just our word again (…). We divided ourselves last time because of the war, but now we shouldn't use those words again. We are all together.[67]

In the broader socio-political economy of South Sudan where population numbers play a large part in determining political power, access to state resources and protection networks, highland Murle not only felt Murle, but many also strategically recognised the longer-term advantages of being Murle.

Surviving in Ethiopia

The violence of being Murle extended across the border to Ethiopia. The hardship of displacement in Raat refugee settlement and Dimma border town related not only to fulfilling basic needs but also to *being* ethnic Murle in Ethiopia. Nuer and Anyuak lived on both sides of the border and disseminated negative stereotypes about the Murle, also fed by sporadic cases of Murle child abductions. There were cases of active discrimination and it was not uncommon for Murle refugees to be abused on the streets of Dimma market. To avoid harassment, Murle in Ethiopia sought strategies to adapt and go unnoticed. Two informants noted that similar to Nuer and Anyuak that lived on both sides of the border and could present and pass as being South Sudanese or Ethiopian,[68] 'We can pretend we're Ethiopian and "become *ŋalam*" from Ethiopia',[69] alluding to an agrarian community from the same language group living on the mountain range northwest of Dimma.[70] One key informant from Boma found physical ways to adapt and go unnoticed. He went from dressing like a 'clean-cut' NGO worker to adopting what he termed 'Anyuak style' haircut and clothes. These changes made him go unnoticed by the wider population and by authorities and gave him a sense of safety.[71]

Murle that had fled to Ethiopia were busy adapting to a new language and life in exile. The politics of Murle identity affecting 'home' were not a priority for them. The settlement in Raat had lowland and highland Murle facing the same challenges of displacement. However, the historical legacy and associations between violence and pastoralism still permeated relations. As explained by one refugee from Boma:

> I shall be very happy if we just become ŋalam. The problem is this language of ours, it is the same (…). They've done many bad things, like abductions and killings. Now the name 'Murle' is bad. But if you are ŋalam you are accepted. I want to be known as ŋalam. (…) It is very difficult being a refugee, we'll think of that when we go home. There are no problems between us and *Lotillanya* in the camp.[72]

His remarks underlined the frustration of existence constantly threatened by negative portrayals of Murle. Yet they also revealed an awareness that Murle from Boma could not just become ŋalam, they were Murle.

Being Murle: internal displacement and shifting identities

Murle people responded in real time to the social conditions and pressures of each location. In Boma, the consequences of identity nomenclatures, and engaging with ŋalam identity politics, were not only discursive but had concrete implications for people's safety. Conversely, in Juba, it was the opposite. In the neighbourhoods with most Murle homes – Souk Sita, Jebel, Jeberona, Kator and Lologo – Murle networks supported each other, irrespective of where they came from. In Juba, Murle supported each other and relied on the strong social institutions, family bonds and marriage relationships that bound Murle people together. Highland Murle in Juba were safe because they had wider Murle networks to rely upon. The majority of the 10,000 Murle people that had fled to Juba by July 2013 were town people from the lowlands (from Pibor, Likuangole and Gumuruk towns) with some financial means.

Some highland Murle also made the journey from Boma to Kapoeta and eventually to Juba. At a time when being Murle was associated with being a rebel, some displaced Murle in Kapoeta asserted their government loyalties, because 'especially soldiers, they say "you Murle, you are all Yau Yau"'.[73] In these cases, people emphasised their agrarian subsistence as the most distinctive factor. As noted by one displaced woman in Kapoeta: 'We are different because we have no cows and we are cultivating, when these people came and killed us, we had no guns.' Her friend added: 'For us of Boma, we just cultivate and marry without cattle. Maybe we will separate. Us in Boma, we are very few in number, we don't fight. Boma is just for ŋalam. ŋalam is another tribe.'[74]

There were, however, alternative views in Kapoeta. The younger educated generation in particular expressed their sympathies for the Cobra Faction rebellion, 'fighting for Murle rights'. For one secondary student from Boma:

> If you are educated, you know we are all Murle. All those people in Pibor originated in Boma. If we are to be united all these troubles wouldn't have happened. There's no way to separate people. To be Murle or ŋalam, all are Murle. (…) People are really one, all of us are Murle.[75]

Yet even when displaced Murle from Boma emphasised their ŋalam identity in Kapoeta, upon arrival to Juba, and staying at a Murle home, people would drop the ŋalam identity

and re-assert their 'Murleness'. Murle social support networks and the "adaptive edge" proved strong and resilient. Support networks were drawn from age-set loyalties, inter-connected with family and kinship ties. One man from Pibor, himself married to a woman from Boma, ironically noted that 'Maybe they [Murle of Boma] have forgotten that half the people of Pibor have their ancestors',[76] referring to common inter-marriages of lowland Murle men with highland women.

Murle fleeing to Juba relied on existing Murle networks – staying with relatives or friends with homes in Juba. They would sleep, eat and live in the homes of those previously settled in Juba. Murle homes in Juba swelled. A home of six could host over 40 people. For this man: 'I don't have a home in Juba, I'm staying with the family of my wife. In the same tukul, we are 3 men and 3 women, and 2 small boys.'[77] It was not only the overcrowded conditions that posed a challenge. Because the cost of life in Juba was expensive, it was a temporary place until moving on to settle in Arua or Adjumani refugee settlements in Uganda or Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, where there were also Murle support networks in place.

Peter had moved from Pibor town to his older sister's home in the Souk Sita neighbourhood in Juba. With Peter staying at her home in Juba, a number of his age-mates and relatives fleeing the violence across the lowlands had also sought refuge at Mary's house. As a popular young man with relationships across Greater Pibor, he hosted many of his age-set age-mates that found themselves in Juba. Peter's wife was from Boma, and Mary's home also saw the arrival of several of her sister-in-law's relatives for different periods until Peter decided to move his extended family to a refugee settlement in northern Uganda. Referring to the making of community by returnees in Ethiopia, Hammond observes that the reliance on both kin and affinal social support networks ensured social safety nets were in place during times of hardship.[78] When most households struggled to make ends meet, the increased reliance on Murle social structures, especially the age-sets, kin ties, and geographical affinities, ensured people had social safety nets to rely on during particularly distressing times. Peter explained: 'We share everything. I cannot refuse … I receive him in my home because he's from my age-set and from Likuangole. If you have friends or relatives, you go to their house.'[79] These practices reveal the strength and importance of Murle age-set loyalties and kinship networks, and how these operate in practice and bind together Murle people from different places.

But the important social safety nets whose existence many of those displaced depended on, also represented heavy burdens on host families. Mary, whose home in Souk Sita hosted dozens of her brother's relatives and age-set affiliates, struggled to sustain so many people in her Juba home. 'It's not easy', she stoically repeated. In June 2013, she had a total of 28 people living in her home in Souk Sita in Juba: 'There is no chance of saving and no chance of refusing anyone. But that's Murle culture.'[80] Her situation was emblematic of Murle homes across Juba. In this scenario, everyday existence revealed how highland Murle in Juba were part of, trusted and relied on Murle social support networks for survival.

During these times, ethnic identities were fluid, context-based and geographically situated. Murle people who had previously reiterated their ŋalam identity in Kapoeta changed narratives and identified as Murle in Juba – relying on Murle social networks made them Murle again. People changed their minds, and offered different, sometimes

contradicting, versions of events, as time and circumstances changed. Based on people's own words, but also omissions and evasions, it could be seen how individuals would change their stories and their allegiances as events unfolded, and as they moved from one location to another, adding complexity to the idea that those caught up in war are victims; but rather active agents able to frame a story. In this sense, identity politics are not only used by the state but also deployed as a protection by those experiencing political violence.

Conclusion

In the midst of crisis, highland Murle strategically deployed alternative ethnic identities that offered them protection from violence, and shifted in different times and spatial locations. Navigations of ŋalam demonstrate how identity formation and transformation is reactive and unbounded by time. This nuanced recognition of ethnic identity challenges over-simplified and polarised debates on identity in South Sudan as a cause of conflict.

There are a number of reflections and arguments to make about the fluidity of Murle and ŋalam identities, and ethnic identities more broadly. First, as well established, there are simultaneous and overlapping identities. Second, ethnic identities are deployed selectively depending on circumstances; and connectedly, are geographically situated and contingent on place. Third, they relate to contestations over land, resources, opportunity and in some cases as argued through this paper, survival. Similar to how the Uduk 'in their modern form' were *produced* as a group through their experiences of displacement,[81] Murle and ŋalam selective identities were produced through their experiences of political violence and spatial movements.

Although ŋalam may have provided highland Murle people with temporary protection, it was deployed to deal with everyday practicalities of survival. When faced with political violence, highland Murle emphasised their distinctive mode of subsistence as a signifier of peace and a conscious dissociation from Murle. Beyond over-simplistic links to pastoralism, 'Murleness' – as 'Maasainess' – is a mutable social category with different livelihood modes. As with 'Maasainess', some identity claims end up being 'naturalised' and others rejected.[82] At the September 2013 Boma Peace Meeting, a senior politician spoke of the interdependence and 'adaptive edge' between highland and lowland Murle:

> There's a story in Murle – there's a woman not organising her house, the child urinating everywhere, when you enter it smells, and we say – that is not a good lady. The name Murle is always very good, [but] if we can't stay peacefully, then it's bad. […] The words *ŋalam* or *Lotillanya* (…), these words have existed within Murle. When the rains return to Pibor, it [means it] is raining in Boma and it means we can eat beans. What can we say if we can't remove this word? It is going to be there, but it's not going to be for a tribe. This kind of word is there just to joke (…). People are translating it differently (…). They want to distort the original meaning – that's why they want to make it a tribe.[83]

Being Murle was the greatest long-term survival strategy. As Nyelerum Nyabok asserted, *Lotillanya* and ŋalam had existed for long and would continue to exist. For him, politics could not splinter Murle – and it was socially and politically advantageous to remain a unified group. Population size determines resource allocation, establishes political

constituencies and in turn political representation.[84] In South Sudan's context of violent fragmentary identity politics, ethnicity also offers protection. And equally important, ethnic identities are not only instrumental as this would otherwise suggest. Ethnic identities are also deemed natural and fundamental in ways that resist (or are part of a longer duree than) the instrumentalisation of the present.

Ethnicity results from constant internal and external negotiations constituted by claims and conditional recognition. Internally – individually and collectively by members of the group – and externally – with the state, neighbouring groups, and international actors. The pressures of survival are at the core of the shifts and struggles of ethnic identity-making, which is why violence is such a formative category in shaping identity. Thus, far from simply being victims of ethnic identity politics, highland Murle were also active agents of identity politics. The consequences of these ethnic identity performances and temporary shifts are impossible to determine, of which elements will endure and which will be discarded. Rather, as Marshall Sahlins argues, communities 'make up the rules as they go along',[85] engaging both with questions of necessity and survival. These 'rules' and processes of identity construction and survival are inseparably embedded in each other.

Notes

1. Interview paramount chief of Pibor ŋantho Kavula, Juba, 28 June 2013.
2. Sung by the late paramount chief ŋantho Kavula, Juba, 28 June 2013; translated with his son Kaka ŋantho. Recording on file with author. The song can be accessed through Felix da Costa, "Former Paramount Chief Ŋantho Kavula on Murle Origins and Unity".
3. Impey, "Performing Transitional Justice".
4. Felix da Costa, "The Politics of Murle Identity".
5. Laudati, "Victims of Discourse".
6. Interview in *South Sudan President Response to Save Yar Campaign*, 2008. *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhsQb8UR7AQ&feature=youtube_gdata_player*.
7. Office of the Minister, Ministry of General Education and Instruction, "Press Statement on 2022–2023 Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) Examinations".
8. Andretta, "A Reconsideration of the Basis of Group Cohesion"; Felix da Costa, "The Politics of Murle Identity".
9. Ibid.
10. Interview paramount chief of Pibor ŋantho Kavula, Juba, 28 June 2013.
11. Kaldor and de Waal, "Identity Formation and the Political Marketplace"; Pendle, "The 'Nuer of Dinka Money' and the Demands of the Dead".
12. Rolandsen and Anderson, "Violence in the Contemporary Political History of Eastern Africa"; Anderson and Rolandsen, "Violence as Politics in Eastern Africa, 1940–1990".
13. Hutchinson and Pendle, "Violence, Legitimacy, and Prophecy"; Thomas, *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation*; Marko, "Negotiations and Morality"; Finnström, *Living with Bad Surroundings*; Jok and Hutchinson, "Sudan's Prolonged Second Civil War".
14. Broch-Due, *Violence and Belonging*; Felix da Costa, "The Politics of Murle Identity".
15. Mohamed-Salih and Markakis, *Ethnicity and the State in Eastern Africa*; Werbner and Ranger, *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*.
16. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*; Markakis, "Ethnic Conflict & the State in the Horn of Africa"; Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*.
17. Dunn, "Identity, Space and the Political Economy of Conflict in Central Africa," 59; Schlee and Watson, *Changing Identifications and Alliances in North-East Africa / Sudan, Uganda and the Ethiopia-Sudan Borderlands*.

18. Dunn, "Identity, Space and the Political Economy of Conflict in Central Africa," 56–57.
19. Tornay, "The Omo Murle Enigma," 125.
20. Mkutu, "Pastoralism and Conflict in the Horn of Africa".
21. Spear, "Being 'Maasai', but Not 'People of Cattle,'" 124–5.
22. Ibid., 120.
23. Andretta, "Symbolic Continuity, Material Discontinuity, and Ethnic Identity".
24. Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 3.
25. James, "Uduk Resettlement".
26. James, *Kwanim Pa*; James, "War & 'Ethnic Visibility'".
27. Laudati, "Victims of Discourse," 21.
28. Ibid.
29. McCallum and Okech, "Drivers of Conflict in Jonglei State"; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner and United Nations Mission in South Sudan, "Armed Violence Involving Community-Based Militias in Greater Jonglei, January – August 2020".
30. Pitt Rivers Museum, B.A. Lewis Papers, Box 1, Item 12 (1/1/12): "Murlei Notes", 'Note on the Murle Tribes (Plains Section)', no page.
31. Thomas, *South Sudan*.
32. McCallum, "The Murle and the Security Complex in the South Sudan-Ethiopian Borderlands"; Felix da Costa, "Changing Power Among Murle Chiefs".
33. See for instance Jack Rice interview with President Salva Kiir on behalf of the Save Yar Foundation in *South Sudan President Response to Save Yar Campaign*, 2008. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhsQb8UR7AQ&feature=youtube_gdata_player.
34. Thomas, *South Sudan*; Rolandsen and Breidlid, "What Is Youth Violence in Jonglei?"
35. Smith, "The Murle – Report of a Preliminary Enquiry into Reproduction Rate"; Wendy Dyment, "Lekuangole STD Intervention – Final Report December 3, 2003 – February 28, 2004".
36. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner and United Nations Mission in South Sudan, "Armed Violence Involving Community-Based Militias in Greater Jonglei, January – August 2020," 13.
37. Small Arms Survey, "My Neighbour, My Enemy".
38. Thomas, *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation*.
39. Felix da Costa, Pendle, and Tubiana, "What Is Happening Now Is Not Raiding, It's War".
40. Garfield, *Violence and Victimization after Civilian Disarmament*; Human Rights Watch, "'There Is No Protection' Insecurity and Human Rights in Southern Sudan".
41. McCallum and Okech, "Drivers of Conflict in Jonglei State".
42. Amnesty International, "South Sudan"; Human Rights Watch, "They Are Killing Us".
43. Todisco, "Real but Fragile".
44. McCallum, "Murle Identity in Post-Colonial South Sudan," 11–24.
45. Thomas, *South Sudan*, 19.
46. Kaldor and de Waal, "Identity Formation and the Political Marketplace".
47. Santschi, "Briefing"; Kaldor and de Waal, "Identity Formation and the Political Marketplace".
48. Amnesty International, "Church Leaders Detained in South Sudan".
49. *Sudan Tribune*, "S. Sudan Warns Security Forces, Militias over Violence against Civilians". 17 May 2013. http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article46610.
50. Human Rights Watch, "'They Are Killing Us".
51. *Sudan Tribune*, "S. Sudan Warns Security Forces, Militias over Violence against Civilians". 17 May 2013. http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article46610.
52. Interview male Pibor IDP, Juba, 7 June 2013.
53. Felix da Costa, Pendle, and Tubiana, "What Is Happening Now Is Not Raiding, It's War".
54. Felix da Costa, "The Politics of Murle Identity".
55. *Sudan Tribune*. "SPLA Denies Jonglei Rebels' Claim on Capture of Boma". 8 May 2013. http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article46490; James Deng Dimo. "SPLA Recaptures Key Jonglei Town, Advancing Elsewhere". *Gurtong*, 19 May 2013. http://www.gurtong.net/ECM/Editorial/tabid/124/ctl/ArticleView/mid/519/articleId/11300/SPLA-Recaptures-Key-Jonglei-Town-Advancing-Elsewhere.aspx.

56. Spear, "Being 'Maasai', but Not 'People of Cattle'"; Galaty, "Being 'Maasai'; Being 'People-of-Cattle'".
57. Felix da Costa, "The Politics of Murle Identity".
58. Boma Peace Meeting, Boma, 15 November 2013.
59. Boma politician, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba, 12 September 2013.
60. Former local authority, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba, 12 September 2013.
61. For a discussion on spiritual red chiefs, see Felix da Costa, "Changing Power Among Murle Chiefs."
62. Interview male IDP from Boma, Juba, 9 December 2015.
63. Interview red chief Peter Kuju, Boma, 15 November 2013.
64. Paramount chief Logidang Lom, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba, 13 September 2013.
65. Fieldnotes, Boma Peace Meeting, Boma, 15 November 2013.
66. Ibid.
67. Interview Logidang Lom, Kaiwa Boma, 10 August 2014.
68. Feyissa, "The Cultural Construction of State Borders".
69. Discussion with 2 male refugees, Dimma, Ethiopia, September 2013.
70. Practically the only written reference, Bender ("The Surma Language Group", 11–12) notes the 'ŋalam (I)alam, "the people without cattle")' lived on the Ethiopian border.
71. Interview male refugee 2, Dimma, Ethiopia, 5 September 2013.
72. Interview male refugee 1, Dimma, Ethiopia, 6 September 2013.
73. Interview male Boma IDP 1, Kapoeta, 19 July 2013.
74. Interview two female IDPs, Kapoeta, 17 July 2013.
75. Interview male Boma IDP 2, Kapoeta, 19 July 2013.
76. Interview male Pibor IDP 1, Juba, 13 June 2013.
77. Interview male Pibor IDP 2, Juba, 3 June 2013.
78. Hammond, *This Place Will Become Home*, 26.
79. Interview Pibor IDP 1, Juba, 19 June 2013.
80. Interview Pibor woman hosting IDPs, Juba, 27 June 2013.
81. James, "Uduk Resettlement," 196.
82. Spear and Waller, *Being Maasai*.
83. Nyelerum Nyabok, Boma Peace Meeting, Juba, 13 September 2013.
84. Santschi, "Briefing".
85. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, 27.

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