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Murle Youth and the Iconography of Modernity Inscribed on the Body in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a novel perspective into how Murle agro-pastoralist youth in South Sudan draw on permanent body marks (also known as scarifications or body inscriptions) to communicate their individual and collective stories and future aspirations; negotiate identities and generational relations; and reimagine social norms and political subjectivities. Based on long-term ethnographic research and through a visual analysis of body marks, the article explores the meanings behind young people's body mark iconography, including assault rifles and army ranks, to mobile phones, syringes and United Nations acronyms. Body marks are a powerful embodied knowledge practice and unique lens to understand people as well as how social institutions like the age-sets are transforming. In particular, this article explores the insights that body mark iconography reveal about how Murle rural youth interpret and imagine "modernity", as read through young people's bodies, as a culturally situated phenomenon. It reveals how young people's interpretations of modernity are tied to an urban and military culture that, in their eyes, is synonymous with power. While youth may be aware of the global connotations of their body marks, these are localised practices and claims for validation and pathways to social personhood within their own social world.

KEYWORDS

Embodied knowledge; iconography of modernity; scarification; violent conflict; youth; age-sets; Murle; South Sudan

Introduction

Logocho, an agro-pastoralist whose life revolves around the seasonal migrations of his herd, had come into Pibor town in eastern South Sudan from his dry season homestead, some two days' walk away. He had come to town to purchase drugs for his cattle and cooking salt, and would soon return to his cattle camp. Logocho had chosen to permanently inscribe his body with the designs of a small antelope and lines for the reedfish,¹ animals that identified his *Lanngo* age-set (Figure 1).² His arms were also decorated with stylised designs of scythes and triangles symbolising tobacco, further identifying him as a member of a particular age-set subgroup named *Nyoro*, after the neighbouring Anyuak people known for their farming abilities. When asked about the

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Figure 1. Logocho Voro. Pibor town, April 2022. All photographs are by the author except when otherwise stated.

“new” designs young men and women in the Pibor countryside were permanently inscribing on their bodies, Logocho explained:³

Before, we didn’t know the things that were happening in town, but now we do. We see things in town and think they’re beautiful and reflecting things in town that are more beautiful than in the village and we want to identify with that. For example, some of those that were designing pens got inspired and are now in school. These symbols are representing urban life and what we want to have. We have the hope to do and be what we scarify on our bodies.⁴

This article is concerned with better understanding Logocho’s aspirations when he says, “We have the hope to do and be what we scarify on our bodies.” For Lévi-Strauss (1974), body inscriptions are simultaneously a reflection of the self and a “microcosm of society”, while in Mary Douglas’s (2002, 116) words, “What is being carved in human flesh is an image of society.” This article explores what is being carved in human flesh in Pibor: how do these images reflect society, and what do they say about how society is transforming?

As in many other African societies, scarification – the broad term for techniques used to form scars on the skin – was widely practised across South Sudan until it was outlawed by

the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) during the second Sudanese civil war of the 1980s and 1990s because it was seen as a "backward" practice that emphasised ethnic differences (Hutchinson 1996, 293; Hashimoto 2021).

Although still practised across the country, scarifications or, as more commonly referred to in South Sudan and thus the term adopted in this article, body marks are in decline. Not just because of the SPLA's 1980s ban, but also because of education and urbanisation. But unlike in other parts of South Sudan, since around the early 2000s, body marks have resurged among Murle rural youth like Logocho. These youth are not only scarifying more than they did in the past, but they have introduced new repertoires of designs. In addition to the "traditional" motifs that reflect and honour the natural world and identify age-set affiliation, agro-pastoralist youth in Pibor have incorporated images of urban and military power into their designs, or, in Logocho's words, "urban life and what we want to have". The "new" designs reflect *aturukzet*, the closest Murle term to "modernity", more closely translated as "town life", and they range from assault rifles, military ranks and satellite phones to water pumps, pens, batteries and keys, all the way to symbols of other ethnolinguistic communities and nationalities.

Permanent body inscriptions are a situated embodied knowledge practice (Rubin 1988; Pitts 2003). These are "ways of knowing that are rooted in embodied experience, orality, and local contingencies" (Conquergood 2002, 146), but also modalities of communication that emerge from the body. Embodied knowledge practices such as song, dance performances and body marks are particularly important repertoires of communication in societies with powerful oral and performative traditions (Impey 2021, 2007, 2013; Conquergood 2002). This article focuses specifically on the universal human experience of using the body's skin as a canvas (Schildkrout 2004). In Greater Pibor, body marks communicate agency and individual and collective histories, and they are the mediums to negotiate identities, generational relations and socio-political claims and aspirations.

Ethnographically, through a visual analysis of original figures of body marks, this article offers a novel perspective on the lives of Murle rural youth by detailing how the new iconography of body marks reflects profound historically framed social changes and discusses what is at stake for these youth. In other words, the article explores the insights that body mark iconography reveal about how Murle rural youth interpret and imagine "modernity", as read through young people's bodies, as a culturally situated phenomenon. It shows how young people's interpretations of modernity are attached to an urban and military culture that, in their eyes, reflects power. But these designs are not to be read literally.

Unlike the flamboyant fashion culture described by Sasha Newell (2012) and others in different parts of Africa, and the phenomenon of young *bluffeurs* who use luxury goods, flashy clothes and self-presentation to create the appearance of wealth and modernity, the rural youth at the centre of this article make use of their skin and body marks in a different way. It is not that they superficially aspire to the socio-economic and military symbols and transglobal identities they carve on their skin. Rather, they aspire to the recognition and respect that is afforded to those embodied in these designs.

For the Ivorian urban youth described by Newell, "bluffing" enables them to create a "modern" cosmopolitan identity and achieve status and respect through performances that mask socio-economic realities. But whereas he describes the "bluff" of their performative projections as externally driven, Murle rural youth's body marks are a profoundly

localised practice with coded meanings within the community. While these youth may be aware of the global connotations of their “new” designs, these are localised practices and claims for validation and pathways to social personhood within their own social world.

There are, however, parallels in how youth use the surfaces of their bodies for self-expression. They deploy fashion as powerful means of self-assertion and identity, where clothes allow them to navigate social, political and cultural landscapes (Newell 2012; Masquelier 2005). Scholarship emphasises clothes as mediums of resistance and claims for independence from traditional norms and generational expectations, as well as symbols of modernity and aspirations, utilised by young people as tools to negotiate their place in a rapidly globalising world (Hansen and Soyini Madison 2013). Similarly, there is extensive literature on body modification and body inscriptions as highly contextual and coded yet universal communicative acts that blend the individual and collective, the aesthetic and symbolic (O’Hanlon and Ewart 2007; Schildkrout 2004; Pitts 2003; Fisher 2002; Rubin 1988).

What is unique to this article is how it uncovers how Murle rural youth use their skin as a multifaceted medium to articulate age-set identities and sub-identities, resist constraints, and navigate their aspirations amid local and global pressures. Doing so, it visually explores Murle iconographies of modernity. This article represents a contribution to appreciating the historical and socio-political meanings of scarification, not just as an aesthetic and communicative practice, but as knowledge and as a unique lens to track shifting political subjectivities and social change. It shows how body marks are unique windows into understanding how Murle age-set systems are transforming in light of decades of colonial and postcolonial violence. This piece also offers a novel interpretation of the knowledge embedded in body scarification in South Sudan, and is a unique contribution to Murle ethnography.

The Murle community are an agro-pastoralist self-identified minority group living along South Sudan’s eastern border with Ethiopia, in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). They are often portrayed locally, nationally and even internationally as aggressors and the source of much of the instability affecting their region, despite the reality of a politically and economically marginalised Murle (Laudati 2011). The scapegoating of the Murle was promoted by their better-represented and politically powerful Dinka Bor neighbours in the initial colonial encounters with this region and is sustained by their contemporary politico-military elites (Felix da Costa 2016, 2023). Referring to the disarmament of the Murle in 2008, South Sudan’s President Salva Kiir Mayardit argued: “[E]ither 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.”⁵ The area lacks social and economic infrastructure, even when compared with other remote parts of South Sudan.

The contemporary history of political violence in Pibor – from persistent socio-economic and political exclusion to local and national political changes in South Sudan – has reinforced experiences of Murle marginalisation and led to changes in the important Murle social institution of the age-sets, as well as in the body marks that represent these. In my larger, forthcoming, project, I challenge simplistic representations of the Murle as aggressors by historically contextualising their socio-political marginalisation, and by showing how agro-pastoralist youth – demonised as violent, “primitive and ungovernable” (Laudati 2011; McCallum 2017) – use their body marks to reimagine social norms and political subjectivities.

The article starts with a brief discussion on methods and ethics of reading the body as knowledge followed by a literature review that makes the case for a research approach centred on embodied knowledge. There, I also introduce the important Murle social institution of the age-sets and how body marks and other embodied knowledge practices are pathways to social personhood. The remaining sections unpack age-set body mark iconography and how these reflect Murle youth interpretations of “modernity”, divided along the themes of military power, “development” and transglobality.

Methods and Ethics of Reading the Body

This article is based on ethnographic research conducted between 2012 and 2024 in the Greater Pibor region in eastern South Sudan. It uses portrait photographs and close-ups of body marks alongside in-depth interviews with both those in the photographs and others exploring interpretations and meanings of designs and symbols, and the broader context in which these are carried out.⁶

Analysis emerges from in-depth interviews with rural youth, who embrace body scarification and are at the forefront of reimagining the practice, and whose (Murle–English interpreted) words are used extensively in this article. It also draws upon continuous discussions with English-speaking Murle intellectuals referenced in the article – who do not practise body scarification but who provided opportunities to discuss key Murle words and terminology, and the broader socio-political and historical context. Though building from previous research, the bulk of the interviews used in this article were collected in April–June 2022 in Pibor town, Manyirany village and Kongkong River, with the support of a close friend and research assistant from Manyirany who brought me into his own familial and age-set networks.⁷

The problematic historical and contemporary context that frames the methodological and ethical considerations of visual analysis of photographs of bodies in South Sudan is undeniable. The Western gaze, fed by popular media, photographers and sometimes even neocolonial scholarship, has exoticised African bodies, especially pastoralist and problematically so-called warrior societies (Bruner 2002). These range from romanticised “primitive” and “hyper-sexualised” female and male bodies to the long-standing images of children’s bloated bodies.⁸ This is not a thing of the past – “poverty porn” perpetuates such neocolonial representations deployed to “further organisational ends, triggering emotional responses, aestheticising suffering, objectifying, essentialising, infantilising and exploiting victims and reinforcing stereotypes of Africa as a continent of dependence and violence” (De Laat and Gorin 2016, 15; Comaroff and Comaroff 2019).

Yet the visual approach this research adopts is centred on African epistemologies where the body is the channel for self-expression and self-assertion. In this regard, the bodies portrayed in this article’s photographs are not “the subjects” but the agents: bodies have voices (Meintjes 2017) and are active mediums of communication and agency. In one informant’s words, explaining his body marks: “The intention of scars is to be seen, not hidden. And so people scarify where it is exposed for other people to see.”⁹ Body marks are about exhibition, recognition, individual and collective agency, self-representation and self-narrativisation; they are about “being known”. I argue that a conceptual and methodological approach based on reading and hearing the body as knowledge (Meintjes 2017;

Conquergood 1991) values emic perspectives and experiences, paying attention to how and what people choose to express through their mediums of choice.

It is not only that body scarification in Greater Pibor is an entirely voluntary practice undertaken by men and women who not only consent but are actively engaged in selecting designs and reconfiguring the practice. Body marks are a self-identified traditional cultural practice and a source of pride for Murle people, especially those across the countryside. As discussed throughout the article, body marks are tangible manifestations of age-set identities and assertions of social personhood. They are profoundly personal as well as collective symbols of identity. This is also why informants were interested in discussing their age-set iconography, and this often led to other discussions of socio-political pasts, presents and futures.

The Case for Embodied Knowledge and Anatomy of Murle Body Marks

Song, dance and body inscriptions may be considered “art” in the global North, but these embodied knowledge practices are more than art. Especially in societies with rich oral and performative traditions, as in South Sudan, they are critical means of self-expression. By framing embodied knowledge practices as “art” – abstract and ephemeral products of entertainment rather than the knowledge, memories and cultures of non-Western populations (Sousa Santos 2015) – we risk seeing them as inconsequential, and ultimately non-evidential (Impey 2021; Daniel 2005). This research privileges “the view from a body”: knowledge that is “practical, embodied, popular” (Conquergood 2002, 145–146). It moves away from the Eurocentric “textcentric”, “abstract and authoritative ‘view from above’ that pretends to transcend location” (Haraway 1991, 196; Conquergood 2002, 146).

Forms of permanent body inscriptions, including tattooing and scarification, are powerful forms of “indirect, nonverbal, and extra-linguistic mode[s] of communication” (Conquergood 2002, 148), and represent a socially situated medium through which people produce and negotiate knowledge about their world. Tattooing and scarification – also known as cicatrization – are relatively similar in that both involve modifying the skin to produce permanent marks. But while tattooing involves pushing pigments under the skin, scarification relies on creating controlled cuts, etchings, or burns that heal into keloid-like scars, sometimes with pigments applied to enhance the pattern. A vast array of scholarship has explored the human skin as “the boundary between self and society” (Schildkrout 2004) and as a powerful canvas for communicating individual identity and difference (Pitts 2003; Gell 1993; Strathern and Strathern 1971). This body of work investigates the social and political significance of permanent and non-permanent body decoration, as means of asserting socio-political and economic identities and boundaries.

Scholars have also investigated body inscriptions across Africa, suggesting diverse purposes from aesthetic value and identification to wellbeing and protection (Rubin 1988). Similar to the role body scarifications play in Murle society, much of this scholarship emphasises how they convey “underlying concepts of personhood” (Drewal 1988, 83) and are a means to realise social personhood (Vogel 1988). Recent scholarship (Gengenbach 2010; Vaughan 2007) has also called for a re-examination of simplified longstanding (mis)understandings of African scarification practices. Critical approaches to these embodied practices provide more nuanced understandings of histories of social struggle and

shifting intergenerational and gender relations. I situate this article within this body of work: Murle body inscriptions are simultaneously a reflection of socio-political histories of violence, mediums of socio-political contestation, and pathways to realise social personhood, achieved through age-set assertion and belonging.

Murle rural youth – especially men but also women – inscribe their bodies with iconography that affirms age-set and *nyakenet* identities. This is claimed as a traditional cultural practice: “Scarification is done by anybody from the age of 15–30 for the side of boys and men but girls practise it until they get married when then they stop doing more scarification”¹⁰ because they then belong to their husband’s age-set. In a forthcoming book, I explore how Murle age-sets – *buulok* (singular: *buul*) – remain society’s most defining social institution (see also Felix da Costa 2018), and I concentrate on their powerful aesthetic and material displays of belonging. These performative practices – from songs and dance to body markings – are the pathways to formal community acceptance and thus to establishing social personhood.¹¹

Protracted conflict in the region has led to the militarisation and fragmentation of Murle age-sets and the emergence of age-set subgroups, known in Murle as *nyakenet* (singular: *nyakeno*) or *ken*, previously referring to a group of two or three close friends within their age-set. Named after the black and white mallard duck, *Bothonya* age-set, who emerged around the 2000s, were the first to fragment age-sets into *nyakenet*, but it has since become the norm that the same age-set will have three or four subgroups, based on age and region. A *nyakeno* comes up with its own name, bead arrangement, songs and dance choreographies, and permanent body inscriptions that reflect the group’s identity and embodied qualities.

Historical written references to Murle scarification are scarce, but oral histories reveal that scarification has been around for as long as people can remember. A colonial administrator in the Murle area in 1944 left one of the few written references to the practice, noting: “Cicatrization is common but not universal. It is performed according to taste, but is usually not extensive.”¹² Murle body marks continue to be elective. This is distinct from, for instance, neighbouring Nuer, where body marks were compulsory in initiation, the creation of age groups and transition to manhood. There, age distinctions and cultural and social identities were literally inscribed on young men’s bodies (Evans-Pritchard 1936, 1969), in a similar manner to “how age transitions are constituted in rites of passage in Africa” (Durham 2000, 115).

Another colonial administrator turned ethnographer observed that “the patterns of scarification tend to vary between age-sets, according to current fashion” (Lewis 1972, 98). Body marks remain an important element of flirtation between youth, when each would caress the raised scars of the other, usually on the shoulders, back, chest, belly or thighs. In a discussion with *Kurenen* youth, they explained: “Girls and women appreciate scarification in men. They are feeling better and better when they touch the scars.”¹³ The intention of having body marks – *longoditto*, in Murle language – is for them to be seen, and so designs are inscribed on exposed parts of the body, such as “the chest, arms, back and stomach, most on the right side and less rarely on the left side”.¹⁴ Though not forbidden, concealed body parts such as the armpits or buttocks are not appropriate sites; to “hide” designs defeats the purpose of “being known”.



Figure 2. Kurkur Lotilla displaying age-set designs on her upper arms. Pibor town, October 2022.

Until the emergence of *Bothonya*, the male members of an age-set created similar designs inspired by the natural world. Most often, these designs reflected the age-set's token animals. Figure 2 shows Kurkur Lotilla, from *Dorongwa* age-set, now in their seventies and eighties, with designs that she described as “the horns of the hartebeest. These are also the lines for the redfish, both representing my age-set.”¹⁵

The now deceased sultan Ismael Konyi was simultaneously paramount chief of the area, a spiritual chief, military commander of the Pibor Defence Forces, and eventually a senior political figure (Felix da Costa 2018). He discouraged facial scarifications in both women and men as “a negative cultural practice” and was instrumental in their abandonment from the 1990s onwards. Women from the *Thithi* age-set, named after the cordon-bleu bird, which emerged in the 1990s, were the last to do facial scarifications, but the rest of the body continued to be used as a canvas across the countryside.

Scarifications are not done as a group nor as a formal rite of passage. Rather, reflecting society's decentralised and non-hierarchical organisation, an individual confers with their friends before deciding if and when to do their body marks, their preferred design, and the body part to be inscribed. The designer – known as an *arith* (plural: *ariinya*), the term for “someone skilful”¹⁶ – is usually from the same village and age-set. The *arith* practises first on trees, jerrycans and sometimes less visible parts of the body of the person doing the *longoditto*. A hook, *rongodec*, is used to raise the skin, which is then cut with a blade, taking usually about two weeks to heal.



Figure 3. *Bothonya* zebra lines. Pibor town, September 2017.

Men of all age-sets often design a *tarer*, a thick line that runs from the belly button to the chest. The age-set token animal or symbol remains the most common type of body mark and is usually inscribed on the right side of the chest, the abdomen or the upper arms. *Bothonya* youth, composed of men born in the late 1970s and early 1980s, design the black and white lines of the zebra on their bodies (Figure 3), although there are various aesthetic interpretations of these lines. As explained by Molokthuoch Kongnyandor (Figures 12 and 13), “We design these marks in honour of the beautiful colours of zebra. The scarred part shows the black stripe while the gap between them shows the white stripe of zebra.”¹⁷

Lanngo age-set, composed of men born in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, named themselves after the *Kobus kob* and claimed the animal’s yellow colour and, more commonly, the reedfish. Figure 4 shows a young man wearing his age-set beads (yellow and black) with a large *longoditto* of a kob on his chest.

The youngest age-set at the time of writing were the *Kurenen*, named after deer, composed of youth born in the mid- and late 1990s. They claimed the deer’s red colour and other animals in similar shades, especially the giraffe (Figure 5).

Since the 2000s, youth from these three youngest age-sets – *Bothonya*, *Lanngo* and *Kurenen* – have creatively incorporated symbols of an urbanised social world into this



Figure 4. A *Lanngo* man's chest displaying his age-set's *kob* and other designs for his *nyakeno*. Boma, June 2014.

traditional practice. The same powerful aesthetic material displays of age-sets have been adopted by the *nyakenet*. James Aleyi, one of the community's intellectuals and senior church representatives, explained: "Each and every *nyakeno* have their own bead arrangement. They have their own dance. They have their own songs. And the designs of these *longoditto* are things that people adopted from outside and are taking into the village, which wasn't in our culture."¹⁸ The rest of the article explores how Murle rural youth interpret "modernity" through their body mark iconography.

Body Marks and the Iconography of "Modernity"

The emergence of *nyakenet* created new layers of division that are being negotiated with extreme violence. *Bothonya* were the first to use firearms against the younger *Lanngo* age-set when the younger members of the former defected to form the latter, leading to deadly clashes in age-set formation. Age-set competition changed dramatically in scale and type of violence – with a shift from mediated and ritualised stick-fighting to the deadly use of small arms. Murle society faces violent competition not just between age-sets, but also within age-sets, between the *nyakenet*. In some ways, age-sets are multiplying into novel identities – the *nyakenet* – with no historical depth. But the new identities are marked on the flesh in the same way as before. And the marks are immutable, for a lifetime, suggesting, perhaps, that there is a yearning to make these new global references and hierarchies permanent.

The new iconography of body marks offers insights both into the militarisation and fragmentation of Murle age-set and *nyakenet* identities, but also into rural youth's



Figure 5. A man from *Kurenen* age-set with a giraffe. Pibor town, July 2022. Photo credit: Lauryen Oleyo.

culturally situated aspirations to and interpretations of “modernity”. Or, as suggested by Logocho in this article’s introduction, “We have the hope to do and be what we scarify on our bodies.”¹⁹ In other words, they reveal what rural youth understand as modernity’s concrete material expressions and how these are valued locally.

Scholars have argued that modernity is an analytically incoherent concept that is neither linear nor even (Ferguson 2006; Appadurai 1996). Rather, modernity operates as a social imaginary that drives aspirations, disappointments and diverse forms of identity. It is profoundly contextual, both a local and a global phenomenon shaped by constant negotiation between traditional values, social aspirations and the consumption of global commodities (Masquelier 2013). Newell (2012) explores modernity as an experience and identity shaped by consumption, globalisation and the cultural performance of modernity itself, where urban youth use displays of wealth, style and technology to perform modernity as a way of navigating social hierarchies and creating aspirational identities. In his work, modernity is a socially constructed image that urban Ivorian youth project and perceive, often involving a process of imitation and bluffing, where appearances are as valued as, or even more than, reality.

The body iconography of Murle agro-pastoralist youth could be mistaken for imitation and bluffing and a performance of globalised modernity, projected through their skin. But while agro-pastoralist Murle youth may be aware of the global meanings and connections of their

designs, they are deploying them within a internal system of meaning, communication and age-set and *nyakenet* identity assertion. The choices of *nyakenet* names and the symbols permanently inscribed on bodies reflect how pastoralist youth's conception of modernity is tied to an urban and military culture that, in their eyes, is synonymous with power.

While there is no single Murle word that translates into "modernity", there is consensus among Murle – English speakers that "the nearest word to modernity is *aturukzet*, which means town, or the life in town".²⁰ The word originates from *aturuk*, town, and is a reference to the Turkish, who, during the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire rule over Sudan, brought "town" and urban life. The Turks introduced administrative and economic changes across Sudan, yet their rule was harsh and exploitative. They imposed heavy taxes, engaged in forced conscription, and used Sudan as a resource base, extracting resources and conducting the slave trade. As a result, many Sudanese came to view the Turkiyah era as a period of foreign dominance, oppression and exploitation. The etymology of *aturukzet* is a powerful indication of the associations, meanings and implications of modernity in Murle society. The *nyakenet* names and designs fall into three broad categories that reflect the understanding of *aturukzet* or modernity: (1) militarised power; (2) socio-economic aspirations; and (3) transglobality.

To some extent, the designs reflect tangible aspirational manifestations and are the embodied means through which youth lay claim to being included in the resources of the state – represented through access to water pumps, education and security, as the concrete manifestations and promises of modernity. The ways in which designs and symbols of military power and technology, socio-economic development and transglobality are inscribed on the flesh make scarification an act of assimilation of new ideas and ideals. The bodily incorporations of the ideas and symbols of modernity reveal yearning for access to the perceived material benefits of urban and military culture. These youth aspire not only to access to the resources of the state, but, even more so, to the power, respect and external recognition that is associated with possessing these. In the words of one youth intellectual explaining *nyakenet* names and symbols, "[I]t is all about power, about being known, being strong, influencing people around. It is about being a great person."²¹

Thus, these designs should not (only) be read literally. Even more significantly, the material expressions and displays of age-sets and *nyakenet* are about standing out and being valued in society. The new body iconography offers valuable insights into Murle rural youth's understandings of what it takes to be "known", "strong" and respected, and how this is perceived to relate to urban and military iconography. To use Newell's term, these youth are not *bluffeurs* and these designs are not about performance and consumption as a social strategy to project an image of wealth, power or modernity.

While navigating a context of extreme socio-political and economic marginalisation and hardship, these youth are contesting their place in their own society and aspire to the recognition and respect that is afforded to those represented by these designs. While the designs may be new, the medium of using the skin as canvas and as communication is recognised as a traditional cultural medium of self-expression. Referring to the new designs and dance styles introduced by the younger age-sets, John Boloch, an elder and community intellectual with whom I have co-authored, suggests: "These cultural changes show how young people these days are searching for ways to stand out and distinguish themselves from their elders using culture as a material expression of

their identity and place in the world” (Felix da Costa and Boloch 2023). The remaining sections discuss rural youth’s iconography of modernity as inscribed on their bodies, along three dominant themes: military power; socio-economic development; and transglobality. These are analysed through photographs of portraits and close-ups of body marks, alongside the voices of the informants in the photos.

Military Power

Violent state formation and systematic socio-political and economic marginalisation brought about the changes in body mark iconography, and violence and war became inscribed on people’s bodies. Violence and coercion are a major part of modernity. Many of the *nyakenet* names reflect military power and aspirations such as *Tobath* (top-ranking generals), *Tubarath* (military intelligence), *Jij* and *Koliyam* (SPLA) (Figure 6), *Suar* (the term for the former Murle armed rebellion) and *Habeesh* (after the Ethiopian army), among others, often based on Murle or Arabic words. Connectedly, the iconography of those *nyakenet* range from designs of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), AK-47s and other assault rifles, to military stars and ranks, and to the radios and satellite phones often carried by senior officers, given the absence of a network in most of the area. As argued earlier, it is not only about the actual objects and symbols; rather,



Figure 6. A *Lanngoch* with reedfish identifying his age-set and pronounced AK-47s for his *nyakeno*. Kongkong River, May 2015.



Figure 7. The shoulder of a *Lanngoch* with pronounced military ranks for his *nyakeno*. Lotilla River, May 2015.

youth aspire to the recognition and respect that is afforded to those represented by these designs. In other words, an AK-47 is not only an AK-47; and the radios and Thuraya phones are not about communication. Rather, they reflect the power of military commanders and the respect afforded by these symbols.

Figures 6 and 7 show *Lanngo* youth from different parts of Greater Pibor with designs of AK-47s and military ranks. The same designs allude to military power and status and might be worn both by different *nyakenet* and sometimes even by different age-sets. There are also written texts, such as “South Sudan” and “SPLA”, and symbols that identify the army, such as flags and identification of battalions and divisions.

The young man in Figure 8 posed with his back inscribed with symbols of his *nyakeno* and explained: “Our scarification is of giraffe for the entire age-set and other designs for *nyakeno*. For the *nyakeno* we design South Sudan text, Division Eight sign, Division Two text, SPLA and hearts.” His friend added, “South Sudan is for SPLA and army organs that are running the affairs of the country.” Their *nyakeno* name and designs were about the power represented by these organs. He explained why he thought these transformations had occurred:

Now the youth have shifted to do designs connected to the *nyakeno*. Especially the age-sets from *Lanngo* to *Kurenen* changed to scarifying symbols of their *nyakeno* and the people they

name themselves after. This is because people have changed their old ways by discovering new things. People are aware of town and the old symbols are no longer practised.²²

The “old symbols” that honoured nature and identified the age-sets are still practised, but they are done alongside the iconography of *aturukzet*.

Socio-Economic Development

Symbols of social and economic development feature extensively in the new repertoire of designs connected to the names of *nyakenet*. The young man in Figures 9, 10 and 11 was from *Kurenen* age-set and a *nyakeno* that called themselves “Doctors”, *Hakeemanet*. The designs they had chosen to reflect *Hakeemanet* affiliation included pen lids (Figure 9), the symbols of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the United Nations (Figure 10), and a water pump (Figure 11). I met him in his village of Manyumen, where there was no water pump, no school, no clinic, and no international agency present. He explained that “Doctors” were respected and



Figure 8. The back of a *Kurech* with symbols identifying his *nyakeno*: the words “South Sudan”, the SPLA’s symbol, and the SPLA’s Division Two symbol. Pibor town, July 2022. Photo credit: Lauryen Oleyo.



Figure 9. A Kurech with designs for his *nyakeno* “Doctors”: pen lids on his right arm. Manyumen, September 2019.

“known”, which was why they had chosen that name and inscribed those designs associated with “Doctors”.

Moloktuoch Kongnyandor, in [Figures 12 and 13](#), was from the *Bothonya* age-set and from a *nyakeno* that named themselves *Tojar*, the Arabic term for “business” or “businessmen”. The symbols designed for *Tojar* were objects that they associated with businessmen – they sold Christian crosses, mobile phones and batteries. The designs symbolised not just young men’s aspiration for more economic opportunities, but even more so the qualities embodied by businessmen. Moloktuoch explained:

We do the zebra design for the age-set. But we have other designs we do for our *nyakeno*. For example, the cross sign, keys and batteries ... For our *nyakeno*, we design keys because keys are always sold by traders and we want to imitate traders, so we do items sold by traders to be identified as such. I also have tobacco because I was *Nyoro* before turning to *Tojar*. We found that businessmen also sold [religious] crosses so we picked an interest in designing these on our bodies.²³

He wore black and white beads that reflected his *Bothonya* age-set membership. His story shows how one’s personal history is inscribed on the body as an archive. On his right arm ([Figure 12](#)), he had inscribed the zebra lines for his age-set and six crosses for his *nyakeno*, the *Tojar*; on his left arm ([Figure 13](#)) he had a mobile phone. But his left arm also had eight triangles as symbols of tobacco, which identified his previous *nyakeno* *Nyoro*, which was



Figure 10. The same *Kurech* (figure 9) with designs for his *nyakeno* “Doctors”: the symbols of the United Nations and the ICRC and a water pump first practised on a small scale; on his left arm. Manyumen, September 2019.

known for being good tobacco farmers. He had defected from *Nyoro nyakeno* to join the younger *Tojar*.

Moloktuoch’s friend Iza Mama, from the same age-set and *nyakeno* and with designs of batteries on his abdomen, further explained: “Our symbols are keys, watches and batteries because businesspeople are having those objects on them ... We named our *nyakeno Tojar* because we admire businesspeople. They take and sell cattle, they have no guns, they’re harmless, not hostile, so we decided to name ourselves after them.”²⁴ Iza’s words, again, suggest how it is less about yearning for the objects that are designed, and more about what the objects represent and the qualities embodied by those who own them.

Just like how age-sets select a token animal and embody their qualities, youth choose a name for their *nyakeno* and embody and are inspired by the power invested and represented in their designs. One striking anecdote of this embodiment is alluded to by Logocho, in the article’s introduction. He makes reference to some *Kurenen* youth whose *nyakeno* body marks were pens and pen lids. These youth were so inspired by their symbols that many of them moved to Ugandan refugee settlements to attend school and gain a formal education.

Transglobality

The third category of *nyakenet* names and designs is inspired by neighbouring ethnolinguistic groups and nationalities. As above, it is not about aspiring to

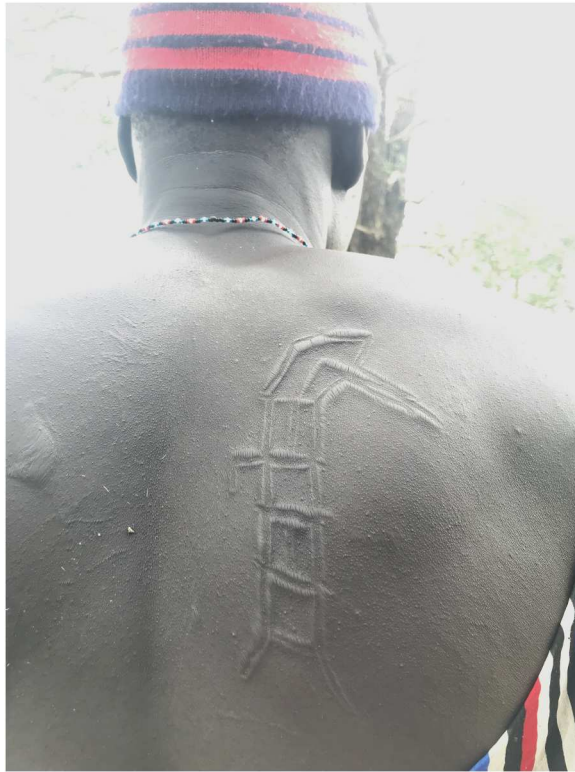


Figure 11. The same *Kurech* (figures 9 and 10) with designs for his *nyakeno* “Doctors”: on his back, the final larger water pump. Manyumen, September 2019.

become other cultural groups or nationalities, but about being associated with the attributes that those groups embody. There are *nyakenet* named Bor after neighbouring Dinka Bor, *Nyoro* (the Murle word for Anyuak people), Nuer, Jikany (for the Nuer section), *Kum* (the Murle word for Jie people), and others. There are also *nyakenet* named after countries such as America, Habeesh (for Ethiopia) and Jamaica, among others.²⁵

Logocho Voro, from the opening of this article (Figure 1), and his close friend Nyabok Zirac (Figure 14) were from *Lanngo* age-set and *Nyoro nyakeno*, and had similar designs to reflect these affiliations. Nyabok explained why they had called themselves *Nyoro* and the symbols they had chosen: “We admire the way *Nyoro* build their houses and farm tobacco, so we called our *nyakeno* after *Nyoro* and design symbols of tobacco and a scythe.”²⁶

Nyelgo and Gogol, in their early twenties, were also close friends from the same *nyakeno* they had named Bor. Gogol (Figure 15) had “BOR” inscribed in large letters along his pelvis, from one side of the body to the other, identifying his *nyakeno* affiliation after the neighbouring Dinka Bor people. There were also more subtle designs and references associated with Dinka Bor people: above the word “BOR”, crossing all along the left side of the abdomen from the pelvis to the chest, were 11 satellite phones designed one

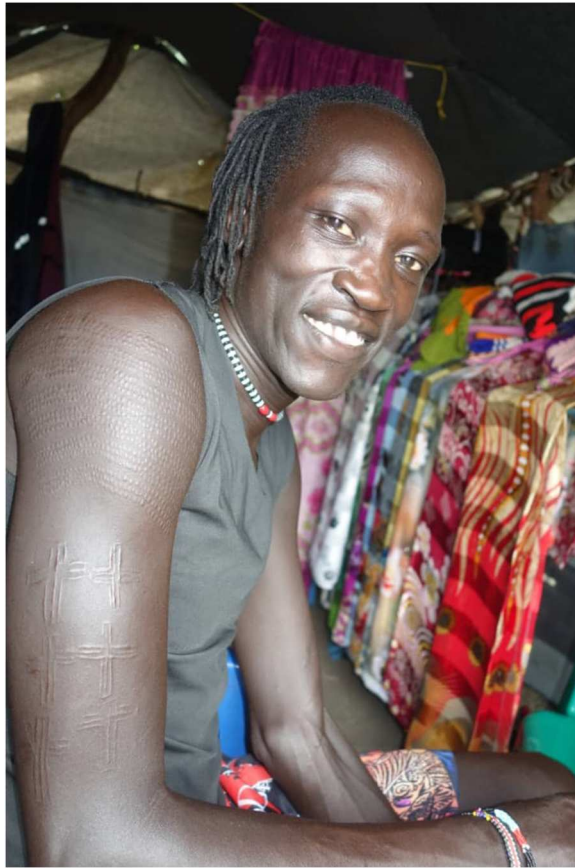


Figure 12. Moloktuoch Kongnyandor. Pibor town, June 2022. Photo credit: Lauryen Oleyo.

above the other, with pen lids in between these. These symbols reflected how Dinka Bor were perceived by these youth. Gogol explained:

We imitate people we think are very strong. Bor [people] were the first people to get an education in South Sudan, which is why we also design lids of pens. There is no school in [my home of] Wunkok. Our symbols, we draw [facial] marks of Bor [on the forehead], of the UN [acronym] and we write the word "Bor" on our bodies.²⁷

Naming themselves after Dinka Bor, with whom the Murle community have held complex relationships and historical grievances, may seem incongruous. But Gogol added, "We are acting like them, but we're not like them." He elaborated, "These [body marks] are to attract girls, not about embracing Bor." Gogol concluded, "The idea is, we think they're strong, so we name ourselves after them. It is a sign of respect and admiration for our neighbours. We admire each other, in our hearts. We just have misunderstandings among us." Contrary to dominant narratives that place Murle and Dinka youth at odds, the *nyakeno* name and designs show common ground and how relationships are much more nuanced. In the eyes of these Murle youth, Dinka Bor strength and power



Figure 13. Moloktuoch Kongnyandor's left arm. Pibor town, June 2022. Photo credit: Lauryen Oleyo.

emerged from their high levels of education, and for this they had managed to control the resources of the state. Being known as Bor reflected these embodied attributes.

Conclusion

Pibor's history and contemporary dynamics of violent conflict and militarisation are inscribed in young people's new iconography of body marks. The "new" designs and symbols offer unique insights into historical contingencies, but also into how protracted war and society's militarisation have contributed to the fragmentation of age-sets and the emergence of *nyakenet*. Returning to Mary Douglas's proposition – if "what is being carved in human flesh is an image of society" – then Murle society has transformed quite dramatically: it has militarised, and its key institution of the age-sets has fragmented, with still uncertain consequences.

The new designs on young people's bodies hint at how modernity has failed to live up to its promises in places like Pibor, and much more widely across the hinterlands of South Sudan (Thomas 2015, 2019). The violence of state formation in Pibor left a more divided and fragmented society, struggling to cope with the pressures of prolonged socio-



Figure 14. Nyabok Zirac wearing yellow beads mixed with red and blue, signifying his age-set and *nyakeno* affiliation. His right arm has lines for his age-set reedfish and his left arm has four triangles and scythes for his *nyakeno*, named after the neighbouring *Nyoro*. Pibor town, April 2022.



Figure 15. Gogol from *Kurenen* age-set and Bor *nyakeno*. Pibor town, 27 April 2022.

political marginalisation, poverty and insecurity – and this story is told on and through these young men’s bodies. The state’s “modernity” contributed to dismantle customary sources of authority and governance as well as traditional livelihoods, but it has not provided credible alternatives. The vacuum of authority has been filled by violence. The shift from self-sufficiency to a cash and market economy has further disempowered people, not just in Pibor but across all of South Sudan (Kindersley and Majok 2019; Thomas 2019). There is a stark contrast between the *ideals* of modernity reflected in the designs and the *realities* of modernity.

This article has focused on how Murle youth use what is self-identified as a traditional cultural practice – body markings – as individual and collective modes of self-expression to assert socio-political claims and belonging not just to their age-set and *nyakeno*, but also to the state and its resources. The *nyakenet* names and body mark iconography reveal a yearning to be part of those who embody and are perceived to control and dispense “modernity”. Yet more than yearning for these material and symbolic aspects, as was often described by many of the youth with body marks, the “new” iconography is about “being known”, “being strong” and, in other words, respected and recognised in their own society. These youth are not bluffing – they are not adopting globalised fashion styles and behaviours. They are neither manipulating their appearance nor embracing consumer aesthetics. Rather, they are using their skin to exercise agency in a context of exclusion and doing so through a culturally and socially accepted pathway that asserts social personhood in Murle society.

Material expressions of heritage in South Sudan – such as body marks but also other embodied knowledge practices – are fluid and changing. Murle youth, as elsewhere in the country, are creatively reshaping and making sense of traditional practices to suit them. They are telling their own individual and collective stories through cultural mediums that make sense to them.

The iconography of the “new” designs also reveals how, contrary to popular representations, agro-pastoralist youth in Pibor are not “stuck” in a distant past, nor isolated from and unaware of the world and ways of life beyond their borders, or the global social and political implications inscribed on their bodies. The iconography of body marks complicates and challenges stereotypes of isolation and “warriorhood”, histories of conflict and antagonism between neighbours. Most strikingly, body marks offer unique insights into value systems and relationships. They disrupt misconceived representations of cattle camp youth and the divisions and neat separations that are sometimes alluring to believe.

Notes

1. The small antelope is known as Kobus kob and the reedfish is also known as snakefish.
2. There are two types of East African age systems: age-sets refer to men who join an age-set in early puberty and remain lifelong members (Abbink and van Kessel 2005), while age grades are used to refer to a status through which a man passes in their lifecycle, from childhood, to “warrior” class, to elder (Spencer 1976). Most systems have elements of both.
3. Except where stated, all interviews were carried out by the author in English or in the Murle language and simultaneously interpreted into English.
4. Interview with Logocho Voro, in Murle language, Pibor, 23 April 2022.
5. In “South Sudan President Response to Save Yar Campaign”, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhsQb8UR7AQ&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

6. This paper reports analysis of primary data. The ethics of data collection and analysis were approved by the Research Ethics Committee at SOAS. Oral informed consent was ensured ahead of all discussions with research participants.
7. I have collaborated with Peter Daky since 2013 and he actively supported the fieldwork that led to this article, in terms of facilitating access to his familial and age-set networks, as well as interpreting and analysing data and interviews. During this time, I also had the support of Lauryen Oleyo, and some interviews were conducted individually by him, transcribed and interpreted. Interviews were sometimes audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed and translated from Murle to English, but also sometimes detailed notes were taken *in loco*.
8. See, for instance, Riefenstahl (1974, 2010) and Carter (2013).
9. Interview with Encha Chez by Lauryen Oleyo, in Murle, Pibor, 20 June 2022.
10. Focus group discussion (FGD) with *Kurenen* youth by Lauryen Oleyo, in Murle, Pibor, 15 June 2022.
11. Interview with James Aleyi, in English, Pibor, 4 May 2022.
12. Richard Lyth Bimbashi in Boma, 1944, Intertribal Relations File, 66.-A-.1, Murle-Anuak, Juba Archives.
13. FGD with *Kurenen* youth by Lauryen Oleyo, in Murle, Pibor, 15 June 2022.
14. Interview with Logocho Voro, in Murle, Pibor, 23 April 2022.
15. Interview with Kurkur Lotilla, in Murle, Pibor, 14 October 2022.
16. Personal communication with Johnson Kengen, 8 July 2023.
17. Interview with Moloktuoch Kongnyandor by Lauryen Oleyo, in Murle, Pibor, 18 June 2022.
18. Interview with James Aleyi, in English, Pibor, 4 May 2022.
19. Interview with Logocho Voro, in Murle, Pibor, 23 April 2022.
20. Personal communication with Joseph Lilimoy, in English, 29 October 2024.
21. Personal communication with Johnson Kengen, in English, 30 October 2024.
22. Interview with Encha Chez by Lauryen Oleyo, in Murle, Pibor, 20 June 2022.
23. Interview with Moloktuoch Kongnyandor by Lauryen Oleyo, in Murle, Pibor, 18 June 2022.
24. Interview with Iza Mama by Lauryen Oleyo, in Murle, Pibor, 18 June 2022.
25. I use the names given to neighbouring ethnolinguistic groups and countries, which are most often in the Murle language, but occasionally in English or Arabic, such as America and Jamaica.
26. Interview with Nyabok Zirac, in Murle, Pibor, 23 April 2022.
27. Interview with Gogol Rico, in Murle, Pibor, 27 April 2022.

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