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OPINION

Christmas in South Sudan: Fieldnotes from a Warzone

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In many ways, this Christmas was like any other we had experienced. There was the early morning excitement, the quality time spent with friends and family, and the much-enjoyed consumption of unnecessary amounts of food prepared by Grace, our host mother. Drifting in and out of the conversation, however, was the recent outbreak of violence, news of which hung over proceedings like a cloud of smoke from the fires so common here in the dry season. After all, it had only been ten days since news of the 'coup' first broke, and the conflict's rapid escalation had everyone a little on edge. Worse still was the rumour violence had not only spread to Bor and Malakal, but perhaps even to Eastern Equatoria itself.

Today is Wednesday 15 January, 2014. It is one month since fighting erupted in South Sudan and I am writing this report from Pajok village, Magwi County, Eastern Equatoria State, the site of my ongoing PhD research. It is a report written from the other side of the current South Sudanese conflict, from a place, like much of this country, which remains untouched by violence and where life continues almost as normal. In Pajok, at least, women continue their trips to the river to get water; men continue to sit together under shop fronts or mango trees, pondering over community life; children continue to fish, hunt small rodents and lizards, or play games of pick-up football in any empty space available. People still travel to visit family and sub-clans continue to have their regular meetings. The town's small businesses are slowly restocking their supplies, finally convinced, a month later, that violence is not coming to Equatoria. Life is normal.

Pajok, like most places in South Sudan these days, gets no mention in the global media, because it does not generate anything newsworthy: the lack of conflict means it does not conform to easily recycled stereotypes about brutal inhumanity in the heart of darkness. Most news stories speak about South Sudan as if it is one singular entity, as though the events in one village are happening everywhere. The news is only specific when describing the horrors, the suffering, and the violence. Despite the beneficial ethical considerations of giving voice to the

victims of this most unnecessary violence, in doing so, such stories also serve to homogenise the country and its people, reinforcing long-held racist stereotypes linking Africa (and thus Africans) to violence. It is important to note (although I have not read a single news report that has) only six of South Sudan's ten states have experienced any violent incident since December 15, and that, of these, 88% or 49 of 56 total incidents have taken place in three states: Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile. Indeed, Unity alone accounts for 26, or 46%, of these incidents (OCHA, 2014). As I have said, in much of South Sudan it is business as usual.

In this report, I provide examples of the ways most Pajok community members understand and explain the conflict. For each, I give examples, explain why these accounts are important, and show how they inform wider debates about causes and logics of the so-called 'coup'. Instead of the common portrayal of the conflict, whereby the voices of actual South Sudanese are silenced by all-knowing and all-powerful international observers, such accounts allow us to understand something of how real people living everyday life in South Sudan conceptualise the conflict. Let us begin with the alleged coup itself.

In July 2013, President Salva Kiir dismissed his entire cabinet, including Vice-President Riek Machar. Although trouble had been brewing since, the conflict really started with a public renunciation of Kiir's alleged dictatorial rule by a group of high-ranking SPLM dissidents on December 6. This group included Machar, Rebecca Garang (widow of the late Dr John Garang), and Pagan Amum (former Secretary-General of the SPLM/A), among others, and included demands for reform of the national and party constitutions. Garang, like both Kiir and her husband, is also a Dinka. This is a fact conveniently forgotten when using an 'insurmountable ethnic division' explanatory framework.¹ Also forgotten is the fact many of these politicians are awaiting corruption trials.

Events came to their head at the ironically-named National Liberation Conference over December 14th and 15th. Although exact details are sketchy, whatever sparked the violence almost certainly happened there: party dissidents walked out during the conference's first day and did not return. According to one party member spending Christmas in Pajok, the demands for reform were quashed: "*Kiir is the*

¹ For example, if these ethnic divisions are truly insurmountable, why then is Machar, a Nuer, and Garang, a Dinka, working together? Perhaps it is more about personal political ambition than ethnicity?

big man now. And big men do not like to be told they are wrong! He did not like to hear what the others [i.e., the dissidents] were saying, that they wanted to be Party Chairperson, to one day be President. So that's where it started". By the end of that weekend, there was violent division within the SPLA and widespread gunfire throughout the capital, Juba. Within a week, fierce fighting had spread to twenty locations in five states. It continues today.

What really happened on that fateful night in mid-December may never be known. A dearth of national infrastructure and pervasive government propaganda has seen to that. It seems certain there was never really a coup, a point reiterated by most well informed international observers since the very beginning (de Mabior, 2014; Rift Valley Forum, 2014). Instead, what we have is the politicisation, and then violent contestation, of personal hostilities, jealousies, and ambitions between Kiir and the dissidents mentioned earlier. Many of these dissidents were arrested in the days following the alleged coup, ostensibly for their roles in the plot, but more likely as a part of an advantageous putsch.

The longer the government goes without releasing these arrestees, the more people suspect they are not being released because they are dead, and that the government cannot comply with demands for their release without this unsavoury fact becoming known. This was the rumour floating around Pajok over Christmas, at least, and was accompanied by accusations of the prisoner's torture and execution. For example, when news of Pagan Amum's arrest on 17 December was officially announced several days later, rumours said he had "*just gone through the torture and the beatings. For several days. The people in the government, they just wanted to kill him and make him disappear. But the news got out!*" Every day the government refuses to release the prisoners, the more such rumours become 'fact'. "*Why else does the government not release them?*" one man asks rhetorically, "*It is because they cannot! Because they are dead!*" Unfortunately, no matter the truth, refusing their release means the rebel's basic ceasefire demands are not met and the peace process continues to stall.

Another widespread and persistent narrative involves charges of corruption. As people in Pajok have told me, "*the people in the government, all they care about is getting the monies. They get into power and then they get the monies. The monies comes for the cars, they get the cars. But what do the people get?*" Although this feeling is circumstantially confirmed by the government's refusal to try sitting politicians for fraud, the assessment is certainly borne out by the

available empirical evidence: not only does Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) rank South Sudan as the fifth most corrupt nation on the planet (Tiitmamer & Awolich, 2014), but in the two years between July 2011 and July 2013, the country somehow managed to 'lose' US\$ 4 Billion in direct development aid (Dowden, 2014). According to Jok Madut Jok, a Professor of History and formerly a Ministerial Undersecretary, the country's high-level elected officials are the ones to blame (Jok, 2013).

Given the amount of money available, both the incentives to remain in power and the desire to gain that power are strong. As several people in Pajok pointed out, "*the fighting in Juba is not really a war. It is just the politicians fighting to decide who gets to keep the money*". The internalised norm at play in such comments unproblematically links corruption, politics, money, and violence: a potent and dangerous mixture. And such a perception about politics and politicians is not unique to Pajok; Leonardi, Moro, Santschi, and Isser (2010) found it was widespread throughout South Sudan, no matter ethnicity.

Despite such inter-ethnic commonalities, however, the dominant idiom used to describe the conflict is without a doubt one of Dinka and Nuer 'ethnic' or 'tribal' divisions.² For example, one educated man said,

And, you know, the Dinka think they have been given Sudan by God! Because of the Bible! You know, Isaiah? 8, I think. Maybe 18. They think it say in there God give Sudan to the Dinka. So the Dinka, they use that for the reason. And the Nuer, the Murle, the others, they disagree. So that will also be the fighting.

Such an attribution demonstrates how the international community's simplistic obsession with ethnic division is internalised by South Sudanese as they themselves rationalise events. According to such thinking, Dinka and Nuer have a long history of hatred and blood-shed that cannot be overcome and will always threaten the stability of the

² If the trope of 'ethnicity' is a good neo-colonial euphemism for allowable racism, then the trope of 'tribalism' does not even make this politically-correct attempt. As many anthropologists and historians have demonstrated, in Africa 'tribes' more or less began with colonialism. This is not to say that ethnic differentiation did not occur in pre-colonial times, just that they were likely described and defined differently. The continuing prevalence of tribal discourses referring to contemporary Africa is little more than a modern variant of a broadly dehumanising narrative with a long historical precedence, that of the 'Primitive Black African'.

state. This is partially true: there is a long and well-documented history of intercommunal conflict between these groups, and, because the Dinka and Nuer are the two largest collectivities in the country, any tensions between them will have a significant impact on the rest of South Sudan.

This reasoning remains the same whether those narrating the conflict are South Sudanese or external observers. “*You should not be worried living here in Pajok: it is just the Dinka and the Nuer fighting each other, Equatoria has nothing to do with it*” was the usual reasoning I was given when Pajok locals found out that, unlike what they had heard about most foreigners in the country, we were not leaving South Sudan unless absolutely necessary.

However, not only have more nuanced analyses demonstrated that this conflict definitely did not begin as an ethnic conflict (De Waal & Mohammed, 2014; Hirblinger & de Simone, 2013; Rift Valley Institute, 2014), some have shown that simplistic accounts asserting this have led South Sudanese to develop their own ‘ethnic conflict’ rationales (de Mabior, 2014; Le Riche, 2014): when all the apparently well-researched and better-resourced international news sources with their white and educated analysts provide such an ‘obvious’ answer, it makes disagreement seem foolish.

Certainly, the informed status of foreign news agencies such as CNN and the BBC, at times the only source of nonpartisan information in the first weeks of the conflict, allowed people in Pajok to rationalise the conflict as ethnic, rather than political in nature. “*They said on the BBC that it is the Dinka fighting the Nuer,*” one man told me, “*And, you know, the Dinka and the Nuer, they are violent people, angry people. This will be a bad, bad war!*”

Despite what advocates of the ‘ethnic conflict’ position think, however, there are well-demonstrated counterarguments to the ‘ethnic violence’ explanation: 1) Dinka and Nuer are not homogenous. Not only are members of both groups different individuals with highly variable interests, but there are significant internal differences. Their internal coherence is as much a fiction as their external differentiation (de Mabior, 2014); 2) each group has a strong and closely-knit interdependence, sharing a historical propensity to absorb members of the other group, resulting in significant biosocial similarity (Hutchinson & Jok, 2002); 3) the so-called intractable ethnic divisions of the 1991 SPLA split were not really ethnic at all but rather the result of personal political tensions between Garang and Machar, two men who did more to lengthen that war and harm South Sudan than their supporters care to admit (De Waal & Mohammed, 2014; Johnson, 2011).

Furthermore, focus only on ethno-cultural causes of the recent violence neglects the long history of politico-economic marginalisation which forms the basis of the current as well as South Sudan's previous two conflicts (Johnson, 2011). Connected to both corruption and ethnicity is the common idea the national government is overly and negatively dominated by members of the Dinka ethnic group in a specifically 'tribal' form of nepotism: allegedly Dinka are given preferential treatment to jobs and money making opportunities, with those in positions of power favouring their family and tribe before others. "*You know*", a doctor told me, "*the problem is that the Dinka, they just are just taking over the government. They are getting all the jobs and that is not good. The other tribes, they are getting jealous. They think the Dinka will have all the power and then take all the monies*". In a country where the poor have nothing and the rich are very obviously the political elite, then as the rich get richer, the gap between haves and have-nots not only grows but becomes increasingly obvious and resented.

Christmas Day in Pajok was just like any other. Calm, peaceful, family oriented. People visited friends. The churches were so full they were overflowing. The village was so calm, in fact, that nearly 200 people gathered at sunrise on the banks of the Ateppi River for an AIC baptismal event. True, blood did flow in the streets, but it was the blood of the cows and goats slaughtered for the day's feasting. Although some places in South Sudan awoke to sound of gunshots, like many communities in the country Pajok woke only to the laughter of children. Christmas, and life, was normal.

In this report, I have tried to give a different picture than that in most current stories about South Sudan. I have attempted to show the conflict currently dominating news stories only represents one aspect of a more complex and less violent reality. As well as giving an alternate account for South Sudan's current conflict, this report tries to subvert the dominant and only partial narrative about life here and demonstrate South Sudan is neither inherently conflict-ridden nor its people somehow beset by insurmountable primordial tribal hatreds. Despite widespread global media reporting, rather than being devastated by rampant and pervasive violence, many communities in South Sudan remain peaceful. They are far from either the causes or concerns of a conflict simplistic analyses portray as ethnic or 'tribal' but which is, like much violence in contemporary Africa, almost entirely politico-economic. To make such a statement is not to belittle the tragic human cost of the exceptional hubris that began this saga. Rather, it is to

attempt, through description of one South Sudanese community's understanding about "*what happened in Juba*", to find the underlying logics of the conflict; to site it within its wider political, economic, and historical contexts; and to provide its victims with explanations other than that most pernicious of modernist fallacies, biological determinism (in either its ethnic or tribal variants).

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