
Spear masters and mechanisms of conflict resolution/ reconciliation in South Sudan

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The following short sections point at some general aspects of spear masters and their role in mechanisms of conflict resolution/reconciliation in South Sudan. This is just a brief draft. The document mainly draws on research done for a doctoral thesis on Northern Bahr el-Ghazal State and therefore has a focus on spear masters and Dinka communities.¹ However, important aspects are similar/relevant also in other communities.

Pre-colonial authorities engaging in conflict resolution/reconciliation: Spear masters and prophets

- South Sudanese communities feature different spiritual authorities who date back to the pre-colonial era. They have been playing an important role in reconciliation and conflict resolution before and also after the arrival of the Anglo-Egyptian powers. They include Dinka spear masters (*beny bith*), Nuer leopard skin chiefs (*khour muon*), prophets and spiritual other authorities.

Spear masters or masters of the fishing spear (*beny bith*)

- Spear masters are the most important Dinka spiritual leaders and are seen as intermediaries between their communities and spiritual powers (*Nhialic*, free divinities, clan divinities and ancestors) in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal and neighboring states.² Spear masters mediate between divine powers and human beings by praying, invoking and sacrificing and are seen as guardians of rules, morals and norms.³ Thus spear masters were also seen as guardians of rules of warfare which exist in Dinka and other communities. These rules for instance prohibit killing individuals outside the battlefield, killing relatives or neighbors. Individuals who do not follow these rules are thought to be hunted by the spirits of the killed person.⁴ One of the tasks of spear masters and Nuer leopard skin chiefs was the removal of the pollution caused by killing a human being.⁵

¹ Santschi, Martina 2013: Encountering and 'capturing' *hakuma*: Negotiating statehood and authority in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal State, South Sudan. Doctoral thesis, University of Bern, Switzerland

² The terms for spear masters vary regionally. Padang Dinka refer the term *beny rem* for common spear masters and *beny nhial* for very influential spear masters. Dinka Ngok use the term *beny de ring* for spear masters.

³ Mawson, Andrew N. M. 1989: *The Triumph of Life: Political Dispute and religious Ceremonial among the Agar Dinka*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge.

⁴ Deng, Francis Mading 1972: *The Dinka of the Sudan*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

⁵ Hutchinson, Sharon E. 1996: *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War and the State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Before the Anglo-Egyptian rule spear masters and other spiritual leaders settled conflicts and disputes and mediated/reconciled individuals but also larger, autonomous groups.⁶ Spear masters are assumed to be able to find 'the truth'.⁷ They do so by referring to oaths and ordeals and by calling upon divine powers.⁸
- Spear masters stop fighting and disputes by drawing a line between parties of conflict.⁹ It is still assumed that individuals ignoring spear masters rituals face punishment of spiritual powers for instance in the form of heavy casualties in warfare or in the form of illness and death. In addition to that spear masters sacrifice animals preferably bulls to reconcile parties to the conflict: By showing unity during the ritual the community is "re-created".¹⁰ During such ceremonies compensation may also be handed over.
- Spear masters influence is grounded in their religious sanctions, their "reputation for strength and success"¹¹ and on "respectable status well founded on tradition".¹²
- Some spear masters including Duang Marial and Atiek Atiek who lived in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal in the 19th and early 20th century were politically and militarily powerful and were successful traders. They ruled members of different ethnic groups, and forged alliances with external powers including slave traders, the Turko-Egyptian rule and later the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium government.¹³ They were also able to mobilize large forces and to fight subsequent external rules.

Prophets:

- Dinka and Nuer prophets are also spiritual leaders. But in contrast to spear masters and Nuer leopard skin chiefs they are thought to have the capacity to foresee the future and to mobilize large groups of followers. Thus their sphere of influence is larger than the sphere of influence of other spiritual leaders. They also have the capacity reconcile distant groups.
- The Anglo-Egyptian administration was concerned about spiritual leaders particularly prophets, their political influence and their capacity to mobilize people. Prophets like Nungdeng and Ariandit were seen as a threat to the colonial rule. Ariandit who originated from Northern Bahr el-Ghazal mobilized forces that fought the colonial government in 1922. After quelling the revolt Ariandit was imprisoned and only allowed to return to Aweil East in 1936.

Other communities feature other forms of spiritual leaders who engage in conflict resolution and reconciliation.

The colonial rule, chiefs and new forms of reconciliation and conflict resolution

- When the Anglo-Egyptian administration introduced the native administration, administrative chiefs and chief courts, these new institutions gradually took over part of the activities of spiritual leaders

⁶ Johnson, Douglas H. 1986: Judicial Regulation and Administrative Control: Customary Law and the Nuer, 1898-1954. *The Journal of African History* 27 (1): 59-78. Stubbs, J.M. 1934: Notes on Beliefs and Customs of the Malwal Dinka of Bahr el-Ghazal Province. *Sudan Notes and Records* 17 (2): 243-254.

⁷ Howell, Paul 1951: Notes on the Ngork Dinka of Western Kordofan. *Sudan Notes and Records* 32 (2): 239-293.

⁸ Lienhardt, Godfrey 2003: Divinity and Experience. The Religion of the Dinka. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Stubbs, Notes on Beliefs and Customs of the Malwal Dinka.

⁹ Deng, The Dinka of the Sudan.

¹⁰ Lienhardt, Godfrey 2003: The Western Dinka. In: John Middleton (Ed.) Tribes without Rulers: Studies in African segmentary Systems. London Routledge. 97-135.

¹¹ Lienhardt, Godfrey, The Western Dinka

¹² Howell, Notes on the Ngork Dinka of Western Kordofan.

¹³ Santschi, Encountering and 'capturing' *hakuma*.

including some aspects of conflict resolution, local justice and in mediation/reconciliation. Since spear masters and their clans hardly occupy administrative chieftaincies, their political influence also decreased with the introduction of chiefs.

- Yet, practices of chiefs in local justice and in reconciliation in many ways resemble/are similar to the practices and underlying concepts of the work of spear masters and other spiritual leaders.¹⁴ Many concepts and practices of spiritual authorities were adapted. Thus new syncretic forms emerged. Therefore as Deng noted it is difficult to differentiate “between what was indigenous and what has been implanted by alien powers”.¹⁵

Spiritual leaders in the present-day context of South Sudan

- Despite the presence of chiefs and the spread of Christianity, spear masters and other spiritual authorities continue to engage in some of their core activities including spiritual ceremonies and praying for a safe movement of cattle, security, peace, healing, protection of armed forces etc. Depending on their popularity and their assumed spiritual powers, they are influential and well respected, and also feared even among educated, baptized South Sudanese. Yet, in particular educated and baptized individuals do not necessarily mention that they consult/belief in the influence of spiritual authorities, some fear that it would not be considered appropriate and could be understood as being backward.
- Spear masters continue to play a major role in different aspects of conflict resolution/reconciliation. In Northern Bahr el-Ghazal in case of homicide spear masters usually start the reconciliation process between the involved families. Doing this they prevent that homicide leads to inter-klan and intra-communal revenge attacks and they also pave the way for the case being settled in a formal court. They are also involved in larger scale reconciliation processes and conduct important rituals in relation to peace and reconciliation. In peace processes such as the Wunlit peace process spiritual leaders were also involved.
- The boundary between local justice, conflict resolution and reconciliation is blurred and it is difficult to clearly differentiate these different spheres. This is also caused by the nature of local justice. Chief courts and informal arenas of local justice which include spear masters aim at restoring stability and cohesion in the community rather than to punish the defendants.¹⁶
- Spiritual leaders still play an influential role in warfare. The alleged Lou Nuer prophet Dak Kueth is widely rumored to have been involved in mobilizing Lou Nuer fighters who attacked Pibor in 2011.
- Spiritual leaders do not often engage with and are not in the focus of international actors. While chiefs – as intermediaries between communities and external actors such as the government, international NGOs, etc. frequently engage with external actors, spiritual leaders intermediate between the community and spiritual leaders. Thus their role in reconciliation, mediation and conflict resolution is not necessarily recognised by representatives of the international community.
- Rules of warfare of Dinka, Nuer and other South Sudanese communities which prohibit attacks outside the battle fields, attacks on women, children and elderly people have particularly since the 1991 SPLM/A inter-fighting not been followed any longer. Hutchinson suggested that rebel commanders promoted the idea that “killing in a war with the government did not involve pollution dangers.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Johnson, Judicial Regulation and Administrative Control.

¹⁵ Deng, The Dinka of the Sudan, p. 111.

¹⁶ Jok, Aleu Akechak, Robert a Leitch and Carrie Vandewint 2004: A Study of Customary Law in Contemporary Southern Sudan. World Vision International and the South Sudan Secretariat of Legal and Constitutional Affairs.

¹⁷ Hutchinson, Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War and the State.

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