CHANGING POWER AMONG MURLE CHIEFS

NEGOTIATING POLITICAL, MILITARY AND SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY IN BOMA STATE, SOUTH SUDAN

SOUTH SUDAN CUSTOMARY AUTHORITIES PROJECT

Changing Power Among Murle Chiefs

Negotiating political, military and spiritual authority in Boma State, South Sudan

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COVER: Chief Charburo Lokoli addressing Bothonya youth during a court case in Pibor town, 21 October 2017.

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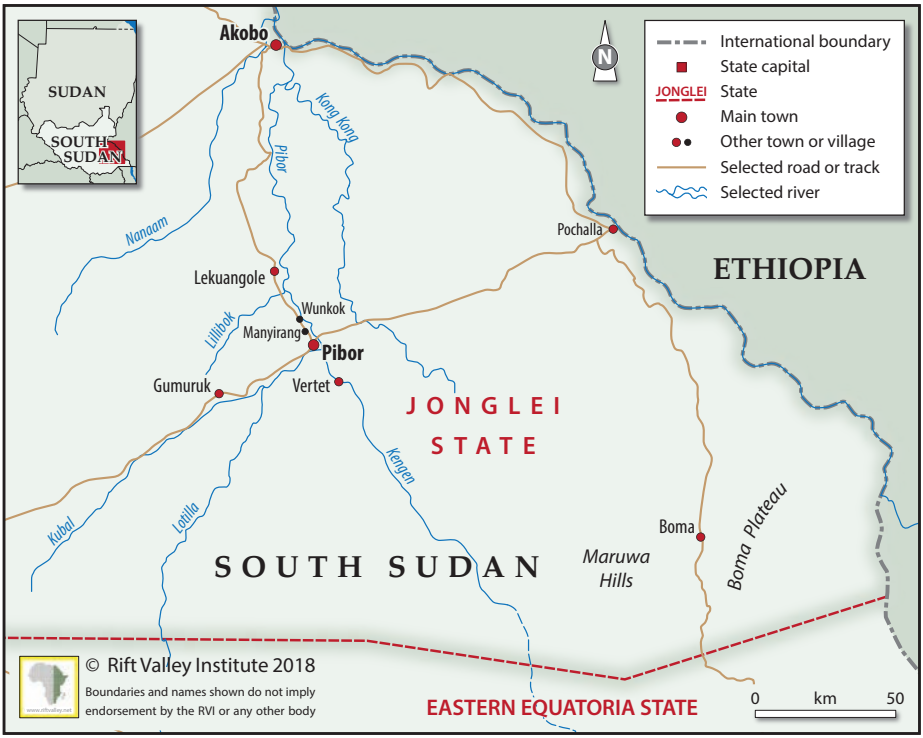

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South Sudan states are according to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005)

Map 1. (*above*) South Sudan
Map 2. (*below*) Former Jonglei state

Summary

This report investigates how Murle customary authorities in south-eastern South Sudan navigate and negotiate political, military and spiritual authority, while simultaneously challenging the view that Murle society has no organic leadership structures—an idea often linked to negative stereotypes.

The study emphasizes the resilience and adaptive edge of authority structures within Murle society. It demonstrates that the most successful customary authorities—in particular the position of red chiefs—are those who are able to combine spiritual power with other sources of authority. Historically the prime holders of law and order in their communities, red chiefs continue to derive their authority as a traditional God-given right, passed down from father to son. This is in contrast to the government chiefs—a legacy of the colonial system of indirect rule—who derive their authority from their relationship with the state.

The power of red chiefs and that of government is simultaneously aligned and in competition. On the one hand, the most successful chiefs are those who embody multiple sources of power, combining traditional spiritual authority with that of government. On the other hand, in asserting their strength, members of the elite in government challenge the authority of red chiefs, partially alienating those same government officials from the population at large. In many cases, chiefs will occupy both the traditional and government forms of customary authority. Clearly, the challenge is not the lack of credible authority structures among the Murle, but rather their abundance and, as a consequence, the difficulties outsiders find navigating them.

This study, carried out through extensive interviews across Boma State between 2012 and 2017, draws heavily from the case of one of the most prominent political, military and spiritual leaders among the Murle, Sultan Ismael Konyi. It demonstrates how the intersections between spiritual, political and military power and authority in Murle leadership structures are drawn from complex internal hierarchies and require skillful negotiation.

1. Introduction

The Murle community from south-eastern South Sudan is often described as an acephalous society with elusive sources of authority and lacking credible and legitimate governance structures. This is not, however, an accurate picture. In fact, it may be the opposite. There are many *alat ci merik*[1] (red chiefs) in each *buul* (age-set or generation) in each specific area—a village, cattle-camp or town—who play important leadership roles. Red chiefs mediate conflicts within and beyond their own age-sets, speak on behalf of their groups, and influence, determine and have overall responsibility for their group's actions. In this regard, the challenge is not the absence of leadership structures but rather their abundance. Consequently, it is important to be able to accurately identify the internal hierarchies of spiritual and political leadership and authority so as to better understand how community legitimacy and support is attained.

This analysis of Murle chiefs draws on long-term field research in different locations across Boma State conducted between 2012 and 2017, and in particular on interviews with a number of chiefs in Pibor town, including Sultan Ismael Konyi, in October 2017.[2] The report counters the prevailing notion that Murle society has no organic leadership structures, which is often linked to negative stereotypes that represent the Murle community as 'primitive and ungovernable'.[3] International, national and local political discourses often portray the Murle community as principal aggressors and the source of much of the instability affecting Jonglei and beyond 'despite the reality of a politically and economically marginalized Murle'.[4] The Murle are stereotyped as exceptionally violent and are generally blamed for incidents of conflict in Jonglei and elsewhere.[5] Such negative stereotypes and accusations are partially driven by actual events, but are also manipulated by more dominant groups to serve political purposes.[6]

The intersections between spiritual, political and military power and authority in Murle leadership structures are complex. The most successful red chiefs are those who are able to combine spiritual with other sources of authority. As government authority grows, however, the spiritual and political power red chiefs wield is being challenged and is changing. This contributes to tensions

1 The Murle language: *Alat ci merik* (plural form) and *alan ci meri* (singular form) for the term 'red chief(s)'. It is an exclusively male position passed from father to son among leading families in a given drumship (clan). It is seen as a God-given position.

2 The author wishes to thank Cherry Leonardi and Jonathan Arensen for helpful feedback on an earlier version of this report.

3 J. McCallum, 'The Murle and the security complex in the South Sudan–Ethiopia borderlands', *The Horn of Africa Bulletin*, 25 July 2017. Accessed 4 June 2018, http://life-peace.org/hab/murle-sudan-ethiopia-borderlands/.

4 A. Laudati, 'Victims of discourse: mobilizing narratives of fear and insecurity in post conflict South Sudan—the case of Jonglei State', *African Geopolitical Review* 30/1 (2011): 21.

5 J. McCallum and A. Okech, 'Drivers of Conflict in Jonglei State', *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine*, number 57, Humanitarian Practice Network, Overseas Development Institute, May 2013. Accessed 4 June 2018, https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8777.pdf.

6 See D. Felix da Costa, '"This Word, It Is for Murle, Not Meant for Other People": The Politics of Murle Identity, Experiences

between the traditional spiritual authority of red chiefs and that of some Murle politicians who rely solely on the political and military power provided by their relationship with government. These sources of authority are sometimes in competition. At the same time, government authority can rely and build upon spiritual authority. For example, some of the most successful Murle political figures make use of their spiritual authority as red chiefs to speak the cultural, spiritual and political language that the majority of the rural Murle population understand and respect. In turn, this serves to alienate a significant portion of the class of Murle political elite, who privilege the language of government, education and qualifications. More tuned in to ideas of modernity, this political elite remains somewhat detached from a large part of Murle society.

This analysis draws heavily on the case of one of the most prominent political, military and spiritual leaders among the Murle, Sultan Ismael Konyi, who has effectively drawn upon and strategically deployed multiple sources of authority to strengthen his position amongst his community. This includes his role as a red chief, a prominent senior politician, a government official and a military commander who was the founder and head of the Pibor Defence Forces (PDF), aligned with Khartoum since the 1980s. The case of Sultan Ismael Konyi also sheds more specific light on both the intersection of and tensions between spiritual and government authority in Murle society.

of Violence and of the State in Boma, South Sudan', PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London, 2016.

2. The Murle in the political context of South Sudan

Murle society is organized through three core interconnected social institutions: Age-set or generation system (buul); red chiefs (alan ci merik); and clans or drumships (*kidoŋwa*). These three social institutions bind the Murle together as a group and shape Murle discourses about themselves as a distinctive and cohesive ethnic community. Each age-set has its own red chiefs, with a hierarchy of authority determined by the clans, which establishes seniority within each age-set and across the Murle as a whole. The Murle are divided into four clans, or drumships, with respective sub-clans that divide between red chiefs and black commoners.[7] The two larger clans are the *Taŋajon* and *ŋarɔti*, followed by the *Keleŋnya* and *ŋenvac*. There are red chiefs in all four clans, with those from the *Taŋajon* considered to have the greatest authority, followed by the *ŋarɔti*, *Keleŋnya* and *ŋenvac*, respectively.[8] Within each clan, there are also complex and nuanced hierarchies and sub-clans, that establish seniority. The issue, then, is not the absence of complex leadership structures. Rather, it is the ability to navigate and understand them.

Despite a shared collective sense of ethnic identity through common social institutions, the Murle people of South Sudan have diverse experiences of recent history, ecology and landscape, thus also of livelihoods, legacies of conflict and even of the state.[9] At the most basic level, the Murle are divided between the larger agro-pastoralist lowland Murle inhabiting the Lotilla plains and the mostly agrarian highland Murle inhabiting the Boma Plateau. Landscape and ecological differences have meant that the lowland and highland Murle have developed diverse sociocultural patterns, livelihood strategies and relationships with neighbouring communities.[10] Whereas lowland Murle place cattle at the centre of social, political and economic life and follow seasonal transhumance migrations, highland Murle are predominantly sedentary cultivators who keep small livestock.[11]

The Murle community also have important historically entrenched divisions based on political allegiances that emerged during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005). During the second civil war, the town of Boma was taken by the Sudan People's

7 Historically, red chiefs got their name from the crimson bird feathers they wore on their foreheads, although now they often wear a red hat and other red pieces of clothing. The term 'black commoners' refers to those that are not from red chief clans.

8 On clans, see: B. A. Lewis, *The Murle: Red Chiefs and Black Commoners*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972, especially chapter 3.

9 See: Felix da Costa, 'This Word, It Is for Murle'; and E. Andretta, 'Symbolic Continuity, Material Discontinuity, and Ethnic Identity among Murle Communities in the Southern Sudan', *Ethnology* 28/1 (1989): 17–31.

10 D. Felix da Costa, '"We Are One, but We Are Different": Murle Identity and Local Peacebuilding in Jonglei State, South Sudan', Policy Brief, Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF), 2013. Accessed 4 June 2018, http://www.peacebuilding.no/Regions/Africa/Sudan-and-South-Sudan/Publications/We-are-one-but-we-are-different-Murle-identity-and-local-peacebuilding-in-Jonglei-State-South-Sudan.

11 See: Felix da Costa, 'This Word, It Is for Murle'; and E. Andretta, 'A Reconsideration of the Basis of Group Cohesion among the Murle of Southern Sudan',

The Murle age-set system

The age-sets or generations (*buul*) are groups of men loosely based on age and with multiple social functions, to which a man will usually belong to all his life. Women will usually belong to their father's age-set until they marry (or are promised to marry someone), when they shift to belong to their husband's age-set. At present, the existing age-sets, from the youngest to the oldest, are:

Kurenen: emerging age-set born from late 1990s onwards, in competition with Laŋo.

Laŋo: born 1980s–1990s–2000s, many took part in the Cobra Faction war, currently in competition with Kurenen and Bothonya.

Bothonya: born late 1970s–1980s–early 1990s; said to be the first age-set to fight younger age-sets with guns rather than sticks; age-set of David Yau Yau and many that took part in the Cobra Faction war.

Thithi: born 1960s–1970s; the age-set of a large number of the Cobra Faction leadership; dominance still contested with Bothonya.

Muden: born 1950s–1960s; an age set that joined the PDF.

Doroŋwa: born 1940s–1950s; the age-set of Ismael Konyi.

Maara: born 1930s-1940s.

Nyeriza: born 1920s-1930s.

Nyakademu: born 1910-1920s, few remaining members.

* For further discussion of the Murle age-set system, see: J. Arensen, Mice Are Men: Language and Society among the Murle of Sudan, International Museum of Cultures no. 27, Dallas: International Museum of Cultures, 1992.

Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and Pibor was largely under the control of Khartoum. Internally, the Murle were split between those in Boma, who largely supported the SPLM/A, and those who fought with Ismael Konyi's Popular Defence Forces (PDF). The PDF is known as the 'Brigade', or more commonly, the 'Berget',[12] a local Murle militia in Pibor that was aligned with the Khartoum government and established to protect the Murle community from 'predation by the neighbouring Dinka and Nuer, who dominated the leadership of the SPLM/A'.[13] Decisions regarding the side on which people fought were often based on practical concerns, such as who was in control of the physical location where a person was or had been displaced to, rather than political or ideological considerations.[14] Despite the organization of peace and reconciliation meetings in the years leading up to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the 2006 Juba Declaration—when the PDF and other militia groups under the South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF) were integrated into the SPLA—unresolved political divisions linked to historical tensions between the PDF and the SPLA still permeate Murle political dynamics.[15]

Since the 2005 CPA, violence in Jonglei has been multifaceted, with some areas, especially the Murle home of former Pibor County (now in Boma State), experiencing a deterioration of security. Jonglei State was affected the most by both communal and political conflicts.[16] Across Jonglei, neighbouring ethnic groups continued to engage in intercommunal conflicts, accompanied by mass killings, cattle raids and abductions of women and children, in addition to local feuds at the village level. The rebellions of the late George Athor in 2010 and David Yau Yau in 2010 and 2012, both supported with weapons from the Khartoum government, contributed to a wide availability of arms and ammunition.

Intercommunal conflict between the Lou Nuer and Murle escalated and became increasingly violent in 2009–2011.[17] Tactics changed, with attacks no longer being solely focused on capturing cattle, but also targeting entire villages, killing women, children and the elderly, and looting and destroying homes, state infrastructure and NGO facilities. This new era of violence is seen as having started with a Lou Nuer attack on Lekuangole between 5 and 8 March 2009, where some 450 mainly women and children were killed.[18] From March 2009 to March 2012, more than 1,800 Lou Nuer people were killed by Murle and 134,000 cattle taken.[19] In turn, more than 2,000 Murle were killed in Lou Nuer attacks and more than 628,000 cattle taken, in addition to unaccounted

PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1985.

12 The name 'Berget' is how the word 'brigade' is appropriated in the Murle language.

13 McCallum, 'The Murle and the security complex'.

14 See: Felix da Costa, 'This Word, It Is for Murle'; and J. McCallum, 'Murle Identity in Post-Colonial South Sudan', PhD thesis, York University, York, 2013, especially chapter 5.

15 See: McCallum, 'The Murle and the security complex'. The first step in a gradual reconciliation and cessation of hostilities between Murle communities divided partly by opposing loyalties to the Sudanese government and SPLM/A, and their neighbours, took place in Lekuangole in June 2003, under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church of Sudan–Pibor, with follow-up meetings in Boma in February 2004 and again Lekuangole in June 2005. See: M. Bradbury, J. Ryle, M. Medley and K. Sansculotte-Greenidge, 'Local Peace Processes in Sudan: A Baseline Study', London: Rift Valley Institute, 2006, 156–158. Accessed 4 June 2018, http://riftvalley.net/publication/local-peace-processes-sudan. For background on intra-Murle reconciliation, see McCallum, 'Murle Identity in Post-Colonial South Sudan', 2013, chapter 2, especially 44–48. For a discussion of the PDF's integration into the SPLA, see: M. Arnold, 'The South Sudan Defence Force: Patriots, Collaborators or Spoilers?', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*

numbers of civilians displaced on both sides.[20]

The government of South Sudan responded by initiating another round of civilian disarmament of all groups in Jonglei State, the fifth SPLA-led disarmament campaign in Jonglei since 2007.[21] The SPLA battalion responsible for disarmament in Pibor was, however, 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 own communities.[22] By May 2012, this had effectively become a forced disarmament campaign, particularly in the plains of Pibor County, where the SPLA reportedly committed rapes, simulated drowning and carried out other serious abuses.[23] In addition to previous unresolved political grievances, the SPLA's violent disarmament campaign motivated Murle rebel leader David Yau Yau to resume his 2010 rebellion. The violent actions of the SPLA against Murle civilians also encouraged many Murle men to join David Yau Yau's rebellion, in the form of the South Sudan Defence Movement/Army–Cobra Faction (SSDM/A–CF), as a way to protect their communities, capitalizing on the feelings of resentment, distrust and marginalization among the Murle population toward the SPLA.[24] Yau Yau called for greater representation for the Murle in government and the creation of a Murle state.

Since the national conflict between the SPLA and the SPLA-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO) began on 15 December 2013, the dynamics of the conflict in Pibor have changed significantly for the better. The area went from being the most unstable to one of the quietest in the Greater Upper Nile region.[25] With the government of South Sudan keen to have the Cobra Faction and the Murle ethnic group on its side, a peace deal was signed on 9 May 2014 in Addis Ababa. This included provisions for the establishment of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), answering the Cobra Faction's calls for greater government representation and an independent state. The GPAA consisted of the counties of Pibor and Pochalla, formerly part of Jonglei State, and home to the Murle, Anyuak, Jie and Kachipo ethnic communities. The Cobra Faction and the Murle community at large committed to stay neutral in the wider conflict. David Yau Yau was appointed chief administrator, a position he held until shortly after the government's creation of 28 new states, which replaced the 10 previous constitutionally established states, in October 2015. At this time, the GPAA became Boma State, still composed of former Pibor and Pochalla counties.

45/04 (2007): 489–516.
16 Small Arms Survey, 'My Neighbour, My Enemy: Inter-Tribal Violence in Jonglei', Sudan Issue Brief Number 21, Human Security Baseline Assessment, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2012. Accessed 4 June 2018, http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/issue-briefs/HSBA-IB21-Inter-tribal_violence_in_Jonglei.pdf.
17 E. Thomas, *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation*, London: Zed Books, 2015; and Small Arms Survey, 'My Neighbour, My Enemy'.
18 Small Arms Survey, 'My Neighbour, My Enemy', 2.
19 Small Arms survey, 'My Neighbour, My Enemy', 3.
20 Small Arms survey, 'My Neighbour, My Enemy', 3.
21 J. Young, 'Jonglei 2010: Another Round of Disarmament', Situation Report, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2010. Accessed 4 June 2018, http://www.issafrica.org/uploads/May2010Jonglei.pdf; 'No One to Intervene: Gaps in Civilian Protection in South Sudan', Human Rights Watch. Accessed 4 June 2018, http://www.hrw.org/reports/2009/06/21/no-one-intervene-0; and R. Garfield, 'Violence and Victimization after Civilian Disarmament: The Case of Jonglei', Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2007. Accessed 4 June 2018, http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1002_1257164736_swp-11-jonglei-violence.pdf.
22 McCallum and Okech, 'Drivers of Conflict in Jonglei State'.

By December 2015, the government had removed Yau Yau from leadership and installed long-term SPLM supporter Baba Medan as governor of Boma State, resulting in intra-Murle violence (between supporters of the two leaders) affecting the area once again.[26] By January 2017, President Salva Kiir Mayardit had replaced Medan with Sultan Ismael Konyi as governor of Boma State, a position he kept until 26 January 2018, when Kiir once again appointed David Yau Yau as governor.[27] The political dynamics in Boma State continue to be delicate. They are connected to wider national political maneuverings, fragile relationships with neighbours and challenging intra-Murle elite political divisions, with powerful individuals drawing support from youth in their home areas and making use of the age-set system to build their own private armies.

23 Amnesty International, 'South Sudan: Lethal Disarmament—Abuses Related to Civilian Disarmament in Pibor County, Jonglei State', London: Amnesty International Publications, 2012; and '"They Are Killing Us". Abuses Against Civilians in South Sudan's Pibor County', Human Rights Watch. Accessed 4 June 2018, https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/12/they-are-killing-us/abuses-against-civilians-south-sudans-pibor-county.

24 Felix da Costa, 'This Word, It Is for Murle'.

25 C. Todisco, 'Real but Fragile: The Greater Pibor Administrative Area', Number 35, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, March 2015.

26 See: 'Clashes in Pibor involving Governor Baba's guards', Radio Tamazuj, 24 February 2016. Accessed 4 June 2018, https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/clashes-in-pibor-involving-governor-baba-s-guards; and 'Dozens wounded in Pibor clashes', Radio Tamazuj, 25 February 2016. Accessed 4 June 2018, https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/dozens-wounded-in-pibor-clashes.

27 'Kiir sacks three states' governors', Radio Tamazuj, 27 January 2018. Accessed 4 June 2018, https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/kiir-sacks-two-states-governors.

3. The meanings of chiefs among the Murle

> *'People still respect red chiefs. It's like a snake and its children. If it bites you, you will still die.'*[28]

Historically, red chiefs were the prime holders of law and order in their communities. In places where the state does not reach—in villages and cattle-camps—they continue to play this role. In towns and other semi-urban areas, the role of red chiefs has changed. This change is explained by Chief Wowo Bodo, a red chief from the *ŋarɔti* clan and former chief of Taŋajon village, who had been promoted as a chief in the high court in Pibor: 'Before, it was only red chiefs in charge but now there is government on top of that. People have become arrogant.'[29]

When referring to chiefs among the Murle, it is possible to distinguish between what are intrinsically Murle traditional leadership structures (red chiefs) and those introduced by colonial authorities (government chiefs). The latter were established and appointed by the colonial government as part of the system of indirect rule. Government chiefs are locally known by the Arabic terms of 'sheik' or 'omda', and a paramount chief as 'sultan'. Although not always the case, and there is some variation across Murleland, in most instances government chiefs are also red chiefs.[30] For instance, most Murle chiefs serving in the high court in Pibor are both government chiefs and red chiefs.[31]

The standard Murle word for leader or chief is '*alan*', usually referring to a red chief. Charburo Lokoli, the paramount chief of Kongor and a red chief from the ŋarɔti clan explains:

> Since the beginning, we are the people from above. … From the beginning, people were without anyone to lead them, so God sent us to lead. The original meaning of 'alan' is 'to rescue'. If I say something, no one will deny it or challenge it. If someone does, I can curse them.[32]

Thus, the original meaning of the term alludes to how Murle perceive red chiefs but also increasingly to the idea of chiefs more generally as protectors, rescuers and guides of the community. Red chiefs are spiritual men said to have gained their power directly from God (*Tammu*) and as such, with spiritual authority to rule.

28 Interview with elder from Murle chief's court in Juba, Konyo Konyo area, Juba, 16 October 2017.
29 Interview with Wowo Bodo, red chief from the ŋarɔti clan and former government chief of Taŋajon; currently part of the chief's high court in Pibor town, Pibor town, 19 October 2017.
30 This appears to be generally the case in the lowlands but not in the highlands.
31 According to Amoyo Kiron Theuwa, since the position of paramount chief was created by colonial authorities, all Murle paramount chiefs (apart from the first one) have been red chiefs. The first paramount chief appointed by the British was Jakor Beo, who was a black commoner. He was followed by Lotillem, Korok Ngayon, Ismael Konyi, ŋantho Kavula and Nyikcho Ame Bolen (current paramount chief), all of whom are red chiefs. Interview with Amoyo Kiron Theuwa, red chief from the Taŋajon clan and deputy paramount chief of Pibor South county, Pibor town, 21 October 2017.
32 Interview with Charburo Lokoli, red chief from the ŋarɔti clan and paramount chief of Kongor, Thithi

Hence, the power of red chiefs is not something given in this life but is inherited from father to son as a God-given position. For this reason, the authority of red chiefs is perceived by many to be more valuable and legitimate than the power derived from government, although this is also contested. As one red chief from the Bothonya generation from Wunkok village notes, 'The strongest and most important is a red chief; that [power] can never be taken away from you. The other [government chief] is just a promotion.'[33]

Some observers regard the position of red chiefs as religious rather than political.[34] The spiritual authority of red chiefs, however, has provided them with the social legitimacy to make and impose moral claims with wide social repercussions and to take decisions that have political implications. In this sense, it is possible to say that red chiefs also hold political authority, which is even more so the case when government chiefs draw on their authority as red chiefs.

Sultan Ismael Konyi, himself also a red chief from the ŋarɔti clan, elaborates the importance of red chiefs among the Murle and the roles he thinks they continue to play in maintaining social stability and governing society:

> When I was born, I found my clan were already red chiefs. I asked my parents about being a red chief and they told me that it is something that God gave to the clan during the time of creation. I then asked them to explain to me the role of a red chief. They told me that the role of a red chief is to resolve all the problems in society. For example, murder, theft and adultery cases. And whatever the red chief says, people will always respect his decision. If a person commits a murder and runs to the red chief's home, no one from the deceased's family will try to revenge that death. They understand red chiefs were sent by God to save people from the suffering that they experienced due to lack of leadership among them before. Murle people well understand the role of red chiefs in the community. If I say anything or I make any decision, people will respect what I say. And if you visit my elder brother's home, you will find a drum that was used by our ancestors a long time ago. But red chiefs are not doing witchcraft. It's just a system used to govern society. Some communities, such as the Anyuak and Shilluk, have kings.[35]

The role of government chiefs has come to resemble the role of red chiefs as understood by Sultan Ismael, in terms of restoring order, peace and customary justice. Referring to the role of government

age-set, Pibor town, 19 October 2017.
33 Interview with red chief from the Taŋajon clan, Bothonya age-set from Wunkok village, Pibor town, 20 October 2017.
34 J. Arensen, 'Murle Political Systems and Age-Sets', paper presented at AECOM Jonglei conference, Nairobi, Kenya, March 2012.
35 Interview with Sultan Ismael Konyi, Pibor town, 21 October 2017.

chiefs, John Kaka, at the time, the county commissioner of Pibor South, explains:

> Chiefs are actually selected in each payam [second lowest administrative division, below counties] to solve issues that local people face. For example, if someone kills someone in any payam, the killer will go to the chief's home, where he will be protected and brought to government because we don't have prisons in that area. But we put the [government] chief who is a red chief at the same time to be our protector. If you kill someone, you'll run to the chief, whether [you killed] intentionally or unintentionally. You'll run to the chief. And the chief will be feared by everybody. For example, during those days when our culture was still actually believed by our people, if the chief said stop, people would stop. People would listen to him. They would hear him. Even the wife of a chief would be able to stop any group of people mobilizing to come to the chief's home. That's why now the role of chief in areas where I'm not present can take over my activities, which the simple ones can be solved by them. The difficult ones, like killings, will be brought to me and will then be taken to the high court where we have selected other chiefs to take over such kind of activities.[36]

What the (former) commissioner's account reveals is that even the cases that are considered to be too serious and difficult to resolve individually by red chiefs or government chiefs in rural areas, and are thus brought to government in town, are then taken back to be addressed in the chief's high court in Pibor. This court is composed of senior government chiefs who are also red chiefs. The role of chiefs in maintaining social order and justice across Murle areas remains vital.

At the same time, perhaps Chief Charburo, Sultan Ismael and the former commissioner are referring to the power red chiefs used to hold. Kaku Aturuk Kutura was one of the founders and senior commanders in the PDF, alongside Sultan Ismael. He laments the decrease in the authority of red chiefs:

> The role of the chief is to guide Murle in issues related to cattle, and of anything else in the community. These things have been spoiled now. It is these generations since the *Bothonya* [age-set] that have changed things. Before, if a red chief spoke, everyone respected his words [but now] it's like politics or modern civilization are causing misunderstandings. Some years ago, when

36 Interview John Kaka, (former) former county commissioner of Pibor South, Pibor town, 24 October 2017.

> my age-set fought each other, if one red chief came and told us to stop or he'd curse us, we always stopped. I don't know about these new generations. They've become mad. I don't know.[37]

Kaku, now an elder from the *Doroŋwa* age-set, is referring to the important role that red chiefs have had in mediating and regulating competition and fighting within and between age-sets. The highly functional buul (age-sets) are arguably the most cohesive social institution holding Murle society together. These generational groups, however, have also become one of the major causes of intra-Murle violent conflict. Age-sets comprise groups of men loosely based on age, to which a man will belong all his life. They provide men with a meaningful sense of belonging to a social group, with ties and loyalties between those of the same age-set sometimes stronger than those between relatives and brothers from competing age-sets. The age-set system has multiple social functions and remains a core element of Murle society—in everyday discussions, social relationships and friendships, in the ways in which cattle raids are conducted, in military mobilization, and in political allegiances and orchestrations. Age-sets are also used to divide labour and responsibilities in the dry season, when youth in particular have specific roles in annual pastoralist migrations. Until the emergence of the Bothonya age-set, competition between the two youngest age-sets was considered to be a rite of passage, regulated by older age-sets and usually conducted through stick-fighting, with red chiefs able to control disputes. These competitions, however, have grown increasingly violent and harder to control.

Chief Charburo explains the role he believes red chiefs still have in mediating age-set competition:

> For example, if Laŋo and Kurenen are fighting, I'll intervene. I'll use power as a red chief by using a spear and marking a line on the ground: 'Whoever crosses that line will die!' They'll fear and they'll stop. … Before, in the time of my father, there was no government and fewer crimes. But now things are worse. Now, age-sets are using guns instead of sticks, from the Bothonya and Laŋo onwards.[38]

In principle, disputes within an age-set are resolved by the red chiefs of that particular age-set. Disputes between age-sets are also addressed through the most senior red chiefs of the two age-sets that are involved in the dispute. If necessary, for example

37 Interview with Kaku Aturuk Kutura, founder and former PDF commander, *Doroŋwa* age-set, Juba, 16 October 2017.
38 Interview with Chief Charburo Lokoli, red chief from the ŋarɔti clan and paramount chief of Kongor, Pibor town, 19 October 2017.

because a dispute has escalated, red chiefs from older age-sets will also mediate, as Chief Charburo indicates above. In practice, however, serious age-set fighting has become difficult for some red chiefs to manage, unless they have alternative or additional sources of power and authority, such as military or government power, to threaten and coerce the enforcement of the decisions of those red chiefs. For example, in October 2017, there were uneasy relations between the Bothonya and Laŋo age-sets in parts of Boma State. In 2016 and the first half of 2017, there had also been more serious clashes between the Laŋo and Kurenen, the youngest age-set, the presence of which was still limited to wider Lekuangole and to Manyirang payam in Pibor but not elsewhere in Murleland.[39]

Competition between the youngest age-sets has become increasingly brutal and a source of violence due to the growing militarization of youth and widespread availability of firearms.[40] As a result, red chiefs are no longer able to regulate age-set competition in the ways that they did in the past. One twenty-year-old man from the Kurenen age-set in Manyirang payam had clear thoughts on these social changes:

> Chiefs have become less important. They are not as important as during the time of our fathers because in this age-set [Kurenen] sometimes there are very many people who are challenging things. Like when the red chief says, 'Don't go there or you will die', they'll say 'Ah, we don't care and even if we die, there is no problem'. … The reason why people are challenging things at this time is because of guns. It is the time for people to die because when you want to die, you always challenge things. That's why people die every time. Last time, in the time of our fathers, people were not dying like this. Unless they were sick. But now it is because we have guns. That's why we are dying. Because we don't understand. …
>
> Last time, when we withdrew from the Laŋo generation, we still wanted to be young. When you withdraw,[41] you still have your [same age-set] brothers. But when we withdrew, the Laŋo started killing us. So when they kill us, now we say, 'OK, if it is like this, then OK, let's kill each other' because there is no one who can reject his [age-set] brother. That's why we fought. But when people told us, it's OK [to stop], we said OK. We accepted this because many of us had died. On the other side, many of them had also died. So we wanted to stop all this killing.[42]

39 Although age-sets are not geographically limited, they tend to emerge in western Pibor and then extend eastward to other parts of the region later on. At the time of this research, for example, there were no Kurenen age-set members in Pibor town or Boma but they will eventually reach there, too.

40 See: Ø. Rolandsen and I. Breidlid, 'What is Youth Violence in Jonglei?', PRIO Paper, Oslo: Peace Research Institute of Oslo, 2013.

41 Use of the word 'withdraw' in this context is intentional. Because Murle males belong to the same age-set all their lives, a decision to leave their given age-set represents a conscious withdrawal on the part of an individual. This is also how a new age-set emerges: when a number of the younger males in the youngest age-set decide to leave (withdraw) and start a new younger age-set. This consequently leads to fighting between the newest, youngest age-set and the slightly older age-set from which they have just withdrawn, as the latter do not want any competition.

This young man refers to the first half of 2017, when Laŋo and Kurenen age-set youth violently clashed in Manyirang. These clashes ceased in July 2017, when Sultan Ismael Konyi intervened and succeeded in negotiating peace between the two sides, an age-set peace, which by November 2017 had remained in place. Those who are able to resolve conflicts, including age-set conflicts, are those who derive power and authority from multiple sources. A controversial figure, Sultan Ismael Konyi has been able to draw on his authority as a senior government official and political figure, a former military commander and a red chief to impose his will.

42 Interview with young man from the Kurenen age-set, Irith village, Manyirang payam, 21 October 2017.

4. Drawing on multiple sources of authority

Red chiefs and government chiefs have different means to exert power and impose their will. This is why when the same individual embodies multiple sources of authority, he is usually more successful in influencing actions.

Red chiefs possess the ability to curse as a means to enforce decisions and impose their will through the fear it inspires in others. The ability to instill fear and respect through cursing is contingent on the extent to which those who are cursed by a red chief actually suffer the consequences of the curse, which is usually death. To make this point, Chief Charburo—a red chief from the ŋarɔti clan and paramount chief of Kongor—recalls one episode during the 2013 clashes between the government's SPLA and the largely Murle insurgency, the SSDM/A–CF.[43] Charburo was robbed by a man on the road, though the thief's friends advised him against it, knowing Chief Charburo was a red chief. At the time, Chief Charburo said, 'Let him go but he will die.' Immediately, when fighting took place, the thief was killed. For Chief Charburo, this meant that the power of red chiefs was again on the rise because during the 2012–2013 clashes many of those who had 'disrespected [red] chiefs, they were cursed and died', legitimizing the power of red chiefs and instilling fear in the power of cursing.

In this regard, there is also a temporal distinction between the ways in which spiritual authority and government authority operate and are socially interpreted. When someone is cursed by a red chief, the curse and its implications may take a while to occur, whereas the power of government is immediately effective. When asked how he deploys his power, Charburo, who is both a red chief and a government paramount chief, explains: 'For me, I'm using both. If I want something now-now, I'll use government force. My position in the government is what I'm now deploying. I'm working for the government. If I feel I am having some difficulties in a case, I will request power from the government.'

For many chiefs and others across Murleland, having the power of government behind them, especially its military might (whether through the police or army), has become more important and influential than the spiritual power of red chiefs.[44] The authority of red chiefs no longer simply derives from only being a red chief. Rather,

43 Interview with Chief Charburo Lokoli, red chief from the ŋarɔti clan and paramount chief of Kongor, Pibor town, 19 October 2017. The quoted interview material presented in this paragraph and the next is all drawn from this source.
44 Interview with sub-chief of Kongor, Kongor, 21 April 2015.

authority issues from how this spiritual authority intersects with and builds upon other forms of power. Baba Kudumoch, government chief of Manyirang payam and also a red chief from the ŋarɔti clan insists that 'chiefs should work with government', regretting that chiefs do not 'have government forces that can enforce our decisions'.[45] Chief Baba also points out other issues facing red chiefs: 'There is a challenge facing red chiefs. If there's fighting, you may try to use your authority as a red chief but you may find there's also another red chief from another age-set. That's also another of the challenges. When we try to request government forces, the age-sets within [government] also interfere.'[46] The chief is referring to the allegiances and forces pulling a man to choose between his commitment to and the interests of his age-set, and those of government.

It is not only the inherited spiritual authority or government authority and military strength that counts. Chiefs require a number of other attributes in order to be respected. They require a certain charisma, the gift of speech and the ability to speak the truth. They also need the skill to listen, and to be generous and fair. Amoyo Kiron Theuwa is a red chief from the Taŋajon clan and the deputy paramount chief of Pibor County since 2012. He explains that the order to select him as a deputy paramount chief came from government but that he was elected by various chiefs. He reflects on the reasons why he was elected, which resonate with the attributes desired for a chief. 'First, I'm humble. Second, I know how to study cases. Third, I know how to talk. And fourth, I like to help people.'[47] For many Murle people across different age-sets, Sultan Ismael Konyi appears to embody these features, particularly in his ability to speak the language that his audience understands and trusts.

45 Interview with Baba Kudumoch, government chief of Manyirang and red chief from the ŋarɔti clan, Pibor town 21 October 2017.
46 Interview with Baba Kudumoch, government chief of Manyirang and red chief from the ŋarɔti clan, Pibor town 21 October 2017.
47 Interview with Amoyo Kiron Theuwa, red chief from the Taŋajon clan and deputy paramount chief of Pibor South county, Pibor town, 21 October 2017.

5. Sultan Ismael Konyi

'He has power not only to curse yo u but military power and government power and connections.'[48]

Sultan Ismael Konyi is one of the most prominent Murle leaders alive. For nearly 40 years, he has successfully negotiated and strengthened his various sources of authority among his Murle constituency. He is a savvy senior political figure, a former military commander who established the PDF and, importantly, a red chief from the ŋarɔti clan.[49] He has remained socially and politically relevant both in his Murle community and in the wider national political context of South Sudan. Insights into the sultan's life, through his own words, shed light on the various social and political roles he plays, as well as on the multiple sources of power and authority he exercises.

Converging sources of authority

Ismael Konyi, whose original name is Alan Guzulu, was born in 1942 in the village of Muur in Pibor County into a relatively poor family, the second of three brothers. He moved to Pibor town with his uncle to attend school, after whom he adopted the name Konyi. He also converted to Islam (his uncle's religion) and took Ismael as his Muslim name, becoming known as Ismael Konyi. Although no longer formally a sultan (paramount chief), Ismael Konyi continues to be referred to as such by many people. The title 'sultan' is a term of endearment that he acknowledges and enjoys. Sultan Ismael Konyi offers a short overview of his life and the various positions he has held:

> I was born in 1942 in a village called Muur. In 1943, when I was still young, my father migrated here and settled in Tenet in a place called Kavachoch, nowadays known as ɔle ci Meri[50] I grew up here. Since I migrated here, [to Pibor] I studied in Pibor Boys Primary School. After primary school in Pibor, I went to Kodok Secondary School [in Upper Nile]. In secondary school, one day I left for traditional dancing without permission of the teachers and was chased out of school. So I went to Malakal and found that the government was recruiting police and searching for

48 Interview with Murle intellectual, Juba, 17 October 2017.
49 In particular, Konyi belongs to the ŋachimor sub-clan, which is senior to the ŋaloga sub-clan.
50 'ɔle ci Meri' translates literally as 'Red People', but is referring to 'the place of red chiefs'.

people who knew how to read and write. I submitted my application and was called for an interview that I passed and was recruited as a police officer in Malakal.

In 1972, an order was sent from the police headquarters in Khartoum saying that all educated policemen were needed in Khartoum to join the army. I qualified to join the army but was first taken for military training in Khartoum for six months, after which I returned to Malakal as an army officer. In the same year of 1972, I was transferred from Malakal to Juba and then on to Bor as security intelligence, representing Pibor for two years until I resigned and came to Pibor in 1976.

People in Pibor were desperately looking for a good person to be appointed as chief. I was among 12 nominees competing for the position and was appointed as paramount chief in 1980. I started my work in 1980, attending some workshops in Bor in 1981 and 1982. By 1983, the SPLA war broke out. But to me, Murle people were safer in the hands of the Khartoum regime, so I came to Pibor and advised the Murle youth not to join the SPLM/A, and instead mobilized them to protect our cattle, our families and our land, and they agreed.

During 1984 and 1985, the SPLA were always attacking us here. Then in 1987, the SPLA displaced us from the barracks and we had to run to Malakal. While we were in Malakal, an order was sent from Khartoum saying we need you and your youth to be soldiers in our army, and I accepted. Some of my forces joined the SAF [Sudanese Armed Forces] and were promoted to officers and I was promoted as a major general.

In 1993, I was appointed as the commissioner of Pibor and I worked as commissioner for ten years. In 2003, I was appointed as governor of Jonglei [State] and then in 2005 I was later appointed to the legislative assembly. In 2007, I was appointed as presidential advisor for peace and reconciliation. In 2009, I was removed from being an advisor and appointed the deputy chairperson of the peace and reconciliation committee for the [ten] states. I held that position until 18 January 2017, when I was appointed by the president as the governor of Boma State.[51] Throughout these roles, I remained as the sultan of Pibor.[52]

As Ismael Konyi notes, he is a red chief by birth, although not the firstborn son. He was appointed as paramount chief of the Murle

51 McCallum (2013) reports a different account, stating that when Ismael Konyi joined the SPLM/A after the Juba Declaration in 2006, he became the peace and development advisor to Salva Kiir Mayardit and was later appointed a member of the Council of States, a chamber of the South Sudan national legislature.

52 Interview with Sultan Ismael Konyi, Pibor town, 21 October 2017.

in 1980, a position he occupied until 2008.[53] His political appointments were given by both the government of Sudan in Khartoum and the government of South Sudan in Juba because he came to be seen as the means to garner the support of the Murle community. One Murle intellectual explains:

> Sultan [Ismael] was the focal point for the Murle with the Sudanese government, and the Sudanese government was looking at South Sudan through tribes. They're the ones who built him. The Murle people like cattle and guns, and if you help them to marry. The Sultan did that through the north and he distributed weapons. The government of South Sudan wanted to keep the sultan as the focal point for Murle but the Murle who were in the SPLA rejected that. Because if you have support of the sultan, you have the support of the community.[54]

In an account presented earlier in this paper, Sultan Ismael makes reference to the SPLA war and how he discouraged Murle youth from joining the SPLA movement, instead urging them to remain at home to protect their cattle, families and land. This is also how these actions were widely understood among the lowland Murle—as a means to protect the community from external attacks. Many young Murle, however, chose to join the SPLM/A. This was the case in the lowlands and especially in the highlands of Boma, which was the first place captured by the SPLM/A in April 1985. This also functioned as the SPLM/A's main headquarters throughout the initial years of struggle against the Khartoum government.[55]

Perhaps what has strengthened Ismael Konyi's authority the most over the last 40 years is that he has been perceived as a protector of the Murle, politically, spiritually and militarily (through the distribution of weapons). As Kaku Aturuk Kutura, one of the co-founders of the PDF with Ismael Konyi, asserts, 'Commanders are the ones protecting the community. They're more important than chiefs.'[56]

Protecting the Murle

> *One of the reasons I established the PDF was because of theft and raiding in my area. I formed community policing to prevent these cases. When it was 1983, and the [SPLA] rebellion occurred, I advised them [youth] not to join but to stay here to protect the*

53 In 2010, the former Pibor county commissioner, Akot Maze, removed Sultan Ismael Konyi from the position of paramount chief and appointed the late Ngantho Kavula in his stead.
54 Interview with Murle intellectual, Juba, 17 October 2017.
55 For a more in-depth discussion on this point, see: Felix da Costa, 'This Word, It Is for Murle', 68-106; and McCallum, 'Murle Identity in Post-Colonial South Sudan', 11-24.
56 Interview with Kaku Aturuk Kutura, founder and former PDF commander, *Doroŋwa* age-set, Juba, 16 October 2017.

Murle and their resources. The main reason I formed the PDF was due to internal crimes; then in the time of the rebellion in 1983, to protect the Murle from external attacks.[57]

According to Ismael Konyi, he first brought Murle youth together in what he above terms as 'community policing' to address internal criminality among the Murle. The group was initially called 'shabab' (youth) and was part of Sudanese president Jaafar Nimeiri's youth mobilization policy across Sudan.[58] Then, in 1983, to address the threat of the SPLM/A in Pibor, Ismael transformed the shabab into the PDF (the Berget). The PDF became a local Murle defence militia in Pibor aligned with the Khartoum government. Its primary role was to protect against external threats facing the Murle. The Khartoum government saw the PDF as a cost-effective means to fight the SPLA and provided generous quantities of uniforms, weapons and ammunition to the Murle through Sultan Ismael Konyi, who had direct access to Khartoum. As one Murle intellectual explains, 'From 1983 to 2003, for 20 years you couldn't do anything [in Pibor] without the support of the PDF.'[59] The supply of weapons was understood locally by the Murle as a means to protect themselves from the external threats of hostile neighbours, who for the most part supported the SPLA.

The PDF were one of several pro-Khartoum militias that were part of the umbrella SSDF, which were used by the Sudanese government as southern proxies to fight the SPLA.[60] Arguably, however, the PDF were unique among the SSDF because Sultan Ismael's justification for the movement was 'strongly based upon the desire to protect the Murle community and identity, fulfilling the traditional protection role of the alan in a new way.'[61] Another observer similarly points out that the PDF 'had a strong identity centred on notions of defending the Murle people. It is interesting to note that while members of the PDF consider Ismail Konyi to be a SSDF general (as well as in SAF), he was most importantly a commander of the Murle'.[62]

During this period, when Ismael Konyi was simultaneously playing the role of paramount chief, Berget commander and senior government official, his wealth significantly increased through perhaps three primary means: First, as a government official with direct access to Khartoum and a continuous supply of weapons; second, as a paramount chief (sultan), whereby a portion of the compensation resulting from dispute resolution is traditionally paid to the chief responsible for reaching a settlement; and third,

57 Interview with Murle intellectual, Juba 17 October 2017.
58 Interview with Murle intellectual, Juba, 17 October 2017.
59 Interview with Murle intellectual, Juba, 17 October 2017.
60 See Arnold, 'The South Sudan Defence Force'.
61 McCallum, 'Murle Identity in Post-Colonial South Sudan', 133.
62 Arnold, 'The South Sudan Defence Force', 504.

using his simultaneous spiritual and political role as a red chief and paramount chief, and his military and political role as a Berget commander, he prohibited the Murle from raiding their neighbours. When youth from the Thithi age-set raided their Nuer and Dinka neighbours and returned with cattle, for example, Sultan Ismael sent Berget to collect the raided cattle on the pretense that they would be returned to their rightful owners. While cattle were indeed often returned, they were also sometimes integrated into the herd of Sultan Ismael. One observer notes that Sultan Ismael has been strategic in forming clan and family ties by marrying into all the Murle clans, thus providing him with a wide base of support and relationships of reciprocity.[63] He used the raided cattle he kept to marry the more than 40 wives he is said to have (and with whom he has 168 children).[64] He is also said to have supported many of his PDF soldiers in marriage and other Murle youth in pursuing an education, thus further cementing relationships of loyalty, dependency and debt.[65]

Cementing relationships, power and authority

'The sultan will never refuse anyone.'[66]

Across Murleland, Sultan Ismael Konyi is spoken of as charismatic and generous, even by those who are not politically aligned with him. Over the last forty years, he has not only helped hundreds of men to marry but he is said to have supported 'thousands' of Murle boys and young men in pursuing their education.[67] He is also said to have sponsored a large number of the current cadre of Murle intellectuals and political elite from the Muden, Thithi, Bothonya and Laŋo age-sets, including those Murle who now hold senior positions in the government of Boma State. One of those who was sponsored by Sultan Ismael and is now a government official explains:

> This guy has got his own way of thinking. Whenever he's together with those who are educated, since he's not well qualified [in formal education], he can use this issue of [his role as] red chief. And when he was Berget commander, he was a Berget commander and at the same time commissioner. He used to pay the school fees of thousands of people. Whoever became a politician here was actually supported by him. This guy has supported thousands of people, including myself. Yes, whenever

63 McCallum, 'Murle Identity in Post-Colonial South Sudan', 136.
64 Interview with Sultan Ismael Konyi, Pibor town, 21 October 2017.
65 Interview with Murle intellectual, Juba, 17 October 2017.
66 Interview with John Kaka, county commissioner of Pibor South, Pibor town, 24 October 2017.
67 Interview with John Kaka, county commissioner of Pibor South, Pibor town, 24 October 2017.

> he says something, he will be understood because of what he has done for you. Not me alone, including the ministers.[68]

After his time as Berget commander and senior government official in various capacities, Ismael Konyi has continued to sponsor youth in school and marriage: 'Whenever you run to him, you will be helped. If you face difficulties of school fees this year, you run to the sultan and you will be helped.'[69] Sultan Ismael's support is perceived as fair. He does not privilege his own relatives but supports individuals across age-sets and from across the region. As an example of the sultan's generosity, one government official explains that as recently as August 2017, Sultan Ismael had sent USD 16,000 to six Murle students in China studying geology, who are expected to return to Boma State and use their skills for the development of the region.[70] Generosity is a prided value among the Murle, the coping mechanisms and support structures of whom rely on relationships and extended networks:

> You know, he's generous. In our culture, or even worldwide, and I'm sure it's been reduced in America and in developed countries, but here, you see, our people, they used to be beggars a lot. Can you give me? I'm hungry. Can you give me food? … Whatever the sultan has, he can give. Take it. Until we are ashamed of asking the sultan, give me. Even if he has one pound in his pocket, he will give it away and he will stay without food all day. That's why you see that the sultan is ever popular. He's ever popular.[71]

Sultan Ismael has also used his daughters to build consensus and cement relationships across dissenting Murle factions. For instance, in order to bring back to government Paulino Zangil and John Welarum, who had defected to the SPLA-IO and the splinter group of the SSDM/A–CF led by General Boutros Khaled, respectively, the sultan offered both men two of his daughters as wives, agreeing that the required bridewealth cattle would be paid later. Among the Murle, marriage always involves the payment of cattle as bridewealth from the groom to the bride's family. This exchange serves to assert relationships and building alliances within and between families.

There are differing views on why Sultan Ismael Konyi is well respected, which has been consistently the case for a long time. This is a difficult achievement in the fragile political landscape of South Sudan. Elders from his own age-set emphasize that this may be the case 'because he's Berget, governor, but most of all,

68 Interview with government official, Pibor town, 24 October 2017.
69 Interview with government official, Pibor town, 24 October 2017.
70 Interview with government official, Pibor town, 24 October 2017.
71 Interview with government official, Pibor town, 24 October 2017.

because he's alan ci meri.'[72] Young people from the Bothonya age-set and below explain that 'ever since we were born, we hear about him from our parents; how he's a good man, how he's fair'.[73] Across age-sets, Sultan Ismael is perceived as someone who is able to protect the Murle and advocate for their rights. Perhaps what makes him so successful in garnering the support of most Murle, however, is his social and political astuteness in understanding his audience, and strategically selecting and deploying authority and language accordingly. John Kaka used to be the sultan's personal secretary and also benefited from his financial support during his university studies. He explains the sultan's wisdom:

> He's using mostly the word of red chiefs, the word of being sultan. He doesn't use the words of a governor. It's like people could not understand he's governor so he applies the words of a red chief. You know, I became his private secretary for almost four years, for the sultan. I used to sit with him in a private place, and ask, 'Sultan, why are you always popular?'... When we were in Malakal, in 2009, we were accommodated in one place. My room was next to his, and I tried to come to him at around ten or midnight, saying, 'Sultan I need you. Can you wake up?' He said, 'John, what happened to you?' I said, 'I actually need to capture some few words from you. Why are you always popular?'
>
> He told me, 'If you want to be popular, first, you greet everybody in nice language. … Whatever you have, give to the poorest people. Leave alone the richest and don't be a proud person [be humble]. If a small child says stop, you stop and listen to what he or she has to say to you. And don't give your money according to class. Give whatever to all classes—whether first class or second class; whether poor or whatever. Give, give. If you do things in this way, you will see yourself, you will be popular. That's why I'm popular.'
>
> I told him, 'You used to, sometimes, give negative promises that "you come tomorrow, come tomorrow". Why do you do this?' He said, 'You know, human beings are human beings. When they come to you, they know you are the highest authority. You are the highest person. You are a person who has got everything. If someone comes to you and says, "John, give me money" and you say, "No, I don't have any", he or she will go and die. It's better to say, "You come tomorrow" so that she has hope of getting something. Come tomorrow.' If you go to him now, the sultan

72 Interview with elder, Konyo Konyo area, Juba, 16 October 2017.
73 Interview with youth from the *Laŋo* age-set, Pibor town, 20 October 2017.

> will not say, "I don't have". He'll say, "No, come tomorrow." If he has nothing to give you, he'll say, "Come tomorrow". He's just postponing you. Don't cry. Don't die. Just come tomorrow. Then if you meet and he has something tomorrow, he'll give, [if] not, just come tomorrow again. He keeps on, 'tomorrow, tomorrow', until he gets something [to give away].[74]

Not all Murle agree on the sultan's altruistic generosity or his predisposition to support Murle youth in pursuing an education. Other less politically connected Murle youth disagree with the claim of the sultan's alleged generosity, noting that it is self-interested and self-motivated, designed to build strategic alliances of support to keep himself in power. As one young man asserts, 'He just wants to remain in power forever.'[75]

Still, the sultan's ability to remain socially and politically relevant in the volatile Murle political arena suggests that he has been able to build upon different aspects and sources of power to develop his authority and legitimacy among the Murle. He is also able to do so outside the Murle community, building relationships with the government in Khartoum and, since the 2005 CPA, with the government in Juba, presenting himself as the most authentic representative of his community.

Youth and chiefship

From January 2017 to January 2018, Ismael Konyi was governor of Boma State. While acting in this role, some Murle intellectuals and politicians came to resent the sultan because he cultivates and speaks the language of tradition, which partially excludes them. Instead, some educated segments of Murle society are calling for the language of government. While some Murle intellectuals and politicians seek to diminish the authority of red chiefs, Sultan Ismael Konyi, by contrast, understands and values red chiefs as individuals who are still able to muster the support of their communities and respective age-sets. This is especially the case in rural areas, which still constitute the majority of Murleland. As such, Sultan Ismael Konyi chooses to deploy language that his audience understands. With reference to the clashes between the Laŋo and Kurenen age-sets in Manyirang, the role he played in addressing those tensions and why these youth listened to him, Ismael explains:

74 Interview with John Kaka, county commissioner of Pibor South, Pibor town, 24 October 2017.
75 Personal communication with young man from the *Bothonya* age-set, 13 December 2017.

> At the moment, I have two leadership roles. First, I am a red chief, then followed by governor. I talk as a governor first, then if they don't listen, I'll use the system of red chief. Many Murle are illiterate. They only believe in customary laws, rather than government laws, because it is this system of red chiefs that keeps us together. That's why if I talk to [rural] Laŋo and Kurenen [age-sets], they listen to me. The third thing that makes them listen to me—there is one issue. Murle as a whole know me since I began being a leader. I am prominent among all. If I go to them, if they're fighting, they will stop. Even if any of my wives go, they'll stop. …
>
> Also, the issue of being prominent, it makes them listen to me. I was playing a very big role, not just leading people but also bringing some changes. For example, when I was growing up and was given leadership, I saw all Murle walking around naked and having no interest in school or government. They were all cattle-keepers. I've changed some of these ideas. Before they were all tattooing their faces and removing the [two lower front] teeth. I discouraged these practices and advised youth to forget these old kinds of traditions. I was also focusing on the rights of Murle. Until now, Murle [finally] have some rights [in South Sudan]. That's why you see many Murle are now educated and well dressed. The only issue is that of killing one another and I'm here now to stop that. …
>
> I talk to the youth. I don't want to impose [ideas] on them by force. I try to talk to them as individuals and I hope they understand me without force. Maybe it's a gift and a privilege [to be listened to]. Sometimes I go to Jie, Didinga and [Dinka] Bor and they listen to me, too. That's why so many youths listen to me. Their fathers and mothers tell them about me since they're small.[76]

Two young cattle-keepers from the Kurenen age-set who had been involved in the clashes with the Laŋo age-set explain how the sultan brought them together and used his authority as a red chief, saying that Ismael Konyi 'was coming with the army and with the soldiers. Then from here, we were taken by our chiefs'.[77] Sultan Ismael mobilized the political and military authority and power of government, alongside the community authority of government chiefs, and red chiefs. In front of the army, government officials, government chiefs and red chiefs from all generations, Sultan

76 Interview with Sultan Ismael Konyi, Pibor town, 21 October 2017.
77 Interview with young man from the Kurenen age-set, Irith village, Manyirang payam, 21 October 2017.

Ismael Konyi addressed the red chiefs of the Kurenen and Laŋo age-sets. One of the youth recalls:

> He called all of us, and in addition to this, he also called all the red chiefs from all the other generations. Then he said, 'All the black commoners, you have no problem. The problem are the red chiefs. You are the ones making people fight because if a black commoner wants to say something important, you don't understand it.' Now, from there, he took a bullet and buried it. Then he said, 'If you shoot someone again, this bullet will turn to you.'[78]

This explanation suggests that youth respect the threat of a curse by a red chief as powerful as Sultan Ismael Konyi. For the other young man, his generation had listened to the sultan 'because he is powerful. Everyone listens to him, on both sides. On the side of the government, he's very big. And on the side of the red chiefs, he is also leading. So everyone is fearing'. These two twenty-year old Kurenen age-set members had heard of sultan from their fathers as they grew up:

> During the fighting between the government and Arabs, he [the sultan] was the one taking control of the area here. He was powerful. He was bringing guns. He was the one supplying everyone here. So those who went to the other side, to the SPLM, he cursed some of them. And those people did not return. That's why the elders explained to us that we should not be against what the sultan is doing.[79]

For the youth from Irith village in Manyirang payam in Pibor County, an area where the government is not formally represented, the authority of red chiefs continues to be respected and unchallenged. 'Whenever we are in a group and we are planning to do something and the red chief says we have to do it, then if black commoners like us say, "No, this thing is not good. Let's not do that", they'll say "No, this population is mine, for my father. You have no power. You cannot challenge [me]".'[80] Another young man adds, 'If they send you to fight, you go.'[81]

For the two Kurenen youth from Manyirang, both black commoners, the authority of the red chiefs in their age-set in their area remains certain, sacred and undisputed. Whether for peace or for war, their decisions should be embraced and respected. While red chief authority is nuanced and not the case for all youth everywhere across Boma State, nonetheless the comments of

78 Interview with young man from the Kurenen age-set, Irith village, Manyirang payam, 21 October 2017.
79 Interview with another young man from Kurenen age-set, Irith village, Manyirang payam, 21 October 2017.
80 Interview with young man from the Kurenen age-set, Irith village, Manyirang payam, 21 October 2017.
81 Interview with another young man from Kurenen age-set, Irith village, Manyirang payam, 21 October 2017.

these two young black commoners suggest that their view of red chiefs is contrary to a prevalent assumption. That is, that youth are disenchanted by the moral, spiritual and political authority of chiefs. In contrast, these rural youth in Murleland continue to respect their age-set red chiefs and age-sets remain one of the core pillars of Murle society. The views expressed by these two young men indicate the importance both of recognizing the subtleties through which age-set authority is exercised and of navigating the complex webs of Murle spiritual, moral and political authority in rural areas where the state does not reach.

It is clear that Sultan Ismael Konyi embodies the ability to embrace various diverse forms of authority, revealing how these are not necessarily in competition but rather build on and reinforce each other. Speaking of the sultan, Kaku Aturuk Kutura succinctly sums this up: 'They fear him because of the words that come out of his mouth. He speaks the truth. He's not respected because he's the governor. He'd have the same respect if he wasn't the governor.'[82]

82 Interview with Kaku Aturuk Kutura, former PDF commander, Doroŋwa age-set, Juba 16 October 2017.

6. Conclusion

As this study indicates, it is important to emphasize the resilience and adaptive edge of authority structures within Murle society. This is not unique to the Murle community and there are multiple examples from other parts of South Sudan where the creative adaptability of chieftaincy can be witnessed.[83] The case of the Murle is, however, perhaps particularly relevant because of how its society is often represented as lacking internal leadership structures and as unreceptive to authority. This may be part and parcel of the ways in which Murle people are negatively stereotyped in South Sudan. Clearly, the challenge is not the lack of credible authority structures among the Murle but rather the abundance of these structures and the difficulties they pose for the ability of outsiders to navigate them. Considerations of Murle chiefship need to take into account the complex internal hierarchies of red chiefs, especially in terms of clans and the politics of age-sets. They also need to account for how chiefs creatively and strategically deploy and make use of different sources of authority and power to make their voices heard.

Contrary to generalized claims, youth respect their chiefs, in particular those who are perceived to embody the qualities a chief should have such as community protectors, guides and rescuers. The effectiveness of these qualities may rely on the overlap of various sources of authority. The power of red chiefs and the power of government is simultaneously aligned and in competition. On the one hand, the most successful chiefs are those who embody multiple sources of power, combining traditional spiritual authority with government authority. On the other hand, in asserting their strength, members of the elite in government challenge the authority of red chiefs but this partially alienates those same government officials from the population at large.

Red chiefs continue to be the only source of law and order available in many rural areas. They speak the cultural and moral language that rural people understand and to which they can relate. Those leaders, such as Sultan Ismael, who recognize and embrace this are able to draw on multiple sources of legitimacy and authority and thus command respect among their constituencies.

83 See: C. Leonardi, *Dealing with Government in South Sudan: Histories of Chiefship, Community and State*, Eastern Africa Series, Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2013 and N. Kindersley, *Politics, power and chiefship in famine and war: A study of the former Northern Bahr el-Ghazal state, South Sudan,* Nairobi, Rift Valley Institute, 2018.

In this regard, it is necessary to better understand and appreciate their experiences as red chiefs.

Glossary of acronyms, words and phrases

alan	(*Murle*) leader, chief; typically refers to a red chief; original meaning: 'to rescue'.
alan ci meri	(*Murle; singular form*) red chief
alat ci merik	(*Murle; plural form*) red chiefs
buul	(*Murle*) age-set or generation
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005)
GPAA	Greater Pibor Administrative Area
payam	second lowest administrative division, below counties
PDF	Pibor Defence Forces
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
shabab	(*Arabic*) youth
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/ Army
SSDF	South Sudan Defence Forces
SSDM/A–CF	South Sudan Defence Movement/Army–Cobra Faction

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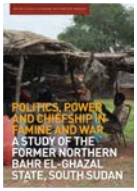

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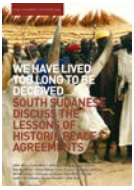

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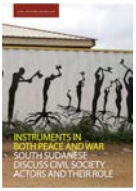

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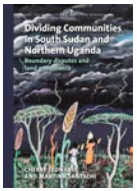

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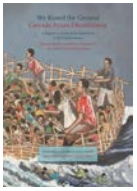

Carrada Ayaan Dhunkannay: Waa socdaalkii tahriibka ee Somaliland ilaa badda Medhitereeniyanka

Sheekadani waa waraysigii ugu horreeyay ee ku saabsan waayo aragnimadii wiil dhallinyaro ah oo reer Somaliland oo taahriibay. *Also in English.*

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International, national and local political discourses often portray the Murle community as principal aggressors and the source of much of the instability affecting former Jonglei State in South Sudan. Although such negative stereotypes are partially driven by actual events, they are also manipulated by certain groups to serve political purposes and informed by the assumption that there is a lack of credible authority structure among the Murle. Changing Power Among Murle Chiefs investigates how Murle customary authorities—in particular, red chiefs—navigate and negotiate political, military and spiritual authority, while simultaneously challenging the view that Murle society has no organic leaderships structures. The challenge is not the absence of leadership structures but rather their abundance and the difficulties they pose for the ability of outsiders to navigate them.

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