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RURAL MURLE AGE-SET MEN TACKLING ELITES IN SOUTH SUDAN

ABSTRACT

The Murle age system is often presented in a negative light in the South Sudan conflict reporting, which links age-set activities to communal violence, cattle rustling, and the abduction of women and children. Such assessments by outsiders overlook the positive effects of age-sets on interethnic relations in rural areas, where young people follow the Murle tradition and navigate the complex influence networks of Murle society. We focus on pastoral Murle youth in Pibor born in the 1980s and 1990s—that is, the laŋo age-set. By drawing on in-depth life-story interviews, this article studies how Murle laŋo masculinity is constructed, embodied, and negotiated. The analysis of our ethnographic data exemplifies how early childhood emotional bonds with caregivers, conflicts, and marginalisation impact the life trajectory of one Murle man. Our results show the connectedness of political orientation, tradition, and masculinity to intergenerational conflict and competition for political and societal power in Murle society. The study increases our understanding of Murle laŋo men's survival strategies. Specifically, it shows that these rural marginalised Murle youth build alliances beyond kinship and ethnic ties, defend land, advance the goal of peace with neighbours, volunteer for unpaid community work to fight idleness, and act as a counter force to prevent manipulation by political and military leaders.

Zɔɔz

Zɔɔz nici ɔp bayiz ci ɔl o maac een murle abaak Murla, ki gɔl ci bayizo, ki gɔl ci ganonto been culanɛ ci kobɛkɛ ɔl kaal. Gi ci titiny bayize ceen murlen nɛɛn, buluwa kibeen kerenɛ ogi o murle gɔɔn anya bayiz o gɛɛr gɔɔn aruwɔn ɔl, ma kɔran tiin moda ma kagaman ŋai ki dɔɔl ci modo. Mazin liŋliŋɔnti nici aŋamnek kaal o abon agɔɔn bulowa o abaak murla loce o ɔl o kolik een junup ŋawo azɔɔzi kaal o bayiz uneŋ murlo. Ma golowa ci kaŋamneka kalyanit o bayiz o een murlen, ayelza rɔŋrɔŋanɔnɛt ci arɔrɔŋanon nigi ki, gɔɔl ci adiŋdiŋani Jowanɛ o adilyai, gɔl ci siaso, ki kɛranɛ, ki kaal ci akati ŋayetin ki jorɛnɛɛn zɛɛ been ŋerɔn ci aŋɛrɔɔn alata o murlo aŋɛrɛ sias giye ci arɔɔŋi rum o. Bayizi ween aturuwen aroŋnyi, ayelzai bule o kazi lango, agamta nigi bayiz ci aromɛn niŋgi dook kodoye, ma arican ganɔɔn ma buk ɔp calaŋ aŋɛɛr nɔgɔ siasa karabɔŋ een zɔɔz ci takirzetu.

Keywords: masculinity, *laŋo*, life story, tradition, elites, Murle, South Sudan

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INTRODUCTION

The Murle people live in rural areas of South Sudan near the Ethiopian border in East Africa. These southern regions of Sudan were colonised by the British until 1956, and have been affected by civil wars[1] since the mid-1950s (e.g., Thomas 2015). In 2011, South Sudan gained independence, but political and ethnic violence continued, straining relations between the country's 64 ethnic groups. During these violent conflicts, Murle age-set men defend their land, people, and cattle, rely on the age-set's diviner for advice, uphold Murle principles of acting honourably toward enemies who surrender, and renew political relations with their neighbours.

Today, the estimated 200 000 Murle people[2] are confronting social, political, and economic marginalisation by the South Sudanese government (Krause 2019). Approximately 55% of the population of Pibor is aged 18 or younger (UNOCHA 2020). A vast majority of the Murle in the Greater Pibor area lack birth certificates and identity documents. Thus, they cannot exercise certain civil rights including the right to officially marry. Without identity cards, the Murle cannot apply for jobs the United Nations (UN) and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) have allocated for South Sudanese citizens (Markó 2021: 72). People living under such circumstances in South Sudan are sometimes classified as 'stateless persons' (UNHCR 2017).

The Murle social system is hierarchical and organised in groups of men and women of the same age—that is, age-sets (*buul*). A new age-set is created approximately every ten years (Lewis 1972: 86). Currently, the established Murle age-sets from the youngest to the oldest are as follows: *guzule,* (youth born in the 2000s); *kurɛnɛn* (1990s); *laŋo* (1980s); *bothothniya* (1970s); *tithi* (1960s); *muden* (1950s); *doroŋwa*

(1940s); and *mara* (1930s). Murle age-sets associate with specific animal species as totems through which they establish relationships with other members of society. This is a common practice in African Indigenous relational ontologies, whereby people are viewed as connected to land, animals, and other beings (Chilisa et al. 2017: 328).

In addition to marginalisation, Murle age-set youth must navigate the complex conflict context in South Sudan. As Ann Laudati (2011: 21), a human-environmental geographer specialising in sub-Saharan Africa, shows, narratives portraying the Murle as 'a hostile people' and practices aimed at preventing outsiders from visiting the Murle are maintained by multiple actors in South Sudan. Previous research has criticised the UN of slow, inaccurate, and biased reporting about incidents affecting the Murle (Rands and LeRiche 2012: 23; Santschi et al. 2014: 16). The special representative of the UN secretary general (SRSG) in South Sudan in 2011–2014, Hilde F. Johnson (2016: 127)—an anthropologist by profession—reported that the UN was also accused by Jonglei communities of 'favoring the Murle'.

The analytical focus in many studies relating to southern and South Sudan has remained on the country's two largest ethnic groups: the Dinka and the Nuer (e.g., Pendle 2015, 2021; Wild et al. 2018). Less attention on fieldwork-based research during the last decade has been paid to small marginalised ethnic groups, such as the Murle (e.g., McCallum 2013; Felix da Costa 2018). Specifically, research focusing on young Murle age-set men who must endure the consequences of communal violence and the hidden political motives underlying such violence has been limited.

The traditional pathway of young Murle men from boyhood to adulthood through

warriorhood has transformed in recent decades. Youth now join armed groups affiliated with South Sudan's political opposition and navigate conflicts by leveraging the age-set network. Murle masculinity norms and practices adopted by these men are shaped and impacted by multidimensional contextual factors such as armed conflict, poverty, multiple marginalisation, and displacement. In this article, we describe how these dynamics impact a life trajectory of one Murle man (Jijiyo) and how particular narratives and age-set practices contribute to upholding ethical values that affirm sharing and nobility among the vulnerable and adversaries.

Reports that show the positive impacts of Murle age-sets rarely gain visibility in conflict reporting. For example, in July 2020, at the height of intercommunal fighting, Murle age-set youth captured a group of armed Dinka and Nuer youth from Jonglei in Maruwo, the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). The attackers included a military general, an ethnic Bor Dinka, who at the time of his capture held a position in the peace-monitoring mechanism in Juba. The Murle youth did not harm the attackers, who laid down their weapons. Neither the government nor international organisations agreed to transport the captives. On 3 August 2020, to protect the lives of the attackers, the *laŋo* age-set leader (overall)[3] struggled to raise the money to charter a plane and organise their transport to Juba. This case illustrates that these Murle youth obeyed the laws of war by not harming surrendered attackers, and that a Dinka military general tasked with overseeing the peace mechanism fought as part of an irregular armed group. This incident, however, was not included in the UN South Sudan Panel of Experts' report on the fighting in Jonglei and the GPAA of February–August 2020 (UNSC 2020).

This article is based on in-depth life-story interviews with Jijiyo and ethnographic fieldwork in South Sudan. Here, we investigate how Murle *laŋo* masculinity is constructed, embodied, and negotiated. We focus on the *laŋo [laŋgo]* age-set (born in the 1980s), which forms the backbone of the Murle community defence force. This prominent social group in Murle society numbers roughly 15 000 socially active males and females in Pibor [GPAA].[4] The youth of this age-set have not yet been the subject of a specific study. Most *laŋo* men were born and have lived during Sudan's second civil war (1983–2005). Identifying with a small African antelope (kob), the word *laŋo* denotes 'friend' and 'kob'. The *laŋo* communicate their ethnic identity as members of the age-set by wearing black-and-yellow necklaces (beads) and clothing, and, at times, by also wearing specific hairstyles and scarring patterns (Andretta 1983: 86).

In this article, we argue that the Murle tradition, age-set socialisation, as well as young men's shared experiences of marginalisation and conflict are essential elements affecting *laŋo* men's masculinity, upon which these rural men build social activism and gather support against elite manipulation. This study contributes to the existing research on African masculinities and marginalised social groups in East African pastoralist age-set societies by increasing our understanding of the challenges Indigenous youths such as Murle *laŋo* men face as they grow up and become men. Specifically, we examine: (1) how Murle masculinity is constructed, embodied, and negotiated by *laŋo* men; and (2) how *laŋo* men resist attempts at manipulation by elites. We illustrate that rural Murle *laŋo* men who follow the Murle tradition and society's social norms and practices navigate the challenges of everyday life by joining an

age-set and by undertaking responsibilities as *laŋo* age-set men in Murle society as well as by 'volunteering'. The term 'volunteering' refers to unpaid community work conducted for the benefit of Murle society. We also show that *laŋo* men forge alliances across intersecting identities of ethnicity and political orientation to advance the goal of peace.

The article is organised as follows. After explaining the methods and materials used, we explain the relevant scholarship on the Murle tradition, youth, marginalisation, African masculinities, and cultural learning in East African pastoralist societies. Then, we examine the shifts in *laŋo* men's roles and statuses through a selection of life-story events of one Murle man who joined an age-set and became a leader. We also discuss the contributing factors to the experiences of Murle men who are struggling with undertaking traditional male roles. Lastly, we conclude with an analysis of the counter-manipulation strategies *laŋo* age-set men use to reduce violence and resist unjustified orders imposed by political and military leaders.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This article draws upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in South Sudan in 2016–2020. Our primary data were collected through participatory methods, such as observation, open-ended group discussions, semi-structured qualitative interviews, and numerous conversations. During the period from February 2016 to October 2017, we had the opportunity to interact daily with Murle interlocutors. We held discussions in Murle, Arabic, and English. By using these languages, including through research collaboration, we could access a cross-section of Murle society, as well as better assess the validity of the sources. The ethnographic

data, comprising field notes, observations, interviews, and audio recordings, were collected during fieldwork in Pibor, Likuangole, Verteth, Kongor, (Jebel) Boma, Maruwo, Gumuruk, Manyabol, Pochalla, and Akobo (Figure 1).

From October 2017 through the end of February 2020, we interviewed Murle interlocutors in Juba and conducted the life-story interviews with the *laŋo* leader (overall). The core in-depth life-story interviews were held in Juba, South Sudan (8 October 2018); in Nairobi, Kenya (9 October 2018); and, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (12–15 October 2018). We examined rural Murle masculinity through the life story of a Murle *laŋo* man who grew up and became a leader in an age-set society. By using a life-story method (Hubbard 2000), we examine how some *laŋo* men follow the Murle tradition (*kɛranɛ*) and join age-sets, and experience violence and its consequences. We also study how they contribute to peace, stability, and nation-building. These interviews aimed to learn how *laŋo* men's experiences 'emerge from particular structural relations and the role of individual agency' (Hubbard 2000: para 7.1).

Our qualitative data analysis, including thematic organising of the interview data, identified three main themes: warring, marriage, and resilience. We created a timeline by triangulating interview data with field data, corroborating it with other available secondary sources. The secondary data includes relevant anthropological and sociological research on Murle society, theoretical research on masculinity which we discuss below, as well as data produced by international organisations on South Sudan (UNHCR 2017; UNOCHA 2020; UNSC 2020) and fieldwork-based research published by NGOs (Burtscher 2021; Rands and LeRiche 2012; Santschi et al. 2014).
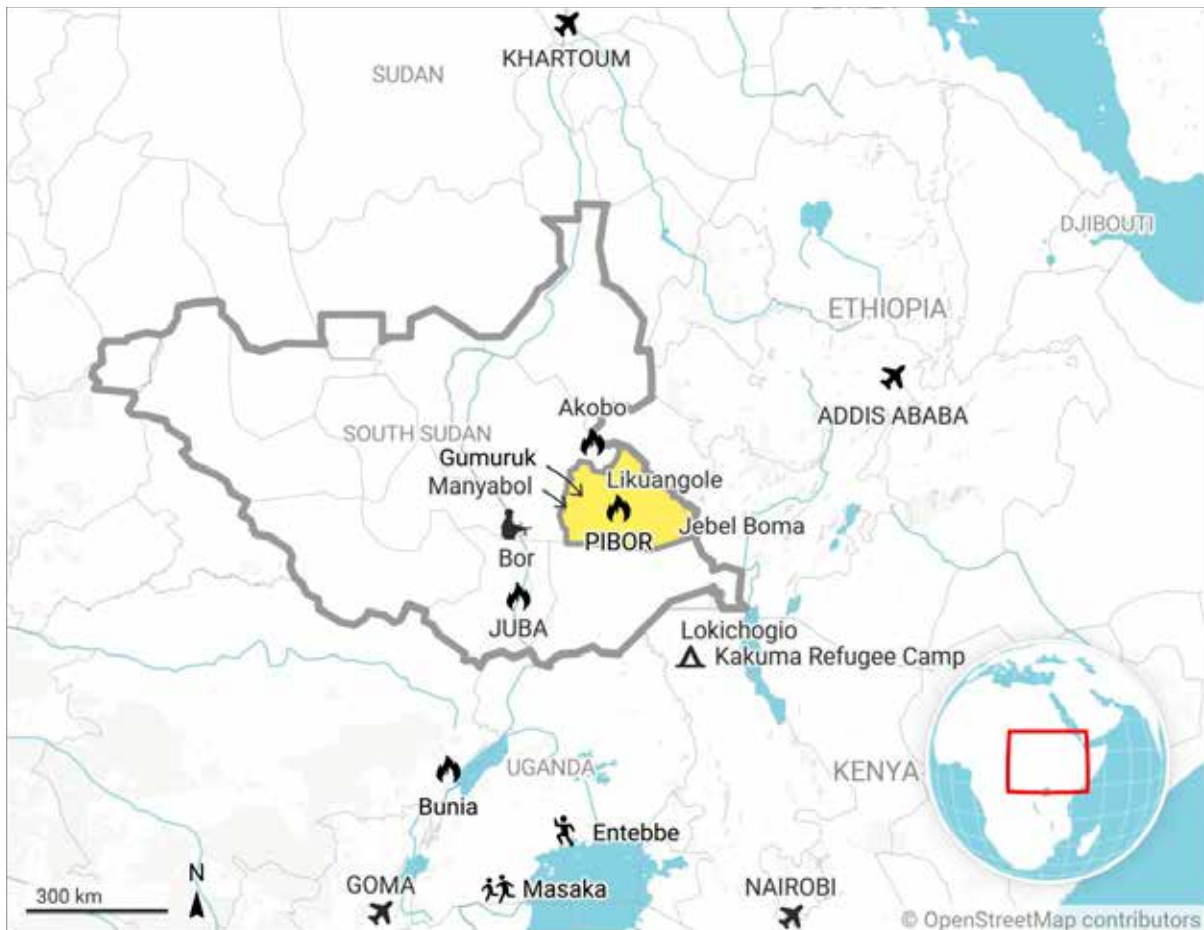
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Figure 1. Map of specific locations in the GPAA, South Sudan, and East Africa.

This study has two authors. One author, Paulino Jijiyo, is a Murle *laŋo* man from Pibor who shared his life story and knowledge of the Murle tradition and age-sets, drafted the Murle-language abstract, and took part in the analysis of research data during and after fieldwork. The other author, Juhanna Sankelo, a doctoral researcher from a Nordic country, shared fieldnotes, conducted life-story interviews, and had the main responsibility for the analysis as well as drafting the article. We (Jijiyo and I) focused on one Murle age-set, reflected on one *laŋo* man's experiences, and filtered our data through the lens of

laŋo. These biases and limitations influenced the interpretation of our data. However, the research collaboration also offered insights into an understudied topic—Murle masculinity—and assisted in placing *kɛranɛ* or the 'Murle tradition', the Murle language, and young Murle *laŋo* men's perspectives at the centre. The late paramount chief of the Murle, Sultan Ismail Konyi (d. 10 March 2021), who was also the Boma State Governor in 2017–2018, granted his permission to conduct our research, and shared his knowledge on historical events and the Murle tradition. We feel the approval of Sultan Ismail Konyi and the *laŋo* leader

(overall) afforded us the opportunity to publish fieldwork-based research findings about Murle society, particularly about the *laŋo*. Our Murle interlocutors, with the exception of the *laŋo* leader (overall) and the author of the article, remain anonymous for their safety. All translations from Murle to English are our own.

MARGINALISATION, MASCULINITY, AND MURLE MEN

Murle marginalisation has its roots in colonial politics. In colonial Sudan, the British coloniser's military campaign against the Murle included harsh reprisal attacks (Collins and Herzog 1961: 131). The Murle were inclined to seek assistance from the North (Sudan), while resorting to passive resistance towards the British (Lewis 1972: 158). The Murle age system and traditional authorities played a pivotal role in resisting changes imposed by the colonial administration. Murle resistance against the coloniser emphasised men's role as warriors. In these remote rural lands, Murle men still assume the role of warriors, participate in political decision-making, herd cattle, migrate to cattle camps, and pay bride price—a way of life that Margrethe Silberschmidt (2005: 191) associated with men in the Kisii region of Kenya 'before colonial rule'.

Masculinity as a norm and practice is historically, contextually, and geographically situated and shaped by particular temporality and spatiality (see, e.g., Barker and Ricardo 2005; Messerschmidt and Connell 2005). Murle masculinity builds on Murle traditions, experiences of marginalisation, and the specific rural context in which the Murle live. Raewyn Connell (2016: 307) observes that colonialism disrupted Indigenous gender orders and institutionalised a dominant form of masculinity.

Many rural Murle age-set men embody a kind of dominant, hegemonic masculinity that draws on tradition, which also responds to marginalisation and valorises the brave warrior and protector. This masculinity has been attributed to a wider continental African trope that Kopano Ratele (2014: 32), a South African psychologist researching men, masculinities, and violence, describes as 'hegemony within marginality'.

Yet, neither Murle masculinity nor the Murle tradition is fixed; they evolve over time. The term 'tradition' perhaps indicates that the whole Indigenous Murle worldview encompasses a belief system, rituals, social norms, and practices. Through age-set practices, Murle youth are socialised to uphold the society's ethical values. For the Murle, tradition (*kɛranɛ* < *kɛɛr* 'custom'; *ɛɛrɔn* 'journey, travel') is grounded in Murleland, arises from generational experiences, and is transmitted orally through shared experiences. The Murle perception of 'tradition as journey', from past to present, resonates with how speakers of some other Indigenous African languages also understand tradition. For example, in the Sesotho language, the word *setso* ('tradition') means 'where things or people come from' (Ratele 2018: 214). In the South African context, Ratele (2015: 151) observed that 'tradition and culture are often embraced as a resource by men and women, and boys and girls who may not have access to other vehicles of power'. He maintained that oppressive policies partly explain why rural marginalised men in post-colonial societies turn to tradition (Ratele 2018). We draw on this work to explain why *laŋo* men rely on traditional age-set practices, as well as to examine the transformative shifts in Murle *laŋo* masculinity and novel ways to navigate Murle manhood, such as by opting out of age-sets.

Coming of age in Murle society is not a smooth process, but fraught with intergenerational tension and competition for political and societal power. Intergenerational conflict among youth groups in East Africa, as Israeli sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt (1971: 310) showed, has the potential to lead to 'organized rebellion' or 'estrangement from certain collective values of the older generation'. In Murle society, Elizabeth Andretta (1983: 93) attributed the tension to the vague timing of transitions and status changes. Such tension among the Lotuho and Lotoya communities (the Monyomiji age system) may intensify when the transfer of power nears (Simonse 1998: 65–68; also Kertzer and Madison 1980). These observations align with a survey of 21 African age systems, in which Anne Foner and David Kertzer (1978) found that life-course transitions of youth from one role to another involve problems related to the timing of transitions, age discrepancies, and role discontinuities. Because Murle age-sets do not have a set date for the transfer of power to the next age grade (Andretta 1985: 89), members of older age-sets try to hold on to political offices (and accompanying resources) as long as they can. As Andretta (1983: 104) observed, 'Murle elders do not retire.'

In Global South youth studies, Clarence Batan et al. (2021) called for more attention to the concept of the 'fluidity' of youth in Africa. These scholars pointed out that the word 'youth' does not merely indicate age in Africa, but rather a social status; a youth is someone who has not yet become independent. They also perceive African youth as 'social shifters' rather than young people who transition from one phase of life to another. Alcinda Honwana (2012, 2014) used term 'waithood' to describe the liminal phase in which youth get stuck between childhood and adulthood for failing to earn their living and provide for their families. Scholars researching African youth use notions such as 'hustling' for the opportunistic manner that youth search for a better life by utilising social connections and mixing languages, while 'precarity' draws attention to the life-threatening circumstances in which youth struggle to survive without access to health care or education (Cooper et al. 2021). We consider this work in our analysis of shifts, practices, and strategies among *laŋo* age-set men, including 'volunteering' by Murle youth.

The transition from boyhood to adulthood among East African pastoralists involves methods of cultural learning and socialisation into an age-set. Marginalised youths in war-torn societies such as the Murle who may not have support from family or schools (e.g., due to the loss of family members and a scarcity of schools in rural areas including cattle camps) are highly perceptible to targeted socialisation, the teachings of chiefs and elders, and fellow age-set members. Socialisation methods strengthen the sense of belonging to one's own age-set. In a review article which examines 32 texts related to East African pastoralist societies, Temechegn Bira and Barry Hewlett (2023: 103) demonstrated that 'teaching is an important process of cultural learning'. Much of the learning also happens outside formal schools. Specifically, warfare and defence skills, herding skills and knowledge, and cultural values are acquired through teaching and by participating in adult activities (Bira and Hewlett 2023: 87–88). Teaching by 'stimulus enhancement' such as giving knives or sticks for a given assignment is a common method of teaching in pastoralist societies (Bira and Hewlett 2023: 99). Eisenstadt (1954) emphasized the educational role of age-sets in adopting values and knowledge of one's own society and passing this knowledge on to the next generation.

Barker and Ricardo (2005: 9) labelled the type of socialisation through 'informal learning' in which older males transmit the necessary knowledge or skills to younger men as 'rites of passages'. We use this work to illustrate the impact of socialisation into the *laŋo* age-set may have on young Murle men as well as on other members of Murle society.

Research focusing on South Sudan has also investigated ethnic violence, the role of political and military elites in conflict escalation, and the militarisation of pastoralist societies. In a case study focusing on the Dinka–Mundari–Bari conflict, Paul W. Gore (2014: 15) dates the weakening of traditional administration, civilians turning to their ethnic communities, and the emergence of an urban military elite in southern Sudan to the mid-1960s. By 'elites', we refer to wealthy and often highly placed political and military leaders who create networks between the capital Juba and their home areas and, as Naomi Pendle (2015: 432) asserts, provide 'access to government resources and security'. In Bahr El Ghazal, the western part of South Sudan, politico-military elites in Juba created patronage networks with the help of the (Dinka) *titweng* age-set who protected their cattle wealth (Pendle 2015: 423–424). Elites cling to power, blocking youth from the opportunity to access socioeconomic and political mobility (Abbink 2005: 24). For example, Jana Krause's (2019: 480) study on local conflicts and stabilisation highlighted the detrimental impact of urban elite politics on conflict resolution efforts in rural areas of South Sudan. In a study focusing on armed Dinka and Nuer cattle-herding youth, Hannah Wild and colleagues (2018) explained how third parties make guns available and exploit youth to serve political objectives. Diana Felix da Costa (2018: 12) observed that powerful individuals use the Murle age-set system 'to build their own

armies'. We cite these works to illustrate the role of elites in conflict escalation as well as the strategies *laŋo* men use to confront attempts at manipulation.

JOINING OR OPTING OUT OF AGE-SETS

In East Africa, age-set societies such as the Murle are built upon social networks, particularly solidarity. Social practices help to establish and maintain relationships, build new alliances, and increase community resilience. Membership in an age-set is a resource upon which a young Murle man builds his identity and from which he draws support for his family's defence and social security. The age-set looks after its members, providing them with various needs for social welfare, a responsibility the state is unable to meet. This example illustrates the capacity of the age-set underpinned by ethnic affiliation and tradition to create community, form boundaries, and function as a system of support and solidarity (Woodhead 2011: 127–128).

From the numerous interactions we had with Murle interlocutors during our fieldwork, we learnt that several principles are integral to Murle norms on social relations, as well as ideals underlying traditional Murle masculinity. These principles guide Murle youth to respect the elderly, not to beg, to share food, honour guests and enemies, assist the vulnerable, cooperate with the community, and reconcile conflicts through traditional mechanisms. Men of the *laŋo* age-set observe the Murle norms related to the desirable physical appearance, such as refraining from braiding their hair, since it is perceived as inappropriate for men. In official meetings in the town of Pibor, many *laŋo* men wear the traditional southern Sudanese attire, a men's suit, which has an embedded back pocket.

Furthermore, two important Indigenous principles that guide *laŋo* age-set men's actions emerged from our field data: *ɛzɛɛth* ('loyalty') and *ɔrkɔɔr* ('togetherness'). These principles affirm the notion that age-set members acquire social connections through the philosophy of comradeship and brotherhood. *Laŋo* membership is strongly associated with the willingness to defend Murleland, which is perceived as one of the core responsibilities of a Murle man. A leader of the Murle *laŋo* age-set, Jijiyo, stated:

> Somebody who wanted to be a man and really wanted to be in our age-set, there are two things … involved… we try to defend the land … If you want to be a man, you defend your people and your land. It shows that you really are a man, if you do this, you sacrifice yourself, yes. (Jijiyo, Juba, 19 September 2019)

Scholars have noted a similarity between a military command structure and East African age-set organisation (Lewis 1972; Simonse 1998). In the (Jebel) Boma context south of Pibor, Andretta (1989: 22) observed that the Murle village 'becomes the primary military and social unit'. Just like youths in rural areas elsewhere in South Sudan (Pendle 2015: 412–413; Krause 2019: 483), Murle youth also join age-set and community defence groups out of loyalty and for the survival of their society.

The *laŋo* leader (overall) speaks on behalf of the age-set as well as Murle society, who largely rely on the *laŋo* to protect their people and cattle. Jijiyo explained as follows:

> A *laŋo* leader is a person who has the support of the entire age-set. There is no official selection. A leader has to respect himself and respect others. I encourage the youth when there is a need to defend land and cattle, and discourage them when it is not acceptable to fight. (Jijiyo, Juba, 8 October 2018)

Most Murle age-set youth come from families and clans that belong to 'Black commoners' (*ɔl ci kolik*). In the Murle tradition, commoners are placed under the spiritual authority of 'red chiefs' (*alaat ci mɛɛrik*), the drumchiefs of the four Murle drumships (clans): *Thaŋajon*, *Ŋarɔthi*, *Kelenya*, and *Ŋinvach*. Red refers to the colour of the feather; nowadays a cap may distinguish the chief from the rest of the people. Murle ideals dictate that, while commoners may need to fight for society, red chiefs and their sons are not supposed to take part in battles. This unwritten customary rule is reinforced by the notion 'if the red chief's son goes first [to fight], all youth will die' (Jijiyo, Juba, 18–19 September 2019). This saying embodies a norm that regards commoners as the protectors of Murle society.

The moral principle of acting honourably towards one's enemies, such as not harming those who surrender, has also been put into practice. In July 2020, Murle age-set youth captured a group of armed Dinka and Nuer attackers in Maruwo in the southern part of Greater Pibor. The attackers surrendered their weapons. The *laŋo* youth identified the leader of the armed group as a Dinka military general who worked for the peace-monitoring mechanism in Juba. Neither the International Committee of the Red Cross nor the South Sudanese authorities took up the task of transporting these armed men out of Murleland. The Murle youth held the captives unharmed until the *laŋo* leader (overall), with great difficulty, managed to raise the money to charter a plane and organise their air transport to Juba on 3 August 2020. The families of the captives were unwilling to contribute towards the cost of the flight to rescue their relatives.

However, not all Murle men embrace and adopt the traditional ideals of masculinity, particularly in relation to joining age-sets and defending the Murle. The traditional pathway to Murle masculinity is becoming harder or much less desired for some men as their communities confront multiple changes and challenges following the independence of South Sudan and the ongoing wars. In their earlier work, R. W. Connell (1996 [1995]) theorised that masculinity is multiple and hierarchical; it may include several types of masculinities, such as hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, and marginalised masculinities. Beyond the warrior type of manhood ideal we observed among many *laŋo* age-set men, there are also other Murle versions of African masculinities, such as those shaped by Islam, Christianity, conflict, and urban and Western influences (Barker and Ricardo 2005: 4). The strategies that some Murle men adopt demonstrate 'individual adaptations' associated with transitions in age-set societies (Foner and Kertzer 1978: 1101).

One category among Murle men has involved struggling with juggling two different worlds. Some of these men work in international or local NGOs where they must adhere to the rules of neutrality. During our fieldwork in Pibor (2016–2017), we observed that some Murle men working for NGOs felt pressured to participate in age-set activities, including fighting or allocating resources such as vehicles or fuel for purposes benefitting their age-set. Some joined the Murle community defence force during conflicts and some also lost their lives while defending Murleland. It was obvious that some of these men found it difficult to be involved in both worlds since the traditional norms of loyalty and commitment to Murle society and land entail warring, which were incompatible with their new roles.

Another category of young Murle men chooses not to join or identify with age-sets. They reject the traditional Murle male roles of warring and protecting Murle society, relying instead on personal connections to substitute for the lack of network and support the age-set provides. These men do not gain the important technical and historical knowledge that age-set members acquire (Eisenstadt 1954: 107). Consequently, they struggle with accepting the Murle ethnic identity and the cultural stigma attached to it. Yet, these youth might benefit from the achievements of age-sets, such as the recovery of raided Murle cattle, embodying a type of complicit masculinity (Messerschmidt and Connell 2005: 832).

There is also a category of young Murle men who shun age-sets because of a physical or mental disability, a problem with toxic substances or due to involvement in criminal activities. Some of these young men embody a type of subordinate masculinity. They are at risk of being excluded from their own society because they defy socially acceptable behaviour in Murle society. The Murle have a narrative, which talks about a Murle who was unable to live up to the standards and values of a traditional society; as a result, he was excluded from the Murle community and died shortly thereafter. This narrative, widely shared in Pibor, demonstrates that the socialisation of individuals in Murle society carries the expectation of accepting the values and norms of traditional society, while also indicating the psychological toll of social exclusion.

Murle men who repudiate traditional Murle roles face repercussions. One is related to the socially structured society which provides the age-sets' bargaining power. Murle men who disdain age-sets can hardly influence local political decision-making. Social networks of

Murle men who opt out of age-sets are less developed since they cannot rely on the social support of the age-set. They fail to embrace Murle ethnicity and, instead, deemphasise their ethnic identity in public settings. For these youth, ethnic ties and loyalties are irrelevant. Murle men who choose not to join an age-set may be regarded as demonstrating and performing a different kind of masculinity, sometimes one less violent. By so doing, their inability to conform to the Murle normative system, of which age-sets are an integral part, however, leaves them on the margins of Murle societal practices. This means that they lack important social networks and a means of influencing consensual decisions in Murle society.

TRANSFORMATIVE SHIFTS IN ROLES AND STATUSES

When talking to young Murle men in Pibor, we found that their stories described future uncertainties, a lack of jobs and opportunities for education, and persistent communal conflicts. Many youth aspired to a position as a civil servant in the local administration or a rare opportunity for a paid job with international organisations and NGOs. Some youth were idle, constrained by socioeconomic difficulties. Some other young men tried to survive by helping their families to cultivate land, herd, and hunt. For rural Murle youth, herding is a backup option, a survival strategy. For many youth who do not have relatives in the capital, moving to urban areas such as Juba is difficult due to the lack of support networks and gainful employment in town (see, e.g., Honwana 2014: 33).

Many young rural Murle men also kept themselves busy by 'volunteering'. The oft-heard phrase 'we are just volunteering' (*ola kaliŋliŋ dɔwuk*) refers to defending the land, as well as other types of unpaid community work performed for the benefit of Murle society. Work without pay includes tasks compatible with Murle principles, such as carrying sick people to the clinic or searching for missing persons. In a parallel practice, Sarah Mathew (2022) illustrated how participation in raids in Turkana society was voluntary, yet often mandatory due to various considerations related to maintaining social cohesion and norms. In Murle society, volunteering in community defence groups and joining rebel groups are strategies that the rural Murle youth in Pibor use as they adopt an active role to navigate the harsh social realities during 'waithood' (Honwana 2014: 30). In urban areas, such as in the Mahad neighbourhood near the Konyo Konyo market in the town of Juba, playing football is one way for young Murle men to avoid idleness (Isabirye 2024).

There are also many similarities in the past experiences of these rural Murle men. As children, many *laŋo* men looked after the family cattle, hunted game, and migrated to cattle camps. Many were also recruited as 'warriors' at an early age, lost family members and friends in wars, were displaced due to conflicts, and grew up in refugee camps. These young Murle men had to learn to cope with economic hardships. They followed the Murle tradition of protecting Murle civilians, property, and livelihoods (see, e.g., Johnson 2016: 106). Assuming the role of warriors, they responded to marginalisation by honing warring tactics and by participating in traditional practices.

But, confronting Murle marginalisation from the government, particularly in the post-independence era after 2011, meant that *laŋo* men had to adopt new roles beyond the traditional roles of warring and rustling cattle. The life-story interviews with Jijiyo, the *laŋo* leader (overall), were conducted in three main sessions in October 2018, when he was in his

30s. Jijiyo's story is one of violence, trauma, and poverty. Three main themes emerged in our interview data: warring, marriage, and resilience. We highlight the main shifts and turning points in his life story under the following labels: Pibor, Kakuma, Entebbe/Masaka, rebellion, and marriage.

PIBOR

Coming from an ordinary Murle cattle-keeping family, Jijiyo looked after the cattle like many other Murle boys of the same age. At the age of 9, he went to the bush carrying an Arab gun with a 20-bullet magazine. Jijiyo's father had obtained the gun in exchange for 15 cows in order to protect the family's cattle wealth against attacks from wild animals. Between the ages of 9 and 14, Jijiyo served for 5 years as a *bɛkchok*[5] for a Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) General in Boma County. Childhood and youth in Jijiyo's life were filled with hardship, hunger, and emotional suffering.

Jijiyo's elderly stepfather died in 1999, when Jijiyo was 10 years old. Then, his mother was struck by a stray bullet and killed during a communal conflict in 2000. Jijiyo found her body in the vegetable garden at the family home. His mother's wish was that Jijiyo would obtain an education (*yeedinet)*, not kill, fight or seek advice from witchdoctors, and never to go to Nyandit, a ritual place near Akobo visited by non-Christian Murle. Jijiyo's mother was the fourth of an older man's six wives. She made a conscious decision to convert to Christianity, while her own mother remained a follower of the Murle tradition all her life.

Only in November 2018 was Jijiyo able to organise a (symbolic) burial for his mother. Jijiyo also changed his surname to his mother's surname to honour his late mother. That process

helped him to strengthen his connection to his childhood family and roots, and to heal from these traumatic losses during the war. Jijiyo credits his protective grandmother for his lack of tribal marks and scarifications, which age-set youth often get in cattle camps. He explained, 'My grandmother did not allow me to have them [scarifications, etc.] done' (Jijiyo, Juba, 24 October 2018). These examples show that Jijiyo's mother and grandmother, two strong Murle women, provided a moral compass that Jijiyo followed in his life even after their passing.

KAKUMA

One phase of life known as *bɛkchok* ended when Jijiyo's good friend was injured. Jijiyo helped him to reach Lokichogio in Kenya, and, later, the Kakuma refugee camp. Having lost both parents in the conflict in southern Sudan, Jijiyo remained in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya in a zone reserved for minors without parents. There was a sign of hope. The Lost Boys of Sudan—a programme established by the United States (US) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—offered thousands of Sudanese refugees the possibility for resettlement in the US, Canada or Australia. Jijiyo also submitted applications in 2001–2003. He recalls:

> On 6 February 2004, I went with my friends to see the list of refugees selected to travel to those countries. I noticed that Murle and Equatorian names had been deleted. Persons that were approved to travel were Dinka and Nuer only. A few Murle managed to go since they claimed to have Dinka wives. The list was approved by 'UN managers of staff', who were Dinka and Nuer. (Jijiyo, Juba, 8 October 2018)

At Kakuma, the differentiated treatment of southern Sudanese refugees was a great disappointment for Jijiyo and for many Murle. Laudati (2011: 28) observed that, since the Murle were excluded from the Lost Boys programme, they could not develop support networks abroad, especially in the US, from where the Dinka and Nuer drew support.

It took another year before the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005) ended, following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which was signed between the southern rebels of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the Government of Sudan in Khartoum (Thomas 2015). Refugees from southern Sudan in Kakuma, Kenya, including Jijiyo, were advised to return to their homes. To heed his late mother's advice, Jijiyo went to Uganda to seek an education before returning to Pibor.

ENTEBBE/MASAKA

In Uganda, one adaptation strategy for Jijiyo involved converting to Christianity. Jijiyo converted to a charismatic form of Christianity because he had to survive:

> I became a Christian because the church people promised food and support if I converted to Christianity. So, I converted, but we still follow the traditional Murle ways. I was given food and a place to sleep at the doorman's office. This was in exchange for cleaning the church on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, for teaching children in Sunday school, and for coaching children to play football and to run. Although they promised, the church did not pay my school fees at the Modern Primary School of Entebbe, because they said that I failed to clean the church. (Jijiyo, Juba, 8 October 2018)

This excerpt demonstrates that some Murle adapt to situations of duress by converting to Christianity, referred to as *thuwen* ('faith'), while at the same time holding on to *kɛranɛ,* the 'Murle tradition' and way of life. In Judith McCallum's (2013: 135) interview, Sultan Ismail Konyi affirmed the notion that, unlike conversion to Islam, 'the church does not change the identity of the Murle'. This idea is reflected in the Murle language, which has an expression for converts, *eet ci ŋan agama jok jor* ('a person who received the spirit of God recently'), as well as for the Murle who converted back to the tradition, *eet ci emironek jowane o loocu* ('a person who turned away from God'). These phrases illustrate how language adapts to the reality where the Murle juggle multiple identities.

This account also indicates that Jijiyo, a refugee boy belonging to an ethnic minority, had no real choice. He felt that conversion to the form of Christianity endorsed by the Ugandan Calvary Chapel in Entebbe along with the responsibility of carrying out a lengthy list of daily chores were preconditions for the provision of food and shelter. Yet, those recruiting him to the church failed to deliver on the promise to pay his school fees. Out of kindness, two American pastors living in the town of Masaka, Uganda, came to his rescue, and Jijiyo, the head boy of the senior class (S3), later graduated from Masaka High School near the Tanzanian border.

From Masaka, Jijiyo returned to Pibor. He became the leader of a new age-set, *laŋo*, which gradually attracted more youth and then separated from an older Murle age-set, *bothothniya*, in 2009. In many regards, Jijiyo's story is typical for many Murle boys who join age-sets. Jijiyo's experiences of inequality and the unfair treatment of the Murle were the driving factors of his sense of social responsibility that led him to engage through age-set organisation

and become a leader. Yet, these decisions came at a hefty price to him as the violent conflict in South Sudan escalated after independence in 2011.

REBELLION

The political and ethnic conflict persisted after South Sudan gained independence in 2011. One notable development in the post-2011 era was the *laŋo* age-set participation in the Murle-led rebellion movement against the national government in 2012. Hilde Johnson (2016: 121) determined that human-rights abuses of civilians involving SPLA soldiers had angered many Murle. *Laŋo* men were in their early 20s, eager to assert their masculinity and impress women by fighting for social justice for the Murle. But, many of the younger Murle boys had no choice but to fight because defection was not an option (Human Rights Watch 2015: 50). Some Murle cited the harsh disarmament campaign as a reason for joining the rebellion (Human Rights Watch 2015: 48). We understand that many *laŋo* men supported the rebellion in 2012–2013 as a reaction against post-independence policies, which they felt disregarded the Murle contribution to the liberation war. This justification is expressed in the lyrics of a Murle song we collected in Pibor in 2017: *karyayith zaany buk, munyathotha, kawo tho* ('We have been separated [from Sudan] also, in the star [in the flag], we all are there [we contributed]'). In the South Sudan flag, the yellow star represents unity. The ex-combatants Guðrún Friðriksdóttir (2018: 10) interviewed in Burundi similarly cited social injustice and oppressive policies as reasons for joining armed groups.

Another significant development was the *laŋo* joining the armed opposition movement, the South Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army 'in Opposition' (SPLM/A-iO), in February 2015. That same year, Jijiyo's older sister and her husband were killed in two separate incidents in the conflict. Their orphaned children were left without care and the responsibility fell to Jijiyo. The deaths of family members also left some fundamental questions, necessary for the construction of his identity, unanswered. Jijiyo explained, 'I think my sister would have known my birthdate [day], but now I don't know who to ask' (Jijiyo, Juba, 24 October 2018). The loss of family property, including Jijiyo's school certificates and identity documents, in a fire that destroyed the family house in Pibor during the conflict in 2015 made life even more difficult.

The following year, in July 2016, fighting between the government and opposition forces broke out in Juba. In the weeks that followed, the SPLM/A-iO forces moved southward to the Democratic Republic of Congo, reaching Bunia. That journey took a toll on the forces. The core group of forces was flown by UN aircraft from Goma to Khartoum, where Jijiyo also received medical attention for injuries he sustained in the bush while carrying his commander. In October 2018, the commander, now South Sudan first vice president, recognised Jijiyo's display of bravery during the conflict through a letter of appreciation. But, the recognition was cold comfort for the personal losses Jijiyo suffered during the rebellion.

Following the rebellion, Jijiyo, the *laŋo* leader (overall), used his role as a political and military leader over Murle age-sets to build a new alliance with the Nuer to challenge the government. In March 2021, inheriting the leadership from Sultan Ismail Konyi, SPLA Lieutenant General and paramount chief of the Murle who in the 1980s founded the Murle brigade (*Berget)*, further reinforced his status as the *laŋo* leader (overall) (Sankelo and Jijiyo

2023: 388). This development consolidated his status as a Murle leader who, like the late Sultan, draws his legitimacy from multiple sources of power—traditional, spiritual, political, and military—which some other Murle leaders cannot do. Jijiyo, whose family comes from the largest commoners' clan—the Mayngule clan—challenges the notion of the political dominance of the chiefly clan in Murle society (James 1973: 202).

Jijiyo's life stories were marked by turning points—traumatic losses of family members and experiences of inequality—but, also, positive experiences including the kindness of strangers which instilled confidence in society. Jijiyo's joining the SPLM/A-iO and resisting the government demonstrates a new transformative process for his role as traditional Murle warrior.

MARRIAGE

The age-set system underpins the construction of the identity of Murle men. Male roles in such societies are commonly marked by transitions from one age grade to the next. These transitions are unique for each age-set due to the historical and environmental settings in which they live (Foner and Kertzer 1978: 1086). In Murle societies, transitions are flexible (Arensen 1992). Murle men remain in the same age-set throughout their lives; however, they achieve 'age grades' individually. Their system is similar to that among the Latuka [Otuho] of southern Sudan (Kertzer and Madison 1980). Otuho youth transit through warriorhood to elderhood at a pace that depends on whether the males have gathered sufficient wealth to marry.

In principle, Murle men of fighting age can marry and, thus, elevate their status. But, to achieve marriage—that is, to become a man—many age-set youth who participated in the Murle rebellion or joined armed groups are struggling to collect the required number of cattle to gift a bride and build a house. Unlike some other East African pastoralist societies, Murle society frowns upon circumcision: it is not a precondition for marriage for a boy or a girl. A circumcised Murle man is pejoratively called (*eet ci) legerenyo* ('a man with no skin on his penis').

Marriage is without a doubt one of the most significant transitions in the life of a Murle *laŋo* man. Dianne Singerman (2007: 6), who first used the notion of waithood, observed in the Middle Eastern context that delayed marriages change the institution of marriage as youth deviate from the morals of their parents and society, such as by engaging in premarital sex. In Murle society, parents and relatives can challenge a marriage initiated by a girl and a boy without consulting the parents and relatives on both sides. Elopement, whereby a girl disappears with a boy usually for a period of three days, is a way for girls to resist the decision of parents who might have already selected another husband for their daughter. In the case of an elopement, the girl's family can open a case in a traditional court to claim cows from the man with whom their daughter eloped.

Murle marriages often serve the purpose of building alliances and strengthening family, clan, and age-set ties. For Jijiyo, marriage was an important part of becoming a trusted adult male in his society. Marriage helped him gain the respect of his age-set and was essential to his becoming a leader. Jijiyo explained:

> A Murle man without a wife is hopeless … If you are not married, you cannot be a leader. They would not allow you to speak during communal events. (Jijiyo, Juba, 8 October 2018)

Like the Xhosa men of South Africa who are required to 'demonstrate masculinity through speech' (Mfecane 2018: 300), Murle masculinity also manifests itself in the ability to speak convincingly in social settings. In community meetings, the speaker establishes connections with the audience as well as demonstrates their place in the social hierarchy at the beginning of the speech by introducing the self, clan, marriage, and village/birthplace to prove that the speaker is a 'son' (or daughter) of Murleland. Thus, traditional (common law) marriage was also a means via which Jijiyo could access the political power upon which he later built.

Jijiyo's story offers a lens via which to view the life experiences of one Murle *laŋo* man who became a husband, a father, and a caretaker of orphaned children, as well as a prominent community advocate and a military commander. He resisted marginalisation by taking an active role and became a leader in his age-set. His story illustrates the opportunities, constraints, and turning points of life-course transitions. It also draws attention to the early childhood emotional bond between Jijiyo and his mother and grandmother, which may have influenced how Jijiyo viewed women's roles in society later in life. This idea aligns with the observation that 'the roles of mother and grandmother carry high status in Murle society' (Andretta 1983: 101).

COUNTER-MANIPULATION STRATEGIES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS AMONG *LAŊO* MEN

Some Murle leaders are known for their connections to specific age-sets to whom they provide resources. These individuals contribute to conflicts by pushing for the appointment of their relatives as the 'eyes and ears' for local government positions in rural areas. These military and political leaders are notorious for using youth as a proxy to undermine security and to impose unjustifiable social hierarchies on other groups of society. There are also 'Murle intellectuals'—that is, a loose group of urbanised 'honourables' with some education who have established their political careers at the local or national level. They demand respect from their constituencies in rural areas, from whom they are, however, both socially and economically alienated. Individual adaptation strategies, such as joining rebel groups, fighting with weapons, and resorting to age-set chiefs and diviners, are part of a process young Murle men use to challenge the authority of traditional leaders, politicians, and military men.

As a collective, the *laŋo* uses several means of active and passive resistance to influence sociopolitical decision-making in Murle society. These means include coordinating activities and ideas independently with neighbouring societies' chiefs and military leaders without involving the local authority; reserving the right to decide whether to mobilise youth—that is, to prepare youth for battle to defend Murleland, people, and cattle from attackers; organising age-set meetings and dances without seeking approval for such events from local authorities; being absent from community meetings; organising a sudden movement of age-set youth from the village to the bush (*balala*), thereby triggering concerns of impending insecurity; rejecting the common form of cultural learning in pastoralist societies, such as task assignment, and; stepping in as a group to prevent corrupting activities.

Some *laŋo* activities affect hierarchies and patriarchal relations. In a society that builds on social inequalities and values seniority and males (Stewart 1977), the *laŋo* actively promotes equality among the Murle. For example, in an interview with Radio Miraya, the *laŋo* leader

(overall) encouraged Murle men to send their girl children to school, help their wives with domestic work, and stop early child marriage and the abuse of women (Kuthurchar 2018). Furthermore, men of the *laŋo* age-set listen to the advice of mothers, particularly the *dole ci lilu*, the *laŋo* age-set's diviner (Sankelo and Jijiyo 2023: 392). These *laŋo* activities may challenge the authority of male traditional leaders as well as local government authorities.

In addition, the activities of the *laŋo* safeguard access to traditional lands and prevent grazing and farming lands from being exploited by extractive industries. For rural Murle, ethnic identity, traditional ways, hunting, herding, and farming are important parts of life and Murle cultural survival. These interests of rural Murle are incompatible with the business interests of Juba elites. In particular, the southern area of the Greater Pibor, rich in natural resources, has attracted the interest of elites. The area has several sacred sites which consist of cultural and spiritual objects. For example, Mount Kathangor and the Maruwo Hills are known as the burial places of early Murle chiefs (Lewis 1972: 82–83). Caves in the Maruwo Hills were a secondary burial place for the bones of dead chiefs, as well as a place where sacred drums were kept (Arensen 1992: 254). Mount Kathangor is also indicated as the residing place of *Apayok*, the supreme being of Jie [Jiye], an ethnic group inhabiting the boundary areas of the GPAA and Eastern Equatoria State (Burtscher 2021: 28). In addition, Indigenous peoples, such as the Murle, have responsibilities toward sacred sites (Clifford 2013: 75).

For example, in August 2022, *laŋo* age-set youth prevented the work of a mining company in Jebel Boma County, forcing the GPAA local government to act (The City Review South Sudan 2022; Radio Tamazuj 2022*)*. This incident illustrates how rural Murle

youth 'subvert and disrupt gerontocracy' (Batan et al. 2021) through the means available to them. Youth stepping into the role of traditional leaders responsible for the welfare of civilians serves as a moderation technique, a dynamic used by rural youth to curb corruptive activities (see also Honwana 2012: 167).

Engaging in social activism carries implications on the youth. Some Murle leaders who hold government positions have threatened to harm the age-set leader's family and closest friends. The age-set demonstrated its strength to sustain and stand by its leadership despite numerous attempts by Murle elites to dismantle the support structure by buying loyalties and by sanctioning abuse. *Laŋo* men and their family members and supporters have been arbitrarily detained and ill-treated in detention. These abuses and offences include acts amounting to physical and psychological torture, such as severe beatings, mock executions, and extrajudicial killings (which remain uninvestigated). The level of systematic violence some *laŋo* men and people close to them have sustained far exceeds the 'beatings' that Foner and Kertzer (1978: 1088) found commonly occurred in the 1970s during transitions in East African age-set societies.

Likewise, *laŋo* men's counter-manipulation strategies carry implications on elites. Violence and the use of youth as a proxy have been a means via which elites obtain political power and economic benefits (Wild et al. 2018). The brutal violence against some *laŋo* men and their close friends and family members points to a gradual erosion of political and moral authority among some Murle political and military leaders. The influence of 'Murle intellectuals' has diminished. Following the passing of the two most respected Murle red chiefs, Ismail Konyi and Barchoch Lual, in 2021, attempts by some Murle leaders to assume multiple roles

have failed. The ability of the *laŋo* leadership to block attempts by the local government authorities and their Juba affiliates to mobilise Murle youth in the GPAA may defuse tensions in neighbourly relations. Thus, a Murle political leader in Juba essentially must win the support of the *laŋo* age-set to execute any plans in rural areas.

Yet, these counter-manipulation strategies also have implications on the neighbours of the Murle in contexts involving conflicts. One *laŋo* strategy involves embracing the Indigenous Murle ethical code, which has helped to reduce fighting and contributed to the goal of peace. Similar strategies have been used by other pastoralist groups in East Africa. For example, Pendle (2021: 893) observed that some members of Dinka-affiliated armed groups in South Sudan 'reinterpreted norms to allow restraint' as a means to mitigate the attempts of militarised leaders to control them.

Another *laŋo* strategy is forging an alliance with age-sets from neighbouring societies. Alliances are formed as a reaction to the challenges *laŋo* men encounter in enacting traditional male roles as protectors of Murle communities. The *laŋo* age-set has successfully built alliances with parallel age-sets across ethnic lines, as well as with armed groups affiliated with both the government and the opposition. The interethnic network the *laŋo* has established within the Upper Nile region such as with the Lou Nuer, and in the Eastern Equatorial region with the Jie and Toposa, has enabled the *laŋo* leadership to pre-empt fighting and resolve cattle-rustling disputes. Such cooperation has also assisted in the recovery of abducted women and children. Reciprocal relationships with neighbours have politically strengthened the *laŋo* and reduced the possibilities of ill-intended manipulations of youth by elites.

Ultimately, forming alliances is not a new development among African pastoralists. According to Andretta (1985: 2), maintaining a broad network of contacts gives pastoralist peoples 'the adaptive advantage', which contributes to their survival in times of uncertainty. The benefits of networking are also found among pastoralists in northern Uganda, who 'meet and mix' in cattle camps with herders from other communities, while maintaining preparedness to defend their animals (Simonse 2005: 244). Among the Lotuho in South Sudan, David Kertzer and Oker Madison (1980: 103) considered the ability to easily mix with unrelated people an 'environmental adaptation response' of members of pastoralist age-set societies. The novelty of the *laŋo* approach—and yet another moderation strategy—is that, now, Murle youth seek alliances with like-minded youth to promote peace rather than fighting. These actions demonstrate that rural *laŋo* youth in villages no longer accept a passive waithood, if they ever did.

CONCLUSIONS

This article contributes to the existing research on African masculinities and marginalised social groups in East African pastoralist age-set societies. In it, we illustrate that the competition over political and societal power between younger and older generations of Murle has led to an outcome in which the younger men, such as the *laŋo*, resort to traditional age-set practices to challenge marginalisation and abusive practices by elites. In turn, elites, in their manipulation attempts, draw on the Murle value of respecting older people, as well as resort to cultural learning methods that are typical in pastoralist societies, such as stimulus enhancement and task assignment.

This study on Murle *laŋo* masculinity provides a new perspective regarding what it

means to be a Murle man. The life story offered an interpretation of Murle ideals through a *laŋo* man's subjective lived experience by increasing our understanding of how violent conflict may shape opportunities for a secure childhood and youth and create constraints through traumatic losses, disappointments, and experiences of inequality. Turning points in the life story such as rebellion and marriage were complex transitions. The life story of the *laŋo* man is nonetheless a survival story, exemplifying what young Murle men must endure as they undertake the role of protector in their home communities. These experiences reflect a considerable amount of hardship, but also remarkable resilience.

Our analysis indicated that social changes are gradually affecting gender relations in Murle society. We showed that embracing the Murle tradition does not necessarily mean turning one's back on women; rather, it illustrated that mothers and grandmothers can have a lasting impact on the lives of their sons. Relating positively to women's participation in Murle society, the study shows that at least some *laŋo* men are transforming the Murle form of African masculinity. For them, the age-set is a resource that men who opt out of age-sets do not have. The study also shed light on Murle men who opt out of these traditional roles and examined the contributing factors to their experiences.

Yet, our results also revealed that joining age-sets, warring, and making peace with adversaries still constitute the standard of desirable masculinity expected from a *laŋo* age-set man in rural areas. *Laŋo* age-set men and women, who together make up a large part of the Murle adult population, resist marginalisation from the government by joining political rebel groups, forming alliances with age-sets from neighbouring societies as well as with armed groups affiliated with the

opposition and through marriage. These young Murle men leverage the age-set organisation and inter-ethnic alliances, fostering reciprocal relationships within a wider network.

Our observations during our fieldwork affirm that Murle youth adopt strategies as individuals as well as at the age-set level to navigate the challenges of marginalisation and attempts at manipulation by corrupt politicians and military men. Specifically, by resorting to traditional age-set practices, our results ultimately contradict the work of researchers such as Mamadou Diouf, who claimed that African youth reject ancestors and traditions (Diouf 2003: 7; Burton and Charton-Bigot 2010: 5). Murle *laŋo* men act by joining age-sets, community defence groups, and at times rebel groups, refusing to wait any longer. Through social activism, these youth contribute to the well-being of Murle society, including by 'volunteering'—that is, by forming an informal (and often unpaid) workforce.

Furthermore, using the example of captured enemy fighters in Maruwo, our study demonstrates the ability of the traditional age-set organisation to emphasise unity (conformity), solidarity, and ethical values, providing a solid foundation for peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms based on Murle Indigenous laws. We describe how young *laŋo* men uphold the ideals of Murle society, such as by affirming nobility among the vulnerable and their adversaries. Murle *laŋo* men are transforming their society by rejecting the elite's corrupt practices. The results speak to the need for peace practitioners and researchers to expand consultations beyond national- and subnational-level authorities to include different social groups in dialogues at multiple levels of the hierarchical Murle age-set society, and genuinely seek to include the perspectives of all parties to a conflict.

Yet, this study also more broadly contributes to the literature by adding to our understanding of the challenges young Indigenous men face as they grow up and become men. More recently, Global South youth studies have emphasised the need for 'localized knowledge' (Batan et al. 2021), and research practices that consider social realities from the Global South as well as the diverse ways youth navigate everyday challenges (Cooper et al. 2021). As rural Murle men go through the complex transition from childhood to adulthood, they resort to traditional practices, adhering to social norms, and resist ill-advised instructions from local authorities as well as prevent the manipulation of youth by elites.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1   Sudan's First Civil War (1955–1972), Sudan's Second Civil War (1983–2005), and the South Sudanese Civil War (2013–2018).

2   Most recent population projections estimate that the total population in Pibor is 227 854, comprising 118 985 females and 108 869 males (UNOCHA 2020).

3   Any Murle age-set may have several (youth) leaders. We use the word 'overall' for the *laŋo* age-set leader who coordinates activities with other leaders of the age-set.

4   The male population of Pibor aged 18–61 years was estimated as 39 123 (17% of males), and the female population aged 18–61 years was roughly 44 659 (20% of females).

5   The Murle word *bɛkchok* denotes a bodyguard who follows the orders of someone else, such as a child soldier, whereas *kerorowe* is a word used for a trained bodyguard, an adult, who oversees someone's security.

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