

The History of Murle Migrations

The Murle people live in southeastern Sudan and are proud to be Murle. They are proud of their language and customs. They also regard themselves as distinct from the people that live around them. At various times they have been at war with all of the surrounding tribes so they present a united front against what they regard as hostile neighbors. The people call themselves Murle and all other peoples are referred to as *moden*. The literal translation of this word is “enemy,” although it can also be translated as “strangers.” Even when the Murle are at peace with a given group of neighbors, they still refer to them as *moden*.

The neighboring tribes also return the favor by referring to the Murle as the “enemy.” The Dinka people refer to the Murle as the Beir and the Anuak call them the Ajiba. These were the terms originally used in the early literature to refer to the Murle people. Only after direct contact by the British did their self-name become known and the term Murle is now generally accepted.

The Murle are a relatively new ethnic group in Sudan, having immigrated into the region from Ethiopia. The language they speak is from the Surmic language family - languages spoken primarily in southwest Ethiopia. There are three other Surmic speaking people groups presently living in the Sudan: the Didinga, the Longarim and the Tenet.

When I asked the Murle elders about their origins they always pointed to the east and said they originated in a place called Jen. The term Jen has symbolic meanings because it is one of the cardinal directions meaning “east.” It also refers to the location of the rising sun, bringer of warmth and light. The rains also come from the east, bringing vital water for pastures and gardens. The Murle elders also described their original area of Jen as being a place of mountainous terrain.

The Murle elders went on to describe their migrations to their present location as being a series of moves by a bounded set - a powerful group of Murle moving from location to location, attacking and pushing out the former inhabitants. They started their migration by moving south along the Omo River until they eventually reached Lake Turkana. Here they turned west, moving to the area of southern Sudan around Kapoeta. In this semi-desert they found pasture for their cattle and water in the sand rivers. Their population grew in numbers and eventually some of them broke away and moved into the Didinga Hills, where they eventually became known as the Didinga people. Other smaller groups also separated, with the Longarim moving west into the Boya Hills and the smallest group, the Tenet, moving farther west into the Lafit Hills. Then the main group of Murle went through a hard time. Their numbers were decimated by smallpox and many of their cattle contracted pleuro-pneumonia. The combination of diseases weakened the tribe and they were soon attacked by the Toposa, a war-like people moving north out of Uganda. There was fighting between the two groups and the Murle ended up moving north, looking for new land. They eventually reached the small Maruwa Hills and here the tribe split. The Murle people without cattle moved east on to the Boma Plateau where they still live at the present time. The larger portion of the Murle, who still had cattle, moved northwest, heading for the Pibor River system. At that time the region was inhabited by the Dinka and the Nuer. Battles took place and eventually the Murle took over – pushing the Dinka toward the Nile River and pushing the Nuer to the north.

In all of the descriptions of the Murle migrations the elders described the Murle as a superior fighting force, attacking and taking over new territory. Of course the other Surmic groups tell their own stories with themselves as the center of the discourse. But without question all of the four people groups are fairly recent immigrants to eastern Sudan.

However, David Turton presents an alternate theory that is useful in understanding the nature of these migrations. In a 1979 paper he takes an intriguing position regarding

identity and the forces that have a bearing on migration. Turton did his research with the Mursi of Ethiopia – another Surmic speaking people. He spent many years in the region and observed that the Mursi people were gradually moving northward. The ethnic group to the north of the Murle was called the Bodi. Their population was approximately the same size as the Mursi, with both tribes numbering about 5,000 people. Most of the time there was peace between the Mursi and the Bodi. During this time there was interaction and even some intermarriage, with Mursi men marrying Bodi wives. During this time the northern Mursi kept pressing up against the Bodi, even to the extent of planting gardens and building houses in Bodi territory. Then an argument would develop along the border over some incident and there would be a cattle raid. The victims would retaliate and soon the borderlands were in a state of war, but on a small scale of tit-for-tat fighting. Most of the fighting was done by young warriors on both sides, anxious to show their prowess and courage. There were a few deaths and many cattle were taken, but nobody won in this time of warfare. Eventually, after a couple of years, the elders from both tribes would get together and work out a peace agreement. A new border would be laid out between the two tribes and each side would sacrifice a bull on a new border. Each time this happened the new border would be set further north than the old one, with the Mursi gaining territory and the Bodi losing territory. Turton states that “the purpose of the fighting [was] to bring about a peace-making ceremony, and the purpose of the ceremony is to give clear ratification to a territorial encroachment which had taken place peacefully, before the fighting started” (1979:13).

Turton goes on to point out that the strongest and most populous section of the Mursi was on their northern border and they were actively striving to move further north at the expense of the Bodi. The Bodi were arranged in the same way with their strongest most populous section to the north at the head of their migration. But at the tail of their territory they were weak and it was here that the head of the Mursi migration was nibbling at their tail.

More significantly, it is not just that the Mursi were physically pushing the Bodi people northward. Many of the Bodi living near the tail of the Bodi migration were simply being overtaken by the aggressive Mursi culture and language. In many cases Bodi women were marrying Mursi men and staying in the same place where they were born, but in the process they were becoming Mursi. In other cases Bodi families stayed on their home territory, but were absorbed by the incoming Mursi and began to live in the new culture and language. So the northern migration of the Mursi society can be seen in two ways: as both physically pushing some Bodi people north and, in other cases, absorbing Bodi into their ranks and making them Mursi.

Turton compares these northern movements of people to waves of the ocean, which move gradually forward until they hit the Ethiopian highlands. Groups are not frozen in time and space, but move in and out of each other. There is no value in unity for its own sake. As Turton has argued, “As the front line advances, links with units left behind become more and more tenuous until they amount to no more than a memory of common origin” (1979:135). Perhaps the mistake of many scholars is that they do not take a long look at history, but tend to see things only at the time of their study.

I consider Turton’s analysis of Mursi expansion and their gradual movement northward as a good way of looking at Murle migration to their present location. In contrast, the Murle elders perceived themselves as having moved through the various locations of their migration en masse, leaving behind a few small groups as they came. Their description of that migration is similar to that of a billiard ball effect where one society bumps into another and so forth down the line, with each society staying totally intact and not interacting with its neighbors. Turton’s approach to migration and expansion is more useful than the original view that the whole Murle tribe marched as a united force into Pibor, conquering and routing the Dinka and Nuer who formerly lived here. It is more likely that there was a slow gradual movement north with a certain amount of mixing between the various societies that bordered each other.

I have found firm evidence that the Murle migration has been made up of an aggressive head and a weak tail just as Turton describes. Most obvious is the evidence of the tail. When Serge Tornay was doing research among the Nyangatom near the Omo River, he found a number of older Nyangatom who gave him color terms in a language different from Nyangatom. He later learned that they were using Murle color terms. He also met elderly women who said they belonged to a different clan called Tangajon – an identical clan name still used by the Murle in Pibor. Tornay wrote up his findings in an 1980 article called “The Omo River Enigma.” Early explorers to the region in the 1890s had made reference to a Murle people as a flourishing tribe living on the banks of the Omo River. But after 1910 there were no more references to these Murle people. It was assumed that they had died of illness or been killed in battle. But it now seems from the evidence that Tornay gathered that the Omo River Murle did not die off completely. They had been the tail of the Murle migration and those that remained behind had simply changed their cultural identity and became Nyangatom.

I found further evidence of Murle being left behind when I visited the village of Mogoz in Toposa country in 1981. I was doing a language survey, writing down Toposa vocabulary. I soon attracted a crowd of people and since I could not converse with them in Toposa I started talking to them in the Murle language. Some old women started talking back to me in Murle. I questioned them closely, but they could not tell me what language they were speaking. They insisted they were Toposa. They wore the proper jewelry, they had Toposa husbands, and they were fluent in the Toposa language. The best they could tell me was that they were conversing with me in the language of their childhood. This is a further example of the Murle moving onward but leaving some members of the tribe behind to be absorbed into another culture.

There is also linguistic evidence to show that the Murle and Toposa not only bumped up against each other, but that they overlapped long enough to share language. In evaluating

the Murle language, I discovered that almost all the terms for weapons started with *ny-*, an unusual letter in the Murle alphabet.

Later I looked at a Toposa word list and noticed that the Toposa terms for weapons also started with *ny-* and that the words were virtually identical. This showed that when the Murle and Toposa cultures overlapped, the Murle admired the superior weapons and adopted many of them – using the Toposa vocabulary as well.

Gloss	Murle	Toposa
Wrist knife	nyapel	nyapelu
Club	nyabeela	nyabela
Spear	nyatubot	nyatubwot
Razor ring	nyapakodec	nyapakodec

The Murle also like Toposa songs. I frequently attended Murle dances organized by the various age-sets. There was always a lead singer who would dance and sing solos while the rest of the men would sing a response. Even after I understood the Murle language well, I struggled to understand the words in these songs. Eventually I recorded them and then asked my language teacher to assist me in translating the songs. He listened to the recorder and told me that the songs were not Murle. I later discovered that the songs were Toposa. The singers were passing on the songs from one generation to the next with no idea of their meaning. This is strong evidence that the Murle and Toposa societies once overlapped.

All Murle boys receive a secret name when they become a man. A father gives his son a large ox with beautiful colors and spreading horns. The boy then makes a riddle based on the color of this name-ox. He then goes to an old man who remembers the Toposa language. The riddle is shortened to a couple of Toposa words and this becomes the boy's manhood name for the rest of his life. He will tell his friends his new name, but the meaning remains a secret. So Murle men go through their lives bearing Toposa names.

I also learned that the supposedly ferocious, aggressive Murle do not always live up to their reputation. I originally wanted to live on the Boma Plateau with the highland Murle. The climate was pleasant and the highland Murle were an agricultural society that stayed in one location. But when I arrived at Boma with all my gear to build a house I found myself engulfed in a small war. The Kachepo people on the east side of the plateau were moving up into the hills and taking land away from the Murle. Usually there was peace between the two groups, but at the time I arrived hostilities had broken out and people were being killed. The Kichepo only numbered about 4,000 people, but they were getting the best of the fighting. I had to withdraw to avoid the fighting and came back the following year. By then the Kichepo were in the ascendancy. There was still fighting going on, but the Murle had withdrawn to the western edge of the hills and were living in caves and had little food. What happened to the ferocious Murle? I eventually realized that I was looking at the tail of the Murle migration. Over time some of these Murle became Kachepo, others stayed on the plateau and kept their Murle identity, and still others moved west to the Murle heartland near Pibor.

Using Turton's theory, there is also evidence that the Murle migration has a head. This has serious implications for understanding the contemporary conflict in South Sudan. Collins, in his article "Patrols Against the Beirs" (1960), provides valuable insights into the issue of Murle expansion. At the turn of the last century (1906), the British set up a military post at Bor to administrate the Dinka. The new administration immediately discovered a problem. Murle warriors were making raids on the Dinka people. This had been going on for a number of years and the Murle were taking cattle and women. Collins suggests from his research that the total number of Murle at that time was only about 10,000, but that the largest and most aggressive group of them lived on the west side of Murle country adjoining the Dinka. The Dinka were a much larger group and had similar instruments of war. However, the Murle had a reputation for being more warlike and belligerent and continued to have great success in their raids against the Dinka. Collins reported the following: "So terrified had the Dinkas become that in spite of

superior numbers, they absolutely refused to pursue the raiders unless they were accompanied by government police” (1960:39). Eventually, in 1912, the British put together a large government force and marched into Murle territory. There were a few running battles and the Murle capitulated. A police post was established at Pibor and this became the administrative headquarters for the Murle people.

But even since that date there has still been a push by the western Murle, the head of the migration, to move toward the Nile River, and raids have continued over much of the past century. However, these raids were not continuous. There have been periods of time when the two sides lived in peace with one another. Intermarriage took place, usually with Murle men marrying Dinka women. In January of 1975 I drove the road from Bor to Pibor and found many herds of cattle being driven down the road to water at the Nile River. I discovered that these were Murle cattle being herded by Murle warriors. At the time there was peace between the two sides and some Murle had cattle camps on the banks of the Nile. But a few years later hostilities broke out again and the Murle retreated to the Lotilla and Veveno rivers.

Historically, these head/tail migrations have taken place frequently, especially among pastoral peoples. It is a common phenomena as ethnic groups expand and look for resources such as food, water and pasture. In the more recent past colonial governments stopped these border wars and ordered ethnic groups to stay in one place, with space allocated to each particular group. There are only a few places left in Africa where the desire to move and act upon it is still possible. A strong administration in Sudan would have stopped this type of movement long ago.

For the head of the Murle migration, the pressure is to move westward toward the Nile River. But the Murle people should not be seen as a strong unified army, conquering people as they move forward. Instead, expansion into new territory has taken place gradually with a series of raids and with small units of people moving their homesteads

and cattle camps into new areas. Waller points out that there are three types of social formations in which expansion is likely. He calls them agglomerative, assimilative, and replicating (1985). The present Murle pressure to move west seems to be that of a replicating society, which he defines as a society that “segment[s] easily and send[s] out small colonizing units to settle new areas. [It] can if necessary, combine, but each unit is structurally and economically self-sufficient” (1985:367).

The Murle in the west have also expanded their number by absorbing Dinka into Murle society. Much of this is done during times of peace by simply arranging to marry a Dinka woman and paying the bridewealth. The Dinka wife then moves into a Murle homestead and over time learns the Murle language and culture. At other times Dinka women have been captured during a cattle raid. They were then married off to one of their captors.

Dinka children were also brought into Murle society. Most of these children were purchased. Dinka who had many children would sometimes sell one in exchange for cattle. This still happens today with Dinka children being offered for sale in the Pibor market. The price for a Dinka child is presently ten cows. In the past, Dinka children referred to as “children of incest” were also offered for sale. In addition, children were sometimes captured during cattle raids. In all of the above scenarios such children were adopted by Murle families. These children were well treated and after learning the Murle language and culture were considered to be full Murle with all the rights thereof.

The question has to be asked – why did the Murle want Dinka children? In some cases a woman was sterile and adopting Dinka children was a way of making a family. In other cases the Murle parents simply wanted a bigger family. In still other cases a family may have had only boys or girls and wanted to equalize the sex ratio.

The assimilation of Dinka into Murle society is not unique in the Sudanese context. Hutchinson reports a similar process that took place with the Nuer: “By the end of [the

19th] century these Nuer groups had reached the Ethiopian frontier, effectively tripling their original land base and assimilating tens of thousands of Dinka residents, captives and immigrants in their wake...As one Nuer man laughingly summed up the results of this long-standing assimilation trend, 'There are no [real] Nuer. We are all Dinka.'" (2000:8).

The Murle practices of adoption of Dinka children and marriage to Dinka women over a period of one hundred years means that the Murle are a mixture of peoples - not a pure ethnic group. Most of the Murle people living in the west of Murle land have Dinka blood flowing in their veins and this can be easily seen in their tall strong physiques that are quite different from Murle living in the east.

Although Dinka are being absorbed into Murle families and learn Murle culture, they also bring some aspects of Dinka culture to the Murle world. This is especially obvious when it comes to traditional religion. Dinka women are reluctant to give up their religious beliefs and bring their practices and vocabulary with them. The traditional Murle word for God is *Tammu*. This word also refers to the sky and to the rain. Everyone in eastern Murle land uses this term for God. I used the term *Tammu* when translating the word God in the Murle Bible and it was well accepted. However, as the church grew and expanded I noticed that people in the churches usually used the word *Jok* to refer to God. The Murle Christians prayed to *Jok* and they made up many songs praising *Jok*. I questioned this and the pastors told me it was just another word for the same God. I later learned that *Jok* is a Dinka term referring to God and various spirits. Over time the term *Jok* has become ubiquitous in western Murle-land. My assumption is that this term was brought into the Murle belief system by Dinka women. Although it is not the original Murle term for God, it has become the Murle word for God and *Jok* is the current term used in the Murle Bible.

A similar transfer of cultures took place between the Murle and the Nuer. When the Nuer were pushed north by the Murle, they left behind a sacred pool called *Nyandit*. At the same time some Nuer stayed behind and became Murle. In the process they taught the Murle about *Nyandit* (the term for a large crocodile in the Nuer language). The Murle in that area have since incorporated *Nyandit* into their religious beliefs. Large goats are identified as *jok*. People organize evening sessions around a fire where they confess their sins and put them on the goats. After a month the old Murle women take these *jok* to the shrine at *Nyandit*. Here the goats are tied and thrown into the muddy water to drown, symbolically taking away the sins of the confessors. I was told by a number of Murle that this was not a Murle tradition, but rather something they had learned from the Nuer.

In spite of all this migration and cultural borrowing, the Murle are not a splintered people in disarray. They are in no danger of losing their identity or sense of being uniquely Murle. In conclusion, even though the Murle originally came from Ethiopia and speak a language quite different from that of their Nilotic neighbors, they should not be seen as a completely separate people. Like their Nilotic neighbors they have adopted a culture based on the cattle complex and in most ways are more similar to their current Nilotic neighbors than to their Ethiopian ancestors. All such cattle-loving people have much in common. They need to find a way to respect each other and live in harmony.

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Human Ecology of the Murle

The Murle people live in a vast area of over 30,000 square miles. Much of this area is used only for hunting and occasional grazing for their cattle and therefore contains some of the largest herds of wildlife remaining in all of Africa. The ecology of this area is intriguing- similar environments occur in only a few other locations in Africa. With the exception of the Boma Plateau, the land of the Murle is very flat with a few intersecting rivers. During the rainy season, from June through August, these rivers burst their banks and the area becomes a vast shallow lake. Grass grows rapidly in the black cotton soil and in places stands ten feet tall.

When the Murle people see the thunderheads building in the east they know the rains are coming and they start moving from their dry season camps to their semi-permanent homesteads. These have been left largely uninhabited during the long dry season. Upon arriving home the people re-open their homesteads. The women make the necessary repairs to the roofs of their dome-shaped homes and the men rebuild the thorn *zaribas* for their cattle. Large cattle byres are also cleaned and prepared for the coming deluge. Both men and women then prepare small fields adjacent to the homesteads- the men turn over the soil and the women and children clear away the old growth. With the coming of the first rains the soil becomes soft and the Murle plant sorghum, corn and pumpkin seeds. Within days of the first rains the grass begins to grow, giving nutrition to the weak thin cattle. At this time of year the countryside looks beautiful and green, but it is actually a period of serious hunger for the Murle. The cattle have just come through the severe dry season and are producing no milk, and the crops are just beginning to grow in the field. People subsist largely on wild greens that they find in the surrounding riverine forests. When the pumpkin plants first put out leaves, these are picked and made into a thin soup. It is a time of lethargy and waiting. The days are often dark, cold and wet, and people sit in their huts huddled around the fire, glumly waiting for the warmth of the sun. Mosquitoes appear in hordes, making life miserable for both human and beast. At night

the cattle are moved into the byres and smudge fires are lit – using dry cattle dung to produce an acrid smoke. This drives away most of the mosquitoes, but by morning the cattle are often drugged by the smoke and have to be dragged outside to recover in the fresh air.

It is during May and June that the young warriors plan raids on other ethnic groups. With water available in every puddle it is relatively easy for the youth to cross the high plains and make attacks, stealing cattle and occasionally taking women and children. The abundant water and pasture also means the stolen cattle can undertake the return journey to the Murle homesteads.

As the rains continue the rivers gradually fill up and by July they usually burst their banks, with the water spreading out over hundreds of square miles. Travel is difficult during this time and people are quite isolated from each other, having few canoes that can traverse the deep rivers. When the cows give birth to their calves, there is a sudden surplus of milk and people start to regain their strength. By September the crops mature in the fields and the people add grain and pumpkins to their diet.

Over the ensuing weeks the river gradually subsides and the Murle people can once more move freely about the area. For the next two months, October and November, the Murle enter fully into social life. The cattle have adequate pasture near to the homesteads so there is little work in caring for them. Grain is available in the granaries and everyone has abundant food. Since the homesteads are bunched along the rivers it is easy for people to get together for activities. Members of the younger age-sets plan dances and invite the unmarried girls. Hundreds of people show up at these dances to watch the warriors dance in their regalia. Young men court the girls and many marriages take place during this time of abundance. Old men gather in the shade and tell stories and talk about their cattle – much of the talk having to do with past and present bridewealth payments. As the sun gets hotter the ground changes from mud to hard cracked clay. The grass keeps growing

and becomes so tall that it is difficult to walk long distances cross the savannahs. Some of the warriors also use this period to go on cattle raids. They use the long grass as cover for their attacks, and there is still enough water in the rivers to keep the stolen cattle alive on the long trek home.

December is the most exciting time of year for the Murle, since it is the time of the great annual hunt. During the rainy season large herds of antelope such as the white-eared kob, *leocitus kobus*, retreat south to escape the flooded plains. When the rains stop and the rivers drop, the herds of animals move north to eat the fresh grass along the receding rivers. The white-eared kob migrate into the Pibor area during December and bunch up in large herds at the banks of the rivers. The Murle men sharpen their spears and gather each morning on the banks of the Kengen River at a junction they refer to as *keet ci iding*, the tree of meat. Each morning at sunrise they cross the river and attack the kob en masse. Hundreds of kob are speared during these hunts. These animals are then butchered and much of the meat is cut into strips and dried. The dried meat is then put in a mortar and pounded into powder. This keeps for months and is a crucial food during the dry season. The herd of kob numbers over 1.4 million animals and the annual hunting does not endanger the total population, but rather keeps it in check.

By January the herds of kob move on and the world of the Murle gets hot and dry. Temperatures soar above 120 degrees Fahrenheit and the Murle refer to this season as *tagith*, the time when the world is hot and ugly. The rivers continue to recede and some stop flowing altogether, only leaving shallow pools in ox-bow bends. Pasture around the homesteads is depleted and the young men split their herds, taking the bulk of the cattle out into the plains, heading for the swamps. As they cross the plains they set fire to the long dry grass and for days the sky is full of smoke and ash. The burning triggers the grass roots under the ground and within days they send up green tendrils, providing nutritious forage for the cattle.

Over the ensuing weeks the herders take the cattle to far away swamps where there is permanent water and green pasture. The Murle living in the east take their cattle to the Jwom swamps. The Murle in the west take their cattle to the Nana'am swamps, which they historically shared with the Nuer. On the edges of these swamps the herders build temporary cattle camps, simple *zaribas* of thorn branches to protect the cattle from predators at night. They also build small grass shelters for themselves. The cattle thrive on the rich grass and continue to give milk and blood. The herders also search the neighboring trees for hives from which they take the honey. Although the temperatures are hot, the herders say that camping in the swamp is a good life.

Meanwhile the families and the older people remain in their homesteads near the main rivers. A few lactating cows are left to provide milk for these families. They can also eat the last of the grain from their granaries. But the people are waiting primarily for the fishing season. As the rivers recede, men make small dams across the slow current. Then they drive the fish into woven fish traps set into holes in the dam. But eventually the currents stop altogether and only the ox-bows retain any water. Each of these pools is guarded by an *eet ci liilu*, man of the pool. When he deems the time is right, he announces a fishing day. Hundreds of people show up. After a goat is sacrificed to ensure safety from crocodiles, the men wade into one end of the pool, forming a solid line of bodies across the pool. They then move slowly forward, thrusting their fishing spears into the water and mud. It is too dirty to actually see any fish, but the fish are so prolific that the men get a fish with almost every thrust.

The women follow behind the men, carrying fishing baskets called *toi*. These baskets are open on the bottom end and women line up shoulder to shoulder and place the open ends of their baskets into the mud. Then they put their hands in through a small opening at the top and grab any fish that are trapped in the baskets. They withdraw the fish, bite them behind the heads to kill them, and then string them around their waists. By the end of the day the pool is completely fished out. The next day another pool is opened and the

fishing continues. Many of the fish are roasted and eaten on the spot while the surplus fish are split and dried for future use.

By the time the last pool is fished out in February, finding food has become a serious problem. With the lack of pasture the last milk cows have gone dry and the granaries are now empty of grain. It is time for the big move. The women pack up their belongings in kob skins, load them on their heads, tie their babies on their backs, and head off across the scorching plains toward the cattle camps. Thorn bushes are pulled across the doors of their houses to indicate that the owners have gone off for the balance of the dry season. After several days of hard walking the women and children arrive at the cattle camps where the women build a few rough shelters. Rain is not expected; the shelters exist only to provide some shade from the burning sun. For the following weeks the families relax. The women claim that it is their favorite time of year since there is abundant food and little work. The cattle are still giving milk and there are animals to be hunted in the swamps. People sit round and eat and socialize.

Eventually even the swamps start to go dry and the pastures turn brittle. The kob leave their mating grounds and head south. The cattle stop producing milk. The herders remain, but other Murle family members move south to groves of balanites trees where they pick the bitter fruit. Initially they peel off the shells and suck the moist seeds. The seeds quickly become bitter and are spat out. The used seeds are collected and boiled in water. The water becomes bitter and is replenished several times. After hours of boiling the seeds are dried and then pounded into white flour. The flour is baked into a hard cake that can be eaten. It is still bitter, but provides basic nutritional value.

The families spread out and continue to camp under the trees, simply waiting for the weather to break. In May when they finally see the clouds forming in the east, they pack up their few belongings and head for home. The herders also watch for the change in weather. By now the cattle are thin and looking desperate. With the coming of the rains

the young men round up their cattle and start on the way home. Soon the small paths are full of cattle and people heading back to their homesteads on the rivers, beginning the whole yearly cycle over again.

The Murle see themselves primarily as a cattle people. They love their cows and have myriads of terms for the color combinations and horn configurations. The region in which they live has a harsh environment, but they consider it to be the most beautiful place on earth. It is actually ideal for cattle as long as the Murle have the space to move their cattle from water hole to water hole and from pasture to pasture.

But in actuality the Murle practice a mixed economy. Without question they focus on their cattle that provide them with milk, blood and meat. However, they also plant gardens along the rivers and the sorghum, corn and pumpkins provide essential food for several months of each year. So they are also farmers.

In December they become hunters, killing large numbers of white-eared kob. The powdered meat from this hunt provides food for the long dry season. In February they become fisherfolk and these fish are caught at a time of year when other food sources have been used up. Then at the end of the dry season they become gatherers, collecting wild honey from the forests and seeds from the Balanites trees.

The Murle make use of all aspects of their environment to survive in this hostile land. But to do so they need lots of space. They are not a nomadic society that just wanders around looking for food. They are a transhumant society with a definite pattern to their movements. Individuals do not own land but territory is held in common by the entire tribe and all Murle have the right to go anywhere within this territory. Each family has a semi-permanent homestead, built usually within walking distance of a major river. This homestead is the hub of a family's existence. As the year goes through the seasons, the

people leave their homesteads and go out to the various food sources. It is useful to envision this in terms of a wheel – a hub with spokes leading out in all directions.

The Murle people have an in-depth understanding of their territory. They know when and where to move at the appropriate time of year. During the SPLA takeover of the Murle towns, most of the Murle simply vanished into the bush, away from the sources of conflict. After several years some NGO workers went out into the remote regions to evaluate food security. They expected to find people starving and in need of food aid. Instead they were surprised to find that nobody was starving, but that they were in good health. It was obvious that the Murle knew how to live off the land.

During the 1990s many Nuer and Dinka boys walked out of the Sudan because their families and homes had been destroyed. Some of these “lost boys” made it to foreign countries and are now educated, some of whom act as a vocal diaspora for their ethnic groups back in Sudan. The Murle youth were never part of these “lost boys,” because rather than walking out of the country they simply went into hiding in remote parts of their own territory and continued living their traditional lifestyle.

Why do I spend time focusing this paper on ecology and the Murle economy? Economy, the procurement of food, is at the base of every society. It is important to understand how the Murle procure their food because it has serious implications when it comes to understanding the present fighting between the Murle and the Nuer. Ann Laudati has argued that “any investigations into conflict must explore how identity has been mobilized for social and political purposes, as well as strategies to access material (natural resource) gains” (2011:17). The Murle have their own tribal territory and within this territory they have access to adequate food sources. They have a successful economy even though they live in a harsh environment. They are not inherently poor, since they procure enough food to continue from year to year. However, to be successful and to meet their subsistence needs they must continue to have adequate space. They need to

have habitable space along the rivers for their semi-permanent homesteads and they need to have a large open space where they can spread out according to the seasons, using this space for herding their cattle and for hunting and gathering.

If the Murle are guaranteed rights to their entire territory, they can continue to survive as a people. With proper peace negotiations they can live and abide peacefully within this territory. There is no economic need for them to go out and raid other ethnic groups. However, if part or all of their territory is lost or becomes unsafe, then they will be in desperate straits and trouble will continue into the future.

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Murle Political Systems and Age-sets

The Murle are an acephalous society, meaning there is no hierarchy of leadership. This has serious implications when it comes to making political decisions that affect the entire tribe. Since there is “no head,” there are no strong political leaders who have far reaching authority.

A homestead, *korok*, typically consists of two or three generations of a family, *tatok*. The oldest man in the family is the de facto head of the homestead and he makes all major decisions on behalf of his extended family. This is an extremely small unit, therefore to enhance the chances for physical survival, it may unite with other homesteads through a horizontal extension of social ties. Elizabeth Andretta states that “*korok* and *tatok* membership is established through the horizontal extension of relations to living members, rather than oriented vertically in relationship to family ancestors” (1985:227). Therefore relationships between homesteads are not primarily political, but rather provide a mechanism for residential mobility, mutual help and physical survival. The term for neighbors who assist each other is *abaayizo*, those who live together. If members of one homestead do not get along with their neighbors, they simply pull up stakes and move away, building a new *korok* in another area where they find the neighbors more compatible. Since the Murle people are transhumant they move easily and do not need complicated mechanisms for solving conflicts between homesteads – instead they simply avoid them.

However, one would expect to find some further type of leadership system. B.A. Lewis wrote the first anthropological book on the Murle and he writes about four clans, *kidongwa*, translated as drumships, with their respective chiefs. But in his book he asserts that even in the 1930s the drumships had lost their cohesiveness and the attendant chiefs were losing their power. Lewis was studying at Oxford University when the theory of structuralism was in vogue. He expected to find hierarchy among the Murle and thus

found what he was looking for. During my research in the 1970s I discovered that the drumships were never strong political units and political chiefs were never part of Murle society. There are four drumships. The largest two are the Tangajon and Ngaroti. The smaller two are the Kelenya and the Ngenvac, but they claim to have lost their drums and their prestige. In the 1970s I frequently asked my Murle friends which drumship they belonged to. They would have to think about it and some did not even know and had to go ask their grandparents.

Although not operating as political entities, each drumship possesses an *alaan ci meeri*, red chief. There is a leading family in each drumship and the position of red chief is passed on from father to son. But an *alaan ci meeri* holds a religious position rather than a political one. A more accurate translation of *alaan* would be priest or prophet. A red chief gets his name from the crimson bird feathers he wears on his forehead. He is expected to have direct contact with *Tammu*, God. He can pray for rain, bless the crops, advise the hunters, heal the sick, and predict the success (or failure) of an upcoming cattle raid. He is also feared because he has the power to curse a person and cause their death. However, he stays somewhat aloof and does not get involved in the daily decisions of the various homesteads. Only rarely do red chiefs get together and make a broad decision that affects the whole tribe. This happened recently when the red chiefs tried to set a top limit of 40 cows for the payment of bridewealth.

Since there is little hierarchy, the cohesive factor that holds Murle society together is the highly functional age-sets. These are well-defined groups of men based on age, and I regard them as the core social force among the Murle. The younger age-sets are a fighting force and take on the important role of protecting the tribe for outsiders. Belonging to an age-set is critical. When Murle men meet each other for the first time, one of the first questions they ask is which *buul*, age-set, the other man belongs to. If they find out they belong to the same *buul* there is instant rapport and offers of hospitality and help.

All boys become members of a *buul* in their late teenage years and they stay in the same *buul* for the rest of their lives. Members of an age-set do not formally move from one social position to another over time, although as men get older they will marry and focus their lives on their cattle and family. It is when the Murle men are still young and single that the age-sets are most important in their lives. This is the time when young men are eager to fight and prove themselves – whether in protecting their country from enemy tribes, or going out on raids to procure cattle.

At the present time there is no formal initiation into an age-set. Lewis states that the last initiation took place about 1890. At that time there was an epidemic that killed many cattle and there were not enough oxen to hold the necessary sacrifices (1972:85). Since that time new age-sets have been formed gradually during periods of adolescence. Boys are spurned by the age-set above them so they slowly organize themselves. There is no patronage by an older age-set as exists among the Maasai of Kenya. I had the privilege of watching the development of an age-set when I lived at Pibor from 1976 to 1984. At that time the *Dorongwa*, hartebeest, age-set was in the ascendancy. This was made up of strong young warriors in their twenties. They had images of hartebeests carved into the skin of their chests and hexagon patterns scarred on their faces. They wore red beads in honor of their totem animal. They rejected the adolescent boys and called them *Muden*, mice. The boys accepted the name and ran with it. They chose a color code, black and red, a scarification pattern, and composed songs to praise themselves. They used the private space in front of our house to practice their strength and they would wrestle, throw spears and practice stick fighting. Over time they gathered dancing regalia such as skins, leather and feathers, and they would dress up and strut around outside our house. But they were still too weak to take on the *Dorongwa* so after practice they would stash their regalia, spears and sticks in our house for safekeeping.

For several years the *Dorongwa* continued to hold on to their position and power, of which a critical aspect was socialization with adolescent girls. They would organize

dances to which unmarried girls were invited, but not the adolescent boys. As the *Muden* became more assertive, they would march around with their dueling sticks, occasionally finding a *Dorongwa* man alone, and beating him with their sticks. These aggressive acts caused the *Dorongwa* to periodically band together and attack the *Muden*. But both age-sets were careful to use only sticks, since fighting with metal could only be done against enemy tribes.

Eventually the *Muden* grew into a powerful force and the *Dorongwa* got tired of the fighting. The *Dorongwa* backed off, allowing the *Muden* to have a full-fledged *buul*. The members of the new age-set now had the right to dance with girls, sing, hunt, fight the enemy and steal cattle. A Murle man told me that a *buul* comes into ascendancy “by force like the government, *atobo akuma*.”

Men within an age-set rose to positions of leadership based on their popularity and ability. A talented singer would compose songs and lead the singing at the dances. A good hunter would naturally lead the men when they hunted white-eared kob. But the most important position was that of a talented fighter who earned the title *eet ci oronto*, the man who owns the war. This man rose to his position through his natural abilities. He would be a man who had proved himself in battle and a man who was respected by other men in his *buul*. He was chosen for his ability to think well and quickly. He earned the authority to plan attacks and lead members of his *buul* into battle.

Across the entire tribe all men of the same age belonged to the same *buul*. But since they were so spread out, the full membership of a *buul* did not meet together and function under one war leader. There were different war leaders for different areas. Men could choose to follow whichever leader they liked. The fighting units that went on raids were usually small mobile units who planned and executed raids on their own. The results were small but effective raids that took place fairly often, especially during the dry

season when travel was easy. These raids were a bane to the Dinka around Bor who were the most frequent victims of these attacks.

When the members of a *buul* became a little older (late 20s) they became interested in marriage and they needed cattle to pay the bride-wealth. Such a *buul* would step up the number of raids to gain the necessary cattle for marriage. Then they would get married and ease off into family life. But for the next twenty years they could still be militarized and brought back into a fighting force if it became necessary to defend their land.

At the present time there are three young age-sets that are the most active. The youngest *buul* is called *Lango*, small antelope, and their colors are yellow and black. These men are single, wild and the most aggressive age-set at present, since they want to prove themselves. There are recent reports of serious fighting taking place with the *Lango* attacking the *buul* above them and trying to establish themselves as valid warriors.

A new age-set is organized about every ten years. The age-set above the *Lango* is named *Bototnya*, knob-nosed goose. Their color code is black and white like the goose. These men are in their prime, still single, and are experienced warriors.

The age-set above them is called *Titi*, cordon bleu. Their color code is green and blue. Most of these men are aged between 30 and 40 and many of the men in this age-set are now married. But they are still considered to be the ruling age-set. They took over this position from the *Muden* in 1994. They are still active warriors, although they have passed some of the fighting down to the *Bototnya*. I have included the older age sets in ascending order in the list below:

Age-set name	Gloss	Color
<i>Muden</i>	Rats	black and red
<i>Dorongwa</i>	Hartebeest	orange and blue

<i>Mara</i>	Lion	yellow and blue
<i>Tubezwa</i>	Guinea fowl	spotted
<i>Wawoc</i>	Cattle egret	white
<i>Tiyen</i>	Zebra	striped
<i>Kiziwan</i>	Buffalo	black
<i>Tagoon</i>	Giraffe	spotted
<i>Karam</i>	Colobus monkey	black and white
<i>Boroi</i>	Rainbow	multicolored

The names of most of these age-sets are taken from animals – known either for their bravery or their beauty. The Murle use alternative names for the various age-sets so other lists may use different terms.

Men over fifty years of age still acknowledge their age-sets and remember the glories of their youth. But they are no longer immersed in age-set activities. It is merely a point of identification.

In the past a war leader would go to an *alaan ci meeri*, red chief, and ask him for a blessing on a planned raid. The *alaan ci meeri* would read the omens and then bless the raid – or warn him not to go. If a raid was successful the war leader would then give several cows to the *alaan ci meeri* in thanks for blessing the raid. At the present time the red chiefs are no longer being asked for a blessing. The war leaders of the three youngest age-sets are simply going out on their own. It is said by my informants that most of the red chiefs no longer have any influence over the younger age-sets.

But there is another level of hierarchy among the Murle – the one initiated by the British colonial government. This was a hierarchy of chiefs that was chosen by the colonial administration. Early District Commissioners tried to set up a system of indirect rule – a system that worked well in places like Nigeria, where there were already powerful chiefs with a traditional hierarchical system. These appointed chiefs would intercede between the people and the colonial government. They had the authority to solve basic disputes following traditional methods. However, they were also assigned the onerous task of

collecting taxes and appointing people to work details, such as making roads. This system of indirect rule did not work well among the Murle. When the Murle discovered how the system worked, they put forward their most incompetent men as their official chiefs – and then ignored these chiefs as they tried to implement their duties.

Richard Lyth was the District Commissioner over the Murle from 1944-1954. The first chiefs he appointed were incompetent, but over time he found some good men and trained them to be judges. Working through these men he was able to bring peace to the Murle area. Cattle raiding by the younger age-sets was largely curtailed and severe punishment was inflicted on anyone attacking people from other ethnic groups (Arensen 2012).

But this method of working through government appointed leaders has had a checkered history among the Murle. Since the time of Lyth, most government-appointed chiefs have not been able to bring peace to the Murle people. This carries over into the present time. There are currently a large number of Murle chiefs appointed by the new South Sudan government. But these chiefs are not held in high esteem and one Murle pastor told me that “most people continue to do what is right in their own eyes.” This is especially true of the three younger age-sets that continue to make raids on other tribes – thus extending the present unrest and conflict.

The present fighting has also experienced a substantial change from traditional cattle raiding. Historically such raids were undertaken using only spears and involved a relatively small number of warriors. Few people were actually killed and the focus was on stealing cattle. In turn the other ethnic group would attack, kill a couple of men and take some cattle for themselves. This tit-for-tat type of fighting took place between cattle people all over Sudan. It was almost considered to be a sport of the younger warriors.

However the coming of guns, and especially the AK-47, has radically changed this situation. Such guns give the raiders the capability of killing many people, often from a distance. This naturally makes the victimized people furious and they mount a return attacks – also using guns. Moreover, the old ethics of war have changed and now many women, children and old men are being killed. In addition, houses and crops are being burned. Sharon Hutchinson discusses this while describing fighting between the Dinka and Nuer, but her statement is equally true of the Murle situation. She states, “Until 1991 Nuer and Dinka fighters did not intentionally kill women, children or elderly persons during violent confrontations among themselves. The purposeful slaying of a child, woman or elderly person was universally perceived not only as cowardly and reprehensible but, more importantly, as a direct affront against God as the ultimate guardian of human morality” (2000:4). She argues that “regional codes of warfare ethics also precluded the burning of houses and the destruction of crops” (2000:4). Sadly, the introduction of powerful guns into the raiding system has accelerated the whole procedure into an increasingly destructive practice. Hutchinson concludes with the powerful statement, “the killing of unarmed women and children became standard practice between Nuer and Dinka combatants. God, it seems, was no longer watching” (2000:6).

The only other kind of leadership system within the Murle people is that of the Presbyterian church. This church was established by American missionaries who came to Pibor in 1952. These early missionaries brought modern medicine and introduced literacy. Later expatriates helped translate the New Testament into the Murle language. Over the following decades many Murle have become Christians and these Christians have become a strong force in the Murle community. At last report there were 66 churches in the Murle area, many of them with well-trained pastors. Some of these pastors have received college degrees and have returned to live among their own people. These pastors are actively speaking up against the current violence. They played an important role in bringing the two sides of Murle society together after the end of the civil

war. However, they are having a difficult time influencing the younger age-sets. Pastors have reported to me that members of the younger age-sets do not come to church and do not listen to the pastors' messages of peace. So even though there are local pastors in place committed to peace efforts, they are still struggling to play an effective role in ending the present conflict.

So a vital question remains. In an acephalous society, how do people put pressure on the young age-sets to stop fighting and learn to live in peace with their neighbors?

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Contemporary Issues Facing the Murle

Tribal wars in Africa are ugly. They are often motivated by revenge and may last for generations, with severe consequences. However, the present fighting taking place between the Nuer and the Murle tribes in Jonglei State is more than a simple tribal war. The Murle tribe is being portrayed as the aggressor. The Nuer tribe is being portrayed as noble warriors simply reacting to the attacks of the evil Murle people. Nothing is farther from the truth. Almost all the publicity being generated, both local and abroad, takes the position of the Nuer fighters. Few people are listening to the position of the Murle people. This paper seeks to give a historical context to the present fighting – focusing on what has led up to the present unrest in the area.

The Murle are a small tribe numbering approximately 148,000 people living in the southeastern corner of Jonglei province. In the distant past they immigrated into the Sudan from Ethiopia. Over time they have evolved a culture that is similar to that of the Nilotic cattle-loving people of the Sudan. The Murle were the last tribe in Sudan to be pacified by the British in 1912. After that time they were lightly ruled by the British colonial government. Dick Lyth, the District Commissioner from 1944-1954, focused his administrative work on the Murle. He learned their culture and language and wrote a grammar book and dictionary. He prohibited cattle raiding and with the help of Murle leaders he set up a judicial system. Under his rule the Murle experienced a time of peace. From 1952-1963 missionaries lived in Pibor and set up a station – building a modern hospital, and introducing Christianity and literacy. A number of Murle became Christians during that period.

After Sudan gained independence in 1955, the Murle region was ruled by the northern Arab-run government. It was increasingly hostile toward Christianity and all missionaries were evicted from the area in 1963. The administration was harsh and many of the Murle Christians were imprisoned or killed. During this time members of the Arab militia were

assigned to the region. They slept with Murle women and introduced venereal diseases into the population that led to sterility among some of the Murle women. This resulted in Murle raiding the neighboring Dinka to abduct children. When the problem was identified, the World Health Organization came into the region and did a medical campaign, giving everyone injections of penicillin. This cured people of the venereal disease and the following generations of Murle women have had many children. The current rumor that the Murle people have become largely sterile and are therefore stealing children is widely circulated, but is patently false. However, it is true that for many years the Murle have purchased unwanted children from both the Dinka and the Anuak.

Between 1972 and 1984 the Murle lived a fairly peaceful existence. During this time my family and I lived with the Murle for a period of eight years. Before moving to Pibor we were warned by government officials in Juba to be careful, for the Murle were supposedly a dangerous people. But we found ourselves warmly welcomed by the Murle and learned that they were a peaceable people if left to themselves. We studied the Murle language and culture and over the years we made many close Murle friends. During that period many Murle went to school and others became literate through a village literacy campaign. Christianity flourished and many churches were started. A number of young men went out for training and returned as pastors of these churches. At that time there was little friction between the Murle and their Nuer neighbors to the north. Both tribes were known for their fighting prowess so they stayed clear of each other, maintaining a buffer zone where both groups herded their cattle during the dry season.

However, with the onslaught of the second civil war starting in 1983, SPLA fighters overran the Murle region and took over the governance of the Murle people. The Nilotic leaders in the SPLA did not like the Murle for historical reasons and treated them badly. There are a number of stories of serious abuse and the Murle felt that living under the SPLA was worse than living under the northern Arab government. Eventually a Murle leader called Ismail Kony stepped to the fore. He was a former police officer and he also

was a red chief so he had credibility on two levels. He formed a contingent of Murle warriors and they left the area and offered their services to the northern Arabs. They became a flying militia, armed by the northern government. Chief Ismail and his men eventually fought their way back into Murle land and took over the area from the SPLA. Until the end of the civil war the Murle governed and defended their own territory with the help of supplies and arms from the north.

After the peace accords were signed in 2005 the Murle people were a split society with the northern Murle having aligned themselves with the Arab government and the southern Murle around Boma having aligned with the SPLA. There was tension between the two sides, but eventually, with the help of Murle pastors, peace was established and the tribe was reunited. However, the neighboring Nilotic tribes continued to see the Murle as traitors, since they had temporarily aligned themselves with the north. But they are no more traitors than other any other tribe. They aligned with the north for their own survival, gaining food and guns, not because they had any particular love for the northerners. Many of the Nuer fighters under Machar also aligned with the northern government during this period and these are the very people who are now referring to the Murle as traitors to the southern cause.

A paper was written in 2009 stating that the first order of business after gaining independence should be the destruction of the Murle and the seizure of their land. This paper was openly circulated and signed by a variety of prominent Nilotic leaders. I saw this paper with my own eyes, but sadly was not permitted to keep a copy. In March of 2009 the Murle village of Lokwangole was attacked by a large contingent of Nuer warriors. They were well-armed and wearing new camouflage uniforms. They destroyed much of the town and killed approximately 200 Murle – mostly women and children. I visited Pibor in May of 2009 where I met some of the IDPs and was shown video footage of the dead.

This vicious attack by the Nuer was unprovoked by the Murle. But the Murle are a warrior people and they quickly gathered their forces and counter-attacked, killing many Nuer people in their villages. Since that date there have been many such attacks and counter-attacks by both sides. The latest attack by the Nuer in January of 2012 was massive with over 5,000 fighters. Pibor town itself was attacked and the MSF hospital partly destroyed. The number of Murle casualties was high, estimates vary from several hundred to as high as 3,000 dead, including many women and children. Mary Boyoi, a well-known Murle composer and singer, states that she has lost over 15 members of her extended family. Joseph Romulen, a Murle studying in Nairobi, claims he has lost over 20 family members. The attack has had a devastating effect on many Murle people. Over 90,000 Murle fled to Pibor where various NGOs provided security, shelter and food. At last word many of these IDPs were leaving Pibor and going back to their homesteads. The NGOs are trying to figure out how to protect these people and feed them when they are spread out over such a large area.

These attacks need to stop. The new nation of South Sudan needs to forget the past and treat all of its citizens equally. The Murle people do not deserve what is happening to them. It is true that they have been involved in cattle raiding in the past, but this is true of all the Nilotic cattle people in the Sudan. The Murle are not a wild and primitive people that deserve to be annihilated. Many of them are literate and well educated. Some have college degrees. They have a Bible translated into the Murle language. There are over 66 functioning churches with thousands of Christians and many of these churches have dedicated trained pastors. There are also thousands of Nuer Christians. Why are Nuer Christians allowing themselves to be spurred on to attack and kill Murle Christians from the same Presbyterian denomination?

UNMISS peacekeepers are now stationed at Pibor town. The SPLA also has a large number of troops based there. But they see their role as disarming the Murle, not that of separating the two fighting factions. At present, disarmament would be a catastrophe for

the Murle who could then no longer defend themselves against armed attackers. The UNMISS and SPLA forces are based in Pibor town, but this will not solve the problem. These forces need to be in the field so that they can truly separate the two sides. They need to enforce the peace, not merely observe what is happening. Any attacker, Nuer, Dinka or Murle, should be severely punished. After a cooling off period, peace negotiations need to take place. These should include a wide variety of actors, such as the Sudan Council of Churches, government officials, NGO leaders, tribal elders and youth. Within the peace negotiations there must be some long-term thinking to stop the cycle of killing.

It is critical that clarity is established about the causes behind the current fighting. Accusations over cattle raiding and child abductions are a poor excuse for the present attacks on the Murle. Why are the Nuer youth presently focusing on killing women and children? This is not a customary practice for any Sudanese culture. Who is actually behind this catastrophe? Where have the Nuer youth gotten their modern guns and uniforms? The Murle did not start this particular war, but rather are victims fighting desperately to survive.

There are a number of NGOs in the Pibor area offering assistance in the way of food and medical help. But they are being cautious in what they report. They are dealing with the symptoms of the war, but are unable to address the underlying issues. The South Sudan government needs to identify and then effectively address these issues before the killings escalate even farther.

The current information in this report has been collated from a number of sources, including Murle informants, NGO administrators, and diplomats.

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