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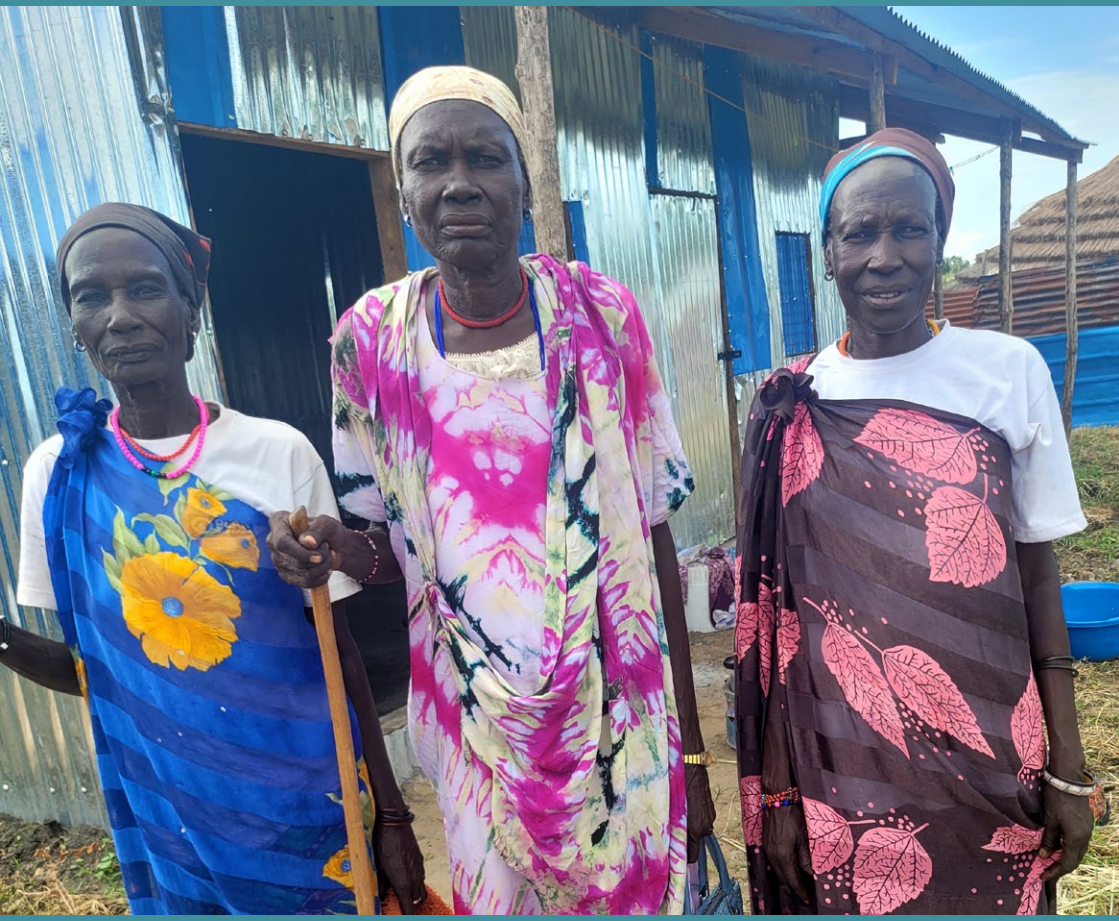
WHEN WOMEN SING

How Murle women use arts and cultural mediums to communicate

Kongkong Marshal Babanen May 2025



SOUTH SUDAN WOMEN'S RESEARCH NETWORK

RESEARCH GRANTS – ROUND TWO

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WHEN WOMEN SING: HOW MURLE WOMEN USE ARTS AND CULTURAL MEDIUMS TO COMMUNICATE

THE AUTHOR

Kongkong Marshal Babanen is a young feminist and early career researcher. Her research centres around some of the ways women use culture as a platform to express themselves in Murle society in South Sudan. Kongkong served as deputy chairperson of the Upper Nile Region Youth Union (2023–2024) and deputy secretary for information of the South Sudan National Youth Union. She has a bachelor's in economics from Ethiopia's Wollega University. She works as an internal auditor at the Nile Petroleum Corporation in Internal Auditing Department. Kongkong grew up as a refugee in Kakuma camp in Kenya, relocating later to Uganda, experiences that gave her opportunities to see different countries and cultures and contributed to her interest in exploring culture and how women use it to express themselves. She now lives in Juba, South Sudan. She plans further research exploring different cultures and how women use them to amplify their voices. She is part of the second cohort of the South Sudan Women Research Network.

SOUTH SUDAN WOMEN'S RESEARCH NETWORK

This report is a product of the EU-funded South Sudan Women's Research Network (SSWRN), which provides research grants, training and mentorship to early career female researchers. The project aims to ensure that women's perspectives are included in research and decision-making on development issues in South Sudan.

THE RIFT VALLEY INSTITUTE

EDITING Catherine Rosemary Bond

COVER PHOTO L–R: Ng'achun Kavula, Boyoi Kavula and Nyandit Kuju of the Dorongwa age-set, Pibor Town, 12 August 2024. © Kongkong Marshal Babanen

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SUMMARY

This research explores how Murle women in the Greater Pibor area of central eastern South Sudan use not just songs but dance, hairstyles, body marks and beads to express themselves. Its objective is to draw attention to the ways Murle women make their priorities known. These ways are used by Murle women in rural areas as much as in urban areas, so the research engaged women in rural areas of Pibor as well as in Pibor town and Juba, South Sudan's capital.

It is my hope that this study can help government and humanitarian agencies see that Murle women often express themselves differently, and that the ways women voice their needs must be understood as knowledge and as valid. This research shows how arts and culture can be used by humanitarian and government agencies as resources in policy and programming. It enables us to learn about the various ways Murle women use creativity for change.

Discussions about gender equality need to account for the ways women are already negotiating their positions in society through a cultural repertoire that is meaningful to them. While I was carrying out interviews in Greater Pibor, women said this project made them feel seen. They felt empowered, as it focused specifically on women and on what—and how—they want to communicate. They were free to speak their minds, using words that deciphered their cultural practices.

The report offers a brief overview of the Murle community. It then moves into key findings of the research, looking at song, dance, body marks and hairstyles, and their meanings for them, in their own words. We find out through interviews why women choose body scarification to communicate, and provide some images and descriptions of it. Women offer information on how body scarification has changed over time and whether this has affected the way it is used for communication. Lastly, we look at how women use hairstyles to communicate, and how these four cultural mediums—song, dance, body marks and hairstyles—have been used together.

Women employ cultural mediums to communicate different things and while the meaning is well understood by those in the community, others could also use this information to acknowledge the subtle ways in which women articulate their agency.

INTRODUCTION

How do Murle women communicate?

At first glance, it may seem that Murle women—and more broadly South Sudanese women—lack opportunities to express themselves publicly. It is easy to assume that women in Greater Pibor, an area where Murle women live, have no voice and no agency. Apart from having token women representatives, they are hardly given a chance to speak in public. This, however, misses the creative ways and cultural mediums that women use to make their ideas known.

As a female researcher, I am interested in understanding and highlighting the ways in which Murle women are not powerless. As a Murle woman who grew up outside of my own land, but around the culture, there are many things I saw and heard about as a child that I wanted to hear and see in person as an adult. For example, what Murle women sang about the Sudan government through the years of the Anyanya 1 and 2 rebellions (1955–1972) and during the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army's (SPLM/A) struggle against it (1983–2005).

The Anyanya rebellions took place because Southern Sudanese felt oppressed in the workplace and in government positions. The first civil war ended with the 1972 agreement, signed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The second civil war, which started just over ten years later for the same reasons of the oppression of Southern Sudanese, ended in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed in Naivasha, Kenya, between the SPLM/A and the Sudan government.

Some of the research questions driving this study are: Why—and how—do Murle women use cultural mediums to communicate? Who is their audience? How do different audiences understand the different ways women communicate? Have their modes of communication changed with time? I also asked myself: Do women married into different age-sets use mediums differently for communication? Is body scarification only connected to age-sets?

METHODOLOGY

In addition to a desk review, my findings emerged from two weeks of fieldwork carried out in Greater Pibor in February 2024. This included visits to Gumuruk and Pibor counties in eastern South Sudan. Specifically, these findings are drawn from 11 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 7 focus group discussions (FGDs) in Pibor, 2 FGDs in Lukurnyang and 1 FGD in Gumuruk.

My project employed a combination of qualitative approaches, including audio-visual research and photography of aesthetic practices like body marks, beadwork and hairstyles. I used storytelling extensively as a method for oral history interviews. During discussions, I took pictures of hairstyles and body scarification and recorded songs. Visually documenting these

aesthetic cultural practices and processes helped me illustrate the oral history I gathered. By using these creative, arts-based research methodologies, I was best able to answer the questions: Do different age-sets use these cultural arts and mediums differently? How has time changed these arts and cultural mediums?

The women I interviewed gave me in-depth explanations on how they use songs to communicate (and what they communicate through these songs), who their audience is and why they choose songs as a platform to express their ideas. They spoke about what they communicate through dance, who they dance with and where they dance.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN MURLE SOCIETY

The Murle community are a Surmic-speaking ethnic group that migrated to South Sudan from the Omo Valley in southwestern Ethiopia several centuries ago. They live in South Sudan's Greater Pibor Administrative Area, particularly in five counties: Pibor, Boma, Lekuangole, Vertet and Gumuruk. They are agro-pastoralists who heavily depend on cattle-keeping.

Murle identify as two groups—those living an agropastoralist life who occupy the Lotilla plains along the Pibor, Veveno, Lotilla and Kengen Rivers, and those who live in the highlands of the Boma Plateau. The Boma highlands are fertile and good for agriculture, which the highland Murle mostly do. Cows are a sign of wealth and are used for commodity exchange, blood compensation, settling debts and for bride price during wedding ceremonies. Cattle are a source of life because they cement relationships and social networks.

Murle society is made up of four primary social institutions—Red Chiefs, drumships, clans and age-sets—of which age-sets are the most prominent. Red chiefs are called *alaath ci meri* or *alaath ci kunde*co. *Kundec* is a crimson bird, and chiefs used wear their feathers on their heads but now mostly just wear red hats. These chiefs are chosen by God and possess divine powers to bless and curse. *Alaath ci meri* (Red Chiefs) are dispersed among four large clans: Thangajon, Ngaroti, Ngenvac and Keleknya. Drumships are only in two of these *alaath* clans; Thangajon and Ngenvac.

The Red Chiefs have the authority to be judges of society. Although no woman can be *alaath ci meri*, a woman possesses spiritual power as part of the *alaath* clan. When she gets married, if even to a commoner, her boy child has the same power as the Red Chiefs to curse and bless, only he is not *alaath ci meri* (he cannot wear a red hat). Nonetheless, this shows that Murle women have more spiritual powers than people talk about.

Within Murle society, the institution of the age-set is a major social system, and events and activities are attached to age-sets. Age-sets, also known as generations, are a social structure that consists of men of a similar age, which spans roughly a 10-year period. After an age-set has been established—which usually means when young boys of 15-years feel old enough to belong to one—another age-set can emerge. Women in Murle society belong to an age-set in two ways: First, before marriage, a girl will belong to her father's age-set; second, after marriage, she will belong to her husband's age-set.

Decision-making to the Murle is a gender role that for men explains why women don't have a *rii*, a meeting place for decision-making. Women are left to attend to chores and to take care of the

children. Some of these household chores are beyond the physical strength of a woman, such as collecting firewood and fetching water from afar.

As in other South Sudanese agropastoral communities, men pay a bride price to their wives' family. This gives them a sense of ownership and control. Bride price is seen as a token of appreciation to the bride's family for raising a good daughter. Paying bride price gives the man rights over the children his wife will give birth to: 'Death doesn't dissolve marriage that is based on fully paid bride price'.[1]

From the 1980s, up until South Sudan's independence from Sudan in 2011, bride price was set at around 40 head of cattle. Girls and daughters were considered an investment by their fathers, and this attitude continues to this day. These days, bride price in Murle society ranges from 42 to 50 cattle, as per a customary law agreed upon in 2024.

Sometimes bride price for educated girls is higher than for uneducated. The argument for this is that this is to encourage people to take the girl-child to school. Parents resist taking their daughters to school because the practice of early marriage continues in South Sudan, and because they think girl-child education is a waste of time. However, with time more girls are getting educated and parents are encouraging schooling, largely because of role models and because of prominent Murle fathers setting an example with their own girls.

Work, too, is divided by gender roles: Women are very active, responsible for work ranging from collecting firewood, preparing and cooking meals, fetching water, child rearing and building all the structures of a homestead. When a woman is building a house, she sings to make her work easier—and to remind herself that it will end. When she is building a grass-thatched hut, she decorates the outer walls of her house with drawings of flowers (or anything else she likes). Women provide the bulk of horticultural labour as well.

Women are otherwise often just seen as wives and mothers, people who cannot take part in decision-making and who belong in the private space of the home. However, they still have agency: A father's sister (an aunt) can curse others if her sons do not receive a good number of cattle when her brother's daughter (her niece) gets married. When a girl has cows as her bride price, these are normally distributed by her father among her paternal uncles, brothers and paternal aunties. Sometimes only one cow, a pregnant one, is given to the bride's mother.

A widow of reproductive age can choose one of her late husband's brothers to father children in her husband's name, or she can choose a lover by herself (but that remains a secret between her and her deceased husband's family). The children she gives birth to in any of these ways remain

1 Jan Pospisil, Melissa Johnston, Adut Alaak Garang and Nyachangkuoth Rambang Tai, 'Bring Enough Cows to Marry: Brideprice, Conflict, and Gender Relations in South Sudan', PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, University of Edinburgh. DOI: 10.7488/era/5105. Accessed 8 May 2025, https://peacerep.org/publication/bring-enough-cows-to-marry/.

the legitimate children of her deceased husband. Part of Murle women's importance in society is to ensure a family has a home and continue its lineage.

Apart from a token woman representative, who may be given the opportunity to speak at gatherings, Murle women do not participate in public meetings, but this does not mean they do not make themselves heard at them and in public spaces. This report expands on four means through which women make their issues known to people, both in the home and outside to the entire community: Poetry and song, dance, beads and *longoditho*, and hair.

THE ROLES OF POETRY AND SONG

During my data collection, I noticed that most Murle women with body marks, known as *longoditho*, said they were a sign you had loved someone you dated before you got married. While some had married the man they dated, sadly others were married off to other men—some of them old enough to be their fathers or even grandfathers. These women's hearts had a lot of words in them, as though they were tattooed on them.

I wrote this poem below from the point of view of a young woman, married-off to an old man. Not long into their marriage, he passes away from old age. The woman is inherited by the one of her late husband's brothers. It is a cultural practice among the Murle people to inherit the wife of a deceased brother. This poem takes us through the mixed emotions of a young girl who becomes a mother at a young age. Does she even know what being a woman is?

My poem also refers to women who used their voices to force their warring sons to listen to their appeals for peace. The story of these *Kabarze* women motivated me to know more about how women's voices can be powerful in political environments at community level:

> I stare into the grey clouds thinking of who I am—a woman, with no choices and no decisions. But no, I see a woman with a smart mouth who knows how to compose messages from her heart into songs. A woman who can choose her lover and tattoo his age-set symbols on her skin so they remain a part of her that no one can take away.
>
> A woman who may not be included in decision-making but a mother of decision-makers. I can influence my husband's decisions! A woman whose voice can silence wars.
>
> In times of chaos, my heart aches for children and women and a need to let these kids know that they came out of a woman. I used my voice to sing and calm down the age-set fights. Was it because I am brave or was it because I am a mother?
>
> It's because I am a mother, with a voice to command her offspring. To me, I was saving a generation. To society, I showed the love of a mother. No one noticed, but the songs told them of my bravery.
>
> Is my identity restricted to only being a woman and a mother? Of course not! I may turn heads on the dance floor when I dance, showing off my hair and *longoditho* [body marks]. But I am more than that!

> I continue the lineage of a dead man. I raise his beloved sons to be leaders in their society because I am a leader, too. The things I manage never die but multiply because I am also a teacher.
>
> Even if I was married young to a rather old man, I still took care of him and his household. My tongue can curse but I chose to use it to bless because I had a vision. I moved with grace. Above all I was a mother (although I have a lot to say!).
>
> I tattooed my heart with a lot of words that I express through songs. This is a piece of my heart.

As one older woman told me in Gumuruk, west of Pibor town: 'Us women don't have *rii* [shade] and, so to express what we have in mind, we sing. We sing about things poetically because we are afraid. We never sing directly about our husbands or the government in condemnation.'[2]

Rii refers to a shaded place, usually under a tree, where men meet, and where all important decisions for the community are made. It is exclusive to men and women are not invited. But Murle women find ways to express themselves, privately and publicly.

Songs have been used in Africa to instil pride and courage in younger generations, to praise, condemn, encourage, teach and preserve history.[3] Songs are used by communities across South Sudan to narrate histories, relationships and individual hopes. As in Murle society, Dinka women sing songs about their cows, their husband or dancing partner.[4]

Women sing for people who did great things in the community. Agau Bul Deng's research describes how Dinka and Nuer women have used songs to encourage unity between their communities in Jonglei state and to celebrate peace and honour those who are peaceful. She shows how these songs were accompanied by dances, which took place in the evening, simply because, in African societies, songs are often followed by dances.[5]

Most of these songs expressed joy and harmony, but at times the dances became highly political in the Dinka communities of Bahr-el-Ghazal and, because of the increased insecurity they

2 Key Informant Interview (KII), Ngalano Allan, Mudec, Juba, 20 January 2024.

3 Asante Darkwa, 'Culture and Communication: Music, Song and Dance As Medium of Communication in Africa', *África*, 10 (dezembro), 1987: 131–39. DOI: 10.11606/issn.2526-303X.v0i10p131-139.

4 Francis Mading Deng, 'Music of the Sudan: The role of song and dance in Dinka society; Vol. 3: Burial Hymns and War Songs', Washington DC: Smithsonian, 1976. Accessed 8 May 2025, https://folkways.si.edu/music-of-the-sudan-the-role-of-song-and-dance-in-dinka-society-album-three-burial-hymns-and-war-songs/islamica-world/album/smithsonian.

5 Agau Bul Deng, 'Hidden Figures: Women navigating a culture of exclusion in peace and conflict resolution processes', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2024.

brought, the Sudan government tried to stop them but failed. Dance is a powerful tool to attract the notice of government officials and other decision-makers.

Songs are also used to contest power. Diana Felix da Costa reports how, 'Songs are not only important repositories of South Sudanese history and knowledge' but are 'also culturally situated mediums, used to challenge oppressive power structures or call for accountability.'[6]

She shares a song by the late Murle paramount chief, Ngantho Kavula, in which the chief sings about the origin of the Murle and the conflicts surrounding their home. Kavula sang it during the conflict between the newly independent SPLM government and the rebellious and largely Murle army Cobra Faction (2012–2014), led by David Yau. Da Costa notes that Ngantho used the song 'as evidence of shared Murle identity and to contest the identity politics of a violent state'. [7]

It is a common practice among the Murle to sing and there are songs about every part of life. Songs are used not just to express joy and love, but also anger and hatred by men and women alike. They communicate people's identity and their position in society. There are songs for each clan; these are very sacred and sung strictly during weddings and wars.

At weddings, the groom's clan song is sung, and it is the groom's family that is the happiest. The mother of the bride does not sing for her daughter because that would make it seem as if she wants her daughter not to leave, to remain at home.

Songs are perhaps even more important for women than for men, as women otherwise lack a public platform on which to speak. Songs are gendered: While men have songs for their favourite bulls and their guns, women have songs for their children or milking cows. Most Murle women sing for their children. This habit strengthens the relationship and bond between a mother and a child. When the child hears the mother singing, they recognize her voice, and the familiar song stops them from crying.

Kidich Logoco is another of the women I interviewed. She composed this song for her baby. She is singing about her midwife, the woman who helped deliver her child. This woman was one of her father-in-law's wives who, as a young wife, had struggled against his older wives to find her place in her husband's home. The song says:

6 Diana Felix da Costa, 'The Politics of Being Murle in South Sudan: State Violence, Displacement and the Narrativisation of Identity', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 17/3 (2023), 405. DOI: 10.1080/17531055.2023.2259547.

7 Da Costa, 'The Politics of Being Murle', 405.

My mother tells me to keep quiet,
It's indeed other people's home, at other people's home where we find mistreatment, and where we become the woman of the house.
Don't let being an orphan deceive you.
Occasionally go to the village and visit your mother's sons.
You will give birth at your home, you are the woman of the house.
My mother usually tells me to keep quiet, it's indeed other people's home.[8]

Ize nga ci korgu
Anek kang gon yaai ne jao korok culu didi'
Anek kan yaai ne jao
Korok culu didi, korok culu nginthi gon agideth ol kizikthi baai ngai ci korgu
Ma anyi gon kakathin boyokzeth kuthure
Meda gon bitho olo kuthure logos o yaathun kagon ka thir kenga kthure

Whenever she sings this song, her baby is soothed, keeps quiet and understands the song is meant for her. Indirectly, she sings these songs to comfort herself as well. For her, these songs make her feel like she is advising her child about the future.

When Murle women sing for their cows, they express their love for them and encourage their milk production. Often, their children's lives depend on these cows for nourishment. A 'stubborn' cow will release milk when they sing. Songs for the cows usually refer to the colour; even without seeing it you can tell the colour of the cow from the song. The following song is by Kuthuri Apath. She sung to a grey cow—spotted, with white and black—which is referred to as *buzen*. A woman will sing for a *buzen* while she is milking it. This song can also be sung for *buzen* cows during a bride price payment:

The vulture keeps on doing it, the vulture keeps flying rotating around.
The vulture keeps flying around in the sky, looking to the ground.
The cow that my father's children fought for came to visit.
The man's cheetah brings me a lot of water, the black cheetah that my father's children fought for.
The vulture keeps on doing it, a grey one with white and black spots that is dark that loves meat, left at dawn.
So, I have been fighting a witch in the middle of the night, it's there tying its head in the open place [a patch of open ground where people go to die].
Like someone that has lost a person.[9]

8 KII, Kidich Logoco, Pibor, 9 February 2024.

9 Focus Group Discussion (FGD), Kuthutri Apath, Lukurnyang, 14 February 2024.

Amena zerwana, yo amari zerwana
Yo amari thedec gon thama eh ugun thodo
Kodi ma erona thang bal orona Kuma dol o baba
Car o eto nya yan mam kizi mele
Car koli da thang o baba orona Kum dol o baba
Yo amena zerwani ci buzen ci gidang arez iding
Eh alok bal o
Yo barthe kukona ki thamarac kumen balin kenga
Yo non nen ce acap o Vanya kadak alyani
Kiyo lilthimanthi liginyodethu

The vulture, the cheetah and the black cheetah are all animals that are spotted; they are mentioned so as to represent the *buzen* cow. When Kuthuri asks the cow to bring her a lot of water, she is asking the cow to release for her a lot of milk.

Some songs are to encourage girls' education. They sing about women in power, who did not finish school yet defied all odds and became women of influence. Rebecca James Korok sang this song:

She penned the paper, our Nuren,
Our girls pen the paper.
Hold the pen properly, our girls.
Indeed, my Nuren—the Murle girls, so that our children live, so that the widows live,
We want a state in Pibor.[10]

Akatun werege Nuren unai
Akatit galam dol o ngaye
Nuren onan didi
Agamith galam jurung dol ungaye
Nuren can didi
Dol o Murle didi, ka kurugith dolya ka kurugith ngai o boye
Karonya wulaya Pibora
Agam werege Nuren can did.

This is a song about a woman called Nuren who started schooling but had to drop out because it was time for marriage. Her discipline and commitment were admired by other women, who sung her songs of praise to encourage girls to go to school and tell other women this story of what patience and determination can do. It is a song of encouragement for women to take their children to school. Most of these women did not have the privilege of going to school

10 KII, Rebecca Korok, Mudec, Pibor town, 19 February 2024.

simply because of being born female. Yet some still understood the importance of education and ensured their children went to school.

Many South Sudanese women have to live in refugee camps in neighbouring countries in order for their children to get an education. It is a difficult life for them, but with patience and time, they feel they are eventually rewarded.

POLITICAL SONGS

Modern Murle songs have been used as a platform to communicate peace. A song sung by a young man from the Kurenen age-set (of 18–32 years in early 2024) was being listened to by people from all age-sets in the Murle community. Murle modern artists have used their platforms to sing about the dangers of age-set fighting and the development that peace between age-sets will bring. An educated woman in Pibor town said, 'I sang a song with a *kurec* [the youngest age-set in 2024] about peace. This song is listened to by everyone of all the different age-sets both in the towns and in the villages.'[11]

Murle women have been political in their songs. They have sung of topics beyond children and cows. They have sung about thrones and dominions. Though their role is often forgotten, women involved themselves in the liberation struggle, right up to January 2005 when the CPA was signed. Their songs are a valuable source of evidence of how the Murle contributed as a community to the SPLA. 'When the boys decided to join the rebellion, I followed,' said Boyoi Kavula, a wife of the Dorongwa age-set, now in their seventies and eighties.[12] She shared her song on when she made the decision to follow 'the boys' to the bush:

> Marshal Babanen sent a message, and I heard, [of] fighting for our Boma.
> If it's [the] Boma I held with my own hands yes! Yes!
> Babur Maze sent a message, and I heard, [of] fighting for our Boma.
> Kennedy Gain sent a message, and I heard, [of] fighting for our Boma.
> If it's Boma I held it with my hands, yes.
> Zal Battalion, Agarab Battalion is where the Arab Sudanese will come out.
> But our leader John Garang is strong! Greetings!
> Let's take care of ourselves so that there is no death or disease.
> This is where the chaos comes out as I greet combat vehicles.
> Where the Arab Sudanese come out, I have conquered our land.[13]
>
> *Yo Marshal Babanen tona molok kiziwa eh, ruwaya Bom onang*
> *Baliyo ma en Bom kagama ng'azene ayua*

11 KII, Yaile B, Pibor town, 2 August 2024.

12 FGD, Boyoi Kavula, Dorongwa age-set, Pibor town, 19 February 2024.

13 FGD, Boyoi Kavula, Dorongwa age-set, Pibor town, 19 February 2024.

Yo Babur Maze tona molok kiziwa eh, ruwaya Bom onang
Yo Kennedy Gain tona molok kiziwa eh, ruwaya Bom onang
Baliyo ma en Boma kagama ng'azene ayua
Katiba zal zal, katiba agarab, allan unong ca adoi
Nginthi adungna mundukura, John Garang adoi
Kazayo e kazayo e
Kagamith alethi kakom ale moris
Nginthi adungni zal zal e
Gici agem zal giji adoi ayua
Kaza nganther there kaza ayua
Nginthi adungna mundukura kagam loc onai

The men Kavula refers to as 'boys' are from the Muden age-set; in early 2025, they would be in their sixties and seventies. The song is historical and refers to an important period of time and the names of people and places. The second Sudanese civil war lasted for a full 21 years. Oftentimes, women are removed from the picture of this war, yet they played a very big role in it.

Songs like this are evidence of their contribution to the struggle. The only thing people think women did was cook and clean for the SPLA liberators, but these women were morale boosters who knew why there was a need for South Sudan's independence and who faced the same things men did under the regime they were trying to overthrow. This song gave men the courage to fight for their land. Women sung for Murle men who were in the struggle and for those beyond Murle land.

Another historical song by the same singer, Boyoi Kavula, also honours 'the boys' from the Muden age-set, who were in their twenties and thirties when they joined the struggle. As is often the case in age-set songs and Murle songs, the song refers to animals that symbolize and identify Muden. These include the fish and fox:

All the fish is for Ngacigak, all the fish is for Babur,
With even the foxes with trumpets.
The boys with trumpets saying they will fight for our land—
All the liberators in Bilpam, greetings!
Let them destroy our land, but
Cucane has strength.
Thawaza [cows special to Muden boys] has strength.
At the foreign land,
Gain Liliko has strength,
Holding the flag boys will conquer or land.[14]

14 FGD, Boyoi Kavula, Dorongwa age-set, Pibor town, 19 February 2024.

Kuluk dok o ci Ngacigai, kuluk dok o ci Babur
Maje kirerwa ngathi tarateth
Azi tharatith ora thedec loc
Koliyam dok Bilfoma kazayo
Anycek kuzurith loc labak e loya maye
Cucane anyak nyakiryam Thawaza anyak nyakiryang
Buri modo
Gain Liliko anyak nyakkiryang
Birinethe ora thedec logos loc

One of the most prominent Murle officers in the SPLA was the late Ngacigak Ngacilluk. He was a fighter and among the first Murle to join the SPLA during the time of the struggle. He was among the top leaders in ranking in the SPLA/SPLM. The trumpets that Boyoi Kavula is referencing are the sounds of joy and celebration. She mentions *koliyam*, which is a Murle word meaning 'rebellion' or 'revolution'. Murle women were happy with Ngacigak's bravery to fight the oppression of the Khartoum government of the time. They sung to boost his bravery and courage.

These were songs of praise and let those in the song know that Murle society was proud of them. The song mentions other prominent Murle fighters, including the late Babur Maze from the Muden age-set, and Gain Liliko (husband to Boyoi Kavula) from the Dorongwa age-set. It shows how important special cows are to Murle men. *Thawaza*, *Cucane* and *Loyama* are all special cows for the Muden; only the last is special for Dorongwa. To address Murle men using the names of special cows shows the highest level of respect:

Agidan miriothi ci alekan,
Agidan miroithi ci alekan, agidan moroithi na? Salva Kiir logos, eyan thodo cogo o
Agidan miriothi ci aleketh
Bal da, bal da ma kajua loc eh
Uwen da ma gajua loc eh
Kei kuca thilalo, key wan thilalo bal kamane Bom kenga[15]

This is another song by Boyoi Kavula. The song was also sung during the time of *Junubin*, a term used in Arabic by northern Sudanese for southern Sudanese, who were black and felt the oppression of the then government. The song says:

I'm mistreated by an enemy I don't understand.
I'm mistreated by an outsider I don't get, why is the stranger mistreating me [and] *Alimaam* [and] Salva Kiir, my guy?
The enemy feels like I don't deserve our land.
A stranger I don't understand is mistreating me.

15 FGD, Boyoi Kavula, Dorongwa age-set, Pibor town, 19 February 2024.

If I get back our land,
I will wipe the tears I cried at the centre of Boma.

The enemy Boyoi Kavula refers to were Sudanese Arabs. Murle use the word *miroi* to mean an enemy, stranger or an outsider, and most times it is not intended to be harmful. *Alimaam* is a special cow that is black and white, and which is associated with the Muden. Most Murle who joined the SPLM/A were Muden, so she mentions the special cow to encourage them. She was encouraging the leaders of the then rebellion to keep fighting because outsiders were taking what was theirs.

Among the names she mentions is Salva Kiir, President of South Sudan (2011–), who was among the top leaders of the SPLM/A. Boma is a very historic place for the SPLM. During the struggle, people in Boma suffered. Women captured that painful story in another song:

Ol wen Agarab intingkaz je, logos wen Guerrilla itingkas je oto ri moda
Salva Kiir to balala inona 'loc can don'
William Nyuon to tua nger inona 'loc can don'
Ol wen Agarab ocoit loc otuit kot rena
Kerubino to tua nger inona 'loc onan don'
Babur Maze to tua nger inona 'loc can don'
Ol wen Agarab ingkazo oto ri moda
Logos wen Guerrilla itingkas je oto ri moda[16]

This is another beautiful song that shows how involved women were in the struggle. They include words like 'guerrilla' for the SPLA because guerilla tactics were among the strategies used during the war against the Sudan army. These women were deeply concerned for their land and freedom. They sang about men beyond their village—Salva Kiir, William Nyuon and Kerubino all came from beyond Pibor. Babur Maze was from Pibor, and they sang about how he and the men that went to war were passionate about their land. Agarab Batallion was one of the units of the SPLA:

The Agarab Batallion have started their journey to the enemies.
Salva Kiir has rebelled, thinking 'my own land'.
William Nyuon has rebelled, thinking 'my own land'.
Agarab Batallion spy on them and chase them far from us.
Kerubino has rebelled, thinking 'my own land'.
Babur Maze has rebelled, thinking 'my own land'.
The Agarab batallion has started their journey to the enemies.
The guerrilla boys have started the journey to the enemies.

16 FGD, Boyoi Kavula, Dorongwa age-set, Pibor town, 19 February 2024.

THE ROLE OF DANCE

Dance is performed across all age-sets—women, men, boys and girls. Dances are performed as a sign of joy and peace, for celebrations and for war. Dances are held at a time of abundance during the rainy season.

Nyelilya is a dance performed by virgin girls when they are ready to date or are just recently married. In Murle they are known as Kabarze. This dance is performed during peaceful times by the Kabarze so that boys notice them. It is a dance performed in the evening when the temperature is cooler.

A group of young girls is dressed in skirts made from cow skin, known as *carama*; the skirts are embroidered with beads, *nyezia;* and the girls wear bracelets made of cow skin, with ropes connecting them to tiny balls of goat hair that are tied on the arms and known as *nyaladeth*. The girls come to the *baal* and form a circle. *Baal* is the dance floor, usually under a big tree. The lead singer goes into the middle of the circle and starts to sing. The other girls start clapping and sing along. Girls from one side of the circle choose the same number of girls from the opposite to dance in the middle. Young boys then join the dance the same way.

Figure 1. *Nyaladeth* in a house in Lukurnyang.
Photo: Kongkong Marshal Babanen

Nyelilya is a dance that's performed by *Kabarze*. *Kabarze* refers to young adolescent girls (ages 14–16) who have started dating and are ready for marriage. *Nyelilya* is usually performed during peaceful times and when there is no famine.

In 2017, a group of older women started to dance the young girls' *nyelilya*. This was when a series of fights between the two youngest Murle age-sets, Lango and Kurenen, had become increasingly violent.[17] Government authorities, NGOs and chiefs had tried to stop them but all of them had failed until the mothers of these age-sets stepped in. As one

17 Diana Felix da Costa, 'The Kabarze: A novel platform for women's involvement in age-set tensions', Murle Heritage, 2022. Accessed 8 May 2025, https://www.murleheritage.com/videos/the-kabarze-womens-involvement-in-age-set-tensions.

of the women reasoned, 'Everyone walking here on earth came out of a woman, and for that [reason] they must listen to a woman'.[18]

The group of women went in large numbers and danced, moving towards the two age-sets in Pibor town. They stripped naked and snatched the weapons of boys who did not put their weapons down. In Murle culture, the nakedness of an elder is a curse. The boys ran away because they knew curses would befall them. The women had also calmed them down through their dancing and singing.

What the older women did was beyond the normal because, first of all, *nyeliya* is performed by the young, and secondly it is performed in peacetime. But older women took it upon themselves to dance *nyelilya* because young girls would be scared to do that in a hostile environment. Older women are now invited by the young *Kabarze* to be an independent body in helping influence decision-making.

Kabarze have become a voice for women to influence Murle society. They have a centre in Pibor town. A number of villages have *Kabarze* and do the same. It is young girls and a group of older women that have helped solve age-set conflicts.[19] *Kabarze* women had mobilized in large numbers, dressed in *nyezia* and *nyaladeth*, and danced the *nyelilya*, a dance of peace and a sign of living in harmony. At the time, there was chaos in Pibor. They danced to communicate that, although there was chaos, they still believed in living at peace. This shook the youth and brought the boys in the warring age-sets to their mother's knees.

18 KII, Mama M, Pibor town, 8 February 2024.

19 Da Costa, 'Politics of Being Murle'.

THE ROLES OF BEADS AND *LONGODITHO*

The visible expressions of age-sets are beads and body marks. The *buul* (age-set) is a fundamental lifelong identifier and unifier, and provides individuals with a sense of identity, belonging and certainty.[20] Each age-set selects certain token animals or birds, based on the qualities they represent, relating their colours to the beads they choose.

Across the countryside of Murle land, people proudly expose their age-set identity through the colours of the beads worn and by the permanent body marks of the age-set symbols on their bodies. The colours of a person's beads indicate their age-set: Dorongwa are orange and blue, Muden are black and red, Thithi are green and blue, Bothoth are white and black, Lango yellow and black, and Kurenen white, black and red.

Just like the Murle, the Samburu tribe in Kenya have an organized system of age-sets and gender groupings. Beads play an important role in someone's social status, marital status, gender and circumcision status, as well as signalling whether someone is happy or not. A sign of someone's happiness or sadness is known by beads they wear for mourning. Married women wear the beads of their husbands, and the unmarried wear beads of their fathers. A married woman can wear her father-in-law's age-set beads, too, because she is now his daughter by marriage, though she must emphasize her husband's age-set's beads first. The beads Samburu women wear on their necks, waists, wrists and ankles help define their beauty and make them feel feminine. 'Beads define the concept of a woman's beauty'.[21]

Figure 2. Lango beads in a house in Lukurnyang.
Photo: Kongkong Marshal Babanen

20 Diana Felix da Costa and John Boloch Kumen, 'What can the Changing Tastes in Body Scarification Tell Us About the Lives and Aspirations of Murle Youth?', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023. Accessed 23 April 2025, https://riftvalley.net/publication/what-can-the-changing-tastes-in-body-scarification-tell-us-about-the-lives-and-aspirations-of-murle-youth/. This section draws on this source for its analysis.

21 Ruth Nyambura, Peter Waweru, Reuben Matheka, and Tom Nyamache, 'The Economic Utility of beads Culture of the Samburu tribe of Kenya', *African Journal of Social Sciences* 3/4 (2013): 79-84.

Although beads are connected to age-sets, women can wear them purely for beautification as well, carefully choosing their colours.

Longoditho is the Murle word for body marks, which are made by cutting the skin, pulling the skin with a hook and making another small cut with a razor blade. More recently, they are done with blades, not hooks. Body marks made with hooks are called *vora* when they are marks on the face. They are also the dotted ones on the face and the stomach.

Cutting *vora* was common at the time Dorongwa (men in their seventies and eighties in 2024), Muden (in their sixties and seventies), Thithi (in their forties and fifties) and the Bothothnya heads (many of whom are also in their forties to fifties). Overlaps of age-sets can be a bit confusing but are usually because of differences between villages, for example the Lango in Pibor are much younger than the ones in Kubal. As a result, the Lango, Kurenen and the younger Bothoth age-sets do not have *vora*. Another reason for overlapping age-sets is when the eldest son of a family is taken to an age-set older than his own, to show respect.

Longoditho is done to girls when they believe they are of age to date. It is voluntary and girls do it with their friends. When they are cutting their skin to make *longoditho*, a girl is forbidden to cry in order to impress boys of her age or the boy she is already dating: 'You can't cry when they cut your *longoditho*. You want the boys to recognize you'.[22] It takes two to three days for the bleeding and the swelling to reduce. The new scars are not washed with water but rather with warm ghee to speed up healing and give the skin a glow. A girl whose *longoditho* do not show up properly is referred as *adai ale* (dead body), meaning her skin doesn't keep scars. Once a girl has healed completely, she attends a dance to show the boys of her age she is ready to date.

If a girl doesn't have *longoditho*, either she is not dating or she is a 'coward', as girls describe her. *Longoditho* is a sign of bravery and confidence: Some girls get *longoditho* because they admired their friends' bravery and beauty. They also admired the attention they got from boys. *Longoditho* is not only for age-sets, however, as some younger girls get it because they simply want to show the public that they are brave and beautiful.

When a girl is dating, a boy comes to her home at night, just to talk with her, and leaves her home before six in the morning, so her family does not find out. When a boy touches her face or her stomach and feels the *longoditho*, his perception of her shifts. He thinks of her as a girl who cares about her appearance, he thinks of her as a very attractive lady, and this communicates to him that she loves him because the *longoditho* is of his age-set and she cut them just for him. This is an imprint of love on her skin that will stay with her forever. It is not just a memory of someone that she once loved but also becomes part of her identity.

Girls look forward to the dance day. They smear their *longoditho* with ghee on their arms and around their stomach so that their body marks shine. Then they smear their well-plaited hair,

22 FGD, Mama X, Pibor town, 8 February 2024.

put on their *nyezia* and *nyaladeth*, and adorn their foreheads, waists and arms with beads. When such a girl steps onto the dance floor, boys compete to get her as a dance partner. Sometimes, after first getting *longdithо*, young women sing about how brave they are, which conveys confidence and the belief that boys will run after them.

It is very common for a Murle woman to have the *longoditho* of an age-set she is not married into. When girls reach dating age, they date boys their age and put the *longoditho* of the newest age-set on their skin to show who they want to marry. Most marriages are arranged by both families. A girl might sometimes marry someone from that young age-set. But other times, her family may marry her to an older age-set. Her desires and stories will be imprinted on her body through the *longoditho*, which is okay, as it is in her past.

Although many Murle women see *longoditho* a sign of beauty, some, especially in towns, disagree and think it is a form of self-harm and not attractive at all; the pain of the process means some women discourage their own daughters from doing it. Other women and girls do not find it that beautiful but appreciate it how it looks on someone else.

Taste in *longoditho* has changed with time, mostly because of technology but also because body marks became highly militarized when age-sets became militarized.[23] This made some women reluctant to do it as they saw its symbols as political. New designs represent sub-groups and sub-identities that have emerged within age-sets. Body marks are a powerful form of 'indirect, nonverbal, and extralinguistic mode of communication',[24] as well as 'a socially situated alternative medium of producing and negotiating knowledge about the world around'.[25]

Figure 3 shows a wife from the Kurenen age-set of men, which was in its early twenties to early thirties in 2024. As

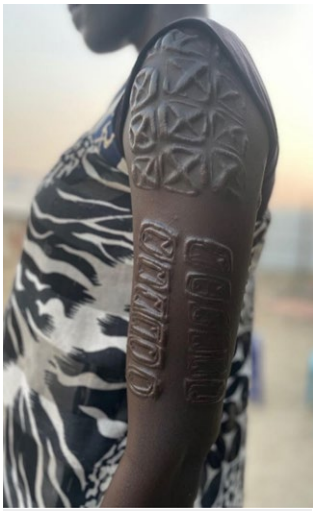

Figure 3. *Longoditho* on a woman's arm.
Photo: Kongkong Marshal Babanen

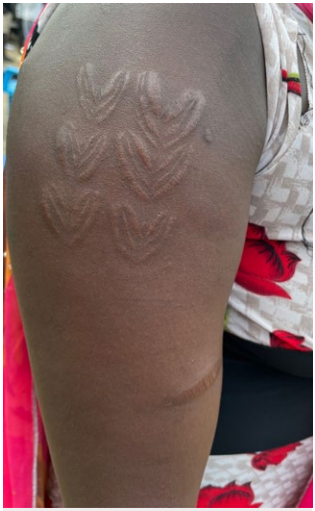

Figure 4. *Longoditho* on a young woman.
Photo: Kongkong Marshal Babanen

23 Da Costa and Kumen, 'Changing Tastes in Body Scarification'.

24 Dwight Conquergood, 'Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research', *TDR* (1988-) 46/2 (2002): 145–56. Accessed 8 May 2025, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146965.

25 Da Costa and Kumen, 'Changing Tastes in Body Scarification'.

a wife of the Kurenen, this woman proudly displays that she is in love with a man from the Kurenen. This woman has the *longoditho* of her husband's age-set sub-group or *nyakeno*. Her husband is from the group of Habesh from the Kurenen. The marks are smartphones, and they represent modernization and civilization. Many Kurenen came of age at a time of high technology and took from what was around them.

Age-sets are divided into sub-groups of older and younger; they can span up to 15 years. Men at the older end withdraw from the age-set they were first in. Among the Kurenen of Lilot, there are Habesh, Koliyam, Pacthoreth and Thubezwa sub-groups. In 2024, the Habesh were in their late twenties or early thirties, the Koliyam in their mid-twenties, Pacthoreth in their early twenties, and Thubezwa between fifteen-years-old and their early twenties.

Figure 4 is a young woman in Juba with the *longoditho* of the Lango age-set, a sign of an army rank. This is from the Koliyam group. Most of younger age-sets cut *longoditho* on their arms, a practice that differs from older. Because age-sets have become increasingly militarized, younger age-sets have a lot of symbols that derive from the military. Older age-sets, from the Thithi to Muden, Dorongwa and Mara, have cuts on their faces, lower abdomens, backs and arms.

Figure 5 is a picture of *vora f*or the Muden age-set. *Vor* is mancala. Mancala is a board game for two players, where the board has two rows of shallow holes in it. Players use stones or seeds to place in the holes. When Muden, Dorongwa and Mara cut *vora*, they depict this game. In this game, a player's main goal is to capture all his opponent's stones. It was a game young Muden loved, showing life and the use of intelligence. They used this symbol and cut it on their faces, arms, backs and abdomen. Figure 6 shows Nyandit Zuagin with her *vora*. She says, in her time, it was a sign of beauty, but because times have changed, younger girls do not cut vora anymore.

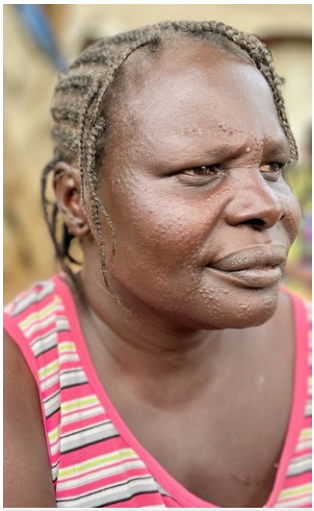

Figure 5. *Longododitho* on the face of an older woman.
Photo: Kongkong Marshal Babanen

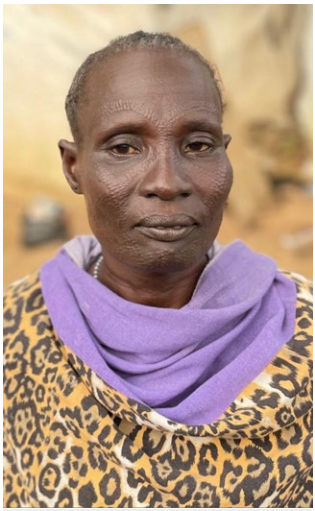

Figure 6. *Longoditho* known as *vora* on a woman's face.
Photo: Kongkong Marshal Babanen

Mama says the *vora* on her face is are a source of pride (Figure 7). They are a little different from those of the Muden age-set. The gaps of skin are spaced in much smaller circles than those of the Muden, but otherwise they mean the same thing.

The Thithi age-set pattern looks different from that of the Muden and Dorongwa age-sets (Figure 8). Though the meaning is slightly different, it is based on the same *vora* gameboard, but with the lines mimicking the pattern of car tyres on a marram road.

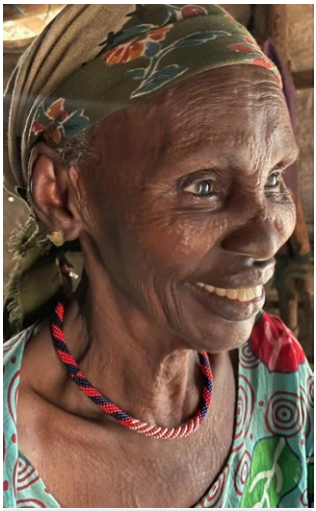

Figure 7. *Longoditho* on a woman's face, Dorongwa age-set. *Photo: Kongkong Marshal Babanen*

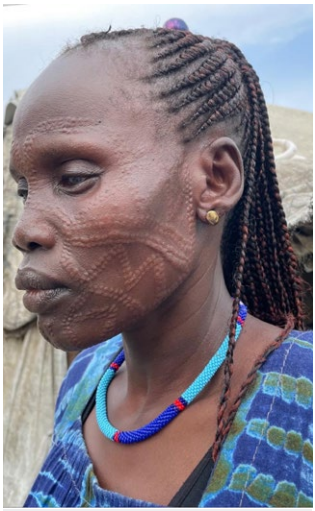

Figure 8. *Longoditho* on a woman from the Thithi age-set. *Photo: Kongkong Marshal Babanen*

THE ROLE OF HAIR

Black women's hair is very political. Hair plays a big role in building people's confidence, regardless of the style.[26] African women think someone judges them by their hair. Some straighten it with relaxers and other prefer its natural state. Hair has become a dress code in their professional environments, and they can spend a great amount of time managing it. They may end up opting for wigs.

Hair is vital to a Murle woman's beauty. Women of all ages, and wives of all age-sets, communicate beauty and pride through their hairstyles. But very little is written about Murle women and men communicating through their hairstyles.

Murle men use their hairstyles, too, to identify which age-set they belong to. In the Kurenen age-set, their wives and girlfriends use red, white and black braids—in 2024, a new style. Hairstyles have evolved with the emerging of the different age-sets. In the time of the Dorongwa, girls used to twist their hair with ghee and ash, adding sand to keep it straight, before finally washing it off and smearing it with ghee to make their hair grow and shine.

After a girl carefully plaited her twisted *abul o* (twisting hair), she attended a dance, lifting her head up high and making sure it whipped in all directions to attract the attention of the boys. After the Muden, however, *abul o* became scarce and other hairstyles started to emerge, braided into very tiny cornrows girls could keep for a while, making their hair grow faster.

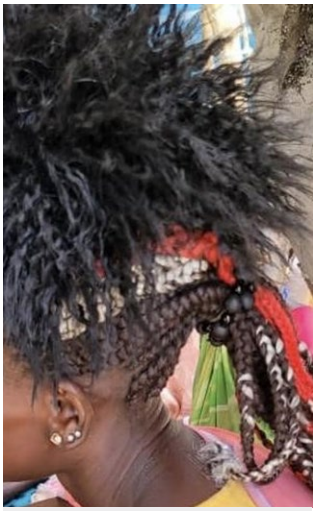

Figure 9. A hairstyle mimicking a chicken's head.
Photo: Kongkong Marshal Babanen

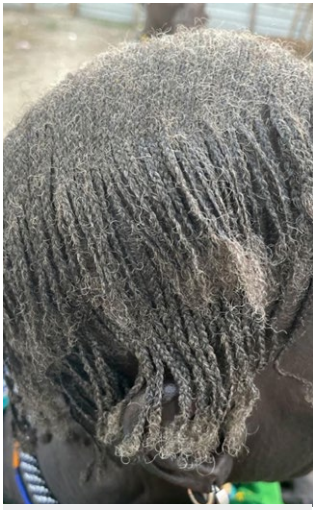

Figure 10. A hairstyle on an elderly woman.
Photo: Kongkong Marshal Babanen

26 Zukiswa Majali, Jan K. Coetzee and Asta Rau, 'Everyday Hair discourses of African black women', *Qualitative Sociology Review* 13/1 (2017): 158-172. Accessed 8 May 2025, https://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/Volume40/QSR_13_1_Majali_Coetzee_Rau.pdf

Another factor that has changed hairstyles is the role of modernization in changes in taste. Murle women in towns like Malakal, Khartoum and Juba saw the different ways other women plaited their hair. They incorporated these modern hairstyles into their existing hairstyles. They sometimes included hair extensions in their cornrows. They even included coloured extensions. The colours they use may sometimes represent a certain age-set but mostly they are just for beauty. This is how different hairstyles have emerged unconnected to age-sets, with some women only recently starting to connect hairstyles to age-sets. Murle women do not much care which hairstyle belongs to which age-set. They plait whatsoever hairstyle looks appealing to them.

The hairstyle in Figure 9 is called *o ci toloco* (the head of a chicken), mimicking a chicken's head. It belongs to the Kurenen age-set. It is admired by even women of different age-sets, who plait it like this. It can include red, white and brown extensions with a black Afro wig on top.

Figure 10 shows an elderly woman in her late eighties. A wife of the Nyeriza, an age-set that would have been in their hundred-and-twenties or hundred-and-thirties by 2024. This is the reason she wears blue and white beads around her neck. Beauty is not only for the young when it comes to hairstyles: Women take care of their hair regardless of their age.

Hairstyles also reflect situations and ideas. Murle widows do not immediately cut their hair but leave it without combing it or taking care of it to show they are mourning. A widow does not comb, plait or smear her hair. How women carry themselves and their hair is a way of telling if they are happy or going through a life crisis.

A girl who just got married is taken to her husband's home, where she stays indoors for about a month. Before leaving the house, she braids her hair in tiny cornrows so that people know she is married. Figure 11 shows the hairstyle of a woman who has just come out of her husband's house for the first time since the day she was married. She keeps

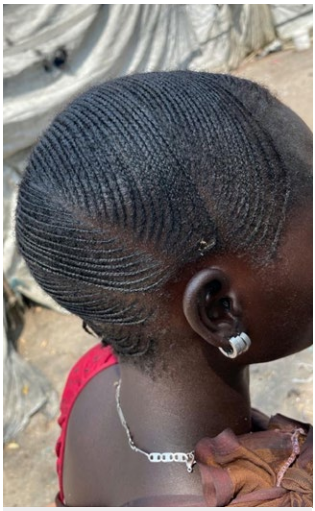

Figure 11. A Murle hairstyle on a young woman.
Photo: Kongkong Marshal Babanen

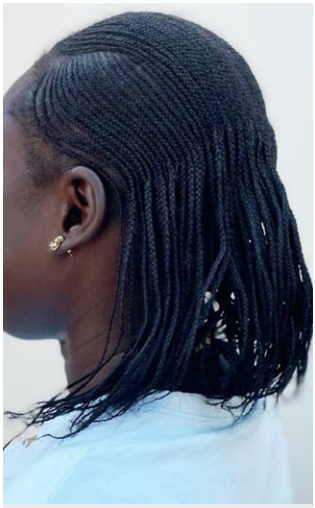

Figure 12. A Murle hairstyle on an urban Murle woman.
Photo: Kongkong Marshal Babanen

this hairstyle for about two months, and it encourages hair growth. The tinier the cornrows, the longer it takes to finish plaiting and the longer it stays neat.

Urban Murle women have used traditional hairstyles to protect their hair and as styling typical of a black African woman. Figure 12 shows a modern urban Murle woman showing off her beautiful, healthy hair. She says Murle women have long hair, which adds to their unique beauty.

CONCLUSION: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT CULTURAL MEDIUMS

My conclusion looks at how these mediums of communication interact, returning us to the questions driving the research. Together, the information can be used to understand Murle women better. In interviews, women traced events and times by age-sets and told stories surrounding the scarification and beads. Their songs, beads, hairstyles, dance and designs of body scarification largely differed from age-set to age-set, as with time, styles have altered, and new elements been added and borrowed from neighbouring communities.

Murle women combine different cultural mediums to communicate their identities, their opinions, their pasts and their futures. It may look as if they do not know their rights and cannot stand up for themselves, but this research shows they can speak up and they know what is good for them. Even when hairstyles are politicized, women choose what hairstyle they want. They take pride in the cultural mediums available for them to use.

The women are very strong but cannot always defend themselves verbally, so they chose to do it creatively. Hopefully, their creativity in communicating will attract the attention of humanitarian agencies, governmental bodies and academics. Already they have drawn the attention of NGOs and government institutions in Pibor, resulting in the *Kabarze* centre, where Murle women can be acknowledged through their songs, art and dance. Women have used songs and dance to encourage peace among different age-sets. As the majority of these women are providers in their homes, they hope to help build more centres and maternity hospitals, schools and training facilities, enabling them to become financially independent.

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