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THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN CONFLICT AND PEACEBUILDING AMONG THE BALANDA AND JURCHOL COMMUNITIES IN WESTERN BAHR EL GHAZAL

Madelina John Juma September 2025



SOUTH SUDAN WOMEN'S RESEARCH NETWORK

RESEARCH GRANTS - ROUND TWO

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SOUTH SUDAN WOMEN'S RESEARCH NETWORK

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COVER PHOTO Ritual performance of reconciliation by Jur people, photo taken during research.
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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this ethnographic study is to explore the role played by cultural expressions in conflict and peacebuilding in South Sudan, with specific reference to song, dance and beadwork. This study aims to understand how symbolic communication is used to shape individual identities, values and societies in Western Bahr el Ghazal, together with how these are changing across generations. Through the documentation and analysis of several case studies in Western Bahr el Ghazal, the project aims to bring deeper understanding to the importance of symbolic communication in peace and conflict in South Sudan.

Symbols play a crucial role in peacebuilding, offering ways to communicate values, to heal collective trauma and foster a sense of shared identity. These symbols and practices, which are deeply embedded in local contexts, nurture reconciliation, promote unity and facilitate dialogue between conflicting parties. In the article, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*, Schirch argues that symbolic actions such as ceremonies, memorials and public apologies play a vital role in creating shared meanings and facilitating emotional healing. These practices can transform relationships and establish a foundation for long-term peace.¹ Such rituals often involve symbolic acts of forgiveness or recognition of past wrongdoings, and are essential for mending broken relationships and restoring trust between former adversaries.²

Similarly, in considering the symbolic dimensions of peace processes, Mac Ginty argues that symbols can transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, thus facilitating mutual understanding.³ National symbols such as flags and monuments can, however, either perpetuate divisions or promote a collective identity that underpins peacebuilding efforts.⁴ In the context of interfaith dialogue, religious symbols and ritual action are often leveraged to foster a sense of shared humanity and facilitate open dialogue between conflicting groups. Memorials can serve as powerful symbols of remembrance and reconciliation, helping both survivors and perpetrators

1 L. Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*, Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2005.

2 J.P. Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997.

3 R. Mac Ginty, 'The Role of Symbols in Peacemaking', in *Contemporary Peacemaking*, eds., J. Darby and R. Mac Ginty, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

4 M. Hamilton, N. Jarman, D. Bryan, *Parades, Protest, and Policing: A Human Rights Framework*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 2001.

to confront the past and build a peaceful future.⁵ By the same token, the removal of contentious symbols may be essential to achieving peace in a deeply divided society.⁶

Symbolic acts have been central to traditional peacebuilding efforts in indigenous cultures around the world. The potlatch ceremony among the First Nations Peoples of the Pacific Northwest in Canada is a means of redistributing wealth and reinforcing social ties, promoting social cohesion and mitigating conflict.⁷ Similarly, the Ubuntu philosophy in many African cultures emphasizes shared humanity and reconciliation and has been instrumental in shaping conflict resolution mechanisms.⁸

After the end in 1945 of World War II, European symbols played a crucial role in reconciliation. The 1963, the Franco-German Treaty of Friendship, known also as the Élysée Treaty, marked a step towards reconciliation between two former adversaries. Symbolic gestures, such as joint commemorations and public apologies, helped to heal the wounds of war and foster a sense of shared history and future.⁹

Other reconciliation efforts may rely on symbolic gestures, such as the ritual exchange of gifts, shared food, animal sacrifice or traditional music and dance. More recently, the use of art, literature and performance in formal peace initiatives has begun to gain prominence. The Combatants for Peace organization uses theatre and storytelling to humanize those considered the enemy and foster empathy and understanding between Israelis and Palestinians.¹⁰

The role of cultural heritage in peacebuilding has been recognized by UNESCO through the preservation and promotion of heritage sites. This can be seen in the restoration of the Bamiyan Buddha in Afghanistan, which symbolizes resilience and the collective memory of communities that remain in a state of post-conflict recovery, and in identity reconstruction.¹¹

5 R. Bleiker, 'The Aesthetic Turn in Intentional Political Theory', *Millennium*, 30/3 (2001): 509–533.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298010300031001>

6 See for instance Mohammed Abu Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peacebuilding in Islam: Theory and Practice*, Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001.

7 H. Codere, *Fighting with Property. A study of Kwakwaka'wakw potlatching and warfare, 1792–1980*, J.J. Augustin, 1950.

8 T. Murithi, 'Practical Peacemaking Wisdom from Africa: Reflections on Ubuntu', *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 1/4 (2006): 25–34.

9 C. Defrance, 'The Élysée Treaty in the Context of Franco-German Socio-cultural Relations', *German Politics and Society*, 31/1 (2013): 70–91.

10 D.J. Perry, *The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Movement*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. In particular Chapter 14, 'Combatants for Peace: Actualizing Peace Theory, Education, and Research', 177–189.

11 UNESCO, 'Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural Heritage', Paris: UNESCO, 2003.

THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSIONS OF PEACEBUILDING IN AFRICA

In Africa, symbolic practices, such as rituals and sacrifices, are crucial to repairing impaired relationships.¹² Conflict resolution practices may include ritual pledges of truth telling, necessarily undertaken in the presence of traditional leaders. The *gacaca* courts in Rwanda, set up in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, are a notable example of the use of traditional leaders and community-based conflict resolution mechanisms. These courts, while primarily judicial, incorporate symbolic acts of apology, forgiveness and public witnessing, all of which are considered essential to the collective healing process.¹³

By the same token, the spiritual world may be implicated in promoting conflict, as divine entities, ancestors and symbolic acts are also drawn upon to ferment discord. Such actions may involve incantations, curses and oath-taking, among other ritual performances, which are mediated by spiritual leaders, such as fetish priests, custodians of deities, herbalists and soothsayers.

This research argues that symbolic practices serve as powerful tools in peacebuilding by helping to bridge divides, heal trauma and create new narratives of unity and hope.¹⁴ These practices can facilitate the transformation of relationships and rebuild trust, both preconditions necessary for sustainable peace.

RITUAL INTERVENTIONS IN PEACE AND CONFLICT IN SOUTH SUDAN

In South Sudan, symbolic practices are integral to peacebuilding efforts, particularly in the post-conflict context. These practices, which include ritual actions, songs and dances, play a crucial role in fostering reconciliation, rebuilding social cohesion, and promoting a shared sense of identity among diverse groups. Rituals provide a structured and meaningful way for communities to express their grievances, seek forgiveness and commit to a peaceful coexistence. Ceremonies, such as cattle sacrifices and communal feasts, have been used to bring together conflicting parties and reinforce social bonds.

Several case studies highlight the impact of symbolic practices in South Sudan. One notable example is the Wunlit People-to-People Peace Process, initiated by traditional leaders and

12 E. Daly and J. Sarkin, *Reconciliation in Divided Societies: Funding Common Ground*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhm81>

13 P. Clark, *The Gacaca Courts, Post-Genocide Justice and Reconciliation in Rwanda*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

14 Lederach, *Building peace*.

members of the New Sudan Council of Churches in the 1990s. This initiative, which is well documented and the subject of much scholarly debate, used traditional rituals and ceremonies to facilitate dialogue between conflicting communities and has been credited with reducing violence and fostering reconciliation.¹⁵ While much has been said about the importance of sacrificing a bull to inaugurate the conference and drawing its participants into making a common commitment to peace, little to no information is available about the role of other symbolic expressions, particularly song and dance, in the mediation process.

The use of cultural festivals to promote peace and unity is another example. The South Sudan Peace and Reconciliation Commission has organized events like the Juba Peace Festival, which brings together diverse groups of people to celebrate commonalities of their culture and heritage. These festivals serve as platforms for dialogue and promote a positive narrative of coexistence.¹⁶

While symbolic practices are valuable, their use has been challenged by some. Some scholars argue that practices can be co-opted by political elites to meet their own agenda, potentially undermining their impact.¹⁷ The diversity of South Sudan's cultural landscape means symbolic practices may not resonate equally with all groups, requiring careful consideration and inclusivity in their use and design.

Despite this, these symbolic acts, often overlooked during high-level mediation efforts, are profoundly important within community settings. This research argues that a deeper understanding of the meanings and performative enactments of such symbols may be vital to the achievement of sustainable peace on different scales.

15 J. Ryle and D.H. Johnson, eds., 'What Happened at Wunlit? An oral history of the 1999 Wunlit Peace Conference', South Sudan Customary Authorities Project, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021; and T. Paffenholz, ed., *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2010.

16 O.H. Rolandsen, 'Another civil war in South Sudan: The failure of Guerrilla Government?' *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 9/1 (2015): 163–174.

17 P. Richards, ed., *No peace, No war: Anthropology of contemporary armed conflicts*, Oxford: James Currey, 2005.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted qualitative methods to promote an in-depth understanding of the role of local cultural expression and values in conflict and peacebuilding processes. More specifically, the study employed narrative inquiry based on oral history interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation with selected individuals. These included male and female respondents, chosen from the study areas of Wau and Jur River counties, who had intimate lived experience of the topic in question.

The study explored the following research questions:

- What implication does expressive culture have in times of peace and conflict?
- What generational dynamic does expressive culture have in South Sudan?
- Is there inter-generational dialogue among communities in Jur and Wau about cultural expression in peacebuilding?
- How can understanding local values shape culturally sensitive peacebuilding processes?

A total of 24 people participated from Balanda community in Wau and Jurchol community in Jur River counties. Four Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with two chiefs from Balanda and two chiefs from Jurchol. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with youth and elders in Wau and Jur River. Each FGD consisted of seven participants, of which three were elders and four were youth. This helped me establish generational differences and similarities in perceptions of the role symbolic expressions have in conflict and peace. Six oral history interviews were conducted among youth, two with youth leaders and four with youth who did not hold leadership positions in their respective communities. These groups consisted of three males and three females from each location. The researcher paid particular attention to nonverbal expressions while conducting these interviews.

Primary data, collected from participant settings, exposed gaps in existing literature. Attempts were made to analyse primary data according to meanings ascribed it by interviewees and the interviewer as part of the community.

KEY FINDINGS

In Nilotic cultures, symbols are intrinsic to all aspects of life and invoked when seeking either to incite violence or promote peace. The importance of symbols is often overlooked by foreign peace negotiators, who tend to focus on universally applicable mediation procedures.¹⁸ The following section contains examples of symbolic actions that may lead to conflict or assist in promoting peace between groups.

SYMBOLIC ACTS THAT INCITE CONFLICT

This analysis explores the negative effects of symbolic acts in Wau, which lead to violent conflict.

Dances

In an interview, the Chief in Gedi Boma said dance was among the symbolic practices that contributed to conflict in the community. This was especially so with the dance that is called *ngadu*, *mayia* or *mbadala* in different languages. Whenever this dance is held, people will begin to fight. This occurs when women refuse to dance with the men at a public dance or when men accuse other men of dancing with their wives. This dance is not like most other dances, as it is physically intimate, one where men will touch women and women will put their heads on men's shoulders. If the woman you are dancing with is not your wife or your brother's wife, these actions will incite intense jealousy and invariably end in conflict.



Figure 1. Author interviews Chief in Gedi (Wau), 10 June 2024.

Chief Michael Silvano emphasized that, in the past, the Balanda community was united, there was nothing like Balanda Bagari or Balanda Bazia. In 1956, however, there was a *mayia* dance held in Bagari. People from Bazia attended and, during the dance, Bagari women rejected their own husbands and other men, choosing instead to dance only with Bazia's men, who they considered more impressive than their own. During the *mayia* dance, no woman wanted to dance with an unattractive man, as she had the freedom to choose her dance partner.

18 Richards, *No Peace, No War*.

When Bagari men were rejected by their women, the people of Bazia began drumming and singing that all good things were taken and only the bad remained. This provoked a fight between the people of Bagari and Bazia. The drum was removed from its wooden base during the fight. Unfortunately, a man from Besailia Payam was fatally stabbed with a knife and many others were injured. This marked the beginning of the division within the Balanda community. The people of Bagari referred to the people from Bazia as *akputulu*, which means *lulu*, a reference to the *lulu*¹⁹ obtained from Bazia, where it was produced at the time. Conversely, the people of Bazia called the Bagari people *akarangba*, meaning people of cassava, because they were known for cultivating cassava. From that point on, the Balanda community divided into groups associated with Bagari, Bazia and another group, Duimzieber.

Silvano said it was this dance that divided the community. If the dance had been like other dances, the community might not have split apart.

Likewise, in an interview with the Chief Deng Koang in Jur River County Mbili Boma, on 11 June 2024, I was informed that dance among the Jurchol people can provoke conflict. Their dance, however, is somewhat different from that of the Balanda community mentioned above. Here, the focus on conflict in dance is related to the drum, which is always beaten at night and draws people from different places. People will stand with the team they came with and compete with others. They dance in groups to determine the best dancers of the night, while others clap for them. When their time is over, they give others a chance to dance, and the clapping continues until the last group finishes dancing. If a group dances but others refuse to clap, and leave immediately, it can escalate into conflict, possibly resulting in loss of life and triggering community or ethnic conflict.²⁰

Koang also mentioned that if people are dancing and someone crosses between them abruptly, they may be beaten. In Jur culture, dance is significant in marriage; if a man wants to marry a woman, he needs to demonstrate that he can dance, otherwise his bride may think he is ignorant of his culture and could embarrass her during their wedding. The opportunity to prove oneself is during the drumming that takes place at night, when she is present, as it is the only place where they can meet.

19 'Lulu' is the local (Arabic) name for the tree *Vitellaria paradoxa nilotica*, which grows in East Africa. Its nutritious nuts are widely relied on by local people to stave off hunger and used to make shea butter and oil.

20 Interview with the Chief in Jur River county/Mbili, 11 June 2024.

Songs

On 18 June 2024, I interviewed the Chief in the local court authority in Wau, Hai Mutamadia residential area. He emphasized that songs often contribute to conflict among people. There are, for example, insulting songs of hatred, as well as challenges directed at individuals or communities, which frequently cause discord and division in the community.²¹

For instance, in 1974, after the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement between the Sudan government and southern Sudanese rebels, a man named Dongo Absala composed the following song, urging people to fight northern Sudanese Arabs. He titled it *Dhaka ka Sol* (Let's burn the Arabs):

*Sei no kanako tibaino hatidharal weinotino hutavo.
Hati sei wa salaam wati sei wa havotovokotikanakore.
Kadha seino hakabai bizaman halven hukashano.
Va nokkoji Akel vara nokjagi Akel kuya Udo sibatamivi?
Nekatiyelmina wuvara Hasibazim tadhakataka soll ka soll logirwau woo.
Hasibazim tidhakatasole sibakamaive kadhabanasoo, momadhamad
hanak kalogil tavogudoto diva hayaniki va.
Ka soll jaidiba Hasibazim dhakatakasolre kasoll abjalabia rogilwau woo.*

This means:

Pour oil on Akel or give her bush meat, Udo, so that this home can become okay like before.
The Arabs are depleting our resources.
If I have to tie *lulu* rope, let's buy fuel and burn *Sol*.
There are many on the Wau road.
What can we do with *jalabia*?
Let's buy fuel and burn them, there are many on the Wau road.
Momadhamad, you were shot on the way with your dress on.
Let's buy fuel and burn the Arabs; there are many on the Wau road.²²

21 Interview with the Chief in the local court authority in Wau (Hai Mutamadia residential area), 18 June 2024.

22 *Sol* refers to 'Arab' (northern Sudanese), while *jalabia* refers to the type of their dress.

This song was sung because people wanted to separate southern Sudan from the Arabs. They believed northern Sudanese Arabs could not change their ways and that the Southerners would continue to be enslaved by them. The song meant not just to burn but to kill them. When this song was sung, some Southerners realized that the Addis Ababa accord was not being fully implemented, and people went back to the bush to fight the government.

The Chief in Roc-Rocdong Boma (Jur River County) said that songs gave people the courage to pursue activities that could trigger conflict. Certain songs are sung to encourage people to fight or to give them courage when they are going on a hunt.²³ There is a song called *guma* (English) that people sing when they are going to fight. It is also sung when people are going to hunt a wild animal such as an elephant or lion. If a person dies during one of these activities, the *guma* song will be performed at their funeral to signify that the person had killed a wild animal or a person.

Herewith a loose translation:

My right hand is holding a spear, and my left hand is holding wood, because spears are painful.

My brother is over the elephant. You lazy person, the animal woke up.

Dein jumped on the elephant to defeat it. Defeat has come.

You, those who use sticks, go to the forest. [Use] the stick spear of Mr Ayak to destroy the animal's forest. My wood has destroyed the animal.

[It] did not return to the forest, nor did it go to a residential area to eat soil. Our animal lies down, and the arm of temerity has bent itself.

The message went out to inform men to come and perform the cultural activities for killing harmful animals.²⁴

The interviewee said this song makes sure no one surrenders the fight. If they do, their own people might beat them, as their enemies are challenging them, and surrendering is seen as cowardly. Moreover, while the men sing, women will follow their men, ululating and singing with them.

Spears and beads

During a focus group discussion in Mbili, Respondent 1 (R1), who withheld their name from publication, highlighted that *tong* (spears) are a threatening symbol among the community in Jur river county. To activate a battle, the elders will select one of the strongest youths in their community. He will be sent with a spear to the warring community. He will give it to an elder

23 Interviewed with the Chief in Rocdong (Jur River County), 11 June 2024.

24 These words are sung during a fight, especially when someone has been killed from the enemy side.

person and say, 'my people sent me with this spear to enter in your space'. After that, the person will blow a sound clave to gather his people and explain what has happened. This act will infuriate them, as it insults their elders, and they will immediately pick up their spears and animal skins for protection, ready to attack. Before reaching the enemy, they will first throw the spear at the enemy to announce they have arrived.²⁵

In the same interview, R1 explained that beads can also have a damaging impact on relationships. In Jurchol culture, if someone wants to propose to a lady, he will give her beads. Giving beads to a lady signifies his desire to marry her and accordingly indicates to other men that they should not approach her. Sometimes, however, another man may also want to marry the same woman and may try to present her with his beads. If the first man sees these beads, and the lady shares the identity of the man who approached her, he and his family will embark on a battle with that person.

In a focus group discussion in Wau, R3 explained there are black and white beads called *duga*. In the Balanda community, a husband must buy these for his wife as a new bride. If he does not, there will be no peace at home, as the wife will forever believe the man does not love her.²⁶

THE USE OF SYMBOLIC ACTION TO PROMOTE PEACE

This section describes actions in Wau that contribute to the promotion of peace.

Medicine

In his interview, the Chief in Gedi described some of the cultural gestures that are used in conflict resolution and reconciliation. If there is fighting among people, and they say they cannot talk to each other and can never come together, certain ceremonial activities need to be performed to reconcile them.²⁷ Local medicines will be cooked to symbolically cool the problem between the two conflicting parties. If the conflict is very serious, it should be cooked three times.



Figure 2. Image of symbols of conflict in Jur, taken by the author in Mbili on 12 June 2024.

25 FGD in Mbili, 12 June 2024.

26 FGD in Wau, 13 June 2024

27 Interview with the Chief in Gedi, 10 June 2024.

There is also a medicine called *dere*, which is sprinkled over the disputing parties because it is a stronger medicine for the purpose of bringing the warring parties together. *Dere* consists of a mixture of leaves from a *lulu* tree, which is also called *delle*, and clay soil. It can be administered at home or in a communal area. If at home, a portion of medicine will be smeared on the door of each aggressor, as well as on their chests to calm the animosity in their hearts. If a woman is the one who swore to stand against the idea of reconciliation, it is the man who performs the ritual and vice versa.

The medicine is considered hot, so these activities are normally performed early in the morning or in the early evening hours, when the weather is cooler. If these ceremonies are conducted when the sun is too hot, it is believed they will not work, as the sun is already hot, and the wind will dissipate their effect. If this medicine produces a lot of oil, it means the problem has cooled. That oil is then taken on the tip of a local broom (made usually of grass) and put on the combatant's tongues. When they spit it out, they are symbolically spitting out what is inside them. The belief is that if you violate what you said you would do, something bad will happen to you.

The interviewee said there are symbolic practices carried out to prove guilt and to prevent someone from repeating what they did. These include *ngbaga*, sorghum, *wora*, and *fuhubu*, as explained below. When carrying out such a practice, all these items will be given to you and someone will ask you to, 'tell the truth and say you will not do this again', while you are holding these things in your hand:

- *Ngbaga* involves bending a spear and saying, 'If what I am saying is not correct, let this spear stab me to death'.
- Sorghum is eaten with a vow that, 'If I am saying something wrong, I should not eat newly produced sorghum next year', because sorghum is what we all eat.
- *Wora* is the bark of a bitter tree put in water, which you drink while saying the same as above.
- For *fuhubu*, a pot of water with a stone in it is heated until it boils. Your hand will be smeared with *lulu* and you will be asked to tell the truth and insert your hand into the hot water to pick the stone out. If you are telling the truth, the water will not burn your hand, but if you are lying, it will burn your hand and remove your skin.

During his interview, the Chief in Gedi, R2, shared an experience. They mentioned that, during the 2016 conflict between the Government of South Sudan and the South Sudanese opposition—SPLM In Government (SPLM IG) and SPLM In Opposition (SPLM IO)—most Balanda and Jur forgot their internal issues. (Some, though, refused to attend the forgiveness and reconciliation ritual.) When there was a conflict in Wadalalo Boma between members of the SPLM IO from Jur River County and SPLM IG from the government, for example, Balanda went there to assist. Two people from Jur and one from Balanda were killed. This incident surprised people, causing

them to recognize their unresolved issues. An elder advised people to forgive each other before their next mission. R2 explained as follows:

I was then called to perform the ritual for them. Since there were many, I combined local medicine and dere in a calabash, added water, and sprinkled it on Jur people from one side and Balanda from the other. I declared all that happened is finished today. The next day, none of them were killed. All of this was done to foster mutual understanding and restore broken relationships.²⁸

In an interview with the Chief in Wau, attention was drawn to customary court procedures. If two parties agree to reconcile, they were asked to kneel, and then water is sprinkled on them. They are then asked to greet each other and all those present. Thereafter, leaders in the family prepare local medicine for a swearing ceremony.²⁹ The chief explained the importance of water and its use in rituals:

We use water because it is essential to our life, from drinking to bathing, and even in death. It is the same water that is used in baptisms and blessings, and that our ancestors used to bless and resolve conflicts. The leaf symbolizes peace in the Balanda community and is used for blessings in church. Water is life, rejecting it means rejecting life. We have reconciled many people using water and leaves. For instance, there was a case between family members; an uncle accused his nephew of having an affair with his wife. The nephew wanted to take an oath before his uncle, so we allowed it. After monitoring them for six months, they took the swearing ceremony last week to restore their relationship.

Peace talks

During a focus group discussion in Jur River (Mbili) on 12 June 2024, R4 highlighted the importance of beads in peace talks. He said, 'beads play a role in peacebuilding. For instance, during peace talks, people wear white beads, symbolizing purity of heart and inner beauty. If you are beautiful outwardly, your heart is considered beautiful and clean, too'.

28 Interview with the Chief (R2) in Gedi, 10 June 2024.

29 Interview with the Chief in Wau, 18 June 2024.

In an interview, an elder in the Hai Kosti Residential Area emphasized the significance of songs during times of peace talks and conflict. Songs during peace serve as a stimulant, helping people to remember and to move past events. During the conflict in 2016, many songs were sung advocating change and peace.³⁰ She recalled one song sung by a man named Towil:

When will the peace come home, mother?

When will the peace come, mother?

We are washing dry fish with cold water

When will the peace come, mother? We are tired.

In an interview, the Chief of Gedi in Wau County explained that during times of conflict, if one group does not wish to fight, they will hold up a *lulu* leaf and shake it. When people carrying harmful items, such as knives, spears or wood see this gesture, they immediately put down their weapons and listen. This leaf symbolizes peace among the Balanda, conveying a message that they seek peace, not conflict.

During the focus group discussion in Mbili Boma (Jur River) on conflict resolution, participant R6 stated that elders from the conflicting parties, or from a third party from another community, should intervene.³¹ Their role is to bring the conflicting parties together by identifying the root cause of the conflict. If resolution is uncertain, they may refer the matter to the chief. For instance, in disputes over crops eaten by goats or cows, the elders assess the damage and request compensation from the livestock keeper. In cases where individuals refuse to engage with each other, the chief and elders will facilitate a reconciliation process. This involves using a calabash filled with water, sorghum root, *lulu* leaf and charcoal. Participants and elders alike spit in the water, signifying purification and forgiveness. Together, they wash their hands in the water, greet each other and sprinkle the water on themselves, symbolizing the restoration of relationships. The use of the *lulu* leaf signifies that the process of resolving problems should go smoothly like *lulu* oil. The root of the sorghum plant is relevant as all people subsist on a diet of sorghum. Using charcoal from a cooking fire suggests that problems should be cooled down, as if fire were placed in water. Saliva is used to symbolize that you have expressed what is inside you—akin to spitting in water. Below is an excerpt from R6:

If these things are not done, and they forget what they had said and start talking to each other, something bad will happen or someone will die. If they are done and you violate the [meaning of the rituals], you will also face consequences because we, the Jur, if you have a problem with someone, unless these things are done first to forgive what was in someone's heart, there will be no resolution.³²

30 Interview with elder in Hai Kosti residential area, 13 June 2024.

31 FGD in Mbili (Jur River), 12 June 2024.

32 FGD in Mbili (Jur River), 12 June 2024.

One chief shared a case from his own experience where someone stole money from his uncle, then denied it. ‘They were brought to me to solve the case. I performed rituals with the elders to restore their broken relationship.’

Generational dynamics

On 12 June 2024, I interviewed the youth leader in Jur River, Mbili Boma, regarding generational changes that have occurred. He stated that many changes have contributed to peace among the communities. He said some people used to have their teeth removed and put marks on their bodies, which was not their culture but imposed by colonizers. Previously, elders prioritized these practices for respect within families, but now they are optional:

Removing teeth and body marks seems like enslavement to me, as it defies the natural order that God created with teeth both up and down, but my people took it for granted. This affects people differently because if other communities see you with your teeth removed, they will know you’re from this community. If they have a conflict with your community, you could become a victim. I am glad that removing teeth is now optional. If it were not, I would advise my children against removing their teeth or marking their bodies. If someone falls and breaks a tooth or is injured, I would prefer to apologize [to them] than to remove teeth or scarify [the skin].³³

Previously, chiefs were respected by the communities, who would bring cases to them for resolution. However, changes brought by modern systems of administration meant they no longer feel as valued, and people now take their issues to state courts, which do not prioritize maintaining relationships. This change makes achieving sustainable peace among people very difficult.³⁴

My observation during interviews with local court authorities is that they give conflicting parties time to reflect on whether the case is serious, and that officials have some beliefs—for example, they do not allow lactating mothers to swear oaths, especially when their baby is less than six months old, believing that misrepresentations from the mother could bring harm to



Figure 3. Demonstration of ritual performance of reconciliation by Jur people, taken on 12 June 2024 in Jur River County.

33 Interview with the Youth Leader in Mbili, 12 June 2024.

34 Interview with the Chief in RocRocdong, 12 June 2024.

the child rather than to herself. During court sessions, they allow the family members of the disputing parties to speak and ensure that both parties agree to reconciliation before beginning any reconciliation rituals.

Blood pact

In one of the interviews with court authorities in Wau on the 18 June 2024, an elder recounted that, in the past people resolved conflicts by cutting skin to shed some blood or by sharing blood. Sometimes, this involved cutting the skin on their bodies or sacrificing a bull or goat, before mixing the blood with groundnuts and consuming it to form a blood pact. If one person had committed an offence against the other, they believed something bad would happen to the offender or to people on their side of the dispute:

In 1956, when I was a Chief in Bazia, there was a person who killed someone and escaped. As people searched for him, he climbed a tree. Those searching sat under the same tree and smoked. The murderer came down, asking for a cigarette, ready to accept his fate. The youth wanted to stab him with a spear, but the elders intervened, suggesting he surrender to the victim's family. They brought him there, and although the family wanted to kill him, the elders insisted he be reconciled instead. Both families were brought together, and they performed a blood pact to ensure mutual respect and peace. Since then, they have considered themselves family, and offences against each other have been rare. Blood pacts [are used by people to] swear not to harm each other, promising that if one does, something bad will happen to them. They also serve as warnings; for instance, when my son was once being followed with the threat of death, a blood pact saved him.³⁵

Another respondent mentioned that sometimes blood pacts were made with animal blood from cows or goats. For instance, in 1987, there was dialogue in Mapel Boma between the Balanda and Jur, which ended in Ayar Boma when a bull was sacrificed. Members of the disputing parties marked their chests with its blood, symbolizing their strengthened relationship. An elder in Jur River (Mbili), said a bull used for conflict resolution should be uncircumcised. He while men go to battle, and are at risk of being killed, women remain at home to cook: dividing labour and cooking the bull symbolizes solving the problem. The head goes to the person seen as the cause of the conflict, symbolizing responsibility, while the lower part of the bull goes to the victim. This practice prevents conflicts, ensuring there are no more disputes between people.³⁶

35 Interview with the local authorities in Wau on 13 June 2024.

36 FGD in Jur River county, Mbili, 12 June 2024.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of culture in conflict and peacebuilding in South Sudan with a particular focus on the Balanda and Jurchol communities in Western Bahr el Ghazal. Symbols and symbolic action are intrinsic to the cultural fabric of the people of Jur River and Wau counties, playing a crucial role in both inciting conflict and promoting peace. Understanding and leveraging locally meaningful symbolic practices will have a significant impact on formal peacebuilding initiatives in South Sudan, which tends to follow universalistic mechanisms constructed in the Global North—and which, to date, have had limited benefit. Sustainable peace is dependent upon the application of cultural processes that carry local meaning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been drafted by the author in association with respondents.

Community engagement and awareness

- Initiate community dialogue and awareness programmes to educate communities about cultural practices that contribute to conflict. Highlight the negative impacts of some dances, songs and symbolic gestures that escalate tensions.
- Encourage community leaders and elders to promote peaceful cultural practices and discourage those that provoke conflict.

Conflict resolution mechanisms

- Strengthen traditional conflict resolution mechanisms by supporting elders and local courts in conducting rituals and ceremonies that promote forgiveness and reconciliation.
- Implement regular training for elders and community leaders in conflict mediation and negotiation techniques that align with cultural practices and values.

Legal and governance support

- Collaborate with customary and state courts to integrate traditional conflict resolution practices into the formal legal system, where appropriate.
- Advocate policies that respect and recognize traditional conflict resolution mechanisms alongside state laws.

Peacebuilding initiatives

- Support peacebuilding initiatives that emphasize the use of symbolism in promoting peace, such as rituals involving local medicines and symbolic items.
- Foster inter-community dialogue and cooperation through cultural exchange and joint rituals to build trust and understanding.

Education and cultural preservation

- Integrate cultural education in school curriculums to promote understanding and respect for diverse cultural practices.
- Preserve and celebrate cultural traditions that promote peace and unity while addressing those that perpetuate conflict sensitively.

By implementing these recommendations, communities can draw on their cultural strengths to resolve conflicts peacefully, fostering mutual respect and understanding among diverse groups.

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FIELD RESEARCH CITATIONS

Focus Group Discussion (FGD), Jur River County, Mbili, 12 June 2024.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD), Mbili, 12 June 2024.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD), Wau, 13 June 2024.

Interview with Chief in Gedi, 10 June 2024.

Interview with Chief (R2) in Gedi, 10 June 2024.

Interview with Chief in Jur River County/Mbili, 11 June 2024.

Interview with Chief in local court authority in Wau (Hai Mutamadia residential area), 18 June 2024.

Interview with Chief in RocRocdong, 12 June 2024.

Interview with Chief in Wau, 18 June 2024.

Interview with elder in Hai Kosti residential area, 13 June 2024.

Interview with local authorities in Wau, 13 June 2024.

Interview with Youth Leader in Mbili, 12 June 2024.



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