

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Investigating the impact of child abduction and cattle raiding among the Dinka, Nuer and Murle communities in Jonglei State, South Sudan**

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**Child abduction and cattle raiding pose a threat to sustainable socio-economic development among the Dinka, the Nuer and the Murle communities in Jonglei State, South Sudan. A 7-month study was conducted to investigate the impacts of child abduction and cattle raiding among the three communities-Dinka, the Nuer and the Murle community. Two hundred fifty households, one hundred fifty two Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and fifty six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were investigated using semi-structured questionnaires, interview guide and observation checklist. Simple random sampling procedure and proportionate stratified sampling were used to select respondents from each community. Both qualitative and quantitative data were concurrently analyzed and interpreted. Analysis of FGDs revealed that the increasing need for bride wealth and the availability of small arms or light weapons were the major driving factors behind cattle raiding and child abduction among the three communities. Consequently, increasing death rates, illiteracy, displacement, poverty, and loss of properties were rampant threatening social coherence among these communities. Disarmament, demobilization and re-integration, and other peace building processes are highly needed for sustainable socio-economic development among the Dinka, the Nuer and the Murle communities in Jonglei State, South Sudan.**

**Key words:** Child abduction, cattle raiding, local communities, peace building, Jonglei State.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Cattle raiding and child abduction are frequent events occurring among pastoral communities in sub-Saharan African countries. In South Sudan, such socio-cultural phenomena usually predominate among the Dinka, the Nuer, and the Murle communities inhabiting Jonglei State. Intercommunal conflicts have been identified as vicious cycles that revisit deep wounds on these three communities (Legassicke, 2014). Many communities

have attempted various mechanisms such as conducting dialogues, truce and peace building committees to resolve their conflicts. Evidence has shown that the major causes of cattle raiding are the high existence and the use of guns prompting the Pokot and the Marakwet of Kenya in Eastern Africa (Mwole, 2016) and the Dinka, Nuer, and Murle of Jonglei State of South Sudan (Wild et al., 2018).

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Livestock including cattle support the livelihoods of pastoral/agro-pastoral communities (Onyango et al., 2015). Moreover, cattle pose a great potential for social engagements, income generation and exporting surplus of livestock production in South Sudan (Musinga et al., 2010). Therefore, cattle occupy a particular social position among these three pastoral communities who have viewed cattle as a sign of prosperity. As such abduction of children and cattle raiding has been rooted in the historical and social relations of the diverse communities inhabiting Jonglei State (Copnall, 2011). The incidence of tribal conflicts and child abduction have risen greatly since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 (Dalil, 2010) and post-independent South Sudan (Christopher, 2011).

As a result of child abduction in the 1930s and 1940s pastoral groups adopted using cattle to pay this form of compensation (Lewis, 1972). Nevertheless, the exchange of children, especially between the Dinka and the Murle continued during the 1950s and through the 1970s. The Dinka children, who were the result of an incestuous relationship (*Akeeth*), or any other unacceptable union were given to or exchanged with the Murle for cattle. Seemingly, the preparedness of the Murle to barter for, and accept, illegitimate children, and their continued practices of abducting children during cattle raids, has been linked to an apparent long-standing problem with infertility. Tor (2016) argues that the Dinka Bor, Lou Nuer and Murle communities seem to harbor strong resentment against each other, which is manifested by cattle rustling, child abduction, revenge attacks, and threats of ethnic cleansing.

Not surprisingly, both the Murle and Nuer have a perception that Dinka Bor community is a source of political friction, ethnic tension and conflict that is currently witnessed in Jonglei State. As such the two ethnic groups, as well as other tribes demand an area of inclusivity on all aspects of governance. It has been reported that the ethnic tension and intercommunal conflicts pose threats to the state (Jok, 2012). A few studies have been conducted to explore the impact of child abduction and cattle raiding on the livelihoods of pastoral/agropastoral communities in Jonglei State in particular and South Sudan at large. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of cattle raiding and child abduction among the Dinka, Nuer and Murle communities such that tangible solutions through peace building processes can be sought for social coherence and sustainable development of the three communities in Jonglei State, South Sudan.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study area

This study was conducted in Jonglei State, focusing on the Dinka, Nuer and Murle pastoral/agropastoral communities. Jonglei State is one of the volatile ten states of South Sudan witnessing

intercommunal conflicts. It covers a territory of approximately 122,581 km<sup>2</sup> and lies at latitude 6° 12' 21.35" N and longitude 31° 33' 22.79" E. Moreover, the state is located in poor Savannah climate characterized by scarcity of grazing lands and water during dry season. The human population was estimated at 1,358,602 households (Census, 2008).

### Sample size and sampling procedures

A sample of 250 household heads was obtained using descriptive study. Semi-structure questionnaires were administered to 94 Dinka, 80 Nuer and 76 Murle community members (Table 1).

### Methods and tools of data collection

The primary data were collected from July 2019-January 2020 for seven months using the following tools.

#### Household survey

Representative households were proportionately sampled within the child abduction and cattle raiding corridor. In each household, the head was randomly selected and questionnaires were administered.

#### Key informant interviews

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with 152 village elders; community opinion leaders, youth, religious leaders, civil society organization leaders, World Vision, Red Cross South Sudan (RCSS), and the United Nation Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in Bor (Table 1). KIIs on the impacts of child abduction and cattle raiding, the role played by women, men, youth and elders, the perception of child abduction and cattle raiding, and the transformations into modern day child abduction and cattle raiding incorporated.

#### Focus group discussions (FGDs)

As shown in Table 1, 56-gender and age based-FGDs were organized. In each FGD, eight to twelve participants were selected. A guide for FGDs included information on the history and social organization of Dinka, Nuer and Murle, their culture, the perception and impact of cattle raiding and child abduction, the role of women, men and youth, the preparations and processes of carrying out abduction and raiding events.

#### Observations

Observations on cattle raiding at household and community levels were made. Women, men, youth, police, chiefs, religious leaders and leaders of civil society organizations and councils of elders were incorporated.

#### Ethical approval

Ethical considerations and informed consents of the local authorities and respondents were obtained prior to commencing this study.

#### Data processing and analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) to provide descriptive statistics

**Table 1.** Summary of sample size of the respondents among the Dinka, the Nuer and the Murle in Jonglei State, South Sudan.

Parameter	Sex- based number of respondents in each community									Total number (%) of all respondents in the three communities		
	Dinka			Nuer			Murle			M	F	Total
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total			
Household heads	59	35	94	46	34	80	56	20	76	161(64.4%)	89(35.6%)	250 (100%)
Focus group discussions	9	7	16	9	10	19	12	9	21	30(53.6%)	26(46.4%)	56 (100%)
Key informant interviews	30	25	55	27	39	66	20	11	31	77(50.7%)	75(49.3%)	152 (100%)

which are presented in frequency tables and bar-charts. Qualitative data were sorted and summarized to complement the quantitative data. The data were presented in the form of narrative descriptive analysis.

**RESULTS**

**Community composition of the households**

Dinka community was 94 (37.6%), Nuer was 80(32.0%) and Murle community was 76(30.4%), suggesting that most of the respondents in this study were from Dinka community (Figure 1).

**Age of respondents**

Table 2 shows that the age group (30-39) of the respondents are higher (37.6%) compared to the least (4%) of those above 60, suggesting that youth from the Dinka, Nuer and Murle communities have been heavily engaged in child abduction and cattle raiding.

**Gender of respondents**

Table 3 shows that men are the major components of the households heads (64.4%), FGDs (53%.6), and Kills (50.6%) compared to women respondents.

**Community raiding and abduction**

Figure 2 shows the community raiding and abduction engaged by the Murle, Dinka, and Nuer communities were 40, 30, and 20%, respectively compared to 10% of unsure respondents. This suggests that the Murle community has taken a lead in raiding and abduction practices.

**Impact of child abduction and cattle raiding**

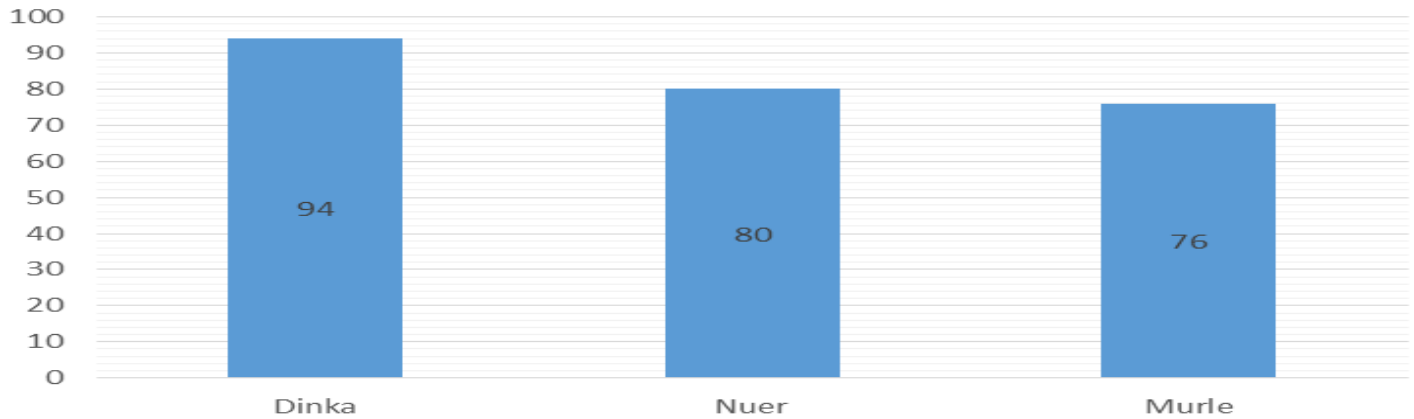
FGDs revealed that the increasing need for bride wealth and the availability of small arms or light weapons were the major driving factors culminating in child abduction and cattle raiding among the three communities. Increasing death rates and illiteracy, displacement of the affected community, poverty, and loss of valuable properties were rampant. Such practices eventually pose a threat to social coherence among the Dinka, Nuer and Murle communities.

**DISCUSSION**

Child abduction and cattle raiding have been traditional practices of Dinka, Nuer and Murle in Jonglei State using the conventional white weapons such as spears. However, political

upheavals and militarization of intercommunal conflicts have aggravated the situation (Wild et al., 2018). Consequently, losses of cattle and valuable assets including human, internal displacement, and abject poverty and insecurity have surfaced (Tor, 2016). This has negative impact on social coherence, security, stability as well as economic development (Kaprom, 2013). Furthermore, the most recent attacks of youth from the Murle community to Lou-Nuer’s Uror County have led to a very high death toll, burned down villages and abducted women and children (South Sudan News Now, 2020).

The practice of child abduction and cattle raiding at the community level reveals that Murle community has taken the lead. Seemingly, a low population growth due to infertility among these communities, particularly the Murle might have exacerbated the phenomenon of child abduction. The present study reveals that the Social Cubism theory, theory of child abduction and Social conflict theory have been used to gain insight into the impact of child abduction and cattle raiding in Jonglei State of South Sudan. Byrne and Carter (1996) argue that the Social Cubism theory is used to understand the complexity of cattle rustling among pastoral communities and is utilized in identifying challenges experienced in places, where violence erupts and in assessing the appropriateness of the interventions initiated



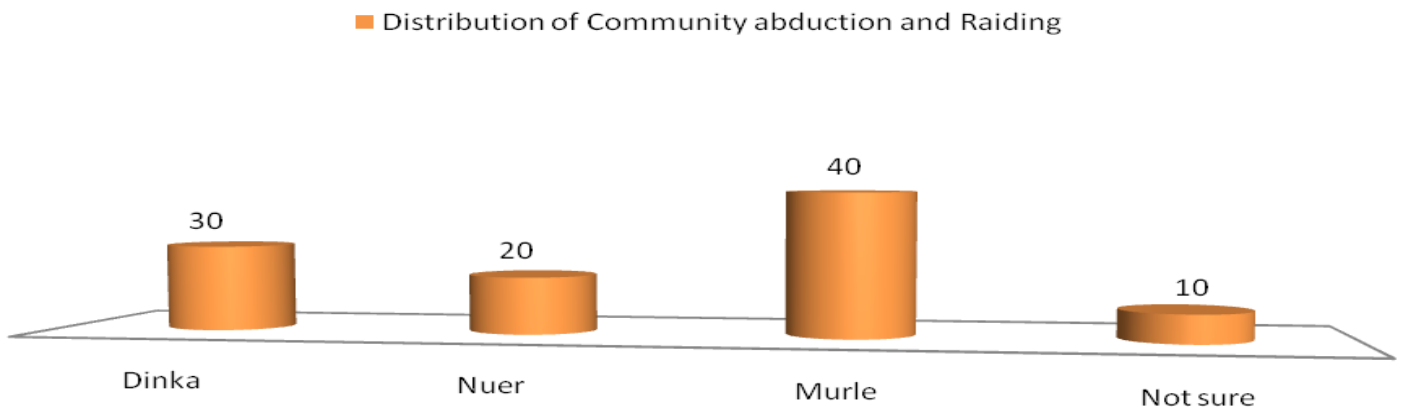
**Figure 1.** The community composition of the respondents among the Dinka, the Nuer and the Murle Jonglei State South Sudan.

**Table 2.** Distribution of respondents by Age of Households Heads among the Dinka, the Nuer and the Murle tribes in Jonglei State South Sudan.

Age (years)	Frequency	Percentage
18-29	46	18.4
30-39	94	37.6
40-49	57	22.8
50-59	43	17.2
Above 60	10	4
Total	250	100

**Table 3.** Gender based Households Heads, Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviewers among the Dinka, the Nuer and the Murle communities in Jonglei State South Sudan.

Gender	Households heads		Focus group discussions		Key informant interviewers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Men	161	64.4	30	53.6	77	50.6
Women	89	35.6	26	46.4	75	49.4
Total	250	100	56	100	152	100



**Figure 2.** Community abduction and raiding among the Dinka , the Nuer and the Murle communities in Jonglei State South Sudan.

to alleviate the problem. Theory of child abduction explains two main types of child abduction; namely family abduction and nonfamily abduction.

Each type involves different causal factors, developmental factors, and different motives, because different types of offenders tend to commit each of these abductions (Boudreaux et al., 1999; Finkelhor and Ormrod, 2000; Erikson and Friendship, 2002). Meanwhile, Social conflict theory views society as an arena of inequality that generates conflicts and social change. Turner (1989) defines conflict as bipolar (having two extremes), that is when the exploited classes become aware of their true interest, they form a revolutionary political organization and that stand against the dominant property- and property-owning classes.

Hutchinson (1996) states that contrary to the Dinka-Nuer-Murle relationship of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a radical change in ethnic identity and intergroup perceptions between the Dinka and Nuer across the country earlier to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, that the Dinka and Nuer shared a common bond. The effect of climate change and access to water and pastures is a central issue for local communities in Jonglei State. It seems that inhabitation of the Lou Nuer in a water poor area forces them to move into the territories of other communities during the dry season from November until March, which could prompt intercommunal conflicts over shared resources as one of the drivers (McCallum and Okech, 2013). Therefore, scarcity of grazing lands and water supply remains the stumbling block which usually leads to an increase in a number of clashes in Jonglei State. However, effective natural resource management may contribute to mitigation of such intercommunal conflicts (Mbugua, 2012).

Observations of child abduction and cattle raiding in Jonglei State have led some elders to state that such practices were only confined to a specified group of people, such as strong men, but today women are also involved in child abduction and cattle raiding. This statement is in line with the findings of Mwole (2016) who revealed that women were involved in cattle rustling between the Marakwet and the Pokot communities of North-Western Kenya. In this study, three quarters of the respondents explained that it is very risky to possess cattle with no weapons, because the raiders use firearms to raid cattle and abduct children. This explains the rampant availability and the use of guns in the intercommunal conflicts in Jonglei State. Such an explanation is in line with the findings of Wild et al. (2018). Therefore, provision of security, basic services delivery, and gender mainstreaming in economic opportunity are imperative for post- independent South Sudan (Alam et al., 2014).

## Conclusion

Cattle raiding becomes a joint mission of child abduction

among Dinka, Nuer and Murle communities in Jonglei State. The mechanical majority of cattle raiders and child abductors are the youth. Rampant firearms in the hands of the communities have hugely contributed and encouraged the practices of child abduction and cattle raiding. Disarmament, demobilization and re-integration (DDR), good governance, reduction of illiteracy rate and enhancement of peace building processes including intercommunal dialogue are highly needed for sustainable socio-economic development among Dinka, Nuer and Murle communities in Jonglei State, South Sudan.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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