

# ELEPHANTS ARE STORIES NOW

UNDERSTANDING THE LOSS OF  
ELEPHANTS IN SOUTH SUDAN

Isaac Waanzi Hillary, Machot Amuom, Cherry Leonardi



**Rift Valley Institute**

MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK

# “ ELEPHANTS ARE STORIES NOW.

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, ELEPHANTS  
WERE HERE (YALI). WE COULD WAKE  
UP IN THE MORNING AND SEE THE  
TRACKS OF ELEPHANTS BETWEEN  
HOUSES AND MY FATHER WOULD  
SAY THAT ELEPHANTS CROSSED THE  
VILLAGE WHEN YOU WERE ASLEEP. ”

*An elderly male cattle-keeper, Yiroi, 2021*



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## ELEPHANTS ARE STORIES NOW: UNDERSTANDING THE LOSS OF ELEPHANTS IN SOUTH SUDAN

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### THE PROJECT

This research was conducted in 2021-22 as part of a broader project on the history of elephants and human-wildlife relations in South Sudan led by Cherry Leonardi, supported by a Rachel Carson Center Fellowship in 2020 and facilitated by Anna Rowett and the Rift Valley Institute in South Sudan. A related article will be published in 2024: Cherry Leonardi, “‘Extraordinarily Inconspicuous’ Elephants: The Interspecies Constitution and Contestations of the Ivory Commodity Frontier in Nineteenth-Century South Sudan’, *Environmental History* (forthcoming, 2024).

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### COVER

A Bongo elephant table made by Marko Molokor. Tonj, Warrap State. Photo by Ragnhild Gylver.

# CONTENTS

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Introduction	5
Living with elephants	7
Hunting elephants	11
'Elephants bought the guns': Conflict and ivory-trading	17
'Elephant is a person' ( <i>Akon ee ran</i> )	21
Living without elephants	24
Conclusion	26
Bibliography	27

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# INTRODUCTION

Elephants are iconic animals in South Sudan, featuring on bank notes and state flags and in many myths and sayings. ‘When the elephants fight, the grass suffers’ is one example widespread across the African continent: a popular expression about the effects that conflicts among political and military leaders have on ordinary people. The size and power of elephants has always impressed people and made them important symbols in human cultures. Known for their equally huge appetites, elephants have also played a major role in shaping the landscape by opening up dense forests and creating grazing areas for cattle and other species. Yet over the past fifty years, South Sudan’s elephants have also suffered when people fight. Killed for their ivory and meat to fund and feed armies, elephant numbers have fallen from over 133,000 in the 1970s to possibly only a few hundred today.<sup>1</sup> As some of the elderly men and women interviewed for this report pointed out, children growing up in South Sudan today may never see elephants or other wild animals that were so prominent in these elders’ childhood memories. ‘Elephants are stories now’, as one put it.<sup>2</sup>

What does this loss mean for South Sudanese people, and is there any prospect of conserving or increasing the few remaining elephants in the country? Some of our interviewees had no regrets about the disappearance of these potentially dangerous and destructive animals, which in the past had posed a threat to crops and people. Recent migrations of elephants and other wildlife across the Ugandan border are also perceived negatively by some people in Kapoeta.<sup>3</sup> How did people manage the problematic effects of elephants in the past, and are there lessons to be learned from this for managing human-elephant relations today? These are timely questions as South Sudan’s Ministry of Wildlife and Tourism has recently heralded a new era for conservation through its partnership with African Parks Network to manage Boma and Badingilo National Parks and expressed the hope ‘that people and wildlife can prosper together’.<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 Philip Winter, ‘AECGG Elephant Conservation Plan: Sudan’, 1991. Available via the Sudan Open Archive: <https://www.sudanarchive.net/?a=d&d=UNEP-02.1.12&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN%7ctxTI%7ctxAU----->. Personal communication with Philip Winter, February 2024.
  - 2 Interview by Machuot Amuom with two elderly male cattle-keepers, Yirol North, 21 December 2021.
  - 3 Nhial Tiitmamer, Ranga Gworo and Tim Midgley, ‘Climate change and conflict in South Sudan: Community perceptions and implications for conflict-sensitive aid’, Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility South Sudan, July 2023, 7.
  - 4 Marcus Westberg, ‘Building a New Frontier of Conservation’, *African Parks*, 3 May 2023, <https://www.africanparks.org/building-new-frontier-conservation>. For an overview of national and international conservation initiatives in South Sudan, see Philip Winter, ‘Conflict and Conservation in South Sudan’, CSRF Blog, 28 Feb 2024, <https://www.csrfsouthsudan.org/blog/conflict-and-conservation-in-south-sudan/>.

This report offers some preliminary responses to these questions, based on a small pilot project in which 23 oral history interviews were conducted in the Yambio and Yirol areas with elderly men and women who had personal memories and knowledge of elephants. Their narratives reveal the changing ways that elephants came to be valued and hunted for their tusks as well as their meat. But the interviews and older records also show that elephants were associated with other kinds of value. The social bonds that are evident between elephants, and the care and protectiveness they exhibit towards their young, are easily comparable with human social values. Many communities in South Sudan revere elephants in spiritual and cultural ways: they can be seen as persons and as relatives with some myths telling of a common ancestry with humans.

The personal memories and direct experience of elephants in South Sudan are increasingly becoming limited to elderly people. This makes the preservation of knowledge about them in cultural forms like stories, songs and material heritage even more important, together with historical records of human-elephant relations. Culture and nature are often treated separately: governments have ministries of culture and ministries of environment and wildlife, while different academic disciplines have traditionally studied either human cultures or natural environments. Efforts to conserve wildlife in South Sudan often refer to its value as natural heritage and its potential monetary value through tourism.<sup>5</sup> However, to fully appreciate the value of elephants and wildlife, we need to understand their significance and meanings in human cultures too. The loss of elephants is a loss to cultural as well as natural heritage. And in turn, cultural heritage is an important source of indigenous knowledge about wildlife and environments which should inform conservation and environmental management efforts.

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5 Westberg, 'Building a new frontier'.

# LIVING WITH ELEPHANTS

One of the original Nuer... was called Loh. Loh's wife gave birth to a monstrous girl-child with long teeth. She was named Nyalou. Her appetite was enormous and increased with the growth of her body, so that when she was still quite young, the food of man was insufficient to satisfy her hunger. Every day she would go into the forest and fill her belly with grass and the branches of trees, with roots and heglig nuts, and every day she grew larger and larger. At last she swelled to such proportions that she could no longer squeeze herself through the door of her home. She called her people together and said to them, «The time has come for me to leave you. I must go to the forest and live there, for there only can I find sufficient food to feed me.» Then she took her sleeping skins and attached them to her ears and straightway they became part of her body. «I am now different to you», she said, «and my descendants will live in the forest apart from mankind. Men will want to kill me because of my huge teeth and because my flesh, is fat and sweet...»

P. P. Howell, 'A Note on Elephants and Elephant Hunting among the Nuer' (1945).<sup>6</sup>

The British District Commissioner who recorded this story in the 1940s added that it 'expresses the mystical link between man – that is Nuer – and elephant'.<sup>7</sup> Other South Sudanese communities also tell similar stories about their origins, suggesting that humans and elephants had a common ancestor.<sup>8</sup> Such mythical narratives contain important truths: human and elephant species both originated in Africa and evolved together over vast time periods.<sup>9</sup> The great size and vegetarian appetite of elephants highlighted in the Nuer story has been important for humans and other species throughout this long history. With their huge footsteps, elephant ancestors created pathways that prehistoric human hunters would have used.<sup>10</sup> Such pathways remained important in twentieth-century South Sudan, as two elderly Dinka interviewees explained:

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6 P. P. Howell, 'A Note on Elephants and Elephant Hunting among the Nuer', *Sudan Notes and Records*, 26/1 (1945), 96-7.

7 Howell, 'A Note on Elephants', 96-7.

8 For example, a Lokoya story recorded by the Catholic missionary Spagnolo in 1933 tells of five brothers who became the fathers of the Bari, Lokoya, Lotuho, buffalos and elephants: Simon Simonse, *Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centralism, and the Scapegoat King in Southeastern Sudan*, Kampala: Fountain, 2017, 58.

9 Dan Yulie, *Elephant*, London: Reaktion Books, 2008, 8-26.

10 Gary Haynes, 'Mammoth landscapes: good country for hunter-gatherers', *Quaternary International* 142-143 (2006) 20-29.

We are cattle-keepers and cattle-keepers are not different from animals. We need grass and water and it is the same for animals in the forest. When we used to drive cattle here, all these forests were thick and we had to follow the places opened up by elephants. Even the roads you see today connecting villages were routes of cattle-keepers and elephants... You know elephants move in groups like cows and they have seasons of movement like us. When the flood is high, they move out of the swamps to *gok* [higher ground]. So you could get elephants mixed with cows in the months of July, August and September.<sup>11</sup>

The way from Pajot to Kirkou was an elephants' path. The bushes were dark and thick and it was difficult to use another path. You could find the dung of elephants, wet and dry..... a lot of thorns in the dung. That place has a lot of acacia trees, which is what elephants like.<sup>12</sup>

Elephants played a crucial role in creating grazing areas for cattle and other species, by consuming and crushing trees and bush. As argued by the zoologist R.M. Laws, 'After man himself, probably no other animal has had as great an effect on African habitats as the African bush elephant'.<sup>13</sup> They propagate tree seeds through their dung, as one interviewee emphasized: 'elephants planted the mangoes'.<sup>14</sup> Elephants can also dig water-holes and create salt-licks used by other species.<sup>15</sup> Cattle-herders particularly benefited from elephants' destruction of dense vegetation harbouring tsetse flies, which carry the *Trypanosome* parasites causing bovine and human sleeping-sickness.<sup>16</sup>

But while humans and their cattle benefited from the effects of elephants on the landscape, that same size and appetite of elephants could also be a threat to people and particularly their crops.

There is something you hear: '*ciet ran ci akon nong*' [like a person beaten by the elephants]. This is said when a person is in a condition where he cannot be saved. A

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- 11 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 24 December 2021.
- 12 Interview by Machot Amuom with two elderly male cattle-keepers, Yirol North, 21 December 2021.
- 13 R. M. Laws, 'Elephants as Agents of Habitat and Landscape Change in East Africa', *Oikos* 21/1 (1970), 2; L. A. Evans & W. M. Adams, 'Elephants as actors in the political ecology of human–elephant conflict', *Trans Inst Br Geogr.* 43 (2018), 635.
- 14 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly man, Yambio, 15 December 2021.
- 15 Jeheskel Shoshani, 'The African elephant and its environment', in Doran H. Ross (ed.), *Elephant: The Animal and its Ivory in African Culture*, Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1992, 43–59; Jules Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc: notes géographiques et ethnologiques et les chasses à l'éléphant dans le pays des Dinka et des Djour*, Paris: Arthus Bertrand, 1864, 118; Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male church elder, Nzara, 16 December 2021.
- 16 Andrew Reid, 'Archaeological ivory and the impact of the elephant in Mawogola', *World Archaeology* 47/3 (2015), 482; N. Thomas Håkansson, 'The Human Ecology of World Systems in East Africa: The Impact of the Ivory Trade', *Human Ecology* 32/5 (2004), 561–91.



person beaten by the elephant, even if he is alive: he is seen as dead on earth.<sup>17</sup>

One area near Yirol called Mathiany is said to have been abandoned because of elephants. A family lived and cultivated there but left their fields unguarded at night while they slept away in the cattle camp to escape the mosquitos in Mathiany. Elephants came and consumed all the crops and then cattle disease killed all the family's cows, so some people died and others had to migrate far away. This disaster is still remembered in songs and people are warned not to be like that family but to guard their crops at night. This illustrates the value of intangible heritage like songs for preserving and passing on indigenous knowledge about managing wildlife.<sup>18</sup>

In the Yambio area, elephants used to pose even more threat to farms because of their liking for crops grown here like bananas, pumpkins, mangos and cotton.<sup>19</sup> A Zande saying translates approximately as 'You are the elephant that killed the owner of the farm': a way to criticize someone for taking something by force.<sup>20</sup> In general, elephants stayed away from people in uninhabited areas, but they would 'remember about the food that they had smelled in our homes' and come to 'make war' on people.<sup>21</sup> People had methods of trying to protect their crops and homes: they would beat a slit-drum to warn other communities of elephants coming, and learned that fire was the best way to scare the animals away. Shouting and other loud noises were not enough to scare them, hence the expression in Zande: 'To shout at the elephant is to praise it'.<sup>22</sup>

Yet elephants did fear and avoid people, especially when hunting for ivory increased at different times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, discussed further below. One elderly man in Nzara, near Yambio, revealed considerable knowledge of elephant behaviour and ecology in explaining their avoidance of people:

It [the elephant] cannot get scared of any animal. The only thing it understands is that God made its eyes so that it can see the man called *Bangbaara*; he is the only person that it fears. *Bangbaara* means person... Only this person alone has power equal to it; it fears him. It doesn't fear any common things or the forest or anything that is there, because nothing was like it. So the elephant started to descend into the forest and said it will live its life in the forest, in a good forest. After that, the swamp which had good mud: that was where they would go and play; that is their field... They would scrape the

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17 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 24 December 2021.

18 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 3 January 2022.

19 Interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male church elder, Nzara, 16 December 2021; and a male community elder, Rimenze, 14 December 2021.

20 Interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community elder, Rimenze, 14 December 2021; and an elderly man and woman in Yambio, 15 December 2021.

21 Interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community elder, Rimenze, 14 December 2021; and a male community elder, Rimenze, 26 December 2021.

22 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly man, Yambio, 15 December 2021.

area of *giya* [salty clay].. other animals would come like buffalos, like waterbuck, like pigs to come to eat this *giya*... Where there was *giya*, you see that place of elephants is that soft, and... nothing can fall again and grow. [Only] grass grows there because of its stubbornness.

The thing about the elephant: the elephant would drink water that is a whole barrel to satisfy it. And the elephant eats fifty kilos of food to satisfy it. Those are things that it crumples into its belly... When it walks, it fears nothing. When elephant sees a person, it has much anxiety; since it can now smell the person, where exactly is he? On which side is he? It will stand. That was the male. It would lower its trunk and raise its eyes and line it up and lower it again below. And it would take its ears this side and that side, like this, and start to measure the place, to see. These ears show that person was there. It would measure the place with this nose that was a trunk, it was curved here. Always it measures the place, it takes air, it takes air. If it looks without seeing the person, but it smells the odour of the person, then it snorts, *fu'ooo*, and if elephants were there in that place, if it snorts twice, they would start fleeing... They would run from that place. Only where they don't get the odour of people, there they are happy to stay well.<sup>23</sup>

Both elephants and people tried to avoid each other, preferring to keep a mutual distance. Only their mutual need for food would sometimes bring them into closer proximity and conflict. While crops could attract elephants, their huge bodies could also be an important source of food for people.

# HUNTING ELEPHANTS

It doesn't look for the human to kill. It kills the human because the human looks for it.<sup>24</sup>

Hunting elephants was an extremely dangerous activity, particularly before the advent of automatic weapons. A Zande saying cautions that 'the hunter of elephants: it's the elephant that would kill him'.<sup>25</sup> Even nowadays, interviewees remembered individual hunters who were killed by elephants. In the Yambio area, their families maintain a kind of feud with elephants, refusing to speak or hear the name of the animal. Elephants' size, tusks, trunk and thick skin and skulls made them both difficult and dangerous to hunt: 'When there are other animals, there is no need to kill the elephant. Hunting it down was difficult.'<sup>26</sup>

Three things made (some) people nevertheless take the big risk of hunting elephants: the large amount of meat and fat they could provide to whole communities; the opportunity to demonstrate courage, fitness, skill and teamwork in hunting; and the exchange value of ivory. Interviewees in Yambio emphasized what a great amount of meat just one elephant could provide: people would come from all around to cut and dry pieces from it.<sup>27</sup> It was also an important source of oil which was melted down and stored in pots.<sup>28</sup> Feet were a particular source of fat: 'one of its feet produced one jerrican, twenty litres of oil.'<sup>29</sup> People also made use of the ivory for practical and ornamental purposes, particularly as a tool [*wata*] for making bark-cloth [see *Image 1*].<sup>30</sup> But 'they never knew the price it had'.<sup>31</sup>

That time people used to see elephants just as animals of the forest that were fit to be eaten, and only later when Europeans and Arabs and other types of people came to buy the teeth of elephants, it caused that thing now that Azande go into the forest to

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24 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man (former Anyanya One soldier), Yirol East, 2 January 2022.

25 Isaac Waanzi Hillary, personal communication with Cherry Leonardi, 19 December 2021.

26 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man, a renowned hunter, Yirol East, 16 January 2022.

27 Interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community chief, Ezo, 19 December 2021; and an elderly male retired wildlife officer, Ezo, 20 December 2021.

28 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly man, Rimenze, 14 December 2021.

29 Interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community elder, Rimenze, 14 December 2021; an elderly man in Yambio, 15 December 2021; and an elderly man, Rimenze, 26 December 2021.

30 Interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly man in Rimenze, 14 December 2021; also an elderly woman in Yambio, 15 December 2021.

31 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male church elder, Nzara, 16 December 2021.

kill elephants in mass form. Because they saw money in it, that caused them to do it. Otherwise, elephants were among Azande as a good animal for food; there was nothing else.<sup>32</sup>



Image 1. Ivory wata bark-cloth tool. Photo by Isaac Waanzi Hillary, February 2022.

Elephant-hunting was always a communal effort, involving teams of hunters working together or sometimes whole communities. In the Yambio area, a special kind of fire [*ngumbe*] used to be started to encircle elephants and other animals and drive them towards the spears of hunters.<sup>33</sup> Other methods to kill individual elephants included pit-traps with a spear in the bottom for elephants to fall onto.<sup>34</sup> Or hunters climbed trees and speared elephants below them with a special weighted elephant-spear (*kawaja*) in the spinal bone or the heart, so that they only ran a short distance before dying or being killed. The Bongo were particularly well-known as elephant-hunters: they would blow a special whistle called *yambu* which had magical power to bring elephants to the area [See *Image 2 and Image 3*].<sup>35</sup>

32 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community chief, Ezo, 19 December 2021.

33 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community chief, Ezo, 19 December 2021; '19 hunters suffer burn injuries in Yambio', *Radio Tamazuj* 5 March 2021, <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/19-hunters-suffer-burn-injuries-at-yambio-hospital>.

34 Interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly man, Rimenze, 14 December 2021; a male community chief, Ezo, 19 December 2021; and a male community elder, Rimenze, 26 December 2021.

35 Interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community elder, Rimenze, 14 December 2021; an elderly man, Yambio, 15 December 2021; a male church elder, Nzara, 16 December 2021; an elderly man, Nzara, 17 December 2021; an elderly male retired wildlife officer, Ezo, 20 December 2021; an elderly man, Rimenze, 26 December 2021; and an elderly woman, Rimenze, 26 December 2021.



*Image 2. A Kura -- Yambu hunting whistle. Photo by Isaac Waanzi Hillary, September 2023.*

Interviewees in the Yirol area recalled hunting elephants with spears as a test of fitness and brotherhood and as a highly organised collective endeavour with clear rules to ensure its sustainability:

There were rules of hunting; these female elephants were not killed. The only male elephant in a herd was not killed. When you get two animals – male and a female – don't kill both. Kill one and leave one. These were the rules. There were also times of hunting. When it is a time for fishing, around February, March and April, the dry months: this was a time for fishing and no hunting was allowed. Hunting could resume when the grass was tall around the sixth and seventh month. There were also rules when distributing the meat. There were parts reserved for the lead hunter, the one who speared the elephant first. Hand, head and the right tusk was for the lead spear man. Hunting was organized around age sets. People who knew each other's hearts. When one person is attacked by the animal, they make a resistance together. No one should run and leave this brother behind... My generation was the last to use spears and arrows for hunting. There were good people who run very well. Now you don't need to run, you need to be a shooter. Being a good runner made you a good hunter.<sup>36</sup>

Another elderly man who had been a renowned hunter recalled the value of hunting in preparing young men for warfare:

At your age, I knew every animal in the bush. I hunted all these animals. I ate the meat of all these animals. There was no government. Hunting was something good. It was fun and it was how young people could know who was stronger than the other. Spearing and running, the tactics of chasing animals, the courage you get when your age mate is attacked by the animal and you need to help. These were the same tactics needed when

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36 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 24 December 2021.

you are going to fight other people.<sup>37</sup>

Hunting was only done in order to obtain food, but it also functioned as a test of young men's fitness, as a third interviewee from Yirol explained:

You cannot hunt what you cannot eat. You hunt what you eat. Before the (most) hunted animals were buffalo, antelopes, warthog, and giraffes. There were other small animals. When I was a young man of your age, I was a real runner. I could go hit an animal with my club or spear and then run. Hunting was something well organized. It was like going for a fight. You could come out of the cattle-camp and do a mock battle – running around jumping and dodging the mock spears. You could see from the mock battle who was not fit to chase the animal. Once there was a screening of fit and less fit, the people who are fit and better runners could go and provoke the elephants or buffalos.<sup>38</sup>

In this area, hunters also used methods similar to those practiced by the Zande, such as digging pits or throwing a weighted elephant-spear [tang akon] from a tree. The direct collective attacks described above were the most dangerous methods, especially against elephants or buffalo.<sup>39</sup>

Such hunting was outlawed or restricted by the British colonial government, as some of the oldest interviewees recalled. The use of fire was banned, so people began to use guns to hunt elephants, but only certain chiefs and elders were permitted to have guns by the government. One Zande chief used to send hunters/poachers with his gun to the forest to get ivory to sell.<sup>40</sup> The government forbade hunting of certain animals and the penalty was a five-year prison sentence or a heavy fine in cattle, so that really deterred people from hunting unless they could do it without any risk of government surveillance.<sup>41</sup> One interviewee in the Yirol area highlighted the misperception that the government banned all indigenous hunting for food



*Image 3. A man holding a kavaja spear used to kill elephants. Isaac Waanzi Hillary, December 2021.*

- 37 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man, a renowned hunter and wrestler, Yirol East, 28 December 2021.
- 38 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man, a renowned hunter, Yirol East, 16 January 2022.
- 39 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man, a renowned hunter, Yirol East, 16 January 2022.
- 40 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community chief, Ezo, 19 December 2021.
- 41 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community elder, Rimenze, 14 December 2021; interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man, a renowned hunter and wrestler, Yirol East, 28 December 2021.

while allowing foreign or northern Sudanese hunting for sport and ivory:

In those days [1940s], a week cannot finish without a mouth [report] of a person being killed by the animals, including children. We never saw there was going to be a world safe from the attacks of forest animals... The problem started when guns came. The first time I saw the gun was in Shambe and this was the first time I heard the sound of the gun. These were Arabs coming to hunt our animals here in Shambe and people said it was the government. I saw a white person. I only used to hear of white people until I visited Shambe. This was the same time that hunting by us was stopped. Hunting was punished: three to four cows. Killing rhino was ten cows. We could only hunt in places without government. We hunted with spears and sticks. At that time only fishing was not punished. Hunting even small animals was punished. When we complained to the police officer at the meeting of Akuoc [1954], the chief who raised his hand to talk about the government hunting animals which were not eaten but allowed to rot in the forest was dismissed by the government. These government hunters could kill an elephant or other animal and leave the body to rot in the forest. They took good meat and they left the rest of the animal to rot. When a person was caught with meat, he was arrested, beaten, fined, jailed or made to pay cows.<sup>42</sup>

Similar restrictions in the Yambio area made people perceive elephants as ‘the government’s animals’ and tusks became known as ‘government teeth’ (*ga hukuma rinde*).<sup>43</sup> But here, people also remembered benefiting from the meat when wildlife officers killed elephants:

Government would take his own, that is the teeth, and return with it. Then its meat would help the people of the area.<sup>44</sup>

If elephants were causing problems in an area, particularly if they were eating cotton, the chief would report it to the wildlife officers (known locally as shooters-of-elephants) in the town and they would come and kill the biggest elephant, assumed to be the leader, to deter the rest.<sup>45</sup> Then people would be allowed to come and cut meat from it.<sup>46</sup> Both the benefits and risks of being a wildlife officer are preserved in a Zande song, which one interview knew and sang:

The shooter of elephants: you eat the trunk of elephant, child *eee*. I will marry you because of your good life *yo’uuuu*, the shooter of elephants, you come, I ask you child

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42 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 3 January 2022; Peter Molloy, *The Cry of the Fish Eagle*, London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1957, 136.

43 Interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly man, Nzara, 17 December 2021; and an elderly man, Rimenze, 26 December 2021.

44 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community elder, Rimenze, 26 December 2021.

45 Interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community elder, Rimenze, 14 December 2021; an elderly man, Ezo, 19 December 2021; and a male community elder in Rimenze, 26 December 2021.

46 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly woman, Yambio, 15 December 2021.



*eee*, you come I ask you, mother *eeee*. Shooter of elephants: you will eat the trunk of elephant. Shooter of elephant: you will die during the time of elephant [laughs].<sup>47</sup>

One interview explained that these wildlife officers were really protectors-of-elephants, but they became known as shooters-of-elephants because they would shoot one elephant to scare the rest away from people's crops and homes.<sup>48</sup> Wildlife officers were responsible for game control as well as protection.

Despite the government prohibitions and risks, some individuals nevertheless engaged in illegal hunting:

Many people used to send their children to school because they went poaching and killed elephant. They sold its parts and it brought money to them and they would send children to school to learn to become people tomorrow and next tomorrow.<sup>49</sup>

The motivation to hunt elephants would be radically increased by both commerce and conflicts over the course of the twentieth century.

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47 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly woman, Yambio, 15 December 2021.

48 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly male retired wildlife officer, Ezo, 20 December 2021.

49 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community chief, Ezo, 19 December 2021.



# 'ELEPHANTS BOUGHT THE GUNS': CONFLICT AND IVORY-TRADING

It was ivory that first drew major external commercial and imperial interests into the region of South Sudan in the nineteenth century. International demand for ivory was increasing due to industrial manufacture of commodities like ivory cutlery, combs, billiard balls and piano keys in Europe and North America. At the same time, the Ottoman ruler of Egypt, Muhammed Ali, had invaded and occupied northern Sudan and launched the first expeditions up the Nile to reach Equatoria in 1840-41, in search of ivory, gold and slaves. This opened the area up for the arrival of ivory traders from Europe, Sudan, Egypt and the wider Ottoman territories over the next few decades. The traders relied on South Sudanese hunters and middlemen like chiefs to supply them with ivory. They also raided communities for cattle to exchange for ivory and captured and enslaved women and children. In this violent economy, ivory became a means of obtaining cattle and buying protection from raiding.

The ivory trade was disrupted by the Mahdi's uprising in northern Sudan in the 1880s, but the British rulers of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium were quick to re-establish ivory trading and sought to maintain a government monopoly over this valuable resource. As interviewees detailed above, only certain chiefs and government employees, as well as foreign hunters, were given licenses to shoot specified numbers of wild animals. They were also licensed to use firearms, as the Zande chief Tembura requested in a letter to the Governor-General of the Sudan in 1902:

The elephant is found in numbers in our country, but we are short of arms. So we beg of you to send us the 'Khushkhan' such as formerly used by the dervishes to shoot the elephant with, and to be thereby useful to Government.<sup>50</sup>

The first significant challenge to such government monopolisation of ivory came during the first Southern Sudanese armed rebellion against the newly independent Sudan government in the 1960s. The Anyanya rebels had few resources or arms, and so ivory became a vital means of obtaining weaponry, as one interviewee recalled:

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50 'Sudan Intelligence Report 91', Appendix B, February 1902, cited in Brendan Tuttle, 'A trip to the zoo: colonial sightseeing and spectacle in Sudan (1901-1933)', *Journal of Tourism History* 11/3 (2019), 224.

It was the elephants that bought the guns. Because we used to kill them, the soldiers that were Anyanya 1, they used to kill elephants... Yes, and carried the teeth of them and bought guns with it from the people who had the factory. They used to ask them what riches do you have? They would say elephants are what we have, but if we give the teeth to you it can help in paying the debt of your guns.<sup>51</sup>

Another interviewee recounted that soldiers sometimes shot elephants for meat, while some of the senior Anyanya commanders gained wealth by trading ivory with northern Sudanese traders. The division of the tusks among the government and the area chiefs led to increase in killing of elephants:

Some people got rich. When you killed five elephants, you gave four to our commander, four to chief and two to you. This was very hard. Many people killed many elephants because they wanted the tusks also.<sup>52</sup>

But civilians and even junior officers were not allowed to hunt elephants.<sup>53</sup> One former Anyanya soldier explained that lack of ammunition made it impossible to hunt elephants for meat:

On our way to Congo [in 1969], this was the first time I saw an elephant, many elephants. We went to a border camp and only a few who were soldiers at the time had guns. There were guns but the problem was the bullets. You could not waste a single bullet like today. You couldn't shoot the elephant because to kill an elephant needed many bullets. We used to shoot small animals for food. We spent a number of months eating wild food and meat.<sup>54</sup>

Ivory was therefore a more important motivation for hunting elephants, in order to obtain arms and ammunition. The increasing effectiveness of the Anyanya forces, united under Joseph Lagu, led the Sudan government to negotiate the Addis Ababa peace agreement in 1972. One interviewee saw ivory as central to this outcome: 'elephants created that peace that existed between us and Arabs'.<sup>55</sup>

The peace did not end the killing of elephants, however, as ivory trading boomed in the 1970s, despite renewed attempts at government regulation of hunting and trading:

When the peace came, the soldiers were still killing the animals. Elephants were not

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51 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community elder, Rimenze, 14 December 2021.

52 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man (former Anyanya One soldier), Yirol East, 2 January 2022.

53 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man (former Anyanya One soldier), Yirol East, 2 January 2022.

54 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man (former Anyanya One and SPLA soldier), Yirol North, 2 February 2022.

55 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community elder, Rimenze, 14 December 2021.

killed for meat; they were killed for tusks. You could get the elephant killed, rotten, and tusks removed and body not skinned. It didn't stop. The Arab traders were coming and working with commanders [of Anya-Nya] in this area [Yirol] and in Shambe. The Arabs were coming with money to buy tusks. We didn't know the tusks were bought with big money in Khartoum. Some people who knew got involved and became wealthy. People like N got rich because of elephants. The elephants made families here. N has seventeen wives because he was part of the trade. He was having big herds of cattle.<sup>56</sup>

Another elderly man recalled the novel exchange value of ivory at this time:

When that year ended (1975), we came to side of Shambe with our cows and there were stories of people hunting elephants with visitors (Arabs) from the North (Sudan). People were going there to get clothes. We were told if you bring one elephant tusk, you would be given three cloth items: shorts, a shirt and a blanket. A blanket was something nice and new. Before we used papyrus crafted material (Ayiek) to cover bodies when it was cold. Many people were taking the visitors around to hunt elephants. We used to pay for the cattle vaccination but when these people came, they vaccinated our cattle for free. They were good: once they killed the elephant... they skinned it and give the dry meat to us. It was later that they were taking both dry meat and tusks when the boats were coming to Shambe.<sup>57</sup>

Despite this trade, there were still large elephant populations in Southern Sudan, estimated at over 133,000 in 1981.<sup>58</sup> As interviewees emphasized, the biggest change came after the outbreak of the second civil war in 1983: 'There was no control. Even civilians hunted, killed and sold their tusks... This was the time many elephants were killed.'<sup>59</sup> Elephants were killed for both meat and ivory, but again it was the value of ivory to trade for guns that made them a particular target of both government and rebel armies, as a former SPLA soldier recalled:

We had to kill elephants because we knew this was a war and nothing was going to survive. Elephants came to be killed because of ivory not meat. There were other animals killed for meat. We were told the only thing to sell and bring us guns from the Ethiopians was ivory.<sup>60</sup>

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56 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man, a renowned hunter and wrestler, Yirol East, 28 December 2021.

57 Interview by Machot Amuom with two elderly male cattle-keepers, Yirol North, 21 December 2021.

58 Philip Winter, 'AECCG Elephant Conservation Plan: Sudan'.

59 Interviews by Machot Amuom with an elderly man (former Anyanya One soldier), Yirol East, 2 January 2022; an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 3 January 2022; two elderly male cattle-keepers, Yirol North, 21 December 2021; and an elderly man, a renowned hunter, Yirol East, 16 January 2022.

60 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man (former Anyanya One and SPLA soldier), Yirol North, 2 February 2022.

The war also brought much hardship and hunger for civilians, which made elephant meat particularly important, as another interviewee recalled:

The year of ‘Makur’s hunger’ [1988], there was a killing of animals because there was nothing to eat. At that time, if you killed an elephant the whole village feasted for a month.... Even the soldiers then were doing it to save people from hunger. Many people still died. They killed the elephant, invite the village people and take the tusks. Animals saved people that year.<sup>61</sup>

Since the global ban on ivory, the trade is often blamed on international organised crime and demand from particular countries. It also brought opportunities for some military leaders and other individuals to gain wealth. But it is important to understand that both ivory and elephant meat have at times been vital to the survival of people and rebel movements in South Sudan. The necessity of killing elephants to obtain guns or food, together with the capacity to do so more easily than ever before with automatic weapons, drove a change in the scale of hunting which decimated elephant populations by the twenty-first century. But while this overrode former limits and constraints on hunting, elephants are still not seen simply as meat and commodities.

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61 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 24 December 2021.

# 'ELEPHANT IS A PERSON' (AKON EE RAN)

As the stories of common human-elephant ancestry demonstrate, people have often seen admirable human-like qualities in elephants, such as strength, cooperation and protectiveness of their young.<sup>62</sup> An interviewee who had hunted elephants recounted seeing females hurrying their young away from danger 'just like people'.<sup>63</sup> A Dinka interviewee explained the common saying 'Akon ee ran' (elephant is a person) as referring to the reluctance of elephants to attack people. Another recounted a fable which ended with the elephant forgiving the fox for his trickery:

The elephant is a merciful animal and that's why people say, "be like the elephant". Elephants ignore many things. When you are big, you just ignore things and move on. It makes you bigger.<sup>64</sup>

Elephants often feature in folklore and proverbs,<sup>65</sup> such as the Zande saying that 'the teeth of the elephant can't defeat it', meaning that however long and heavy its tusks are, it will always manage to carry them. This is said to parents to mean they must care for and protect their children, however many they have or how much of a burden they seem.<sup>66</sup> The lengthy pregnancy and lactation periods of elephants is also referenced in the Zande description of women as 'fruit-elephants' if their children are widely spaced in age.<sup>67</sup> Around Yirol, elephant dung was smeared on the stomachs of women to ensure that they gave birth safely, while pregnant women

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62 Interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community chief, Ezo, 19 December 2021; and an elderly male retired wildlife officer, Ezo, 20 December 2021.

63 Interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly man; Yambio, 15 December 2021; and a male community chief in Ezo, 19 December 2021; Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc*, 127, 148.

64 Interviews by Machot Amuom with an elderly man, a renowned hunter and wrestler, Yirol East, 28 December 2021; and an elderly man, a renowned hunter, Yirol East, 16 January 2022. The Nuer also refer to the elephant as a 'person': Sharon Hutchinson, 'Dangerous to Eat': Rethinking Pollution States among the Nuer of Sudan', *Africa* 62/4 (1992), 495.

65 Elephants feature in several animal fables as told in interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly man, Nzara, 17 December 2021; a middle-aged man, a former hunter, Bodo, 26 December 2021; interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man, a renowned hunter, Yirol East, 16 January 2022. Elephants also play a central role in the widespread myth of the spear and the bead: See: Simonse, *Kings of Disaster*, 326-8.

66 Interviews by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly woman, Yambio, 15 December 2021; and a male community elder, Rimenze, 26 December 2021.

67 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly male retired wildlife officer, Ezo, 20 December 2021.

were not supposed to step in the tracks of elephants in the forest because it was believed to cause miscarriage.<sup>68</sup>

Comparisons between elephants and people also extended to the status and spiritual consequences of their killing. In the 1870s, Bari men were reported to wear an ivory armband only if they had killed either a man or an elephant.<sup>69</sup> Lotuho hunters danced funerals for elephants that they killed, and tusks could be used like spears for swearing oaths.<sup>70</sup> The spears still used in some chiefs' courts for swearing oaths are said to have the blood of elephants or people on them, which gives them their spiritual power. For Nuer communities, hunting elephants was comparable with fighting human enemies in battle and had similar potential to bring honour but also the risk of spiritual consequences. According to a British district officer in the 1940s, this meant that 'it is considered cowardly and spiritually dangerous to attack the elephant without giving it due warning to stand and fight'.<sup>71</sup> Like Nuer hunters, Zande hunters who landed the first spear into an elephant had to undergo special rituals after the killing to avoid any spiritual harm.<sup>72</sup> Certain elephants were also believed to have a magical substance [*mangu*] inside them that made them impossible to kill, and therefore particularly dangerous to hunt.<sup>73</sup>

Around Yirol, Dinka clans are associated with a particular animal as their totem or relative. One interviewee explained that 'animals and humans were one... we believe we are relatives of animals', but that humans and animals became separated long ago by human conflicts. The clans which claim a relationship to elephants also had a special role in providing ritual protection for farms from elephants.<sup>74</sup>

There are animals that we don't call animals but have a relation with us: rhino, giraffes and elephants are gods. When you kill one, there is always a rain. You cannot kill them for no reason unless you want to eat.<sup>75</sup>

The spiritual reverence for elephants and familial relationships with them demonstrate the importance of culture and religion for managing relations with wildlife and for conservation

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68 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 3 January 2022.

69 Charles T. Wilson and Robert W. Felkin, *Uganda and the Egyptian Soudan*, Vol. 2, London: S. Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1882, 97.

70 Simonse, *Kings of Disaster*, 328, 24.

71 Howell, 'A Note on Elephants'.

72 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male church elder, Nzara, 16 December 2021; and a male community elder, Rimenze, 26 December 2021.

73 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly man, Yambio, 15 December 2021.

74 Interviews by Machot Amuom with an elderly man, a renowned hunter and wrestler, Yirol East, 28 December 2021; and with an elderly man (former Anyanya One soldier), Yirol East, 2 January 2022.

75 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 28 December 2021.

efforts. Such cultures have been ignored and overridden by conflict and commerce to enable the decimation of elephants in South Sudan. What then does their loss mean for communities and cultures?



*Image 4: A male member of the Zande community draws an elephant on the dust before the interview. Photo by Isaac Waanzi Hillary*

# LIVING WITHOUT ELEPHANTS

Living with elephants can be risky and costly: it is not surprising that some interviewees expressed relief that elephants were no longer present in the Yambio area:

Nobody mourns about the elephants. It has given happiness that we have gained peace... No person can mourn about the elephant. The elephant is a wild animal: it brings poverty to people, uprooting their cassava or millet farm.<sup>76</sup>

But others expressed a sense of loss that young people would never see or know an elephant:

It has given sadness to the people of this place and to children and people of today, that they don't know the elephant. When elephants were in South Sudan, in Sudan, people used to go and see them and know that this is how big an elephant is; this is the height of an elephant. Now the children of today: they can't know the elephant. They only hear the name of 'elephant' with their ears; they know not what an elephant is. Because elephants are not in our country of South Sudan.<sup>77</sup>

Some interviewees in Yirol had heard of elephants being sighted in remote forested areas near the Nile, but those in Yambio believed that any remaining herds had migrated to Congo or Uganda. Camera traps have revealed small numbers of otherwise unseen forest elephants still remaining near these borders<sup>78</sup> Elephants in remote areas were still being hunted due to an internal market for ivory, as one interviewee in Yirol explained: 'Elephants are there...The problem is that people are still going there to hunt for tusks'.<sup>79</sup>

As noted from the lived experiences of the respondents for this report, people viewed elephants as creatures of destruction, meat, and tusk:

Our community struggles with wild animals and elephants. People do not know how those things help people, because of lack of learning... Even our game scouts, they don't

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76 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly woman, Yambio, 15 December 2021.

77 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male church elder, Nzara, 16 December 2021.

78 Jason Patinkin, 'Rare Forest Elephants Seen for the First Time in South Sudan', *Smithsonian Magazine*, 11 December 2015, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/rare-forest-elephants-seen-first-time-south-sudan-180957526/>

79 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man (former Anyanya One and SPLA soldier), Yirol North, 2 February 2022.



know what they are doing, to tell you the truth, because I have studied them. Some time back we used to teach some few things to them, but those game scouts now, they do the duty of soldiers and so on, [but] they even destroy animals, and kill animals. That is very bad. Because they don't know what thing they are doing. They don't know how to protect animals.<sup>80</sup>

Interviewees pointed to the widespread possession of firearms as a threat to wildlife: 'Now if elephants come to South Sudan and you find their footprints, you will also see a smaller human footprint inside them, because there will always be someone hunting them.'<sup>81</sup>

The destruction of elephants is representative of the wider effects of warfare and weapons on the country, threatening people and cattle as well as wildlife, as one interviewee emphasised: 'Elephants are still there. The problem is the gun. Not only elephants, all animals. Even the cows are reducing in numbers because they are being raided.'<sup>82</sup> Like people, many animals fled South Sudan because of rifles, and the silence of guns is a fundamental step to enable the return of elephants. While interviews in these two areas suggest that some people find life without elephants good, others miss the lessons that elephants offered to humans, explained one respondent around Yambio: 'Elephant was good among people because it used to teach things to people. People used to learn things from it.'<sup>83</sup>

The elephant is a god and one day it will come. When elephants are many, people will be many. The reason why there is death is that we chased away the animals that used to protect us.<sup>84</sup>

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80 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with an elderly male retired wildlife officer, Ezo, 20 December 2021.

81 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male church elder, Nzara, 16 December 2021; interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 24 December 2021; an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 28 December 2021; an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 3 January 2022; and an elderly man, a renowned hunter, in Yirol East, 16 January 2022.

82 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 3 January 2022.

83 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community chief, Ezo, 19 December 2021.

84 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 3 March 2022.

# CONCLUSION

This report has recounted what it meant to live with elephants for some of South Sudan's people. The interviews from areas of Yambio and Yirol teach valuable lessons on the relationship between communities and wildlife. Both the community and the elephants tried to avoid each other. While people suffered the loss of farms and displacement because of elephants, they still knew how to live with elephants collectively. The elephants were aware of the cunning *bangbara*-man and many, as a result, preferred to frequent thick forests to avoid coming in contact with man. The avoidance of humans in principle, suggests that the elephants were aware of the danger that would arise through a close association with humans.

However, the prolonged war experience in Sudan led to rapid change in behaviour of South Sudan's people towards the elephants. Local communities and rebels increasingly perceived the elephants in terms of their economic value. Elephants were targeted for their tusks as well as their meat, and thus many died while some tried to take refuge in remote areas. In this context of loss, South Sudanese cultures, memories and oral histories are a precious resource for understanding human relations with wildlife such as elephants. Through both relations of co-existence and conflict, elephants have always impressed people with their size and strength, making them important symbols of power in human societies. Yet people have also recognised or perceived other qualities in them apart from size, including their protectiveness of relatives and young, their beneficial effects on the landscape and ecology, and their general tendency to avoid conflict with humans. Elephants feature in songs, stories, proverbs and art across South Sudan because they are seen to have admirable qualities and attributes, and because hunting them always required skill, strength and courage.

Elephants are not the only wild animals to feature prominently in human cultures. This report demonstrates that culture should be seen as a resource for conservation more broadly and that cultural and natural heritage are interconnected. There is a great deal of knowledge about wildlife and environments embedded in South Sudanese memories, songs, stories, languages, names and material cultures. This cultural heritage is endangered as older generations pass away, wildlife numbers decrease and fewer people encounter animals like elephants directly. Documenting and sharing such knowledge can teach us about how people lived with wildlife and used natural resources sustainably, as well as helping us to understand why many of these resources have been over-exploited in recent times. Perhaps most importantly, this knowledge is a resource for talking about why animals like elephants matter – not just to international conservationists, or imagined foreign tourists, or government wildlife departments, but to all South Sudanese people as an intrinsic part of their culture, history and heritage. Enabling the sharing and celebration of these cultures may be a more positive and effective way of building support for conservation than solely economic arguments.

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