

VIOLENCE, SACRIFICE AND CHIEFSHIP IN CENTRAL EQUATORIA, SOUTHERN SUDAN

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Two elderly chiefs from the same clan of the Sudanese Kakwa came to live in Yei Town, after it was captured in 1997 by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) from Government of Sudan (GoS) forces. One of them, 'Simon', suffers from chest complaints, which he attributes to his torture by SPLA soldiers in the early 1990s: according to witnesses, he was tied and stretched with ropes as well as beaten.¹ As a mere headman, he is bitter about the attempted self-promotion to full chiefship of his neighbouring sub-chief and town court member, 'Ezekia'. Ezekia became a chief around the same time that Simon suffered his torture; when the majority of people fled from the SPLA to take refuge in the town or in nearby Uganda, the remaining rural population were told that the SPLA 'worked with someone called a chief', and Ezekia was duly selected to perform this role. Torture of suspected GoS informants, as well as provision of food for the soldiers, then reportedly took place within Ezekia's house. Since the signing of the peace agreement in January 2005, there have been increased demands by some local people for the chiefship to be removed from Ezekia and restored to the hereditary line of chiefs. This process is further complicated, however, by a deeper layer of local controversy regarding the origin of this hereditary line nearly a century earlier with a chief from outside the senior 'first-born' lineage, remembered for standing up to the Belgian Congolese soldiers who tortured him.

The complex histories and debates about a local chiefship may seem overly particularistic and irrelevant in comparison to more sweeping accounts of the root causes of Sudan's civil wars (Johnson 2003). But the argument here is that specific oral histories and ongoing disputes regarding chiefs in Central Equatoria reveal much about the historical relationship between state and society – and in particular the mediation with external violence – which is central to understanding the legitimacy of local authority (cf. West 1998). The motifs of scapegoats or proxies, sacrifice and curse which feature in the local histories also resonate with earlier anthropological and historical research across Southern Sudan, reflecting the ambivalence of 'government' chiefship, and the relations between secular and spiritual power and between agnatic and affinal kin structures. More recently, the growing academic consensus about the historical patterns of harsh and extractive Khartoum-based government and its 'peripheries'

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¹ For reasons of anonymity, all names have been changed and the villages/clans are not named.

has been furthered by localized studies of the experience of these patterns, at the points of linkage between extractive external force and local society (Baumann 1987; Hutchinson 1996; Kurimoto 1994; James 1988; Johnson 1994; Simonse 1992, 1998; Willis 2003). By the 1990s, however, the war had interrupted most fieldwork; this article represents the most recent assessment of the effects of the SPLA war on local chiefship. The Kakwa and other ethnic groups of Yei have also received little attention since featuring in brief ethnographies of the western Bari-speakers by British officials (Nalder 1937: 206–16), although neighbouring areas have been more recently examined, the Bari by Simonse (1992) and northern Uganda by Leopold (2005a).

More widely, the politico-economic dominance of chiefs in rural areas of Africa has increasingly been highlighted as a factor behind armed rebellion and civil wars, particularly in terms of the recourse to violence by marginalized youth (Ellis, 1999; Fanthorpe, 2001; Keen, 2005; Kriger, 1992; Richards, 2005; West, 1998: 151–7). If – as famously argued by Mamdani (1996) – chiefs are everywhere a legacy of the decentralized despotism of the colonial state, then it would not be surprising if violent rebellion were the outcome of the failure of post-colonial states to effectively reform and democratize rural local government and landholding. From this perspective, the liberation of the oppressed subjects of chiefs into citizens of the nation state would perhaps be the final stage of the independence struggle, so that the punishment or replacement of chiefs by the SPLA soldiers might be read as an important aspect of the liberation struggle in Southern Sudan; after all, it is widely agreed that chiefship originated in the colonial period, and chiefs have mediated with a succession of repressive and exploitative governments since then. But this would assume both that the SPLA had a legitimate popular mandate to reform chiefship, and that the chiefs themselves had no moral legitimacy. The reality, however, appears to be the reverse.

To understand why, it is necessary to grasp the somewhat paradoxical history of the chiefship and its relationship to the violence of ‘government’. The two chiefdoms which form the subject of this article are particularly useful because the way that people talk about local authority makes explicit parallels between the early colonial period and the recent conflict. This history has produced an ongoing local debate between those who argue that chiefship has been ‘bought with blood’ through the courage and sacrifice of certain mediators with foreigners, and those who argue that these mediators were not from the senior patrilineal clans and should only have held the chiefship as a temporary expedient during dangerous times. The informants engaged in this debate are largely elders or members of the rival chiefly lineages, and their contention provides a contrast with the resignation or lack of interest displayed by other informants – a contrast in itself revealing of the historical accommodation reached between

ideals about authority and the pragmatic need for a mediator with government.²

Local debates over who is the rightful chief contain a deeper question, of relevance to post-war 'reconstruction': during periods of violent depredation, may norms be pragmatically but *temporarily* suspended, to be followed by a restitution of patrilineally derived authority? Or is there something more permanently normalized about the harsh nature of external/government force, so that the chiefship is inherently derived from its capacity to deal with this force? The debate also concerns questions of identity and authority: whether the community is defined by an exclusive notion of patrilines, or by a more flexible association of paternal and maternal kin and married-in outsiders. In contrast to Giblin's account of chiefs in Tanzania (2005a, 2005b), the chiefs in Central Equatoria have not controlled patrilineal clan histories but have retained a marginal status in these internal structures, despite becoming hereditary. Nor have they been from the landowning clans and hence the primary focus of agrarian class tensions, as in Sierra Leone (Richards 2005). Their ideal role – it will be argued – has been one of speaking and converting between the ways of government and the ways of the community, including mediating the violence of government by deflecting it with their words and, if necessary, absorbing it in their own bodies. This article begins by examining the role of the chiefs in relation to the recent violence of the SPLA war, and the resulting debates in two chiefdoms in Central Equatoria, before looking at the oral histories being utilized in these debates and the historical context for patterns of violence and local government.

TRADITION AND STATE

Before turning to the paradoxes of local chiefships however, it is worth highlighting the wider context in which such debates have been taking place. Somewhat belatedly, scholars have been addressing the 'resurgence' of 'traditional authorities' across Africa since the 1990s. As Fanthorpe wrote in 1998, 'analysis of chiefdoms as local political arenas is long overdue'. From South Africa to Nigeria, studies of the revival or resilience of traditional authorities have demonstrated the dangers of such sweeping generalizations as Mamdani's, whilst at the same time grappling with the ubiquity of these institutions.³ The strongest comparative work has moved on by focusing on the varied and dynamic role of chiefs as 'brokers' or 'double gatekeepers', converting between state and locality (Ray and van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1996; van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal and van Dijk 1999). Yet scholars also return to

² Informants of the former kind were largely recorded through formal interviews and will be cited; the latter (especially younger people and women) were accessed more through informal conversations, which cannot usefully be cited.

³ A sample of the literature includes: Goheen 1992; Nyamnjoh 2004; Ray 1996; van Kessel and Oomen 1997; Vaughan 2000, 2005; West and Kloock-Jenson 1999.

Mamdani's distinction between citizens and subjects, asking whether, as brokers, chiefs are also implicated in narrow state patrimonialism, and whether therefore their resurgence may entrench a (colonial-style) system whereby access to rights and resources is confined to recognized members of a 'community', defined by its chief (Buur 2004; West 1998). While the strong links between urban-centred government and home villages lead Geschiere and Gugler (1998) to conclude that everyone is 'both citizen and subject', Fanthorpe (2001) focuses on youth in Sierra Leone who were 'neither citizen nor subject' as a result of the exclusionary legacy of colonial chiefdom policies. Different analyses have emerged of the relationship between chiefs and rebel forces even within the same country, as is apparent for Zimbabwe (Alexander 1996; Kriger 1992; Lan 1985), Mozambique (Alexander 1997; McGregor 1998; Schafer 2001; West and Kloeck-Jenson 1999), and most recently for Sierra Leone: Richards (2005; cf. Keen 2005: 41–2, 60–9) concludes that resentment towards a chiefly elite motivated excluded rural youth to join armed groups, but Fanthorpe (2006) argues that chiefship, however contested, has continued to be valued by the rural poor because it is the one political institution upon which they can exert some leverage. It seems that chiefship is contingently situated somewhere along the gamut from exclusionary restriction of access to rights, land and justice, to an institution more morally legitimate and popularly accountable than any government office. This is why academics reiterate the need for research into local complexity – the grey shades (West 1998) – rather than continent- or even country-wide blueprints.

Policy makers in the international community have also shifted their focus more towards decentralization and grassroots empowerment, including a role for traditional authorities, in their efforts to create a 'liberal peace' (Duffield 2001; Lutz and Linder 2004; West and Kloeck-Jenson 1999). The idea that traditional authority may have blueprint potential is apparent in the recent (August 2006) 'tour' of South Africa, Botswana and Ghana by Southern Sudanese chiefs to meet their 'counterparts', sponsored by UNDP and other organizations.⁴ The paradoxes of this approach in Southern Sudan are also becoming apparent, however. Consultant research has been eager to highlight the newly recognized democratic and consultative nature of chiefs and their courts, yet has also been forced to note certain incompatibilities with international law, women's and children's rights and Western-style democracy (UNDP 2005; World Vision 2004).

Of course the proponents of 'liberal peace' are more comfortable with the concept of 'civil society' organizations which make collective claims for rights on the basis of age, gender, occupation or religious or social affiliation, rather than ethnic or local communities. But rural people tend to associate leading members of 'civil society', along with international organizations, with the government; all are part of an urban and bureaucratic sphere from which both 'development' and

⁴ 'Traditional Leaders on Tour', August 2006: <<http://www.gurtong.org>>.

war have come (the latter more than the former). As Alexander (1997) shows for Mozambique, fear and coercion – not democracy – have been the norm of government, and it is in this context that local politics should be approached; the state was to be avoided if it could not be profitably joined. Chiefs in the main have not been seen to belong to this sphere, though they interact with it, which may be the reason why they have provided an apparent continuity in local authority and dispute resolution even during the war. This continuing role has contradicted the tendency of international policy makers to presume that violence destroys all cohesion, leaving the slate wiped clean for their interventions in governance (cf. Duffield 2001), a concept that was utilized in the early colonial period by British officials. The chiefs have proved surprisingly resilient, despite being the focus of coercive colonial polices in the 1930s and 1940s, and despite the subsequent move to elected councils from the late colonial period, which culminated in the attempted eradication of chiefs in the 1971 Local Government Act.⁵

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) has also committed itself to maintaining traditional authorities (SPLM 2004), though with much debate as to the extent of their powers; the proposed 'House of Nationalities' has so far been restricted to state rather than national level.⁶ Individual SPLM/A leaders differ quite fundamentally as to the importance of chiefs, but, like other governments before them, have had to acknowledge their dependence upon these local intermediaries, not only pragmatically for tax collection and preserving social order, but belatedly also for some degree of local legitimization of their claims to state power. The 'Conference of Chiefs and Traditional Leaders' held in 2004 came up with recommendations in support of the SPLM/A; the first specific ones concerned 'war memorials', suggesting that the chiefs were to help to mythologize the 'struggle'. Unfortunately the history of the war has left many chiefs less than amenable to simply rubber-stamping the new regime (even if it literally gave them their rubber court stamps); already they have been publicly protesting against government corruption.⁷ The interim constitution has left the specifics of traditional authority functions and laws to the individual state governments. The chiefs in Southern Sudan defy categorization and easy definition, because they embody the complicated relationships and bargains hammered out between people and military/governments over the last century and a half.

⁵ In 1974 there was reportedly 'as yet no practicable alternative to the chief' in the Southern Region (Development Administration Group 1974).

⁶ See <<http://www.houseofnationalities.org>>.

⁷ For example, chiefs spoke at a rally for the state governor in Yei on 14 September 2005, criticizing military and police interference and corruption and the illegal export of teak. A letter (5 August 2006) to the Vice-President purporting to be from the Rumbek chiefs successfully called for the removal of the Lakes State governor: <<http://www.gurtong.org/ResourceCenter/documents/pressreleases/Community-LeadersOpenLetterToKiir.asp>>.

THE SPLA AND THE CHIEFS: THE *GELA* OF THE BUSH AND THE *MATAT LO GELA*

The question of local civil administration in SPLA-controlled territories during the war has generated some debate, as summarized by Rolandsen (2005: 64–71) in his study of the SPLM/A in the 1990s, which also highlighted the general dearth of knowledge about events on the ground. As Johnson (1998: 66–9) shows, chiefs' courts continued to function in the areas penetrated, and increasingly controlled, by the SPLA from the mid-1980s (Hutchinson 1996: 148; Kuol 1997). Around Yei by the 1990s chiefs' courts functioned rather more in spite of the military 'administration' than with its full support; intimidation by soldiers and the 'Civil Military Administrators' (CMAs) is said to have been common. Nevertheless, as Johnson argued, the role of the chiefs has been crucial to forging the relationship between SPLA and people, because by working with 'chiefs' the former have slotted into familiar historical patterns. Support from the civilian population was gained – if it was gained at all – through a combination of coercion and structural recognizability, rather than ideological identification (cf. Kriger 1992). The violence and military strength of the SPLA convinced people that here was the latest 'government' force with which they needed to forge a bargain in order to secure protection, and perhaps potential benefits. Such bargaining was the role of the chiefs.

The two chiefdoms discussed in this article are located in Yei County, in what is now Central Equatoria State, where relations with the SPLA have always been problematic (Johnson 2003: 85–7). Because the SPLA did rely upon chiefs for the provision of food and conscripts – as well as to be, by default, the main civil administrators and judges in the 'liberated areas' – local debates about the resulting chiefship actually function as discourses about the SPLA itself, and the legitimacy of its coerciveness and predations. While informants express loyalty to what is seen as the anti-Northern cause, they nevertheless also recount a litany of abuses by SPLA soldiers during the war. Sometimes there is considerable pride among the locals who remained in the bush, rather than seeking refuge abroad, that they were the 'hoe brigade', the Maoist water in which the SPLA swam as fish. But this seems to reflect some effective recent propaganda, as well as the hope of reward; their own experiences reveal a much less harmonious relationship between soldiers and civilians. The legacy – and, some Equatorians would argue, the cause – of this relationship has been the association of brutality and abuse with certain ethnic groups, particularly the Dinka, who were seen to dominate the SPLA (even though most soldiers around Yei *c.* 1990 were Nuer: Johnson and Prunier 1993).

Even leaving aside the question of ethnicity, the very military, as well as alien, appearance and behaviour of the rebels placed them in the familiar historical category of *gela*, in the Bari language spoken by the Kakwa. The appellation originally meant 'white people', but has come to indicate the government, military, uniforms, town and offices; similar terms have been adopted across the south for the same bundle

of associated influences. As Simonse (1992: 108) defines it, *gela* implies 'the ways and institutions the white man had brought', so that by the 1970s it was being applied to Southern government officials too. The guerrilla nature of the SPLA necessitated a modification to distinguish them as the '*gela* of the bush'. This reflected the unprecedented penetration of the rural areas by the new kind of *gela*, their lack of urban culture or education (cf. Alexander 1997: 8), and the dubious morality of inhabiting camps in the 'bush' rather than living in the village.

The authorities widely known as 'chiefs' have retained the vernacular title of *mataat lo gela* (or *miri*: government/military), translated variously as chief of the 'foreigners', 'government' or 'military', a clear indication of the origins of their office. The recent war saw the emergence of a 'chief of the *gela* of the bush', or – more universally – 'SPLA chiefs'. The exodus of population from Yei Town in 1990, and from villages along the roads, led either to refugee movements into Uganda or Congo, or to internal displacement in more remote areas. Chiefs who went into exile, died or became too old or ill were replaced, often on the orders of SPLA officers. It is difficult to ascertain how much popular consent there really was to their appointment, but informants usually claim that new chiefs were selected by the remaining community, conscious of the need for someone strong to mediate with the soldiers. Older people reminisce that the Anyanya rebels of the earlier civil war had relied on young men in the villages, known as 'Fronts', to gather and transport food to them, but the SPLA themselves came to individual households, demanding and threatening them. In this context, it was preferable to find a chief who, instead, could meet with the soldiers in one place and provide them with food collected by him and his headmen from the people. No doubt the military command also recognized the greater viability of such a system if they were to retain any civilian population in these areas, especially given the attraction of refugee camps across the borders.

NOT REALLY A CHIEF?

The two communities which are the focus of this article both gained new chiefs during the 1990s, neither being from the previous hereditary line of chiefs. To preserve anonymity they will be referred to as Clan One and Clan Two, since these are communities which define themselves primarily by clan names. They are predominantly agricultural communities, and have also been involved in trade, urban employment and labour migration as a result of their proximity to the small but important market town of Yei and to the Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) borders. They consist of straggling settlements reaching up to ten miles from Yei, which are sub-divided into smaller settlements also known by sub-clan names, as well as by road mile numbers. The Kakwa language is one of the Bari dialects (classified as an Eastern Nilotic language), and the two clans,

along with another two clans, claim descent from a common ancestor who led a migration westward across the Nile; these four clans maintain close social and ritual relations. They also claim 'ownership' of Yei Town (which has long contained an ethnically mixed population). The main chiefs' courts have been held in town, except during the war. Land/boundary disputes have been the only source of limited conflict between ethnic groups or clans in the wider area.

Technically the two clans are each under a 'sub-chief', but since there is no equivalent vernacular distinction, these will be referred to simply as chiefs. In Clan One, the last long-serving hereditary chief, Benjamin, died in the 1970s, and a succession of his relatives also died or were deposed by the community for drunkenness or other offences. By the 1990s the last one had become too ill to function as chief, and so a headman from another sub-clan, Joseph, was appointed instead to work with the SPLA. In Clan Two, a long-serving chief, Jeremiah, died and was also briefly succeeded by his brother, but by 1990 Ezekia was appointed as the chief for the population outside the town. Some sub-clan or village headmen also remained with their communities in the 'bush', though some (like Simon) went to Uganda, and some handed over the position to their sons.

There is a sense among informants that people generally recognized the need for a particular kind of chief or headman during wartime. One headman in Clan Two declared that he was 'too old to manage the laws of the SPLA' and handed over the duties to his son, who explained that the SPLA demanded someone energetic to work with them, to collect food and provide conscripts, otherwise 'you will be beaten always or you will even be killed'.⁸ There is a common emphasis on the need for a chief to shield people from the soldiers: 'somebody who could confront the SPLA soldiers without fear, to prevent the civilians being flogged'.⁹ Another headman from Clan Two explained: 'if they came to you for food, you quickly collected the food from the people and gave it to them while they are seated with you, because if they entered the village, they would do damages, raping, robbing'.¹⁰ In attempting to play this role of gatekeeper, a number of headmen were beaten badly by the soldiers, and one died as a result. The chiefs, Ezekia and Joseph, were taken for six months' military training in 1992 and given ranks, which is said to have given them greater authority over the ordinary soldiers (cf. Johnson 1998: 67–8). As trained officers of the 'hoe brigade', the chiefs 'rescued the people from the hands of the SPLA. . . If the SPLA wanted to mistreat the people then the trained chiefs could go to the commanders to inform them about the mistreatment by the SPLA.'¹¹

But the training also identified the chiefs more closely with a military culture: Ezekia explained that he sent his guards to collect food from

⁸ Interview 19, 4 October 2005: Headman 1, Clan Two.

⁹ Interview 20, 6 October 2005: Headman 2, Clan Two.

¹⁰ Interview 14, 17 September 2005: Headman 1, Clan One.

¹¹ Interview 13, 16 September 2005: Elder 1, Clan One.

people, and then had it cooked in his own house, where the soldiers came to eat. His daughter also recalls suspected government spies being tortured in the house. More widely in the area, the military training of chiefs is said to have made them behave more like soldiers themselves, issuing orders and using more force. Even more resented than the food demands was the forced conscription of boys into the SPLA. At times this was done by mass round-ups, or *kashas*, but it was also increasingly done by demanding a certain number of recruits from each chief or headman. Again, this could protect the population somewhat, because 'good' chiefs would distribute the conscription to ensure that not all the boys from a particular family were taken. One headman was beaten for his outright refusal to provide the required number, telling the soldiers they would have to 'grow boys like trees' if they wanted that many.¹² But although people – especially the headmen and chiefs themselves – may now emphasize a bigger picture in which the chiefs as shields or gatekeepers ameliorated the direct predation by soldiers on the civilian population, the channelling of demands for food and boys through the chiefs must nevertheless have generated great resentment towards the latter. As two headmen were aware, 'Oh, there were many curses and quarrels from the people, because their children were being taken to die', and, 'If a child who had been taken was killed, it was blamed on the chief as the cause.'¹³

Since the SPLA capture of Yei Town in 1997, the population has gradually been returning to the area. With the lengthening peace and reduced military interventions in government, there is apparent agreement in Clan One, with Joseph himself assenting, that the chiefship should be returned to the original line, although to which descendant it is not yet agreed; there is still a sense of waiting for further returnees from abroad before decisions can be made. In Clan Two, the dispute over the chiefship is more heated, and more complicated. People are divided as to whether Ezekia earned his position by being a 'strong' chief during the war, or whether he actually has no legitimate claim to be a chief at all. If he were removed, there would still be competition, however, between two sub-clans with rival claims to the chiefship. One is the senior or 'firstborn' sub-clan, whose members claim to be descended from the eldest son of the founding ancestor. The other sub-clan is descended from an adopted 'nephew', allegedly captured during nineteenth-century raids by the senior sub-clan, and from whom the main line of chiefs is descended up to Jeremiah. And, in a final complication, Ezekia claims a link to the senior sub-clan, but he is related only on his maternal side: he is a 'nephew', as his opponents like to point out. The discussions of the current chiefship in both clans invariably turn to its origins and history, as they try to make sense of the legacy of the war and the existence of the 'SPLA chiefs'.

¹² Interview 20, 6 October 2005: Headman 2, Clan Two.

¹³ Interview 18, 3 October 2005: Headman 3, Clan Two; Interview 12, 14 September 2005: Town sub-chief, Clan Two.

'BOUGHT WITH BLOOD': SACRIFICE OR STEALING?

The most striking motif in discussions of both the current and historical chiefship is the idea of sacrifice. There are many who argue that the chiefship has been earned by individuals who had the courage to face potential or real personal danger by meeting with external military forces, in order to secure protection for their people. This reflects the origins of the chiefship of the *gela* in the unpredictable and violent circumstances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and especially at the point when the Turco-Egyptian and Mahdist army remnants in the area were succeeded by the '*tukutuku*' troops of the Belgian Congo, during the brief existence of the Belgian Lado Enclave. The Enclave officers had a reputation for brutality among British colonial officials at the time, as well as in local memories.¹⁴ Like other foreigners before them, they sought out 'chiefs' or 'sheikhs', but being identified as such tended to place an individual first in the firing line, as one visiting British hunter found when he accepted assistance from a Belgian military post:

Without any preliminary enquiry, the sheikh was seized and severely beaten, the Officer himself taking a leading part in belabouring the unfortunate man on the head, back or legs, indiscriminately. Having been thus treated he was ordered to show where the game was to be found.¹⁵

Nineteenth-century accounts by Europeans also suggest that those identified as 'sheikhs' had risked being punished, tortured or killed by the ivory and slave traders or the forces of the Egyptian government (Baker 1874, 2: 69–70; Gordon 1899: 72, 125; Wilson and Felkin 1882, 2: 128). It was probably common, therefore, for relatively marginal men (or even some women) to take on the role of negotiating with the foreigners, especially if they had picked up some Arabic through trade or contact with the *zeriba* military camps. British officials in both the Turco-Egyptian and Condominium governments occasionally recognized that such an intermediary was 'not the real sheikh' (Baker 1874, 1: 338). An example made famous by Samuel Baker's accounts was his adversary 'Allorron', who was actually the local Bari agent of an Egyptian trading firm and represented the rise of what Simonse (1992: 93–101) has termed 'cargo chiefs'. The latter were part of an emerging class of Bari middlemen, including soldiers and translators, and were expected to use their privileged access to the traders to obtain some protection for their people as well as personal profit. Allorron's headmen told Baker that 'although Allorron had been the ostensible sheikh for a great length of time, the true sheikh by actual descent was

¹⁴ For example, Logan, Mongalla, to Assistant Director Intelligence, Khartoum, 25 December 1905, National Records Office, Khartoum (hereafter NRO), Mongalla Province 1/8/50; Wood, Bahr El Ghazal Intelligence Report, 30 April 1904, NRO Intelligence 8/2/9; *Sudan Intelligence Report* 138, January 1906, Public Records Office, London (hereafter PRO), WO 106/228.

¹⁵ *Sudan Intelligence Report* 155 June 1907, PRO WO 106 229.

a chief named Morbe' (Baker 1874, 1: 255–7). Already in the 1870s, then, some of the proto-chiefs who negotiated with new commercial and military influences stood outside authority based on blood descent.

Similarly, in the Yei area to the west a few semi-Arabized local ex-soldiers or translators had become prominent as intermediaries with the foreigners, and were recognized as 'chiefs' by the Belgian colonial officers in the early twentieth century. The origin of the chiefship of Clan One is linked in local histories to the establishment of government offices in what became the town, which at that time is said to have been inhabited by the rain chief (*matat lo kudu*) of Clan One, Aligo.¹⁶ His wife Awate is central to the story, and indeed it is in her granary that the 'eggs' which produced rain are said to have first appeared. When the soldiers arrived, the people fled to take refuge in caves in the hills, but Awate came out to confront them. Perhaps – like a woman who had come to negotiate with Baker during a raid (Baker 1874, 1: 331) – she believed that a woman was less likely to be killed. But she was captured by the soldiers, her hands were amputated and her child killed. Aligo then came to negotiate her release, and agreed to move his settlement a short distance to vacate land for the government offices. In return he was 'given' the chiefship by the Belgian forces; he in turn gave it to a brother, Mabe, and their respective lines have continued to hold the rain and government chiefships, until the appointment of Joseph to the latter under the SPLA.

In Clan Two, various versions of history all emphasize that the senior lineage headed by Balla feared the foreign forces and sent Ciwa or Lasu to negotiate or to rescue captured women, and return with a flag and the chiefship. Later Balla handed over the chiefship to Lasu, who was a (maternal) nephew or the son of a Lugbara 'captured and brought from the bush'.¹⁷ Balla declared that Lasu had earned it by his bravery and cursed anyone who tried to take back the chiefship in the future. Lasu's courage and 'stubbornness' (defiance) is widely remembered: 'when the French [Belgians] came they were beating Lasu, and they smeared his face with honey and burnt it with fire, but still he persevered'.¹⁸ The curse against reclaiming the chiefship has not prevented some of Balla's descendants from insisting that it should have been returned to them after Lasu's death, but one such contender is believed to have fallen victim of the curse in the 1970s.¹⁹

The theme of risking death – and even of blood sacrifice – is thus prominent in histories of the chiefship. Although the immediate violence of the early colonial days diminished until the recent civil war, a feeling

¹⁶ I translate *matat* as 'chief' – whether of rain or government – since the same word is used in the vernacular. Rain chiefs perform rituals using grinding stones and gourds to beseech or prevent rainfall, and do not appear to have had the extent of authority of the Bari rain 'kings' described by Simonse (1992).

¹⁷ Interview 20, 6 October 2005: Headman 2, Clan Two.

¹⁸ Interview 9, 10 September 2005: Headman 4, Clan Two.

¹⁹ Interview 19, 4 October 2005: Headman 1, Clan Two; Interview 33, 31 October 2005: Elder 1, Clan Two.

has lingered that the chiefship carries an inherent danger, sometimes explicitly described as a 'curse'. This is similar to, though not as starkly defined as, the curse on colonial chiefs in neighbouring Arua in northern Uganda (Leopold 2005b: 221–2). But while in Arua the bloodshed associated with foreign forces led to a curse on those who collaborated with government, in the Yei clans this is countered by the blood sacrifice of the chiefly families themselves. In Clan One, since Awate's child was first killed, and especially since the 1970s, a number of chiefs or their family members have died, leading one elderly lady to defy any rival to lay claim to the chiefship: 'Count out your dead people who were slaughtered, through whom the chiefship was obtained! Count your dead ones, your blood poured!'²⁰ The younger members of the lineage are said to be afraid to take on the position; similarly in Clan Two: 'The youth have been traumatized by the deaths of those who were made chiefs; they think that they will also die like their fathers if they hold the chiefship.'²¹ And supporters of the 'SPLA chiefs' argue that they too have earned the chiefship through personal sacrifice and risk; Ezekia's position was 'bought with blood', claimed his son.²² Chief Joseph of Clan One similarly explained that during the war 'you bail difficult issues with blood'.²³

'THE CHIEFSHIP OF FOOD'

Whether or not some Christian imagery has crept in, the idea is striking: the chief 'bails' his people from military/government punishment with his own blood. (More literally, chiefs in Juba became responsible for bailing people from torture and detention by the GoS in the 1990s.)²⁴ The idea of a contract is central to understanding the position of the chief in the relationship between government and local communities. The chiefship was clearly objectified as a 'thing' that was brought from the government by the first chiefs, symbolized particularly by flags. It is sometimes described as a 'burden' carried by them (cf. Kuol 1997: 28–30). But it is also an object which is seen to confer certain rights upon the people belonging to each chiefdom; Aligo's agreement to vacate land for the government in return for the chiefship is used by Clan One to claim leading rights over the town and area, because 'our grandfather brought the chiefship . . . [and] founded this place . . . where our iron column is' [perhaps the base of a flag pole].²⁵ The perceived autonomous existence of the chiefship is also apparent in the claim by

²⁰ Interview 10, 12 September 2005: Elder Woman, Clan One.

²¹ Interview 33, 31 October 2005: Elder 1, Clan Two.

²² Interview 4, 30 August 2005: Chief Ezekia and son, Clan Two.

²³ Interview 24, 12 October 2005: Chief Joseph, Clan One.

²⁴ Interview 37, 30 November 2005; Interview 38, 1 December 2005: Chiefs in Juba.

²⁵ Interview 6, 5 September 2005: Town sub-chief, Clan One.

some members of Balla's line in Clan Two that 'the chiefship has come back to us on its knees', in reference to Ezekia holding it.²⁶

So what does this object 'given' by the government signify? In a sense it symbolizes a bargain, whereby people have consented tacitly to the demands of the *gela* in return for a measure of security and a degree of control over how those demands would be met. In turn, they gave the chiefs a mandate to execute government demands provided that the chiefs acted as the tool whereby such control could be exerted, to ameliorate the worst government depredations. This notion is obvious in more recent times, when people clearly agreed with the SPLA on the need for an intermediary to deflect some of the violence of the soldiers. But it also comes through in the oral histories, and in numerous instances in the colonial records when chiefs were reported to defend or, more often, hide the transgressions of government orders by their communities; they were often punished by the government for the actions of the people.

More widely in Central Equatoria, this potentially dangerous or demeaning role was often rejected by senior elders and spiritual leaders like rain chiefs, who instead delegated 'clients or outsiders' to conceal and protect them from government (Buxton 1963: 65; Leonardi 2005). Later, mission-educated young men who knew the 'ways of government' were appointed (cf. Hutchinson 1996). For – although in the later colonial period there were reports of tax embezzlement by chiefs – the opportunities for profit have always been rather limited. The ability to requisition labour for their own cultivation was the most notable, but even this was understood as part of the contract between chief and people; if the chief was busy with 'government' work, the community should cultivate for him to maintain his important capacity for hospitality.²⁷

If not bought by blood, then, the chiefship was bought by food, according to oral histories which emphasize the readiness of certain individuals – including Lasu – to provide hospitality and food for the foreigners. And increasingly during the colonial period, the chiefs had to provide tribute and later taxes to the government. The SPLA war saw a return to the collection of tribute in kind rather than cash, and for this reason Ezekia has been described as holding the 'chiefship of food': 'he just stole it . . . [by] feeding the *gela* of the bush'.²⁸ Similarly, another opponent explained that 'He was the one who fed the SPLA, so then he was made a caretaker of the SPLA, but he is not actually a chief.'²⁹ Even Ezekia himself offered the same explanation: 'They selected me because . . . I was a hospitable man. I fed them throughout the night, cooking day and night, and they said you [the villagers] have found a person, he

²⁶ Interview 20, 6 October 2005: Headman 2, Clan Two.

²⁷ Fanthorpe (2006: 36) questions Richards's (2005) argument that chiefs' labour demands were overly exploitative in Sierra Leone.

²⁸ Interview 33, 31 October 2005: Elder 1, Clan Two.

²⁹ Interview 11, 13 September 2005: Elder 2, Clan Two.

will be your chief.³⁰ An intrinsic aspect of being a chief has involved the ability to extract ‘food’ from the people to give to the government, and this has perhaps always rendered their legitimacy questionable. Ezekia and others argue that it was much better in the first Anyanya war when the rebels relied on a young ‘Front’ to ‘take care of their hunger’, since he was subordinate anyway and the chief could remain above such matters. It was after all this kind of government work that the elders and rain chiefs sought to delegate to younger ‘chiefs’ in the early colonial period, and which had limited the status of the latter. But there has also been a deeper aspect of the ‘hospitable’ role of the chief; in receiving potentially dangerous visitors, he could deflect their violence. As one famous chief from a neighbouring ethnic group reportedly declared to the GoS when accused of supporting the SPLA: ‘I am a chief. If the SPLA come, I give them food, and if the Government soldiers come, I give them food. I am a chief, not a fighter: I receive people.’³¹

BLOOD DESCENT OR BLOOD Poured

The idea of the curse of chiefship relates to its moral ambiguity, because the moral relations of the government are seen to operate on an entirely different basis from those of the village. In the light of this, it is difficult to know whether the marginality of the chiefs to the ‘norms’ of lineage authority contributed to this ‘cursed’ ambiguity, or whether in fact those norms have been constructed subsequently as a counter-discourse to the power of the chiefs. Giblin (2005a, 2005b) demonstrates how chiefs in colonial Tanzania developed discourses of patriarchal clan authority in order to define the community and their own status, which were ultimately at odds with the more flexible community relations operating in practice. But in Clan One, and especially in Clan Two, chiefship by its origins and functions has stood outside or on the edge of such discourses, even though it is frequently debated in a clan-centred idiom. Komma (1998) similarly shows that Kipsigis chiefs in Kenya were ‘marginal men’ like adopted foreigners (and like earlier peacemakers), whose power was checked by the curse of clan elders.

The chiefship of Clan One was obtained through the actions of a woman who came from another clan; Awate confronted the soldiers and it was her sacrifice of her hands and her child which is actually upheld as the bloody price paid for the chiefship: ‘The chiefship was given to the husband because chiefship cannot be given to a woman. . . They gave him the chiefship because his wife’s hands were amputated.’³² This is far removed from an ideal of authority based on blood descent through first-born males, which is how rain chiefship, landowning and some claims to government chiefship have come to be defined. In Clan

³⁰ Interview 2, 23 August 2005: Chief Ezekia, Clan Two.

³¹ Interview 6, 5 September 2005: Town sub-chief, Clan One.

³² Interview 7, 7 September 2005: Rain chief, Clan One.

Two, the chiefship was obtained not by a woman but by a nephew or outsider, Lasu. Parallels with Ezekia's current chiefship are explicitly drawn, because he is also 'only' a maternal nephew to the senior clan lineage: 'there were a lot of troubles [because] they [the clan] felt they were being ruled by a nephew'.³³ Members of Balla's family are faced with a particular conundrum; they have welcomed back the chiefship 'on its knees' in the person of Ezekia because he is related to them, and yet if they justify handing the chiefship to a nephew, they risk justifying the original handover to Lasu, which they now dispute.

The derisive references to nephews disguise the complexity of relations between patrilineals and maternal kin, which has been famously discussed more widely in Southern Sudan by anthropologists. Lienhardt (1955) used Shilluk and Anuak examples to question Radcliffe-Brown's (1952) analysis of the 'mother's brother/sister's son' relationship in South Africa as affectionate and supportive, showing some of the potential political tensions between agnatic royal clans and the power of mother's brothers. Evans-Pritchard has also been criticized for ignoring the political importance of affinal and matrilineal relations among the Nuer (McKinnon 2000). Lienhardt (1958a) described the Dinka 'dual chieftainship' of maternally related spearmasters and war leaders, and showed that powerful nuclear spearmaster lineages functioned as maternal uncles to the people attached to them. Similarly Evans-Pritchard (1947: 94) did observe that 'stranger' lineages among the Anuak counted as sister's sons because they married women of the dominant clan (cf. Buxton 1963: 61, 103). This is why around Yei the term 'nephew' can apply to 'outsiders' and captives (like Chief Lasu) whose marriage into the clan might also have been paid for by their patrons.³⁴ The population displacements of the nineteenth century, like those of the later twentieth, heightened the importance of marriage as a means of attachment to a dominant patron or lineage, according the latter both power and duties as 'maternal uncles' whose curse is feared above all and yet who are also bound to assist their sister's sons. It is common to meet nephews who have grown up with their maternal relatives (cf. Fanthorpe 1998: 574–5). Later though, the 'nephew' lineages may have sought greater independence by emphasizing their own patrilineages, perhaps encouraged by colonial-era developments after the 1930s, when the British colonial administrators suddenly focused on the idea of 'clans'.³⁵

However, the British preoccupation with 'monarchical' African chiefship also encouraged patrilineal inheritance by chiefs' sons – even if, as we have seen, the early chiefs were often 'nephews'. They in turn (rather than risking their own sons as recruits in the first schools, as the missionaries and government had ordered) often sent *their* nephews,

³³ Interview 18, 3 October 2005: Headman 3, Clan Two.

³⁴ For example, Interview 34, 1 November 2005: Elder 3, Clan Two.

³⁵ For example, Governor Nalder, 'Mongalla Province Summary of Information', November 1933, NRO Civil Secretary 57/35/131.

who sometimes subsequently became the next generation of chiefs. So chiefs must have been both restrained and supported by their position as 'sister's sons' to more senior lineages, which is why Ezekia's maternal relation to the senior lineage in Clan Two is welcomed by some people. On the other hand if chiefs were seen to overstep their position, as perhaps during the SPLA war, the senior lineage could (and did) complain that they should not be ruled by a 'nephew'.

This oscillating relationship between the force of agnation and the power of maternal uncles has thus, as elsewhere in Southern Sudan, functioned as a check and balance on individual power, something which Shilluk royal clans sought to eradicate (Lienhardt 1955). Around Yei a theoretical balance is further maintained by the separation of chiefship from the rain chiefship, and from landowning. Unlike in Sierra Leone, where landowning chiefs have dominated the agrarian political economy (Richards 2005), around Yei specific territories or plots with well-known boundaries belong to particular sub-clans, understood either to have been the earliest inhabitants, or to have established such rights by burning the grass for hunting. The senior and rain lineages claim a more general authority over the land or soil itself, but when such an elder from Clan Two recently claimed a share of profits from land sales, the landowning clan leaders were angered and his subsequent death is commonly ascribed to their curse.³⁶

The chiefs have even less claim to any land rights, something which may be misunderstood in the recent constitutional efforts to enshrine land rights vaguely with 'communities' and 'traditional authorities' (cf. West and Kloeck-Jenson 1999: 482–3). In particular, NGOs have increasingly recognized the importance of obtaining permission to build their compounds from the 'landowners', but sometimes assume that this simply means the 'chief'. New opportunities are creating new tensions. Chief Ezekia has seized the opportunity to claim authority – and share in any sales – over all the land of Clan Two and even the town itself, largely on the basis that he remained in the area during the war: 'I did not run. Some have remained as refugees, some have just returned. They found me here, which means in the land here I am guardian of the land of my grandfather.'³⁷ This comes close to asserting that the war has wiped out previous history and that the land has been newly 'bought with blood' rather than belonging to blood descent groups; a claim incidentally made by the SPLA soldiers who have settled in the area. But it is not a claim tolerated by local people, who remain committed to the landowning system and have roundly condemned land sales and interference in land issues by Ezekia, and by Chief Joseph in Clan One. Even the youth have protested, locally and from as far afield as Khartoum.

The opposition to Ezekia's claims to land demonstrates the way that clan discourses can seek to impose limits upon the abuse of chiefly

³⁶ For example, Interview 32, 28 October 2005: Elder 2, Clan One.

³⁷ Interview 2, 23 August 2005: Chief Ezekia, Clan Two.

power, which is also checked by the separation of powers or offices. There is often strong criticism if a particular office holder attempts to mediate with other kinds of power; the most famous rain chief in Clan One, who died in the 1970s, has been criticized for also working as a government chief.³⁸ The secularization of chiefship by colonial administrators has been highlighted more widely in Southern Sudan (Beswick 1998: 258–68; Buxton 1963: 83, 90–1; Hutchinson 1996: 116–33; Johnson 1986, 1994: 24–34). In Yei it is depicted in local histories as a deliberate internal decision to separate powers or offices: chiefs are the busy gatekeepers and peacekeepers but remain answerable to more hidden authorities, particularly if the latter are their classificatory maternal uncles.

SPEECH AND POWER

Local discourses suggest that authority derives from the capacity to communicate with a source of power, not from possession of power in itself, which may help to explain why brute force has rarely been consistently employed by chiefs or other ‘office holders’. The courage and ability of individuals to communicate with the *gela* is seen to have earned them the chiefship, which was then slotted alongside other kinds of authority, and confined to ‘government matters’. Meanwhile rain chiefs, senior elders and landowners mediated with divinity and ancestors through ritual, prayer, curses and their own bloodlines. Because the ancestors and divinity are seen to be the ultimate source of moral knowledge, however, their mediators have been able to claim a central role in defining and governing the moral community. Government, on the other hand, is seen to operate on a different moral basis, and so the chiefs’ internal role in the moral community is inherently more marginal. But, as elsewhere in Southern Sudan, the chiefs became more significant as they partially usurped the function of arbitration formerly performed by spiritual leaders, extending their interstitial position between government and people to insert themselves between feuding parties, their neutrality perhaps enhanced by their marginal origins. The ability to talk or speak well is widely upheld as a vital attribute of chiefs in their courts, as of earlier peacemakers (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1940: 162–76; Johnson 1986; Lienhardt 1958b: 31).

The ‘good speech’ of chiefs thus became valued, both in relation to the *gela* and within the community, as the means by which to resolve or prevent violence.³⁹ In the face of the overwhelming force of the military/government, only the chief’s skills of negotiation – and of knowing when not to talk – could provide any real defence for the

³⁸ Interview 24, 12 October 2005: Chief Joseph, Clan One. This is also a source of controversy, for instance, in Rumbek in Lakes State, where a leading ‘spearmaster’ also took on a role as ‘government chief’ in the town court in the 1970s: Interview 65, 29 May 2006: Rumbek elder.

³⁹ For example, Interview 8, 9 September 2005: Elder 4, Clan Two.

community. The two long-serving chiefs in Clan One and Clan Two were remembered above all for speaking out, even in government offices. The SPLA training of the chiefs was intended 'to enable them to speak in front of the SPLA; to give you a gun so that you look like a soldier and so that the work would go well in the village/country'.⁴⁰

As this implies, speaking to the *gela* to some degree involved mirroring such force by adopting the languages and symbols of military and offices. The danger, as in the case of Ezekia, has been for a chief to become too much a mirror of the *gela*, and thus fail to convert and translate effectively between government and people. For the chiefs are respected for their 'straight talk', unlike 'tricky' educated/government people (cf. Hutchinson 1996: 270–88). It is when chiefs are isolated from their communities by living in the town and working in more government-associated courts that their interstitial position is lost. As one elder said of Chief Ezekia:

The chief actually should be with his people, talking to his people, and having meetings with people in which he can give advice so that people stay peacefully among themselves without hatred and grudges. It is not his matter alone; he should call us in. Sometimes he [Ezekia] appears once, like a ghost, and then disappears forever. And yet the clan is very large and it is difficult to recognize everybody.

Specific criticisms made of Ezekia for living in the town and for laying illegitimate claim to authority over land reveal the high degree of accountability that communities seek to impose upon chiefs. And it is above all the failure of Ezekia to talk with – and observe the diffuse authorities in – his community which has led to criticism of him, because it is through speech that the role of the chief derives its legitimacy *within* the community.

The chief has also been expected to bring news of the government to the people, and in particular to bring the 'laws' – the government's ways of resolving conflicts and disputes. The chiefs' courts have been the ultimate arena for translation, where the chief has had to marry the government's 'laws' with the moral ideas of the community and listen to and summarize the advice of the elders. And extracting 'food' from the community has involved the art of persuasion and bargaining, not simply the use of force. Chiefs have sought to depict themselves as merely messengers for the more unwelcome exactions, like the SPLA conscription: 'it is not the chief who took the child; it is the government who wanted the child'.⁴¹ 'The work of a chief is just a messenger', according to Chief Joseph.⁴²

The failure to communicate effectively with government power results in violence, however, and often the chiefs have been the first in

⁴⁰ Interview 21, 8 October 2005: Sub-chief 1, Clan Two.

⁴¹ Interview 12, 14 September 2005: Town sub-chief, Clan Two.

⁴² Interview 24, 12 October 2005: Chief Joseph, Clan One.

line for such punitive force. There are parallels again with the rain chiefs' role of mediation with divinity; their failure to beseech rain effectively has sometimes led to violence or death being inflicted upon them collectively by the community, as in Simonse's account of the Bari 'scapegoat [rain] king' (1992). Someone must pay the price for breakdown of communication; while at times mediation and translation offer opportunities to skilful manipulators, they can also lead to the shooting of the messenger. Violence inflicted on the chiefs and headmen during the war thus represents the ultimate breakdown of communication, and the function of the chiefship as a kind of safety-valve or scapegoat between the people and the arbitrary and unpredictable force of government, just as between feuding parties.

The chiefs' legitimacy has also rested on the contested definitions of the community. For the normative discourses of the elders and clan leaders, while they have been central to defining a moral community, have also tended to be exclusionary. The chiefs' authority, somewhat ironically, has been more inclusive and more practical. The fact that – despite becoming largely hereditary – it has not been based on seniority in the lineage has enabled it to remain more open to political change. The younger or more educated people, who have been calling for chiefs to be democratically elected and more literate, have actually been arguing very much within a long-standing discourse of chiefship. The idea that a chief should be 'for all the people' rather than clan-biased, and that a chief should be qualified to communicate effectively with government in order to bring both mitigation and resources for the community, appears to be deeply embedded in local political culture. Of course it represents more of an ideal than a reality, since chiefs have frequently been accused of bias, and since government resources have rarely been forthcoming and instead government has been more or less predatory upon the people. But even from a more realistic angle, the general tacit tolerance for the 'SPLA chiefs', alongside the elders' longing for a return to the true lineage chiefship, is deeply revealing of the kind of balance which has been reached – and renewed – over the last century or more. It is a compromise between the need to define and defend the local moral community, and the inescapable realities both of the recurring predations of 'government' (whether colonial, 'Arab' or rebel) and of the continually shifting composition of local communities. The latter in itself reflects the pragmatic coping mechanisms which have enabled people to draw on different networks of kin and community in order to survive the disruptions and dangers brought by the *gela*. And yet, whatever the pragmatic reality, people nevertheless need the sense of continuity and of a moral centre, which the discourses of blood descent, land rights and roots provide. It is ultimately revealing that those discourses claim descent from migration leaders during times of displacement and danger, just as the histories of chiefship locate its origins in familiarly violent circumstances.

CONCLUSION

The local oral histories and chiefship disputes discussed in this article have been revealing of much wider issues than their immediate specificities. They demonstrate the continuities in the experience of 'government' over the last century, which to some extent expose the limits of the de-normalization wrought by lengthy periods of civil war. Guerrilla wars, especially in the 1990s, have been seen to involve unprecedented trauma and violence. But the origins of chiefship in this part of Central Equatoria, and local understandings of its role, have ensured that the institution of chiefship has been uniquely well suited to managing the relations between military/governments and the civilian population during the war. The chiefs are indeed linked intrinsically to government violence, but as mediators and shields, not as Mamdani's strong arm of the state. Whether the chiefs will be as suited to a role in a 'post-conflict' scenario remains to be seen. Chiefs have retained legitimacy in this area (and often more generally in Southern Sudan) for so long partly because of their marginal status and the limited potential for the development of profitable patrimonial relations between local and state political players (unlike, notably, in Sierra Leone). If they are treated as the central community authorities with sole rights over 'tradition', land rights and 'customary law', they may become the focus for much greater factionalism and resentment; West and Kloeck-Jenson (1999) offer a salient warning of similar misunderstandings and simplifications in Mozambique. But nevertheless, the historical experience of government in Southern Sudan has taught that only a member of the local community can be trusted to take the personal risks required to 'bail' his people from the recurring violence of the state. And the debates over definitions of that community generated by the patrilineally marginal status of some chiefs have so far served to prevent the kind of exclusionary definition of chiefdoms observed elsewhere. Policy makers, who envision a democratic and developmental state and seek to incorporate chiefs into it, risk ignoring the historical experiences of rural people, and their current expectations. The new government is dominated by the very officers who have inflicted violence and made demands upon them, and who were tolerated on the understanding that a bargain was being struck with them as it had been with other *gela* before them. People continue to tolerate a chief like Ezekia, however grudgingly, because he has proven his ability to speak out to the *gela*, not because they necessarily believe he is the best person to represent them in a not-yet-existing democratic and distributive state.

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ABSTRACT

This article explores specific oral histories and chiefship debates in the aftermath of the SPLA war in two Southern Sudanese chiefdoms. It argues that these local histories reveal much about the historical relationship between state and society – and in particular the mediation with external violence – which is central to understanding the legitimacy of local authority. Rather than being the strong arm of the state, chiefs have ideally mediated and deflected state (and rebel) violence. Unlike other African examples, they have been marginal both in landowning and patrilian structures, so that chiefship has offered a more inclusive and pragmatic definition of community than have patrilian discourses. As elsewhere in Southern Sudan, the early chiefs were often proxy mediators with marginal or outside origins and their access to government force has been balanced by the continuing authority of rain chiefs, elders, senior lineages and 'maternal uncles'. Current governance interventions which treat chiefs as sole custodians of community land and customs may not be

compatible with local understandings of the role of the chief. Oral histories of chiefship origins reflect a symbolic bargain made with government and with chiefs, whereby the latter use their 'good speech' to mediate violence, and if necessary sacrifice themselves to 'bail' people from external/government force.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie des histoires orales et des débats de chefs spécifiques aux lendemains de la guerre de la SPLA au sein de deux chefferies du Sud du Soudan. Il soutient que ces histoires locales sont très révélatrices de la relation historique entre l'État et la société (et notamment la médiation de la violence externe), qui est centrale pour comprendre la légitimité de l'autorité locale. Au lieu d'être le bras fort de l'État, les chefs ont idéalement joué le rôle de médiateurs et détourné la violence d'État (et des rebelles). Contrairement à d'autres exemples africains, ils ont été marginaux en termes de structures de propriété foncière et de patriclan, de sorte que la chefferie a offert une définition plus inclusive et pragmatique de la communauté que ne l'ont fait les discours patrilinéaires. Comme ailleurs dans le Sud du Soudan, les premiers chefs étaient souvent des médiateurs indirects avec des origines marginales ou extérieures, et leur accès à la force gouvernementale a été contrebalancé par l'autorité continue des chefs de pluie, des anciens, des lignages supérieurs et des "oncles maternels". Les actions de gouvernance actuelles qui traitent les chefs comme les gardiens exclusifs des terres et des coutumes de la communauté peuvent être en contradiction avec les interprétations locales du rôle du chef. Les histoires orales des origines des chefs reflètent un accord symbolique passé avec le gouvernement et avec les chefs, par lequel ces derniers utilisent leur "bon parler" pour régler les problèmes de violence par la médiation et, si nécessaire, se sacrifient pour "sauver" les personnes de la force extérieure/gouvernementale.