THE ETHICS OF RESEARCHING IN CONFLICT:

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS FROM GREATER PIBOR AND SOUTH SUDAN

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Introduction

I first went to Boma in southern Pibor in South Sudan in November 2012 on a preliminary visit to determine the site for my doctoral fieldwork. In the hinterlands of South Sudan, previously located in Jonglei state, Boma and Pibor are the home of the Murle, a small agro-pastoralist people that have lived on the margins of the state and experienced difficult relations with their neighbours and the government. In South Sudan, the Murle have been subject to a widespread, politically motivated narrative that demonises them as hostile, violent, infertile and as child abductors. As Anne Laudati argues, 'Despite the reality of a politically and economically marginalized Murle, they are often cast as the aggressors and perpetrators of the continuing insecurity of Jonglei—a narrative that has been upheld by media agencies, prominent figures in government, NGO staff, and local citizens' (Laudati 2011: 21).

I was interested in learning about the social meaning of violence among the Murle, the ways in which it was perpetrated, experienced and lived, and how it was made legible, accounted for and constituted as a central element in Boma Murle representations of collective self and in articulating relations to the state. By the time of my first visit, the conflict between the largely Murle rebellion known as the South Sudan Democratic Movement/Army – Cobra Faction (SSDM/A-CF) and the South Sudan Government's Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) was already affecting much of Pibor county.

The Murle have been part of cycles of inter-communal violence with neighbouring Lou Nuer, and to a lesser extent Dinka Bor, which particularly escalated from 2009 and led to a SPLA-led civilian disarmament campaign in 2012 across Jonglei (Small Arms Survey, 2012). This campaign started peacefully by engaging local chiefs, but it assumed a

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particularly violent character in Pibor county, where the SPLA reportedly committed rapes, simulated drownings and other grave human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch 2013). These abuses of civilians encouraged many young people to join the largely Murle rebellion led by David Yau Yau, SSDM/A-CF, against the Government's SPLA. As the country fell back into a civil war between the SPLA and the SPLA-In Opposition (SPLA-IO) in December 2013, the government of South Sudan agreed to sign a peace deal with the SSDM/A-CF and give in to its greatest demand, an independent state. A quasi-state was established in May 2014, known as the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) (see Todisco 2015).

But Boma town remained a relatively quiet and sleepy place, and the few Murle villages in the Boma Hills even more so. This seeming tranquillity and safety was a significant factor in selecting Boma above other places in Greater Pibor to conduct my doctoral research: I was welcomed by initial contacts and authorities, and equally importantly, I could walk freely between villages without too many security restrictions and *be in the world* (Duffield 2014: 77), rather than remaining secluded behind fortified aid compounds (Duffield 2010).

I therefore moved to Boma in early February 2013, when it was still possible to walk around in relative safety. I began my fieldwork under the assumption that I would spend my time moving between a couple of villages in Upper Boma over the following year. This did not happen, not only because I had not anticipated that the war across Pibor would affect Boma to the extent it did, but also because I assumed that my everyday life as an anthropologist would be static and sedentary. Instead research proved much more mobile and dynamic. Over the following months, the conflict drew closer and the area became more insecure. In addition to the fear of the rebellion and of an increasingly tense and agitated SPLA, sporadic ethnically motivated attacks and violence on the roads became a concern. While this latter type of violence did not target me directly, my Murle research assistant became very exposed, and like many residents of Boma we limited our movements. By early May the conflict had effectively reached Boma, leading to the displacement of most of its Murle population and the looting and destruction of homes, the hospital and schools.

The Murle in Boma had begun leaving the town for the safety of the hills in Upper Boma. As the rebel army was about to take Boma from the SPLA, all I had to do to physically leave Boma was run down the mountain very fast and jump into an NGO-chartered aircraft. All this took was a quick phone call by an NGO representative to my satellite phone warning me that the town was on the verge of being taken by the rebels and that NGOs were evacuating and asking whether I wanted to leave with them. Faced with unpredictable violence, I chose to take up their offer. Within less than two hours I had landed, estranged, in South Sudan's capital city, Juba.

The privilege I possessed as a foreign researcher was never made more crudely clear. It brought to the forefront how challenging it was to remain an 'independent researcher' when I was constantly dependent on the logistical support of aid structures. It also made visible how new technologies have altered how researchers *exist* in the field. As Mark Duffield notes, referring to his fieldwork in Maiurno in Sudan in the 1970s, 'Limited external communication meant local immersion, learning the language, making friends and trusting people' (Duffield 2014: 77). Conversely, I had my own satellite phone and could occasionally access the internet at the INGO compounds. I had privileged access to information about events taking place across South Sudan, and in some cases I was even better informed about significant events relating to the rebellion taking place in Pibor than many of my local informants in Upper Boma with no immediate access to information on events as they unfolded. I was also regularly in touch with my supervisor, family and friends. Inevitably, this affected the extent to which I immersed myself in 'the field.' Nevertheless, echoing Mark Duffield's words above, I was still able to improve my (limited) knowledge of the Murle language (continuing the lessons I had started in Juba), make friends and trust people.

I had begun my relationship in Boma as a doctoral student with no formal affiliations. I established good relations with aid workers at the couple of NGOs operating in Boma and was fortunate to benefit from their friendship and support. When in Boma town I could stay at the NGO compounds and use their facilities such as their offices and internet, and I was informally included in the security plans in case a situation arose requiring sudden evacuation, as indeed happened.

I was suddenly in the capital Juba at a loss over what to do as the conflict unfolded in Boma. A few weeks after the SSDM/A-CF took control of Boma, the SPLA recaptured the area, and in the process the majority of Murle civilians fled. Friends and informants fled south to Eastern Equatoria and across the border to Ethiopia, losing family members, their homes and their belongings. I felt useless; what could I do ethically and practically? Practically, and with a renewed sense of urgency, I continued with my research by following the trajectories of Murle friends and informants into displacement, trying to record what was taking place and how people were making sense of these events and of the new reality. Ethically, what kind of moral obligation and responsibility did I have to use the information I had gathered and my privileged access in a way that could perhaps contribute to alleviating the human suffering I was witnessing and somehow had become part of? In a context of uncertainty, war and human suffering, how could I learn from people in a way that was ethical? Should I continue with my own research by collecting people's narratives of events? And, in a highly polarized political environment, would this mean endangering myself, my work or the very people I hoped to help? What should I do with that information? Could it, and should it, be used in advocacy efforts for the people I was working with? And how could I be sure that it was for their benefit? Would I compromise myself by associating directly with institutional actors? These were all issues and questions acutely in my mind over those initial weeks and months.

The remainder of this article offers a short personal account of how I have navigated some of these ethical questions in relation to my involvement and fieldwork with the Murle in South Sudan and in areas to which many Murle fled to during the period of crisis in recent years. I remain convinced of the potential of ethnography as a valuable approach to learning about societies facing war, not least because of how improvisation and adaptation are central to its *modus operandi*. I will discuss in particular what has come to seem like an inescapable relationship between research in remote and insecure areas and the aid industry and some of the problems this entails.

The value of ethnography as an improvisational practice during crisis

Ethnography is based on long-term and systematic engagement with a group of people and the development of social relationships and emotional bonds, in which 'participant

observation as a methodology blurs into and becomes indistinguishable from living itself' (Duffield 2014: 81). With time, these experiences and relationships – a part of everyday living – result in cultural, social and political insights and knowledge. Much in line with Lisa Malkki, I understand ethnographic fieldwork as 'simultaneously a critical theoretical practice, a quotidian ethical practice, and an improvisational practice' (Malkki 2007: 164), *being in the world* to develop knowledge of it (Duffield 2014; Jenkins 1994).[2] But how possible is it to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in contexts of conflict, disaster and human suffering? And what kinds of specific ethical dilemmas surface in contexts of crisis?

Allaine Cerwonka (2007) speaks of fieldwork and ethnography as a 'nervous condition', and I agree with Malkki when she says that 'there are many improvisational dimensions to knowledge production and writing in general, but for ethnographic research … improvisation is indispensable' (Malkki 2007: 163). Ethnographic research in difficult and unstable contexts intensifies this 'nervous condition' and relies even more on improvising and on ethnographic intuition. Researching, encountering and experiencing human suffering is never going to be an objective and straightforward process. Rather, it is full of uncertainty, intense involvement and self-reflection, as well as permanent ethical reassessment and improvisation.

My research took place in a shifting environment in which I navigated between physical, social and political spaces of instability and constant change, where improvising – theoretically, ethically, emotionally and methodologically – was not a secondary feature, but rather an ever-present, conscious and necessary strategy. I found myself documenting events and informants' narratives and strategies as they occurred. Researching and conducting fieldwork of any social phenomena are inevitably unpredictable and uncertain. This is multiplied many times by situations of violent conflict and instability. Pieke (1995) speaks of what he terms 'accidental anthropology', where he urges anthropologists neither to hold on to the execution of a predetermined research plan, nor to start all over again when encountering unexpected events. For Nordstrom and Robben (1995: 16), accidental anthropology is 'not about emergencies but rather about understanding contingencies in a wider social and cultural context'. I find the principle of 'accidental anthropology' not only

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[2] This sentence alludes to Mark Duffield's critique of current remote research and aid management methodologies, where he states that 'being in the world is no longer a requirement for developing knowledge of it' – a reference to Maybury 2010 (Duffield 2014: 76).

relevant but inevitable if fieldwork is to remain a genuine endeavour and reflective about what is happening in a shifting social world.

Convergence of the researcher and the aid encounter

Mark Duffield has observed and written incisively about the retreat of aid workers into secluded fortified compounds and the growing use of remote methodologies (Duffield 2010; cf. Collinson et al. 2013). More recently, he has also written about the dangers of the convergence between research and aid, arguing that academic 'area studies has collapsed into aid policy' (Duffield 2014: 86).

It is difficult to conduct research in hard-to-reach and insecure areas. The sheer physical isolation of Boma, in addition to an insecure environment and a lack of options in movement, did mean that I was extremely dependent on aid structures, particularly for flying in and out. But having the support of NGOs can be very helpful in this regard, while it still being possible to maintain some independence. In Boma, there was no telephone network, and the only roads connecting the area to Ethiopia and to Kapueta in Eastern Equatoria State are impassable during the eight-month rainy season. But even on a good day in the dry season, it takes roughly three days to drive from Juba to Boma. Prior to the conflict, flying in and out of Boma was only possible through the weekly United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) flight, permitted only for humanitarian staff (during the instability even this more or less regular flight was cancelled). To fly with UNHAS to get in and out of Boma, I had to find an NGO that would agree to sponsor me.[3]

After the conflict, research logistics and access became even harder. Looking to follow the new social and political circumstances of the people from Boma, I travelled to areas of Murle displacement to learn how people were making sense of events and of their new reality. At the same time, however, I also actively searched for ways to return to Boma. Boma became a highly militarised and controlled area, and access was even more challenging. The UN and NGOs were occasionally flying in, and I began to engage formally with some of these agencies in order to access Boma. For the researcher, there are both benefits and risks in associating with an aid agency. The most obvious benefit is

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[3] This was done through informal relations and friendships with aid workers who would assist me in managing the bureaucracy. The NGO would buy the flight from UNHAS, but I would reimburse them. Alternatively, an NGO would fly me in in return for a briefing of the situation.

logistical and at times institutional support to access hard-to-reach areas. I considered these collaborations as opportunistic engagements from both parties, where both the agency and myself had a simultaneous purpose, as well our own individual agendas. There were also serious risks, as I somewhat naively came to learn: one can easily become caught up in the politics of aid.

The politics of information, positionality and competing accounts

In the highly politicised context of South Sudan, how could I protect my informants and myself as a researcher? I was a doctoral student with first-hand knowledge in a world of advocacy NGO-types often operating remotely, and who often felt entitled to information, despite their distance from the field. The compelling moral mission of NGOs may lead them to acquire a sense of entitlement and expectation. This is perhaps grounded in a combination of agendas (for example, competition for donor dollars and advocacy attention), a desire to operate independently and a genuine belief in the morality of their cause.

Just before the conflict reached Boma in May 2013, I published a short paper for a Norwegian peacebuilding institute discussing briefly the context experienced by the Murle in Boma (Felix da Costa 2013). I had intended to use the policy brief to shed light on the specific environment of the Murle in Boma and counter the wider anti-Murle discourse, with internationals in Juba as an audience. On the one hand, I was keen to draw attention to the situation of the Murle in Boma. On the other hand, I feared representing Murle in an unfavourable light that could have negative consequences for the already tense political environment and be used to legitimise anti-Murle rhetoric and policies, particularly in terms of reproducing anti-Murle discourses and contributing to the narratives promoting the division and disunity of the Murle people. I became well aware of the perils of publishing in highly politicised contexts, of how information can be distorted and taken out of context by individuals and how researchers can easily become scapegoats.

In this scenario, choices regarding how to handle and present certain information at both the ethical and emotional levels are difficult to take, particularly when they relate to human rights abuses and political and structural violence. Rather, in such politically charged environments, it may be wiser to resort to silence and self-censorship. Laura

Hammond (2011) notes that silence can and should be read and interpreted as having meaning and significance, both from research informants and researcher alike. Ultimately, given the practical implications of knowledge, Cramer et al. (2011: 17) argue that difficult questions and decisions should be analysed through the following lens:

> If anthropological knowledge is best seen as public knowledge, we are left to wonder whether our words can be used against either us or our informants; if they can, there may be justification for self-censorship, either in choosing to frame the research project in such a way that sensitive or uncomfortable truths are avoided, or else (perhaps more commonly) censoring ourselves in the presentation of what we have found.

For Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995: 419), morally engaged research involves being more than a spectator. Rather, it recognizes that what emerges 'ln the act of writing culture (…) is always a highly subjective, partial, and fragmentary but also deeply personal record of human lives based on eye-witness accounts and testimony'. At this level, witnessing 'positions the anthropologist inside human events as a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being, one who will "take sides" and make judgments, though this flies in the face of the anthropological non-engagement with either ethics or politics' (Nancy Scheper-Hughes, 1995: 419). Scheper-Hughes, then, sees ethics as 'responsibility, accountability and answerability to "the other"', arguing that a politically and morally engaged discipline requires its practitioners to be 'witnesses' instead of 'spectators' (1995: 419). However, this political righteousness suggests that such decisions are straightforward and simple: in reality, they are set in complex and messy political, social and ethical webs. As Adam Kuper suggests, in his response to Scheper-Hughes, 'most ethnographic situations are less dramatic and most political choices more complicated' (Kuper 1995: 425). Rather, Aihwa Ong is right to argue that, 'taken to the extreme both positions, neutrality versus advocacy, are very dangerous, if not for anthropologists, then for the people they work with' (Ong 1995: 428). There are scientific expectations that researchers should be neutral and impartial, but like Hutchinson (2011), arguing on the basis of her long-term involvement in South Sudan, I have also found this to be an illusion. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research in India with Maoist insurgency and counterinsurgency groups, George Kunnath questions the meaning of objectivity 'in the face of violence and oppression' (Kunnath 2013: 740). He eloquently states that

> I consider not speaking and not acting against oppressive structural arrangements and power relations unethical. As an anthropologist, I am not advocating the blurring of the boundaries of anthropology and activism, nor am I demarcating them as separate identities. Being an anthropologist among the poor in itself is a call for participation in their struggles. (Kunnath 2013: 742)

Social research is often presented as an objective and sanitised exercise. But more recognition should go into acknowledging the contingent and the failures. Importantly, there should also be greater recognition of the emotional and human aspects of research and the positionality of the researcher.

My research has been interested in how competing 'knowledges' are constituted relationally and structurally. I have found it impossible to create a linear and structured picture and reconstruction of events that have taken place in Boma, as these are contested and subjective. Instead, the various voices, sometimes in contradiction, offer a more complete understanding of social processes in war. It is also difficult to discern what is objectively 'true' and 'false' from what are just rumours, which can nevertheless be equally important. At a workshop at the University of Birmingham in November 2014, one participant made the insightful remark that 'it's rumour when "they" say it, but it's knowledge when "we" say it', astutely alluding to the hierarchy of knowledge, authority and 'expert knowledges', and contested and partial truths.[4] This increases the ethical and moral dilemmas faced by the researcher, who has even greater power and responsibility when telling a story.

Some of the relationships I have built up from Boma have come to challenge 'traditional' understandings of informed consent, as they become long-term relations of friendship. In this sense, I became part of a complex web of relations that was also inevitably political. While long-term relationships and friendships made over the years have evolved in such a way that it does not always make sense to engage in standard informed consent, ethical responsibility lies in being very aware of where to draw the line and discern what is being told as a friend and otherwise as an individual related temporarily to an aid

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[4] Anonymous participant at the workshop entitled 'Knowledge, "information" and conflict: what we know, how we know it and what it means', 7 November 2014, organised by the Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Birmingham. The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule.

agency – and of course, when in doubt, asking, and if need be, ultimately censoring oneself. This may not always be easy and straightforward, yet ethnography is always an improvisational and intuitive process.

My emotional attachment to Boma also grew after its destruction in May 2013. My trips to areas of Murle displacement strengthened relations that had begun months earlier in Boma. I would also often carry news from place to place. I became involved in some of the peace meetings, either by being part of writing the funding proposal for donors alongside Murle intellectuals, or by documenting the meeting as part of the secretariat team. In turn, I saw these invitations and participation in Murle debates as consent and support to my interest in documenting Murle narratives of events, and as informal collective approval to continue my research on the part of the broader Murle 'community'.

Conclusion

In May 2015 I returned from just over a month in Pibor, where I was hired by an NGO to learn about the effects of conflict on the Murle's relationship with cattle. The Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) had been established a year before, in May 2014, with the signing of a peace deal between the Government of South Sudan and the SSDM/A-CF. After over two years of heavy fighting, destruction and displacement, people were returning home, enjoying a refreshing period of peace and some relative stability.

This visit was a delight. Many people who had fled to exile were back. People in towns, in villages and in cattle camps were optimistic about their new political home, the GPAA, which they had fought long and hard for. I had witnessed the Murle collective struggle and the suffering experienced during the war that led to the establishment of the new political entity. I was unequivocally supportive of the GPAA, convinced of its potential to provide a chance for peace in the area.

During the research debriefing, after I enthusiastically shared my research findings with a small audience composed of the NGO staff, I was jokingly asked by the NGO's country director if I had been nominated as an ambassador for the GPAA. The friendly remark brought to the forefront issues I had often asked myself. On the one hand, it raised awkward feelings of failing to adhere to the supposed principles of research detachment and of the neutral observer. It questioned my research objectivity and my ability to offer an unbiased

picture. On the other hand, the remark recognised where I stood – that my research was positioned and my knowledge situated and anchored in Murle aspirations and perspectives in which the establishment of the GPAA was seen as a recognition of the Murle struggles and as a way in which they could govern themselves. I do not see that it is possible to do research in any other way: recognising the researcher's intellectual and emotional subjectivity and partiality, while striving to tell a story as rigorously as possible.

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