

# In the Belly of the River: Water-Related Traditional Practices and the Moral Authority of Murle Mothers

Juhanna Sankelo  
University of Helsinki Doctoral School  
juhanna.sankelo@helsinki.fi

Paulino Jijiyo  
Murle society  
Pibor, South Sudan

## Abstract

This study illustrates the significance of water for the Murle people of South Sudan. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork, we analyse traditional practices and metaphorical expressions in the spontaneous speech of male members of the *lanjo* age-set. We show that the spoken language embodies metaphorical expressions of the Murle cattle- and land-based identity and demonstrate how Indigenous knowledge manifests itself in water-related expressions and in traditional practices related to water. In these traditional practices water is used to foster peace, convey blessings, purify, and enhance fertility. The study also offers a new perspective on the role and agency of women in Murle age-sets, highlighting the role of a female diviner of the *lanjo* age-set. Female traditional experts, such as *dole ci lilu*, draw moral authority from the Murle tradition which regards women as the mothers of all society, and use spiritual power to promote peace and build relationships through advice. In turn, male chiefs performing traditional rituals deal with the ill effects of conflict, ensuring unity in the society and continuity of the tradition. The results indicate a complementary approach among the male and female experts of Murle tradition (*kerane*). This gendered study supplies a nuanced understanding of the transformative potential that Murle spirituality and traditional water-related practices can have among young men and women in an age-set society.

**Keywords:** water-related traditional practices; diviners; *lanjo* age-set; Murle; South Sudan

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## **Zɔɔz**

Aduwaket demzin nici gɔl ci obi zɔɔz ceen murlen o joowane o aduɲna lila, kaɲamneka yapzi-nok ceen amonki codai keranene o kayeeda kiben zoozok o aduwa lɔgɔl o macik buul o kazi laɲo. Yabzinowa nici aduwa gi ci awɔyi murle liil keɲa ki gi ci ɲaai avi mama zɛɛ ma alaɲ adode o. Eci gɔɔn laɲona avɔ ajina kaal ɲarye ci ɲai een dole ci lilu. Mazin ma avi eeti ci deer mami ecitɔ kadalta mama otok ki keɲ dook ma alaɲ adode koca zɔɔz nici anyeet ɲolin ma alaɲ een gi ci labak. Mazin zoozowa ci ayedi weregenyaye ceen murle ogen azi nɛ, mama ci atilna tammu o dook ayabzai kizi mɛɛ karabɔɲ bar kizi kidice. Nici gi libir o alugan murle da bale eo gɔɔn obin o. Bodo buk kacin allat o murlo mɛɛrik gɔɔn ma iroon ɔl ci ayɔwɔ zɛɛ mazi ka kaganistɔ, adoma maam ma azai ɔl ka kamayukte kaganistɔ. Icinit ziin ɔl o ademez utugeti zɛɛ abon zɔɔz een gi ci kazɔɔz kiziyɛ keɲ juruɲ ɲati kazɛdi, ma abon buk kademeez zoozok ci gɔɔn tɛ akomnet akeet otoge cinai o ka coma kaga kalyan ci azee otoge cina o tɔɔ.

## **About the authors**

*Juhanna Sankelo* is a doctoral researcher in Indigenous Studies in the Doctoral Programme in Political, Societal, and Regional Changes at the Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki (Finland). Her research interests include participatory research, the Murle age system, songs, and transforming societies.

*Paulino Jijiyo* is a Murle age-set leader who lives in Pibor, Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), South Sudan. At the time of writing of this article he was invited as a visiting researcher to be hosted by the Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki (Finland). His research interests include youth, peace and security, and community development.

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## Introduction

The Murle are one of the 64 ethnic groups in South Sudan, a marginalized minority that inhabits the south-eastern area of the country, bordering Ethiopia, in Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). In this remote rural area of South Sudan, Murle traditional authorities and other traditional experts, such as chiefs, elders, diviners, and healers, operate at different levels of a hierarchical age-set society. They use water-related traditional practices to promote peace in their own society, as well as to repair neighbourly relations damaged by past wars and conflicts.

In one of the latest outbreaks of violence in South Sudan, Dinka and Nuer armed youths of Northern and Western Jonglei jointly attacked Murle, first in Gumuruk on December 24, 2022, then in Likuangole on December 26, 2022 (Small Arms Survey 2023). The offensive continued until January 2023, targeting multiple areas of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) and causing widespread destruction (UNSC 2023). More than 30,000 Murle<sup>1</sup> were displaced, scores of Murle civilians were killed, and women and children were abducted (Small Arms Survey 2023; UNSC 2023). A less known fact, perhaps, is that two weeks prior to the devastating attack, a prominent leader of the *lajo* age-set, an influential social group in Murle society, set off to walk from Manyabol, in the western part of the GPAA, to Akobo, Lou Nuer territory, in an attempt to persuade the Nuer youth to desist from joining the attack. Before leaving Manyabol he had first ensured an agreement with his own *lajo* age-set that the Murle youth would not go after the attackers. The *lajo* leader took this initiative following the advice that was given by *Mama*, a female diviner of the *lajo* age-set who operates within the ritual sphere associated with water.

This article discusses Murle water-related traditional practices and metaphorical expressions related to water in the spoken Murle

language. We investigate: (1) how Indigenous knowledge manifests itself in water-related expressions in the spontaneous speech of male members of the *lajo* [*lango*] age-set, and in water-related traditional practices, and (2) what these findings can tell us about the contemporary Murle age-set society. We argue that both male and female traditional experts are important and complement each other's work, responding to the different needs of society members. We also argue that the female diviner of the *lajo* age-set to whom we refer in this study draws moral authority from the Murle tradition which sees women as the mothers of all society, using spiritual power to promote peace and build relationships through advice, and thereby embodying the potential for social change. This work addresses a research gap by providing insights into an understudied topic, namely Murle water-related traditional relational practices, which lacks recent fieldwork-based research.

Indigenous perspectives and water-related spiritual practices have been researched, for example, among the Sotho people of Lesotho, the First Nations of Canada, and the Veps of Russia. Colin Murray's (1980) study among the Bantu-speaking Sotho pastoralists in Lesotho, Southern Africa, illustrates that the Sotho have several fertility metaphors associated with the river, as well as a female diviner who heals patients with the power derived from ancestors, using water from a sacred pool. Another study refers to the notion of 'shared breath' and examines the communicative practices between humans and nonhumans among three Indigenous peoples (Siragusa et al. 2020). Clinton N. Westman (in Siragusa et al. 2020, 477), discussing co-presence and relationality with other-than-human persons among the Cree people of Canada, provides an example of the interaction between humans and loons in a lake, through the providing of offerings and the receiving of blessings in return. Sarah C. Moritz (in Siragusa et al. 2020, 483) observes that the Interior Salish St'át'inc

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<sup>1</sup> *murlény*, PL. *múrlé* 'Murle' (Tucker and Bryan 1966, 385).

(The Salmon People) of Canada maintain super-social relations among humans, non-humans, and salmon in the river, showing respect to their 'kin' through nonverbal acts that seek unity and harmony. Laura Siragusa (Siragusa et al. 2020, 474) illustrates how the Veps of Russia whisper enchantments to communicate respectfully with the territorial master, who is the host who controls water, resides in a sacred place, and has spiritual power. These studies show that Indigenous practices are relational and that water is associated with females, spirits, and spiritual power, and must be approached with respect.

Previous research in South Sudan includes a study by Sharon Hutchinson and Naomi Pendle (2015) that discusses the strategies of two influential Nuer prophets from 2005 to 2013: *Nyachol*, a female prophet of *Maani*, and *Gatdeang*, a male prophet of the divinity *Deng*. According to this study, *Nyachol* blessed the Nuer youth by using ashes before they left to raid cattle, resolved killings among the Nuer using purification rituals, and encouraged payments of bloodwealth cattle (Hutchinson and Pendle 2015, 424). *Gatdeang* conveyed *Deng's* blessings using water and his spiritual powers to foster peaceful Nuer-Dinka relations (Hutchinson and Pendle 2015, 418). The study shows that male and female Nuer prophets have spiritual and political power which can be used for destructive purposes as well as to achieve peace.

### **The Murle society**

South Sudan gained independence only in 2011 after a troubled past under the British colonial administration and the Khartoum government (Thomas 2015).<sup>2</sup> The Second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005) and the South Sudanese civil war (2013–2018) took a toll on the population, resulting in internal displacement and many civilians ending up in refugee

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<sup>2</sup> Anglo-Egyptian Condominium 1899–1956 and the Independent Sudan 1956–2011.

camps in neighbouring countries. Following several administrative changes, ten states and three administrative areas were created under the central government in Juba to accommodate the desires of southern Sudan's 64 ethnic groups. One of these distinct ethnic groups, the Murle, inhabits the land in the south-eastern part of the country, which is also home to the Anuyak, Jie, and Kachipo minorities. This semi-autonomous area came to be called the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) in the 2014 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in Jonglei State between the Government of the Republic of South Sudan and the South Sudan Democratic Movement/South Sudan Defence Army – Cobra Faction.<sup>3</sup> The Murle social and political organization includes traditional authorities, such as chiefs and elders, and a type of modern governance in the form of local government.

The Murle people are a marginalized minority with a strong ethnic identity, Indigenous language, and spirituality. The Murle language is spoken by an estimated 140,000–200,000 Murle people.<sup>4</sup> It is classified as a Southern/Southwestern Surmic language, an Eastern Sudanic language of the Nilo-Saharan phylum, geographically located in the neighbourhood of Afroasiatic languages (Bender 1971). The Murle have been studied by early anthropologists who worked for the British colonial administration. Of these, the ethnographic study written by Bazett A. Lewis (1972), the British commissioner in Pibor in 1941–1944, provides a general overview of the

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<sup>3</sup> From October 2015 to February 2020, the GPAA was called Boma State.

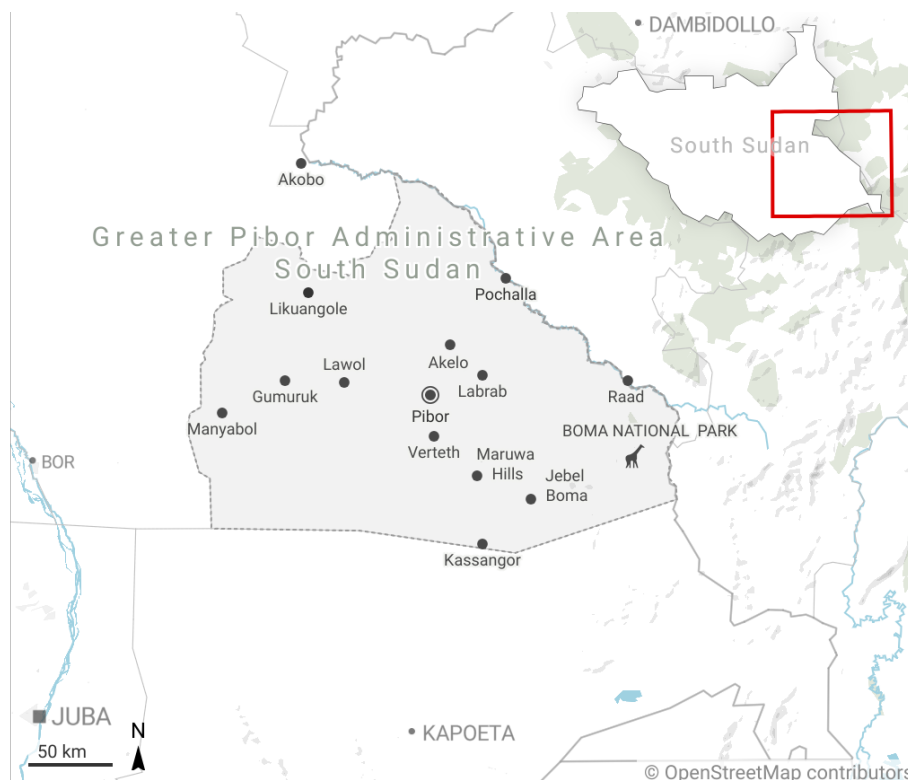
<sup>4</sup> In the early 1940s there were 10,000–12,000 Murle speakers in Pibor District (Lewis 1972). In 1947, there were around 40,000 Murle speakers (Lyth 2013), and in late 1970s, around 70,000 (Arensen 1982). The 2008 census, based on household surveys, estimated the Murle population to be around 148,000. The latest population projections, conducted in May–June 2021 through satellite imagery, estimate the total Pibor population at 227,854, comprising 118,985 females and 108,869 males (UN OCHA 2020, updated June 11, 2022).

Murle society. Richard E. Lyth (2013 [1971]), an Anglican missionary in southern Sudan with the Church Missionary Society and British Commissioner in Pibor in 1947–1953, authored a Murle grammar and vocabulary. Jonathan E. Arensen (1982, 1992), a cultural anthropologist, conducted a large part of his research among the Murle in Pibor in 1976–1983, focusing on linguistic surveys and Bible translation. Latter studies conducted among the Murle include, for example, Elizabeth Andretta's (1983, 1985, 1989) research on the social structure of Murle societies in Pibor and Boma, Judith McCallum's (2013) study on the Murle identity, and Diana Felix da Costa's (2018) work on the Murle traditional authority structures, including age-sets. We refer to these studies as we examine the changes in the Murle age system and place the changes on a timeline using the work of Edward Thomas (2015) on the recent history of South Sudan. Some studies have also discussed the roles

of men and women in East African pastoralist societies. For example, Dorothy Hodgson (1999) shows that the colonial British and Maasai ideas, which assigned men to public and women to domestic roles, leaving cattle under male control, later reinforced the political and economic power of men. Specifically, the male control over cattle wealth, as well as the need to collect cattle as bridewealth, have been associated with having negative effects on women (Lacey 2013).

The Murle migration is traced to near the Maji and Omo River region in southwest Ethiopia, from where the Murle-Didinga group, during the last thousand years before the common era (Ehret 1982, 22–23), moved westward towards Sudan and gradually proceeded northwards, eventually reaching Boma and later the Pibor area.

The Murle societies inhabit the rural areas of South Sudan along the Ethiopian border (Figure 1). The semi-arid landscape of the



Created with Datawrapper

Figure 1: Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA)

GPAA is divided by the tributaries of the Nile, such as the Pibor, Veveno, Lotilla, and Kenen rivers. Many Murle in the Pibor area depend on livestock for their livelihoods. The seasonal cattle migration from these areas commonly targets the Jom Swamps wetlands near the Ethiopian border or the cattle camps along the Kenen River. However, the simplistic perception of the Murle as ‘herders’ draws on colonial imagery and gives an essentialist impression of a people.<sup>5</sup> Many also resort to multiple strategies, such as hunting, fishing, cultivating, and gathering. For example, men and women in Pibor, Gumuruk and Verteth also generate income from other sources, such as selling vegetables and tea in the market, as well as providing services such as blacksmithing and tailoring (Wong and Toma 2022, 33–34). Historically, the southern areas in the vicinity of Boma were considered less suitable for cattle due to the high prevalence of tsetse flies (Lewis 1972, 29). Despite several differences in social structure between the Pibor and the Boma Murle societies, “the metaphoric uses of fire and water” – the latter of which is the focus of this study – are part of shared traditional practices in both Murle societies (Andretta 1989, 29).

The age-set, *buul*, is at the core of the Murle social organization, providing its members with a sense of belonging, solidarity, and bonds of trust beyond family connections, which the Murle describe with the concept of *manjana* ‘no relation.’ Age-sets have a vital role in defending the Murle land, people, and cattle. Sultan Ismail Konyi, who earlier in his career served as a policeman in the Sudan Police Forces, returned to his hometown, Pibor, after the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972, and contributed to the development of the Murle community defence capabilities in Pibor. Especially from 1992 onwards, Sultan

Ismail Konyi recruited youths from Murle age-sets to the Pibor Defence Force (*Berget*), which he had founded in the 1980s with the support of Khartoum (Thomas 2015, 187–202). At present, the responsibility of protecting the Murle society falls mainly on the three youngest age-sets; *kurenen* (born in the 1990s), *lajo* (1980s), and *bothothniya* (1970s). Murle men in the older age-sets, such as *tithi* (1960s), *muden* (1950s), *dorojwa* (1940s), and *mara* (1930s), commonly contribute through various support and advisory roles, such as being chiefs and elders. In his role as paramount chief of the Murle, the late Sultan Ismail Konyi, himself a member of the *dorojwa* age-set, actively engaged in resolving conflicts between Murle age-sets.

The *lajo* age-set is the largest social group in the Murle age system. First emerging in 2001 and gaining strength after the return of the age-set leader (overall) to Pibor in 2005, the *lajo* age-set, which earlier used the name *thalama*, identifying with the yellowish hussar monkey, separated from the *bothothniya* age-set in 2009 and gradually established itself in all areas of the GPAA. Today the age-set comprises around 15,000 men and women born in the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>6</sup> who communicate their ethnic identity as members of the age-set through related animals, such as the antelope (kob), and black-and-yellow necklaces (and beads) and clothes. The *lajo* age-set plays an active role in the social hierarchy, leveraging its bargaining power to negotiate with the local government on matters affecting the welfare of the Murle, as well as with neighbours. Sultan Ismail Konyi (who died March 10, 2021), in his last speech to the Murle society, recorded at his bedside in hospital in Juba, entrusted his position as the leader of the Murle society to Paulino Jijiyo, who belongs to *tolonj*, the oldest

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Hannah Strauss and Nuccio Mazullo (2014, 299) illustrate that the focus of the Indigenous Sámi on ‘reindeer herding’ was a result of marginalization.

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<sup>6</sup> This is a rough estimate. According to UN statistics, the number of the Pibor male population aged 18–60 years is estimated at 39,123, and the female population aged 18–60 years at 44,659 (UN OCHA 2020, updated 11 June 2022).

age group of the *lajo* age-set, and who holds the rank of major general in the South Sudan military. We refer to him as ‘the *lajo* age-set leader (overall).’ The recording of the late chief’s instructions was broadcast to the Murle in a public meeting in Pibor town.

### Theoretical and methodological frameworks

The research design considers Bagele Chilisa’s (2020) postcolonial relational research paradigm, which includes the concepts of relational ontology, epistemology, and axiology. These concepts are based on the collective knowledge and worldview of Indigenous peoples in non-Western knowledge systems. We also used the work of Jo-Ann Archibald (2013) to identify the three types of Indigenous knowledge: traditional, cultural, and ecological.

This article has two authors. Paulino Jijiyo is a Murle *lajo* man of Mayngule clan under Thanajon drumship, Pibor. His contribution was particularly valuable in the processes of data collection, analysis, and sharing of knowledge of Murle language and society through collaboration as a participant-researcher (Kovach 2010) both during and after the fieldwork. The other author, Juhanna Sankelo, from a Nordic country, shared field notes for analysis, conducted interviews, and had the main responsibility for the analysis and drafting of the article. During the fieldwork in Greater Pibor, with visits to areas of Likuangole, Pochalla, Kongor, Gumuruk, Manyabol, Verteth, Maruwo, and Jebel Boma (February 2016–October 2017), we gained improved knowledge of the research context, which was necessary for building trust among the Murle interlocutors who cooperated with us. In other areas of South Sudan (October 2017–March 2020), we listened to the experiences of many interlocutors about Murle and interviewed Murle interlocutors in Juba.

The spoken Murle data (MQ 2020), of which we present a selection, was collected in

South Sudan from November 6 to December 5, 2020, with pen and paper, from the flow of discussion through participation and observation in four small gatherings of a total of ten *lajo* men, mostly from rural pastoralist families in the villages near Pibor town, while some are temporarily in Juba. They all read and write Murle; some are multilingual and also speak Arabic, English, Luganda, and Kiswahili. Some participated in more than one of the gatherings, which lasted approximately 30 minutes each. We communicated remotely with a mobile phone through various texting, calling, and meeting platforms that enable two-way communication. The data collection was inspired by the linguistic project on aqua-motion verbs, coordinated by the Moscow Lexical Typological Group in more than 40 languages (Maisak and Rakhilina 2007). We used a frame-based approach to verbs denoting movement in water and encouraged discussion on topics identified in the questionnaire of the broader 2007 study. Some original sample situations were adapted to the specific geographic, climatic, and environmental context in Pibor. We endeavoured to create a dynamic in which knowledge is co-generated within “a relationship-based approach to research” (Kovach 2009, 98). For example, we used photo elicitation, recalling memorable situations related to the movement of people and animals in water, including in adverse weather conditions. We also occasionally used elicitation to clarify the semantic meanings of some Murle words that had not been reported in previous work. We use a simplified orthography based on the handwriting of our *lajo* interlocutors.

The present analysis uses a mixed qualitative approach by incorporating Indigenous approaches into the (non-indigenous) analytical framework to interpret the data. We reanalysed, retranslated, glossed, and systematized the examples under specific themes using non-indigenous approaches. After this, we selected the most representative examples for

closer analysis and expounded on examples with spiritual connotations. We study eight language examples from our observed and elicited data. Each example is followed by a description and analysis of its key cultural features. Our hypothesis is that the everyday language embodies associations with Murle spirituality. Our goal is to disclose these embedded associations. To do this, we draw on our ethnographic fieldwork data collected from Pibor, Juba, and other areas of South Sudan (2016–2020), linguistic data of water expressions collected through collaborative research in November–December 2020 in South Sudan, and interviews and interactions with interlocutors at different times. Over the past few years, particularly since 2019, heavy rains and subsequent floods, *tawan*, have turned the cultivated areas near wet-season dwellings in Pibor into a floodplain. Our language examples reflect the recent changes in local weather conditions.

Our focus on *lajo* was based on a research collaboration with a member of the age-set and driven by the need to conduct activist research with a social group whose members are subject to harsh measures by some members of older Murle age-sets who strive to stay in power. We were able to relate to these youths, build capacity through the research collaboration, and foster more responsible research practices (Datta 2018; Chilisa 2020). The purpose of the data collection, and specifically its focus on the typical situational characteristics in the semantic domain of movement in water, as well as the use of the data for academic research that would be published, were explained to the *lajo* men, who subsequently consented to participating in group discussions. Participants remained anonymous, their informed consent in writing was not sought, and the discussions were not recorded. This approach was adopted based on our experience in working and conducting research in South Sudan. Kate Cronin-Furman and Milli Lake (2018) likewise highlight some pertinent

ethical challenges associated with fieldwork in violent contexts, which require a reassessment of the dynamics of the research environment.

During the multi-sited research process, and specifically during the spoken Murle data collection, our research participants were male members of the *lajo* age-set. This gendered composition lacked the voice of Murle women and girls, with whom, however, we engaged in numerous informal discussions in Greater Pibor. We mitigated this bias by including data about Paulino's grandmother's advice to respect snakes, and about a female diviner of the *lajo* age-set. These examples give insights into how male members of the *lajo* age-set perceive the role females have in transmitting Indigenous knowledge and in traditional practices.

The remaining sections of this study are organized as follows. 'The daughter of the river' investigates the role and agency of women in the Murle society in traditional practices through the example of a female diviner of the *lajo* age-set. 'The messengers of *Tammu*' examines the Murle tradition involving *Tammu*, spirits, living and non-living creatures, the role of traditional authorities and their means of communicating with *Tammu*, as well as ethnographic examples of water-related rituals. 'The river of our cattle' connects water, river, and women to the Murle cattle- and land-based identity. It examines how Murle conceptualizes space and location using body-part based nouns through examples of horizontal and vertical movement in water, gives examples of age-set specific lexica, and exemplifies how language adapts to the social and political context.

### **The daughter of the river: The moral authority of the female diviner of the *lajo* age-set in fostering peace and building relationships**

Murle spirituality is holistic and encompasses the relations among humans and animals, as



well as with other-than-humans, such as spirits. Traditional practices, narratives, *Tammu*, and the spirit world are part of *kerane* ‘tradition’. The tradition directs the Murle to seek advice from chiefs, *allat*, elders, *dikiriyok*, and diviners and healers, *ηari*.

Diviners and healers are Murle men and women who may have spiritual powers. A diviner’s power comes from the benevolent, bee-like supernatural insects, *kwɔlɔ*, who either come from the earth at night or are sent by *Tammu*, are associated with the rain serpent and the rainbow, and enter the diviner’s head (Lewis 1972, 137; Andretta 1985, 113). In comparison, *miniη* are spirits that cause harm, are associated with death, and need to be removed. In Pibor, we gathered information on several types of *ηari*, who predict the future in different ways. There are men who inspect the intestines; those who throw sandals in the air; and those who roll stones like dice. Andretta (1985, 114–115) adds two more types: *ηari o goo*, ‘the fire diviner’, and *ηari ci anarie*, ‘the diviner who prays’, who work at night. There are also the types of diviners the Murle consult “before setting out on a long journey” (Andretta 1985, 116). They are *ηari ci acine ɔɔwa*: women who rely on dreams, predict the future, and volunteer information to the person in question (Arensen 1992, 256).

One of the female diviners, *Mama*, who is also known as *dole ci lilu* ‘daughter of the river’, belongs to the *lanjo* age-set.<sup>7</sup> The name *dole ci lilu* stems from the conception that during the daytime *Mama* visits Maalachar, ‘a herd of black and white calves’, which is a small pool of water located east of Manyabol into which water comes from the Lotilla River. *Mama* is perceived to possess the spiritual power to predict events with the help of spirits and to empower the knowledge seeker with sound advice to confront future situations, *ηari ci acine ɔɔwa*. *Mama*’s perceived spiritual power and presence by the river bears similarities

to the Russian Veps’ conception of the hosts “*vedenižand* and *veden emag* who have control over water” (Siragusa et al. 2020, 474) and who have spiritual power. Likewise, the Sotho concept of *n̄goana maliba* ‘child of the deep waters’ (Murray 1980, 68) is associated with water, fertility, snakes, particularly pythons, and sacred power. In northern Lesotho, *MaMetsi* ‘mother of water’, whose healing power is derived from the ancestors, “divines the people with her head, so that she knows what the trouble is” (Murray 1980, 73).

*Mama*’s activities, which are part of Murle spirituality, emerged during the civil war and conflict, the setting in which most members of the *lanjo* age-set have lived all their life. Andretta (1983, 101) observes that “the roles of mother and grandmother carry high status in Murle society”, which childless women do not have. In Murle tradition women are considered as the mothers of the entire Murle society and the men as warriors. These gendered roles of Murle women and men are articulated in two songs that we collected in Pibor in 2017. The lyrics of one song, written by two *lanjo* men at around 2012 during the Murle rebellion, emphasize the unity of the Murle through matrilineal lineage: *koronthe kizithi dol o ηawo* ‘We are coming together as children of one Murle woman’ (our transl.). The lyrics of another song reinforce the same idea: *korometh elethi dol o ηawo, anyath cavazil Murle* ‘Let us join, children of a Murle woman, let us all be united’ (our transl.). *Mama*’s activities promote a support system that is similar to that of Bashada, which is based on friendship and mutual aid, and which members of the age-set cherish (Epple 2014, 180).

*Mama* operates within the ritual sphere associated with water, river, and spirits in the male-dominated Murle society. In age-set societies such as the Murle, females achieve a role in the age-set through their father, then through their boyfriend and later their husband through marriage. In Murle society, “young girls will attach themselves to a *buul*

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<sup>7</sup>Lyth (2013) gives *dole*, PL. *dɔl* several meanings, such as ‘child, boy, son, girl, daughter’.

set nearer to their age” (McCallum 2013, 231). Among the Bashada of Ethiopia, Susanne Epple (2014, 180) observes that “women’s social age depends on the social age of their husbands and thus changes at marriage”. Yet their affiliation to an age-set may not offer Bashada women the means to challenge the domination of males (Epple 2014, 182). *Mama* is married to a *lajo* man, yet her status and legitimacy as a member of the age-set is not only established through a male member of the family. *Mama*’s role in the *lajo* age-set exemplifies how men and women belonging to one of the Murle society’s younger age-sets, such as the *lajo*, are transforming the deep-rooted and hostile perceptions which consider females as mere merchandise that, as Lizzie Lacey (2013) shows, can be bought for the purposes of reproduction.

Traditional practices are a living tradition among Murle age-set youth, particularly in rural areas of the GPAA. Ethnicity and tradition are important elements of the Murle identity, regardless of one’s spiritual affiliation.<sup>8</sup> For example, in December 2022, only some days prior to the joint Dinka-Nuer armed youth attack on Murle areas (Small Arms Survey 2023; UNSC 2023), the *lajo* age-set leader (overall) visited Akobo to persuade the Lou Nuer youth to desist from attacking the Murle. Before starting the twelve-day journey on foot, he consulted *Mama* in Manyabol, approximately 70 km west of Pibor, as well as agreeing with his age-set that they would not engage in fighting with the Dinka and Nuer armed youth who had mobilized to fight the Murle. *Mama* advised the *lajo* leader (overall) to do what is in the best interest of the Murle people (Paulino Jijiyo, interview by Juhanna Sankelo, Juba, December 25, 2022). The majority of *lajo* youths were on the side of peace and did not go after the attackers. The government had

to respond by reinforcing the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF) Division 8 forces stationed in Pibor.

The moral guidance *Mama* gave to the *lajo* leader (overall) promoted peace indirectly. Hodgson (1999, 50) observes that Maasai women exercised ‘moral authority’ in the ritual sphere, which extended, for example, to “peace-making ceremonies with neighbouring groups”. But the advice *Mama* gave also had political and security implications, just like the Nuer prophets’ prophetic practices have (Hutchinson and Pendle 2015). This is evidenced by the ability of the *lajo* age-set to control the actions of the Murle youth more efficiently than the local government authority can (Small Arms Survey 2023). Cooperation across ethnic lines also gives prestige to the *lajo*, who have undertaken tasks such as communicating with the military and the government. Since colonial times, these risky tasks have been the responsibility of leading chiefs (Leonardi 2007). In the “complex internal hierarchies” of spiritual and political power among the Murle traditional authority (Felix da Costa 2018, 32), age-sets have their own chiefs, as well as diviners, such as *dole ci lilu*, whose advice the youth follow.

According to Judith McCallum (2013, 249), “decision making within the *buul* is based on consensus, with authority diffused and leadership based on character and charisma”. Compared to “acephalous” societies, which lack a centralized political structure (Andretta 1985, 201), the Murle society is described as a “polycephalous” society in which “there is minimal centralized political leadership” (McCallum 2013, 247). We found that Murle youths, such as the *lajo*, who have lived their life in the midst of conflict, value leaders who have the courage to lead forces in fighting, resolve conflicts, take responsibility on behalf of the age-set, make peace, win the support of civilians, particularly women, confront corrupt leaders, and thwart their attempts to mobilize youth to fight. The image of the *lajo*

<sup>8</sup>In 2010, it was estimated that 60.5 percent of the South Sudan population were Christians, 32.9 percent were followers of Indigenous religions, and 6.9 percent were Muslims (US Department of State 2022).

as “wild and the most aggressive age-set”, as Arensen (2012) observed more than a decade ago, needs an updated reassessment that also considers the efforts the *lajo* age-set is making through these traditional relational practices to reduce violence.

The status *Mama* has in the *lajo* age-set is indicative of how the roles of girls and women in Murle age-sets have been shaped by the ongoing violent conflict in South Sudan. A change in mindset was observed at a community meeting held in May 2017 in Pibor town, where a Murle women’s representative expressed women’s willingness to join men in defensive wars. We also observed a young *lajo* woman carrying a weapon, ready to defend the Murle people and cattle. According to Murle custom, females do not participate in the fighting per se but serve in support functions, such as preparing food and helping males by carrying the wounded from the bush (Anonymous *lajo* interlocutor, interview, Pibor, March 13, 2017) – and sometimes even by “encouraging and celebrating returning raiders through songs and feasts” (Lacey 2013, 94). For example, a research study gauging prospects for disarmament in Likuangole [GPAA] shows that women have a role both in encouraging peace-building and in intercommunal conflict: “The women felt that their sons would give up their arms if so instructed by their mothers. If their sons refused to disarm, they said they would shame them by coming naked before them” (McCallum and Okech 2008, 51). Before guns were introduced into fighting, Western Nuer women also used to accompany their husbands to battle, carry the wounded, and protect a wounded man by “throwing herself over him” (Hutchinson and Jok 2002, 99). The changing roles of Murle women in age-sets, which they have not adopted just by virtue of marriage, offer the opportunity for a more inclusive Murle society that embraces tradition and considers the strengths, participation, and contributions of both women and men.

*Mama*’s work as a diviner is conducted

near the Lotilla River. Colin Murray (1980, 69), who researched fertility symbols among the Bantu-speaking Sotho pastoralists in Southern Africa, observed that for (Se)sotho speakers, ‘river’ is a metaphor for ‘water in the belly’, that is, the womb. He further found that ‘water’ symbolizes the reproductive power of a woman (Murray 1980, 69); ‘rain’, the renewal of fertility (Murray 1980, 67); ‘deep waters’, sacred power (Murray 1980, 68); and crossing of the ‘river’, a girl’s fertility (Murray 1980, 70). For the Murle too, water is associated with fertility and belongs to the female domain:

- (1) *Ceram kurumoch awo maam kenja.*  
(MQ 2020)  
‘Water lilies are floating on the water.’  
(Lit. ‘Cowhide water lily goes water in the belly’)

Example (1) draws a connection between the river covered with a blanket of water lilies and a woman’s body covered with *ceram*. The word *ceram*, PL. *cerama* ‘women’s or girls’ skin’ refers to the cowhide women and girls use to cover their bodies, as well as to carry small children on their backs. The literal translation of the Murle phrase *maam kenja* reveals the metaphorical expression ‘water in the belly’, which, for the Sotho, as Murray (1980) observes, is associated with the womb.

**The messengers of *Tammu*: The role of ‘experts of tradition’ in performing water-related practices to convey blessings, to purify, and to enhance fertility**

Despite the agency some women, such as *Mama*, have in the ritual sphere related to water, the Murle tradition (*kerane*) is still largely dominated by men. The tradition is grounded in relations which extend beyond family connections, like age-sets, and which involve respect for ancestors and reinforce the role of (male) red chiefs as guardians of

tradition. Traditional knowledge is transmitted by Murle red chiefs, who are the drumchiefs of the four Murle drumships (clans): Thaṇajon, Njarṓthi, Kelenya, Njinvach. They derive their traditional spiritual authority directly from these societies, and, according to the Murle belief system, their spiritual powers from God, *Tammu*. For example, red chiefs may point a finger at someone to indicate that the person is affected by something or will meet a particular fate. The designation ‘red chief’ refers to the colour of the shoulder strap, feather, or hat, which helps in identifying the person as a red chief. *Tammu* is a gender-neutral distant god who lives in the sky, comes from the *Jen*, and is associated with rains (Arensen 1992, 41). *Jen* is a place located somewhere ‘east’ or ‘north-east’ in Maji area, in Ethiopia (Lewis 1972, 19; Andretta 1989, 25). Red chiefs are perceived as acting as messengers of *Tammu*, as well as of ancestral spirits, *miniṇit*, PL. *miniṇ* ‘spirit, ghost’.

The Murle refer to two kinds of spirits: *miniṇ* and *voṇiz*. Yet previous research does not specify the difference between the two concepts. The Murle word for the (genderless) spirit that leaves the body after death is *voṇiz* (Sultan Ismail Konyi, interview, Khartoum, October 4, 2019). Murle children learn that the body of the deceased remains [on earth] after death, but *voṇiz* ‘breath’ goes to the heaven. Spirits, or *miniṇ*, occupy the body after death and need to be released through rituals. They leave the dead body through the gap between the teeth. Two teeth are removed from lower jaw. In the context of discussing burial practices some Murle interlocutors estimated that even in 1992–1995, Murle men and women still followed the practice of removing two teeth. Unless removed, “they [the teeth] are inviting the death”<sup>9</sup> (Anonymous *lajo* interlocutor, interview, Juba, January 19, 2019). As of 1999/2000, the general sentiment among the Murle about the practice had turned more negative. It is nowadays regarded as harmful;

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<sup>9</sup> *adera dayiz*, < *der*, *ader* ‘meet/pass on way’ (Lyth 2013).

hence, chiefs and elders discourage it. The Murle ritual performed after death is intended to facilitate the movement of ancestral spirits to the ‘underworld’ so that they do not harm the family of the deceased (Lewis 1972, 134).

Ritual smoking, *burut*, is a means for the red chiefs to communicate with *Tammu*. When Murle people narrate *ṇathanarideth* ‘historical stories’ and celebrate the leadership and wisdom of chiefs and elders, these wise men wear leopard skins, and elderly non-Christian men and women smoke tobacco using *deer ci thambo* ‘traditional pipes’ (Anonymous *lajo* interlocutor, interview, Juba, July 4, 2019). Through this ritual smoking the Murle show profound respect for *Tammu*. Similar Indigenous practices that seek relationality between humans and non-humans through tobacco smoking have been observed, for example among the Cree people of Canada (Westman 2020, 479).

Some mythological creatures, such as rain serpents, *kutel*; living creatures, such as pythons, *orian*; and natural phenomena, such as rainbows, thunder, and lightning, *bṛṛi*, are also considered to be messengers of *Tammu* (Lewis 1972; Arensen 1992). For example, Andretta (1985, 190) found that Boma Murle offered the intestines of a goat, as well as throwing grass into the river before crossing it, to appease a malevolent river spirit and a rainbow god, *Bore*,<sup>10</sup> who is also “a snake asleep at the bottom of a river”.

Paulino’s maternal grandmother, who followed the Murle tradition, also taught her grandchildren to respect snakes (Paulino Jijiyo, interview by Juhanna Sankelo, Juba, December 25, 2019). She told them that her own mother delivered her and a snake at the same time. The snake stayed in the same bed as the baby for a day and then disappeared. Whenever the baby began to cry, snakes arrived and stayed in the house until the baby stopped crying.

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<sup>10</sup> We suggest that *Bore* refers to a whirlwind < *vuuro*, PL. *vuuren* ‘wind-devil’ (Lyth 2013); *vuru* ‘whirlwind’ (Arensen 1992, 228).

Therefore, snakes were never chased away, as they were regarded as protectors of the family. If a criminal had stolen items from the house, the grandmother would call a snake to bring the property back. The grandmother told the children that she had never been bitten by a snake. The story reflects the Murle tradition in which snakes have spiritual significance: they are respected and never killed. It also illustrates how people manage to live their lives in harsh conditions in symbiosis with the nature. By sharing this story with the children, the grandmother transmitted important ecological and cultural knowledge (Archibald 2013).

Other natural phenomena, such as rain, wind, and currents, also contain associations with Murle spirituality. In Murle ways of knowing, rain does not fall by itself, but is the work of the traditional god, *Tammu*. The distant god, *Tammu*, is perceived as having qualities that are commonly associated with humans, such as strength and power relative to body size. *Tammu* is the rainmaker who regulates the intensity of the rain:

- (2) *Atiil tammu ci appe orɔɔt.* (MQ 2020)  
'It rains heavily.' (Lit. 'Leak *Tammu* of big very')

Example (2) indicates that the rain is proportional to the strength of *Tammu*: 'the very big god leaks [water]'. The adverb *orɔɔt* 'very', as well as the adjective *appe* 'big', define *Tammu* 'God'. The common expression *atiil tammu* 'It is raining' (Arensen 1992, 228–229) does not disclose all these attributes. The Murle worldview is consistent with the worldview of people in other East African pastoralist societies, such as the Maasai, for whom rain is associated with divinity (Hurskainen 1984, 175).

Murle traditional practices are important for seeking purification and blessings, as well as being integral to processes of war, resolving conflicts, and peace-making. Ritual practices have primarily the functions of reaffirming the collective identity and value system of the

society (Schirch 2015, 518). These practices have both physical and psychological aspects, and they respond to the social, emotional, spiritual, and physical needs of society members (Schirch 2015, 530). Rituals comprised of several rites activate the cognitive system of the brain and thus assist in making sense of the process (Schirch 2015, 533). The process transforms the audience from passive receivers into active performers, having an empowering effect. Rituals give meaning and restore order (Schirch 2015, 528), establish the status quo in societal relations, and create a sense of security and solidarity.

In August 2017, we crossed the river by boat to attend an age-set peace meeting, *kazoz ganon*<sup>11</sup>, in Lukurnyan. In the evening we returned to Pibor town, where the last of the several rituals that day was conducted by the Pibor River. Standing in shallow water, the late Murle red chief Sultan Ismail Konyi blessed the youth by sprinkling water on them in a ritual, *zacheen*,<sup>12</sup> that aimed at sealing the peace agreement between the warring *lajo* and *kurenen* youths:

- (3) *Alaata ci mæerik azach maam ɔl.*  
(MQ 2020)  
'Red chiefs sprinkle water on the youth.' (Lit. 'Chiefs of red sprinkle water on people')

When the red chief sprinkles water on the men, he says: *Kazi ne, duun gi ci gerzee nathen dol nincoko, ɔh-ɔh (...)* 'I say like this, let bad things go away from these children (...)'

Apart from blessings, water is used in traditional Murle practices to increase fertility. For example, a Murle woman may offer water

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<sup>11</sup> The Murle expression *kazoz ganon* (< *ka-* 'to' + *dhoodh* 'matter, affair, word, talk, voice, law, order'; *ganon* < *ganidh*, *aganidh* 'make peace' (Lyth 2013) is often translated as 'peace meeting', but the words also allow other interpretations. Our interlocutors often used /z/ instead of /dh/.

<sup>12</sup> *zach*, *azach* 'sprinkle, increase' (Lyth 2013).

to a Murle (male) elder, who first drinks some water from the cup and then spits some of that water (and saliva) on the face of the woman, at the same time uttering: *tira logoz* ‘deliver a boy’ (< *tir*, *atir* ‘bear, beget’), or *cam logoz* ‘have a baby boy’ (< *cam*, *acam* ‘win’) (Anonymous *lajo* interlocutor, interview, Juba, October 21, 2022).

There is also a fertility ritual that is performed at a sacred pool of water in the area inhabited by the Lou Nuer. The place is located north of the Murleland, in the Nyandit Payam, two days’ walk towards Akobo. Non-Christian Murle women and men who seek relationality between humans and non-humans visit Nyandit to participate in the ceremonial practice. Andretta (1985, 190) maintains that Nyandit [Nyandit] is a river spirit of Nilotic origin. The Nyandit ritual involves offerings of tobacco and the sacrificing of goats to appease the spirit in the pool (Arensen 1992, 239).

Water is also used in welcoming and purification ceremonies. Elizabeth Andretta (1983, 90) explains how a father welcomes his son home by spitting water on him and then rubbing ash from the fireplace on the son’s forehead and cheeks. Bazett Lewis (1972, 69) observes that “the chief scattered drops of water” to ceremonially purify Murle warriors who returned home from war to prevent the effects of killing from harming their families. In Murle burial proceedings the undertaker “sprinkles a little water” on family members of the deceased in a symbolic purification ritual (Lewis 1972, 135). However, this anthropological research makes only scarce remarks on the use of Murle language during these traditional practices.

### **The river of our cattle: The culturally appropriate manner to enter water in the river is through the mouth to the belly**

The connectedness of river, water, and women in the spiritual domain expands to the cultural

imagery of the Murle land- and cattle-based identity. The name *Naḡol̥tin*<sup>13</sup> (‘the river of our cattle’) embeds an emotional meaning for Murle pastoralists in the Pibor area. Murle cattle, which are believed to descend from the East African Zebu breed (UN FAO 1999), have an all-encompassing impact on the life of the Murle pastoralists. Murle children learn to count by using a system where a man equals 20 cows (Arensen 1992, 92). In the alphabet book, the Murle term *ṛrkṛṛ* ‘cooperation, togetherness’ is illustrated by a drawing depicting two cows standing side by side (Lotiboy and Moti Aguang 2015). Cows form the cattle wealth in which funds are invested in the absence of a cash and banking system in the rural areas. Like the Nuer pastoralists, who, following their tradition, only kill domestic animals for sacrifice (Hutchinson 1996, 299), rural Murle pastoralists would also rather suffer from hunger than slaughter their cows for consumption. Murle cows are sacrificed in rituals and given as bridewealth. In ceremonies where the cattle are divided for the bride’s own family, the animals are blessed just like people by spitting saliva on them to please the ancestral spirits (Lewis 1972, 120).

During their seasonal migration, Murle herders drive their cattle to pastures in cattle camps. They wade through the swampy areas. We presented a picture of a young man leading cattle across a river to our interlocutors. One *lajo* man described the activity as follows:

- (4) *Laḡé onáne o ḡṛṛṛ arayin tiin ṛṛwa ka kabáyiz.* (MQ 2020)  
‘A friend of mine leads the cattle, being first to swim across.’ (Lit. ‘Friend mine of one leads the cattle, in front, to swim across.’)

The animals access the water at a place where the riverbank, *lilotok* (< *lil* ‘river’, *otok* ‘mouth’),

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<sup>13</sup> *Naagol̥tiina* (< *ḡaa(t)* ‘place’, *ḡol* ‘road’, *tiin* ‘cows’) (Arensen 1992, xvi).

is low. Likewise, the swimmer enters the shallow water from the riverbank:

- (5) *Kakɔ naana maami ecitɔ.*  
(MQ 2020)  
'I dive.' (Lit. 'I go I in the water through.')

The Murle conception of being inside water is expressed with the postposition *ecitɔ* 'in, through, into, inside' (Lyth 2013). The culturally appropriate manner of accessing the substance is from *otok* 'mouth' to *keŋ* 'belly'. The direction of movement from mouth to belly is regarded as horizontal in animals and vertical in humans. The entrance to the stomach in both cases is through *otok*, that is, *lilotok* 'riverbank', and not the mouth of a river.

Spatial concepts in languages may be based on the body of a two-legged human (anthropomorphic orientation) or a four-legged animal (zoomorphic orientation) (Heine 1997, 40). The zoomorphic model refers to the spatial relationships of the body parts of four-legged animals (Heine et al. 1991, 126–127). If the movement inside water is *horizontal*, as in the zoomorphic model of grammaticalization, it is perceived as controlled and safe.

In turn, falling into water, sinking, and drowning are regarded as *vertical*, downward movement, as in the anthropomorphic model based on the human body:

- (6) *ɔl ci een iiyu inaaɔ liil.* (MQ 2020)  
'Three people drowned in the river.'  
(Lit. 'People that are three fell into the river')

If the entry into water occurs through a vertical movement, such as by falling into water, the movement is regarded as uncontrolled and frightening for the experiencer. Drowning occurs as a result of vertical movement to 'belly', because the place 'inside the water' is accessed in a wrong manner. For the Sotho of Lesotho, as Murray (1980) observes, 'deep

waters' are associated with 'sacred power'. Likewise, *keŋ* 'belly' in the river can be a mystical and frightening place, just like the place where the spirits concentrate, which, in the case of drowning, must be released through the mouth after death.

Not only is the river a ritual site, a place to water cattle, wade through in flood water, or access spiritual power, but it is also a site of social conflict. When Christian missionaries arrived in Pibor in 1952, they settled in Lukurnyan, which is located about 1km east of present-day Pibor town; they stayed among the Murle until the Sudanese government in Khartoum expelled all missionaries from southern Sudan in 1963–1964 (Arensen 1992, 262–263). Lukurnyan came to be known as a place on "the other side of the river" (A Murle elder, interview, Pibor, May 11, 2017). Christianity attracted part of the population with promises of development and a better livelihood; however, some Murle Christians showed only "a minimum of cultural change" (Arensen 1992, 293). The river manifested the division in social relations as well as the internal conflict within the Murle society, in which traditional rituals remained vital. Murle speakers know the origins of the general connotations related to the expression 'the other side', such as *kakɔ naana baagita* 'I am going across the river' (Arensen 1982, 90),<sup>14</sup> but they regard the (colonial era) social and political setting as outdated. Example (7) illustrates how Murle speakers modify their speech to conform to the community's social norms:

- (7) *Kaduthané zεε, makacin kabáyiza liil.*  
(MQ 2020)  
'I swam on and on, thus, I crossed the river.' (Lit. 'I swim on and on thus I swam across the river')

In the colonial period, 'the other side' signified and made visible the internal social conflict in the Murle society, as well as the place of

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<sup>14</sup>*baagit* 'side'; *baagita* 'across, far side of' (Lyth 2013).

residence of the church missionaries, associated with the colonial administration. The expression ‘on the other side’ illustrates how language adapts to the social and political context.

Another example highlights the sensitivity associated with age-set lexicon. During the time Richard Lyth served as British commissioner in Pibor in 1947–1953, West African crocodile hunters reportedly killed more than a hundred crocodiles in the Labrab River, east of Pibor (Arensen 2013, 271). We used this historical information to inspire a discussion and learn how our interlocutors express the movement of a crocodile hunting prey in the river:

- (8) *Aguli ariith mañan kiya alyaz.*  
(MQ 2020)  
‘The crocodile pursues an antelope.’  
(Lit. ‘Crocodile swims while comes antelope’)

In South Sudan, the antelope is one of the animals that Murle age-sets associate with and through which they relate to others in the society. Bagele Chilisa (2020, 101), for instance, illustrates how the Indigenous Bakalanga people of Botswana maintain relations between the living and the nonliving through the sharing of totems. We observed a difference between the word *kajac* for a type of African antelope (kob) in previous work (Arensen 1982, 50; Dimmendaal 1998, 64), and the word *alyaz* [ɛlyaz] found in our data. Our interlocutors consider that *kajac* is a generic word for diverse types of African antelopes.<sup>15</sup> The word *alyaz* is used by the *bothothoniya* for the type of antelope associated with their age-set.<sup>16</sup> In turn, *lanjo* men, who compete for societal and political power with members of older Murle

age-sets, use the word *lanjo* for the antelope (kob) they identify with.<sup>17</sup> The use of a generic, inclusive term *kajac* hides these important differences. The choice between the words *kajac* and *alyaz* illustrates how language-external factors such as affiliation with a specific age-set impact the lexicon speakers use. We argue that linguistic research that focuses on the language spoken by young people can partially help us understand some of the generational misunderstandings, *ɲorowoneth*.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined how Indigenous knowledge manifests itself in water-related Murle expressions and traditional practices related to water, and what these findings can tell us about contemporary Murle age-set society. The results confirm the hypothesis that the spoken Murle language embodies metaphorical expressions that reflect the underlying cattle- and land-based identity and the sources of Indigenous knowledge: traditional, cultural, and ecological. Ritual words and water are used in Murle traditional practices to promote peace, convey blessings, purify, and increase fertility. The results also show that some *lanjo* men seek spiritual guidance from the female diviner of their age-set to reduce violence and improve relationships with neighbours, and that *lanjo* age-set men in general participate in traditional practices performed by male traditional leaders to alleviate the harm caused by fighting.

This study contributes to the existing work on Indigenous perceptions and practices related to water, affirming the connection of female and male traditional experts with water, the rivers, and spiritual power in water-related practices. It offers a new perspective on the agency of women in Murle society. We illustrated that the female diviner, *Mama*, whose status in the *lanjo* age-set is not limited to the social age of her husband, and who

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<sup>15</sup> *kajaac*, PL. *kaja* ‘white-eared kob’ (Lyth 2013; Arensen 1992, 129).

<sup>16</sup> *elyadh*, PL. *elyadhwa* ‘Thomson’s or Mongalla gazelle’ (Lyth 2013); *elyaz*, PL *elyazwa* ‘gazelle’ (Arensen 1992, 114).

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<sup>17</sup> *lanoc*, PL. *lanjo* ‘reedbuck’ (Lyth 2013).



draws moral authority from the Murle tradition which sees women as the mothers of all society, uses spiritual power to promote peace and build relationships. Her agency extends to the use of spiritual power to influence decisions that may have implications for policy and security. In turn, male chiefs performing traditional rituals deal with the ill effects of conflict, thereby ensuring the unity of the society as well as continuity of tradition. The participation of male chiefs in fertility rituals through verbal utterances and water-related practices shows that fertility-related issues are not solely within the purview of women. Hence, the work of male and female Murle traditional experts who possess spiritual power and who perform water-related rituals responds to the diverse needs of society members.

The roles of traditional authority and age-sets in the Murle society are in transition. Chiefs and elders no longer hold the monopoly in representing the community voice, although they still have the spiritual authority to perform rituals that restore order. The local

government authorities are weak and increasingly sidelined by the youth. Chiefs and youth leaders appointed by the local government often lack popular support. The youth age-set are the driving force of societal change. They assume new roles and initiate transformative ideas that promote peace, yet they do so by resorting to traditional relational practices. They engage in networking and relationship-building with neighbours, which earlier was the responsibility of chiefs and local government officials. While previous research has noted the rise of (male) age-set chiefs, this study highlights the role of a (female) diviner of the *lajo* age-set. This development needs to be considered in parallel with studies that examine women's agency in rituals in other East African pastoralist societies, as well as work that discusses women's subordinate position in male-dominated rural age-set societies. The results indicate that more transdisciplinary research is needed on different aspects of the Murle language and society.

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