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Turning a Blind Eye
The Media's Neglect of Cultural and Historical Intricacies of Violence

Following a brief period of peace in which the country declared its independence, the Nuer and Murle tribes of South Sudan have resumed conflict. Hundreds of people have been killed within the past few months, and thousands have died since independence.[1] The Nuer and Murle are caught in a cycle of violent revenge consisting of cattle raids, kidnappings, and massacres. Efforts to bring community leaders together have been initiated in order to quell the conflict, identify the roots of the violence and reunite the communities.[2] Engaging in Besteman, Gourevitch, and Gusterson's discourses on the nature of violence as well as Sanjek, Steinmetz, and Winichakul's discourse on cultural dynamics, this paper focuses on the media's flawed understanding of this issue. I argue that the media, representing collective societal consciousness, intentionally fails to acknowledge the historical complexity of the inter-tribal violence between the Nuer and Murle of South Sudan, misrepresenting the issue in order to deny the vulnerability of the human condition, something that is addressed more adequately and intelligibly by ethnography.

I will begin by demonstrating how the New York Times, Al-Jazeera, and the Citizen come up short in their analysis of this particular conflict. This will be followed by a discussion of the role culture plays in conflicts like these, as well as the benefits of ethnographic research. I will then make the case for a more elaborate and contextualized analysis of the situation before concluding with some thoughts on the implications of international complacency regarding violence of this sort.

The aforementioned media organizations have exposed and relayed information in a way that details the conflict while adequately establishing some sense of urgency. However, they stop short of delving into context and history in a meaningful manner. In simply throwing out names of tribes and statistics pertaining to casualties, these sources fail to acknowledge the intricacies behind violence. Violence cannot be fully understood this way, as it does not recognize its development. Understanding how violence develops is considerably

more important than understanding how it happens, because if its cause is identified then efforts can be made to stop it. The Times describes the Nuer and Murle as being "locked in a tit-for-tat cattle rustling feud for years, with the death toll steadily rising each round."[3] Al Jazeera goes a step further, bringing up how the two tribes have engaged in such conflict for centuries due to the significance of cattle to the local economy.[4] The Citizen goes as far as discussing the importance of isolating the root cause of the conflict for community leaders negotiating a peace initiative.[5] Yet these sources do not attempt to look into the collective conscious of these groups, opting for a very "in the moment" approach. What such statements actually accomplish is questionable. If this really is one of worse instances of South Sudanese violence in recent memory then describing it as a vengeful cattle-related feud is insufficient. The escalation of the tension between the Nuer and Murle is certainly important, but the goal should be to identify why this escalation is happening now and where it comes from.

It is important to note that these publications should not be held completely accountable for their failure to acknowledge the constructs that precede ethnic violence. This is where ethnographic research becomes paramount. Ethnographies are crucial in understanding situations like these because they produce knowledge, "which in turn suggests new problems and interpretations" beneficial to the understanding of other cultures.[6] It is

unreasonable to expect journalism to produce knowledge of this sort. The conflict between the Nuer and the Merle, then, must be approached from a variety of angles. The ethnographic perspective is perhaps the most helpful, as it addresses the cultural aspects not acknowledged by other viewpoints. It delves into knowledge not readily accessible to journalists and the media.

The first significant mistake on the media's part is the lack of consideration for the cultural context of the violence between the Nuer and Murle peoples. They are described as feuding ethnic groups in an unstable country, and nothing more. No attention is played to the cultural dynamics present in this particular region. Indeed, it would appear that the "constitutive role of culture" described by George Steinmetz is disregarded by these publications.[7] The New York Times and Al Jazeera place a considerable amount of emphasis on the state of South Sudan, communicating its instability and struggles as an independent country. In doing so, they nearly reduce culture to the "product of the state."[8] In other words, the state comes first and culture second both in terms of development and analytic significance.

I agree with Steinmetz in asserting that culture does in fact play a stronger role in the conflict than recognized. More emphasis should be placed on the cultural context of these conflicts rather than the instability associated with it. It is easily apparent that South Sudan is in a time of crisis. However, the media should be focusing

on the analyzing the roots of the violence rather than the fact that South Sudan is unstable. In understanding the cultural context of the situation, they may be able to illuminate the true nature of the situation.

This context points us in the right direction, as it provides an insight into the political consciousness of the Nuer and Murle. As Catherine Besteman shows in her work on political violence in Somalia, identifying the tradition of conflict between two groups of people does not clarify why it is currently occurring.[9] Somalia is not South Sudan, but certain parallels can be drawn in terms of understanding the escalation of violent confrontation. This conflict must be contextualized "in the wider social arena of power, inequality."[10] As previously mentioned, ignoring historical intricacies prevents the production of any useful knowledge. It even worsens the situation by denying the reality of the situation, perpetuating the cycle of conflict.

What ideas, then, can we draw from the political violence in Somalia, and how do they relate to the violence between the Nuer and Murle in South Sudan? For one, the violence in Somalia demonstrated the importance of race in identifying the most vulnerable people in a time of crisis.[11] In periods of instability, then, it is safe to assume that different groups of people "panic" and target weaker populations for conflict in the name of self-preservation. The cattle raids and kidnappings are an example of this. Additionally, the experience (or in this case, threat) of war

serves to nurture the development of a historical consciousness and reinforced group identity.[12] The threats of war from Sudan and the resulting instability show that external factors play an important role in the development of violence, something not touched on by the media. If the Murle are the traditional rivals of the Nuer, then their persecution is to be expected when the Nuer feel the need to reinforce their sense of identity. This plays into Winichakul's idea of two-way identification, positive "by some common nature, identity, or interests; [negative] by the differences."[13] Here, I reach the same conclusion as Besteman: that people "kill each other not because they are unrelated but because they are struggling for power and control over resources" in a time of heightened vulnerability.[14] The independence of South Sudan did not bring stability to the region, and it certainly failed to maintain any sort of peace of mind. Understanding the circumstances surrounding the conflict is necessary in understanding this violence, as political consciousness plays a hugely important role in the development of violence.

Furthermore, the neglect of these intricacies may not be wholly unintentional but rather indicative of "turning a blind eye." Hugh Gusterson contributes to this idea, as he claims that the dichotomy present between mind and body is the result of the "sensate, mortal body" being "marked as a centralizing symbol for the multiply unwanted phenomena of subjectivity, transience, vulnerability, and emotion."[15]

I would extend this from an individual's mind and body to society's mind and body. The larger, societal consciousness sometimes rejects its collective pain in order to perpetuate the idea that it is above such suffering. The media, representing this collective conscious, elects to disregard pain in order to assert its claim to power over such. The problem with this is obvious: denying something does not stop it from happening. Philip Gourevitch touches on the dangers of this in his discussion of the failure to stop genocide in Rwanda. One U.N. aid describes, regarding a letter from an informant to Kofi Annan that forecasted the outbreak of violence, how incredible it was that it was not noticed.[16] The case of Rwanda provides an excellent example of society's unwillingness to recognize its own vulnerability. Indeed, the caution surrounding the case of Rwanda was the result of the "shadow" of Somalia.[17] This begs the question: what is the broad, international context of the lack of attention to ethnic violence in South Sudan? Perhaps more importantly, is international society becoming burnt out from constantly intervening in the affairs of countries in the Global South? Kofi Annan is quoted in the aforementioned peace as asking, "'if a genocide does not push us to intervene, what can make us budge?'"[18] The danger of denying the suffering of others because it acknowledges society's vulnerability is that it unnecessarily delegitimizes certain kinds of suffering and degrades societal values.

The media, being a projection of collective societal consciousness, wields a considerable amount of power whether the people realize it or not. It is a problem, then, when this institution of massive influence inaccurately or inadequately portrays an event. From a "current events" perspective, the stories presented on the ethnic conflict between the Nuer and Murle of South Sudan get the point across. However, the usefulness of this knowledge is, as I have shown, debatable. Ethnography fills the gap by providing the cultural information necessary to thoroughly analyze this instance of violence. It does so by acknowledging the cultural context and historical complexity that precede this conflict. The broader issue, then, is the media's neglect of background, something spurred by society's unwillingness to recognize its own vulnerability. If violence similar to the current conflict between the Nuer and Murle is ignored, then we as a society begin to unintentionally delegitimize certain forms of suffering and carelessly disregard the human condition. ◆

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[1] Jeffrey Gettleman, "Accounts Emerge in South Sudan of 3,000 Deaths in Ethnic Violence," *New York Times*, 12 Jan 2012.

[2] Lagu Joseph Jackson, "Greater Pibor Peace Initiative Commences," Citizen, 29 Apr 2012.

[3] Jeffrey Gettleman, "Accounts Emerge in South Sudan of 3,000 Deaths in Ethnic Violence."

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5 Lagu Joseph Jackson, "Greater Pibor Peace
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6 Roger Sanjek, "Ethnography," Encyclopedia
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7 George Steinmetz, "Introduction: Culture and
    the State," Web. 29 May 2012: 2.
8 Ibid., 4.
9 Catherine Besteman, "Violent Politics and the
    Politics of Violence: The Dissolution
    of the Somali Nation-State," *American
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    579.
10 Ibid., 579.
11 Ibid., 580.
12 Ibid., 580.
13 Winichakul, "Introduction: The Presence of
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14 Catherine Besteman, "Violent Politics and the
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15 Hugh Gusterson, "Bodies and Machines."
    Web. 29 May 2012: 102.
16 Philip Gourevitch, "The Genocide Fax,"
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17 Ibid., 46.
18 Ibid., 46.

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Edited by Rutger Ceballos