War and Genocide in South Sudan

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South Sudan became independent in 2011. Prior to this, the world’s newest country had experienced two civil wars. The first conflict had peaked in the 1960s and ended in 1972, but the second one, which began in 1983, had lasted for twenty-two years. A peace agreement in 2005 between the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) and the government of Sudan had terminated one of Africa’s longest civil wars. It kicked off an interim period of six years marked by large-scale corruption, culminating in the country’s independence.

Three years later, the new country descended into yet another civil war in December 2013, following a political crisis in its capital of Juba within the political branch of the SPLA and the dominant party: the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM). War quickly spread from the capital to other areas of the country, with its cortege of violence against civilians. At first limited to the greater Upper Nile region (Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity states), war engulfed Western and Central Equatoria, and Western Bahr El Ghazal in 2015.

Due to the ethnic identities of the leaders of the two warring parties—the Dinka president Salva Kiir and the Nuer former vice-president Riek Machar—from the onset the media portrayed the war as a conflict between the Dinka and the Nuer. The academic community quickly mobilized against what was considered a misrepresentation and oversimplification and argued that this war should not be depicted as ethnic. Too much emphasis on ethnicity would make us miss the root causes of the conflict, some argued, and might instead risk increasing ethnic violence on the ground. Consequently, the elephant in the

FROM PREDATION TO GENOCIDE

In December 2013... In Juba alone I lost ten relatives... They were killed in the same house... There were others who were suffocated in a container where they locked them in.

The SPLA said it wanted to kill all the people so that only birds remain in South Sudan. They did not want to see any human being... They were talking about the entire country, not just Central Equatoria.
room—ethnicity—and its role in the very root causes of the war and perpetration of violence have never really been addressed since. Most talk of “Dinka domination” was brushed off by some international observers as anti-Dinka racism and mere propaganda.

Even as the African Union and the United Nations have documented part of the violence in South Sudan and labeled it as “ethnic cleansing,” no academic work has dealt with the ethnic dimension: its roots, its scale, and its meaning. There exists no international legal definition or convention about what constitutes “ethnic cleansing,” but it is widely understood as the forced removal of a specific group from a particular territory in order to make it ethnically homogeneous. Although there are overlapping elements between genocide and ethnic cleansing and ethnic cleansing can be part of genocide, the term “ethnic cleansing” by itself is usually used when referring to geographic areas that have historically been ethnically mixed. The international community did not escalate its rhetoric to describe the violence in South Sudan as genocidal. This was at odds with the interpretation of most South Sudanese I interviewed about the violence: “If the government knows civilians are fleeing, they chase them,” pointed out a civil society member from Central Equatoria. They often drew parallels between violence against non-Dinka people in different parts of the country: “Whether you are a civilian, a woman, a child, they will do the same to you: they will clear you. In Shilluk land they did the same than in Unity and Equatoria,” explained a Shilluk woman who lived in Central Equatoria.

Genocide, as defined by Article II of the 1948 Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (and as replicated in Article 6 of the Rome Statute), “means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

a. Killing members of the group;

b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

The UN has so far considered South Sudan on the “verge” of a genocide that it warns could be like Rwanda’s, the archetype of genocide in Africa. This book addresses the processes that led, among other things, to the formation of an exclusionary Dinka nationalism, and argues that South Sudan’s case is a genocide, not just ethnic cleansing—but a much different one than that of Rwanda.
Argument

The book explains how a predatory rebel state was born in civil war, reached independence, and then waged genocide. It especially investigates the links between predation and ideology. It explores the relationship between predatory wealth accumulation, state formation, and a form of racism—extreme ethnic group entitlement—with genocidal potential.

I argue that ethnically exclusive and predatory wealth accumulation was key in fostering ethnic group entitlement that became extreme. Violent ethnicized wealth accumulation was one of the engines of extreme ethnic group entitlement, until it also became a symptom. The other engines of group entitlement were group legitimacy and group worth, emerging out of ethnic ranking and past humiliations (or accomplishments). I address both throughout the book. Ethnic group entitlement eventually grew into an ideology of ethnic supremacy. Throughout the second civil war (1983–2005) and after, the international community supported the rise of a predatory ethnic state, which turned into an ethnocracy that eventually perpetrated genocide. In sum, the more wealth an ethnic faction of the elite accumulated, especially under favorable international auspices, the more entitled it felt and the more intolerant it became toward ethnic competitors. Emboldened but also threatened in its control of politics, people, and resources, it found no reason to accommodate ethnic competitors and decided to eventually annihilate them.

I contend that the genesis of ethnic ranking and ethnic supremacy must be found in the legacy of slavery and colonialism. They provided the basis for ethnic stereotypes upon which the SPLA practiced ethnic ranking in favor of the Dinka since 1983. Slavery also laid the foundation for the SPLA’s exclusionary predation in areas under its control. Indeed, the very mode of production through which the SPLA elite accumulated wealth was rooted in the Sudanese history of slavery: in a mode of production that was inherently racist. In SPLA areas during the second civil war, ethnic ranking and dominant class formation resting on predation thus converged. On the whole, this dominant class had very few ethnic outsiders.

As the SPLA became even more Dinka in the 1990s, by supporting it the international community fostered a state-building process that routinized predation. Back then, the SPLA protostate, akin to a mafia state, was almost exclusively focused on extraction. State-building institutionalized the Dinka SPLA’s predatory mode of production. The SPLA’s extractive, exploitative, and ethnically exclusive mode of production combined both material and reproductive wealth accumulation incurring real demographic and territorial gains in favor of the Dinka and to the detriment of non-Dinka groups. This started a three-pronged
territorial conquest, begun during the second civil war, consolidated in the inter-
war period, and expanded in the current conflict.

Through ethnically exclusive wealth accumulation and violence against non-
Dinka civilians, the SPLA reinforced Dinka group ownership and groupness. This cloaked in-group competition and divisions between its two main eastern and western Dinka constituencies. The international community also contributed to mask SPLA divisions and validate the SPLA political myth of national lib-
eration through the signing of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) leading up to independence. The CPA strengthened Dinka group legitimacy and ownership, and eventually group entitlement. This entitlement manifested in the return of ethnic ranking and the making of a violent predatory Dinka ethnocr-
acy in the postwar years (2005–13). Ethnic competition among the Dinka and with other groups (especially Nuer and “Equatorian”) accelerated the process of ethnic ranking within the postwar state.9 As ethnically exclusive and violent predation extended through the new state, it steered group entitlement, making it more exclusionary and extreme.

The international community also continued, as in the last civil war, to aggravate group entitlement by triggering past feelings of humiliations from slavery and the colonial period in the 2005–13 period through condescending stereotypes and perceived threats to southern sovereignty. As group entitlement intensified, the state and its Dinka followers grew more and more violent toward non-Dinka, Dinka dissidents, and foreigners. Symptomatically, Dinka hardliners close to the president organized the recruitment of parallel western Dinka mili-
tias when political competition increased. December 2013 marked the beginning of the third civil war and the start of a multiethnic genocide against nearly all non-Dinka ethnic groups.

I explore three of this genocide’s phases—in Juba, Unity, and Central Equatoria—and the links between these phases. In all these phases, the state coordinated and ordered attacks against non-Dinka civilians. It used different perpetrators depending on the wartime legacy of ethnic ranking and social class formation. Across all locations, the state security apparatus and militias implemented the same ideology of Dinka supremacy that equated Dinka ethnic membership with the right to live. This ideology was at its core an ideology of extreme group enti-
tlement: the result of decades of unrestrained predation and comforted group legitimacy. The perpetrators considered that they “owned” the country and were merely recuperating what had always been theirs.

Extreme ethnic group entitlement thus exploded into genocidal violence and predation in the third civil war. It culminated in the idea of group expansion through land-grabbing, which on a large scale amounted to a conquest. Dinka in-group competition fueled this “inner colonization” of the country.10 This
sent us back to the colonialist, expansionist, and imperialist origins of modern genocides.11

**Theoretical Contribution**

Since my objective is to offer a new historical account of the country, I remain focused on South Sudan and I avoid delving into comparisons. Yet I hope this account provides a few general insights into the relationship between predation, ethnic violence, and state-making in war.

My analysis of this relationship pivots on Donald Horowitz’s notions of ethnic group legitimacy, relative group worth, and group ownership, which “merge into a politics of ethnic entitlement.”12 I pay special attention to the history of ethnic ranking and to the humiliations and trauma of slavery that are at the root of ideas of relative group worth.13 Horowitz defined group ownership in relation to group legitimacy: “To understand the concept of group legitimacy, it is necessary to link it to ownership. Legitimacy goes to one’s rightful place in the country. To be legitimate is therefore to be identified with the territory. . . . Group legitimacy provides a foundation for the recurrent psychological denial that another group owns an equal share in the land.”14

I seek to further our understanding of how ethnic group “ownership” is made. Like ethnic groupness, it is not fixed in time: it varies throughout history.15 I introduce a broad materialist angle to group ownership, incorporating the idea of “wealth in people” to account for the role of bridewealth exchange in the economy and politics.16 I highlight the importance of the SPLA’s mode of production in building up that sense of group ownership. I take inspiration from Paul E. Lovejoy’s use of the concept of mode of production in his history of indigenous slavery in Africa.17 Like him, I consider it an instrument of historical analysis to highlight the relationship between social organization and production and how this relationship is maintained. I do not seek to theorize the concept of mode of production. I use it rather to describe a process of wealth accumulation with political implications. I find the history of slavery particularly relevant to uncovering the historical connections of the SPLA’s mode of production.18 In referring to it as a “mode of (re)production,” I mean to highlight its gendered social implications, which go beyond reproducing social relations and concern the exchange of women’s reproductive capacities and the integration of the marriage market into the war economy.

The SPLA’s mode of (re)production consists of ethnically differentiated socioeconomic and sexual predation; forced labor; and the ethnically exclusionary control of the war economy. It does more than just make the dominant social
class that controls it and the predatory state that administers it. It steers ethnic group ownership and entitlement. It generates group “ownership” via the possession of things and resources, people (women), and ultimately land. This, together with group legitimacy endorsed by the international community and in which group ownership also participates, contributes to build up group entitlement.

In its extreme version, group entitlement is the legitimate right to own (territory, land) to the exclusion of other groups, and it becomes ethnic supremacy. In a genocidal context, the legitimate right to have turns into the legitimate right to live. If you are not allowed to have land because someone else should have it, then you are not allowed to exist on it, and you are disappeared from it by whatever means necessary. I connect ethnicity and economics (class) within an exploitative and ethnically exclusive economic system (or mode of production) to explain ethnic conflict. As such, I hopefully contribute to address a gap in the literature on ethnonationalism. This literature has emphasized class conflict at times, ethnic conflict at others, but often failed to show how both “infuse” each other.

In highlighting the importance of the mode of production to understanding the making of an ideology of group entitlement, I illustrate that violence is related to the organizational culture of the armed group. But I also introduce historical drivers behind this organizational culture that complexify the picture presented by some of the scholarship. It has been argued that armed groups relying on their base instead of exploiting natural resources or being supported by foreign backers typically victimize civilians less, and when they do victimize them, they do so more strategically. There was little chance, however, that in relying on civilians the SPLA would not reproduce past violent and extractive behaviors like many other rebel groups have done. Its dependence on its civilian base made it violent all the same—perhaps even more so, because violence crystallizes groups—and it contributed to build an ideology of extreme group entitlement that eventually turned genocidal. This story thus confirms other recent political ethnographies on African warscapes, in that violence is “the product of a specific mode of government and a specific economy.” Rebel governance is indeed rooted in past patterns of social and economic relations, and this pattern must be historically contextualized.

This also echoes other studies that link different events of violence and note how intimate or “privatized” violent politics are. South Sudan’s different wartime patterns of violence are connected, between the mostly coercive, exploitative, and extractive violence of the second civil war and the mostly discriminatory, annihilating, and systematic violence of the current conflict. Analyzing these patterns may also expand our understanding of sexual violence, a field of inquiry that has changed over the past three decades. There are differences in the pattern of sexual violence in both civil wars, but just as with violence as a
whole, there are connections too. Indeed, genocidal rape also participates in violent processes of ethnic group ascension, ethnic group ranking, and ethnicized social class consolidation in the third civil war.

Finally, the case of South Sudan may seem puzzling to policy-makers. Its scenario contradicts studies that posit that a large international constituency would contribute to restrain violence. Indeed, one would think that heavy and long-term Western involvement could yield results to stop violence against civilians. But it is this very investment by the West in South Sudan over the past few decades that has contributed to shape the ideology of ethnic supremacy. After independence, the new sovereign country became very embedded in the international system, which defused means of Western pressure. The interests of states, firms, and individual war profiteers in South Sudan meant that its elite considered it had nothing to lose and everything to gain in securing oil and mineral-rich areas through genocidal violence in an international context of diminishing human rights standards. South Sudan increased the number of its foreign backers, the West exerted no effective pressure, and violence continued.

Methodology

This book is mostly based on a total of 550 interviews and relies when possible on secondary sources. Archives concerning the SPLA were inaccessible. I carried out interviews in various locations across South Sudan during two consecutive years (2009 and 2010) and over a span of seven months from 2014 to 2017, as well as in northern Uganda’s refugee camps in 2017. Throughout these years, I conducted other interviews to a lesser extent in Addis Ababa, New York, Washington, D.C., and Nairobi. I provide the full list of the locations in the appendix.

I anonymized my respondents’ identities for their protection. I decided not to include a table of interviews either for that reason. I use the term “civil society” very broadly to protect the anonymity of local nonstate and unarmed organized actors I interviewed. The term “observer” refers to respondents with deep, long-term knowledge of political events. In some instances, I purposefully indicate my respondents’ ethnicity to analyze the uses of ethnicity and the ethnicization of violence. I also mean to highlight the fact that the Dinka are not a homogeneous group: they are not all on board with their government’s policy, and as such they also fall victim to in-group policing.

Some readers may warn me against writing about the ethnicized nature of violence in such a way, arguing that the book could incite ethnic violence. The concern is laudable, but this warning has veered into intellectual censorship in South Sudan’s academic scene and resulted in its own kind of academic in-group
policing. The most damaging consequence is that it ultimately prevents us from writing about social processes that deserve and need analysis.

In this book, the argument for not identifying perpetrators and victims by their ethnicity in order to do no harm fails the test of chronology and causality. First, extreme ethnic violence is no fiction and it occurred before I wrote about it—and eventually published about it. Second, denying extreme ethnic violence does not make it disappear, as demonstrated by the processes of escalation I describe—quite the opposite. Third, this violence needs to be recorded and my primary objective is to create a historical record (I return to the choice of focusing primarily on non-Dinka victims later). Fourth, it is highly unlikely that the perpetrators, who are vastly illiterate, even at the highest level of the chain of command, would take inspiration from such academic work. Fifth, even if perpetrators read this book, the historicity, deep-rootedness, and intensity of their own ideology of ethnic supremacy imply that they do not need me to embolden or anger them. As for the victims, they already know what happened to them. Of course, victims may turn into perpetrators and victims may instrumentalize memory to generate genocidal ideologies. But this still does not justify not recording and analyzing genocidal violence against them.

Selection of Respondents

Not all 550 interviews are cited in this book, but they provide the very backbone of my argument. From the beginning, I interviewed mostly civilians—men and women who were not in a position of power and not from the elite. Some had served in the SPLA, and the majority of my respondents were women. Out of them, twenty-eight were survivors of sexual violence, mostly interviewed in Uganda’s refugee camps in 2017, but also in South Sudan’s Unity state. I did not select them randomly, since I benefited from the cooperation of an international organization that told them about me (and not the other way around). As such, this number (twenty-eight) should not be taken as an indication of the prevalence of sexual violence in the current conflict. Besides, many other respondents whom I selected randomly turned out to be victims or witnesses of other types of violence; some had lost relatives to such violence or had escaped violence (sometimes death) themselves. Therefore, despite the number of interviews used for this book, the use of mixed methods to recruit respondents means that this is by no means a quantitative survey of violence.

The selection of my respondents was a mix of long-term relationships developed in 2009 and 2010, 2014, and 2015–17 and of more random selection and snowballing especially in that last 2015–17 period. The average ratio between a more classic ethnographic approach and random selection with snowballing
was 50/50 overall. In 2015–16, I selected households randomly when walking through the UN protection of civilian (POC) camp in Unity state and adopted the same approach in 2017 in the refugee camps in northern Uganda. I also spent time at these camps’ entry points to interview people who had just escaped their home areas and were willing to talk to me. In addition, I selected areas of these camps where communities associated with the perpetrators lived. I sought out Dinka and Bul Nuer civilians who had just arrived to hear their side of the story. In those areas, I also randomly selected my respondents. I interviewed as many people as I could. My questions led my respondents to point me to other people, or other locations, where they knew I could find answers to my questions. Friendships from my previous two years of research in the country, also led to more snowballing. Finally, I was fortunate to benefit from the collaboration of some international organizations who told their “beneficiaries” about me: this researcher who would be more than happy to hear their stories, should they want to share them.

The result was overwhelming. For example, in July 2017 women lined up under a tree in one of the Ugandan refugee camps I visited, waiting all afternoon to tell me about how they had been raped. Some waited five hours in the blazing sun to tell their stories. People wanted to share their ordeal, even if it meant crying during the interviews. They were in shock, but displayed an impressive capacity to analyze what was happening to them: who chased and tried to kill them (and often succeeded in killing their relatives), how and why. Medical research shows that most people affected by trauma are able to remember precisely what happened to them, and this memory does not change. But memory loss can occur for war trauma victims, and traumatic memories are fundamentally different from other types of memories. So I interviewed as many people as I could to recoup facts.

My approach—focusing mostly on the experiences of those at the bottom of the social order—is consistent with other qualitative academic works that have defied the common assumption that only an elitist approach concentrating on the architects can account for genocidal violence. Besides, not every genocide needs planning, and genocides are often not fully conceived strategies. Scott Straus writes that “leaders typically do not sit down and map out extermination as the best way to retain power. Rather, they say, in effect: ‘We face a major threat from some malicious group, and we have to do whatever it takes to defeat them.’ . . . the end goal may be vague even for those who unleash the violence.”

Finally, I should clarify that I am not trying to make a legal claim. My point is to elucidate, through empirical research, the sociopolitical processes culminating into genocidal violence. The work of a court of law and the criteria for legal analysis are different. Legal conclusions are not the only type of possible analysis, and neither are they the only ones we should rely on.
When it came to assessing the veracity of my respondents’ claims, I abided to the following rule of thumb: if three people who did not know one another told me the same thing, I started to bring some credence to it and sought as much corroboration as I could with other interviews. Therefore, whenever I cite one respondent (or several in a group discussion) in this book, it implies that at least two other testimonies (but often many more) have brought credence to this version of facts. But I try to quote only one respondent so that the source is not diluted, especially when it comes to individual quotes.

Interviews

My interviews lasted from twenty minutes to three hours. They were mostly individual. When the respondent did not speak English, either someone with the respondent would translate or I used my own translator (most often a woman—always for survivors of sexual violence). I followed a semistructured interview questionnaire from memory (for safety reasons), prefaced by an introduction of who I was, what I was after, and why. I always made clear to my respondents that they could refuse the interview and leave at any moment. By 2015–16, I sometimes found myself hoping that they would refuse to speak with me, so horrendous were their testimonies. But they never did.

I was very clear on the absence of payment, advantage, or sanction of any kind resulting from the interview. Out of the four hundred interviews carried out during the ongoing conflict (2013–), only one woman, a gang-rape survivor who was interviewed in a Ugandan refugee camp, asked for money at the end of the interview. It pains me to say that I refused, explaining that this would taint the data.

Some things cannot be expressed in writing: the particular smell of fear in a woman who narrowly escaped death and hid in the bush for days with her children, the loud screams of a man receiving news that his family was killed and burned in his house, and the cries, lowered looks, and beaten down posture of gang-rape survivors. Good research without empathy is impossible, and so one does not come out unscathed from such field research. Grave illness in the summer of 2017 following field research in Uganda sent me to a prolonged hospital stay and postponed the publication of this book.

Limitations

A few limitations mark this book: first, I did not carry out field research in Upper Nile after 2013, which is where violence against the Shilluk was mostly perpetrated. Since I had to rely on secondary sources to address the case of the Shilluk,
I focus mostly on the cases of violence in Unity state and Central Equatoria state.37 This book cannot do justice to every area of South Sudan (a country as large as France) and to the history of every armed group, or every ethnic group. It is not an anthropology book, even if it explores topics such as kinship and ethnicity. I had to pick what I deemed most important and most urgent in the public domain—mostly what was not said, and what needed to be redressed in my view. In this vein, I address the 1991 Bor massacre by Riek Machar’s Nuer troops against the Dinka only because President Salva Kiir invoked it in December 2013 to justify a much different massacre on Nuer civilians in Juba. This book, as every history, is a selective history. It is written to fill specific gaps and focuses on governmental violence. This does not mean that rebel groups such as Riek Machar’s SPLA-In-Opposition and the White Army militia did not commit war crimes and crimes against humanity. But the government committed human rights violations on a much larger scale, following an ideology of Dinka supremacy, and this is the focus of this book. The book ends in 2017, at the end of my field research. It does not mean that genocidal violence stopped afterwards, or that it continued at the same rhythm in the same places. Genocide, as Straus writes, is “usually a phase within a longer, broader pattern of conflict.”38

It is very difficult (if not impossible) to completely avoid reifying ethnic groups, especially in a context where war contributes to reification—the “Equatorians” are for example a myriad of different ethnic groups.39 I do not wish either for this book to be an accusation toward the Dinka as a people. An ethnic group should not be understood as inherently coherent and following the same objectives.40 This book hopefully shows the many tensions traversing the various Dinka communities and their competition since the second civil war (1983–2005) and since genocide unfolded from 2013 onwards. The book shows that in-group policing has been going on since the very formation of the SPLA. The current government has continued to practice it to silence dissidents within its own ethnic community while attempting to foster Dinka group identity. Yet this approach should not obscure the fact that ethnic identities can be so entrenched that they become structural, and this book does argue that South Sudan became an ethnocracy.41

There is nothing “necessary” about a genocide against non-Dinka civilians in South Sudan.42 My goal is not to blame an entire group for the misdeeds of an elite. The perpetrators happen to be some Dinka (and some sub-contracted Nuer), and the victims are mostly not Dinka (for now). Neither does this mean that an evil Dinka elite masterminded everything against the will of ignorant masses. This book addresses the ties between the elite and its executants on the ground (including non-Dinka perpetrators) and describes the historical roots and development of what is, on the ground, a genocidal Dinka conquest.
“Proving” Genocide

Of course, there is a wealth of academic literature that provides multiple definitions of genocide and acknowledges the political processes behind the passing of the UN convention on genocide and its exclusion of political groups from the list of protected groups. I do not wish to create a new definition, and I do not fully disagree with the UN definition of genocide either. At the same time, since this book is not a legal document but a sociopolitical study, a nonlegal definition is necessary. Following Straus, I understand genocide as “sustained large-scale violence against a social category that aims at that group’s destruction.” The state and a broad coalition of actors, typically including local collaborators, civilian officials, and national security agencies (including paramilitaries), are the ones with the most capacity to wage this group-selective and sustained mass violence. The execution of this violence can be centralized or decentralized through coalitions usually coordinated by the center. This particular type of discriminatory violence is designed to destroy the group, including its ability to survive, and to prevent its regeneration (including through attacks on its reproductive capacity) in a given territory. The “group” is a social construct that the perpetrators use to inflict violence on the perceived threat. When I use the term “genocidal,” I simply mean violence as a part of, and furthering, what I just defined as “genocide.” In other words, I do not use “genocidal” as a euphemism for “genocide.”

The Burden of Proof

From an international legal perspective, genocide must demonstrate the perpetrator’s intent to destroying a group in part or in whole. The infliction of violence on particular individuals must be part of a higher goal to destroy a group. But no written document or video that is authenticated as from the government of South Sudan has proven that intent so far. Yet it is as if one expected the government of South Sudan, which is regularly advised by a myriad of foreign consultants and legal advisers, to make it easy to produce that evidence by ratifying documents exposing its genocidal plans. Even in the case of the Holocaust, documents showing authorization of the 1941 Final Solution have remained elusive to historians. Unfortunately, no member of the government of South Sudan or of the Jieng Council of Elders (JCE)—an organization of powerful Dinka figures—writes a journal like Joseph Goebbels did. We live in an interconnected world where, if progress has been made on accountability through the establishment of various international tribunals and international and hybrid courts, perpetrators and architects of genocide are wary of making public speeches that are recorded or
of writing policy documents that can tie them to genocidal violence. As Mark Levene notes, “On paper the committing of genocide is as morally unacceptable as it is internationally illegal—whatever the circumstances—and so the modern protagonists of exterminatory power have indeed been forced into entirely new modes of behavior.”50 They adapt their political strategies to international politics to blur the picture of genocide and scape-goat rivals for genocidal violence—like Salva Kiir did when he dismissed then SPLA Chief of Staff Paul Malong in May 2017.

“Genocide is always presented to the world as something other than what it is,” Levene writes.51 Besides, as far as written documents would be necessary to prove a genocide in South Sudan, the vast majority of the SPLA is illiterate (including at the highest levels), which means issuing such directives would be of little use on the ground. Finally, executants on the ground may be of a different ethnicity than the architects, and have different stakes in the violence and different immediate interests. This is one of the issues this book explores in the case of Unity state.52 What this means is that issuing genocidal directives through such documents might not be all that necessary, so long as the government is able to manipulate fears and competition between different groups on the ground through its chosen intermediaries, as it did among the Nuer sections of Unity state.

The multitude of ethnic identities and kinds of perpetrators, added to the multiplicity of sites of violence, may be part of the reason why the South Sudanese genocide has been intractable for the few international investigators who have tried to intervene. Indeed, the government has made use of a variety of executants in its violence, including Nuer groups (referred to as different “sections” of the over-arching Nuer group) such as the Bul Nuer or Jagei Nuer, to victimize others such as the Dok Nuer (Riek Machar’s section). South Sudan does not fit the (comparatively simple) genocidal archetype that Rwanda has become in Africa, where one ethnic group (Hutu) massacres another (Tutsi). But ethnicity can be used by both perpetrators and victims and should be understood as a “social radar” to navigate through war.53 Therefore having Nuer perpetrators of genocide on Nuer victims does not mean, as I will show, that Nuer perpetrators were not defending a Dinka supremacist agenda while pursuing their own goals. An analysis of the pursuit of various motives on the ground (especially in the case of ethnic defection) confirms that the vision of a supremacist elite is never totally “hegemonic” in its very execution.54

This book illustrates that the genocide in South Sudan has been waged in an ad hoc manner, adapting to local contexts but always following the same rationale. Where the government could co-opt local militias, and even armed groups from neighboring countries, it did. Where destroying opposition was more urgent in the face of a dire military situation, and where local groups could
not be subcontracted to perpetrate violence, the government sent its own Dinka militias. This complicates the picture of ethnic violence and of genocide. In this way, the South Sudanese genocide is much less straightforward than Rwanda’s efficient hundred-day genocide and much closer to the Armenian genocide, where a variety of actors were used to wage violence and create mass exodus. It is also different from violence in Darfur for a few reasons, though it shares connections. The South Sudanese state most likely learned from the international criminal court (ICC) experience in Sudan and has been careful not to get on the record like the Sudanese officials had.

But the absence of written documents proving genocidal intent does not mean that speeches were not made. As one of my respondents asserts, speeches were delivered, for example in Wau in the summer of 2016, where President Salva Kiir declared in the midst of the violence that “if he were the commander of the SPLA in Wau, he would kill all the people for it to be empty, because the place of Wau is for the Dinka.” My respondent continued, “He spoke Arabic when he said this. This was not on TV but he spoke in public at a rally in freedom square. Everyone in Wau heard about this. But this was not recorded because all the world would know.”

This testimony is illustrative of our dilemma. We are faced with a moral choice: who do we listen to? This book provides an oral history of war: a “history from below,” told mostly by ordinary people, a lot of them women. This is particularly evident when I focus on intent as expressed by the perpetrators to their victims rather than on a chain of command coming from the top, even if my book shows that there evidently is one. Interestingly, in the trial of Sylvester Gacumbitsi at the international criminal tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), international jurisprudence recognized that genocidal intent could be deduced from the perpetrator’s “deeds and utterances considered together, as well as from the general context of the perpetration of other culpable acts systematically directed against the same group.” In other words, from an international legal perspective, speech matters, not just actions. My work has partly consisted in tracking back what the perpetrators’ ideology entails. But my conclusions are just the tip of the iceberg. A lot more research is needed on Dinka supremacist ideology.

Indeed, if ideology matters, it has largely been abandoned as an analytical category in the context of South Sudan in favor of a focus on “greed.” Because the South Sudanese military elite has displayed predatory and corrupt political behavior, analysts from the political economy camp (largely still favoring “greed”) have mostly won over those of the “grievances” one. This book is therefore also about bringing ideology back. Here I am inspired by Straus’s idea that an exclusionary ideology—a “founding narrative”—is one of the conditions for a genocide to occur and a defining feature across the board. Yet I do not choose
between predation and ideology: I explain how their combination, rooted in the *longue durée* of centuries of extractive and racist relations with Sudan, resulted in violence.

**Genocide or “Ethnic Cleansing”?**

A common idea that surrounds the “meta-conflict” on South Sudan and whether violence in the current conflict is genocidal or not is that of its scale and modus operandi.59 “In Equatoria, killing all the men and raping the women is probably below the threshold of genocide,” an international human rights investigator once told me. “If they’re driving everyone out and if that’s just to drive people out, then it falls short of genocide.”60 But systematic killing and raping is what a genocide looks like. Rape has been recognized as a tool for genocide by the international criminal tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, and this book explores its function in South Sudan’s third civil war.61

Besides, the SPLA did not mean to just forcibly displace people. “If it was just ethnic cleansing, the government would just let them flee,” commented the South Sudanese civil society member from Equatoria quoted earlier.62 He was referring to the regular labeling by international agencies of violence as “ethnic cleansing,” always “on the verge” of genocide. In fact, as I noted earlier, ethnic cleansing is not defined under any international legal convention and it is often used as a euphemism for genocide.63 It is generally understood as mass violence meant to “push” civilians of a different ethnic group out of a given confined geographical zone, not to annihilate them.64 If mass killings take place, they are understood as some sort of “side effect” of the main goal—which is to push out, not to exterminate. That is what supposedly makes ethnic cleansing different from genocide in its goals.

The reality is of course different: if there is a difference in scale, ultimately what matters is the perpetrators’ definition of the territory they intend to “cleanse,” which can expand. Though there may be a difference in intent between genocide and ethnic cleansing, not only does one not exclude the other, but they often go together. For example, the Armenian genocide was what is understood as an “ethnic cleansing,” but above all it was a genocide. To want to “get rid of” an ethnic population inherently means that this population should be destroyed within the boundaries of a given territory—it should leave or face destruction. A woman gang-raped recalled what her perpetrators said to her: “They said: ‘you should move away from South Sudan, and if you don’t, we’ll kill you.’”65

The bottom line is that the target group is not allowed to “exist” within a given territory, and it is up to the perpetrators to determine the boundaries of that territory. In South Sudan, this territory turned out to be the entire country.
This merely made the so-called ethnic cleansing exercises different phases of one genocide. A member of a civil society organization in Yei summarized this genocidal strategy best: “They want to kill us, disorganize us, and come with their cattle . . . Their plan is to drive us out and take our land . . . It’s a properly organized killing by the regime to eliminate certain groups of people so they don’t exist in the map of South Sudan now.”

Death Toll and Accountability

No exact death toll has been calculated in South Sudan, but total group annihilation is not legally required for genocide. Some humanitarian organizations took on the burden of estimating mortality in Unity state and Equatoria. In 2016, the Office of the Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator for South Sudan found a crude death rate that exceeded the emergency threshold of 1 death/10,000 people/day in Unity state. In 2017, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) found in the Equatoria region—mostly Central Equatoria state—that most deaths occurred in the village of origin rather than during the journey. But even on the journey, according to one of their staff who participated to the survey, “most people fleeing Equatoria are not successful. Out of a family of 15 people, 8 are killed on the way.”

In 2018, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine estimated that since December 2013, this war had likely led to the violent death of roughly two hundred thousand people. No investigation into the crime of genocide has been launched at the time of writing. Long-time observers noted the reluctance of the UN Mission in South Sudan to gather fresh forensic evidence and death toll estimates right after dust settled from the Juba massacre in December 2013. Evidence disappeared, while the perpetrators also deliberately tried to destroy it. The turnover of investigators, the lack of strategic thinking in data collection, and the shadow of the failed ICC adventure in Darfur did not help either.

In this context, the publication of this book continues to show how political the decisions behind starting these international legal processes are, not to mention their implementation. After all, the international community supported the Khmer Rouge for a long time, well after their fall.