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### Interaction and Conflict among the Nuer and Anuak communities in the Gambella Region, Southwest Ethiopia

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#### Abstract

Gambella regional state is located in the southwestern Ethiopia with diverse ethnic groups. From the ethnic groups, Anuak and Nuer are dominant in the region. Both interacted in marriage, support each other in the time of famine as well as war and followed traditional religion. Their interaction violated by conflicts in the second half 19<sup>th</sup> century. The conflict caused by the question of natural resources, Parliamentary seats and curriculum and media of instruction in school. This fight caused the death of human beings and destruction of material properties on the both ethnic groups. Hostilities and conflicts between them had no earned solution due to outbreak of First World War.

**Key words:** Interaction, Conflict, Gambella, Southwestern Ethiopia.

#### 1. Introduction

The State of Gambella is situated in the Southwestern part of Ethiopia bordering with Benishangul Gumuz to the north, Oromo region to the west, the Southern people's regional state to the south and the newly birth republic of South Sudan to the west.

Like other parts of Ethiopia, Gambella regional state is inhabited by diverse ethnics such as Anuak, Mezenge, opuo, Kumo, Nuer, Olam, Dhwok, Bula Maw and Murle. Among these ethnic groups, the Nuer and Anuaks are the dominant people in the region. Their language belongs to Nilo-Saharan super family.

Agro-ecologically, the Gambella is predominantly lowland (kola) with a few midlands (wena Dega). The economy of the region is based on agriculture, semi-pastoralists, bee keeping and fishing. This paper lays out the social, economic, cultural and political interaction and conflict among Nuer and Anuak in the region. For a long period of time, the relation between Anuaks and Nuers are characterized by violent actions. This ethnic disturbance was later precipitated by the state sponsored resettlement program of the Derg since 1980's. The ethnic conflict caused the death of human beings and destruction of material properties.

#### 2. Historical Context of Anuak and Nuers

The Nuer and Anuaks were believed to be originated from outside Ethiopia. Nuers live mostly in Southern Sudan, in the east upper Nile Province with extending up to the Sabot across the Ethiopia border. The center of the Nuer area is around Lake No. They were migrated to Ethiopia from southern Sudan (Bender, 1975:51). Nuer villages are scattered along the Baro River intermingled with the Anuak, in western most of Illubabor.

The Nuer people have black skin color and their height is too long. They are believed to have linkage with the Dinke people in terms of culture. As Bender stated, the Nuer are known as “Abigar” in the Amharic. They are noted as the cattle people par excellence in Africa and the world. The cattle pervade is the Nuer economic, social and spiritual life (*Ibid*: 52). The Nuer people are largely livestock dependent and are mostly found in Akobo Jikawo and parts of Itang woreda. During rainy seasons, Akobo and Jikawo became flooded and as result, they migrate to the highland areas with their cattle until the river banks recede (Abraham, 2002:2).

On the other hand, the Anuaks are found on the Akobo and Pibor rivers in the Sudan (Bender, 1975:47). It was believed that, Anuaks came into Ethiopia from the Nile valley during the process of Nilotic expansion. The Anuaks are also thought to have come from the so called “cradle land of the Nilotes” or from further south east near Lake Rudolf and Victoria in Kenya and Uganda (Abraham, 2002:2). Unlike Nuers, they are mainly agricultural dependent people with livestock, fishing and hunting as their supplementary income sources (*Ibid*: 3).

### **3. Methodology**

This research was conducted based on the qualitative approach. Both primary and secondary sources of data are utilized. The key informants and document analysis are included. Unstructured interviews were carried out with intention of collecting the required data. Elders of Nuer and Anuaks are interviewed in depth. Published and unpublished sources are cross-checked with responses of key informants. The collected data from key informant interview and written sources were critically analyzed, narrative and summarized in document investigation methodology.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

Likewise other part of Ethiopia, Gambella regional state is populated by various ethnic groups. The Anuak and Nuers is the dominant people in the region from the others. Their language belongs to the same super family, Nilo-Saharan. They interact in marriage, supporting each other in famine, disease as well as war and followed the traditional religion (Tadesse, 2009:6). But, in the mid 1980's has witnessed conflict between Anuak and Nuers (Dereje, 2009:642). This paper emphasized the interaction and conflict among Nuer and Anuak communities in the Gambella region, southwest Ethiopia.

#### **4.1. Socio-economic and Political Aspects of Anuak and Nuers**

The people of Gambella in general do not inherit monoculture as the region composes of different ethnic groups each of which has its own dialect and way of life. As result, the social, economic, political and cultural varied from tribe to tribe. Although some similarities existed especially in marriage could be identified between the Anuak and Nuer tribes. The Anuak-Nuer of Sobat, Baro and Pibor lived in varying degrees of cooperation and interaction (Gach, Pual, Jal). The Nuer married Anuak girls, Anuak boys were given Nuer initiation marks on their skin; the Anuak lived in Nuer villages; milk and grain were exchanged, which benefited both groups (Tadesse, 2009:6). Back in tradition, marriage in Anuak and

Nuer has been usually negotiated outside the bride and grooms knowledge by their families and sometimes can involve the use of force. Marriage in both tribes involves the dowry which is paid to the bride's family (Lam, Ruach, Jal). Because of development and civilization which is currently taking place, there has been minimize dowry paying to the girl's family. Men and women in both tribes have had the opportunity to choose each other whom they want to marry. Also, both tribes practices polygamy like the other tribes lived in the Gambella region (Jal, Gach, Paul).

The villages of Anuak and Nuer had bond of Partnership (Kurimoto, 2002:219-238). In the dry season, the Nuer used to come with their cattle in search of grasslands on the banks of the Baro River while their permanent villages were on the Sudanese side. The Nuer men would able to build up his relationship by giving goat to the Anuak men. In return, the Anuak men would give some tobacco. The Nuer might also ask a piece of land for cultivation or settlement. This Anuak-Nuer bond partnership at the individual could be extended to the level of village community (*Ibid*: 219-238).

The Anuaks and Nuer were supporting each other in time of famine, diseases as well as war. When the Anuak people were invaded by the neighboring Oromo, the Nuer were supporting them by providing shelter, in turn, the Anuaks introduced the Nuer to ivory trade with the Oromo according Meckleberg. Anuak villages such as Pinyimoo and Imedho had alliances with villages of Nuer, Canngac and Puldeng respectively. When the two villages fought, Canngac were supplying guns to Pinyimoo and Puldeng did the same thing to Imedho ("Politicization" Vol.2:806).

According to informants, large numbers of Anuak and Nuers have been followed traditional religion, small numbers accepted Christianity. Since Amharic is declared as the official language of the Coptic Church, the bible parched and written by mother tongue language, it would help them to share experiences while attending church services (Gach, Pual, Jal). In case of traditional religion, the Anuak have normally had a kind attitude towards the spirits and witch doctors. They have been considered as the only people to whom to go in the case of sickness. The witch doctors might be a Nuer ethnic group who might come to help the sick people in Anuak villages and other ethnic groups (Bender, 1975:194-195). They believed the traditional animist spirit known as Gowk. Trees played an important part in their religion and even today there are villages which include "holy" trees. Traditionally, cattle play an important part in Nuer religion and ritual. Cows are dedicated to the spirits of the owner's lineage and any personal spirits that may have possessed them at any time (Evans-Pritchard, 1940:1-13). They linked with their ancestor spirits by throwing ashes along the backs of oxen or cows. Nothing ceremony is complete without such a sacrifice. They worship a supreme being called "Kwoth" who was various manifestations with which claim to have personal relationships (*Ibid*: 1-13).

Anuak and Nuer are differed in such way. The Eastern parts of Anuak are basically sedentary agriculturalists (Shumet, 1985:132). In dry season, fishing on the Baro and Akobo River also supplements of their diet. In contrary to the Eastern Part, western Anuak take part to raise domestic animals with regard to crop production of sorghum and corn (David, 1978:464). The Nuer is first and for most pastoral peoples, with regular dispersal and regrouping of members of local communities. In the nature of their occupation, the Nuer individually lives more lonely lives than the Anuak (Godfrey, 1962:74-85). Other attractive culture of the Nuer that varied from the Anuak tribes is that of "garring", the cutting of six parallel horizontal stripes from ear to ear across forehead in young of man hood, which like circumcision among many Ethiopian people's (Bender, 1975:53).

The traditional political organization of Anuak and Nuer had both common values and different systems. There were two distinct kinds of traditional political organization in Anuak namely (noble, singular nyieya) and Kwaari (head men, singular, Kwaaro). Such leadership was based on the certain lineage. Although, the difference exists in the degree of authority, both traditional leaders perform identical activities such as peacekeeping, distributing the wealth and ritual obligations. While all nobles belong to

one royal clan, head men are from various clans (Kurimoto, 2002:8-10). With regard to the degree of authority, the noble exercised the highest power than head men became; noble (nyieye) can exercise the power over different villages, while the power of head men (kwaaro) is limited to his own village. The Nuer were pastoralists, there was a great deal of mobility of leadership in the Nuer than Anuak. But, the mobility follows the seasonal shift. Due to the seasonal shift both followers and leaders were not expected to stay in one place on either side of the border for a long of time (Johnson, 1986:90-95).

#### **4.2. Tensions Leading to the Nuer-Anuak Ethnic Conflicts**

This concerned with long term factors underlying internal conflicts have different causes, take different shape in different countries as well as regions and often lead population displacement. In most cases, as it is also the case in some parts of Ethiopia, Ethnic differences seem to be major causes of conflicts. In reality, a multitude of factors such as resource scarcity, lack of good governance and transparency with a high degree of power centralization, power sharing and unequal access to resources and the pattern of settlement that brought shared resources causes conflicts (Tesfay, 2007:24).

Borders artificially alter the value of resources, depending on which side of the line they rest. As result, groups of people who are denied the right to access shared resources can easily trigger inter- ethnic conflicts. The situation becomes worsen and brought resources scarcity. Although this assertion is concerned more with inter-conflicts than with intra-state, it can apply to countries such as Ethiopia where ethnic based boundaries are drawn (*Ibid: 25*).

Gambella is one of the administrative regions in Ethiopia with diverse ethnic groups. Since in the mid 1980's has been witnessed factional fighting and inter-community violence in the region. The western Part of the region identified by five types of conflict: - inter-ethnic, intra-conflict, indigenous and migrants; the state against ethnic groups and cross border conflicts (Dereje, 2009:642). But, the study explored this inter face from one angle. This is the underlying inter-ethnic conflict among Anuak and Nuer communities in Gambella region. Anuak-Nuer conflict is first and for most ethnic conflict in the southwestern part of Ethiopia in the second half of nineteenth century. The need to control resources and cultural identity-related issues, the nature and the intensity of conflicts over the last two decades has been transformed by the Sudanese civil war and political realities in Ethiopia.

##### **4.2.1. Causes of Anuak-Nuer Disputes**

###### **4.2.1.1. The question of natural resources**

Though insignificant in its nature and causality inter-group conflict between Anuak and Nuer can be traced as far back as the early twentieth century. Livelihoods pursued by these two groups are one of the major causes for conflict. As mentioned above while Anuaks are primarily cultivators, the Nuers are mainly pastoralists (Abraham, 2002:2). The Nuers (Jikang) migrated to the east from Southern Sudan. The main driving forces of Nuer territorial expansion are access to land control over vital natural resources, cultivation and pasture lands along the tributaries of the Sabot. The resource-driven movements of the Nuer have resulted not only in their territorial but also demographic expansion (Dereje, 2009:643). Radically formulated assimilations society that it is Nuer has absorbed many Anuak in to their society (*Ibid: 643*). Although the Nuer and Anuak are linguistically interrelated and engage in various forms of social and economic exchanges, they nevertheless form distinct ethnic communities. In the early days, the Nuer was sensitive to the Anuak mode of production and where they careful that their cattle did not destroy Anuak cultivated fields. Social controls in habited raids against these immediate neighbors and relations with people directly on the boarder of the Nuer settlement were more relaxed (Tadesse, 2009:5).

Thereafter, large scale hostilities continued between the two groups, however, largely due to the incompatible modes of production and livelihood. Traditionally, a major cause of Nuer-Anuak conflict is animals trespassing on to Anuak farm land where they live in mixed settlement or in neighboring villages (*Ibid*:6). The Nuer is gained confidence and begun to allow their cattle to graze on the farm fields of the Anuak and ready to fight (*Ibid*). The Anuak used war as the only option to stop the advancing of Nuer. In early to late twentieth century, the Anuak, organized many campaign to stop the advancing Nuer from taking their lands. These campaigns and many others did not contribute for reiterate of Nuer from advancing and annexing more lands. The Nuer reiterates here that Anuak often left their land before Nuer settled in. The Anuak always prepare to live very far from Nuer because the cattle are threats to their farming business. Cattle don't respects any boundaries which often Anuak. This always the triggering event when these two come in close conflict with each other. Competition over scarce natural resource is compounded by struggle for political power at the regional level. Power struggle between Anuak and Nuer elites expected a greater political advancement over their Nuer counter parts, which they did not (Dereje, 2002:642).

#### **4.2.1.2. The question of majority group seats in the parliamentary system**

This is the most important factor that accelerated the struggle between the Anuak and Nuer communities in the region. It is well known that being a majority group means more seats in the government parliamentary system and other political privileges (Abraham, 2002:4). In fact, the Nuer managed to occupy the two key offices of administration and party secretariat. Early in the 1980's dissatisfied Anuak elites established a liberation movement known as the Gambella people's liberation movement (GPLM) to fight the Derg. Allied with Ethiopian people's revolutionary Democratic front (EPRDF), the Anuak took control over the newly constituted Gambella regional state in 1991 (Dereje, 2009:644).

The other turning point of Anuak anger against the Derg was alienation of their land because of the regime's resettlement program (Tadesse, 2009:9). This program results the Anuaks landless and their land was seized by the settlers that came from high lands. All these developments added to the unhappiness of Anuak of Gambella, overshadowing the far-reaching social and economic changes under taken by the Derg in the region. The Nuer then felt marginalized and unable to gain a seat which was resulted in violent conflicts between the Anuak and Nuer throughout the 1990's. This signified the three major violent conflicts between the groups. The first established from 1991-92 when militant section of Gambella peoples liberation movement committed atrocity against civilian Nuer. As result, thousands of Ethiopian Nuer migrated into Sudan and settled as refugees in the Southern Sudan. The Nuers destructed the villages of Anuak by following counter offensive along the Baro River. Secondly, the Nuer contestation of Anuak political dominance results another war that broke out in Itang district in 1998 (Dereje, 2002:644). Thirdly, a more deadly conflict occurred in 2002 on issues related to succession to the office of vice president. In post 1991, the Gambella office of the regional presidency is allocated to the Anuak whereas the office of vice president and the secretary are allocated the Nuer and the Majangir respectively. Therefore, the competition for political leadership in the new framework of ethnic federalism is the cause of conflict (Kurimoto, 2002:225-230). Between 1991-2003 power in Gambella was dominated by Anuak ("Politicization vol2:811).

#### **4.2.1.3. The question of curriculum and media of instruction in school.**

The other reason of conflict between the Nuer and Anuak was the language that should be taught in school. Both groups argue that their own language should be taught in school in the region since their languages have been taught beginning from 1995. Ultimately, the introduction of federalism encouraged Nuer teachers to left the teaching profession to join government posts. Because of this, "books in Nuer

language are no longer produced.” Currently, both the Anuak and Nuer language is taught up to grade ten as the common in the region (Abraham, 2002:5). Therefore, there is also area of interaction in school until grade ten (*Ibid*).

#### **5. Measure taken to settle Anuak-Nuer Ethnic conflict**

Even though, there was hostilities and conflict, there were still cooperation and peaceful relation between the Nuer and Anuak communities. There were situations, were the Anuak lived in Nuer society or under Nuer leaders (Johnson, 1986:238). Under this condition, inter marriage, exchange of cattle and mingling of settlement was happened. For example, Anuak settled in Itang area established friendly and peaceful relations with the Gaajak Nuer.

Several attempts were made to settle the ethnic conflicts of Anuak and Nuer. In 1912, one headman was able to reduce tensions of Anuak and Nuer. In the years from 1908-1910, the British colonial government tried its best to cease the Anuak-Nuer conflict and to maintain effective administration over the bloodshed regions. Such colonial measures played a great role to suppress and reduce the degree of confrontation. As a result, Nuer- Anuak raid reduced between the 1913 and 1914. On the other hand, in 1913, the Ethiopian government had taken measure to bring Anuak and Nuer close together (*Ibid*). Similarly, the Sudanese government attempted to negotiate Anuak and Nuer in 1914. However, the outbreak of the First World War makes the mediation fruitless.

#### **6. Consequences of the Anuak-Nuer conflict**

The existence of conflict between Anuak and Nuer ethnic group in the Gambella region since in the late 1980's resulted the migration of Ethiopian Nuer into South Sudan and stayed as refuge, the assimilation of Anuak society by the Nuer in some extent and the Anuak lost their farm land and served as grazing land of Nuers (Tadesse, 2009:24). The Anuak-Nuer conflict also signified the domination of Anuak in the political front from 1991-2003 and both ethnic groups argued to use their own language as common for curriculum and media of instruction in school (Paul, Gach, Jal).

#### **7. Conclusion**

The Gambella regional state spent factional fighting and inter-community violence since the late 1980's between Anuak and Nuer ethnic group, mainly over the need to control resources such as water and grazing land, the question of majority group seats in the parliamentary system and the question of curriculum and media instruction in school. The sources of conflict have been aggravated the destruction of traditional values of solidarity on the question of land use and tenure.

This ultimately led to the breakdown of all previous contacts and mutual agreements that allow agro-pastoralists limited access, in time of scarcity and to pasture water. As grazing land became scarcer, the Anuak and Nuer stopped helpful each other.

#### **Conflict of Interests**

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests.

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### Informants

No	Name of informants	Age	Place	Date of interview	Remarks
1	Gach Tut(Ato)	26	Bahir Dar University	11/12/2011	He is natural science teacher from Akobore woreda and undergraduate student in Bahir Dar University.
2	Jal Chol(Ato)	28	Bahir Dar University	11/12/2011	Physical education teacher from Abole woreda and Undergraduate student in the Bahir Dar University.
3	Lam Dobu(Ato)	26	Bahir Dar University	11/12/2011	He is plan and information officer in Lora woreda and Postgraduate student in Bahir Dar University.
4	Paul Joak(Ato)	28	Bahir Dar University	11/12/2011	He is high school director of pinkew in the Abole woreda and postgraduate student in Bahir Dar University.
5	Ruach Them(Ato)	30	Bahir Dar University	11/12/2011	Social science teacher from Lora woreda and undergraduate student in Bahir Dar University.

