Sudan’s Prolonged Civil War and the Shifting Value(s) of Children
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INTRODUCTION
While the entire population of South Sudan has been engulfed in a devastating civil war since 1983, rural Nuer and Dinka communities of the Upper Nile, Bahr-al-Ghazal and Jonglei Provinces have suffered most intensely. These two ethnic groups have supplied the bulk of the southern military forces seeking to overthrow or separate from the northern dominated, national Islamic state in Khartoum. Their traditional homelands have also provided the major battlefields for intensifying leadership struggles and violent confrontations among South Sudanese themselves. Understanding how ordinary Dinka and Nuer villagers, caught in the cross-fire of competing “nationalist” movements, have variously experienced and grappled with the unprecedented social and economic deterioration generated by this war is thus essential for discussions of a peaceful settlement of the conflict and post-war rehabilitation. In addition, understanding how the militarization of Nuer and Dinka community life assists in developing a more regionally comprehensive assessment of the transformative impact of Africa’s longest surviving civil war (1955-72, 1983-present). This discussion concentrates on three major axes of social change: (1) the rapid polarization and militarization of Nuer and Dinka ethnic identities following the tumultuous 1991 split in the Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Army (SPLA); (2) the politically corrosive effects on youth of the demands for their contribution to the war effort; and (3) the growing vulnerability of unarmed women and children to the increasingly violent attitudes of these militarized youth, to the economic destitution and to gross physical and sexual abuse within an expanding regional sub-culture of violence.

Background: The Realities of A Crumbling Political Landscape
Having lost more than half of their homeland populations to the ravages of war, famine, disease and displacement over the past decade, rural Nuer and Dinka men and women alike complain of being “exhausted by death.” Prior to the 2002 merger between the Dinka-dominated SPLA and Nuer-Dominated South Sudan People’s Defense Forces (SSPDF), civilians on both sides of this ethnic divide desired nothing more than to end the military stalemate between SPLA leader, Dr. John Garang and rival SSPDF leader, Dr. Riek Machar. They talked of the need to “prevent southerners from killing southerners and turn our guns at our real enemy in the north.” In discussions held with various Nuer and Dinka individuals, they appear remarkably firm in their resolve to continue this war indefinitely, if necessary, or until such time as southern Sudanese’s “rights to self-determination” were freely exercised. However, they were growing rapidly disillusioned with the nationalist rhetoric of the two leaders. Many Nuer and Dinka were angered by the increasingly obvious intentions of the Sudan Government to exploit the rift between the Southerners for strategic and military gains in the South. They were increasingly becoming more disturbed by the large-scale extraction of previously untapped southern oil deposits. But they were also deeply frustrated by the seeming unwillingness of Dr. Machar and Dr. Garang to resolve their personal and political differences in order to defuse escalating regional patterns of inter-ethnic violence. Over this same period, rural Dinka communities of the Bahr-al-Ghazal were grappling with a famine of unprecedented proportions, widespread cattle raiding by the Arab Baggara and massive displacement.
With dwindling faith in these belligerents’ ability to liberate the South and lack of clear leadership alternatives on either ethnic horizon, many Dinka and Nuer began to define their interminable sufferings as a product of collapsing morality among the youth. Rather than confront the reality of their powerlessness as individuals to explain the violence that has increasingly gripped their societies, many women and men have found solace in the idea that they somehow broke the rules of inter-generational promise, and now, they are having to pay the price of abandoning the contract that traditionally binds them to the responsibility towards the youth. Many people began to explain their problems in terms of having “brought it upon themselves.” In other words the youth who have now become so violent learnt this behavior from their own subjection to violence by the adult political leaders. For many of the tens of thousands Dinka and Nuer women and men who have sought explanation of this war in moral judgment, South Sudanese are said to be reaping from what they sowed; their abandonment of the norms that contained inter-ethnic warfare in the past. This interpretation is based on observations such as the following statement suggests: “If we were to maintain our old ways of reconciling our conflicts over grazing land, Riek and Garang would not have been able to attract us into their political wrangling, they would not have been able to turn their individual political aspirations into a Nuer-Dinka war. This is essentially a war of the educated and we the rural folk should have no part in it.” Equally puzzling is how other Nuer and Dinka villagers attribute the violence to the supernatural world, where gods are allegedly unhappy with them due to the human blood South Sudanese continue to shed daily amongst themselves. The dramatic explosion of violence between different Nuer factions since 1998 in a bid for power has only added to these deepening regional feelings of pessimism and despair. To draw out the ethnographic realities of the war as means to a clear understanding of the place of youth in these war-induced social and cultural changes, addressing the following questions is necessary.

A. What are the beliefs and values that place children at the center of people’s social and cultural lives?

For past and present generations of Dinka and Nuer alike, children are first and foremost “the reason for everything we do and are blessings from God.” Although entrusted into the care of particular parents and families, children remain possessions of God (Dinka: Nhialic/Nuer: Kuoth). In practical terms, “children belong to all.” Consequently, it would be wrong for a parent to count his or her children numerically. For to do so suggests a “definitiveness of ownership” that belies the ever-present powers of God not only to give but to take away. This dependence on the life-creating and life-protecting powers of God is a reality that cannot be ignored in a war-blighted world where many couples experience long periods of infertility and where more than half of the children born alive die before reaching maturity.

Procreation is, in fact, the paramount goal of life for everyone, and the only form of immortality universally valued. Every Dinka and Nuer fears the “true death,” the “complete death”--which is to say, a death without surviving children to “stand one’s head,” remember one’s name and more generally revitalize one’s influence in the world. For men, the immortality sought is motivated in part by strong collective interests: without heirs, a man acquires no permanent position within the patrilineal chain of
ancestors from which he emerged. For a woman, childbirth is the threshold to adulthood and to future security and independence in her husband’s home.

Owing to the overwhelming centrality of this life-goal, these two societies have developed highly creative means of overcoming individual experiences of infertility and/or premature death in order to ensure that every adult man and woman has a fighting chance of acquiring heirs. One of the most important of these cultural premises rests on a marked distinction in people’s minds between claims of “social paternity” (based on bridewealth cattle transfers) and claims of “physical genitorship” (based on “blood/semen” transfers). In situations where these two sets of claims are not held by the same person, “social paternity” always takes precedence over “physical paternity” in determining a child’s “true” line of patrilineal descent. A man without access to cattle, in other words, cannot acquire legal heirs, no matter how many women he impregnates. For women, it is different. Nuer and Dinka women do not need access to cattle in order to become mothers. Social maternity and physical maternity are inseparable in these societies.

The “flip side” of these cattle-based limitations on the procreative ambitions of individual Nuer and Dinka men, however, can be profoundly “liberating” in other ways. Because physical paternity is not a necessary condition of fatherhood as socially defined, it becomes possible, for example, for Nuer and Dinka to marry for the dead. A “ghost marriage” occurs when a man marries a wife in the name of a deceased male relative in order to provide the latter with posthumous heirs. Any children the wife produces are legally the children of the “ghost,” not those of the “pro-husband” who sired them. Furthermore, marriages in these societies do not end with the death of the husband. On the contrary, a widow is expected to continue to bear heirs to her late husband’s name with the procreative assistance of a brother-in-law, step-son or lover of her choice. This institution is known as “leviratic marriage.” Responsibility for the continued material well-being of the widow and her children rests squarely on the brothers and other close patrilineal relatives of the deceased husband. Finally, the “pater/genitor split” opens up the possibility of establishing “woman-to-woman” marriages. A woman who proves infertile is free to become a “social man,” to gather cattle and to marry a wife who will produce children for her. The female-husband designates a lover to impregnate the wife. But in all other ways, she fulfills the social roles of husband and father. What deserves special emphasis here, however, is the unique “reconstructive” potential of these marriage forms. Nuer and Dinka families that have been heavily ravaged by death can potentially regenerate themselves by having surviving members marry wives in the names of deceased older brothers, uncles and fathers—provided, of course, that these family retain some access to cattle wealth.

Children are also valued for the future material benefits their parents and families hope to acquire through them. “We eat our children,” parents say quite bluntly. Children are, indeed, the only form of “social security” known in these societies. A father, for example, will not publicly announce “I have a son” until such time as the boy has begun to fish and hunt, returning home with generous gifts of food for his family. There is also a well-known Nuer saying that runs: “A string of fishing hooks is a hundred times better than a heartless son”—which is to say, “an irresponsible son” who is ignorant of his alimentary responsibilities toward parents and kinsfolk. Daughters, in contrast, are said to be “eaten” at marriage, at which time their families rejoice in the abundant milk
and meat that their bride-wealth cattle ideally provide. It is thus only when a child matures and begins to develop the unique kin bonds acquired at birth through counter gifts of “food” that he or she acquires the status of a “true” relative among relatives.

Nuer and Dinka children are cherished not only for extending specific families and lineages but, more broadly, for preserving valued cultural identities and ways of life. In this sense, “children are the children of everyone.” Or, at least, this is how most adults viewed one another’s children before experiencing this war’s full weight. Evidence for this declining attitude is still apparent in some areas. For example, although adult Nuer and Dinka consider it shameful to mention food or to be seen eating or drinking in the presence of “non-relatives,” women and men will freely beg food from “strangers” without fear or loss of self-respect, provided that the food is destined for the belly of a young child. Similarly, there is a continuing expectation that fellow villagers who are old enough to be “parents” will freely advise, assist, scold and/or discipline one another’s “children” as the need arises. Without this continued collective commitment to the raising of the next generation, it is difficult to see how Dinka and Nuer will survive, whether jointly or independently, as vibrant and valued ethnic communities in the decades ahead. Indeed, it will be later argued that children’s survival prospects in these societies have become increasingly bound up in recent years with changing adult perceptions of children’s abilities to take on and extend particular ethnic identities—as distinct from, say, more individualized kinship networks.

**B. What are the greatest risks children currently face?**

The most detrimental effects of this war include: the widespread disruption of family life, the dispersal of communities, the collapse of the regional economy and local administrative structures, the loss of essential health and educational services, accelerated ecological degradation, cultural damage and the psychological consequences of trauma, identity loss and mounting despair. This war has battered every dimension of these societies. Moreover, as people’s survival efforts have become more and more individualistic and/or household oriented, their abilities to sustain community-wide institutions, cultural practices and social commitments capable of restraining gross abuses of power have declined dramatically.

These war-time developments have robbed contemporary Dinka and Nuer children of the opportunity to be children, as their daily lives are swallowed up by rising tides of physical and economic insecurity. Ever since the tragic 1991 split in the SPLA, rural Dinka and Nuer civilians have been struggling to cope with an expanding regional sub-culture of violence. This sub-cultural force has been both fueled and characterized by: a dramatic surge in the scale and frequency of south-on-south violence; a concomitant polarization and militarization of Nuer and Dinka ethnic identities; an unprecedented unraveling of regional codes of inter-community warfare that previously condemned the burning of houses, the slashing of crops and the killing of elderly men and women and children of all ages; mounting public despair over the abilities of John Garang and Riek Machar to resolve their personal and political differences peacefully, so as to reduce current levels of inter-ethnic violence and mistrust; a deepening experiential equation in people’s minds between political assertions of governmental authority,” on the one hand, and militarized demonstrations of the capacity to kill with impunity, on the other; the birth of an entire generation of younger Nuer and Dinka military recruits who have
known little but the brutalities of war and who readily translate confrontations at the national level into community and intra-family violence; and, lastly, a gradual silencing of the legitimate fears of unarmed women and children in the face of increasingly unabashed military glorifications of the raw “masculine” power of guns.

Like military movements worldwide, the SPLA and SSIM have sought to inculcate a kind of ultra-masculinity in their recruits, equated with demonstrations of aggressiveness, competitiveness and the censure of emotional expression. A growing sense of “entitlement” to the domestic and sexual services of related and unrelated women also pervades this hyper-masculinized world view. Just as Dinka and Nuer men see themselves as responsible for maintaining “the war front,” so, too, women, they reason, should be similarly active during this war in keeping up “the reproductive front.” Pressures for women to disregard the “weaning taboo” (which prohibits their having sexual relations during lactation) are steadily mounting, as husbands and lovers on short, unpredictable military leaves return home determined to conceive another child. Similarly, women are feeling pressured by husbands and in-laws to reduce the “fallow period” between pregnancies by weaning their infants earlier. Whereas before this war infants were usually suckled for 18 months or more, many Dinka and Nuer men now argue that a period of nine months is optimal. And because most Nuer and Dinka women do not feel free to refuse their husbands or lovers sexual access on demand for fear of a beating, they are increasingly forced to make choices that no woman should have to make. “How can I take the risk of another pregnancy and childbirth when I can’t even feed the children I already have?” “Should I attempt to abort, knowing how many other women have died or become infertile in the process?” “How would my husband and his family react if they discovered I aborted ‘their’ child?” “Who will care for my children, if I died?” “Will God punish me for these thoughts?

To these feminine hardships must be added the ever-present dangers of rape and of the forceful commandeering of scarce household resources by gun-toting youth. Nearly every Nuer and Dinka woman has experienced threatening demands by unrelated armed young men for the immediate provision of cooked or stored food, portage services and/or sexual access. Satisfying these unpredictable and, often, recurrent demands severely limits the energies and resources these women are able to devote to their children. Although these feminine support systems have increasingly collapsed beneath the weight of thousands of imported AK-47s, Nuer and Dinka women retain considerable influence over patterns of inter-community violence through their well-recognized abilities “to shame” their husbands, brothers and sons into either participating or not in specific military campaigns.

In addition to these more obvious war risks, Nuer and Dinka women and children are suffering from the centrifugal forces released by recurrent community displacements. Surveys of rural households carried out in Upper Nile and Bahr-el-Ghazal over the years by aid agencies reveal something of the magnitude of this problem. A full third of all resident children in displaced person’s camps are “orphans,” having lost one or both of parents to death or abandonment during this war. Child mortality rates, gleaned from the procreative histories of all adult residents, hover around 50%. Many houses throughout South Sudan are occupied by widows. With the exception of households headed by men holding positions of leadership in local military and/or administrative organizations, there is usually very little by way of food security evident in any of these households, despite
12 years of United Nations food deliveries. In fact, many houses lay empty as their members scattered in search of food.

Growing hunger is aggravated in many instances by a gnawing sense of “broken promises” between husbands and wives, parents and children, and old and young. Many Nuer and Dinka women complain that their marriages are “illusory,” since they are so often struggling alone to maintain themselves and their children. Sharpening generational cleavages of value and perspective are recognized by just about everyone. Some areas have very few old men and women left alive, and many of those are incredibly malnourished and, often, blind. What’s more, much of the cultural knowledge and historical experience accumulated by the senior generation has been deemed irrelevant by disrespectful youth, “who have gone crazy with all the smoke and sound of guns.” Instead of receiving the “retirement” support and deference they believe they have earned from their “sons and daughters,” many older women and men are reduced to rags and are treated openly with disdain by many members of the younger generation. “Our children no longer listen to us!” they commonly lament.

Nowhere is this inter-generational breakdown of communications more apparent among contemporary Nilotes than with respect to surviving remnants of the “red army.” During the later 1980s, the SPLA systematically rounded up tens of thousands of Nuer and Dinka boys between the ages of six and fourteen and marched them to southwestern Ethiopia for the avowed purpose of enrolling them in UNHCR-supplied schools. While some of these boys were forcibly collected on the basis of a regional quota system, many others were voluntarily released by their parents in the hope that their sons would find both a solid education and a safe refuge from the war in Ethiopia. The subsequent plight of these “unaccompanied minors” is well known. Many hundreds died on route or during their first months in Ethiopian camps. The vast majority were forcibly inducted into the SPLA army as soon as they grew strong enough to bear guns. The end result is a socially-isolated community of armed youth who have been brutally trained not only to kill on command but, also, to torture whomever their military superiors designate. When some of these heavily traumatized youth eventually made the long journey back to their home areas during the 1990s, they often experienced great difficulty “fitting back in.” Some returned only to discover that their parents and siblings were dead or missing. Others bitterly rejected their parents and families once found, much as they felt rejected by their parents in the past. These and other children who were forced to survive by their wits from an early age are at severe risk of becoming a “lost generation”--a generation with little faith in the future or in themselves.

Many of these developments have deepened women and children’s vulnerability to social neglect, physical abuse and gross economic destitution. Local military and civilian leaders now monopolize much of the region’s cattle wealth, especially in the tense “border” areas separating various Nuer and Dinka groups. Some of this cattle wealth has been confiscated directly from community members through imposed “fines” and forced contributions to the war effort. But the vast majority has been acquired through the tit-for-tat cattle raids and community attacks that have fed roving SSPDF and SPLA units for the past twelve years. Many of these inter-ethnic raids are carried out for the alleged purpose of recapturing civilian-owned cattle lost in an earlier raid. When successfully “recaptured,” however, such cattle cannot be reclaimed by their original owners but, rather, are claimed as “military property” to be redistributed as the local
commander sees fit. The end result, of course, has been a steady transfer of civilian cattle wealth into the byres of their military “protectors” on both sides of the SSIM/SPLA divide. What chance does a unarmed widow or abandoned wife have of retaining any animal wealth under these circumstances?

C. What are some of the war-provoked changes in social values and practices negatively affecting the well-being of Nilotic Youth?

The progressive abandonment during this war of former restraints on regional patterns of intra- and inter-ethnic violence constitutes the gravest threat to the present and future well-being of children in these societies. Before this war and, indeed, up until the 1991 split of the SPLA, Nuer and Dinka men did not intentionally kill women or children during inter-ethnic confrontations. Acts of homicide within each ethnic group, moreover, were governed by a complex set of cultural ethnics and religious taboos aimed at ensuring the immediate identification of the slayer and the payment of blood wealth cattle compensation to the family of the deceased. The purposeful slaying of a child or woman or elderly person was universally perceived not only as cowardly and reprehensible but, more importantly, as a direct affront against God as the ultimate guardian of human morality. Such acts were expected to provoke manifestations of divine anger in the form of severe illness, death and/or other misfortunes visited on the slayer and/or members of his immediate family. The ethical code of warfare at that time further precluded the burning of houses and the destruction of crops during Nuer/Dinka community confrontations. Cattle, of course, were fair game. And it was not uncommon for raiders to carry off young women and children to be absorbed as full members of their families.

The gradual unraveling of this regional code of warfare ethics stems in part from the conscious efforts of military strategists within the SPLA and SSPDF, and in part from a technological revolution in local weaponry. For example, Nuer practices and beliefs in this regard were openly challenged during the late 1980s and early 1990s by leading Nuer members of SPLA. Local SPLA commanders sought to persuade the local citizenry as well as their recruits that homicides carried out under conditions of civil war were entirely devoid of the social, spiritual and material liabilities associated with homicides generated by more localized fighting and feuding. In essence, the military leadership was arguing that the overarching political context of the current war - which it defined as a “government war” - should take precedence over the personal identities and social interrelations of combatants in people’s assessments of the social and spiritual ramifications of homicide. The fact that these arguments were being introduced when the frequency of violent deaths was rising and local cattle stocks were being depleted meant that people’s abilities to ensure the “procreative immortality” of relatives slain in battle were being severely strained.

Furthermore, as guns burned deeper and deeper into regional patterns of warfare, many people began to wonder whether the spiritual and social consequences intra-ethnic gun slayings were identical to those realized with spears. Whereas the power of a spear issues directly from the bones and sinews of a person who hurls it, that of a gun is eerily contained within it. Often a fighter does not know whether or not he has killed someone. And, as a result, homicide is becoming increasingly “depersonalized” and “secularized” in these societies. These widely lamented trends are also linked to more subtle shifts in people’s perceptions of “ethnic identities” more generally. Mounting civil-war violence
between these two ethnic groups has often been portrayed in decontextualized media accounts as the release of “ancient tribal hatreds” which have been allegedly simmering for years. The historical reality, however, is more fluid and complex. Nuer and Dinka have never been organized into neatly circumscribed “tribes.” On the contrary, they have heavily intermarried for generations and have continued to recognize their common ancestry through a variety of oral traditions and shared cultural practices.

What appears to be happening during this war, however, is a gradual sealing off of this formerly permeable inter-ethnic divide, a trend with especially disastrous consequences for youth on both sides. Whereas during previous periods of inter-ethnic turmoil women and children were more likely to be captured than slain by Nuer and Dinka fighters, the reverse is now true. Although both sides justify their intensifying viciousness in inter-ethnic confrontations as “retaliation” for abominations earlier experienced, there is much more behind this increasingly conscious targeting of unarmed women and children for elimination. People’s concepts of ethnicity are themselves rapidly mutating in ways that bode ill for the future. Nuer fighters, in particular, appear to be adopting a more “primordialist,” if not “racialist,” way of thinking about the “essence” of their ethnicity in recent years. And it is this kind of thinking that can so easily be twisted into military justifications for the intentional killing women and children from other ethnic groups. A declining sense of communal responsibility for the continued well-being of related and unrelated children is everywhere evident. I attribute much of this apparent shift to the extreme depletion of many people's resources and to a narrowing of their livelihood possibilities. Many people now feel too poor to share their few remaining assets with those who have even less - including in some cases even hungry young orphans.

While the lamentable degree of "community disintegration" is still unusual, there is a definite sense that even the bonds between full parents and their children, as well as those between other close relatives has been seriously eroded by a seemingly endless state of civil war. I documented quite a few cases in which a young child or group of sibling was abruptly abandoned to the care of an unsuspecting relative when the child's parent or parents left without warning.

Finally, the forced recruitment of underage boys into the SSPDF and SPLA for indeterminate terms has been a tremendous hardship for many Nuer and Dinka parents. Many parents are losing confidence in the material supports their children will be able to provide in the future. Not only are children dying during this war at previously unimaginable rates but parents are often unable to benefit from the labor potential of surviving children, owing to both their engagement in war and critical shortages of livestock, agricultural implements as well as to the collapse of former markets for charcoal, timber, grass mats, and the like. A badly bruised bride-wealth system skewed increasingly toward military monopolization has also meant that fewer and fewer parents are able to “eat” their daughters.

**Confronting the realities of local military abuse**

Nothing has endangered children’s lives more than the unchecked rumors and general atmosphere of mistrust fostered by the abrupt rupture of direct communications between Nuer and Dinka groups in 1991. As one Dinka chief explained: “The Dinka hear that the Nuer are approaching and deploy forces on the border. The word goes out and a clash
occurs. Sometimes it catches you by surprise; and we wonder why the Nuer are always insisting on fighting us.” Many Nuer expressed equal puzzlement about “why the Dinka are always conspiring against us.” The good news, however, is that nearly everyone who lives along the borders - including most chiefs and many local military leaders - wants to restore the peace in order to protect “the few [people] who are still alive.” “People should not be dying over the cow,” several leading Nuer civilians exclaimed. The problem is that no one feels safe at present to initiate direct cross-border contacts for fear of being accused of treason by distant military leaders.

However, judging from the major strides toward reconciliation taken by a group of prominent Nuer and Dinka chiefs at a recent “Peace Workshop” sponsored by the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) in Lokichokkio, Kenya, mediating bodies could do much more to facilitate inter-ethnic communications and understanding. The pressure these mediators brought to bear on Dr. Garang and Dr. Machar to resolve their political difference was most welcome when they reconciled. However, there are other ways that other agencies could defuse tensions at the local level.

A more direct way of bettering children’s lives would be to find ways of ensuring that underage boys are not forcibly conscripted into the military. On both sides of the ethnic divide, for example, local headmen are responsible for handing over a specified number of youth each year. Should they fail to meet these annual demands, the headmen themselves are drafted and fined with large number of cattle. Faced with this threat, it is not surprising that local headmen at times resort to drafting extremely young boys. What’s more, these young conscripts are expected to serve in the military “until this war ends.” The are no fixed terms of service and thus, very little possibility for these young recruits to get any meaningful education. This reality creates considerable despair among the recruits as well as among their parents and extended families. With little evident concern about where the next generation of southern political leaders will be found, southern military officials continue to focus on their immediate military priorities. In contrast, the Khartoum government is busily training thousands of displaced southern Sudanese youth in the intricacies of Arabic and of its version of the Islamic way. What can be done? With respect to underage recruitment, social advocacy programs along the lines sponsored by the Humanitarian Principles wing of UNICEF are certainly a start. But a great deal more could be done by others, especially since relations between human rights groups and the SPLA leadership appear to be quite strained at present. Moreover, agencies pushing the SPLA to adhere to the conventions on human rights have no permanent Sudanese staff. Other options include linking educational inputs to local military commitments either to establish “fixed-term” drafts or to “release” a certain number of younger recruits to attend schools in south Sudan or in Kenya.

Advocating cultural values and practices to break the cycle of violence.
What are some of the existing values, cultural practices and forms of knowledge that should be preserved in order to minimize the long-term disruptive effects of this war on these societies? First, all those cultural values and social practices that contributed to the former fluidity of the Nuer/Dinka ethnic divide should be actively supported by concerned groups in any and all ways they can. These may include facilitating more direct communications between local Nuer and Dinka chiefs, community-wide discussions, and more child-focused educational programs. These efforts would
reawaken Nuer and Dinka to their common cultural heritage and general “oneness of blood.” As Nilotic peoples take pride in their heritage, young people should be reminded that one of the things that made them such a “great” and “powerful” people in the past was their unparalleled abilities to assimilate ethnic “outsiders” as full and equal community members.

Second, collective faith in the capacities of children-- all children--to make the world a better place in the future needs reinforcement. A significant expansion in the formal educational opportunities available, both locally and abroad, to Nuer and Dinka children would go a long way in boosting this faith. However, I can also imagine the creation of more “grass-roots” educational programs aimed at giving older boys and girls (who may never see the inside of school) confidence in their practical abilities and leadership potential through a variety of community and/or household-oriented projects and events. These educational efforts could be combined with a “grass-roots” literacy campaign in the Nuer and Dinka languages. Gaining literacy in their own languages would do a tremendous amount for the self-esteem of these children. There is a deep vulnerability that illiterate people feel when faced with the “mysterious powers of literacy.” Before this war, many younger Nilotic men and women gained literacy in their own languages by attending evening classes offered by several southern churches located in Khartoum. These types of informal classes could be easily recreated in many areas.

Third, many of the unique marital institutions and practices that have enabled Nuer and Dinka families to survive devastating human losses in the past merit additional support. At present, many of these institutions are being challenged directly by local evangelists and expatriate church leaders on the grounds that they are incompatible with the Christian faith. But there is nothing in the Bible that forbids a brother to marry a wife in the name of a deceased kinsmen. Nor is polygyny unknown in the Old Testament. The problem is that, in some areas, local evangelists under the instructions of their superiors in Khartoum and Nairobi are rejecting many of these long-standing marital institutions with little thought about how their abandonment would affect the well-being of young widows, children born “illegitimately” to second wives, young men who die with out heirs and so forth. Creating public forums in which these “customs” could be openly discussed by local chiefs, church officials and young men and women would be helpful.

Lastly, aid organizations can strengthen local community relations and ease growing inter-generational tensions by sponsoring a variety of social activities designed to enhance children’s awareness of and pride in their cultural heritage (including seasonal dancing competitions, song fests, sporting events and the like). A regional ethnographic archive, consisting of audio and videotapes as well as numerous indigenous proverbs, stories and historical traditions, could be created and used in designing a variety of public advocacy campaigns.

In conclusion, Sudan’s prolonged war has created an atmosphere where children are attracted to taking up arms as their only way to survival. They are also encouraged by their military elite and even forced into the armies as their only way to contribute to the opposition. Whereas such conditioning to violence means that young people are victims of a war that is not their choosing, it also causes them to be the victimizers in this growing sub-culture of violence.